PINE CREEK RANCH

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Pine Creek Ranch

By HAROLD BINDLOSS

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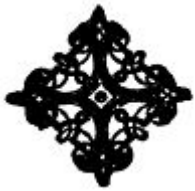
"Brandon of the Engineers," "The Bush Rancher,"
"Cross Trails," "The Girl from Kellers," "Green
Timber," "Lister's Great Adventure," "The Man
from the Wilds," "Ranching for Sylvia,"
"Wyndham's Pal," etc.



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PINE CREEK RANCH

CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

RED lilies dotted the prairie and the poplars by the creek were fresh and green. After a scorching day, the evening was cool, and Lawrence Elliot stopped to let his horses drink. The settlement was fourteen miles off, and where the traces rubbed, the animals' sides were white; the dust of the trail powdered Lawrence's clothes and skin. He ought to push on for home, but Spiers would give him supper, although Geoff's cooking was not first-class.

Trembling shadows checkered the clear stream and the splash of water was softly musical. Behind the thin trunks the sky went red, and in the background the wide plain melted from green to blue. Lawrence had stopped by Pine Creek before, but for long he recaptured all he saw and did that evening. Yet when he jumped down by Spiers' homestead, he laughed with the carelessness of joyous youth.

The birch-log house behind the bluff was small, and Lawrence smelt burning grease. Spiers balanced a battered frying-pan, and tried to hold his greasy overalls away from his leg. When the smoking material touched his skin he swore. Burned potatoes and slices of blackened pork were scattered about the stove.

"If you want supper, get a fork and get busy," he shouted.

"I don't want yours; guess I'll eat at home," remarked another man, and pushed a bottle into his pocket. "Well, so long! S'pose you think about my proposition."

Stopping at the door, he gave Lawrence a careless nod. Their types were different and to some extent antagonistic, for Lawrence was young, rather

lightly built and athletic; Hart was red-faced and fat. Lawrence's skin was brown, and although his clothes were a blue shirt and old overalls, his look was fastidious and somehow thoroughbred. Hart's clothes were good and he wore a large, black plug hat. At the settlement he combined a trade in agricultural machinery and real estate. His glance was keen and as a rule rather truculent. A big red motorcycle occupied the middle of the trail.

"She's a daisy; I reckon to be home in an hour," said Hart. "A live man who can ride a wheel like that has no use for a rig. When you're next up town, take a look at my stock."

Motorcycles were not yet numerous and American cars had but begun to invade the plains. Lawrence was not much attracted and he smiled.

"My team's pretty good. In the meantime I'm satisfied——"

"There's your trouble; you are satisfied! You back-section hicks want to get on a move. Horses and ox teams aren't going to pay: you got to sell up Buck and Bright, and quit lifting water with the well bucket. You got to buy you a tractor and a windmill-pump. Sure thing, Larry boy. You hear me!"

To some extent, Lawrence admitted the other was justified. Although he was young and careless, he had begun to feel the time, so to speak, was a time of transition. The old methods were going and where one had used muscle one must use machines. The drawback was, machines were expensive and implied the farmer's investing a large sum. If the tractor knocked out the ox-plow, an ambitious young fellow with, for example, a thousand dollars, could no longer make good on a hundred and sixty acre preëmption.

"Anyhow, the team's the old man's," Hart resumed. "You want to be a sport and buy you a wheel. Take a ride to the pool-room evenings, see the boys, and get the news."

"Unless you're rich or lucky, the billiard game doesn't pull, and I haven't the money to speculate in a machine."

"We might fix it," Hart remarked in a meaning voice.

"I reckon not. Borrowing's expensive. When you can't pay for what you want, the proper plan's to go without."

"Now you surely talk like a hick," Hart rejoined. "Credit gives you the tools you need and you pay for them by the money you save. Well, I guess you don't see it, and I must shove off. Hold your team and watch me go."

The motorcycle snorted explosively and dust tossed about the trail. Hart's bulky figure jolted in the speeding cloud; Lawrence's horses plunged, and for a minute or two he was occupied. Then behind the trees something

crashed, the throbbing stopped, and a hoarse, savage shout pierced the sudden calm.

"Hit a rock. Let's hope he broke his bottle," Spiers remarked. "Took it away 'cause I wouldn't trade. Fellow's a shabby hound."

"Looks as if you had had enough. What did he want?" said Lawrence, and going into the house, sat down on a box.

Spiers' furniture was primitive, and ashes from the stove, burned matches, and cigarette ends were trampled about the cracked floor. His qualities were not utilitarian, but he had for a year or two helped a prairie farmer, to whom his English relations rashly paid a premium, and then he began to cultivate a small preëmption. So far, he had not made much progress.

"Hart wanted to loan me money; the fellow's a philanthro-factor," he replied. "All the same, he wanted a mortgage, and I must buy his machines. Queer thing is, you can cheat me when I'm sober; but when I'm just drunk enough I think—— Don't see myself sweating for a swine like that. Where I plow he takes the crop. It's not done! Then my relations are not generous; I've got all I will get, and to know you must sink or swim sort of bucks you up. But would you like some potatoes and pork?"

Lawrence refused politely, and Spiers studied the greasy stuff he scraped back into the pan.

"Looks as if I must get a wife, but the sort of girl I'd like would have no use for me. When I've fixed the house and turned the summer fallow, I must write to an English town clerk."

"But a town clerk's business is not to find you a wife!"

"The last fellow said something like that," Spiers admitted. "All the same, sometimes it's done. An Old Country town clerk is a useful man."

"Then you have inquired for a wife before?"

"That's so," said Spiers with a chuckle. "When I get on a jag, it's rather a habit of mine; when I'm sober I get scared. Not long ago a sporting mayor thought he might supply me. Cablegram cost five dollars, but perhaps I was not extravagant. The lady didn't start."

Harness rattled. Lawrence's horses began to move about, and he said he must not stay. Letting the team go, he mused. At a bachelor's homestead, life was laborious and rather bleak; but on the plains cultivated young women were not at all plentiful, and the other sort, for the most part, were raw foreigners. The young Canadians went to the towns. Besides, Lawrence doubted if a fastidious girl could face the loneliness, poverty, and strain the small farmer must endure.

In Manitoba the fertile belts were occupied and settlers, looking for free land, pushed on into the Northwest Territories. The times were changing and one sensed a difference, until recently a prosperous farmer was a sort of primitive aristocrat and commanded strong men. His rules, so to speak, were Homeric; his business was to grow wheat, and he had no talent for finance and not much use for business men.

Now, however Lawrence imagined the tractors, cars and telephones might give the business man control. The new machines were not cheap, and if the farmer were forced to use borrowed capital, his independence would be gone and fellows of Hart's stamp would seize control. One must study modern financial methods and remodel old-time plans, but Lawrence doubted if his father would willingly do so.

Elliot of Fairholm was obstinate and autocratic; his traditions were the traditions of the British army, twenty years ago. He demanded and got obedience, but all he asked from another he himself did. His rule, however, was efficient, and to some extent Fairholm was a model farm. Elliot did not spare effort and liked a proper job; the old fellow loved Fairholm. Yet Lawrence did not know if he were rich, and sometimes doubted. Well, he was not going to bother about it, and he urged his team.

When he got down at Fairholm he tied his horses to a post and went to the living-room. The room was spacious and home-like and, for a prairie farm, the furniture was good. After the disorder at Spiers' shack, Lawrence felt its quiet charm. George, his older brother, and Millicent, were at supper. George was tall and strongly built, and his look was soberly thoughtful. Millicent was an attractive girl, but she was marked by something of George's rather apathetic calm. Lawrence sometimes imagined his father's dominating forcefulness had subdued the others. Now, however, Elliot was not about.

"Where is the old man?" Lawrence inquired.

"He went to cut hay," George replied. "My notion is he meant to clean up the sloo before Ogilvie got to work. At noon he sent Jack back to help me at the fence."

Lawrence nodded. On the plains the grass, for the most part, is but a few inches high and grows long only where the melted snow forms shallow lakes in spring. The sloos are not numerous and sometimes a farmer must go a good distance for a load. Moreover, one could not yet get coal, and cordwood was cut in the scattered bluffs. Ogilvie was Elliot's neighbor, but they disputed about fuel and hay.

"The sun was pretty fierce. At the settlement I could hardly stand for the heat," Lawrence remarked.

"I thought George ought to go for Father," said Millicent.

George smiled. "My orders were to shove on at the fence. You know the old man!"

"I will go," said Lawrence, and when he went off, Millicent gave her brother a thoughtful look.

"Sometimes I feel Larry is not altogether like us. Although we are older, he has a swiftness and decision you and I have not."

"It's possible; he's something of the old man's stamp," George agreed tranquilly and resumed his supper.

Lawrence was not disturbed about his father, but he urged his sweating team. His habit was to drive fast, and since he dined, for twenty-five cents, at the settlement seven or eight hours had passed. By and by the wagon lurched across a rise and Lawrence saw a girl ride up the slope. Margaret Ogilvie was rather a jolly kid, but he did not want to stop. Turning her horse, she motioned to him imperiously, and he pulled up.

The sunset shone behind her, and her slim, girlish figure was dark and sharply outlined. She rode like a boy, and although she was young and raw, her pose was graceful and somehow commanding. Lawrence wondered whether she was annoyed. Since he fronted the sunset her face was not distinct, but he remarked that the strong light pierced her hair and her pale throat was framed by netted gold. Although Margaret and he disputed, on the whole they were pals.

"When I waved to you, you didn't mean to stop!" she said.

"Oh, well, I must go for the old man, and then, you see, I have not had supper," Lawrence replied in an apologetic voice.

"When a man is hungry, food is all he thinks about. You are a greedy lot," Margaret rejoined.

"It's possible," said Lawrence. "I allow I wanted to eat the box of candy I brought from the settlement. Perhaps it's queer, but I did not!"

"Toronto candies, Larry? I don't like the common stuff."

"Looks as if you were pretty fastidious," Lawrence remarked, and putting his hand in his pocket, resumed: "Oh, shucks! I dumped the box with the groceries."

"You mean, you clean forgot it? I know your carelessness."

"After all, I didn't know I'd meet you."

"That's something," Margaret agreed, as if she weighed the argument. "I reckon you were not keen to meet me, anyhow! But where is your father?"

"I expect he's cutting the ridge sloo," Lawrence replied with a twinkle.

Margaret turned the big horse, and Lawrence saw her eyes sparkled.

"Our sloo? Not long ago you cut our wood!"

"I reckon the wood and hay are the Government's. The man who's entitled to use them is the man who gets there first. Besides, the sloo is nearer our farm than yours."

For a few moments Margaret was quiet, and then she looked up.

"Sometimes I agree with Father; he has no use for the Fairholm gang—but perhaps you are not as mean as the others, and we won't quarrel. You see, the old man has fixed to send me away to school."

"That's rather a knock," said Lawrence in a sympathetic voice. "I reckon you won't like it; at Toronto they kept me pretty tight. Are you going to Winnipeg?"

"Winnipeg nothing! I'm going to Montreal. But I expect you're not much interested. You feel you ought to be polite."

"You are not going yet," said Lawrence. "We'll talk about it another time. Anyhow, I've got to look for the old man."

"I want to go, and I will like it!" Margaret rejoined and started her horse. "I want to meet up with real live people. On the plains the boys are hicks. You make me tired!"

Lawrence smiled. When Margaret got mad she was something of a wildcat, but the Ogilvies were a hard lot, and she was younger than he. Soon after she rode off, he crossed a sandy ridge and searched the hollow in front. At the bottom of the easy slope, a small square belt of tall grass marked the sloo. All the rest was cut and the sunset touched the sparkling mower. Lawrence did not see his father, but his horses fed in the fresh grass by a little pond. The old man's loosing the team was queer, and Lawrence used the whip.

When he jumped down his skin was wet by sweat, and he felt as if his heart stopped beating. Elliot lay in the mown grass; his hands clenched on the yellow stalks. His pose was ominously quiet and his look was calm and austerely dignified. Lawrence knew his father's work at length was over. When nobody was about to help, the scorching heat had conquered him.

For a minute or two Lawrence knelt in the dusty grass. The blood had left his skin, and for all his youth, his face was strangely like the other. His boyish carelessness had vanished, his glance was fixed, and his mouth was

firm. Only when, one day long before, he knew his mother was dead, had he got a knock like that; but Lawrence could take a hard knock. He was Elliot of Fairholm's son.

By and by he looked about. But for a patch in the center, the sloo was cut. In a quarter of an hour the old man, as his habit was, would have carried out all he undertook to do. The small square of standing grass fixed Lawrence's glance. Yet, when his father knew himself beaten he had somehow loosed the team. His last effort was for his horses, and Lawrence knew it typical. Well, there was no use in brooding. He must go for help.

His brother and the hired man returned with him, and when they had carried Elliot to the wagon Lawrence began to harness the other team to the mower. George gave him a surprised glance, and Lawrence said:

"Don't stop for me. All the hay's not cut. He liked to finish a job!"

Fourteen days afterward, a lawyer from Brandon arrived, and in the evening the party sat round a table covered by documents in the big room.

"On the whole, my opinion is that you ought to take Ogilvie's offer for the farm," the lawyer remarked. "The fellow's not generous, but your debts are larger than I thought, and to make a fresh start on a preëmption farther west might pay."

"No," said George firmly. "The old man loved Fairholm, and he'd have hated to think we might sell. Besides, Ogilvie was his antagonist."

"Then, for some time you must use pretty stern economy. Wheat is cheap, and when you have met your bills, I doubt if you will make a good hired man's wages. In fact, I reckon one of you ought to pull out. What about your Old Country relation's offer?"

Lawrence looked up. His uncle in England had written as soon as George's cablegram arrived, and the letter was kind. Stephen Orthwaite had no son and was willing to give one of his nephews a post at his Lancashire cotton mill. Moreover, he hoped Millicent would make his large and rather lonely house her home.

"I will go," said Lawrence in a quiet voice. "George is the older and Fairholm is his. I don't know about Millicent— —"

"George needs me," said Millicent. "Somebody must keep the house."

They arranged for Lawrence to go, and a few days afterwards he one morning got on board the light wagon. George took the reins, but when Fairholm was half a mile off a girl on a big horse waved him to stop. Margaret's face was red and she got her breath hard, as if she had gone fast.

"I'm sorry, Larry, and now I don't so much mind I'm going to Montreal. Anyhow, I wish you luck," she said.

She turned her horse, Lawrence waved his hat, and the wagon rolled ahead.

CHAPTER II

FOUR YEARS AFTERWARD

IN EASTERN ONTARIO the track was good and the Pacific express rolled smoothly by the noble river. The rail joints clicked with an even beat and the locomotive's snorts were rhythmical. Cinders rattled on the roofs and gritty dust blew about the cars, but Lawrence Elliot, on the wall bench of the smoking compartment, lighted his pipe and mused.

Since he landed at Montreal but two or three hours had gone and now that he was back in Canada all was strange. Lower Ontario had long been populated by white men, but the landscape speeding by the windows had a queer, unfinished look. The fences were rude, the dirt road by the track was torn by wheels; the small wooden homesteads were not painted, and the barns were roofed by cracked shingles and rusty Canada plates. Yet "unfinished" was perhaps not the proper word; all rather struck a note of utilitarian economy. In the background one saw dark pines, shining water, and rocky islands.

By and by a train-boy pushed back the door and shouted his wares in a raucous voice. When Lawrence politely refused the sticky candy, detective stories, and fly-blown fruit, he gave him a scornful, hostile glance and went off noisily. Then the conductor demanded his ticket and examined the long, folding document as if he were sorry to admit it was correct. But to be annoyed was ridiculous. The train-boy's independence was worth something; he supported himself, pluckily risked his small capital, and no doubt well earned all he got on board the cars. Independence was a Canadian quality. Moreover, Lawrence was Canadian and he was going home.

When he jumped from the wagon at the prairie sloo, one evening four years previously, his joyous youthfulness vanished for good. His habit was to ponder, but when he moved he moved fast, and since he got George's letter he had used some speed. At Montreal he was rather strenuously occupied, and now he must weigh things. To begin with, he wanted to recapture the evening when he knew he must go back. He hated to feel his uncle might think him shabby, and he tried to review all he and the old fellow said. Turning his head from the window, he concentrated.

Dinner was over at Routendyke in the bleak Pennine Hills, and Stephen Orthwaite went to his easy-chair by the fire. The light was going, and when Lawrence looked down across the long, rushy pastures and dry stone walls, chimney-stacks and smoke-plumes cut the sunset on the Lancashire plain. A fire burned in the big grate and red reflections touched dark pictures and old mahogany furniture. The spacious room was marked by a touch of dignity, and for four years Lawrence had been satisfied to think Routendyke his home. Besides, to occupy a good post in the old manufacturing house was something. Orthwaite's was founded sixty years ago, and its cotton-yarn was famous.

Orthwaite lighted a Turkish cigarette. The old fellow was cultivated and fastidious, although sometimes at the office he talked like a blunt Lancastrian. Lawrence knew his uncle shrewd and just.

"Well, my lad?" he said. "What about your brother's letter?"

Orthwaite demanded efficiency. He liked a man to know his job, and Lawrence felt he must not think George slack.

"I mustn't bore you by long particulars, sir, but for some years wheat has been cheap."

"When wheat goes down the crop is large," Orthwaite remarked.

"The large crops were in the United States, India, and the Argentine. Canadian farmers were bothered by frost and blight. Then since George was knocked down by his team he has not been able to get about as he ought ——"

Orthwaite nodded, and Lawrence resumed his narrative. Ogilvie had persuaded George to help him cut a road, for which they had thought to get a grant from the provincial government, across a ravine, and they had hired labor; but the money had not arrived. Afterward they jointly speculated in a tractor, gangplows, and harrows, in order to break a belt of low ground where the autumn frost came soon. The new quick-ripening wheat was costly, and when George was ready to plow, the machines were occupied, with the consequence that Ogilvie reaped his crop but George did not.

It looked as if Ogilvie did not claim his debt, for George rather vaguely talked about a fresh loan, but when George's next crop was bad he took a mortgage on the farm. Now the mortgage had not long to run, Ogilvie asked for payment. And George was ill. The letter was an embarrassed apology, and when it arrived Lawrence had felt some alarm.

"Ogilvie was your father's enemy," Orthwaite remarked. "A pioneer farmer?"

"I believe he was a clerk at a store. Anyhow, he's not, like George, embarrassed for money. George's taking his help was strange, but I expect he was forced."

Orthwaite smiled. "You are stanch. The best farmer I know was a draper. But the important thing is: how much does your brother owe?"

Lawrence told him, and Orthwaite nodded.

"Very well. I must not see my nephew broken for a sum I can spare; but as a rule a debtor does not overstate his liabilities, and the B.N.A. bank at Montreal will meet your bills for an extra five hundred pounds. When Fairholm is prosperous you may pay me back——"

He stopped Lawrence's thanks and resumed: "I expect you want to go across. Will three months be enough?"

Lawrence hesitated. To admit that he might stay longer might imply that he doubted George. Moreover, he saw Orthwaite studied him, and the old fellow was very keen.

"I don't know, sir."

"If a farm is like a cotton-factory, when things are let down to put all straight is a long and awkward job. You imagine you may get entangled?"

For a few moments Lawrence said nothing. He had thought he had done with Fairholm and he was happy in Lancashire. Besides, he had some talent for business and knew he made good at the mill. Yet he was Canadian born, and now George needed him, the prairie called. When he looked up his glance was resolute.

"My father was the first to drive the plow on the Fairholm plain. He made the farm, and since agriculture was not his job, I think he felt his doing so was something of an exploit. Anyhow, he fought and labored for the place, and he would have hated to know we might throw away all for which he'd toiled. George, of course, was the proper man to carry on the farm; but, you see, George is ill."

Orthwaite gave him a queer, sympathetic glance.

"You are like your father, Larry, and he was my good friend. Well, you have a good post. The hands and the manager trust you, and you may go far; I have no son. You are not a fool; I expect you have considered?"

"I feel I am wanted at Fairholm," Lawrence replied with embarrassed quietness.

"Then, you must go. Ambition is not all, my lad, and I like your pluck. Well, I am Orthwaite's chairman, but you are the company's servant, and

one must be just. For *six months* your post is open, and you can start when you like."

Lawrence started two days afterward, and now that the Pacific express carried him west, he wondered whether he was rash. All the same, there was no use in brooding and he began to study a Montreal newspaper.

At Winnipeg the train stopped for three or four hours and Lawrence went up Main Street to the avenue springing up along the old Portage Trail. The evening was cold and the sky was luminous red and green. Behind the new hotels and office blocks, tall grain-elevators and flour-mills towered. The stores were lighted, the sidewalks were crowded, and street-cars rolled noisily by.

Lawrence's mood was thoughtful. He vaguely felt his talents were for organized industry, and his proper place was where goods were made and sold. Perhaps it was strange, but he was homesick for smoky Lancashire. In the meantime, he wanted food and he pushed back the revolving door of a crowded restaurant.

When he had satisfied his appetite he looked about. The long room was rather extravagantly decorated, and for the most part its occupants were smartly dressed young men and women. Lawrence imagined his bill would be large, but by and by he thought something amused a group not far off, and in order to see the joke he moved his chair.

A bored and scornful waitress stood by a table. On the table was a bill and some money, and a girl, clutching a shabby purse, faced the waitress. Her face was red and her look embarrassed but resolute. They obviously disputed and Lawrence was interested. At a Canadian restaurant, to pull out five-cent pieces was something of a joke, but Lawrence was rather sympathetic than amused. In fact, he liked the girl's nerve. Her clothes were stained by the dust of a railroad journey and he thought the material cheap. She was short and thin, but on the whole her rather pinched face was attractive.

She was from the Old Country; Lawrence knew the Lancashire folk, but hers was not the sturdy mill-girl type. He thought her proper background was a little shop in a shabby street. Perhaps she had hoped to mend her fortune in Canada. Although she was disturbed, her mouth was firm. Lancashire folk hate to be cheated.

The picture moved him to humorous pity. The girl was young and somehow forlorn. Perhaps the Canadian currency puzzled her, but Lawrence imagined she, for once, had been extravagant and had got a jolt. When one

has reckoned by pennies, to reckon by dimes is disturbing. Getting up, he crossed the floor.

"You are a stranger. Perhaps you'll let me fix it?" he said, and took the bill.

The girl hesitated and Lawrence knew she studied him. Then she nodded as if she were satisfied and he signed the waitress. The Canadian took her cue, and fixing a haughty glance on the other, gave him the menu. When they agreed and she went off, the English girl pulled some paper money from her purse.

"How much?" she asked.

"Perhaps we are rather conspicuous. If you are going, I'll tell you in the street."

"I want to know now," the girl rejoined. "How much was the bill?"

Lawrence frankly cheated, but when he saw her disturbed look vanish he thought he was justified. She implied that he might go with her to the door, and when they were on the pavement she turned.

"Thank you! It's better than I thought at first. The station's up this street?"

Lawrence said he was going there and she resumed: "One doesn't like to be cheated, but perhaps I shouldn't have gone to that sort of restaurant. Everything in Canada's horribly dear. If you want supper at Blackburn, you can get——"

She gave him particulars about the dishes Lancashire mill-hands approve and he agreed that the tariff was remarkably cheap.

"Where goods are expensive wages are high," he remarked. "The rule has some advantages. For example, I expect you will get better pay than you got at Blackburn."

"I'm not going to work for pay," the girl rejoined, and although she blushed her look was rather proud. "I am going to be married. My fiancé ought to have met me, but I got a telegram at Montreal. He cut his foot when he was chopping and cannot get about. That's all I know. You cannot say very much in a telegram."

She was alone and Lawrence thought her long excursion something of an adventure. He sympathized politely, but at the station she sent him off.

"Now I'm all right," she said. "You're kind, but I'm not going to bother you."

Lawrence was not much bothered, and at the marble waiting-hall the benches and greater part of the floor were occupied by uncouth foreign

immigrants. All the same, he saw she did not want him, and he went. She was not the sort to cultivate a stranger's society, and she had indicated that she was going to be married. Lawrence smiled, a frank, humorous smile.

Walking about the train in the morning, he saw her in a second-class car. The porter had fixed a board across the benches for a table, and she was getting breakfast. Passengers who studied economy brought a lunch-basket and cooked on the compartment stove. On board a crowded train to dress properly in the morning is hard, but the girl looked fresh, and her clothes were neat.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she inquired.

"Thank you," said Lawrence. "Let's see if I can get some fruit."

He was back in a few minutes with a load the train-boy supplied, and when the meal was over his companion carefully returned to the basket all that was not used. Lawrence thought frugality was her habit, and she had not invited him to join her altogether for the charm of his society.

"There ought to be enough for lunch, and in the afternoon I get off," she remarked naively. "Once I had started, I wasn't very homesick on the steamer, and to picnic on the train was something fresh. You see, I was only twice away from home before—at Blackpool, and a Guides' camp. Perhaps it's strange, but now that I'll soon be where I'm going, all begins to look different——"

Lawrence imagined Blackpool was something like Coney Island and Dominion Park at Montreal. The girl was not at all cultivated and Lancashire folk are frank. For him to see she was daunted perhaps did not embarrass her. All the same, she turned from him and looked out the window.

The jolting cars rolled across a wide, level plain. One or two small bluffs like islands cut the horizon, and in the distance, hardly distinguishable, was a wooden homestead. After the arctic winter, the grass was rather gray than green. The lilies were not yet, and little blue flowers like crocuses dotted the snow-bleached turf. Although the sun shone, the landscape was austerely desolate.

"Is it all like this?" the girl inquired. "I don't see any cattle. And where are the cowboys?"

Lawrence smiled. The Wild West tradition was firmly rooted and English people did not yet know that Canada was soberly utilitarian.

"In some belts, the country is broken by little woods and ponds. The cowboys belong in Alberta, and they're not a romantic lot. At all events, they do not carry guns."

"Oh, I bought a pistol! I was told I must, and it wasn't cheap. But if you know the country, perhaps you know Fairholm Plains?"

"My home's at Fairholm," Lawrence agreed, and began to see where she led.

"Then, I expect you know Pine Creek?"

"Why, of course! But are you Geoffrey Spiers' relation?"

"Not yet; my wedding's tomorrow," the girl replied with a blush, and resumed eagerly: "But tell me all you can about the farm and Mr. Spiers. I suppose the house is wooden? It's not very large?"

Lawrence looked up sharply. In the circumstances, her request was rather remarkable. His surprise was obvious and the girl's face got red, as if she saw she had been rash.

"I've got his picture, but it's two years old," she said awkwardly.

Lawrence saw a light. When Spiers indulged in liquor, he talked about sending for a wife from the Old Country, and it looked as if he at length had done so. The girl was frankly not his sort, for although Spiers was something of a wastrel, his type was the English public school type. But Lawrence did not want her to note his surprise, and he began to talk.

"You needn't pretend; I'm not a fool," she said, and although her thin face was darkly flushed, her glance was level. "I see you guess, and you think I've got some nerve! A modest girl would not engage to marry a man she did not know much about? Well, since I expect you're Geoffrey's friend, I'll tell you why I did."

Lawrence said nothing. When she found out he knew Spiers, curiosity had obviously carried her away. Now she talked with rather bitter frankness and her tale was interesting.

She was Helen Mather, and but for her aunt her relations were dead. Her aunt was very poor, and when Helen got a post at a milliner's shop she thought her luck was good. She liked dressmaking, but the workrooms were dark and crowded and one hot summer she was ill. The doctor warned her she must not remain there, and since she was not strong she could not get employment at the cotton-mills. Her aunt thought she might be a domestic help, but her pride rebelled.

Moreover, she was ambitious, and romantic moving-pictures and railroad advertisements fixed her thoughts on Canada. Girls she knew had gone and some were rich and happy. Then Spiers' letter arrived and she sent her portrait. . . .

Lawrence dared not inquire from whom she got the letter. On the whole, he doubted if Spiers was sober when he wrote, and he pictured his

disturbance when the portrait arrived. All the same, Geoffrey was willing to bear the consequences and that was something. To talk about his paying for his folly was perhaps to exaggerate. Lawrence was sorry for Helen. When she saw Geoff's homestead, he thought she would get a jolt.

"Now you know all about it; but if I'd had some sense at the beginning, you wouldn't have known," she said, and then her mouth got firm and her eyes sparkled. "Not that it matters very much! I've got Geoffrey's letter, and so long as he is satisfied— —"

Lawrence imagined the letter's composition was an awkward job; but he said:

"Perhaps you'll let me say I think Geoffrey's luck is remarkably good. He's my pal; in fact, everybody is his friend. Then Pine Creek's a first-class location and grows fine wheat. The house is rather small and the furniture is not up-to-date, but on the plains we're a primitive lot, and you can buy better stuff when Geoffrey goes ahead. Then I'll get my sister to go across, and where you are puzzled about things she'll be glad to put you wise."

Helen gave him a queer look. "You mean to be kind, and if your sister is like you, I hope she'll come to see me. Well, I must pack the basket, and I expect you want to smoke."

Lawrence did not particularly want to smoke, but he went. Helen's voice had got unsteady, and he imagined she did not want him about. Now the end of the journey was near, she had perhaps begun to repent her rashness.

CHAPTER III

THE WASH-OUT

WHERE PINE CREEK curves about thin woods, Lawrence got off his horse. It was long since he had ridden far and he wanted to stretch his legs; moreover, Spiers' homestead was behind the bluff and he ought perhaps to look Geoff up. Nobody had met him at the settlement. On the Atlantic the weather was fine, the Gulf was clear of fog, and at Montreal he had got the west-bound train a day before he thought. Since Fairholm was some distance from the railroad, he had not telegraphed.

Walking by his horse, he looked about. The creek flowed through a wooded hollow and fresh leaves had begun to dot the birch and poplar branches. The sky behind the trees was dark, the snow-bleached grass was wet, and a rise in the background cut, like a streak of livid yellow, lead-colored thunder-clouds. July is the month for thunder, but the creek's turmoil indicated that a storm had not long since swept the plain, and Lawrence imagined another soon might break. When, however, he had crossed the belt the winding creek enclosed he would be at home.

By and by he heard a shout and Spiers limped across the grass.

"Hello, Larry! Your folks did not expect you until tomorrow."

"The *Falernian's* run was near the record, and the Montreal office held up the train for us. I suppose it accounts for your not meeting Miss Mather?"

"That is so," said Spiers. "Where is she?"

"I left her with Mrs. Wayne at the hotel," Lawrence replied dryly.

For a few moments Spiers said nothing. His overalls were old and stained, and his long boots were broken. Lawrence thought him thinner, and did not remark the stamp of indulgence Geoffrey had worn. In fact, his look was sternly sober.

"You meeting Helen was queer, but sometimes things happen like that," he remarked. "I suppose the *Falernian* carried a thousand passengers?"

"She carried twelve hundred. The first boat up the river is generally crowded. Is that all you want to know?"

Spiers' soberness vanished. Although Lawrence thought him anxious, his eyes twinkled.

"You're annoyed? It looks as if Helen enlightened you about our engagement."

"Miss Mather did not purposely enlighten me. When she knew I was going to Fairholm she was interested and made some inquiries. . . . Well, I didn't want to daunt her and my picture of your homestead was not altogether accurate; then perhaps I gave you some qualities you have not. Anyhow, my object was good, and your business is to soften the knock I expect she will get."

"You are a good sort," Spiers remarked, and with some hesitation resumed: "But what about Helen? You see, all I've got is her portrait."

In a sense his disturbance was humorous, but Lawrence's look was rather stern.

"Miss Mather is not your sort; anyhow, I imagine she is not your mother's and sisters' sort. All the same, she's attractive, plucky, and intelligent, and I think she can be firm. Some firmness, however, might be useful. On the whole, your luck is perhaps much better than you deserve."

Spiers' relief was obvious, and Lawrence thought his remark justified. Geoffrey's asking somebody to send him a wife was, no doubt, a drunkard's freak. His smile, however, irritated Lawrence and he continued:

"I don't see how you persuaded a girl like that to run the risk."

"In the circumstances, perhaps you ought not to inquire," Spiers rejoined. "It's done with and the proper line is to look in front. All I hope is, when Helen does so, her pluck will bear the strain."

Lawrence gave him a sympathetic nod. At all events, Geoffrey was willing to pay for his joke.

"Then, your engagement stands?"

"Sometimes you don't use much tact," Spiers remarked. "I don't know if you're entitled to think me a shabby hound. The wedding is fixed for tomorrow at the settlement church, and so long as Miss Mather is willing, it will be carried out."

"Well, I wish you both good luck," said Lawrence, and got on his horse.

After a minute or two he turned his head. Spiers stood where he had left him. His pose was braced and Lawrence imagined his fists were clenched. Nothing indicated that he was a joyous bridegroom.

The light, however, was going, the sky was ominous, and Lawrence urged his horse. Not far off the creek curved back and cut the trail, but he did not know where George and Ogilvie had built the new bridge. He steered for the belt of trees and when he got down the light went and thunder

crashed. The long peal rolled away and he heard the angry creek brawl in the gloom.

It looked as if he had not kept the proper trail, for the bank was steep and tangled brush grew between the trunks, but he seized the horse's bridle and went down cautiously. At the bottom all he saw was foaming water. In a dry summer one could jump the creek, but it looked as if a cloud had burst, and an angry flood cut the crumbling banks. The wash-out was awkward and Lawrence pushed through the wet brush and looked for a spot where he could cross.

By and by he saw a tree had fallen and spanned the flood, and had he not had his horse, he thought he might have got over. A few yards off, the creek was wider and the turmoil indicated that the water was not deep. Then lightning pierced the wood and he saw the log's other end was in the stream, but opposite the spot he occupied the bank sloped evenly. His horse could get up.

Thunder rolled across the plain and the animal plunged. For a few moments Lawrence tried to soothe the horse; and then somebody pushed through the brush and he thought he distinguished a woman's dark figure.

"Where is the log?" she asked.

"Five or six yards off—but you can't get across."

"It looks as if I must try," she rejoined and began to push past him, but Lawrence seized her.

"You can't make it! The bark is slippery with rain, and if you got to the other end, you would be forced to jump. Is there not a new bridge?"

Lightning glimmered behind the trees, and for a moment the thin trunks and the woman's figure cut the blue illumination. She was tall and lightly built, but that was all he saw, for his frightened horse forced him to let her go. Lawrence thought her young, and she did not talk like a prairie girl. A relation of Mrs. Ogilvie's from Toronto, perhaps. Pulling the horse, he blocked her path to the log.

"The water is on the bridge," she said. "There is no rail and the stringers are covered. When I crossed in the afternoon the road was dry, but I expect a cloud has burst upstream. However, please let me pass."

"I think not. If you were at Willows, you ought to go back and stay all night. Take my horse. I'll send for it in the morning."

Heavy rain began, and he thought the girl laughed scornfully.

"When I can get across the log, I'm not going back for two miles in a storm like this."

"You cannot get across," Lawrence rejoined. "However, I expect my horse will carry us through and I'll take you up. I don't see another plan."

"My plan's safer. The current might carry us past the landing and a horse cannot climb a steep clay bank."

"Then you must start for Willows," said Lawrence, and when she tried to get past, pushed her back.

"Let me go! You are not entitled to meddle!" she exclaimed, and he got on the horse.

"I don't *want* to meddle," Lawrence replied. "There's no use in disputing, since my best argument is, I'm able to see you don't reach the log. If you are not going back to Willows, get up."

For a moment she hesitated. Then she gave him her hand, her shoe touched his boot, and she was up behind him.

"Put your arm round my waist," he ordered, and they plunged down the bank.

The water was not deep, but the current was savage and the bottom treacherous. The tired horse, carrying a double-load, stumbled awkwardly, and Lawrence was bothered to keep its head toward the proper spot. On the other side the landing was good, and with a plunge and a scramble the animal took the bank. The girl slipped from its back, Lawrence got down and seizing the bridle, pushed uphill through the wet underbrush. When they reached the top, rain beat the grass and he stopped.

"The wash-out is the worst I've known. Perhaps we were lucky to make the crossing."

"You feel you are entitled to boast? Well, if it's some comfort, I expect your plan was better than mine."

"The important thing is, we are on the proper side," Lawrence remarked. "At all events, the storm is pretty fierce, and if you are going to Ogilvie's, you will get there sooner on my horse."

Although he had doubted if she would agree, she rested her foot in his hand and he lifted her to the saddle. For a time he walked by the horse's side, and then the trail forked and lights shone in front. Lawrence stopped by a wire fence and the girl slipped from the horse.

"Now I am at home. Thank you, *Larry*."

"Margaret!" cried Lawrence. "But I like to finish a job. Where is the gate?"

"I must let you go," said Margaret in a firm voice. "My folks and yours are not friendly; when you have talked to George, I expect you'll

understand. . . . Besides, they'll be keen to see you. Good-night."

She vanished in the dark, and Lawrence mounted his horse. He was eager to get home, and his clothes were wet, but when he started he laughed. He certainly had not known Margaret; since she waved him good-bye four years had passed, but now that he thought about it, her obstinacy was typical. When they were boy and girl Margaret liked to rule.

After a time lights pierced the gloom, the horse stumbled across a plowed belt, and Lawrence saw indistinct buildings. When he got down at the kitchen door an old dog crept from a rug and growled, and a woman advanced. Her hair was white and her look was hard, but when the light touched Lawrence's face she smiled.

"Why, Larry! We didn't reckon on your making it before tomorrow and Jake was going in to meet you. Well, you're surely wanted, and since that's so, I allowed you'd be around."

Lawrence noted her satisfaction and he was moved. On the plains one does not pretend politeness, and he knew the old housekeeper's compliment was sincere.

"Then you have not forgotten me?" he asked.

"I helped raise you and I made your first clothes. My eyes are as good as another's; but if I was blind, I'd know your voice. Maybe we're not like your highbrow English friends, but we're stanch. Look at the dog!"

When Lawrence was at Fairholm the dog had followed his horse wherever he went. Now its eyes were dim and its movements were slow, but it pushed its white nose into his hand.

"But your clothes are wet and Jake must take your horse," Mrs. Blake resumed. "Go right up to your old room. I'll fix you with hot water and all you want."

She shouted for the hired man, and Lawrence started for the stairs. All he wore was soaked by rain and splashed by sticky gumbo mud; but when he reached the bottom of the steps a door opened and Millicent threw her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Larry, we knew if it was possible you would see George out, and now you have arrived even before you said you would! Besides, the storm was savage, and we imagined nobody could cross the creek— —"

Lawrence thrilled. Although when he got George's letter he had hesitated, he was glad to be at home and his sister's trust was flattering. Mrs. Blake, however, arrived with a lamp and a kettle and dry clothes, and, kissing Millicent, he went upstairs.

CHAPTER IV

LAWRENCE TAKES CONTROL

LAWRENCE'S supper was good, and when Mrs. Blake carried away the plates he took an easy-chair by the stove. Fairholm was a frame house, and although the rather large room had not the spaciousness and old-fashioned dignity he had known at Routendyke, he thought it home-like. The cordwood snapped cheerfully in the stove and he liked the resinous smell of the matchboarded walls. He was tired and he looked about with languid satisfaction.

George occupied a battered couch. He was a bigger man than Lawrence and five years older, but his face was pinched and his look was spiritless. At Fairholm one pulled off one's overalls in the evening and Lawrence remarked his brother's shabby clothes. In fact, he felt George looked beaten.

Millicent was sewing. She was an attractive girl, but one rather noted her thoughtful calm than her beauty. Before Lawrence went to England a young Government surveyor was sometimes at the farm, and when he was ordered west Millicent received letters from him. Then the letters stopped, and one from a comrade told her Grant was killed by a snowslide in the Rockies. Lawrence did not know if Grant was her lover; he imagined nobody knew, for Millicent used a proud reserve. Anyhow, she was a good sister; kind and quiet, and efficient in all she undertook.

"I expect you *dined* at Routendyke?" she said. "Formal servants waited on you. You wore evening clothes?"

"That is so. After a time, I liked it," Lawrence agreed with a twinkle. "Perhaps one inherits something—for I think I was soon a typical Englishman. In fact, on the train and at Winnipeg I felt myself a stranger. I wanted the mill-hands' burring talk, and the ugly, smoky town. The queer thing is, when I got on the horse at the settlement the strangeness went. The smell of wet grass and gumbo soil was soothing; the prairie was home. Well, my glad-rags are at Routendyke. In the morning I'll put on overalls and harness a plow-team."

"After all, you are Canadian, and in the summer the plains are beautiful," Millicent remarked with a smile.

Somehow Lawrence was sorry for her. Millicent had grace and a queer tranquil charm. Routendyke was her proper background, but since she came back from Toronto school all she knew was the lonely homestead. Lawrence thought her older than she ought to be, and perhaps she was quieter than before. Yet Millicent did not grumble.

"We'll talk about the Old Country another time," he said. "It looks as if Ogilvie planned to entangle us. Why did you trust him, George? He was father's enemy, although I don't know when the quarrel began."

"The old man was not a good mixer," George replied in a thoughtful voice. "The hired men liked him, but he did not forget he was a British officer, and I think he felt he must hold on to Army traditions. His rule, so to speak, was feudal, and he frankly hated the greedy, pushing commercialism for which Ogilvie stands. Besides, you know when he got mad he was not at all polite——"

George laughed, and lighting his pipe, resumed: "Then I imagine at the beginning Ogilvie wanted Fairholm. Our block, sloping south, lies better than his, but we got here first. Yet I don't know that the fellow's altogether revengeful; he concentrates on dollars, and if he did indulge in a red-blooded passion, his revenge must pay. Well, we wanted a bridge and Ogilvie was plausible; if we made a proper job and cut a road through the bluff, he reckoned the Government would stand for it. The Government did not, but the road cost us much and I couldn't meet the bill. Then he rather bluffed me, and we bought the tractor, gangplows, cultivators, and so forth. You see, I was his debtor, and when I wanted to plow he was using the machines——"

Lawrence knitted his brows. George was a good farmer, but one got a hint of slackness; he trusted people, and let things go. When he resumed his embarrassed apology, Lawrence began to see he must take control. Ogilvie had worked on the other's trustfulness, and until the debt was large George did not know him for a merciless creditor. Besides, the seasons were bad and the crops were poor.

"From the beginning I was up against it, and my luck has not yet turned," George went on. "In the rush at harvest the binder team knocked me down, and when I was wanted most I was forced to keep my room. Then, before the snow melted, I started one morning for the bluffs to haul out some logs and a blizzard hit the plain. We lost a horse and when Jake got me home I was frozen nearly stiff. The consequence was pneumonia, and I think the frost got at my damaged leg. Now that seed-time is on us, to get about is awkward and in the evenings I must stick to my couch. I'm sorry, Larry, because I feel I've let you down."

"Although you allowed George to take the farm, you are our partner, Lawrence," Millicent remarked in a quiet voice.

For a few moments Lawrence pondered and Millicent studied him. The humorous boyish carelessness she had known was gone; his look was thoughtful and rather stern. She liked his firm mouth and level glance. Moreover, he was rather a handsome young fellow and she thought he carried the stamp of Old Country cultivation.

"It's done with, George, and perhaps my being your partner helps," he said. "Well, you gave Ogilvie a short-date mortgage and he claims his debt?"

"The loan runs out in six days. I think he wants the farm and he has power to sell."

"Then, we must meet the bill, but we'll wait for Ogilvie to bring the documents across."

"Can you meet the bill?" George asked in an anxious voice.

"Sure," said Lawrence quietly. "All the same, to pay Ogilvie does not wipe out our debt. The sum he gets we owe Orthwaite, and until all is paid we must use some effort."

"Stephen Orthwaite will not bother us. The old fellow's rich," George remarked with obvious relief.

Lawrence's mouth got firmer and Millicent gave him a meaning glance. It looked as if she implied he could reckon on her support.

"The debt will bother me. In the meantime we must try to cut down Ogilvie's claim, and when you have given me particulars I'll see a Brandon lawyer. Then I want to know what seed and teams you've got. We must sow as large a crop as possible. Bad years go by cycles, and I think we'll bet on the summer's being good."

"Then you are going to stay and see me out?"

"I have six months' leave. Afterwards I don't know——" said Lawrence thoughtfully. "Anyhow, Fairholm's ours and we hold all we've got."

"You are rather like the old man, Larry," George remarked with a touch of emotion. "If you want to run the farm, I won't grumble. I'm certainly not justified to boast about my job. But I expect you are tired. In the morning we'll talk about it again."

They did so and when Lawrence had made some calculations he started for the railroad. For two or three days he was occupied at the offices of agricultural machinery dealers, seed merchants, and real estate agents, and soon after he returned Ogilvie, one morning, beat on the kitchen door.

Mrs. Blake, washing the breakfast dishes, looked up.

"Well? What do you want?"

"I want George Elliot. I reckon he expects me."

"Then, you'll wait, and you can take off your hat," the housekeeper rejoined. "You don't own Fairholm yet, and maybe you won't. When I'm through, I'll let Mr. George know you are around."

For two or three minutes she resumed her occupation, and then going to the door of the living-room, motioned to Ogilvie. Ogilvie went in. George, smoking his pipe on the couch, gave him a nod but did not get up. Lawrence was at the table, about which were scattered some documents and calculations. He wore a blue shirt, brown overalls, and long boots, but he did not altogether look like a prairie farmer and Ogilvie's glance got thoughtful. He knew George Elliot, but the young fellow was another type.

Lawrence quietly studied the old man. Ogilvie was tall and lean; his clothes were shabby and his skin was brown. Although he rather obviously labored in the fields, his look was forceful and commanding. Lawrence knew him unscrupulous and something of a bully, but for all his truculence, the old fellow was dignified.

"Your mortgage has run out," Ogilvie remarked.

"That is so," George agreed and indicated a chair. "I expect you have brought the document?"

Ogilvie noticed his coolness, but when George gave the long envelope to Lawrence he frowned.

"The deal was fixed with you. If your brother's interested, I don't know as he mayn't stay, but I don't stand for his butting in."

"Lawrence is going to stay," George rejoined, and his face got red. "So far, the house is mine, and my brother inherited a joint share with me."

It looked as if Ogilvie was unpleasantly surprised, but Lawrence signed George.

"My inheriting is important, Mr. Ogilvie, and perhaps George ought to have let you know before. You see, my agreement was not asked, and in the circumstances, I doubt if the mortgage would stand."

"You don't get me like that, but if you try to put your bluff across, I'll see your brother pays for cheating."

Lawrence smiled. "To do so might cost you something, and I think we might risk it. However, George got the money and we don't dispute our debts——"

He studied the document for a few minutes, and then pushed a paper across the table.

"George and you speculated in a tractor and some expensive implements. The machines were kept at your farm and George was refused their proper use. It looks as if you planned to force him into your debt. Well, we want the tractor and the disc-harrows. If we agree to meet the mortgage, they must be sent across."

"Can you meet the mortgage?" Ogilvie inquired.

Lawrence gave him a letter from his bank.

"The manager's statement ought to satisfy you, but if we agree, my lawyer will hand yours the sum and see the mortgage is properly discharged. In the meantime, there's another thing. You forced George to put up a fence and cut a six-foot ditch. The bill for material and labor was large, and since the job was a boundary job, for our mutual benefit, we expect you to pay half."

"Suppose I will not?" Ogilvie asked in a truculent voice.

"Then I think we'll let you foreclose and sell the farm. I imagine you have long wanted Fairholm."

Ogilvie wondered whether Lawrence bluffed. He did not know, but he saw his plans would not work and anger carried him away.

"I certainly wanted Fairholm. My habit is to look ahead, and the small man's day is gone. Cheap wheat will break him; ox-team farming is not an economical proposition. He's the storekeeper's servant and the man he borrows from takes his crop. You want a long furrow, and where a hick uses muscle you must use machines. You talk about co-operation! No, sir. A live man's job is not to carry along the slobs. He's not going to stop for the slowest; he shoves right ahead. The old-time quarter-section fellow has got to quit. The big farm, run on modern lines, will knock him out."

He stopped and Lawrence pondered. The fellow was obviously sincere and perhaps he did not exaggerate. Lawrence knew his ambition and imagined he had qualities that help an ambitious man. Ogilvie was calculating, unscrupulous, and indomitable; in fact, he was not the sort of neighbor an impoverished farmer liked. After a few moments Ogilvie resumed:

"When your father got going at Fairholm I wanted him to join up with me. He was a hustler and a live man; I reckon we'd have made a strong combine. I saw us driving a straight furrow across both blocks. In ten years we'd have run a model farm and owned a big bank-roll. Well, he turned my offer down. I guess he was a highbrow Englishman, and the money he ought

to have used for plows he spent on his homestead and smart furniture. When he died I made you a square proposition to take the farm. You refused, and you're going to be sorry. You can't hold on to Fairholm. You haven't the capital."

"We are willing to try," said Lawrence. "At all events, Fairholm's ours, and if you want the farm you must give a proper price. From your point of view, there's the trouble. If we let you foreclose, the sale must be public and settlers looking for improved farms are pretty numerous. The real estate brokers at Brandon and Winnipeg have long inquiry lists. In the circumstances, perhaps you ought to agree with us."

Ogilvie studied the accounts Lawrence gave him, in which the cost of fencing and road-making was calculated; and then looked up with a frown.

"I'll stand for my half and send the tractor across. My agent will see yours and wipe out the mortgage. All the same, if you had stayed in the Old Country, I'd have beaten George."

He went off, and George smiled an apologetic smile.

"It's very possible. The fellow does not boast."

CHAPTER V

PLAYMATES

A FRESH northwest wind swept the plain, and soft white clouds rolled across the sky. Swift shadows touched the springing grass, and where they passed, the gleaming sides of the long plow furrows faded to chocolate-brown. The sun was hot and the dust that tossed about the disc-harrows stuck to Lawrence's skin. Since seven o'clock he had steered the big horses across the summer fallow, and he began to think he had got soft in the Old Country. His long boots galled his feet, his back ached, and he wondered when Millicent would call him to dinner.

Yet he was frankly happy. The sun and wind were bracing, and after the dingy office and noisy mill, the wide plain called. Back to the far horizon, all was fresh and green, and he got a sense of space and freedom he had not known for long. Then at Fairholm one did not bother about one's clothes, and the blue shirt and threadbare overalls he had borrowed from George were light and loose upon his athletic body.

At the headland the team stopped, and he looked about. The sun was south, and fifty yards off, sparkling ripples rolled across a little pond. On the other side, a bluff dotted by fresh leaves gave a narrow belt of shade and blackbirds with golden wings fluttered about the trees. Across the wide belt of plowed land a tossing dust-cloud marked the tractor's path, and when the wind dropped one heard the engine throb and the multiple harrows clank.

Lawrence smiled. So far, he had beaten Ogilvie, but he imagined he had not yet done with the fellow. Then he pulled out his watch. Since breakfast he had stayed with his laborious job, and now perhaps he was justified to let the horses drink and stop for dinner. He loosed the harness and followed the thirsty animals into the water as far as his boots would allow, for sometimes when the sun is hot a plow-team will not leave a sloo.

Leaning against one's shoulder he began to light his pipe, and then dropped the match, for a girl on a young horse rode from behind the bluff. She used a man's saddle, her figure was light, and her riding-clothes went in smooth, flowing lines. Her boots were long and her hat was a man's wide Stetson. She was nearly as tall as Lawrence, and although her eyes twinkled she gave him a level glance. Margaret carried herself nobly, but one rather

sensed pride and firmness than womanly gentleness. Lawrence pulled off George's battered hat.

"Hello, Larry!" said Margaret. "You know me now?"

"The ravine was dark and I was bothered by my horse," Lawrence replied in an apologetic voice.

"Oh, well," said Margaret, "I did know you. One's voice does not alter much, and then your obstinacy was a useful guide; but perhaps you call it firmness? At all events, you ought to be flattered."

Lawrence saw the implication, but he knew Margaret. Sometimes when they were boy and girl her remarks had annoyed him.

"My apology is, when I thought about you I pictured my old pal—the brown-skinned jolly kid who rode about the plains with me before she went to school at Winnipeg."

"At *Montreal*. Well, I doubt if I was always jolly. Sometimes we quarrelled and you called me Wildcat Meg. However, for you to keep my picture's something, although you did not know the model."

Lawrence's mouth curved in a humorous smile.

"Perhaps I'm not very bright, but I didn't reckon on finding the girl I thought about was nobly tall and dignified. You must allow for my four years' absence, although you have not much grounds to approve my compliment."

"Oh, well, perhaps I forced you to be polite. And you are not altogether the boy I knew. You went to Sheffield, in England, did you not?"

"It's not important, but Routendyke is near Blackburn, in Lancashire," Lawrence rejoined.

The horse lifted its wet mouth and smelled at his coat. Lawrence pulled a crust from his pocket for the animal, and now his head was partly turned, Margaret gave him a searching glance. She saw his boyishness was gone; when he did not smile his look was sober. Although she imagined he wore his brother's clothes, his unconscious pose was firm and graceful. One got a hint of alertness and resolution. Margaret admitted he was rather a handsome young fellow.

Lawrence suddenly looked up.

"When one remembers them, the old days were golden," he said. "One did not bother, and somehow the sun was always shining. I expect we didn't know the prairie was beautiful, but unconsciously we felt its charm. Sometimes in Lancashire I recaptured the days when I stole the old man's rifle and we crept through the grass after sandhill cranes. We did not shoot a

crane, but perhaps you remember the morning we thought I shot Gordon's horse. Then in summer we went to the Butte for wild strawberries and your hands and mouth were red—— In winter, we hauled my toboggan to the ravine and disputed about the proper spot for a slide. Well, the strawberries at the Butte will soon get ripe, but we will leave them alone; and if a toboggan pitched you into a snow-bank, I expect you'd get mad."

Margaret laughed, but her look was gentle.

"Were you not happy in Lancashire?"

"After a time, I liked it at the factory," Lawrence replied in a thoughtful voice. "My job interested me and I was ambitious; I saw I had got my chance and I must make good. All the same, I'd a sort of half-conscious notion it was not my proper job, and I might be forced to let it go. I felt I might be wanted at Fairholm."

"Then, you are not going back?"

"I'd sooner go back, but I may not. You see, George and I inherited Fairholm, and the old man loved his farm. You must carry your load, so long as you are satisfied the load is properly yours. Well, I'm not much of a philosopher and I mustn't bore you—— In winter the plains are dreary. Did you not want to stay in Montreal?"

Margaret's look was gently humorous. Lawrence was rather naive, but she knew him sincere.

"The skating-rinks and toboggan-slides were splendid fun, and sometimes on summer evenings one went up the mountain with a jolly party —— You see, I did not come home for holidays. I stayed with friends on Sherbrook and theirs was a beautiful city house. For all that, I, like you, began to think I had another occupation. It looked as if my mother needed me."

Mrs. Ogilvie was not much about and did not go to Fairholm; but Lawrence knew her for a quiet, tired woman. Since she was something of an invalid and Ogilvie was hard and domineering, he imagined she might need her daughter's support. Then Margaret turned her head and saw the dust that rolled across the plowed belt. Her smile vanished.

"You are using the tractor? To baffle my father was something of an exploit!"

"All I did was to pay our debt. The dispute has not much to do with us."

"I wonder——" said Margaret, and Lawrence felt the friendliness that had marked their talk was gone. "Your relations and mine are hostile, and so long as I am at home I must play for my side. However, it looks as if you were plowing for a big crop?"

"We will sow every rod of ground we can break. For the last lot we must use the new quick-ripening wheat."

"The new seed is expensive," Margaret remarked. "If George had got the tractor sooner, it would have helped. I expect he was lucky when you came back."

"After all, we can buy the proper stuff, and something must be risked. Parsimonious farming does not pay, and I'm betting on a first-class crop."

"But suppose the crop is not first-class?"

"Then, I imagine Mr. Ogilvie will get Fairholm," said Lawrence dryly.

A touch of color came to Margaret's skin, but she gave him a level glance.

"Your nerve is good, Larry," she said, and stopping for a moment, resumed: "Millicent may get a friend. Did you know Spiers was married a few days ago?"

"Why, yes. I met the girl on the train. She's an Englishwoman."

"But, so far as I know, Spiers has not gone back to the Old Country since he arrived in Canada."

Lawrence pondered. In the circumstances, Margaret might think Spiers' getting an English wife was strange. He saw she was interested, but his business was not to enlighten her.

"Mrs. Spiers certainly is English, but that's all I know."

Margaret's glance got rather keen, but she said carelessly: "Well, I am sorry for her. After an Old Country home, Pine Creek will be something fresh. But George has stopped his harrows and perhaps you ought to go for dinner. Good-bye, Larry."

She started her horse, and Lawrence led his team across the grass. His look was thoughtful and he went slowly. Although he was not an artist, he thought Margaret beautiful. Yet, to some extent, she was the brown-skinned girl he knew. His little pal's temper was frankly hot, and when Margaret talked about the tractor her eyes had sparkled. Then her touch of haughtiness was perhaps but Ogilvie's truculence, so to speak, refined, and he knew her firm and stanch. There was the trouble, because Ogilvie was not his friend.

Well, if he could put all straight for George, he might go back to Lancashire, and in the meantime to dwell on Margaret's queer attraction might be rash. He must concentrate on the task he had undertaken, and in order to banish his disturbing thoughts, he speculated about Spiers and Helen. He must ask Millicent to go across. Pine Creek was lonely and Mrs. Spiers might need a friend.

Helen, in fact, did need a friend. As a rule, she had with stubborn courage faced dreariness and poverty, but when, on the evening of her wedding-day, Spiers' team carried them across the plain she was frankly daunted. The mud of the recent thaw crusted the wagon wheels, a spring of the seat one fitted across the rails was broken and the jolts were violent. Then as they labored over a sand-belt the harness broke and Spiers was some time making the damage good.

At the beginning of the long drive he had joked, and Helen had tried to play up. Now they were quiet and his look was rather grim. He was sorry for the thin, white-faced girl whom, when befogged by liquor, he had called from the Old Country. To some extent he had cheated her, and he had got a wife he did not want and could not support. Yet, when she arrived, his very mixed emotions were marked by some relief. After all, his luck was better than he was justified to expect.

On the plain's northwest edge the dull red sunset shone; the wind had dropped and the tranquil sky was luminously green. Little bluffs dotted the rolling grass, and in the hollows silver sloos reflected the light. The evening was fresh, and only the beat of horses' feet disturbed the brooding calm. The spacious landscape, however, did not interest Helen, and she moodily reviewed her wedding-day.

When Geoffrey met her in the bleak hotel dining-room his look was kind and she knew his voice was cultivated. Helen was rawly ambitious and she indulged a little triumphant thrill. Her satisfaction, however, soon was tempered, for she began to sense slackness, and she saw his clothes were old and shabby; she did not know they were made in England, six or seven years before, and but for his winter outfit were all he had. In Lancashire, poor people bought new clothes for a wedding. Moreover, although everybody at the settlement seemed to be Geoffrey's friend, she soon saw he was not important and people thought his marrying a first-class joke.

The wedding was at a very small wooden church with a ridiculous tower in which a round hole was cut, and the young, brown-skinned minister was rather like a plowman than a dignified English vicar. Everybody went: store clerks and their employers, blacksmiths, hotel waitresses, and grimy brakesmen from a big freight-train. For the most part, they wore slate-colored shirts and working overalls.

Then the wedding-feast was the usual dinner at the rather dirty hotel: hard steak, fried potatoes, and a slab of pie for dessert. The guests were the boarders, and their noisy banter jarred. Helen was marked by a queer, perhaps instinctive, refinement. She began to feel she had been cheated. After all, for a woman her wedding is an important event.

When dinner was over they got on board the shabby wagon and Geoffrey started his rough-coated team. The little houses by the railroad got indistinct and Helen, jolting about awkwardly, saw a high windmill-pump, two or three small homesteads, and a vast sweep of rippling grass. All was somehow flat and dreary. Then the battered harness broke, and for a long time she sat forlornly in the wagon's shade. Now the sun was low, the team went faster, and Helen understood they would soon be at home.

Spiers imagined Pine Creek was not the home his wife had pictured. Perhaps he ought to have warned her; in fact, he wondered whether he ought not to have stopped the wedding. He frankly did not know. The tired, highly-strung girl had borne a five-thousand-mile journey in order to marry him, and she had not a friend in Canada. On the whole, to let things go and trust their luck was perhaps the proper plan.

The horses climbed a rise, and at the top he indicated a curving belt of trees.

"Pine Creek!" he said.

Helen looked up. Behind the trees, as far as she could see, the grass rolled back into the sunset. The wide plain was horribly lonely. A gaggle of brant geese trailed across the sky, and little gophers, like squirrels, ran about by the trail. That was all. Then Spiers used the whip, wheels rattled, the spring-seat groaned, and they plunged down the slope.

CHAPTER VI

HELEN RESOLVES TO FIGHT

SPIERS had gone to the stable and Helen occupied the top of her cheap tin trunk. Her lips trembled and when she beat the dust from her clothes her hand shook. To cry like a tired child would be some relief, but she dared not, and she tried for calm and forlornly looked about. To begin with, she did not see where to put her coat and hat; the only mirror was Spiers' broken shaving-glass, and the washstand was a tin basin on a board at the door. A ragged, stained towel hung on a nail.

The small house was built of birch logs, notched at the corners. The joints were chinked with moss and clay and the walls were not boarded. Two bent-wood chairs were obviously new, but the dust on the seats was thick, and it looked as if Spiers used an old box. A cracked stove occupied the middle of the floor and the pipe pierced the roof; a ladder went up the wall to a square hole in the bedroom floor. The room behind the kitchen was blocked by cordwood, old harness, and broken boots. Helen saw a few cracked plates on a shelf and some cut potatoes and brown grease in a sooty frying-pan.

For long she had been frugal, but she had not known poverty like this, and she was tired and daunted. Moreover, in Lancashire one cleaned one's house. Helen could go without, but she hated slackness and neglect, and she began to be angry. Her husband's poverty was a loafer's poverty and she felt he had tricked her. When he came back from the stable her mouth was ominously tight.

Spiers pulled some groceries from a bag, and, going to the stove, rubbed his knife on his boot.

"I thought I'd cut a fire-stick, but it's gone," he said. "However, the cordwood's dry, and we'll soon get a light."

The wood began to snap, and he put on the table a dark-colored, doughy loaf.

"I meant to bring some cakes from the settlement, but Mrs. Jeans wasn't baking and all I could get was a slab of pie at the hotel," he resumed, and frowned. "Looks as if the meat cans had broken through the crust! However, one mustn't be fastidious, and I think the bread is pretty good."

Helen did not, and when he picked up the knife he had sharpened on his boot she stopped him.

"Take another knife. And when you sit down for supper, don't you tidy yourself?"

"Sorry, my dear!" said Spiers in an apologetic voice. "Once on a time I changed my clothes, but the boss grumbled and the boys were ironical. All the same, the rule's a good rule. May I take your coat and hat?"

She gave them to him, and he went up the ladder and then outside. When he came back his brown skin shone and he carried the tin basin into the other room and gave Helen his cracked shaving-glass.

"Thank you," she said, and firmly shut the door.

The cold water was bracing and when she rejoined Spiers he served the food. Helen's appetite was not keen and she was quiet. When his was satisfied she faced him with ominous calm.

"Now we must talk— — To begin with, why did you send for me?"

Spiers looked at her with some surprise; and then humorously indicated the untidy room.

"For one thing, I liked your portrait, ma'am. My other grounds are rather obvious."

"You wanted a wife? *Any* wife! Somebody who would cook for you and clean your house!"

Spiers' eyes twinkled and Helen blushed, for she saw the retort she had provoked. Spiers, however, let it go.

"Good cookery is not a drawback, but, as you have perhaps remarked, I do not bother much about housecleaning. I think I wanted a woman's sympathy and encouragement. On the plains, to grow wheat is a fight and sometimes a lonely man feels he's beaten. I thought a wife might help me brace up and smile when I must take a fresh knock. Hard knocks are pretty frequent, and you can see I have got slack. Well, perhaps you have undertaken a daunting job!"

Helen was moved. His argument was moving, and to some extent she thought him sincere, but while his need for a wife was obvious, she felt there was something she did not yet know. For a few moments she brooded and Spiers waited.

She rather vaguely acknowledged herself an adventuress. She had not altogether wanted a husband; broken by illness and poverty, she had wanted a home. Helen was primitive and her instincts were domestic. Well, she had

got a husband, but she had not got a home, and she felt she had been cheated. Besides, she was tired and highly strung.

"You were not honest. You told me your farm was good," she said.

"Pine Creek is a good farm. The drawback is, I cannot buy the machines and horses and hire the help I need."

"Don't you think you need some furniture?" Helen rejoined. "All I see is two chairs and a shaky table. Then one cannot cook with burned pans; and the plates are cracked."

Looking about drearily, she stated the articles she thought would satisfy a frugal housekeeper.

"That's the very least," she said firmly. "But what about your neighbors? I suppose their wives will come to see me?"

"Mrs. Gordon, at Willows, will soon be across. She's a Canadian, and I expect you'll like her. Millicent Elliot's rather the English type; Lawrence promised he'd ask her to look you up. I don't know about Margaret Ogilvie. The Ogilvies are a queer lot. However, Willows, and Fairholm are but two or three miles off."

"And that's all?"

Spiers nodded, and Helen looked straight in front. All she had known of England was the manufacturing town: noisy streets, rows of shops, and pushing crowds. In the morning the factory whistles screamed and the pavements rang to the beat of ironed clogs. She hated to be alone, and the quiet prairie frightened her.

"One neighbor's a Canadian," she said in a shrill voice. "I think I hate Canadians. When we were married they laughed! The other's not my sort—you see, I met Mr. Elliot. He is your sort; I mean the sort I suppose you were."

The blood came to Spiers' skin, but Helen was willing to hurt and she laughed, a jarring laugh.

"I don't want Mrs. Gordon, and I expect Miss Elliot will have nothing to do with me. Nobody's left but the Ogilvies, who are queer! Well, what about our furniture? In England, the things I want would cost——"

She began to calculate, and when she stopped Spiers' glance was deprecating.

"In Canada, twice the sum would not meet the bill. I'm afraid you must go without."

"But need you pay at once? Will not the people wait until you sell your corn?"

Spiers mechanically stuffed his pipe. Helen's face was pinched and white, but her mouth was firm. In a way, perhaps, the furniture was not important; he rather thought she faced a crisis, and dared not be beaten. He was sorry for her, but the crisis must be faced.

"When the wheat is harvested, my creditor will take the lot, and he may claim the farm. In the meantime, nobody would lend me five dollars."

"Then, Pine Creek is not really yours?"

"The mortgage soon runs out. I may be allowed to carry on, but all I get must go for groceries and tools, and I might be forced to quit."

Helen leaned against the table, as if she needed support. Her hands shook, but her eyes sparkled and her face got red.

"The wedding-day I dreamed about was not like this! You deceived me; but since you knew I'd find out, I don't understand——" she said, and brooded over the puzzle.

Spiers said nothing. He was resolved her curiosity must not be satisfied, and Helen resumed in a dreary voice:

"Well, I cannot go without some friends, and I cannot live at Pine Creek. My home in Lancashire was poor, but yours is squalid. Then, I'm not your sort; the sort of girl you'd like would not marry you. If I stayed, you'd soon get bored, and when I saw you were sorry I'd hate you. However, there's no use in talking. I'm not going to stay!"

"Very well," said Spiers. "If you are resolved, I expect I must agree. All the same, you are my wife, and I'm responsible for you. Perhaps I can get you a post at the settlement, but until something's fixed Pine Creek must be your home. When you have rested, and are fresh we'll talk about it again. In the meantime, all the house is yours and I will not disturb you. In the West we're a primitive lot, and I have camped in a barn before."

He got a light, and carried Helen's trunk up the ladder. Coming back, he put the lamp on the table, and gave her a smile.

"Perhaps the situation's humorous, although I'm sorry you must pay for the joke. In the morning we may see a plan. Good-night."

He went off, and making a bed in the haymow, lighted his pipe. To smoke was risky, but if he burned the rude shack, the loss would be his creditors'. He was sorry for Mrs. Spiers and rather ashamed for himself; but he had borne some strain, the smell of peppermint in the hay was soothing, and he was soon asleep.

In the morning he fed his plow-team, and carrying a bucket to the well, saw smoke float about the homestead roof. He had meant to light the stove, but Mrs. Spiers had got up sooner than he thought. Anyhow, he must give

the horses a drink, and perhaps the proper line was to leave her alone as long as possible. A few minutes afterwards Helen came to the door.

"Breakfast is waiting!" she called.

Spiers went in and looked about with surprise. The room was clean, the table was white, and the cracked plates shone. Moreover, although the storekeepers at the settlement refused him generous supplies, the food was appetizing. It looked as if Mrs. Spiers had some talent for housekeeping, but he wondered how long she had been at work.

Her face was pale, but when she noted his surprise she smiled. Then her clothes were fastidiously neat, and although he had expected to see her dull and tired, her look was fresh. All the same, she did not talk and Spiers found conversation hard. The pale, quiet girl embarrassed him.

"I'll help you wash the dishes; and then I suppose I ought to start for the settlement," he said.

"To wash dishes is a woman's business—and you were at the settlement yesterday."

"I don't want to go. I ought to plow. Summer is short, and the wheat must be sown," Spiers replied, and added awkwardly: "For all that, you said you could not stay here, and I might get you a post at the drygoods store. Perhaps you know something about material for women's clothes?"

"I was rather a good milliner," said Helen, in a quiet voice.

Spiers hesitated. "Well, Nelson wants a store clerk, but if you are not very keen to get off, we might wait—from Lancashire to Pine Creek is a long journey, and you ought to rest. I will not disturb you, and you must leave the house alone. We'll sort of picnic, and you can loaf about in the sun. In fact, to stay for a week or two might tone you up. Besides, I really must push on with my plowing."

"Then you need not go today," said Helen, and turned her head.

Spiers went off. He thought his satisfaction strange, but to know he would not come back to a lonely house was something. He liked Mrs. Spiers' pluck, and although he had cheated her, she was not revengeful.

Some time after he harnessed his team, Helen went out, and sat down on a sunny bank. Since she arrived at the settlement her courage had been hardly tried, and sinking down in the warm grass she indulged her emotions.

By and by she looked up, flushed by embarrassment. A horse was tied to a tree, and a girl advanced across the grass. Her look was calm but sympathetic, and Helen knew she had noticed her wet, red face.

"Perhaps I ought not to bother you yet, but your farm is not far off, and I thought you might like to see me. I am Millicent Elliot," she said.

"You are kind," said Helen. "I met your brother on the train. But, if you don't mind, we won't go to the house. You see, I only arrived in the evening."

"Then I expect you found much to put straight. A bachelor farmer is not dainty," Millicent remarked with a twinkle. "Besides, your husband is my brother's friend, and we know the Pine Creek housekeeping. No doubt you got a shock."

Helen knew the other knew she had been crying, but one instinctively trusted Millicent. As a rule, Helen did not use much reserve, and she was very lonely.

"The house is dreadful," she agreed in a dreary voice. "If you have money, you can put things straight, but I have none, and I expect you know my husband is poor. On the train your brother tried to warn me, but I didn't understand. Now that I do, I begin to wonder——"

Millicent was pitiful. She saw the girl was daunted and she was very young. Moreover, she was not Spiers' type; but Millicent must not yet indulge her curiosity. Her business was to help the other.

"For the most part, the prairie farmers are poor. For long our farming was rude, and when the frost came soon it spoiled our crops. Now we are getting better seed and tools; but the new machines and methods are not cheap. A few years ago, a man who could build a log shack and buy an ox-team might begin to farm. Today one must plow long furrows and speculate in up-to-date implements."

"In England it's like that," Helen remarked. "The big shops break the little shops, and the old-fashioned mills must stop. Well, one hates to be beaten, and if you haven't much money, you must work and save. I know nothing about Canada, but I don't suppose loafing pays."

For a few moments Millicent was quiet. It looked as if Mrs. Spiers knew her husband. To champion him was Millicent's part, but she must not exaggerate, and some frankness might be useful.

"Geoffrey is a clever farmer, but for three or four years his luck, like ours, has not been good, and sometimes perhaps he's careless. When a man is alone and he labors for himself he becomes neglectful."

"He argues like that," said Helen, and gave Millicent a level glance. "Is carelessness all? I feel I ought to know."

Millicent hesitated. Her apology had not helped much. Helen saw her hesitation; and the blood came to her skin.

"I see—— You are his friend; but, after all, I am his wife. Where does he get liquor? At your house?"

"My brothers do not use liquor. I imagine all Geoffrey gets he gets at the settlement."

"Ah," said Helen, and her eyes sparkled. "That is something! So long as I am at Pine Creek, none comes to the homestead!"

The angry sparkle vanished and her color faded. It looked as if she pondered, and Millicent approved her resolution. The girl was hurt, and a stranger, but she was good stuff. Spiers perhaps had got a better wife than he deserved. How he had done so was another thing, but Millicent wanted to comfort Mrs. Spiers.

"Geoffrey is my brother's friend, and we know his useful qualities. Since we are flesh and blood, one must reckon on some drawbacks, but I expect you can help your husband conquer his."

"I wonder——" said Helen. "After all, you are not married. You don't really know."

"My lover was killed some time ago," Millicent replied quietly.

"Ah," said Helen, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt. But I see by your look he was worth loving. To love somebody you know, and trust, is not hard——"

There was the trouble. She did not know her husband, and so far she had not much ground to trust; but Millicent resumed:

"In the North all life is a struggle, and Canada is not the golden country the emigration people talk about. For a time I think the prairie farmers' fight will be stern, but those who hold on will get their reward. Then you admit you hate to be beaten—— Well, I mustn't philosophize. I expect you'd sooner know how we keep house."

She began to talk about domestic supplies, and when at length she went off, Helen was comforted. Her pluck was as good as another's, and since she had plunged into a rash adventure, she must not acknowledge herself daunted at the start. Besides, the morning was nearly gone, and she must cook her husband's lunch.

Spiers liked his lunch, but he was quiet, and Helen did not talk. She waited, and he soon went off to work. After supper in the evening he picked up a newspaper, and a tobacco plug, as if he were going out, but Helen stopped him.

"The house is yours, Geoffrey; I don't want it all. I expect you used to sit on the box and smoke."

Spiers turned and studied her. Helen's color was high, but her look was calm.

"I imagined you would sooner I went. Anyhow, the evening's fine, and until the mosquitoes get busy, I expect to be comfortable on a log by the bluff."

"Oh, well, so long as you are satisfied—— But I don't like to feel you cannot use your house. And suppose the evening isn't fine?"

"Then I'd be all right in the haymow."

Helen's eyes began to sparkle. To carry out her plan was harder than she had thought, and Geoffrey was very dull.

"Sometime you'll burn the hay—I saw broken matches and tobacco ash. Then, do you mean to stay in the mow for good?"

Spiers put down his newspaper and crossed the floor.

"I begin to see! You are not going?"

"Do you want me to go?" Helen inquired with a blush.

Spiers put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a searching glance. She turned her head, but he dared not take her in his arms, and he gently let her go.

"Although you are brave, my dear, perhaps you are making a rash experiment."

"I was afraid," said Helen. "When one is afraid, one is shabby. Now, if you are very kind, I think I'll risk it."

Spiers' emotions were rather mixed, but his satisfaction was sincere.

"Then, so far as I can, I must see your venture does not cost you too much. But it is a venture, and you must make some allowances——"

"I'll try; I think I mean *we* must try," said Helen, gently.

CHAPTER VII

SPIERS STOPS TO THINK

HELEN put up her sewing and stretched her arms. Geoffrey's clothes were neatly mended and she wondered whether he would notice that the ragged seam was stitched and buttons were where buttons ought to be. Perhaps he would not. As a rule, Geoffrey did not think about things like that, but Helen hated untidiness. Since he started for the settlement after breakfast she had been strenuously occupied, and now she looked about with rather proud satisfaction.

In Canada house-furnishings were horribly dear, and when Helen met the bill from the Toronto store she was bankrupt, but green curtains hung by the windows and a colored cloth covered the damaged table. Thin matting and a rug with a violent pattern occupied most of the cracked floor. Helen did not like the rug; her unsophisticated taste somehow was good, but she must not be extravagant. She had not asked Geoff for money. The sum she had used was hers, the reward for stern frugality in Lancashire. In fact, when Geoff got back he would not know his house, and she complacently pictured his surprise.

Helen faced the open door, and behind the blue smear along the prairie's edge the sunset was yellow and red. She thought the melting color pretty, but after a few minutes her eyes rested on the white chickens in the grass and the long-legged turkey poults. Helen's bent was practical and the fowls were her speculation; Miss Elliot declared that poultry paid. Anyhow, for her to earn some money would help, and she had given Geoffrey a box of eggs for the settlement.

She began to muse about her husband. His drawbacks were certainly obvious and her marriage was not at all the romantic adventure she had thought, but he was kind and she liked his cultivated politeness. Then, although she ought perhaps not to approve, his humorous carelessness had some charm. She knew she held him lightly, but if she used some tact, she began to think she might lead him where he ought to go. He, however, would soon be back and when she heard wheels rattle she went to the stove.

In order to celebrate her decorating the house Helen had cooked something like a feast and the food must be properly served. When all was

ready she turned to the door. Spiers' team had stopped and his figure and the horses cut the sunset. Against the fading green and red their silhouette was dark and sharp, and although his face was indistinct, Helen thought his hat was battered. Somehow the firmly lined picture jarred, but the jarring touch was not about the horses.

Spiers let go the reins and felt with his boot for the hub of the wheel. The hub, however, was not where he imagined, and when he tried a fresh spot it still eluded him. At length, after swinging his foot about cautiously, he smiled a triumphant smile. He had spotted the ubiquitous hub and he let go the wagon top. His foot missed the expected support and he sat down, with some violence, in the grass. The team started for the stable and Spiers swore.

Helen waited rather grimly. In Lancashire men sometimes came home like that, and the feast she had planned was spoiled. After a few moments Spiers got up. His advance was cautious, but he reached the door, and although to locate the hook bothered him, he hung up his hat. Then, giving Helen a complacent smile, as if he thought it something of an exploit, he seized a chair. Helen saw that his face was cut and his collar was broken. She was hurt and angry, but she used control. When Geoffrey could weigh her arguments she might relieve her mind.

"Did you take the eggs to the store?" she asked.

"Why, yes; I took them first, and I believe Hume paid me," Spiers replied, and pulled out three or four small bills and some silver coins. "In all your moods you're charming, but you have got a commercial vein."

"One of us must be business-like," Helen rejoined, and, taking the money, with some surprise noted the sum. "But you did not get so much for the eggs!"

"All's yours," said Spiers, smiling. "You see, when I went to the pool-room I was broke— —"

"Men like you do go broke at billiard-rooms," Helen remarked scornfully.

"Hotels are worse; I b'lieve I stated I was broke *when I went*. Well, I speculated two-bits of yours on a risky stroke, and I made it. So long as you know where to stop, liquor's not the handicap some people think. Anyhow, when the boys declared I could not pull off another awkward shot, I backed my luck. Now you have got the wad, I s'pose you won't use the money? To buy a new hat with a gambler's winnings is immoral?"

"To pay your debts is not immoral, and ours are large. Your hat is smashed and your face is cut. Was that done at the pool-room?"

"In the street, my dear. Not much room between the tables and Sam fired us out. Some people do not lose gracefully, and a brakesman made trouble. Well, one mustn't boast, but when he got up he admitted he had had enough."

Helen colored with humiliation. "Then, you were put into the street for fighting?"

"The room is Sam's. He shoo'd us out," Spiers agreed. "I got a small parcel for you. At all events, I had it when I left the settlement."

He began to feel about his coat, and then touched a bulging pocket and stopped. The parcel he wanted was not like the object his hand rested on, and since Helen studied him, he must not experiment.

"What about your horses?" she inquired.

"They've gone to the stable," Spiers replied. "Now I s'pose they want some corn and it's awkward. My head's as steady as a rock, but my legs are not."

For a few moments he concentrated on the door, as if to locate the opening, and then, launching forward, triumphantly got out. Helen let him go and stretched her arms across the table. Her hands were clenched and her mouth was tight. So far, for all her poverty, she had been *respectable*; the word meant much to her. Besides, she hated liquor and betting, and her hatred did not altogether spring from Puritanical philosophy. Helen had lived in shabby streets where a woman bears the cost of her man's indulgence. The feast she had cooked for her husband burned, but she brooded and left the smoking pans alone.

When it began to look as if Spiers was not coming back, she went to the stable. The building was a rude shed with turf walls and a birch-pole roof, but she remarked with some surprise that Spiers had loosed and fed his team. After all, he thought for his horses, though he did not think for her. Now he was rather noisily asleep in the trampled hay. Her glance searched him and after a moment or two she stooped and pulled from his pocket a thick bottle. The other pocket bulged. It looked as if Geoffrey had brought a good supply, and Helen reflected with stern satisfaction that she would baffle him.

The object she cautiously extracted was, however, a package, and when she cut the string she saw a pair of woman's gloves and a box of sweets. Putting back the packet, she got up and a strange sense of shabbiness brought the color to her face.

After all, Geoffrey had thought of her. He certainly ought not to bet and fight, but since he had done so, she was glad he had conquered the railroad

man. All the same, when her glance rested on the liquor her mouth was firm. Carrying off the bottle, she brought back Spiers' old skin coat, and when she had spread it over him, quietly stole away.

In the morning she smelt coffee, and when she got up the stove was burning, Geoffrey pulled a greasy rag through his rifle. His look was tranquil; Helen's was strained.

"Are you going to shoot?" she asked.

"I thought I might. The sandhill cranes are about and in a few days they'll start for the North. They're shy and know how far a shotgun carries, but sometimes you can pick one off with a rifle."

"But you ought to harrow the ground for the oats."

"Pulling the harrows is a heavy job and the horses were at the settlement," Spiers replied, and looked up with a smile. "Then I, myself, am not remarkably fresh. I expect you think there's the trouble?"

Helen saw he meant to give her the lead she wanted. Not to find him sullenly apologetic was some relief. But she must be firm.

"Perhaps you know how you came home last night?"

"I do not; I imagine the horses brought me. However, in order to help you out, I admit I was drunk."

"And you meant to keep it up? You were not satisfied with the liquor you got at the hotel," Helen rejoined.

She rested her clenched hand on the table as if for support. Her face was colorless and she was very thin. Spiers sensed her fragility and indomitable spirit.

"Oh, well, when the man's a wastrel, the woman perhaps is justified to search his clothes. Your search was obviously rewarded!"

"I felt I was shabby," said Helen, in a quiet voice. "I hated to meddle with your pockets."

"But you thought you ought?" Spiers remarked with a crooked smile. "Where you feel like that, you don't hesitate."

"I don't want to joke about it," Helen rejoined.

Spiers waited and rather sympathized. Her code was, no doubt, the code of some queer sect in Lancashire and she confused virtue with respectability, but she had a code and he had not.

"When you came home—like that—it hurt," she resumed. "I let you go to the settlement, but I did not expect you would drink with loafers and fight a railway hand. After all, you are a gentleman."

Spiers frowned. He was not entitled to be fastidious, but her rawness jarred.

"In Canada we are a democratic lot, my dear. I expect the brakesman is richer than I am, and since he got on board his train, he sticks to his job. In fact, he's no doubt a useful citizen. All my advantage was, I knew something about boxing but he did not."

"Then your going to a famous school and a university doesn't count?"

"On the plains, it does not count for much. Besides, they sent me down," Spiers rejoined with a twinkle, and remarked Helen's fixed, brooding look. Something she thought important must yet be said, and he would play up.

"Where did you put the liquor you took from me last night?" he asked.

"If you like, I'll tell you. But you must stop and think! If you force me to give up the stuff, I have done with you."

"You are bluffing, ma'am! You want to try your power?"

"Not at all," said Helen, and gave him a proud glance. "There is no use in pretending to be braver than I am. Another time I meant to go—— Now perhaps it would be harder; but I will not live with a drunkard and I hate a loafer."

Spiers' mouth was humorously crooked, but he knitted his brows. Helen's waiting for morning implied a rather remarkable control; for all her unsophisticated rawness, she had qualities—Perhaps it was strange, but sometimes she moved him to a queer, approving tenderness. If she went, the homestead would be lonely.

"I admit I bluffed; I did not really think you'd hesitate," he said. "Your scornful fearlessness is rather fine, my lady, and I give up the liquor. Perhaps to see me smash the bottle will be some satisfaction?"

"One mustn't be extravagant. The stuff is expensive, and useful if one is ill."

Spiers laughed, a frank, boyish laugh.

"You're unconsciously a first-class humorist, ma'am. But don't you think you're rash? Suppose, when you were not about, my easy virtue lapsed and I searched the house?"

"Dare you, Geoff? Now you know the consequences?"

Spiers gave her a sober glance. Helen was human, and perhaps she was entitled to enjoy her triumph.

"I might be tempted, but I expect your warning would help me resist."

Helen said nothing. She knew where to stop and she occupied herself at the stove. When breakfast was over, Spiers broke a packet of cartridges, and

she looked up.

"After all, you are going to shoot?"

"I thought I'd take the rifle and loaf about in the sun. Yesterday was pretty hectic," Spiers replied.

"Then, before you start, you might harness the horses. The field ought to have been harrowed some days ago."

"I doubt if you could handle the team."

"Since you are going shooting, I mean to try. The oats must be sown," said Helen firmly.

Spiers put up his rifle and got his hat.

"Oh, well, the job is not a woman's job. Your word goes, ma'am."

He went off and Helen smiled, a gentle smile, and let herself go slack. In a sense, she had perhaps bluffed Geoffrey, but she had not experimented. Had he resolved to stick to the liquor, she certainly would have gone; all the same, she had known he would not let her go. Well, that was something. If she could hold on, she might conquer; in fact, and there was the important thing, *they* might conquer.

Then she heard the harrows rattle and she began to pick up the plates. Victory was not yet and musing would not help. By and by Geoffrey would be back for dinner, the oven was in good order for baking, and she must get to work.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RECKONING

RED lilies dotted the rippling grass and the dark-green wheat rolled in the wind. The sun was hot but large clouds rolled across the sky, and Spiers thought another shower would soon refresh the soil; when he stopped his sweating horses he heard thunder in the west. As a rule, in the morning thin shadows sped across the grass; in the afternoon the clouds banked and for half an hour thunder rain soaked the hot turf. Then the sun shone, and the wheat's thick stalks and strong color promised a bumper crop.

Spiers, however, knew the stern Northwest. On the windy plains nature was not friendly, and he might soon be forced to take another knock, but when he loosed his horses he admitted he had not much grounds to grumble. Since breakfast he had plowed the summer fallow; turning in the burned stubble to fertilize the crop for which, if he were left alone, he would sow in spring. Now the sun was low and Helen must not wait supper.

After all, to feel one had stayed with one's job was some satisfaction, but Lawrence Elliot had helped him with teams and implements. Although Larry was generous, Spiers imagined Helen had something to do with it. Millicent was her friend and she was much at Fairholm. Perhaps it was strange, for Helen was not Millicent's type; but somehow people trusted and indulged her. In fact, Spiers acknowledged she ruled him and her rule was wise. Geoffrey smiled. If his relations in the Old Country knew, they would think it a first-class joke.

Then he looked up and saw Helen cross the grass. She carried a bunch of lilies and her clothes were blue and white print—stuff that until Helen touched it looked like a window shade. Spiers had watched her cutting and fitting the cheap material. The thin dress fluttered in the wind and he thought she carried herself well. Helen was short and light, and when she arrived at Pine Creek her face was pinched, but the sun had given her color and her boyish lines began to flow in gentle curves. It looked as if she bloomed, like the lilies, on the prairie soil. Stopping by the horses, she glanced about.

"The crop is good, Geoff."

"So far, it's the best I've grown. You brought me luck, my lady, but until we carry the sheaves to the thrasher we mustn't boast."

Helen was flattered. She had perhaps given him fresh energy and driving-force.

"You're not very hopeful," she remarked.

"I know the plains. The thistles are springing with the wheat, and we may get up against blight and hail and frost."

"The others are up against things like that, but they hold on, and Mr. Ogilvie is rich."

For a few moments Spiers brooded. As a rule, he was languidly philosophical, but since his marriage, ambitions he had thought he had done with had forced him to somewhat unusual effort. The crop was good; the drawback was, he had pawned it before it grew. For all that, he gave Helen a smile.

"Ogilvie has some useful qualities, although if you knew the fellow I doubt if you'd like me to take him for a model. A prairie farmer must fight for his crop, but Nature is not always his worst antagonist. Perhaps mine's extravagance. Anyhow, I must reckon with my creditor."

"If the crop was first-class, it would help you pay your mortgage," said Helen in a thoughtful voice. "Then I'm getting good prices for the chickens and eggs. Buck up, Geoff. Somehow we'll pay the debt."

She knitted her brows and Spiers studied her with rather pitiful humor. Although Helen's talent for business was better than his, she could not calculate. In Canada, she reckoned parsimoniously by English shillings. When she was forced to reckon by dollars, he thought she would get a jolt.

"In the meantime, I'd like my supper, ma'am," he said. "After the rain, the fallow's sticky. You had better ride across."

He lifted her easily to the horse's back, and they crossed the furrows to the edge of a curving bluff. At the corner by the homestead Spiers stopped and frowned, for a car sparkled in the sun and a man occupied the bench by the wall. The man was rather fat, his soft black hat was tilted back, and he rolled a cigar about his large, loose mouth. On the whole, his look was raffishly insolent, and when his glance rested on Helen she slipped from the horse's back. She had met Hart at the settlement and his bold politeness jarred. All the same, she remembered he was her husband's creditor.

"We did not expect you, Mr. Hart, but you must stay for supper," she said.

Hart got up and gave Spiers a meaning smile.

"I guess Geoff is not much surprised. Anyhow, you're kind, and since we got to talk, why I'll eat with you."

Spiers did not like the fellow's humor, and he rather thought the reckoning he for Helen's sake dreaded had arrived. One must, however, be hospitable, and while she served supper he joked with his guest. Hart did not eat elegantly and his host's suspense did not disturb his appetite, but at length he pushed back his plate.

"Mrs. Spiers is a bully cook, and if after we have fixed things she is willing, I'll look you up again," he said and pulled some documents from his wallet. "Run your eye over those figures, Geoff. I guess all's correct?"

Spiers gave the figures a careless glance, and although he was sorry for Helen, his calm was imperturbable. Helen soon must know he was done for, and on the whole, he would sooner Hart enlightened her. She was stanch, and when she knew his creditor he might reckon on her support.

"The sum is accurate," he agreed. "Well?"

"When are you going to pay?"

"If my luck is good, I'll pay something after harvest."

Hart rather noisily lighted his cigar. He did not ask Helen's leave, and rolling the cigar about his large mouth, he tilted his chair and stretched his legs. Spiers' annoyance was not obvious. He must take his punishment, and he noted Helen's hardening look. When the clown implied that he was boss he unconsciously played up. Helen, however, saw something she thought Spiers did not. In a way, it was ridiculous, but she felt Hart played for her applause.

"I can't wait," he said.

"You rather promised you would wait. When you supplied me with machines and money I might have gone without; there was a sort of understanding that so long as I paid the interest you would not hold me up."

"Oh, shucks!" said Hart. "You're not a fool, and I'm a business man. If I had agreed to something like that, you'd have got it in writing. If you reckoned you might bluff me afterwards, I'm not accountable."

He laughed, as if the other's hopefulness were a joke, and glanced at Helen. Hart knew more about her marriage than Spiers imagined, and frankly thought her a humble adventuress. Girls of her sort liked a swaggering conqueror.

"Anyhow, you got the money and the implements," he resumed.

"That is so. The money, at all events, was good. It went. The machines, particularly a repaired binder, did not."

"You examined the binder at my store."

"Oh, yes," said Spiers. "The crop was ripe, I could not wait, and you refused me a trial in the field. For obvious reasons, I could not order from the Toronto house. When your machine stopped I risked losing the crop."

He lighted a cigarette, and although his glance was fixed on Hart, Helen knew he meant her to weigh his remarks. The strange thing was, she felt both men waited her judgment.

"When you first entangled me I fell for a stale trick," Spiers resumed. "Easy credit for a trustful beginner; you pay when you sell your wheat! Well, perhaps you ran some risk, but you got the wheat; I got third-class implements at the price for a standard make. Then I wanted supplies for the winter, groceries and so forth, in order to plow in the spring. You fixed it, but when you took a mortgage your risk was gone. Nobody but you dared supply me; I was your man. My job was to earn the extortionate interest on a safe investment. If I did not do so, you could sell me up.

"Well, I tried. At one time I was hopeful. A bumper crop would lighten my load, but, as a rule, a beginner's crop is not good. The load got heavier and I reflected—. So far, you had got your interest, which would soon wipe out the sum you lent. My share was cheap clothes and food. The big, clean crop that might give me some hope of freedom did not arrive. Well, since there was not much use in working for my creditor, I'd frankly sooner loaf."

Helen's brows were knit and she looked straight in front, but she was acutely conscious of the others' hospitality. Geoffrey's object was not to taunt Hart. His apology was for her; he wanted to account for his slackness and she did not think he exaggerated much. In fact, she hated his bullying creditor.

"Talking cuts no ice," Hart remarked. "Money's tight; I can't wait for mine. What's your proposition?"

"Since I cannot pay, I must let you take the farm," Spiers replied.

He looked at Helen. He imagined she was badly jarred, but did not mean Hart to know. In the meantime, at all events, she was her husband's champion. Hart got up.

"I'll send you notice of foreclosure and fix about the sale. For Mrs. Spiers' sake, I'm sorry, because I sort of feel you have let her down. Had you been a live man, I might have tried to carry you on a while; but I dassen't take the chances. You're not the sort to hustle; you haven't got the guts."

Spiers gave him his hat. "I think you had better go. If there is something fresh to negotiate, send your lawyer. For you to come back would be very rash."

Hart went. His nerve was good, but he was getting fat, and when Spiers and the brakesman fought he was in the street; the railroad hand was a rather notorious warrior. Hart had some talent for business, but in other respects he was a raw, unscrupulous clown, and when he cranked the engine he scowled. His departure was not triumphant and the interview had not gone as he had planned.

All the same, Mrs. Spiers was a looker and her marriage was obviously a speculation. Young women of her sort emigrated in order to be married. Now she knew Spiers for an impoverished wastrel, she might be willing to mend her fortune. Hart thought his argument logical, but when he pictured her queer hard look he pondered. Anyhow, he was not yet baffled and he started his car.

Spiers heard the engine throb, and studying Helen, waited with some suspense. When all was quiet she looked up.

"You say nothing, Geoff. Are you *afraid*?"

"I'm not remarkably confident. If you were angry, it would not be strange. Are you angry?"

"Come here," Helen ordered, and when Spiers advanced she kissed him and gently pushed him back.

"Now you know," she resumed. "You left me to judge; you tried to show me Hart, when he was about, but you didn't defend yourself. Well, I watched the fellow and knew all was as you said. Sometimes you are rather clever, Geoff."

"Perhaps frankness pays. Anyhow, I took the line I saw."

Helen nodded, but her look was gentle.

"You didn't mean to persuade me? All you wanted was for me to weigh the facts. But, my dear, my business was not to judge. Oh, I know another time I was a selfish prig, and got savage because I was hurt. But it's done with. You are my husband and my business is to see you out. You ought to want to persuade me you are all I'd like."

"Since you are keen, the job would frankly beat me, ma'am," Spiers replied with a twinkle. "I have not much grounds to boast. All my apology indicated was that I am a careless fool, and when there was not much use in working I would sooner loaf. The fellow's remark was really justified. If I'd the guts, I'd have kept up the fight."

Spiers had rather expected Helen to rebuke him for his coarseness, but she did not. It looked as if she pondered. Anyhow, she was taking the hard knock nobly.

"Suppose Hart had not gone, but had said something else about your letting me down?" she asked.

"Oh, well, the brakesman was good, hard stuff, but Hart is rather like a jelly-bag. I expect you see the implication?"

Helen laughed, a queer, harsh laugh.

"One ought to think like a lady, but sometimes it's hard. If you had thrown out the fellow, I wouldn't have minded. Although fighting's *common*, I think I wanted to see him roll in the grass."

"If he arrives another time, I'll try to indulge you," Spiers replied.

Although he joked, he was puzzled, for Helen's look was strange. She was remarkably industrious, and so far as the few dollars she got allowed, she had labored to banish the bleakness of his house. At length, Pine Creek was home to her, but Hart claimed the farm. Yet Spiers felt it did not altogether explain her vindictiveness. He sensed a personal rancor, as if something touched herself.

"Unless you pay, we must go?" she said.

"I'm sorry, but I'm broke," Spiers agreed.

Helen touched his hand. The touch was like a caress, but her mouth was firm.

"Now you have begun to fight, Geoff, I'd hate to see you beaten, and I'd hate that brute to win. Well, perhaps somehow we may find a plan."

Spiers went to feed his team, and Helen frowned and pondered. She had begun to see a plan, but there were obstacles, and in the meantime Geoffrey must not know.

CHAPTER IX

HELEN NEGOTIATES

SLANTED sunbeams touch the matchboarded wall at Fairholm, work for the day was over, and but for Helen's level voice all was quiet. A tranquil, home-like charm marked the big room. Helen concentrated on her artless tale, but sometimes her glance wandered. The old and rather heavy furniture was good, and all was where it ought to be. Helen's ambition was to have a home like that, but she knew she must go without.

At Fairholm one sensed industrious effort and cultivation. The Elliots were farmers, but their philosophy was not altogether utilitarian, and Millicent was Helen's model. Although she herself was a child of the shabby streets, she had somehow a feeling for rhythm and beauty. It looked as if all she rather vaguely wanted was denied her, but she was not resigned. Helen's habit was to fight.

Millicent's look was thoughtfully calm, although she wondered whether she had taken a prudent line. She had heard Helen's story and she sympathized. Millicent was generous, and as a rule, keen to help; but to help Geoffrey Spiers might be rash. Moreover, she knew her brothers, and Helen's tale was moving. Well, there was now no use in speculating, for when she allowed Helen to see George and Lawrence she had in a sense promised her support.

George occupied an easy-chair, and his look and pose were languid. For three or four days he had loaded up prairie hay, and after sustained effort the hurt he had got some time since bothered him. George was not daunted by labor, but he had not Lawrence's decision and driving-force. He acknowledged Larry the real head of his house.

Lawrence leaned against a bookcase. He was thin and hard and brown, and his braced pose was virile. He fixed his glance on Helen, and, like the other, he was moved by her pluck and sincerity. The little, anxious woman was honest. She needed help, but she did not urge him. She admitted the obstacles and frankly stated facts, although he imagined it cost her something.

"I suppose you have got a proper notice that Hart claims the farm?" he said.

"His lawyer wrote to Geoff. The sale will be in two weeks."

Lawrence nodded. He must not allow a romantic impulse to carry him away, but he was glad to think his meddling might be justified.

"Did Geoffrey agree for you to come across?"

"He didn't know," said Helen, with a blush. "We wanted some groceries, and when he went to the settlement I thought I'd venture."

George turned his head and Lawrence knew he smiled. As a rule, Spiers celebrated his visits to the settlement by some queer exploit.

"Do you know if Geoff thought about writing his friends in the Old Country?" George inquired.

"He said there was not much use in bothering them," Helen replied, and after hesitating for a moment went on: "I think they were not very kind, and they were not pleased about his marriage—— After the wedding a letter came I didn't see. Then perhaps they might think I was responsible for his extravagance. I don't know—in fact, it's awkward."

Lawrence nodded. Mrs. Spiers did not pretend and he felt she rather naively struck the proper note.

"It has not much to do with us. If Geoffrey had imagined his friend would meet the debt, I expect he would have asked," Millicent remarked.

"Oh, yes," said Helen gratefully. "For my sake, he would not be proud; but perhaps it doesn't matter. I thought if you could help us pay Hart the loan would be safe, because you would, of course, have a mortgage on the farm, like his."

"Your argument is pretty sound. A deal that satisfied Hart ought to satisfy us," said George. "Well, Larry?"

Lawrence knitted his brows. He wanted to indulge Mrs. Spiers, and to do so might be the proper line. The sum he had brought from England was not all gone; but he must not be rash.

"Not long ago Ogilvie tried to freeze us out, and Hart foreclosed on Spalding. Now he means to seize Pine Creek," he remarked. "I feel the thing's ominous. Looks as if somebody plotted to consolidate the farms on this range."

"Ogilvie has nothing to do with Hart, and you cannot consolidate scattered farms," George rejoined. "You can control a number of businesses from a central office, but at a farm all depends on the individual farmer. To grow wheat on our small blocks is not a combine's job; I don't see the boys sweating for a joint-stock company. However, I expect Mrs. Spiers is bored."

"Unless our crop was ruined, you would get the interest, and Hart thought it paid," Helen resumed, and added with a touch of embarrassment: "Perhaps you think something depends on Geoffrey and you oughtn't to trust him? Well, I know he wouldn't slack. Besides, if he did, the farm would be yours."

"We could trust you," said Lawrence. "Still, if we agreed, all you'd do would be to change your creditor."

Helen smiled. "It's all we want. I don't think you are very greedy, and so long as our creditor was just, we might pay him off. One can work hard for freedom, and two or three good crops would wipe out the debt."

Lawrence hesitated. He knew George would take his lead and Millicent was Mrs. Spiers' confederate. The money he got from Orthwaite, however, was a loan, to be used for Fairholm. In a sense, he was a trustee. Besides, he knew Geoffrey Spiers.

"It's possible," he said. "I'd like to see Geoffrey out, and perhaps I might; but I must weigh things and write a letter to my bank. In a few days I'll let you know, but I cannot promise——"

Helen thanked him and got up. Millicent went with her to the porch, and when she came back she said to Lawrence:

"Mrs. Spiers is fine stuff and I think she knows if Geoffrey is beaten now he is done with altogether. Can you not do something?"

"If the money were mine, I wouldn't hesitate, but Stephen Orthwaite lent me the sum to use for you and George. However, since all's not gone, I'll weigh things."

Millicent saw she must be satisfied, and when she and George went off Lawrence lighted his pipe and mused. He imagined the small farmers, for the most part, owed the merchants at the settlements sums they could not pay. When the debt got large, the rule was for the merchant to take a mortgage and carry his customer on. He got an extravagant interest and the security was good; moreover when the harvest was plentiful or wheat went up the debtor sometimes paid him and regained his freedom. On the whole, perhaps, the system worked satisfactorily.

Hart's seizing the farms, however, was ominous, and Lawrence sensed a vague menace. If the fresh plan were generally used, it might be awkward for two or three of his neighbors, but this was not all. Somehow Lawrence imagined other small men would not be allowed to buy the farms. He rather thought Hart was somebody's agent, and perhaps worked for a rich combine. New methods might make large-scale farming profitable. He had not much

to go on, but if his suppositions were accurate, to keep Spiers at Pine Creek might be a useful plan.

Two or three days afterward, he harnessed his team to a mower and started for a hollow not far off. In the West artificial grasses are not cultivated, and since herbage on the prairie is short, the farmer must cut his hay in the sloos, where the melted snow forms shallow ponds in spring. As a rule, the sloos are not large or numerous, and Lawrence meant to supply Fairholm before Ogilvie got to work.

In the swampy hollows the tall grass was ripe, and Ogilvie would not hesitate to mow a sloo that was properly his neighbor's. Unoccupied land, of course, was really the Government's, but the rule was for a farmer to cut the wild hay he needed in the wet belts nearer his homestead than the next. The rule applied to cutting wood in the bluffs, but sometimes one's neighbors were greedy and disputes arose.

Although the sun was hot, the wind was fresh, and Lawrence, balancing on the mower, smiled. The hay had ripened soon, and he reckoned he was ahead of Ogilvie. The ground rolled, and by and by the machine jolted down an incline. A bluff curved along the side of the hollow and he urged his horses, for the spot where the trees stopped commanded the sloo and he was keen to get to work. When he had cut the first swath, he could claim the hay was his. By the prairie law, it was his anyhow.

When he heard an ominous rattle he used the whip. The rattle was like a mower. One of the Ogilvie gang was steering for the sloo, and since the fellow had no doubt heard Lawrence's machine, he must get there first. Well, his team was fresh, and if Ogilvie's man tried to stop him, he would be sorry.

The noise behind the wood got louder. At the corner Lawrence saw tossing dust and shining steel, and he turned his machine across the other's path. Horses plunged, wheels clashed, and when the dust rolled away, Margaret Ogilvie, braced back in the mower saddle a few yards off, tried to hold her sweating team. Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkled.

"Hello, Larry! It looks as if you meant to run me down!" she said.

"I didn't reckon on your driving the mower," Lawrence rejoined with a twinkle. "I was willing to get in front of your hired man."

"Oh, well, the boys were busy, and I like to handle a team. Our hay is nearly gone and the morning is fine. I thought I'd start for the sloo."

"You thought you ought to start *soon*," said Lawrence meaningly.

"Then, you claim the grass?"

"I have not yet claimed it, but the sloo is ours. It's four or five hundred yards nearer Fairholm than your homestead."

"You like to be accurate, Larry! I suppose you measured?"

"I did not. The thing is rather obvious."

"Very well. You believe I am poaching. Do you mean to send me back?"

"My luck's not good," said Lawrence with a touch of humor. "Had Mr. Ogilvie sent his hired man, I'd have known my line. If you feel you're justified to poach, I must be resigned."

Margaret gave him a queer, rather proud glance.

"We do not admit the sloo is yours, and the dispute's a family dispute. So long as I am at home, I must play for my side."

"I suppose that is so; there's the trouble," Lawrence remarked. "Very well, Margaret, I must try another spot. Perhaps you have, so far, left the belt behind the ridge alone?"

Margaret's look was surprised and she blushed like a rose.

"The first sloo is yours, Larry. If our horses starved, I would not cut a load of grass."

Lawrence frowned. Margaret's temper was imperious, but she was generous, and he had not meant his remark to hurt. All the same, at the first sloo his father had baffled hers and had paid for his triumph with his life.

"To some extent, one must choose one's side, but the quarrel that has entangled us is not ours," he said moodily.

"For all that, we are entangled. One cannot use one's relations where they are useful, and then refuse them one's support. Yet I'm glad you're not revengeful."

"If I'm forced, I must, like you, fight for my house; I think that's all—— Well, the hay is yours, and if you can stop for two or three minutes, let's talk about something else. Perhaps you know Hart is going to take Pine Creek?"

Margaret looked up sharply, as if she were jarred.

"Then, Spiers must quit?"

"The notice of sale is served. Mrs. Spiers was across about it two or three days since. I am not going to apologize for Geoffrey, but his wife is the sort one likes. She's straight and keen to work and her pluck is fine. In fact, I think she'll see Geoff makes good."

"I know Mrs. Spiers," Margaret remarked. "You mean to meddle?"

"I'd like to do so, but I haven't yet decided. Do you imply I ought not?"

Margaret smiled a baffling smile. “Not at all, Larry. You are rather generous and I expect you must follow your bent. All the same, sometimes your luck is perhaps not very good. However, you, no doubt, want to get to work.”

She started her team and Lawrence went the other way. He pondered Margaret’s last remarks, but admitted he did not see much light.

CHAPTER X

HART'S PROPOSITION

SPIERS was at the settlement, and Helen did not expect him for some time, since he talked about looking up his friends when he drove back. None, so far as he knew, could help him pay his debt, but a number might come to the sale and force up the price. Then the buyer must pay a good sum and all that was left after Hart's claim was met would be Geoffrey's. The plan was naive, but it might work, and Spiers did not see another.

Helen cooked her frugal supper and brooded. A week was gone, but she had yet no word from Lawrence Elliot. In fact, her hopes had not been high. Millicent was her friend and she thought Lawrence was willing to help, but he admitted it might not be possible. To leave Pine Creek would hurt. She had made the bleak house home-like, and Geoffrey did not know where to get a post. If he were engaged, his employer might not want them both and Geoff was not the sort to be left alone. He had begun to go soberly, but unless she was about to steer him, his advance would not be fast, and he might go back. In fact, so far as Helen saw, all ahead was dark.

Then she heard a motor-engine. Cars were not yet numerous and it looked as if Hart meant to call at the homestead. Had he not known where Geoffrey was, she thought he would not have risked it. Helen pulled off her apron and for a few moments occupied herself in front of the glass; then she sat down and pondered. Hart might expect to stay for supper, and to forbid him the house would be some relief; besides, the bill of fare was not appetizing. She hated the fellow, particularly since she had grounds to think she attracted him; but perhaps she ought not to indulge her dislike.

He had the power to ruin Geoffrey, but the harvest promised to be good and to wait would not cost him much. Perhaps if she used her charm, she might get some concession— At all events, she could be polite. Politeness would be hard, and the experiment was risky, but when one's husband fronted disaster one must not be squeamish. Then Helen braced up, for Hart came in. He threw his big dusty coat on the table and got himself a chair, as if the house were his.

"Geoffrey not at home?" he said, and pulled out a large and expensive box of chocolates. "Some candies for you, ma'am."

The box carried the stamp of a Winnipeg store, and Helen saw his visit was planned. She blushed and tried to conquer her annoyance, for she was not at all a finished coquette.

"Did you expect to see my husband?" she asked in a meaning voice.

"Maybe I knew where he was," Hart replied with a chuckle. "I guess he's sicking on the boys to bid up when I sell the farm; but we'll talk about that another time. You are going to have supper? If you ask me, I might stay!"

Helen served the food and sat down, as far away from Hart as the table allowed.

"I'm afraid your supper is not first-class, but it's all I've got. In a way, that's your fault."

"Mine?" said Hart. "Oh, shucks, Mrs. Spiers; I just hate to see you pinch! In fact, that's why I came along. I thought we'd maybe fix up something——"

It looked as if he relented, but Helen was not altogether at ease. Instinctively she distrusted the fellow. He began to eat and when his mouth was not full he joked. His humor was primitive and sometimes a touch of color came to Helen's face. For all that, she tried to respond. If she indulged the brute, he might be generous and not force the sale. At length, he pushed back his plate.

"Maybe I better help you clean up, and then Geoff won't get guessing who was around."

"There is no reason he shouldn't know," Helen rejoined.

Hart smiled. Mrs. Spiers was not going to play up; she would sooner he did not think her keen. Well, the kid was not a fool and he reckoned he knew her type. Hart's philosophy was commercial, and where he was not occupied by business he was raw.

"If you don't want to bother, we'll let the plates go," he agreed. "You are a bully cook, but to work around the stove is not your job. You ought to take your supper at a slap-up hotel, with the boss waitress serving you and the other women envying your clothes. Geoffrey has surely let you down, poor kid!"

"I have not begun to grumble, and I know nothing about smart hotels," Helen rejoined, for his look disturbed her.

"You can find out something, if you want. You're a looker, all right. I see you walk up to the front table, and where you pass folks turn their heads. After supper you get in your automobile and go to the opera. Do you like the picture, ma'am?"

Helen laughed. “There is no use in thinking about such things. A half-dollar feast at the settlement on Saturdays would satisfy me, but that would be too extravagant if you sell the farm.”

Hart stretched his big arms across the table and pushed out his chin.

“If I was willing, I couldn’t boost Geoffrey Spiers; his sort naturally comes down. Well, he’s knocked out. A hired man’s job for a strict boss is his mark. Maybe he’ll get it, and when he’s tired he’ll quit; but I don’t see you doing chores for a farmer’s wife, and some I know aren’t keen on lookers. Very well, I’m going to make a proposition——”

Helen’s face got rather white, for she saw where he led. His arms were across the table and since her chair was against the wall, she could not get farther back. All the same, he must not know she was afraid.

“I think you had better not,” she said, as coolly as possible.

“Playing shy?” Hart suggested with a laugh, for he was persuaded all could be bought, but when one sold something one tried for the best price. “Anyhow, you’ll weigh my proposition,” he resumed. “At the settlement I’ve gone most as far as a live man can go, and I mean to quit. In fact, I’ve got a softer job with chances that will help me soon get rich. Well, if you are willing to come along, I can fix you with all you want: a good house, fashionable clothes, and real smart friends. You’d have done with homestead chores and reckoning by five-cents. All you got to do’s to queen it and have a bully time.”

“You want me to leave my husband?” said Helen quietly.

“Why, for sure! I reckon Geoff won’t worry much,” Hart agreed with a chuckle. “So long as he can loaf about a pool-room, he’ll be all right. All the same, I don’t want you to start just yet. We have got to fix things. Maybe in a week or two——”

He stopped, for Helen’s chair jarred against the wall. She had had enough, but since she could not get farther off, she faced Hart and noted his surprise. The brute had not imagined she would refuse! In a way, his dullness was humorous, but Helen’s eyes flashed.

“I think you had better go,” she said breathlessly. “Geoffrey might soon arrive. If he comes before you have gone, I will not hold him back.”

Hart pushed out his jaw, and, reaching across the table, seized her wrist and forced her hand down on the cloth.

“Geoff won’t be home for some time, and you don’t want to get mad. Your husband hasn’t much use for you, and he’s going to be resigned. When he wrote for you to come out, he was *drunk*.”

Helen's face got fiery red and her mouth was straight. Hart held her fast, but one hand was free, and a sharp, old-fashioned carver's fork was not far off. While his glance searched her face she seized the fork, and Hart swore and let her go. Mechanically he put his bleeding hand to his mouth, and then stepped back, for Mrs. Spiers, clenching the long fork, began to move round the table.

Hart felt ridiculously humiliated, but he did not try to stop her. Mrs. Spiers was like a wildcat, and when she had forced him back two or three yards she pulled a shotgun from the wall. The kid had bluffed him; she had meant to reach the gun.

"Aren't you going?" she gasped.

Hart faced the long barrels, and although he doubted if the gun were loaded, Helen's look indicated that his trying to find out might be rash. He thought he would not risk it and he went. Helen followed him to the door, and when his car started, sat down slackly on the bench outside. For a few moments she laughed, a noisy, jarring laugh, and then she wept. She had borne some strain, and at length she could let herself go.

When she seized the fork, Hart's taunt, as much as his violence, had broken her control. She felt he did not exaggerate; she herself had imagined that when Geoffrey sent for her he was not sober. Well, she had already faced it and conquered her humiliated pride. Geoffrey, of course, would never admit a thing like that. He hated to see her hurt, and she had thought nobody knew. Perhaps when she found out Hart did know, he had run some risk; and although her hand shook, she opened the gun. To see there was not a cartridge in the chamber was some relief.

Then she pushed the gun behind the bench and turned her head. Five or six yards off, Lawrence Elliot got off his smoking horse. His look was studiously careless, and he examined his stirrup. Helen knew the handkerchief she clenched was wet and her eyes were red.

"Geoffrey does not seem to be about," Lawrence remarked.

"He is not," said Helen. "How much did you see, Mr. Elliot? I expect you would sooner cheat me; but I don't want you to pretend."

"When I crossed the fallow Hart was leaving the house. He went backwards and rather fast. Then he ran for his car and you sat down. I think that's all."

"I suppose you thought it strange?" said Helen, and gave him a quick side glance.

"On the whole, I did not. You see, I know Hart. Then, of course, my business was not to speculate——"

Helen smiled, a faint but rather moving smile. “You are like Geoffrey, Mr. Lawrence; you try to help me out. But do you think Hart saw you cross the fallow?”

“I imagine he did not; my notion is he was preoccupied. Perhaps that’s the proper word. In fact, I expect my arrival had nothing to do with his retreat.”

“Oh, well,” said Helen, “one can trust you, and for a time I’d sooner Geoffrey did not know.”

“Nobody will know,” Lawrence declared. “However, if Hart annoyed you, I’d rather like to go after the brute. The sandy belt might stop his car and my horse is fast. You, of course, would know nothing about it. There are a number of things about which we might dispute.”

“You mustn’t meddle,” said Helen firmly, and added in a thoughtful voice: “A carving-fork isn’t really dangerous, but I’m rather glad it hurts.”

Lawrence laughed, a joyous, boyish laugh. “I imagined something like that! You are a sport, Mrs. Spiers. But suppose we let it go and I give you my news. At length, I have got a letter from my bankers, and if Geoff comes across in the morning, we will fix about the mortgage.”

Helen got up and gave him her hand. She was short and thin and not at all cultivated, but somehow Lawrence thought her dignified.

“You are kind. Geoffrey’s friends are kind and stanch. Perhaps it’s important, because a wastrel has not friends like you. However, he will thank you another time. After the suspense, to know we are not yet ruined carries me away. I feel I must get calm, and I’d like to be alone.”

She went to the house and Lawrence got on his horse. Mrs. Spiers’ emotion embarrassed him, and she was justified to support her husband, but he did not think her argument logical. The qualities that attracted Geoffrey’s friends were rather hers than his.

CHAPTER XI

OGILVIE'S HOUSEHOLD

OGILVIE studied a Winnipeg newspaper by a window at the Crossing. His hair was going white and his shoulders were bent, but he had labored in the hay since breakfast, and now the sun was setting, he was justified to rest. The social and political columns did not interest him; unless land taxes were discussed, he did not bother about the grafters' disputes. Ogilvie concentrated on the market reports.

He liked to know the bank rate and how wheat moved at Chicago and Liverpool; he calculated the cost of labor and interest for the bushel of grain, and as a rule where his neighbors grumbled his farming paid. For all that, Ogilvie did not spring from farmer stock and in his youth he was clerk in a Toronto department store. He was sternly efficient, and although he met his bills, not remarkably scrupulous.

Mrs. Ogilvie, in an American rocking-chair, was sewing. She was a thin, quiet woman, worn by labor and frugality, for when her husband's fight was hard she had nobly helped. Now he had conquered, habit ruled her, and she was mechanically parsimonious. For the most part, she allowed Ogilvie to dominate her.

Sometimes Margaret and Ogilvie jarred, for the girl had inherited his imperious temperament. She knew where she could reckon on Mrs. Ogilvie's support, but as far as possible she refused to entangle her mother in their controversies. Margaret was independent and did not want another to pay for her obstinacy. She wrote Ogilvie's letters and kept his accounts. Her help was useful and he boasted that Margaret was a better farmer than some he knew, but she imagined he did not altogether give her his confidence.

By and by Margaret came in. She put down her riding quirt and Stetson hat, and beat her dusty gloves. Then she turned to Ogilvie and her look was thoughtful.

"I cut the hay and went to Willows for a bolt for the mower. Mrs. Gordon gave me supper and I got some news. Hart has seized Pine Creek and means to sell. But you perhaps knew?"

Ogilvie's glance was very keen, Margaret's was level, and Mrs. Ogilvie sensed antagonism.

"The rule is to advertise a mortgage sale," Ogilvie replied.

"The notice is not yet in the newspapers."

"Anyhow, it looks as if Mrs. Gordon had heard Hart meant to foreclose."

Margaret said nothing. She did not want to tell him Lawrence Elliot had enlightened her, since she would sooner not talk about their encounter at the sloo.

"You'd have got a bolt from Fairholm quicker," Ogilvie resumed. "The Elliot gang are friends of yours. Why didn't you ask them?"

"I am your daughter and the Elliots are not your friends. I hesitated to bother people who have not much grounds to love us."

"You are riled about Hart's taking Pine Creek? Well, we have nothing to do with it."

"I wonder——" said Margaret. "At all events, I am sorry for Mrs. Spiers and you might have stopped Hart. You are a pretty good customer. He would not offend you."

Ogilvie gave her a queer look and knitted his brows.

"On the plains a man must stay with his job, but Geoffrey means to loaf. Nature cleans out trash like him."

"It rather looks as if Hart had cleaned out Spiers and planned to do so. He's not just; he cheats his victims. Perhaps he'll yet cheat you."

"I guess I'll chance it," Ogilvie rejoined with a dry smile. "Anyhow, I'm not concerned about Spiers. If I'd been keen to carry him on I could not have done so, but I was not. His sort are a charge on the Province and keep better men off the farms they hold. If a fellow's a wastrel, his neighbors have got to pay for his laziness; an efficient man helps the lot. On the prairie, if you hate to work you must break."

"To be broken hurts," said Margaret. "Then Spiers had begun to try ——"

She stopped. To some extent, her father's stern philosophy was justified; but that was not all. She felt he knew something she did not about Hart's seizing the farm. He admitted he approved.

"When Geoffrey goes his wife must go," said Ogilvie. "I reckon the women folks—for example, Miss Elliot—will be resigned."

Margaret's pose got stiffer and she smiled, a scornful smile.

"If Mrs. Gordon is jealous, she is a fool, but I do not think she is jealous, and Millicent Elliot is Helen's friend. Millicent knows her brothers, and neither is at all the sort to be attracted by his neighbor's wife."

"George is certainly pretty sober," Ogilvie agreed. "I reckon Larry's blood is red, and but for him I might have got the farm. However, it looks as if you knew the young fellow."

He carried his newspaper to the porch and lighted his pipe. To annoy Margaret was not hard and sometimes he experimented. As a rule, she was pretty keen, but when she got mad she was frank. Well, she declared Hart might cheat him. If he did so, it might be awkward, but Ogilvie doubted the other's nerve; for one thing, it would certainly be awkward for Hart. Ogilvie put up his newspaper and began to muse.

When he went off Mrs. Ogilvie turned to Margaret.

"I don't like it for you and your father to argue."

"Oh, well," said Margaret, smiling, "on the surface, any way, our differences are not important, and we know where to stop. At the beginning perhaps I was annoyed. Father might have persuaded Hart to leave Spiers alone. I hate to think about his putting Helen off the farm."

"That was all?" said Mrs. Ogilvie. "You were not mad *afterwards*?"

"Not really," Margaret replied. "Sometimes father is ridiculous. For example, Larry and Mrs. Spiers! You see, Larry is not a philanderer and Helen loves her husband. I don't know if she's proud of him, but that is another thing."

For a few moments she pondered. Although she was glad to be Lawrence's champion, Olgivie's implication jarred. After all, Lawrence was enthusiastic about Helen and Margaret knew he went to Pine Creek.

"Sometimes you're queer," Mrs. Ogilvie resumed. "Aren't you happy now you're home?"

"If you had not sent me to college, I might have been happier," Margaret replied in a thoughtful voice. "Before I went I was satisfied, but at Montreal I began to see our rules were mean. It looked as if we were a raw, calculating, materialistic lot, and perhaps we are something like that. The dollar is our standard, and all our labor is for a reward.

"Father farms because to grow wheat pays, and when a big crop is sold I get a sort of shabby thrill. I'm not proud we have grown a fine crop; I like to know our bank-roll is large. In a way, we are efficient, we know our job, but our effort is not for Canada. We want to get rich. When we send our member to parliament his business is to get all he can get for our particular district. The Province's advance does not interest us. We measure his patriotism by his skill for extorting useful grants. We tolerate graft and log-rolling; we tolerate all that pays."

Mrs. Ogilvie looked with some surprise, for Margaret's habit was not to let herself go. She was not a clever woman and her point of view was utilitarian, but she had, long since, known something of generous youth's rebellion, and she vaguely sympathized.

"Maybe we are like that, my dear. But what do you want?"

"I don't know; I expect I'm ridiculous," said Margaret with a smile. "However, if it was but for the contrast, I'd like to be romantic; not to plan and calculate, just to follow my bent. Perhaps niggardly caution does not always pay. Geoffrey Spiers' drawbacks are rather obvious, but he's not afraid to trust his luck, and I think not long since his luck was remarkably good. Although Mrs. Spiers' perhaps was not, to be splendidly rash is something. Well, we are not all her sort. I imagine father was not a romantic lover, but when you married you were young."

"My folks thought I took some chances," said Mrs. Ogilvie in a quiet voice. "We had an orchard by the lake in Ontario and sometimes the big red Baldwins broke the trees in fall. The homestead was like a picture, and in summer we took boarders. People came for the fishing, and your father stayed two weeks."

"I don't see father fishing," Margaret remarked.

"He was sick. The doctor said he must take a holiday—the first he'd ever had. All the same, he hated to loaf, and he helped me with the chores and the garden lot. Perhaps I liked him because he was sober and polite."

Helen was gently amused. Soberness and politeness were not all the qualities she would look for in her lover.

"But your relations did not approve?" she said.

"They did not, my dear. Jake's pay was very small, he was sick, and all he had was a hundred dollars. Well, I knew he'd make good, and I had a thousand dollars of my own. When he went back to Toronto we were married."

"You were married in two weeks?" said Margaret, for to picture her mother making the plunge was hard.

"Why, yes. Jake was getting well and he was wanted at the store. It might be long before they let him go again. After the wedding he started his job, and for two years he stayed with it; he reckoned we'd take a holiday when he was department boss. Then he began to look pinched and the doctor stopped him. He said Jake couldn't stand for handling dusty drygoods by electric light. If he didn't want to be a lunger, he must get out in the sun. A bad setback, my dear. Jake was real smart at business, the bosses trusted him, and he'd begun to go ahead."

"You were poor?" said Margaret, in a sympathetic voice.

"We had fifteen hundred dollars, mine and his. Your father mustn't take a city job. We went West and bought the farm."

"But you could not buy the Crossing for fifteen hundred dollars."

"The broker took a mortgage for all we couldn't pay, and we got to work," Mrs. Ogilvie resumed. "I knew something about packing apples and keeping house, but that was all, and I guess Jake experimented when he harnessed a horse. Anyhow, we must pay the mortgage and I allowed where others had made good your father would not be beat. For six years our food was bacon and potatoes and yeast-powder bread; I made my clothes, and when Jake had done with his the patches were like a checker-board. All the same, he got well and hard in the frost and sun, and we paid the mortgage. We had bought our freedom by honest sweat, and our capital was two hundred dollars.

"In winter we had no hired man, and one day Jake went for a load of logs. At dark the team came back in a snowstorm and he was not with the horses. I found him stiff and unconscious, at the back of the load. Maybe the cold had struck him, but when the team started he somehow got on board. Well, I got him to the house and for a week I fought for his life. The blizzard didn't stop and nobody was about. Then he got up and went back for the logs he had left. There's your father, Margaret; I've wanted you to know him properly. A hard man, but he sweated for all he's got, and when you run a farm like the Crossing you help carry the settlement along. You can't raise a bumper crop but the Province goes ahead. The slobs and talkers make me tired——"

She stopped and Margaret kissed her.

"The important thing is, I know my mother. She does not talk much but her pluck is better than a man's. If I marry, I'd like to be as stanch, but since I am your daughter, perhaps I need not be afraid I'd let my husband down."

CHAPTER XII

SETTLED ACCOUNTS

HART, carrying some documents, pushed back a door at the settlement hotel. He had got Lawrence Elliot's message, and speculated about his asking for the Pine Creek mortgage deed, but when he saw Spiers and the landlord he knitted his brows. He had not met Geoffrey since the fellow ordered him from his house, and he wondered whether Mrs. Spiers had enlightened her husband about their interview. On the whole, he thought she had not, for Geoffrey's look was imperturbable. Hart advanced truculently and the landlord indicated a chair.

"The boys will soon be along for dinner, but they won't disturb us in my room."

Hart knew the landlord sympathized with Spiers, and he gave him an ironical smile.

"Got tired of keeping hotel, Tom? Do you want to buy a farm?"

"I surely do not. If I was keen to get rich, I'd buy me an implement store, and lend suckers money."

"Let's get to work," said Lawrence. "Have you brought the mortgage, Hart?"

The other gave him the document and rolled a cigar about his mouth.

"It will stand, Larry. I guess my title's good."

"We will not dispute about it. Are you resolved to sell?"

"If Geoff would sooner pay up, why, he has the option," Hart replied and smiled mockingly.

"Hart's humor is not subtle and perhaps his best joke was selling me a binder that would not work," Spiers remarked, and gave the fellow a grim look. "Sometimes jokes like yours are expensive!"

"I think we'll use the option," Lawrence resumed, turning to Hart. "To sell Pine Creek would cost something, and if you wanted the farm, we could force you to give a proper price. In the circumstances, you had better cancel the deed."

Hart frowned and took his cigar from his mouth.

"You are going to pay? Well, if you reckon to keep Spiers at Pine Creek, you're not very bright. Besides, you don't know who you're up against."

"I know something about your talents, but I'm not much daunted," Lawrence rejoined. "Anyhow, if you want the money, write a proper discharge. Mr. Davies will witness your hand."

"Now you get why I stopped around. Larry's surely not a fool," Davies remarked.

For a few moments Hart was occupied, and then he looked up.

"The documents are yours. I'll take large notes."

"You'll take a check," said Lawrence, and pushed across his banker's letter. "From my point of view, the plan has some advantages."

Hart nodded and Lawrence wrote his check. Davies witnessed Hart's signature and gave Lawrence the cancelled deed.

"All's straight. I guess he can't go back on you."

"Well, so long as you're satisfied, I won't stop," said Hart and went off.

"His talking about your not knowing who you were up against was queer," Davies observed.

"Perhaps the brute does not know all he himself is up against," said Spiers. "He broke Spalding and Stainton, and is taking all they earn from two or three more. The hate of folks you have robbed is an awkward load, and Spalding, at all events, is not remarkably forgiving——" He turned to Lawrence and with a touch of emotion resumed: "But for you, he would have broken me. I mustn't boast; but, if it's possible, I hope to persuade you you're not very rash."

"Oh, shucks!" said Lawrence. "I don't really run much risk. We are both betting on the good harvests that will put all straight. But come on. Before lunch I must order some groceries and look up the station-agent."

He transacted his business and when he went back to the hotel a bank clerk who opened the office at the settlement on fixed days stopped him.

"Your check most cleaned me out. As a rule, I don't carry a large wad and we had a busy morning."

"Then Hart wanted money! He did not ask you to enter the sum?" said Lawrence with some surprise.

"He took bills. Mr. Hart doesn't bank with us."

"But the other banks have no office at the settlement."

The young fellow smiled. "Now you get it, Mr. Elliot! Mr. Hart doesn't seem to know that if I talked about our customers I'd soon get fired. Well, I want my lunch."

He went to the dining-room and Lawrence gave Spiers a thoughtful glance.

"Since Hart might have mailed my check to his bank, his preferring to carry about a roll of bills is strange, but I don't know if I'm interested and I expect dinner's served."

After the meal they started for the livery-stable. A row of small frame houses and two grain-elevators faced the track, and then the telegraph-posts and shining rails ran back, straight and level, and melted in the plain. Dust blew along the wheel-torn street, and but for a man on the board sidewalk nobody was about. In the scorching sun, the settlement was not an attractive spot, and somehow the lonely figure emphasized its dreariness. The fellow's hat was greasy and his boots were broken. His face was very thin and his look was moodily sullen. Sitting in the shade near the livery gate, he fixed his eyes on Hart's store.

Lawrence thought he knew him and he crossed the street. Before he went to England, Spalding cultivated a good farm.

"Why, Tom!" he said. "I thought you were at Regina. You don't look very bright."

"I was sick and couldn't hold my job," Spalding replied, and turned to Spiers. "The boys reckoned Hart was going to put you off the ranch."

"He meant to do so, but Lawrence fixed things for me."

"Well, I'm glad somebody has beaten the blasted hog, and if Elliot can't use his bank-roll, he might undertake another deal. If I put a hundred and fifty dollars for surety, I can hire a team and take a contract to haul lumber to Butler Lake. A teamster's job is soft and maybe I could stand for riding on the load."

Lawrence was sorry for the fellow, but he had lent Spiers a useful sum and knew he must stop. He refused and Spalding was philosophical.

"That's all right! I've no particular claim on you, and Hart must meet the bill. He took my farm, and a hundred and fifty dollars, which he'll soon get back, will not break the hog."

"What about dinner, Tom?" Spiers inquired.

"When I got some breakfast I was lucky," Spalding replied. "I guess I can wait for supper and I must watch out for Hart. His clerk allowed he wasn't at the store, but when he comes back I mean to be around."

"Get some dinner, Tom," said Spiers and gave him a small bill. "If you don't hit a job soon, you might look me up."

Spalding hesitated. "You're a white man, Geoff, but I ought to watch out. I want that swine, Hart."

His hoarse voice carried and the ostler came to the gate and laughed.

"Then you better get on a move. Mr. Hart hired a horse and hit the Butler trail half an hour ago. Mr. Elliot, your rig's ready."

"We must start," said Lawrence, and he and Spiers jumped on board.

When the wagon rolled away Spalding bought some cheese and crackers and took the trail. He thought he knew where Hart had gone, and he doubted if the fellow would be back at night. Anyhow, Spalding wanted a hundred and fifty dollars and he resolved that Hart should supply the sum. The greedy brute had cheated and ruined him.

The afternoon was very hot and Spalding had been ill, but he stubbornly labored along the dusty trail and his resolve got firmer; Hart must pay for his fatigue. At six o'clock he stopped for supper at a lonely farm and found out that Hart had gone to a homestead some miles off. For a time Spalding rested and then moodily resumed his search. If Hart did not stop for the night at the homestead, he would cross Butler Creek at a bridge where the trail forked.

When Spalding reached the spot he sat down in the grass. He was tired, and the evening was hot, and when the mosquitoes bothered him he lighted his pipe. Dusk had begun to fall and the trees got indistinct. Butler Creek is slow and deep, and thick undergrowth hides the dark pools at the bottom of the ravine. Black birches and poplars cover the steep banks, and the bridge is lonely. Spalding heard the water, and sometimes a branch shook. He waited and fought the mosquitoes; he was willing to wait for morning, but he was going to see Hart.

By and by a wagon rolled down the hill and one of the men on board asked if Spalding wanted a ride. He said he did not and imagined his refusal excited their curiosity. The wagon jolted across the log bridge, and Spalding turned his head, for he thought he heard a horse going the other way.

Two or three minutes afterward, he went down the hill and stopped under a tree a few yards from the bridge. The horseman was riding fast, and Spalding knew who it was. For five or six years the fellow had gathered the fruits of his labor and then had seized his farm. The hog owed him something and now he must pay. Spalding was a savage, impoverished plainsman, and he felt his claim was just.

The bridge rattled and he jumped for the trail. An indistinct horse plunged and the man in the saddle swore. Spalding seized the bridle and stopped the animal.

"Get down, Hart. We have got to talk," he said.

"Tom Spalding!" exclaimed the other. "What do you want?"

"I want a hundred and fifty dollars for three or four months."

"Then, if you think I'll put up the money, you're a blamed fool."

"I'm not begging," Spalding went on with an effort for calm. "The sum's a sort of surety I won't mishandle a team I want to hire for a haulage contract, and when I am paid you'll get your money. You ought to stand for it. I reckon you cleared most a hundred per cent on our other deal."

Hart reflected. He had collected a useful sum from a debtor and the notes he got from the bank were in his bulging wallet. Spalding's voice was ominously hoarse, and Hart wondered whether he knew his wad was large. He had some grounds that had nothing to do with Spalding for refusing the loan, but he wanted to be rid of the fellow and he carried two or three loose bills.

"If you are up against it, I might stand for five dollars, so long as you don't bother me again. But let go the bridle."

Spalding laughed, an ominous, savage laugh.

"Oh, shucks! You hear me; I'm not a beggar! All I want's the surety for the team, and you'll soon get back the lot. Come off your horse and hand out the bills."

Hart swung his quirt and struck for the other's head. Spalding took the stinging cut, but he was on the horse's near side, and in order to reach him Hart was forced to swing his body with the quirt. Spalding seized his arm and kicked the horse. The horse plunged and Hart was on the ground. He staggered but kept his feet, and since he did not know where the quirt was he pushed his hand under his coat. He carried a pistol, and it looked as if Spalding meant to rob him.

Spalding saw the other tried to pull his gun and he grappled. Hart had got the pistol, but Spalding jambed his arm and seized his wrist. For a few moments they gasped and strained in the dark, and then Spalding's face was scorched. A jarring report rolled across the wood, and Hart's hold got slack. Spalding wrenched the pistol from him and used the heavy butt.

Hart reeled and crashed down the bank. The brush closed behind him and Spalding ran up the hill. Hart's horse had vanished and he might need the animal. The horse was a quiet livery hack, and not gone very far. Spalding soon found it, and tying it to a tree, ran down to the bridge and pushed through the bushes below the spot where they had fought. The night was not dark, but, so far as he could see, Hart was not about.

Spalding rubbed a match. Three or four yards off, water reflected the light, but the bank was not broken, and the ground at the bottom of the incline from the trail was nearly level. It did not look as if Hart had plunged into the creek. Had he rolled through the brush, unconscious, he would not reach the water. Spalding felt for another match, but put up the box.

Wheels rattled in the gloom. The farmers had heard the shots and were driving back. The team was going fast and Spalding knew he must not stay there. Stealing up the hill, he loosed the horse, and for a time followed the trees at the top of the ravine. Then he turned to the open plain and used all the animal's speed.

CHAPTER XIII

SPALDING BORROWS A HORSE

BREAKFAST was on the stove; Helen turned the sliced potatoes in the frying-pan and went to the door. Spiers was at the stable, and ought to be back. The morning was fresh; dew sparkled in the grass, and slanted sunbeams touched the poplar bluff two hundred yards off.

By and by a man stole round the corner of the wood and, stopping for a moment, turned his head as if he searched the plain in front. Helen thought it strange, and when he advanced she drew back a little from the door. The man went fast and faced the rising sun. She saw his clothes were dusty and shabby and his face was haggard. His look was grim, and to hear Spiers' step was some relief.

"Hello, Tom!" he shouted.

"You said I might look you up. Maybe I've blown in sooner than you thought," the stranger replied.

"Well, that's all right," Spiers said, smiling, and signed Helen. "Mr. Thomas Spalding. Tom's luck has not been good, but since it's the consequence of his trusting Mr. Hart, I expect you'll sympathize."

"When you know why I came along you won't smile, Geoff," Spalding remarked. "Maybe I oughtn't to stop, but I must hit the trail hard and I want some breakfast."

Spiers pushed him into the house and Helen served the food. She was puzzled and rather disturbed, for Spalding's look was strange, but he ate like a hungry animal and she kept him supplied. If Geoffrey were starving, she thought he would not eat like that, and she approved his polite carelessness. Nothing indicated that the other's arrival had excited his curiosity. At length Spalding's appetite was satisfied, and he turned to his host.

"I got to tell you something you mightn't want your wife to hear."

"You are obviously a bachelor, Tom. Perhaps it explains your imagining Mrs. Spiers would not find out. Besides, I'm willing to admit her judgment, as a rule, is as good as mine."

"Very well. It looks as if I'd shot Hart."

Spiers noisily pushed back his plate and Helen leaned against the table. Spiers signed her to be quiet and turned to Spalding.

"It looks as if you shot him! Don't you *know*?"

Spalding frowned. He had not wanted to be theatrical and he imagined his blunt statement had rattled Mrs. Spiers; but it was not important. He must try to concentrate on awkward facts.

"As far as I can, I'll put you wise," he said, and narrated the fight at the bridge.

Now he must think about it, he recaptured details he had not consciously noted, and the blurred picture began to get distinct.

"When I caught the horse I went back; I felt I had to go," he resumed. "I lit a match, but could not see much—— The brush Hart had broken and the light shining on the dark water. A blamed ugly pool and a high rotten bank! I didn't think Hart had gone down the bank, but he was not about. You see, for three or four yards there's a level piece before you climb up to the road."

Spiers nodded. The road went obliquely down the ravine and turned at the bridge. On the whole, he agreed that a half-conscious man, reeling down the incline, would not reach the pool. At the bottom he would stop and fall.

"But you think Hart was shot?"

"I'm trying to fix it," Spalding replied, and knitted his brows. "He'd pulled his gun, but I'd jumped for him and jambed his arm. My left hand was on his wrist and the pistol was between us. He meant to turn the barrel; I meant to push it up, and I think I did. Then the flash dazzled me, and somehow I'd got the pistol. I swung my arm back and sicked the butt to him. He went down the bank, and that's all I know. When I searched around the spot I heard the farmers' team. They had come back to find out who was shooting, and I quit."

"You used Hart's horse. Where is the animal?"

"I turned him loose about an hour ago. You see, he's a pinto livery hack, and I expect he carries an Alberta brand. I didn't want a horse folks would spot. I allowed I'd sooner borrow yours. Now you get me?"

Spiers had anticipated the request. For a few moments he pondered and Helen waited. Then he looked up.

"Butler Creek is deep and muddy. If Hart is in the water, some time may go before he's found. The current might carry him downstream and the brush along the banks is thick. All the same, you mustn't stop. Have you a plan?"

"If I can cross the railroad without being stopped, I might make Dakota. I've got a pal down south who'd see me to the frontier; but you don't want to know about that. In two or three days I'd send back your horse."

Spiers nodded and turned to Helen.

"The horse might implicate us. In Canada a gunman is hunted down and as a rule it's awkward for his accomplices. Well?"

Helen knitted her brows and hesitated. Geoff had recently got his freedom and her business was to see he was not again entangled. All the same, her impulses were generous and she had hated Hart. Spalding, like her husband, was his victim. She wished Geoffrey had not consulted her, but he had done so, and Spalding waited in suspense.

"It *looks* as if Mr. Spalding meant to shoot Hart," she said. "To persuade the police it was an accident would be hard."

"That is so. He inquired about the fellow at the store and two or three homesteads; the livery-man heard him declare he wanted Hart. In fact, Tom marked his trail to the creek, and a number of people know he thinks the fellow robbed him. I expect by evening the Royal North-West troopers will be on his track."

"Very well," said Helen, with something of an effort. "He was entitled to ask for the money; I expect Hart did rob him. He was a bad man, Geoff; perhaps a worse man than you think, and he was going to shoot your friend ——" She stopped for a moment and her color came and went when she resumed: "If you want to let Mr. Spalding take your horse, perhaps you ought."

Spiers looked at her rather hard, and smiled an approving smile.

"I don't know about your logic, but your nerve's first-class. Well, you have my wife's support, Tom, and it implies mine. She will put you up some food, and although we don't want to push you out, I think you'd better start."

"You're a white man, and so's Mrs. Spiers," said Spalding with some emotion. "If the red-coat boys don't shoot me up, you'll surely get your horse."

He and Spiers went to the stable and by and by Helen heard a horse's feet on the grass. When Spiers came back she gave him an apologetic glance.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have agreed, Geoff, but I was sorry for the poor man. I expect nobody would believe him innocent, and he looked so thin and ill. Then Hart robbed you."

"I wonder whether that was all?" Spiers remarked.

Helen blushed like a rose, but her eyes sparkled.

"It wasn't all. Now perhaps I must tell you—— I was not going to."

Spiers nodded. "You imagined I might take a theatrical revenge? Hart made you an offer, and since he's not romantic, I expect it was rather a business-like *proposition*; the word, no doubt, was his. You very scornfully refused?"

"Of course, I refused," said Helen, and her face got rosier. "You ought to know I'm not——" she stopped, for she remembered that Geoffrey's sort took some things for granted. "Besides," she went on with an effort for carelessness: "I'd really sooner stay with you."

"You are loyal and not soon daunted, ma'am, but perhaps you're rash," said Spiers and kissed her. "However, I expect you got a nasty jar and we'll talk about something else. I ought to go for a load of hay and haul some logs from the bluff, but I haven't got a team. We might picnic. I expect the wild strawberries are ripe."

On sunny banks the prairie strawberry grows large, and Helen's holidays were not frequent. She wanted to go, but she shook her head.

"I'll go with you to Fairholm. Don't you see you must get another horse?"

"By George!" said Spiers, "I do see. Well, I not long since admitted your judgment was as good as mine, and perhaps Lawrence will supply me. Since he has three or four teams, I don't suppose the police would notice that a horse was gone. Larry's a good pal, but I must give him some explanation and I hope he's not got tired. To be my benefactor is rather a strenuous job."

They went to Fairholm, and brought back the horse, and in the evening Helen's caution was justified. She was sewing by the door, and Spiers, in the grass, smoked his pipe, but by and by he gave her a meaning glance. Helen turned and her heart beat, for a young man on a splendid horse rode from behind the bluff and she knew the red and yellow uniform of the Royal North-West Mounted Police.

"Light down, stranger," said Spiers, and the old-fashioned, ranch hand's greeting implied that the welcome was friendly. "Will you take some coffee? The kettle's on the stove."

The trooper got down and tied his horse. He refused the coffee but lighted a cigarette Spiers gave him, and pushing back his big pistol, sat down in the grass.

"I got supper and want to make Wilmot's by dark."

Helen said nothing. If Geoffrey wanted her to talk, he would give her a cue, and she studied the constable. He was an athletic young fellow and his

look was thoughtful.

"Well?" said Spiers, indicating the furrows plowed along his boundary. "Are you inspecting fire guards?"

"Yours are all right, but I've got another job. The sun's been pretty fierce and the sloo grass is good and ripe. I reckon you put up some loads today."

"Why, no," said Spiers. "I was doing chores, and then we visited with our neighbors."

"The homestead's lonely and I like to see people," Helen remarked. "I made my husband stop his chores and take me across to Fairholm."

"A pretty good day to go riding, ma'am. I guess you did ride?" said the young fellow carelessly.

Helen saw where he led. He wanted to know if a horse was gone, but if the team was at the stable, he would sooner Spiers did not imagine he had tried to find out.

"We walked; Fairholm is not far," she replied. "Besides, the wagon spring-seat is broken, and my husband was not keen about using the team."

"One horse is a bit stiff on the fore leg. Suppose you come and look at him, and I'll give yours a feed," said Spiers.

The constable went. His duty was to go, but Mrs. Spiers had banished his doubts. Unless the horses were at the stable, she would not have admitted she had walked; then Spiers had asked him to examine one. Well, he thought he had used some tact, and had not excited much curiosity. The horse's lameness was not marked, but both animals were fresh, and he was satisfied they had not gone far.

When he went back to the bench Helen gave him a piece of pie. He did not refuse, but he put the pie in the grass.

"You met Hart at the settlement yesterday," he said. "He took the trail soon afterwards. Maybe you know he has not come back?"

Helen gave Spiers a warning glance. The question was awkward, for Geoffrey did not know how much the other knew. Spiers, however, did not hesitate.

"It is not at all remarkable. When Hart transacted some business with me and Lawrence Elliot at the hotel he was starting for the Butler Lake district to look up some customers. I don't suppose he'd be through by dark, and the farmers are a hospitable lot."

"The queer thing is, his horse came back."

Helen's disturbance vanished. Geoffrey had taken the proper line and it looked as if the other were satisfied, for he began to eat the pie. At all

events, now he had admitted Hart's horse had come back alone and the police were interested, the advantage he might have used was gone.

"Mr. Elliot and you fixed to meet Hart?" he resumed.

"That is so. We started home in Lawrence's rig about half an hour afterward. But what about Hart?"

"It looks as if somebody held him up at Butler Creek; we don't know yet," the constable replied, and loosed his horse. "Thank you for the pie, Mrs. Spiers. I must shove on."

He got on his horse, and when he took the trail Spiers smiled.

"You played up nobly, Helen, and the lad did not find out much. Now I expect he'll go to Fairholm and I hope Larry does not admit he knew Hart is missing."

CHAPTER XIV

LAWRENCE'S CHOICE

THIN shadows trailed across the grass and melted. The poplar branches tossed, and the blackbirds' gold-barred wings sparkled in the sun. By the bluff the grass was luminously green; farther back, the strong color softened and the parched turf was yellow and gray. Although a man occupied a log in the shade, the birds were not disturbed. He was very quiet, and when they fluttered by he did not turn his head.

Lawrence's hand was tight on his cold pipe and he looked straight in front. A frame-saw and a shining ax rested against the log, a letter lay by his feet. He had cut a load of fence-posts and now he must ponder, for in the morning his reply must go to the settlement. His blue shirt was fastened back from his arms, but when a hot sunbeam pierced the shade and touched his skin he did not know.

The letter was from Orthwaite in Lancashire, and although Lawrence's leave was for six months, it looked as if the old fellow wanted him. At all events, he must know if Lawrence were coming back when his leave was up. His secretary was going, he must make some fresh appointments at the office, and so forth. In fact, although the letter was kind, Lawrence felt that unless he fixed a date for his return, his relation would be willing for him to remain for good. When he reckoned up, he found with some surprise that since he left the cotton-mill three months were gone. Fairholm, so to speak, had absorbed him. Now he must choose one of two lines, and the choice was hard.

Although Lawrence was not a sentimentalist, he had inherited something of his father's love for the farm. Then he was a healthy, athletic young fellow, and the strenuous life in the wind and sun attracted him. The old man, however, was a trustful optimist, and when he was dead it was obvious that stern economy must be used, and Fairholm would not properly support both his sons. George was the older and Lawrence resigned himself to go.

Well, he had made some progress in Lancashire. Anyhow, Orthwaite was satisfied and sometimes stated, meaningly, that if his nephew stuck to his job, he might go far. Lawrence had ambitions, and some talents he could not

use on the plains. He was happy at the cotton-mill and his uncle's spacious house.

Fairholm, however, must not be given up. George and he were their father's trustees; the old man had not doubted they would push ahead when he was forced to stop. It was a sort of stipulation for their inheriting, and one must not cheat. George, however, had rather lost ground than advanced; his luck perhaps was bad, but he had not much driving-force, and he might get entangled another time when Lawrence could not put things straight and Orthwaite would not. The possibility must be weighed.

Then to be rich was not very important. In winter the plains were dreary, but when one was young, independence and adventure called. At the cotton-mill Lawrence was a servant; at Fairholm he was boss. He liked to use his muscles and handle horses. Moreover, farming was now a scientific job, and if one used modern plans, the farm might occupy, and reward, all the abilities George and he had. In fact, Lawrence was willing to stay. His arguments were plausible, but he felt he had perhaps not yet honestly stated all. Then he looked up and saw Margaret.

Lawrence had not heard her horse's feet, but when the animal stretched its neck and seized a poplar branch the leaves shook. He saw Margaret studied him and he remarked her baffling smile. The sun had touched her face and her skin was brown. Her pose was firm, and but for the faint smile her look was calm. One got a sense of proud reserve. Lawrence imagined she had seen the letter in the grass.

"You were brooding, Larry? You didn't know I was here."

"I did not know. I was trying to weigh things—but you might not be interested."

"It's possible," Margaret agreed. "At one time, however, you gave me your boyish confidence, and now and then I saw a plan where you could not. Perhaps you might experiment."

"Very well. My uncle in the Old Country wants me at the mill, and if I am going, I ought to start."

"Then, you don't know if you are going?" said Margaret.

Lawrence wondered whether she inquired because she wanted to be polite. In a way, he had experimented, but Margaret's look was tranquilly unmoved.

"For some time I knew I must soon decide. However, one puts off an awkward choice, and I rather slackly thought I'd wait."

Margaret said nothing. Since Lawrence had hesitated, she imagined the decision was hard.

"If I do not go now, when Orthwaite needs me, I cannot afterwards claim my post," he went on. "You see, I have got to fix things, so to speak, for all my life."

Margaret thought she saw. His voice was not altogether even and his glance was fixed on her.

"Cannot Millicent and George advise you?" she asked and soothed her impatient horse.

"They have not yet seen the letter. The drawback is, they would feel they were interested and mustn't be selfish. Trying to be just, they'd exaggerate, and rather argue against themselves than for me."

"Sometimes one's friends are foolishly generous," Margaret agreed. "When the choice is important, one must choose for oneself. Go on, Larry. I'm not yet bored."

Lawrence stated his problem and Margaret mused. After a few moments, she looked up with a smile.

"Your uncle's wanting you back implies that you are useful at the cotton-factory; your talents are obviously rather varied. For example, my father thinks you a good farmer; in fact, he declares if you had not come to George's help, Fairholm would now be his."

Lawrence frowned. He did not see Margaret's object for talking about their relations' hostility, but she had done so before. Perhaps it indicated that she was willing for him to go.

"Mr. Ogilvie himself was not a farmer. For all that, the Crossing is a model farm."

"He was clerk at a Toronto drygoods house. Your father was a British officer. Perhaps it accounts for their jarring, and you did not inherit your business ability. However, the main thing is to have talent, and then you can make good where you like. I expect you know the Victorian philosophers' argument. At all events, some old-time artists were also sculptors, statesmen, and architects. It looks as if you and father belonged to the illustrious company."

"It looks as if you meant to be nasty," Lawrence rejoined. "I thought you my friend, but you don't help much. Anyhow, I haven't claimed I'm old Leonardo's and Michaelangelo's type. If a man is willing to sweat and concentrate, he ought to put across moderately well a job for which he wasn't trained. I think that's all I claim."

"Sometimes I am horrid," Margaret agreed. "However, where you think Millicent would hesitate, I must not meddle. I'd hate to feel I might be responsible for your not taking the proper line."

Her look was quiet and rather baffling, but somehow Lawrence thought her quietness significant. His eyes began to sparkle and his doubts to vanish. For long the scale had balanced and now, although she said nothing, Margaret had tipped the beam.

"It's strange. Ten minutes ago I could not decide, but my wavering's over," he declared. "After all, my job's at Fairholm. I'm not going back."

He thought a touch of color came to Margaret's skin, but she turned her horse.

"Oh, well, to fix one's course is some satisfaction. I hope you will not be sorry," she remarked and let her horse go.

When the bluff vanished behind a rise, she smiled and blushed. Lawrence was rather obvious and boyishly naive. If he remained, his fight might be hard, and, for his sake, she hoped he would not be rash.

Lawrence loaded his wagon. Now that he saw his line, he was happier, and to throw the heavy posts on board was some relief. He knew he had let ambition go and chosen labor and frugality, but when he started his horses he began to sing a careless song. After all, to labor in scorching sun and arctic frost was a man's job, and new machines and methods would help the prairie farmer conquer his poverty. On the plains all was changing; muscle counted for less and brain for more. Man must yet front hostile Nature, but science now supplied him with better tools.

Then Lawrence saw Ogilvie's rig, and his song stopped. He frankly disliked Ogilvie, but not with the sort of instinctive repulsion he had felt for Hart. The old fellow had qualities one admired; he was sternly efficient and he looked in front. One felt he sensed, and meant to use, the new forces that had begun to remodel prairie agriculture. The trouble was, he was greedy and his advance involved his neighbor's impoverishment. In fact, mechanical progress gave him a dangerous power. Anyhow, he was an awkward antagonist and Margaret was stanch. "Loyal" was perhaps the proper word, and Lawrence frowned.

Where their trails crossed, Ogilvie motioned to him to stop and pulled up his team. Lawrence stood by his horses and waited. Ogilvie's glance was keen, and Lawrence wondered whether the old fellow knew Margaret had recently left him.

"You met Hart at the settlement soon before he took the Butler trail?" Ogilvie remarked.

"Hart met me and Spiers, by appointment, at the hotel."

"Then, if you had persuaded him to carry on Spiers' mortgage, you would have been his surety for the debt?"

"Not at all," said Lawrence with some dryness. "There is not much use in trying to support a man who has Hart for a creditor. I *paid* Spiers' debt."

Ogilvie's horses were quiet, but he savagely jerked the reins and pulled the team across the trail.

"You gave Hart your check?"

"That is so. He wanted cash, and took the check across to the bank."

"Then, when he started for Butler he carried the wad?"

Lawrence wondered whether he had rashly implied that Spalding might have had an object for stopping Hart. Ogilvie was disturbed and annoyed, although so far as Lawrence could see, Hart's disappearance had nothing to do with him.

"It's possible, sir," he agreed. "If you are interested, his clerk might perhaps enlighten you."

"I don't know if I'll inquire," said Ogilvie and gave Lawrence a searching glance. "I don't see why you meddled; but I allow Geoff's wife is a looker."

Lawrence's face got red. He had tried for politeness, but he doubted if he could keep it up.

"It's obvious you don't know Mrs. Spiers. Since I'm not forced to account for my helping her husband, I'll get going."

He seized the reins, but Ogilvie stopped him, and he thought the grim old fellow's eyes twinkled.

"Well, you did pay the debt, and if you reckoned to shove Spiers along, you're not very bright. On the plains, a man must work or quit; the Province won't carry slobs and loafers. Then I guess modern economy will soon put out the small man who's content to use the old rules. You have got to concentrate and consolidate; individual effort is not going to pay. For example, Gordon starts for the settlement Monday to buy chicken feed; Tuesday Spiers goes for groceries. Four horses and two men haul half a load. Thorne can't use a tractor, because all the soil he's broken won't pay for the machine; Lomax, across his boundary-line, likes a good horse-team. Since his father drove oxen, he reckons he goes ahead. An up-to-date gasolene engine would plow out the lot. Farming's a business proposition."

"Consolidation implies central control," Lawrence rejoined. "It implies a dominant boss. Who is the boss to be?"

"The man who has the money and the brains."

"And the others must be his servants? The trouble is, they might not be resigned and when your hired help is dissatisfied, the machine does not run

smooth. Anyhow, so far, Canada is a country where the small man has got a chance, and so long as he can use his vote I think he'll keep it so."

Ogilvie laughed, a scornful laugh.

"You're young and hopeful, Larry. If you buck against economic law, the politicians can't help you. You'll sure go broke!"

He used the whip and the rig lurched ahead. Lawrence started his team, and knitted his brows. Ogilvie's remarks were typical and to some extent his stern philosophy was sound; but he had not argued in order to persuade Lawrence. Lawrence rather thought he, so to speak, had wanted to put him off the track. Perhaps the old fellow had tried to explain his annoyance. Anyhow, when he knew Hart had got cash, he was annoyed.

Lawrence, however, did not see much light, and pulling out his watch, he pushed on for Fairholm.

CHAPTER XV

WOMAN'S HELP

THE FAIRHOLM tractor was at Pine Creek, Lawrence was coming for breakfast, and Helen, hearing horse's feet, went to the door. She saw nobody, but a horse waited by the stable and she knew the animal. Its head was down, and it stood slackly, as if it drooped from fatigue. Helen called on a high note and Spiers, carrying a bucket, crossed the grass. The horse lifted its head and followed him to the house.

The animal's coat was rough and clotted by half-dried sweat and dust; the dew was yet on the saddle and headstall. When Spiers stopped, it stretched its neck and snuffed the water. Helen loosed the bit-links and lifted the heavy bucket.

"The pail's my kitchen pail, but you mustn't wait for your drink," she said.

The horse drank greedily and she stroked its neck.

"As soon as I called, the poor, tired thing came. He's glad to get home," she said.

"It is not at all strange," Spiers remarked. "Your voice is like a bell, ma'am, and if Larry is anywhere about, I expect he's hustling—— In fact, I hear him."

A minute or two afterward Lawrence got down at the door.

"I thought your trusting Spalding was risky, but he has kept his word," he said. "Somebody rode the horse across the railroad in the dark and turned him loose at daybreak. Well, it looks as if Tom had some useful friends. Do you know who they are?"

"On the whole, I'm satisfied to guess," Spiers replied, and turned to Helen. "I'll take Garnet to the stable and when he's fed we'll get breakfast."

"You must groom him first," said Helen. "Somebody might look us up. When Larry goes he must take the horse he lent us."

Lawrence nodded. "Mrs. Spiers is pretty keen and I think her caution's justified. The police are searching the prairie. Come on, Geoff."

They went to the stable, and after breakfast lighted their pipes in the kitchen. By and by Helen said:

"Geoff thinks I exaggerate, but I'm anxious. We don't know if Spalding has crossed the frontier and perhaps he cannot send us word. Then, since Hart's horse went back to the settlement, it's plain Spalding got another. I expect the police will follow up the clue."

"The Royal North-West stick to a trail," Lawrence agreed.

"The awkward thing is, we don't know if they have found out much," said Spiers.

"Reserve's the Regina tradition, and the troopers don't dare talk; they boast when they get their man," Lawrence remarked. "I think they claim they have not yet been baffled, but they have not found Hart. It's possible he is in the creek, but I begin to doubt. Anyhow, I expect Spalding has made Dakota, and if the Americans did give him up, he would not implicate you. Are you sorry you meddled?"

"We are anxious," said Helen. "I think that's all. You see, I hated Hart, and he took Spalding's farm and then refused to help him hire the team. When the contract was finished Spalding meant to give him back the money. He is not a thief. He sent back our horse and his friends are willing to run some risk for him. When a man's friends stand by him you know he's trustworthy and they are the proper sort."

Spiers smiled. "There's my apology! Perhaps the argument's logical. You ought to be flattered, Lawrence."

"I did not lend Spalding my horse. He got yours and the implication's obvious," Lawrence rejoined, for he saw Helen's embarrassment.

"Geoffrey must joke," she said with a blush. "I don't apologize for my husband; but his friends are good."

"Oh, well," said Lawrence, "Hart's vanishing is queer and I wonder whether Ogilvie knows something about it. When he found out Hart had got my check he was much annoyed. However, we must get to work——"

He stopped and turned his head, for he thought he heard the measured beat of horses' feet. Spiers jumped for the door. On the top of a rise, about a mile off, two horsemen cut the sky. Their big Stetson hats were conspicuous and the slanted sunbeams touched their red coats.

"Police troopers!" he remarked. "They'll arrive in six or seven minutes."

"Then, I'm going," said Lawrence. "Since they know you haven't three horses, I'll take mine. If I steal off behind the stable, I dare say I can make the bluff. Perhaps you ought to help Mrs. Spiers clean the plates."

Helen's color came and went but she stopped Lawrence. "You must take Geoffrey's horse. When the trooper was here another time, yours was in the stable, and I expect one doesn't cheat a mounted policeman."

"You are very keen," said Lawrence, and went to the door.

Keeping the house between himself and the police, he threw his saddle on the horse Spalding had borrowed. The holes in the cinch band did not meet the fastening, the buckle was stiff, and for a few moments he pulled at the strap. In the meantime the troopers' advance was ominously fast, and Lawrence imagined they would search the stable. When they arrived the horse must not be there, and when he fastened the headstall he swore. The headstall was Spiers', he did not see his, and the police were now at the house.

Lawrence imagined they would question Geoffrey, and Mrs. Spiers would keep them as long as possible, but they would not stop for long, and he had perhaps two or three minutes in which he must reach the bluff. Behind the bluff, the plain sloped to a hollow, and if he got there nobody would see him, but to cross the higher ground on the other side might be awkward. Leading out the horses, he mounted his, and seizing the other's bridle, rode quietly towards the wood.

When the police dismounted Helen's heart beat, for one was the young constable who had not long since visited the farm.

"I expect we make you tired, ma'am, but our forage is used up and we reckoned you might let us have some corn and chop," he said.

Helen remarked his carefulness to state why he had stopped and imagined he was not altogether frank, but she smiled. Geoffrey, no doubt, would take his cue.

"Why, of course, but that is my husband's job," she said. "You refused supper another time; but you must have some breakfast. I'll put the bacon and coffee on the stove."

She signed them to go in, and shut the door. The morning was not yet hot, and Lawrence's retreat might not be altogether noiseless. She put some plates on the table and Spiers brought the frying-pan.

"Get busy, boys," he said presently. "When you have fed up we'll get the chop you want. One mustn't try to penetrate your official reserve, but perhaps you are allowed to state if you have found Mr. Hart."

"We have not," replied the man he addressed. "Mrs. Spiers cooks bully flapjacks."

"Take some drips," said Spiers, and pushed across the syrup. "Your chiefs at Regina are up against a queer proposition. Can you get after a man for killing another when you cannot produce the corpse?"

"Search me!" said the younger constable. "The conundrum has nothing to do with us. All we got to do is to track the fellow who held up Mr. Hart at

the bridge. He certainly was held up. We like your coffee, ma'am."

"You're fine boys; the sort to carry a sergeant's stripes," Spiers remarked. "Will you take a smoke? But perhaps you'd like to go along and help me mix the horses' feed?"

Helen imagined the constables had meant to go, and a few minutes after they left the house she went to the stable. Geoffrey's horses interested the police, and sometimes where a man overlooks a small but important detail a woman does not.

"I thought I'd bring you a clean grain-bag," she said.

A constable said they carried forage bags, and Helen looked about. In the rude turf building the light was not very good, but when she pushed back the door something twinkled, and advancing carelessly, she saw a headstall on a post. The bright object was a small nickel ornament on a strap, and she knew the Fairholm harness carried a metal star. The headstall was Lawrence's, and she imagined the police would not miss the clue. Helen leaned against the post. Spiers opened the corn-bin.

"The stuff at the bottom's gritty and dusty. I must get you some from another lot," he said. "You might shove the door right back."

Helen imagined he did not want more light; he wanted to persuade the others he had nothing to hide, and but for her it might have cost him much. The headstall was behind her, and she did not mean to move.

A constable went to the door and when Spiers got the forage they returned to the house. After a few minutes the police took the trail and he sat down on the bench and lighted his pipe.

"The boys are pretty smart, but I think we have done with them. After all, the scent was cold, and now they'll probably try a forward cast."

Helen's look was puzzled, and Spiers explained.

"Perhaps you have watched baffled hounds. They know instinctively the fox is not far off, but they have lost the scent and they circle about. Sometimes they try back; sometimes the huntsman throws them ahead."

"I have not," said Helen, with a jealous pang, for she did not yet know much about her husband's life in the Old Country. "You see, I did not go to hunts. I suppose you did?"

"Oh, well," said Spiers, "two or three years ago I hunted in Manitoba. An English enthusiast started a pack of coyote hounds, but the sport was not first-class. Anyhow, if the boys keep the settlement trail, they'll find the scent stone-cold."

"You believe you and Larry baffled them? You're rather proud——?"

"One mustn't boast, ma'am. Lawrence stole off cleverly, and perhaps my calculated openness carried some weight. For all that, we acknowledge your help."

Helen laughed. "I rather think you ought! It looks as if you did not notice he took your headstall and left his on the post."

"By George! The nickel star is on the strap. Everybody knows the Fairholm harness. And I asked for a better light! But what did you do about it?"

"I leaned against the post. The star hurt the back of my neck."

"Anyhow, you saw us out," said Spiers with a touch of feeling. "Your coolness and pluck are admirable, my lady; since I'm beginning to know you, I mustn't say they're remarkable. When things are awkward I'm glad to know I can count on your support."

"Then you mustn't be independent; but I'm not really clever, Geoff. In Lancashire I hadn't much chance to study the sort of things that interest you. For instance, I know nothing about hunting; but the police seem to have vanished, and they may be *casting back*. Do you think you could climb the stable roof?"

Spiers did so, although his boot went through the rotten poles. At the ridge, he commanded a shallow coulée, into which the trail dipped, a mile or two off. The horsemen were not on the trail, but in the distance two figures melted in the grass.

"I'm afraid they've got on Larry's track, and they're going fast," he said. "It's awkward; particularly since I do not see where you can help."

"Come down from the roof," Helen replied. "All you can do is to get to work. If the police come round again, you ought to be busy at your usual job."

CHAPTER XVI

LAWRENCE'S ACCOMPLICE

AT the bottom of a gentle slope Lawrence pulled up his horses. For the most part, the prairie runs back, bare and level, to the horizon, but in some belts rolling ground is dotted by woods, and the Fairholm plains were crossed by wide coulées and ravines, cut perhaps by floods when the Northwest was lifted from the bed of an inland sea. So long as Lawrence stopped behind the bank, he was hidden from anybody who might try to search the plain at Pine Creek. The drawback was the homestead was hidden from him. Moreover, if he climbed the other side, his figure would cut the sky, and a man on a horse is a conspicuous mark, particularly when he leads another.

On the whole, Lawrence thought he would wait. If the police, as he imagined, were going to the railroad, they would cross the coulée two or three miles off, and the time for him to start was when they were gone. If they went the other way, he could not cheat them on the open plain. He got down, and lighting a cigarette, allowed the horses to feed. If the constables spotted him, there was no use in riding off. He must try to bluff them, although to explain satisfactorily why he had Spiers' horse might be difficult.

All was very quiet and the sun was hot. The lilies in the grass shone like crimson flame, and on the ridge in front the green was burned to dazzling yellow. Sometimes a little gopher plunged into a hole, and Lawrence heard a prairie hen call her brood. So long as he did not hear horses' feet, he was resigned, and he pulled out his watch. The police might stop at the homestead for breakfast. He must not go yet.

By and by he looked up and frowned, for Margaret, carrying a small basket, crossed the hollow. Lawrence frankly doubted if he could bluff the police; to baffle a resolute young woman whose curiosity he excited might be impossible. He had, half an hour since, studied Mrs. Spiers. Margaret gave him a cool smile.

"To meditate is your habit, and if you are weighing something important, I will not stop. I don't want you to be laboriously polite."

Lawrence's mouth went crooked. Margaret's humor was acid, and although her charm was marked, he would sooner she bantered him another time.

"I was, in fact, pondering," he agreed. "I doubt if it is my habit and sometimes I'm sorry I didn't weigh things as I ought. Anyhow, I'm willing to talk. I suppose you were gathering strawberries?"

Margaret held up the basket of red, shining fruit.

"Have you in your Lancashire gardens strawberries as fine as ours?"

"Some are larger; I think that's all. Strawberries, apples, and sugar-maples like the North. It looks as if Nature drew sweetness from the snow. All the same, I have done with Lancashire. Perhaps you forgot?"

Margaret had not forgotten. She thought she knew why Lawrence had decided to remain in Canada, but she studied the horses.

"You are not romantic and the spacious days are gone, but you lurk about the coulée and when you saw me you frowned. Well, although I don't suppose you rustled the horses, the headstalls are different, and the brown horse carries an Alberta brand. I think I have seen the animal before and it was not yours."

"Sometimes my soberness is not a good protection, and to get entangled is easier than you think," Lawrence rejoined. "Anyhow, I took the coulée because I wanted to hide."

Margaret studied him with surprise. His mouth was crooked and his eyes twinkled, but she knew he did not altogether joke.

"As a rule, I think I'm discreet," she remarked.

Lawrence knew he could trust her. In fact, it looked as if he must, but he must give her all his confidence. Margaret was proud. He narrated his breakfasting with Spiers and the constables' arrival. Margaret's look got thoughtful, but he imagined she sympathized.

"I was glad Spalding got away," she said. "Hart was greedy and cunning, and I think his sort and their unscrupulous speculations really stop Canada's progress. We advance by labor, but where the farmer plows, the mortgage-broker and storekeeper take the crop. It ought not to go like that. Still, in Canada we are not all greedy, calculating materialists. We have, for example, built railroads that do not pay. I expect the stockholders grumble, but after all the exploit was fine——"

She stopped with an apologetic laugh and resumed carelessly: "Well, I'm not a political economist, and Father thinks me raw—— He declares I got my freak notions at Montreal and I really think he's sorry he let me go. But

perhaps you ought to find out if the police are at Geoffrey's. I will watch the horses."

Lawrence climbed the slope; since he dared not leave the horses, he had not gone before. At the top he clenched his fist. In the background, dust rolled about two horsemen who plowed across a dry sandy belt. Lawrence turned and ran down the slope.

"They're coming as fast as they can shove along, and you must get off!" he gasped.

"You don't know if they spotted you," Margaret rejoined.

"Spiers' stable interested them, and to find me leading a horse that is not mine might give them a useful hint."

"Yes," said Margaret, and knitted her brows, "The led horse is an obstacle. If you rode your own and had not the other, they would not have much grounds to question you."

"Of course," said Lawrence impatiently. "But I *have* got the other, and cannot hide him. There's the trouble. But why don't you start?"

Margaret's eyes twinkled.

"For one thing, Larry, I'd sooner ride than walk. When you were a boy, we sometimes pretended you were a famous horse thief and I was your accomplice. Perhaps it was remarkable, but I rather think my plans for cheating imaginary pursuers were not much worse than yours——"

"The troopers are not imaginary. They'll be here in five minutes!" Lawrence shouted.

"You are not polite, and when I begin a speech I like to finish. Now, of course, you have done with boyish exploits. You are a sober, practical farmer and do not want an accomplice. In fact, if I said you were ridiculously obstinate and prouder of your independence than you have much grounds to be, I would not exaggerate."

"You mustn't be implicated," Lawrence persisted. "The job's mine. When one is Spiers' pal, one must expect adventures, and since I allowed him to entangle me I have got to pay. Besides, I'm not anxious for fresh trouble with Mr. Ogilvie."

"One ought to know where to stop, but you do not," said Margaret. "The led horse is the drawback. Well, when I get up, the led horse vanishes."

"But your clothes—— And the saddle is a man's saddle."

"It looks like that," Margaret agreed. "My clothes are a sort of compromise, but you are not a dressmaker. Give me the bridle, and don't bother to help."

Lawrence occupied himself with a strap, and when he looked up Margaret, fifty yards off, steered the brown horse up the coulée. Lawrence got on his, and since something must be risked, he went the other way. By and by he met the sweating troopers and waved them to stop.

"Perhaps you were at Pine Creek. I reckon Spiers is at home?"

"He was there not long since," a constable replied. "You're from Fairholm, Mr. Elliot? Did you meet anybody on the trail?"

"I saw Gardiner's rig by the long bluff. A team and wagon crossed the rise; Cruden's I expect. I didn't see another man."

The constable swore and turned his horse. Lawrence steered for Pine Creek, and when he got down Helen was at the door, and Spiers ran across the field. Sitting down in the shade, Lawrence narrated his adventures.

"Do you think the boys knew I was here?" he asked.

"On the whole, I do not," Spiers replied in a thoughtful voice. "They know Spalding got a horse and I'm his pal; but I imagine that is all they have got to go upon. Since two surprise parties have led them nowhere, I expect they'll now leave me alone."

"Margaret Ogilvie will not give us away. Since she helped me cheat the fellows I was forced to enlighten her."

Spiers smiled. "In the circumstances, I don't see that you had another plan. Anyhow, I'm not disturbed, although I doubt if Ogilvie would approve. Well, I'll take your horse, and then we'll get to work."

He went off and Lawrence lighted a cigarette. The tractor was at Pine Creek and they were going to break a fresh belt of soil to fallow until spring. Helen gave him an apologetic glance.

"You don't grumble, Lawrence, but I feel we have forced you to bear our troubles. When you began to help my husband you did not know all you undertook."

"Perhaps that is so, but in a way Geoffrey had nothing to do with it," Lawrence replied in a thoughtful voice. "Sometimes one, so to speak, does get drawn on farther than one imagined. I expect much depends on one's temperament, and you are not accountable. In fact, nobody is accountable but myself. You see, it looked as if I need not meddle, and afterwards I might have stopped——"

Helen said nothing and he began to muse. He felt as if in the background a vague force worked against him and his neighbors. Spalding was broken, and hunted for a crime he did not commit. Spiers yet ran some risk, and had Lawrence not returned from England, George would have lost his farm. Perhaps in order to guard himself, he had rather blindly plunged into the

fight. Effort was his best weapon, and he had not waited for a fresh attack. He had bet on the harvest at Fairholm and Pine Creek all he had. Now his youth and rawness weighed and he did not know where to look for support.

George could drive a clean furrow, but his usefulness ended there. He argued like a boy and his lameness embarrassed him. Spiers was not a very good plowman and he refused to calculate. In fact, but for Millicent, when Lawrence wanted help, it looked as if he must rely on Mrs. Spiers.

Lawrence thought he could do so. The little milliner from the shabby streets was fine stuff. She had given Spiers fresh courage, and firmly pushed him ahead. She had saved Spalding, and now she, perhaps unconsciously, forced Lawrence to join in her husband's defense. At all events, if Spiers lost Pine Creek, Fairholm might go.

"Well," he resumed, "when one has started one must push on, and I feel we are going to get there. The crop is fine and a good harvest would float us off the rocks. Still, I wish we had not entangled Margaret."

"You are very scrupulous. Do you think she did not want to help?"

"In a sense, I forced her," Lawrence replied. "If Ogilvie found out, he might make trouble. The old fellow has not much use for me."

Helen smiled. "I wouldn't bother, Lawrence, and I don't imagine Margaret was altogether unwilling. You like to be independent, but sometimes one's independence hurts one's friends. Margaret, of course, is stanch—a real lass, we'd say in Lancashire; but a girl who fights for her own folks will fight for her lover."

"The claims might jar," Lawrence remarked in a quiet voice.

"A time comes when a girl must choose. To keep all she has may cost her much. If she wants something finer, she must let the other go and take the plunge. Well, Margaret is proud. She would hate to be afraid; and perhaps if you are not afraid you can go anywhere. At all events, you can't be shabby."

"Your pluck entitles you to talk like that," said Lawrence.

Helen blushed, and he began to be embarrassed. His remark was perhaps tactless, but she gave him a trustful glance.

"I mustn't boast. At one time, but for your sister, I might have run away. She said, on the plains life was a fight, and since one must fight, one ought to try to win—— Well, your part is to drive the plow."

She stopped and for a few moments watched the tall wheat roll in the wind. The rippling green was broken by faint, yellow gleams. The splendid heads were filling, and when they bent, the murmur from the field was like the slow beat of a tranquil sea.

“There’s your job, and Geoff’s; perhaps a woman’s is harder,” Helen resumed. “Although I cannot plow, I have fought for the crop, and I think we will not be beaten. The wheat will see us out.”

Spiers came from the stable and she went to the house. Five minutes afterward the tractor began to rattle and the gangplows turned back the shining clods to mellow for a larger crop. On the plains one must labor and look hopefully in front.

CHAPTER XVII

HAIL

IN JULY thunder rolls across the plains and as a rule the farmers welcome the refreshing showers, but when the hot month is up they begin to study the clouds. The wheat ears are swelling and sometimes after a savage storm the thermometer falls. Wheat for milling must be hard, and since frost shrivels the milky grain, a cold night may rob the farmer of his reward for twelve months' toil. Moreover, now and then the clouds break in scourging hail, and the track of the freakish storm is checkered like a draught-board by squares of battered crops, for where one man's escapes, his neighbor's may be beaten to the ground.

Lawrence one hot evening steered his team across the grass. He thought Margaret was at the Gordon homestead and he might carry her back. At times they met casually, for Lawrence did not go to Ogilvie's, and they did not fix the meeting. As a rule, Margaret was friendly, but Lawrence knew she knew her father reckoned him his antagonist, and sometimes she used a queer reserve. Although she was not accountable, but for Ogilvie's greediness, Lawrence thought his father might yet have ruled at Fairholm.

The team went slowly, and Lawrence mused and looked about. He had risked much and frost might ruin him, but so far his bold speculation was justified.

In Manitoba the crops were better than he had known, and if all went well, the splendid harvest would banish the farmers' troubles. He began to picture the turning tide's carrying him and his neighbors smoothly along. Moreover, where cultivation spread and fresh soil was broken frost in August did not bother one much.

All the same, the fight was not yet won, and he must brace up for the effort harvest on the plains implied. When the straw wheat-bins, like giant beehives, dotted the fields and the loaded wagons started for the elevators, he might calculate his reward. In the meantime, much depended on the weather.

For the most part, the sky was clear, and the declining sun was hot. The grass had gone yellow, and in the dry, sandy belts, shone like silver; in the background the pale colors melted to blue. Dark clouds, however, floated

about the north, and a gust of fiery wind shook the branches in a bluff he passed.

Margaret was at Willows, and when Lawrence tied his horses Gordon and his hired men were sitting in the grass. Mrs. Gordon and Margaret occupied chairs by the porch. Gordon was lean and hard, but his shoulders were bent. Although he was old-fashioned and cautious, he was a good farmer. Mrs. Gordon's face was lined, for she had long used stern economy and gone without household help. The hired men were young; one was a muscular roughneck, satisfied to drive his team and take his pay, the other a rather delicate, college-trained young fellow. Lawrence wondered why Marshall stayed at Gordon's, for his work was hard.

"How's things going at Fairholm?" the farmer inquired.

"We don't grumble," Lawrence replied. "I have not seen oats as fine and better wheat-heads. This harvest ought to wipe out some debts."

Gordon nodded and studied the sky.

"I like my wheat in the bin, and then maybe I'll shout. Anyhow, things do look pretty good, and we were figuring on Myra's going east to see the old folks at Owen's Sound. She has not been home for most fifteen years."

"You have surely got the wheat," hired man Stalker remarked. "All you want's a merger to hold the stuff until the fellows at the Winnipeg board of trade shove up the price. If you put the screw on them, you might pay us. I guess a farmer's idea of economy is to get his hired help for nothing."

"They try your plan at Chicago, but as a rule it does not work," Marshall rejoined. "Nature's up against them and the earth is big. Europe is not fed by Canada and the United States. They buy wheat from Chile and the Argentine. Cheap freight draws supplies from Australia, and when the monsoon's good India ships a pile."

"You got all fixed up for harvest, Larry?" Gordon resumed.

"We have got the horses and binders, but I must hire some help."

"Then, I guess you got to pay," said Stalker dryly. Gordon looked up sharply. "What about it, Jim?"

"The boys are calculating. You're going to cut a record crop and you mean to keep the wad."

"The wad is ours. In ten years I've harvested three or four good crops. I risk my labor and money, and now I'm hoping to put all straight after my last setback."

"You're a pretty good boss," said Stalker; "I'd like you to win out. All the same, my notion is, where I got to hustle extra I ought to have extra pay.

When the last load's put up you can count your bank-roll, but we'll be sweated mighty thin."

"A contract's a contract," Gordon remarked. "I take my chances on hail and frost, and if I'm broke I don't dispute your bill. However, I'm not poison mean, and if the wheat thrashes out as well's I expect, and you give me a square deal, why I'll try to treat you right." He turned to Marshall. "Well, the boys are grumbling. What's your program?"

"As a rule, I stick to my engagements," the lad replied in a cultivated voice. "For all that, I feel the boys don't grumble for nothing. We get to work when the snow melts and drive your plows through half-thawed soil; we mow the sloos and turn the summer fallow in the scorching sun; and then at harvest you engage a stranger for double pay. In six weeks a fresh man earns as much as I, at all events, earn in six months. As soon as the last load is hauled away we are fired, and are lucky if our wad carries us through the winter at a cheap boarding-house. Mine certainly will not."

"We reckoned you might stay with us," said Mrs. Gordon. "If you'll help me at the chores and chop wood, we'll stand for your board."

Marshall smiled. "You are kind, ma'am, and I'm glad to be your guest. I was thinking for the others, since most of them must quit. Manitoba is not at all the hired man's paradise some people seem to think. When I started for the golden West, the railroad folks declared if I stayed with my job and saved my pay I soon might buy a farm."

"I did it," said Gordon quietly.

"It cost you and Mrs. Gordon much," the lad rejoined. "I doubt if we have got the old-timers' pluck; we certainly have not their frugality. Well, I cannot live in the cities, the doctors warned me off, and I'd sooner help Mrs. Gordon than freeze at a lumber camp. All the same, I'd like to reckon with the people who told me I could get rich."

"I must go," said Margaret. "Are you staying, Larry?"

Lawrence loosed his horses and when the wagon rolled away Margaret gave him a thoughtful glance. His brows were knit and his brown face was thin. Her father admitted Elliot made good, but Margaret knew the strain got hard.

"Do you think our hired men will try to force their claim?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Lawrence, smiling. "Since the rule is to pay after harvest, they are not remarkably logical. In fact, I've known some not get their pay when the crop was reaped."

"But what about your men?"

"There will be no dispute at Fairholm," said Lawrence quietly. "The wheat is splendid, and I shall not, for a few dollars, fight the boys who helped me sow the crop. After all, they are entitled to some part of the reward."

Margaret brooded and when she looked up she said:

"You are generous; perhaps you are but just. I expect you know nobody at the Crossing will get an extra dollar?"

"I imagined your father might be firm," Lawrence agreed with a crooked smile.

"But don't you see——?"

"The trouble is obvious, Margaret, and, in one way, my luck has not been good. Ever since I came back to Fairholm I have been forced to jar with Mr. Ogilvie. When he thought to take the farm I paid George's debt, and afterwards I helped Spiers carry on. Mr. Ogilvie reckons him a loafer and would sooner he went. Now that the hired men want extra pay, we are again opposed, and I expect he'll claim I'm a sort of traitor; in the Old Country, blackleg is the word. Well, I must face it; and I suppose you see your line."

Margaret's look was disturbed and swift color touched her face, but her glance was level.

"Since I'm content to be at home and my father supports me, I must use his rules; but I do not want you to give up yours. In fact, if for my sake you did so, I'd be sorry."

"You are as generous as I thought, and you must play for your side. I suppose I must follow my bent. In the meantime, we will not quarrel about paying for a harvest we may not reap. The thunder-clouds are ominous. Let's get home."

The sunshine faded and dark shadow sped along the trail. A dreary wind shook the grass and its touch was cold. Margaret turned her head and watched the massed clouds' swift advance. Their color was thick, oily black; they rolled on, portentously, and where they passed the plain's silver and ocher melted to lifeless gray. Then a swift flash pierced the gloom and thunder crashed.

Lawrence braced his feet against a board and let the team go. The wagon lurched and rocked, and when the thunder stopped, the horses' feet beat a savage rhythm. Sometimes the lightning leaped across the bluff in front, and trunks and branches got distinct, and then, by contrast, all was dark.

By and by the team's noisy advance was drowned by a fresh turmoil that dulled the rolling thunder. The noise was measured, like the throb of surf,

and somehow it indicated fierce pursuit. Lawrence turned his head and saw a low cloud, of which the ragged, bottom fringe swept the grass. The cloud was not solid; its front was a trembling curtain, streaked by slanted lines, and blue flame flickered in the gloom behind.

Lawrence fixed his eyes on the trees ahead. The team began to gallop, the wagon rocked like a ship at sea, and he must hit the narrow trail through the wood. Then the thunder stopped, and all one heard was the advancing hail. To plunge into the wood was risky, but on the open plain the horses could not face the icy storm.

In a few moments they reached the bluff and Lawrence knew he could not hold the frightened animals. The trail went downhill to a hairpin corner and curved by a narrow bridge. Lawrence steered up the bank, threw the reins to Margaret, and jumped.

Thick brush entangled the horses and he reached the near animal's head. For a few moments he was thrown about and dragged through the brush, but he stuck to the bit-links and used his fist. Then the struggle got less savage and he knew Margaret was at the other horse's head. She was as strong and resolute as a man.

They conquered, but they dared not loose their hold. The wood was thick and one must not allow a first-class team to plunge through its entanglements. Lawrence had taken a nasty kick, and his wrist hurt, but somehow he must break the panic that urged his horses ahead.

Branches tossed and torn leaves blew about. Then the slender trunks bent and the hail searched the bluff like a rifle volley, only it did not stop. Leaves came down as if cut by bullets, broken twigs beat the wagon, and all one saw was shining, battering ice. The noise was like the roll of giant drums. The horses trembled and at length were cowed.

For perhaps ten minutes the uproar lasted, and when it stopped a slanted sunbeam pierced the ravaged wood. But for the splash of water from the branches all was strangely quiet; the wet soil was covered by torn leaves and melting hail. The lumps were large and hard and crackled underfoot.

Lawrence pulled his horses into the trail. His hands were bruised and his face was spotted by blood where the sharp ice had struck. He clenched his fist and his mouth was set. Margaret's large hat and gloves had saved her skin, and when he leaned against the wheel she gave him a sympathetic glance.

"A savage storm! Sometimes they're local. It may not have cut the wheat."

"That is so," Lawrence agreed. "One cannot calculate the hail's track, and I'm afraid to try—— Where that storm passed the wheat is beaten to the ground. We ought to drive on and find out, but I don't feel I dare. You see, we reckoned the splendid crop would banish our troubles, and at Fairholm our reserves are gone. When one faces ruin one is selfish, but to know others have got as bad a knock is not much comfort. However, I expect the storm will not break Mr. Ogilvie."

Margaret was moved. As a rule, Lawrence was hopeful, and since she knew his pride, she felt his frankness was significant. He would not have let another know his nerve, for the time, was gone.

"Would a spoiled crop ruin you?" she inquired gently.

"It would force me to sell the farm. If you're resolved to get ahead, you cannot play for safety. Bad years go in cycles, and since George had faced three or four, I felt we were justified to bet on our luck's turning. We broke fresh soil and bought machines and teams, and I lent a useful sum to Geoffrey Spiers. Well, to grumble will not help, and one must pay for one's rashness."

"Sometimes one pays for one's generosity," Margaret remarked. "After all, however, could you not go back to the cotton-mill?"

"I think not," said Lawrence with a crooked smile. "When my relation wanted me I refused. Now my ambitious plans have not worked, I cannot fall back on him for support. The old fellow's kind. I expect he'd give me some sort of post, but it would not be the post he meant me to take. Besides, he'd feel my shabbiness."

Margaret turned her head. Lawrence was not shabby, and she thought she could account for his resolving to stay in Canada. In fact, she was accountable. Yet, since she knew her old playmate, she imagined when he refused to indulge his relation he perhaps did not altogether see his main object for starting on a fresh career. To some extent, his choice was instinctively unconscious. Now he did see; but she must not dwell on that.

"He might like your prudence; but you mustn't take a mean line," she said, looking up. "Besides, we don't yet know if the storm has hurt the wheat, and the suspense is hard. Let's drive on and find out."

They got on board the wagon and Lawrence started his team. The wet trail shone in the sunset and broken leaves and melting ice crushed beneath the wheels.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN ARMISTICE

BY and by Lawrence used the whip, for the ground rolled and a bluff cut his view. The suspense got insupportable and to feel he was going fast was some relief. Hail crackled in the wet grass; the sun had dipped, and along the sharp horizon the sky was red and green. In the south, however, a dark cloud trailed across the plain, and its track was marked by battered woods, and herbage shorn as if by a mower's knife.

Margaret said nothing. For one thing, the wagon rocked and the wheels rattled. Lawrence's look was stern, and although she sympathized, sometimes when she was moved she indulged a queer reserve. Besides, they had not yet found out if the hail had reaped his crop. Swaying with the jolts, she began to speculate about her father.

To lose the wheat certainly would not break him, and she pictured his stubbornly getting to work to recover all he had lost. Still, the knock would hurt, and when Ogilvie was hurt his grim mood was daunting. In the circumstances, life at the Crossing would not be tranquil, and her mother and she herself must use some caution.

Her father, of course, would recover; but Margaret hated to think he might profit by his neighbors' misfortune. He was not moved by pity; he studied cause and effect, and where it was possible seized his advantage. All the stern utilitarian virtues were his. He was as untiring and efficient as a machine.

To some extent, Margaret approved; after all, she was his daughter, but sometimes she shrank. His ambition was ruthless, and since his son was dead she knew he planned for her. There was the drawback, because from his point of view, ambition justified his using rules she hated. In fact, but for her mother, to whom she was something of a support, and perhaps a defense, she doubted if she would have stayed at the Crossing.

Lawrence stopped his horses by the bluff and she looked up. The spot commanded a wide view and the homestead they had left cut the sky. One saw the belt of wheat in front. The dark oblong was compact and solid, and although the light was going, its edge was distinct. For a few moments Lawrence concentrated on the distant field.

"I believe Gordon's lot is not touched," he said in a hoarse voice. "The color's strong. If the crop were wet and beaten flat, it would look different."

"Ah," said Margaret, "you must want to see your crop. We might go by Fairholm and you can put me down."

"Not at all," said Lawrence firmly. "I expect you are as anxious as I am, and if the Crossing has escaped the storm, it has passed my farm. When we reach the next rise we will know."

He shook the reins and the sweating horses labored in sand and stones. Margaret was anxious, but she wondered whether he reflected. Although Ogilvie said nothing, he knew she sometimes met Lawrence and they were friendly, but Lawrence had not visited at the homestead. For him to carry her there was a sort of challenge and would force Ogilvie to take a definite line. Margaret did not think he would hesitate.

Well, she had tried to help Lawrence out. She did not want him to be shabby, but he might have put her down at Fairholm. Since he refused, there was nothing to be said and she liked his pluck. They must wait the consequences, and by contrast with the suspense about the wheat, it did not matter much.

At the top of an incline Lawrence checked his team. Half a mile off, a twinkling light marked the Crossing, but the homestead was indistinct and the wide sweep of wheat was a vague, dark smear. Lawrence turned his glance and studied the ground by the wheels.

"The hail is gone, and so far as I can see, the grass is not much wet," he said, in an emotional voice.

"Go on. Go fast!" said Margaret, and he urged the horses down the slope.

The ground was uneven. Sometimes the wagon tilted and a wheel left the grass. The pole swung and jarred; the horses smashed through clumps of brush. Lawrence let them go and his whip cracked like a pistol. The sense of speed was soothing; his mouth was parched and his nerves were taut. When he stopped he would know his luck, for if the storm had spared the Crossing, he might hope it had not wrecked his crop. So far, all in front was shadowy; outlines were broken and color had vanished.

At length, bracing himself strongly, he pulled the reins and, jumping down, gave Margaret his hand. Behind a wire fence, Ogilvie's wheat melted into the dark, but its edge, a few yards off, was straight and sharp. Lawrence thrilled triumphantly. To some extent, his fears were banished; the crop was not hurt. Then he saw a dark figure leaned against the fence, and with an effort for calm he advanced. When he stopped in front of Ogilvie, Margaret

was by his side, and he felt her joining him was significant. Since she knew her father, it was, no doubt, calculated.

"I brought Margaret from Gordon's, sir," he said. "I reckoned she was at the homestead and had no horse."

Ogilvie's face was indistinct, but Lawrence pictured his grim smile. Well, he had meant the old fellow to know why he went to Gordon's. His reply, however, was not the sort of reply Lawrence had thought to get.

"Then, I guess she was lucky. Where were you when the storm began?"

"In the bluff. The hail swept the wood and we could not see for flying leaves. The wagon boards were covered by ice. All the same, it looks as if the cloud had passed your crop."

"Not a stalk is cut. The hail stopped five hundred yards off. We got rain up to the house and a few rods of oats are down."

"Then Fairholm ought to have escaped."

"That is so. I reckon the cloud went by your place, maybe a mile east," Ogilvie agreed, and resumed meaningly: "She'd be farther off Pine Creek."

Lawrence leaned against the fence. He had borne some strain and a reaction had began. Moreover, he was puzzled, for it looked as if Ogilvie were willing to give him good news, and nothing indicated that Lawrence's going to Gordon's for Margaret had annoyed him. Ogilvie turned to her.

"Maybe you ought to let your mother know you're home."

"Good-night and thank you, Larry," said Margaret, and when she went off Lawrence pulled out his pipe.

His mood was emotional and he wanted an occupation; besides, he imagined Ogilvie meant him to stay. Perhaps the risk both had run had softened the old fellow; men who have hardly escaped a common peril do not fight.

"The storm was fierce," said Ogilvie. "Our luck was pretty good, but somebody has got to meet the bill."

"I hate to think about it, sir. At noon, in a way, we were justified to calculate the sum we ought to get for the crop; but now I expect the wheat in the hail's track is gone. Sudden destruction like that is horrible. In fact, it scares me."

"Nature's plan for cleaning out the inefficient!" Ogilvie remarked. "The Northwest is a hard man's country and all slobs must quit. She won't stand for loafers, and if you want to ride about after coyote hounds and bet on your stroke at the pool-room, you can't grow wheat. The man who makes good must reckon straight and stay with his job."

"Then, you'd be willing to see all broken who have not the qualities you think useful?"

"I certainly would not grieve. Man's business is to work, although I guess in the Old Country, and maybe in Montreal, some folks act as if theirs was to have a bully time. Well, no country can carry a big load of stiffs; your folks build steamships and cotton-mills, and we blasted the C.P. track across the Rockies. The men who design high-pressure boilers, clench up rivets, and, for example, run big farms, have not much time for tanking and chasing loose women. Their sort sweat and concentrate, and help support the lot. The old Puritans' code was economically sound, and I guess the hard New Englanders founded modern America. They built the big softwood ships and they broke the Western trails across the Missouri. The Scots pushed Canada beyond the Red River——"

"Oh, well," said Lawrence, "I expect soberness and industry are as useful to the State as to private citizens; but I don't know if I want to put down folks whose rules are not altogether mine."

"You don't want to meddle. Nature knows her job, and in the Northwest she uses a pretty keen pruning-knife. However, we'll let it go. You took some chances when you bet on Geoffrey Spiers, but it looks as if you might put the thing across."

"Perhaps it's strange, but I thought you were glad for me to know the hail had not wrecked his crop."

Ogilvie laughed, a queer laugh.

"You're not a slouch, Larry, and I like a man to put up a good fight. I certainly wanted Fairholm, because I hate to see good soil wasted, but when you beat me I was resigned. Anyhow, I got my money back. Then an hour ago I reckoned we might get a knock that would hurt me and put you out. Well, I guess the storm has helped us fix a sort of armistice."

"An armistice does not bind one to stop the fight for good," Lawrence remarked in a thoughtful voice.

"It surely does not," Ogilvie agreed. "Since we are neighbors, it's possible you'll get up against me another time. But what about the extra pay for the harvesters?"

After Ogilvie's remark about the armistice, Lawrence thought the question ominous.

"Gordon's men were grumbling. That's all I know, sir."

"Well, if the boys reckon to bluff us, they are surely foolish. When a man hires up at the Crossing, he engages for six months, and if I cut his pay he'd

get very mad. I allow I like a trained gang, but a live boss can handle pretty raw material, and trade's not good in the eastern towns."

"You must, at all events, have one or two proper harvesters," said Lawrence quietly.

"Sooner than be bluffed, I'd go without," Ogilvie rejoined. "Well, it gets cold and you don't want to stop. I guess you'll find your wheat all right."

He went off and Lawrence started for home. When he got down Millicent met him.

"The crop is not hurt, but the thunder stampeded the horses in the corral and George has wrenched his leg," she said.

Lawrence kissed her. Millicent had watched for his return and his mood was gentle. A hired man took the team, and he went to the living-room. George, on the couch, smoked his pipe, and gave him a cheerful nod.

"I expect you got a nasty scare, but the storm went by a mile east and not a blade of wheat is down."

"That's fine; I was scared," said Lawrence. "But what about your leg?"

"I don't expect it will bother me much," George replied with an apologetic smile. "When the thunder began, the young horses broke the rails and I jumped on Ranger to fetch them back. The lightning dazzled us and he bucked. My foot wasn't firmly in the stirrup and I ricked the leg I hurt before. Since the accident, it won't bear much extra strain, and I expect I must lie off for a day or two. You want a live partner, Larry, particularly when we must get ready for harvest."

"It does not look as if I was entitled to grumble. But for Ogilvie's, our crop is the best north of the railroad," Lawrence rejoined.

Fetching a chair, he languidly stretched his tired limbs. Since sunrise he had been strenuously occupied, and now he was slack. The spacious room was home-like and yet marked by a sort of dignity. Lawrence's mother had given the house her stamp; his father had thought for the farm, and but an hour since Lawrence had feared he must let both go.

Lighting a cigarette, he mused happily. He felt he had some grounds for satisfaction, and now the storm had passed him by, his bold experiment was justified. Had he stopped in Lancashire, he might have got rich, but his ambition was not altogether for money. His vein was independent, and at the cotton-factory, he was but a part of a great industrial machine. At Fairholm he was boss and the central driving-force. After all, the cotton-mill was the company's; the farm was his and George's, something for which one was keen to labor and fight.

Then Margaret was at the Crossing, and when his luck was good, he enjoyed her society. Sometimes he pictured her at Fairholm and the picture fired his blood, but to dwell on it was rash. In the meantime, his part was to concentrate on his farming, for he had not yet conquered. When his cigarette was smoked out, he began to talk about Ogilvie.

"The old fellow is not our friend, but for once his hostility was not very obvious," he said. "Perhaps our joint escape softened him. At all events, I think he was glad for me to know the storm had gone the other way."

"Ogilvie cannot be your friend," said Millicent in a meaning voice. "One tries to be just, and when father mowed the sloo he was cut down by the scorching sun, but to some extent Ogilvie's greediness forced him to run the risk. Although the sloo is ours, he knew Ogilvie would take the hay unless he got there first. Then the fellow cunningly entangled George——"

Lawrence pictured his father, lying by the mower in the yellow grass, and his look got disturbed.

"That is so," he agreed. "All the same, we baffled him and the thing is done with. Then, if I were revengeful, I do not see a plan to hurt the fellow, and, so long as he leaves us alone, we ought perhaps to be content."

"I am not revengeful, Larry; but one cannot be altogether independent. Now and then one must combine with one's neighbors for an object useful to all, and although one perhaps does not altogether agree, one must use their methods. There's the trouble, because Ogilvie is not scrupulous, and in order to avoid a fresh jar, you might be forced to support some shabby scheme."

Lawrence smiled, a crooked smile.

"I think not, Millicent. For Margaret's sake, I'll try to keep the peace, but that must be enough. If my refusing broke the armistice, I might be sorry, but I'd stick to my rules."

He saw Millicent was satisfied. So far as friendship with Ogilvie's daughter was possible, Margaret was her friend, but where Millicent thought she saw the proper line she was firm. Then George knocked out his pipe.

"We must engage some harvesters, and I understand the boys are grumbling about strangers getting higher pay. On the whole, I sympathize, and although it doesn't look as if they could force their claim, they might make things awkward. Do you know what our neighbors are going to do about it?"

"I do not," said Lawrence and wondered whether George saw where his question led. "Some perhaps will meet the bill. Ogilvie, however, will not give an extra cent."

“But have you fixed your plan?” Millicent inquired.
Lawrence smiled, but his mouth was firm.
“The crop is large and the labor’s heavy. I think we’ll try to be just.”

CHAPTER XIX

SPIERS ENGAGES HELP

HELEN sighed, and pushing back the big book, stretched her arms across the table. The print was small, and after an hour's laborious study, the famous political economist's argument frankly baffled her. When one was tired, she reflected, one's brain perhaps was dull, and she had washed a large quantity of clothes and baked a week's supply of bread; but at a prairie homestead one was seldom remarkably fresh. At all events, she thought she would leave the other book, an English pronouncing dictionary, alone.

Helen was not daunted by labor, but she felt she ought not to be satisfied to manage her husband's house. She knew her drawbacks, and since it began to look as if Geoffrey might make progress, she did not want him to be ashamed for her. Her habit was to face a difficult situation with blunt sincerity. Moreover, although she was not at all cultivated, her intelligence was keen, and she began to see the old-fashioned methods and traditions were vanishing.

Young men from the cities and colleges began to break prairie soil. They struck a fresh note, and it looked as if they might by and by push out the roughneck type. Anyhow, one must be up-to-date, and since Helen's education had been elementary, she must try to educate herself. Canada's problems were economical, and she wanted to know why countries prospered, and, for example, why in the Northwest the farmers, who paid no rent, did not get rich. Moreover, she wanted, like Millicent Elliot, to talk about the subjects Geoffrey's friends discussed. Millicent sympathized with her ambition, and since they had a library at Fairholm, lent her books. As a rule, the books puzzled Helen, but she resolutely pursued her studies.

Now it was six o'clock in the evening and she was tired. Spiers had gone to the settlement, and she would frankly sooner he was at the farm, for when he made the excursion she was haunted by the fear of his indulging in some extravagant exploit. Yet she knew unwise firmness led to rebellion and since she was conscious of her raw inexperience her touch must be light. Then, for the most part, Geoffrey was now resigned to go soberly.

Wheels rattled and a shadow crossed the open door. When Helen looked round the wagon had vanished. Geoff was going to the stable; he was back

soon and she imagined she heard him talk to somebody. When Spiers came in, however, he was alone and he threw his dusty hat on the table. Sometimes his carelessness jarred, but Helen quietly put the hat on a peg and went to the stove. When Geoffrey returned from the settlement she would sooner he did not think she studied him.

"You have been very industrious," he remarked, noting the big book; and then shouted with laughter. "John Stuart Mill!"

"I don't see the joke," said Helen, and gave him a quick glance.

So far as she could distinguish, Spiers was sober, and he replied with a chuckle:

"Oh, well, the old fellow is not remarkably amusing."

"Then, perhaps the joke is my trying to improve my mind?"

"Not at all. I rather doubt if your mind requires much cultivation. Anyhow, if mine was as fresh and fertile, I'd be satisfied to leave it alone. But what is the other book? Herbert Spencer?"

Helen pulled the cloth across the dictionary and her face got red. Geoff must not yet know all her ambition, and when she had once admitted she wanted to talk like a lady he was rather annoyed.

"I'll get supper," she said. "But why are you back?"

Spiers hesitated. When Helen knew, her doubting his sobriety might be logical and he wanted her support.

"Nothing much was doing, and when I'd got the groceries the train arrived and I engaged a harvester."

"But harvest will not begin for a week or two."

"To some extent, it explains my taking the fellow. You see, his money was gone and I imagined nobody at the settlement would hire him. However, if you don't approve, I must try to dump him on one of our neighbors. At all events he can stay for the night."

"Is he a good harvester?"

"I rather think he is not," Spiers admitted. "For some time he pushed a wheelbarrow at a Lancashire foundry and he declares nobody could beat him for shoveling coke. He was ill, however, and when he got about again the company had engaged another man. Then he fell down a ladder on board the emigrant ship, and when he applied for a job at Montreal his limping was a handicap. All the same, he declares his stiff knee will not bother him for long."

"You're not hard to please," Helen remarked with ironical humor. "Have you told me all his advantages?"

"I don't know if it's an advantage, but he has got a wife," Spiers replied. "In fact, she's now at the stable. I thought they might use the haymow, but I can, of course, inquire if Lawrence wants a man."

Helen looked at him rather hard.

"You were sober, Geoff?"

"That is so, ma'am. I expect it accounts for something," said Spiers with a twinkle. "Perhaps it's strange, but one or two exploits I might really boast of were carried out when I was drunk."

The blood came to Helen's skin, and although she imagined Geoffrey did not know how much she knew, she looked the other way. His remark, however, moved her to pity for the emigrants he had, perhaps rashly helped, for not long since she herself was a daunted stranger.

"When Heath landed he was lame," Spiers resumed. "Since nobody wanted a cripple, the immigration officers urged him to try the golden West; their habit is to pass on folks for whom they have not much use. Anyhow, he states his capital is fifty cents, and I imagine he and Mrs. Heath have not had a proper meal for some days. But you would perhaps like to see them?"

"I certainly should," said Helen, and went with him to the stable.

The strangers had got down from the wagon and sat dejectedly in the grass. The man was muscular but short and his skin was sickly white. Although he was not old, his face was lined. The woman's look was tired and anxious. Their cheap clothes carried the stains of the emigrant ship steerage and the dusty colonist cars; their baggage was an awkward bundle, fastened in an old bed-cover. Helen knew the type. Their proper background was a smoky street in a noisy manufacturing town; on the wide plain they were exotic and drearily forlorn.

"You want a job?" she said. "What can you do?"

"I'm not a farmer, ma'am," the man replied and his accent was the accent of Lancashire. "For a bit I can't walk much, but my arms is strong and, if the boss will give me a trial, I'm willing t' do owt he wants."

"And you?" said Helen to the woman. "I expect you were at the mill?"

The other looked up, a gleam of hope in her eyes, as if she had unexpectedly found a friend.

"Not after I was married," she said with a touch of pride. "I kept house, and until Tom was ill, our house was smartest in t' street. When his sick benefit run out, landlord sold us up and trade was very bad. They said at shipping office we'd get on fine in Canada, but Tom hurt his knee and at Montreal they sent us to Winnipeg. Tom applied at flour-mills, but foreman saw he limped, and the officer at immigration sheds put us on the train. Now

his leg's getting strong and he'll soon walk right, but if you hire my husband, you must take me. We don't want much and you'll find us willing."

Helen knitted her brows. Her housekeeping was frugal and she had preached economy to Spiers. She could go without a woman's help and Geoffrey ought to have a skilled harvester. Yet she had known poverty and she had inherited the noble rashness with which the poor help the poor.

"I think we'll try them, Geoff," she said, and signed Mrs. Heath. "You're tired, poor thing, and I must get supper. Come with me to the house."

They went off and Spiers gave Heath a smile.

"It's fixed. Suppose you help me loose the team?"

Heath was keen but clumsy, and when they put the horses in the stalls Spiers took him to the turf and birch-pole barn. The light was not good and the floor was beaten soil, but the rude building was sweet with the smell of wild peppermint.

"Here's your camp; the house is small," he said. "We can give you some rugs and blankets, and in the morning we'll cut some poles and rig up a bunk. I hope Mrs. Heath will not think your lodging rough."

"It's ours; all for ourselves," said Heath, pulling out a handful of the clean, fragrant grass. "On board ship and at the sheds we slept in rows, and after the smell and noise—— No, I don't think Mattie'll grumble, sir."

By and by they went to the house, and although Spiers knew Helen's talent, he had not thought to see his supper expanded to something like a feast. Moreover, Mrs. Heath had removed the stains of travel; her look was brighter, her clothes were fresh, and Spiers imagined some were his wife's. Where frugality was needed, Helen was parsimonious; for the most part, she was logical, but when one excited her pity she was royally generous.

Her guests' appetites were significantly keen and Helen kept their plates supplied. When at length supper was over she signed them to wait.

"Now we must be business-like," she said. "If you are going to stay with us, we must fix your pay."

Mrs. Heath negotiated. In Lancashire the housewife keeps the purse, but she was not greedy. Tom could not work for nothing; they needed clothes, and she understood the winter was hard. All the same, he must learn his job and to begin with he did not expect the wages a trained man would earn. She herself was a good washerwoman and baker, and so forth, but if Mrs. Spiers could not give much, she would try to be content. What she really wanted was to stay with Tom. One saw she was horribly afraid they might be separated.

Spiers fixed a sum for the first month, and thought the others' satisfaction implied that they yet calculated by Old Country rules. He wanted to be just, but when Mrs. Heath used the money at the settlement she would find the goods she bought cost more in Canada.

"After the month is up you ought to know your job and we'll review the agreement," he said to Heath. "If your work is as good as the regular harvesters', you'll get all they get."

"He'll stay," said Mrs. Heath rather hoarsely and turned her head.

Then she leaned back slackly and Helen gave Spiers a meaning look. Spiers nodded and pushed Heath to the door. He knew Helen did not want them; she meant to soothe the tired, high-strung woman, whose control had vanished with her fears.

After a time she and Mrs. Heath came from the house and Helen handed Heath some blankets to carry to the barn. Heath gave her an embarrassed, grateful look, and taking the load, went off with his wife. When they were alone, Helen put her hand on Spiers' arm.

"Perhaps we are extravagant, Geoff, but I felt we couldn't send the poor things away," she said. "Besides, I don't think you will be sorry. That man is my sort; I know his talk. He means to work for you."

"I did not notice that Heath talked much, and I rather think he's your man," Spiers rejoined with a twinkle. "You have a talent for ruling people, ma'am."

CHAPTER XX

OGILVIE'S EXPERIMENT

NOT long after Heath's arrival, Helen one afternoon carried her books to the bench in front of the house. The day was hot, for the boisterous northwest wind had dropped, and the wide plain brooded in the calm that sometimes marks the early fall. Helen knew the calm would soon be broken. For a week or two she could rest, since Mrs. Heath now undertook the household chores; and then the strain of harvest would begin.

At length, the farmer's labor had not gone for nothing, and when the binders rolled into the wheat all must use stern effort to reap and thrash and haul away the noble crop. Autumn is short, and until the last load was at the elevators one must stubbornly hold on and not bother much about one's food and sometimes about one's sleep. Then, when the first snow blew across the stubble, the farmer's work was over; but Helen imagined his wife's was not.

All the same, her look was tranquil, her face was no longer pinched, and her skin was brown. Geoffrey went soberly and began to talk hopefully about paying his debts. Moreover, it did not look as if his friends thought his marrying her was rash. Well, so long as she had leisure, she must stick to her studies. To command help was something fresh, and since Mrs. Heath did not need much superintendence, Helen concentrated on the dictionary.

After a time her eyes got tired and she looked about. For the most part, the grass was yellow, and a plume of smoke stained the dazzling horizon. When dark fell one would see wavy lines of fire, but Geoffrey's guards were properly plowed. When Helen looked the other way, she saw the chocolate-brown summer fallow and a belt of oats. In the sun, their feathery tops were silver, and the sky behind them was serenely blue; the stiff wheat-heads shone like red-gold. Helen's bent was rather utilitarian than artistic, but the strong harmonious color was soothing, and she vaguely sensed the splendid field's significance.

Seed time and harvest. To begin with, one must sow, and the soil was stubborn. Blocks not yet melted turned the plow, the tired horses stalled, and the oxen stopped when the yoke jarred their necks. Sometimes the half-frozen stuff baffled the tractor. Then the sun and the harrows broke the stiff clods and one sent out the seeders hopefully, but to hope was not enough.

The wind rolled thistles across the field and their seed sprang with the useful grain. One must watch and labor until at length the crop was ripe. Well, man had now better implements, but perhaps his nature had not changed since his oxen broke the arid soil in ancient Palestine.

For a time Helen mused. Mrs. Heath was at the chicken-house, Heath chopped wood, and Spiers was at a farm some distance off. By and by Ogilvie stopped his rig in front of the homestead, and, tying his horses to a post, joined Helen on the bench.

"Geoff is not around?" he said.

Helen said she did not expect him for an hour or two. She knew about Ogilvie's transactions with George Elliot and did not like the old fellow, but she was willing to meet him civilly.

For a few moments Ogilvie studied the crop. The wide field's beauty did not interest him; he reckoned its value in dollars and cents.

"That lot ought to grade Number-one hard," he said "You are a pretty good farmer, Mrs. Spiers."

"My husband is the farmer. My business is to keep his house," Helen rejoined.

Ogilvie smiled meaningly, but his glance was searching and he saw Helen's color rise. It looked as if she did not like his compliment. Lawrence Elliot was much at the homestead and he had wondered whether she had used her charm to attract the young fellow. Now he began to think she was not that sort. Although it was strange, she perhaps was satisfied with Spiers. Well, he wanted to annoy her: when one got angry, reserve and caution went.

"Geoff is certainly putting it across, but he wants to stay with his job," he resumed. "Interest is high and your farm is *plastered*. Still I guess Larry Elliot is not a hard creditor——"

Helen stopped him. She imagined he had an object for his remarks and her eyes sparkled. To feel she ruled at Pine Creek had given her confidence, and if Ogilvie meant to be nasty, he might get a jolt. Heath chopped wood behind the house and she knew he would not see her bullied. Lancashire folk were rough but loyal.

"I do not talk to strangers about our embarrassments," she said, for she had not for nothing studied the dictionary.

"Then, let's talk about something else," Ogilvie agreed with a dry smile. "I am not your enemy, ma'am, and since Geoff is pulling his proper weight I'd like him to go ahead, but he has not yet got far and he must watch out where he goes. For instance, to get up against the police would not help him

much. A while back, they were sort of curious about his horses, and I reckon they know Spalding was his friend."

Although Helen tried for calm, her color came and went. Ogilvie had found out something and perhaps he meant to work upon her fear. She wondered where Heath was, for his ax had stopped.

"To inquire is the constables' business, not yours. If they think my husband had something to do with Hart's getting shot, they are ridiculous!"

"I guess they know Geoff was with Lawrence Elliot. All the same, Spalding made his get-away, and soon after Hart was held up a man on a good horse crossed the railroad going south. I reckon the horse was Geoff's!"

"Then you must find out somewhere else if your guess is right. I will not be bullied," Helen rejoined.

Her sharp, angry voice carried farther than she had thought, and Heath came round the corner of the house. By contrast with the sunburned plainmen, his skin was white, but he had not a coat and one remarked his thick trunk and muscular arms.

"Did you want me ma'am?" he asked.

"No," said Helen, as if she pondered. "At all events, not just yet."

Heath turned and gave Ogilvie an ominous, frowning glance. Ogilvie was six inches taller and his look was ironically amused.

"If you want me, ma'am, I'll be about," Heath added in a meaning voice and went back to the woodpile.

Ogilvie laughed. "Your hired man is not a looker, but perhaps he's useful. A pretty good example of your bulldog type!"

"Yes; he's *my* type," said Helen, for anger carried her away. "In Lancashire we are a homely lot, but we're stubborn, and meddlesome folk leave us alone. You thought you'd frighten me and find out where Spalding got his horse? Perhaps you thought I wouldn't mind giving my husband away. Well, now you know, and I hope you're proud of your cleverness!"

"Oh, shucks!" said Ogilvie. "I'm not getting after Geoff, and if you put me wise, he would not be hurt. Somebody borrowed your husband's horse. *Was it Hart?*"

Helen's surprise was obvious and Ogilvie was content. He saw she did not pretend; his experiment had worked.

"But Hart is dead," she remarked, in a puzzled voice.

"It's possible," Ogilvie agreed. "The police reckon Spalding knocked him out."

"Then, why do you inquire about him?" Helen rejoined and her voice got high. "Somehow, you meant to catch me; you thought if I was frightened or annoyed, I might be frank. You know as much about women as a boy at school! However, I'll tell you one thing—I hated Hart and he would not have dared asked us for a horse. Spalding did not shoot him, but if he was shot, I expect he had wickedly treated the man who used the gun. Anyhow, I am annoyed, and since it hurts to talk civilly I think you ought to start."

"He's going, ma'am," said Heath, and Helen looked round.

She had not noticed the hired man's advance, but he loosed the team and faced Ogilvie.

"Them horses won't stand and Mrs. Spiers is engaged. Get up and shove off!"

Ogilvie got on board and Helen rather thought he chuckled. The rig lurched across the grass and Heath grinned.

"He's gone, ma'am!" he remarked, and vanished behind the house.

Helen stopped, and knitted her brows. Ogilvie had not found out much, and yet she thought him satisfied. The thing was queer, but by and by she might see a light. Then she began to wonder whether she had taken the proper line. If Ogilvie had meant to hurt Geoffrey, she had some grounds to be savage, but she rather doubted and he declared he did not. On the whole, she was sorry she had let herself go. After all, to be a lady was harder than one thought.

Spiers was not back for supper. Since Hart vanished, a Toronto house had opened an implement store at the settlement and the agent had carried Geoffrey off to watch the trial of some new harvesting machines. When dusk fell he had not returned and Helen began to be disturbed. Geoff ought to be back, and she wondered whether she was rash to let him go. He was entitled to take a holiday; but suppose the agent had celebrated the machinery trial by something like a feast? Geoff's sobriety was recent and might not bear much strain.

Helen got her hat and went thoughtfully along the trail. The nights began to get longer, but were not yet dark, for two or three miles her viewpoint commanded the blurred, shadowy plain. Nothing cut the dim horizon and but for the light wind in the grass all was quiet. The dew had begun to fall, the evening was cold, and Helen frowned. Geoffrey was not coming. It looked as if he meant to stay all night.

Then she smelt burning and turned her head. Now she looked the other way, the horizon was blurred by rolling smoke. Red flashes pierced the smoke, and then, for a few moments, she saw a long uneven wave of fire.

She thought it advanced, and its brightness was ominous. As a rule, however, a prairie fire is not an alarming spectacle, and when Helen first arrived at Pine Creek numerous small conflagrations travelled about the snow-bleached turf. The fires perhaps started from plowed belts where farmers burned the stubble. In western Canada one does not cut much straw. Nobody was disturbed and Spiers had plowed proper guards.

Since the storm, however, rain had not fallen and the grass had dried in the hot sun. The advancing fire was obviously fierce and Helen knitted her brows. When Geoffrey started, the smoke on the horizon had not troubled him, and there was no use in consulting Heath. If she went to Fairholm, the household might be in bed. Since she doubted if the fire was dangerous, she must not force tired men to get up for nothing. All the same, she was vexed because Geoffrey was not home. He ought to have come back; to worry about the fire was not her business.

After a few minutes she started for the homestead. The wind was light and the grass was wet by dew. She must not be ridiculous, and she went to bed; but she was not altogether at ease and her sleep was disturbed.

CHAPTER XXI

SPIERS' RELAPSE

THE homestead kitchen was hot and smelt of tobacco and liquor, for the implement merchant had brought a good supply. Lamond was a convivial fellow and knew his customers. For some years all were forced to use stern frugality, but now that it looked as if the tide had turned, they began to break their parsimonious rules. Moreover, Lamond felt he was entitled to be generous.

When he arrived at the settlement he had expected to meet some competition from Hart's trustees, but, so far as anybody could find out, all Hart had left was a number of unfulfilled engagements, and the manufacturers for whom he was agent claimed the machinery at his store. Then in an awkward trial Lamond's self-binding harvester had beaten a famous maker's implement.

By and by his host put up the cards and Lamond pulled out a notebook and drained his glass. Spiers rather unsteadily stuffed a roll of bills and some silver money into his wallet; as a rule, his luck at cards was good. The homestead was a bachelor's homestead, and the four or five farmers in the room wore soil-stained overalls. Dust covered the battered furniture. Cigar-ends, torn paper, and burned matches were brushed back against a small piano.

"Let's get things fixed; maybe I'll not remember in the morning," Lamond remarked. "Tyson wants some spools of twine and a new knife for his machine. Smith will take one standard binder. Spiers another. Is that right, boys?"

"It is not," said Spiers. "I want two binders. All recent improvements, safe-knotting gear, unbreakable knife, and so forth! To manufacturer's persperspecification!"

"Why, you bought a pretty good machine last fall," somebody remarked. "Unless you yoke up the bulls, you haven't teams for those you got. Say, friends, Geoff's notion's great. Buck and Bright are going to do his harvesting!"

Spiers frowned. When he arrived he had not meant to buy a harvester, but somehow he had ordered the machine, and his word went. Besides,

Lamond was a first-class sort, and since he would like to help the fellow along, he was going to order two.

"I'll take two machines, with new-model knotters, to catalogue exspecification," he resumed. "One's for Lawrence Elliot. You got that, Lamond?"

Lamond nodded, and the others laughed.

"Then Larry's your partner? When did you join him?" one inquired.

"Mr. Elliot's my creditor," Spiers replied. "Since he's got to carry me, we're a sort of combine, and when I order stuff he stands for it. All's right, Lamond. You can send for the machines, and put up your notebook. We must get going."

"I'll be through in three or four minutes. Don't you want another drink?"

"No, thanks. And you have had enough. The important thing's to know where to stop," said Spiers. "Anyhow, I'll go get your team. Must be home soon. Mrs. Spiers might be annoyed."

He steered for the door cautiously, and when he got out steadied himself by a post in the porch.

"I made it! Lamond must be *helped*. He's a tanker," he remarked, and, letting go, plunged down the steps.

After some trouble he harnessed Lamond's team, for the buckles were not where he thought. In the house, he knew he was sober, but somehow when he got outside, the cold unsteadied him. For all that, he presently climbed into the rig, and then for a few moments tried to ponder. He had forgotten something. It was not the binder; he had ordered two. Both horses were in front. Although they were not distinct, he saw two dark heads, and their stamping indicated that the animals were impatient to start. Well, there was no use in bothering, and Helen would certainly be annoyed. Geoffrey shook the reins, and let the horses go.

The night was rather keen, and the team went fast, but for a minute or two the other did not hear the wheels. Then Lamond swore, and jumping up, ran for the porch. All he saw was a dark, swiftly-moving object that presently melted in the gloom. The others laughed, and their host pulled Lamond back into the room.

"You got to stop for the night. Geoff has plumb forgotten you," he said.

Spiers did not hear Lamond's angry shout. His object was to get home, and he must concentrate on keeping the intricate trail. The queer thing was, when he arrived the track was straight. For a time the horses went nobly. The beat of feet and the rocking were soporific, and Spiers' brain got dull. He tried to wake up, but the effort was hard, and by and by he looked about

and frowned. The bluff for which he steered was not the bluff he thought, and the North Star had obviously got on a move. But liquor had nothing to do with it. After the hot homestead kitchen, the cold was insidious. Now he had accounted for his dullness. *Insidious* was the word.

His head bent until his jaw rested on his chest; and when the trail crossed a sand-belt and the wheels sank, he did not know. The team went slowly, and at length pulled the rig into the grass, and stopped, but their stopping did not bother Spiers.

In the meantime, Mrs. Spiers' sleep was disturbed, and not long after midnight she awoke. Red reflections trembled on the wall and a smell of burning filled the room. In a moment Helen was out of bed and at the window. Thick smoke floated down the wind, and behind the smoke were leaping tongues of fire. She heard the grass crackle in the flames, and if the plowed guards did not stop it, she knew the fire would soon reach the house.

For a few moments Helen felt slack and savagely helpless. When his farm was threatened Geoffrey ought to be about; but there was no use in getting angry and she must face the crisis. To plow fresh furrows across its track might turn the fire, and sometimes one lighted back-fires in the grass the blaze had not yet touched. Anyhow, she must get to work, and she went for her clothes.

Ten minutes afterward she called Heath, and when he and Mrs. Heath joined her all in front was blurred by smoke, in which scintillated showers of blowing sparks. Heath's lameness was now not very marked and his arms were strong. Helen was glad to know him a trusty servant.

"You can't plow, Tom?" she said.

"If you want some plowing done, I'm ready to try. Mr. Spiers give me some lessons in t' summer fallow."

Helen clenched her fist. Had she proper helpers, she might yet save the farm, but hers, although willing, did not know their job. Then she must fix on one of two lines, for if she tried to save the house, it looked as if the wheat must burn. Her impulse was to save the house; but, after all, one could build another and to lose the crop might break Geoffrey for good. No! To sacrifice the grain was unthinkable.

"Start by the house and drive an extra furrow along the guards across the front of the wheat," she said. "At the corner you will come back and turn another furrow outside the first. So long as you can hold the horses, you must keep on plowing. Now let's get them out!"

To do so was not easy. Bright reflections leaped about the stable, and the animals were alarmed, but at length Helen got the team from the stall. Then

Heath hurriedly put on the harness, and went off for the single-furrow plow. Helen called Mrs. Heath.

"Bring the coal-oil can, some rags, and newspapers."

Mrs. Heath used some speed and when she returned Helen stopped for a few moments three or four yards outside the guards. The furrows had crumbled in the rain and sun, and grass had sprung up between the broken clods. Now the grass was dead, and Helen imagined the withered clumps would help the fire across.

Fifty yards off, Heath's bent figure cut the flickering illumination. He stooped with the effort to hold down the plow, but the horses' heads were high. They plunged and strained away from the furrow, and Helen doubted if Heath could force them to face the blaze. Yet he obviously meant to try. Although he was not a teamster, his nerve was good. Lancashire folk are stubborn and, for her sake and Geoffrey's, the stranger they had helped would use all his powers. For a moment or two the plow and the horses' backs shone; and then the picture melted in rolling smoke.

Helen seized the big can, and poured some oil on the rags. She and Mrs. Heath must get to work, although she did not know the proper plan and where she ought to start. All the same, where she burned the grass the fire could not spread, and the small fires would not cross the guards.

"Begin at the far end of the furrows and come back to meet me," she said. "As soon as one fire is going light another."

Mrs. Heath vanished, and Helen rubbed a match. The greasy rag blazed, but the grass was wet by dew and the flame presently flickered out. Helen tried another spot. The matches were sulphur matches, supplied in blocks, and when she broke off the sticks her hand shook and the end was short. She burned her fingers, but the red flame began to run in the wet stalks and she went on for twenty yards. Her hands were greasy, and now she thought about it, she ought to have got a woollen coat. Anyhow, the fire was going, and when the next spread she was steadier.

By and by Heath and his horses loomed in the smoke. His body slanted across the plow-handles and his knees were bent. By contrast with the big animals, he looked like a misshapen dwarf, but his crooked pose was strangely virile. When he was near Helen, the tilted plow jumped the furrow, and the horses leaped ahead. Heath staggered and was dragged along, but the lines were round his wrist and he stuck to the handles. Helen heard him gasp and swear, and then the shining steel sank into the turf. The team strained at their collars, and Heath and they were gone.

Sparks showered about Helen and she was forced to beat her thin shirtwaist. The smoke got blinding, and she did not know where Mrs. Heath was. There was not much use in shouting, for the fire roared and her mouth was parched. The strange thing was, the dew stopped the fires she lighted but seemed to help the other. For all that, she burned a narrow belt in front of the house, and with a grain-bag beat the fire from the logs.

Soon afterward she saw Heath's horses. They went very fast, and when a dazzling blaze pierced the smoke they swerved. The plow sparkled and leaped from the soil; and then Heath and the frantic animals plunged into the wheat. Thick smoke rolled across the field and blew away, and in front was a wall of yellow fire.

Helen knew herself exhausted. Her hands were blistered, to get her breath was hard, and her face was scorched, but somehow she thrilled. Heath's example nerved her. He had stuck to the job he did not know, and the guards were wider by the fresh furrows. The furrows were ragged and broken, but to some extent they would stop the devouring fire. Well, she was not yet beaten, and although sparks rained about her, she started back along the guards. By and by Mrs. Heath met her, and put down a tin basin. Her red, scorched face was stained by soot.

"All my rags and the oil are gone," she said.

Helen shook the big can and frowned.

"Mine is nearly gone, but I'll try to give you some."

A thin stream splashed in the basin and stopped. Helen threw down the can and suddenly relaxed. So long as she had an occupation, she had borne up; now she felt beaten and hopeless. Heath had vanished, and all the help she had was a shaken, high-strung woman. The fire crackled savagely and the smoke was choking.

Then her heart beat. Wheels rattled in the smoke and somebody shouted. At length, Geoffrey was coming and would take control. He had fought a prairie fire before. The red reflections got brighter, and she saw plunging horses and a rocking wagon. Men jumped down and another threw grain-bags into the grass.

"Go ahead, George. Tie your horses behind the bluff," somebody shouted, and the wagon went off like a locomotive.

The voice was not Spiers' voice and Helen's mouth got tight. For a moment or two she had thrilled, but now help had arrived she knew Geoffrey had failed her. The help she really wanted was his; she had hoped he would yet justify her trust. Well, he had not done so; while he indulged, she and two raw strangers had fought for his farm. Helen knew she did not

exaggerate; had Geoff not got liquor, he would have arrived some time ago. Then Lawrence Elliot advanced.

"Where are Geoff and Heath?" he asked.

"I don't know," Helen replied in a dreary voice. "Geoff went off with Lamond, and I think the plow-team pulled Heath into the wheat."

"Oh, well," said Lawrence, "we mustn't talk. Since you have broken one or two new furrows, I expect we can stop the fire. But we must get busy and I'd sooner you were at the house——" He turned and shouted. "Get to it, boys! Scatter along the guards and see the fire does not jump across!"

They vanished, and Helen moodily seized a bag. She had got a nasty jar, but the fight she had begun was not yet over, and the crop must not be hurt. The wind had dropped and for a few minutes the smoke went straight up. For all that, the fire advanced, a long, leaping, throbbing wave of flame. At the spots she had burned the yellow wave broke and one saw dark gaps, but sparks and smoldering stalks tossed in front and rained upon the guards. Where a fresh blaze sprang, the Fairholm men jumped the furrows and swung wet bags. If their speed was good, Helen imagined the flame could not steal across the barrier. They must guard a long front, however, and she could help.

Then the wind sprang up and all she saw was tossing smoke, pierced by ominous red flashes. The heat got insupportable and the stinging smoke cut her breath. All the same, where the red sparks fell she must use her bag. At length, she shrank back, daunted and trembling. The fire had reached the guards, and at one spot rolled across. Lawrence sped by, another and Heath a yard or two behind, and Heath ran as if his leg were sound. Their scorched faces were blackened, their clothes smoked, but Lawrence shouted savagely and they jumped for the blaze.

Helen joined the group. The job was hers; at all events, it was her husband's and he ought to be there. She beat down the small red fires that crept toward the wheat, but by and by Lawrence pulled her back.

"Your arm is burned. Go to the house," he gasped. "I've sent off Mrs. Heath, and you'll embarrass us."

"But the wheat——" said Helen.

Lawrence pushed her forward. "You mustn't bother. If we can hold on for a few minutes, we are going to win."

Helen went. She choked, her head swam, and the heat was insupportable. She thought the blaze was less fierce, but she did not know. All she could do was to creep through the smoke to the house, and when she got there she sat down limply on the bench. Her hands and her arm smarted

and the end of her sleeve was charred. She did not remember when it burned, and it was not important. The house was not hurt, and the fire was obviously dying out. Only at one end of the wheat belt it rolled on across the plain.

After a time Lawrence stopped by the bench.

"We are going, Mrs. Spiers. The crop is a little scorched along the front."

"Then, you have saved the lot?"

"I rather think you saved it before we arrived," said Lawrence with a smile. "Anyhow, but for the back-fires and the furrows I doubt if we could have stopped the blaze. You have first-class helpers; but I must push off. Get Mrs. Heath to dress your hands and arm."

Helen tried to thank him, but he shouted for George, and vanished in the dark.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LIGHT TOUCH

HARNESS rattled, the rig shook, and Spiers languidly lifted his head. It looked as if the horses were starting and he did not see the reins. If they had slipped across the rail, they might entangle the animals' legs and he awkwardly got down. For a few minutes he was occupied, and then he shivered and looked about.

When he left the homestead the plain was dark, but now the moon was high. His clothes were wet by dew and the prairie sparkled like a silver sea. The bluffs and buttes were islands of soft gray and blue. In the background, a queer luminous cloud, pierced by quivering red flashes, trailed across the landscape. It was obviously a large grass fire, but grass fires were not often dangerous and Spiers must think about getting home. His head throbbed, his mouth was parched, and Pine Creek was some distance off. The light wind was cold and he knew day would soon break.

The horses started and Spiers smiled. He had forgotten the man whose team he drove and he pictured Lamond's storming at the farm. Well, the fellow had supplied the liquor, and another time he perhaps would know when he had had enough. Then Spiers reflected and his smile vanished. He must account for his staying, and he doubted if Helen would see the joke. In fact, he thought she might be angry.

After a time he began to be disturbed. The cold steadied him and he saw the fire was ominously large. Moreover, it was not far from Pine Creek, although he imagined it had passed the farm. He let the horses go, and when they reached a spot commanding the homestead he got on his feet and balanced clumsily in the lurching rig.

In front the sweep of silver grass was broken. A wide dark belt crossed the plain, and in some places he saw faint trails of smoke. The fire itself was some distance off, but he knew it had gone near his farm, and he used the whip. Although his guards were pretty good, he doubted if the furrows would stop a blaze like that. If they had not done so, house and crop would be gone.

By and by he saw the homestead and his relief was keen. But for a faint glimmer at a window, all was dark. Helen was safe; the fire had alarmed her

and she had not gone to bed. The house was not hurt, but he did not know about the wheat, and he urged the tired horses across the black, smoking turf.

When he jumped down by the guards he was altogether sober and shaken by mixed emotions. Along its front, the wheat was shrivelled, but he did not think the ripening heads were damaged a few yards back. Then he began to study the ground and saw two fresh, ragged furrows and another that broke off. The job was obviously not a plowman's job, but Spiers admitted that Heath had made good.

The guards, however, had not altogether stopped the fire. Spiers noted the burned grass between the furrows and the wheat, and the marks of wheels. Helen had sent Heath to plow, and then had gone for help. She had saved the crop and farm. In fact, but for her, he would now be homeless and ruined. Putting the horses in the stable, he went, hesitatingly, to the house. He must face his wife, and own his debt, and he was ashamed. The raw girl he had recklessly married had fine qualities, but she had good grounds to blush for her husband.

A kerosene lamp burned in the kitchen and Helen occupied the shabby couch. The lamp was a cheap tin lamp, and its ugliness added to Spiers' embarrassment. In consequence of his folly, his wife must be resigned to use things like that. Helen's face was dusted by flour; her hands and arm were bandaged. When Spiers saw the bandages the blood leaped to his skin.

"You are hurt, my dear?"

"My hands are burned," said Helen, in a quiet voice. "You see, the matches broke and the sticks were short. Then, when the can was full, the oil splashed about; but I don't think the burns are very bad. The wheat is not damaged much."

"Then, you lighted the back-fires? While I loafed at Sandsfield, you saved my farm!"

"Heath and Lawrence Elliot saved the farm," Helen rejoined. "Perhaps I helped, but it doesn't matter. Pine Creek is safe. I am all that's hurt."

Spiers got down by the couch and put his arm round her.

"Had you got much hurt, the house and land might go. After all, it's Larry's farm, but my wife is mine. Still, your pluck and my folly have cost you something. Your dear, brave hands are burned."

Helen lifted her head and gave him a searching glance. She knew Geoffrey liked and trusted her, but it was not enough. Her husband ought to be her lover. In a sense, her hold on him was light; had he known her in England, she was not at all the sort he would have married. For all that, she

was proud. She would not, in order to attract him, condone his loose carelessness. In fact, she had meant to be firm, but his emotion melted her.

"Look up, Geoff," she said. "I like you to be nice, but I'd hate you to pretend."

Spiers did look up and smiled, a queer smile.

"Well, I admit my word does not carry much weight, but I don't think you really ought to doubt that I am sincere. When one is as much moved as I was, one does not consciously try to strike the proper note. Perhaps, however, to hint I weighed you against a mortgaged farm was not flattering. All the farms in Manitoba would not tip the beam."

"I wonder——" said Helen. "When I married you we were strangers, and it is not very long since."

"The plunge was the luckiest plunge I ever took," Spiers declared.

Helen knew why he had sent for her, but Hart, who had enlightened her, was dead and she knew Geoffrey would never do so. Well, to find out he was not sorry was something.

"Why did you stay at Sandsfield?" she asked.

Spiers got up and leaned against the table. Although he faced her steadily his face was red.

"I was drunk. I don't claim it's much justification, but it accounts for my allowing my wife and two hired strangers to fight for my farm. Another time you gave me a choice I thought easy, but I have not played fair, and unless you think for yourself alone, you may run a daunting risk. Had the wheat burned, I must have taken a hired man's job. A drinker destroys all who trust him."

Helen beckoned and her look was gentle.

"Come back, Geoff!"

Spiers got down by the couch and she put her bandaged hand on his head.

"Perhaps you ought to have married another girl, but you are my husband. At the beginning I was afraid for myself; I'd been poor so long I'd had enough. Now it's different. Don't you see, Geoff——? If you let things go and took to liquor, it would break my heart. But you won't, dear? You're a man; you mustn't be a slave. You have talent; all the others have done you can do, and so long as you are willing to fight for your freedom, I will stand by you."

Spiers looked up. His emotions were very mixed, but her gentleness banished his humiliation. For all his follies and neglect, Helen loved him.

Her generosity commanded his frankness. He dared not cheat her.

"If I willingly hurt you, I'd be shabbier even than you are justified to think; but, for your sake, I must not rashly promise to take the line you urge. The truth is, before I married you I didn't want to fight."

"You didn't mind being a drunkard, Geoff?"

"It was not altogether my object," Spiers replied with a vanishing twinkle. "Liquor was some excuse for extravagant exploits that helped me banish disturbing thought. Well, perhaps you ought to know your husband, and I'll add something to my apology the evening Hart claimed the homestead. When I started for Canada my relations were not at all sorry to let me go, and they bought me a farm, on the stipulation that I did not come back. I, however, had got a knock in England that sobered me, and for a time I tried not to loaf. Then Hart worked on my reckless extravagance and soon my fresh entanglements were worse than the others. It looked as if I were done for. When I reaped a crop the fellow took the lot, and if I could not pay his interest I knew he'd take the farm. In the circumstances, there was not much use in laboring for my creditor and my relations had had enough. Liquor banished my troubles. I frankly don't think I liked the stuff itself ——"

"Go on, Geoff," said Helen quietly.

"Very well. When I saw you were jarred I agreed to stop. I believed I could do so; I had an object for effort and you gave me fresh hope and pluck. The job, however, was harder than I thought. The stuff's insidious, and when I resolved to leave it alone I found it had captured me. There's the truth, Helen. For your sake, I want to conquer, but I doubt——"

Helen, very gently, touched his bent head.

"But you will try, my dear?"

"With all the force I've got," said Spiers, in a hoarse voice. "Now suppose we let it go? To talk about my fine resolves will not carry me far and the fight may be long. If I win, we'll boast."

He got up, and since Helen knew where to stop, she remarked: "You are tired. Perhaps you ought to go to bed."

Spiers smiled. "I don't know if tired is the proper word, but I'm going to look for the horses Heath seems to have lost."

He went off and returning with the team, met his hired man some distance from the homestead. Heath's coat was burned and his face was spotted by red marks.

"I thought I'd better go after them horses. When I loosed them from the plow they was frantic and broke away," he remarked.

"You stay with your job," Spiers said, meaningly. "Do you like it?"

"I've nowt to grumble about. After foundry, I like to be in t' sun, and Mattie's fond of Mrs. Spiers. All the same, we're anxious about t' winter."

"So long as you are content at Pine Creek, I expect something can be fixed, and when I agreed to try you out I was lucky. Last night was rather a drastic test. But I imagine one must use some nerve at an ironworks."

"I nivver got a burn. Nearest I was to getting hurt was when owd boiler might have gone through roof," Heath replied with a chuckle.

"Then, the boiler did not go? Well, suppose you get up on the led horse and tell me the tale?"

Heath got up awkwardly. He was not a horseman and Spiers had not brought a saddle.

"Boiler was gas-fired and it were fifth November," he began. "The moulders' boys was larking with an owd muzzle-loading pistol. After we stopped for supper I thowt Sam at boiler house a bit unsteady on his legs; on cold night it wasn't tea he browt in his tin bottle. Well, about one o'clock in morning we heard steam blow off, and since all the machines was running it looked as if main boiler carried an awkward load. When, twoathree went to boiler house Sam was in his barrow, fast asleep. Pressure-gauge was over danger line and water was getting low. My mate smells Sam's bottle, and say he, 'T'owd chap's tea is rum.'"

"If the engines had stopped, I suppose the relief valves would not have carried off the extra steam and an explosion would be the consequence?" said Spiers. "Well, you probably did not inform the foundry manager. How did you punish Sam?"

Heath grinned. "We fired pistol behind owd chap's head. Somebody turned a valve and house was full of steam. Sam jumped up and ran for street. He reckoned boiler had gone through roof and he didn't stop until he was in bed. Anyway, we cured him; he's been sober iver since."

"I wonder——" said Spiers with a crooked smile. "Perhaps Sam's luck was good. The warning was stern, but he was given another chance—— Well, we mustn't philosophize, and now I think about it, I have not had breakfast."

He urged his horse, and for a few minutes Heath jolted about on his. Then he lurched forward, rolled across the animal's neck and sat down in the grass. He had no saddle, and after a strenuous night was not remarkably fresh.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PEACEMAKER

SUPPER was over at Fairholm and in the big room a slanted sunbeam crept up the wall. The open windows commanded the plain, and the wheat, shining with pale coppery gleams, cut the red and green sunset. A light wind rattled the shades, and one smelt scorched grass and sun-baked soil.

Lawrence lounged by the window. George tranquilly smoked his pipe, Millicent was sewing, and Spiers rolled a cigarette. For the most part, they were quiet. The scorching day was over, and the wheat was nearly ripe. All was ready for harvest, and until the binders clashed in the silver oats, one could rest.

In tranquil summer evenings the spacious room was marked by a strange soothing charm, and Lawrence sensed a sort of dignified friendliness. He felt the house yet carried its vanished occupants' stamp. To picture his mother in Millicent's place was not hard; sometimes he saw his father study his farming books where George now smoked his pipe.

For all their cultivation, they were laborious, kind and frugal; theirs was the courage that conquers the wilderness, and the British officer's ambition centered on his farm. When Lawrence thought about it, he admitted he had a noble inheritance. Now, to some extent, he was satisfied. He had risked much and used stubborn effort, but he imagined the reward would soon be his. It was not always like that. Often the farmer was cheated, and Lawrence knew he owed something to good fortune, for he had started when the tide turned and his uncle had helped. Then George and Millicent had supported him loyally.

Yet there were drawbacks, since it looked as if he had inherited his father's quarrel with Ogilvie. In all they did they jarred; temperament and circumstances forced them to take opposite sides. The old fellow was stubborn and Lawrence doubted if he would acknowledge him for his daughter's lover. Moreover, Margaret was proud and must stand by her folks. There was the trouble, since but for her, Lawrence was frankly willing to fight Ogilvie.

Anyhow, he did not want to dwell on the disturbing subject. For a few days the strain he had borne was over, and then he must brace up for harvest. In the meantime, he must try to relax, and he was moved by a vague thankfulness for the noble crop. At length, Nature was generous and one would reap where one had sowed. Lawrence lighted a cigarette and presently turned to Spiers, who narrated, apologetically, his transaction with Lamond.

"We must fix about the new binders, Geoff," he said. "Do you need yours?"

"If you loaned me a team, the machine would be useful, but I hesitate to ask you and I certainly ought to go without," Spiers replied. "However, when I met Lamond a day or two ago he was nasty. In fact, he's not altogether the sport I thought. He declared I made him tired. I had won his money and driven off with his rig, but he was not going to stand for my ordering machines I did not want."

George laughed and Spiers remarked Millicent's twinkle. Millicent, although herself fastidious, was tolerant to others, and he imagined she could account for his running off with Lamond's team. In fact, he suspected most of his neighbors chuckled over his exploit, and but for Helen their amusement would not disturb him. Sometimes Helen did not see a joke.

"Oh, well," said Lawrence, "I can supply the team, and I'll take my binder. The machine is a good machine and to harvest a crop like ours one needs first-class tools. Well, we have all the horses we want, but we must pick up a few men, and I think we'll start for the settlement in the morning. Nothing much is doing, George. Can you join us?"

Spiers agreed, but George refused with a smile. Larry used some tact and acknowledged him head of the house. All the same, Larry was the driving-force in the combine and George's part was to handle the teams. George did not grumble. He was not ambitious, but nobody on the wide plain cut a cleaner furrow.

Then bridle-links jingled and riding-boots tapped the veranda boards. Lawrence knew the light step and went quickly to the door. Margaret came in and gave the group a smile. Her clothes were riding-clothes and her skin was brown. Her glance was level and she carried herself proudly.

Millicent studied her and Lawrence, holding back the door. He was lightly built but athletic, and his alert, resolute look was somehow like Margaret's. In fact, for people who were not related, the likeness was rather marked. Both were prairie folk, lovers of the soil and sun; fine stuff, but sometimes perhaps a trifle hard. For example, although Millicent knew them

lovers, they were not the sort to recklessly indulge a selfish passion. Larry would not cheat for Margaret; he would not for her sake take a shabby part, and the girl would hate to think he did so.

"Perhaps Millicent would sooner I had come across in the afternoon, but I wanted to find George at home," Margaret remarked.

George's smile was not altogether humorous. Margaret's object was good, but she struck the note his brother had struck. Although he was not jealous, he did not want people to pretend they thought him important.

"In the evening my habit is to loaf, and I'm at your command. However, if your visit is a business visit, Larry is boss. He is not remarkably occupied. But what about Geoff?"

"I wanted to see Mr. Spiers," Margaret replied. "He might be interested, since, to some extent, he is your partner."

"That is so," Spiers agreed. "For a time, I have joined the gang. George and Larry and I are partners; *accomplices*, if you like. We will not fix the proper title. Something depends on Mr. Ogilvie's point of view."

"Very well," said Margaret. "I know your keenness and I'll use some freedom." She turned to George and resumed: "Neighbors ought to be friendly, and for us to keep up disputes our relations began long ago is ridiculous. Larry I think agrees, Millicent is always kind, and I want to persuade you. We are young and up-to-date and have not much to do with old-time quarrels."

"Ah," said Spiers, "generous youth has got up against family disputes before! In fact, playwrights have used the plot, and the drama one in particular made of it is famous. In a way, I myself am independent, but I sympathize with people entangled by the claims of rival houses."

He stopped, for Margaret gave him an angry glance, and he saw he must not push the implication farther. "Well," he continued, "for some time, the Fairholm gang have left the bluffs and sloos you claim alone. Is fresh trouble breaking out?"

"Don't you know?" Margaret inquired.

"I am the junior partner, and since George is head, I must modestly refuse to state my surmises."

Margaret turned to George and Spiers studied the group. Although they were prairie folk they wore the stamp that marked the occupants of old-fashioned country houses he knew in England. The queer thing was, Margaret Ogilvie had somehow got the stamp; her voice was cultivated, her look was thoroughbred. She and Millicent, so to speak, were his sort, and

had he had Lawrence's qualities, he might have married a girl like that. Well, he had married a milliner from a little shop, but he had not been rash.

Although the others' charm was obvious, they would not have much use for him; he thought their friendliness marked by a sort of humorous toleration, and some pity for his wife. Helen, however, did not want their pity. She risked much, but was not afraid. When he thought about her courage and patience, he was moved to fresh resolves. But Margaret was talking and he looked up.

"I am not my father's ambassador; you mustn't imagine he sent me across," she said. "In fact, if he knows where I went, I expect he'll be annoyed."

"It is very possible," George agreed with a touch of humor. "Mr. Ogilvie is not at all the man to let another help him out."

"He may come across in the morning," Margaret went on in an embarrassed voice. "I thought I would see you first— — After all, we ought not to quarrel."

"We inherited the dispute, and I am afraid we must carry the load," Millicent replied. "When two people fight, the one who first gets tired must meet the other's demands. There's the obstacle, because in order to make peace my brother must indulge Mr. Ogilvie. Well, you are my friend, but I will not urge them."

A touch of color came to Margaret's skin and for a few moments she hesitated. Then she said, "Perhaps you ought not, Millicent. I wondered whether we could not find a way out—some sort of compromise."

"I do not see Mr. Ogilvie compromising," Millicent rejoined.

"Oh, well, my object was good," said Margaret, and turned to George. "Our hired men have given father notice that they want the pay the harvesters get, and if he does not agree, they will quit. Since the fresh hands are strangers and sometimes raw, one needs a few men who know the farm and know their work."

"That is so. I expect Mr. Ogilvie refused?"

Margaret smiled, but her smile was marked by a touch of haughtiness.

"His answer was, he would not pay an extra cent, and the men might go when they liked."

"Since I imagine they have not yet got all their pay, Mr. Ogilvie was on pretty safe ground," George remarked. "For all that, the boys are stubborn, and might try to hold you up. However, if your neighbors supported you he might win; if they do not, the men will beat him. In consequence, you want to know our line— —" He turned to Lawrence. "Well, Larry?"

Lawrence hesitated. His look was disturbed, but his mouth was firm.

"Harvest is a long and strenuous job. Speed is important, because the crop is large and so long as it is in the field one takes some chances. Where all must sweat and hustle, goodwill is worth much. A keen man's example fires his pals; a grumbler slacks and stops the others. Well, at Fairholm we mean to get our crop, and although I doubt if our boys would hold us up, I am willing to pay all they ask. From a business man's point of view, I believe I'm justified."

"You imply you see another point of view?" said Margaret. "Go on, Lawrence."

Lawrence indicated the sweep of shining wheat. "There's my real justification. If the hail had touched the field, if we had got a frosty night, George and I would now be broke. We gambled on the weather and were fortunate. After the long, bleak years, the harvest is finer than we dared hope ——"

He stopped for a moment, and resumed in a deprecatory voice: "The plans and the risk are the farmers', but the hired men must help, and our lot helped nobly. They sowed the splendid crop, and their stipulated share is a thin roll of bills that would not support a careless man until he struck a fresh job in spring. Then a large crop implies one's using all the effort flesh and blood can bear, and if I were a hired man, I'd frankly hate to see a stranger engaged for twice my pay. Well, our share is generous, and I feel we must be just. Although one might claim the boys' agreement stands, we cannot be shabby."

Margaret got up. Her face was slightly flushed, but her look was gentle.

"Oh, well, I cannot move you, and perhaps I ought not to try. At all events, a half-hearted champion cannot accomplish much. Then, you see, when I started I had no plan. All I wanted was to find out if we were forced to fight another time. Now it looks as if we must, I am sorry."

She went off with Millicent, and Spiers gave Lawrence a sympathetic smile.

"Miss Ogilvie is logical. When you set out to persuade others, you must yourself be convinced your arguments are good, and I don't think she is. Perhaps it's some comfort."

Lawrence said nothing. He began to load his pipe, but his hand shook.

CHAPTER XXIV

OGILVIE'S PLAN

LAWRENCE, waiting for Spiers at Pine Creek, soothed his horses and talked to Helen. The sun was getting hot, and the team was eager to start, but Lawrence tried to be philosophical. As a rule, one must wait for Geoffrey. By and by he heard wheels and Helen looked up with a frown.

"Mr. Ogilvie. I wonder what he wants," she said.

After a minute or two Ogilvie stopped his horses.

"I'm not going to bother you, Mrs. Spiers. I knew Mr. Elliot's rig and reckoned he and your husband were for the settlement. You mean to hire up some harvesters, Lawrence?"

Lawrence assented, and Spiers, coming from the house, leaned against the wall and languidly stuffed his pipe. Ogilvie gave him an ironical nod.

"Well, I expect you'll get all the men you want," he said to Lawrence. "Maybe you have fixed the harvest pay?"

"Not yet," Lawrence replied. "We must find out what the others are willing to give; and then we'll pay the sort of standard rate."

"But what about your regular hands?"

Lawrence had seen where Ogilvie led. He wanted to avoid a dispute, but he was not going to be bullied.

"The boys will get the sum I give the fresh gang."

Ogilvie frowned, and turned to Spiers.

"How have you fixed it with your lame Britisher?"

"I am not forced to enlighten you, but Tom's wage will be the top rate," Spiers said languidly. "Perhaps it's not material, but he is no longer lame."

"One can reckon on your extravagance," Ogilvie remarked in an ironical voice and addressed Lawrence. "I thought you had some business qualities; anyhow you can't run Fairholm on sentimental lines. Unless you use sound economy, the farm will break you."

"Perhaps I'm not much of an economist, but I doubt if one can handle men as if they were machines," said Spiers. "For the most part, we are not a mechanically logical lot. At all events, I imagine Larry's gang will work for him where yours will slack."

Ogilvie gave him a scornful smile and fixed his eyes on Lawrence.

"Well, I reckon I'm up against you another time, and I surely hate to be beat. Your partner doesn't count. If you and Mrs. Spiers can carry him along, you are smarter than I think, but that's your job. The important thing is, you are willing to go back on your neighbors. We aim to run our farms as farms should be run; we are not going to be robbed and bullied by our hands. We calculated to get your support, but you turn against your friends and boost the other side. Well, nobody has much use for a man like you."

The blood came to Lawrence's skin, but he said quietly, "All your neighbors are not with you, sir."

"That is so," Ogilvie admitted. "Some are fools, and some have not got much grit. Anyhow, the farms are ours; we broke the prairie and we risk our capital. The boys risk nothing. When the wheat is frozen we bear the loss, but now the crop is good they talk about their share! Yet you will stand for the slobs' bluff. You have no use for economy. You haven't the gall to fight."

"I rather think ours is the true economy," Lawrence rejoined. "At bottom all coöperation is built on a square deal."

Ogilvie laughed a scornful laugh. "Then, the boys' agreement ought to stand. They hired up for a stipulated sum, and on the plains a farmer pays when his wheat is harvested. When mine's at the elevators I'll hand the gang their wad."

"If your men don't stay with you, you mean to keep the pay they have earned?" Helen inquired.

"You get me, ma'am. Farming's a business proposition, and I'm not a sentimentalist like your husband and Lawrence."

"If Geoff was like you, I'd divorce him," said Helen firmly.

"The Crossing is yours, Mr. Ogilvie," said Spiers. "Since we are taking an independent line, your arrangements have nothing to do with us; but if you hold up the boys' wages, I imagine you'll play a risky game."

"I am willing to take some chances," Ogilvie rejoined dryly. "Anyhow, there's no use in talking. You back the wrong lot. It's a sure thing the gang can't put their bluff across."

He started his horses and Spiers smiled.

"You have a stubborn antagonist, Larry, and I expect he sees a plan. All the same, I doubt if he has properly weighed the chances he is willing to take, and if he hits an awkward snag, I don't suppose I'll grieve."

They got in the wagon, and by and by Spiers resumed: "My talent for business is not remarkable, but I rather think greedy people of Ogilvie's

stamp are sometimes a little blind. They clutch at two-bits and miss a dollar. For example, when one has got a crop as large as his, speed's worth much, and by comparison, the small extra sum his men ask is not worth a fight. You see, you cannot hustle an unwilling gang. In fact, if my pay was cut, I believe I could undertake to cheat the boss."

Lawrence thought it possible and he smiled, for he knew Spiers.

"Perhaps greediness does not altogether explain the old fellow's holding out. He hates to be bluffed and no doubt feels he stands for the farmer's right to stick to all that's his."

"His sort call it standing for a principle," Spiers remarked with a grin. "Anyhow, he will put up a good fight. When he saw he could not persuade you he was annoyed, but I sensed a touch of grim humor, as if, after all, he had got a joke on us."

Lawrence concentrated on his driving. He would sooner have indulged Ogilvie; particularly since it looked as if Margaret had hoped he might, and he wondered whether he had exaggerated the importance of their dispute. It was possible, but had he agreed, he would have felt himself shabby. Well, he had refused, and he imagined he must bear the consequences.

At noon they stopped by a little creek and brewed some tea. The sun was very hot, and when they set off scorched silver grass and squares of red-gold wheat shone in dazzling light. At the settlement dust blew along the street. Three or four cars and some wagons were parked in a vacant lot by the livery-stable, shouts and the rattle of billiard-balls indicated that the pool-room was occupied, and groups of strangers loafed about in the shade. For the most part, the men were brown-skinned and muscular, but when Lawrence inquired none seemed keen to take a job.

"If we get all we want, you can hire the crowd, but we don't mean to jump," said one. "I been three days on the cars, and I guess I'll take a rest and watch the pay go up."

"Then I imagine you take some chances," Lawrence rejoined. "I was willing to be just, but you're extravagant."

"It looks as if our lot had put them wise," said Spiers. "The boys, however, have not yet got up against Mr. Ogilvie. I'd rather like to know his plan."

They went to the hotel. The veranda at the top of the steps was a sort of farmers' club, and a number occupied the hard chairs and rested their boots on the rail. Some talked in languid voices, some smoked and meditated, and a few frankly slept. Cigar-ends and burned matches were scattered about the dusty boards. Swarming flies crawled across the shiplap wall.

So far, the farmers' luck had turned and they had grounds to hope the wheat would free them from their embarrassments, but they knew the Northwest, and rejoiced soberly. The most part perhaps used Ogilvie's point of view, and when Lawrence joined them one said:

"I don't know as I'm greedy, but I like a square deal. I'm paying the sum I fixed, and I sure don't see why the boys ask more."

"You can pay," remarked another. "You ought to be glad you got a bully crop and give the gang a share. Anyhow, to meet their bill won't cost you much, and the main thing is to get your wheat off the ground. So long as my lot see me through, I'm not going to fight about a few dollars."

"Then, why don't you go get them?" inquired the first man, and indicated a group on the sidewalk. "I allow they're a pretty good bunch of Ontario harvesters and all they want is double pay."

"Double's too much," said the farmer; and his audience laughed.

"Now you get it," agreed another. "I'm all for a square deal and when my wheat is froze I pay. The trouble is, if you give the boys something, they want some more. They don't know where to stop, and if they think us easy, they'll take the lot."

"The argument's old," said Spiers with a twinkle. "I expect King Pharaoh talked like that. Well, perhaps nobody is altogether satisfied, but when all the boys earn does not see them through the winter they have some grounds to grumble. As far as possible, I'll humor mine. You see, I can be generous because Larry's my banker."

"He has some gall," a big fellow whose face was deeply lined observed. "Well, at length, I guess we're going to shake the mortgage jobber and the wheat will pay our debts. Maybe we must pay the gang more; you can't keep all you get. That's so, Lawrence?"

"I have not kept much," said Lawrence. "My wallet's flat, and all I have is the crop. I want to see it at the elevators and I'm willing to pay for help. Then there's another thing; the tractors, cars, new railroads, and so forth, will carry us where the old-timers never thought to go. The windmill-pump and gasolene engine will sweat for us, life will be easier, and its standards higher. Well, the boys will claim their part and I think they must be satisfied, for unless they pull their proper weight all we plan falls down. The harvest has given us freedom, and at Fairholm we are not going to grumble about our wages bill——"

The station-agent came up the steps, and stopping for a moment, inquired: "Have you hired all the men you want?"

"The boys are putting the screw on us; they reckon they'll wait," a farmer replied.

"Then, I'd let them wait," said the agent. "We got a wire from Winnipeg that a colonist special's on the line. She'll come through about five o'clock, and I guess she carries a bully load of harvesters."

He gave the group a meaning smile, for in Canada the colonist cars are used by emigrants and laborers who cannot buy second-class tickets. Perhaps a crowded steamer had arrived at Montreal, but Lawrence thought the railroad officers had advertised a harvesters' cheap excursion.

About five o'clock he and Spiers waited by the track. In the distance a dark smoke-plume rolled across the plain, and by and by metal sparkled in the tossing dust. Then the black locomotive began to get distinct, the smoke blew away, and the long row of grimy colonist cars rolled into the station. Pushing figures blocked the vestibule steps, heads were thrust from windows, and when the locomotive stopped at the water tank a sweating, dusty crowd, eager to escape for a few minutes from the hot cars, flowed across the track.

For the most part, the men were not Canadians; Lawrence noted their pallid skin, their shabby clothes, and their jaded look. They were tired, impoverished immigrants and yet carried the stains of the steamship steerage. A number, embarrassed by awkward bundles and battered handbags, obviously meant to remain, for they sat down on the sidewalk and forlornly looked about. At length, they had reached the golden West, but all they saw was a wheel-torn street, bordered by mean wooden houses, and a dreary sweep of gray, scorched grass. Then the station-agent, pushing through a group by a baggage car, gave Lawrence a nod.

"The company means to see you out. Another special will be along in the morning."

"Ogilvie's plan; he's beaten the boys!" said Spiers. "I expect he wrote the railroad and immigration offices about our wanting harvest hands. I think we'll look up the fellow who declared he'd wait. He's an Ontario man, and no doubt has stooked sheaves before."

The man and two or three others were smoking in the shade, but when he saw Lawrence his grin was philosophical.

"You have us beat, but my bunch are harvesters and the other mob are not," he said. "What are you going to pay? And how many boys do you want?"

Lawrence told him and he looked up with some surprise.

"We did reckon to get more, but you're not cutting rates all you might."

"I want you to work," said Lawrence meaningly.

"When I like my boss I don't slouch," the other rejoined and turned to his companions. "What say?"

"You can fix the deal," said one, and Lawrence sent them to the hotel.

The locomotive snorted and the bell began to toll. Crowded figures swarmed about the steps and the platform rails; the dusty cars jolted and rolled ahead. Men shouted and waved greasy caps, but the cheers were flat, and the song somebody started was drowned by the throb of wheels. Shipmates and trainmates got indistinct, and the immigrants sitting by the track looked drearily about.

One got up and stopped Lawrence. "A mate o' mine from England is in these parts. Do you know Tom Heath?"

"If you are Heath's pal, your luck is good," said Spiers. "I don't see how you tracked him, but he's at my farm."

"He left notes for me at the immigrant sheds. If you let me look him up, he might put me on a harvesting job."

Spiers gave Lawrence a meaning glance. The fellow was strongly built and Lawrence knew the sturdy Lancashire type and could use another man. Besides, he noted the stranger's eager look and imagined his money was gone.

"I will give you a job; at all events, I'll try you out," he said. "I don't suppose you can drive a three-horse team, but if you can stook the sheaves behind the binder, you will get——" He stated a sum and resumed: "At Fairholm, however, we have not an eight-hour rule. We begin soon after sunup and sometimes we don't stop at dark. Your board, of course, is free, and I think the food is pretty good. On Sundays, if you wanted, you might go across and see your pal."

"I'm your man," said the other. "I don't know much about horses, but when you've carried coal bags up a bending plank, stacking wheat-sheaves looks an easy job."

Lawrence smiled. Easy jobs are not numerous in a Canadian harvest field. He ordered the man to go with him, and, joining the group at the hotel, gave them some money.

"My team has had enough, but you can put your bundles on board the rig," he said. "Get supper, and in the morning take the Fairholm trail."

A few minutes afterward he and Spiers started across the plain.

"Perhaps we were extravagant," Lawrence remarked in a thoughtful voice.

“Oh, well,” said Spiers, smiling, “I have known extravagance pay. Ogilvie, no doubt, will cut his men’s wages, but he has yet to get away with it. Sometimes economy like his is expensive.”

CHAPTER XXV

THE STRIKE-BREAKER

ALTHOUGH some time had gone since the evening meal was served, Mrs. Ogilvie was engaged at the kitchen stove. The steak and potatoes must not burn and the Scandinavian hired girl was frankly mutinous, for after an angry dispute with Ogilvie her lover was going. Mrs. Ogilvie left the girl alone. At harvest one needed help and on the plains to get useful help was hard. Moreover, her part was as far as possible to soften her husband's autocratic rule.

Ogilvie thought his word went, but he did not know his wife's light touch sometimes banished fierce rebellion. Although Mrs. Ogilvie often got tired, she saw there was no use in grumbling. Somebody must absorb the jars and be a sort of buffer against the shocks. Margaret would not; the girl had inherited her father's imperious temperament.

Ogilvie had not stated whom he expected, but when Mrs. Ogilvie went back to the room they used he came from the porch and she imagined he had been looking out. The evening was calm and a tranquil smoky sunset glimmered behind the bluffs on the edge of the plain. As a rule, after supper one heard the hired men laugh and joke, but all was quiet.

Margaret, sewing by the window, felt the calm was ominous. Ogilvie picked up a newspaper, but she thought he listened. Although his look was imperturbable, he had perhaps some grounds to be disturbed, and when at length they heard wheels he got up and pulled out his watch.

When the trail forked a wagon took the homestead track, and Margaret saw with some surprise five or six men on board. The team stopped behind the barn and the men vanished, but after a few minutes they advanced to the house. Ogilvie's men had joined the others, for the group was larger, and the strangers' faces were now covered by white masks, rudely cut from cotton flour-bags. Ogilvie put up his newspaper and went to the window.

"The gang are not going to make much trouble, but to handle them is a man's business and I won't stand for my womenfolk meddling," he remarked, and gave Margaret a steady glance.

Margaret said nothing. One did not dispute with Ogilvie, and although she rather sympathized with his dissatisfied men, she approved his scornful

courage. Moreover, she imagined he had reckoned on the masked strangers' interference and had, no doubt, used some precautions. His noting the time was significant.

"You mustn't be anxious, Mother," she said in a low voice. "The boys' visit is not altogether the surprise party they think. He expected them."

"Why, yes; I know your father, and he hates to be bluffed," Mrs. Ogilvie agreed. "All the same, now our lot have joined them they are a nasty bunch and he's alone."

They waited. Ogilvie had gone to the wide porch, and faced the party at the bottom of the steps. Although the light was going, his tall figure was distinct and his pose was somehow commanding. His men were in front; the others had pulled the flour-bags over their heads and necks. In the dusk they were fantastic and rather ominous, but Ogilvie laughed.

"Well, boys, are you playing Bushwhackers? Jesse James is a long while dead, and anyhow his hunting-ground was not in Canada."

His contemptuous voice carried, and Margaret smiled. She was not much daunted and she approved her father's line; he implied that the American outlaw's methods were exotic and out of date. The men began to push about the bottom of the steps and he waved them back.

"Stop right there! I don't want you on my porch. Now what's the trouble?"

"We're quitting. Our boxes are on board," one of his men replied.

"Then, you brought the Bushwhacker gang to help you load up your clothes? Well, I'm not trying to stop you. Why don't you go?"

"They mean to help us collect our pay."

"Ah," said Ogilvie, "that's another thing! Looks as if your theatrical friends had come along about six weeks too soon. My engagement stands. You'll get your pay all right when the pay is due."

"You can't put that across on us; two or three of the others *tried*," a masked stranger rejoined meaningly. "We know you got some gall, but we're here to see you hand out the wad."

"If you are a plainsman, you know the rule: when the crop is off the ground the farmer reckons up. An easy boss will give you something to go on with, and my lot have drawn about half their roll. Now they want to quit. Very well, I certainly won't stop them. I have no use for trash."

Margaret, by the window, turned her head, for she would sooner Mrs. Ogilvie did not know she blushed. After all, her father was not justified to refuse the wages his men had already earned. She had imagined all he had

wanted was to force them to carry out their engagement; but it looked as if he were willing to keep money that was not his. His unscrupulous greediness had jarred before, but rebellion had not helped much. Her protests had moved Ogilvie to ironical humor, and so long as she was at the homestead she supposed she must acknowledge his authority. All the same, she pictured Lawrence's generous fairness and the contrast hurt.

"If I'd known your father was set on holding up their pay, I'd have fixed it with the boys and said nothing," Mrs. Ogilvie observed.

"Then you have fixed things like that for him at other times?"

Mrs. Ogilvie smiled. "Oh, well, my dear, he's obstinate. One must, of course, be boss, but trouble's expensive, and so long as your father thought he won I was happy."

"I wonder," said Margaret thoughtfully. "Were you not sometimes humiliated? And did you not get tired? I'm afraid I have not your patience. You are a noble champion——"

She jumped up, for it looked as if the men got angry.

"The rule the old man talks about is a blamed bad rule and it's not going to stand much longer," one remarked, and addressed Ogilvie. "Anyhow, I've fought my boss for my wages, and I'm willing to fight for my pals'. Say, mister, are you going to hand out? Or do you want us to break your safe?"

Ogilvie leaned against the rails and laughed.

"You haven't the grit. If you force my house, by morning you'll be on your way to jail."

It looked as if he purposely annoyed the angry group, and his rashness puzzled Margaret. Then, for a window at the back was open, she thought she heard horses' feet. She imagined Ogilvie had calculated on getting help, but the horsemen were not yet at the homestead and the others were on the veranda steps.

"Quit talking and get busy!" one shouted. "We'll take our money."

Ogilvie said nothing. He faced the group scornfully, and the fantastic white-hooded figures began to climb the steps. Margaret ran across the floor and jumped from the window. She had not long since blushed for her father, but now the others threatened him her blood was fired. When she stopped at the top of the steps she balanced a small-bore repeating rifle with which she sometimes hunted sandhill cranes.

"We don't want you on the porch, boys. I think you had better keep the grass," she said.

The group hesitated. Margaret's pose was firm and her hands were steady. Moreover, Ogilvie's men knew she could hit a crane at a hundred yards. They pushed the others back; and then in the sudden quiet one heard the rapid beat of horses' feet.

A few moments afterward, a mounted policeman pulled up his horse behind the group and Margaret quietly put her rifle against a post. Another constable, who had gone down at the back, came from the house. A big pistol was strapped on his hip, but he negligently swung a riding quirt.

"Hello, boys! Looks as if you were not keen for folks to know you," he said in a bantering voice. "Well, I like your modesty, but if somebody has got a gun I want to see his license."

All were quiet. In Canada the firearms law is strictly carried out. The young trooper beat some dust from his uniform and resumed:

"You and Mr. Ogilvie were disputing. What's the trouble?"

They told him frankly. In practise, the Royal North-West constables' powers are judicial as well as executive, and the settlers trust the police. The young fellow nodded and addressed Ogilvie.

"You don't allow their claim?"

"They have no claim. All they have got to do is to stand by their engagement, and I'll stand by mine."

"We sure earned the money and we want it," one of the gang rejoined.

The trooper leaned against the rails, studying the angry group.

"I'm sorry, but to fix the thing is not my job and you want to state your case at a civil court. Anyhow, you can't seize another man's money and the law won't stand for your beating up your boss——" He stopped for a moment and his voice was sterner when he went on: "Your plan's to see a lawyer, and you better get going."

The men grumbled, but they went and when the wagon rolled away Ogilvie turned to the young fellow.

"They can't force their claim, but if you had come along a few minutes later, they might have broke my safe."

"We started when we got your message. I suppose somebody put you wise?"

Ogilvie nodded. "I take no chances. The boys don't yet know whom they're up against. But you have ridden some distance. Come on and have supper."

"No, thanks," said the constable with dry politeness. "We did not mean to stop. If you complain that the gang threatened you, I'll report to the

superintendent, but they were not violent when we were about. Good-night, Mr. Ogilvie."

He went down the steps and Margaret's face got hot. The young fellow had carried out his duty and had used some tact, but she thought his sympathy was for the men and he would not eat in the house. Margaret was forced to admit his fastidiousness was not unreasonable. She rejoined her mother and in a few minutes Ogilvie returned to the room.

"The bunch is gone," he said. "When you handle trash like that you have got to be firm."

"But you need men for the harvest," Mrs. Ogilvie remarked.

"In the morning I expect to hire a wagon-load," said Ogilvie, with a short laugh. "The railroad is running harvesters' excursions, and I guess all the stiffs and deadbeats from Toronto, Port Arthur, and Winnipeg are on the cars. The strike's clean broke, ma'am."

Margaret colored and her eyes sparkled. When her father was threatened she had gone to his support, but now the strain was over his shabbiness and hardness jarred. Moreover, the young trooper's polite contempt had stung.

"You planned the excursions?"

"I am not a railroad boss. All I did was to put it up to the office."

"But the men who quit were farmers," said Mrs. Ogilvie. "The fresh lot from the cities will not earn their pay."

"They'll earn mine," Ogilvie rejoined. "When you are forced to fight, something must be risked, but I allow it may be awkward. If my neighbors had had the gall to back me, I might have kept the bunch I had."

"I wonder——" said Margaret. "Spiers and the Elliots have kept their men, but they were just. After all, they had not much grounds to indulge you. I suppose you think they let you down?"

Ogilvie gave her a queer smile. "Larry argues like a crank and George carries no weight. I am up against Mrs. Spiers. She rules her fool husband and he is Larry's pal. But for her, I'd have got the Elliot farm and Geoff's."

"Lawrence is a first-class farmer and Pine Creek was mortgaged to Hart."

"That's so," Ogilvie agreed, dryly. "Lawrence paid the mortgage and I guess it cost him most all he had. If Geoff had been left alone, he'd have gone broke and pulled down his partner, but Mrs. Spiers saw he didn't loaf. She means him to make good, and so long as Geoff pulls his weight Larry will keep his feet. Well, the Fairholm lot were first to meet the boys' new

wages bill and their easiness made trouble for me. The raw English kid at Pine Creek is some antagonist!"

He resumed his newspaper and Margaret got up. There was no use in contending and she was humiliated. By contrast with her father's stern parsimony, Lawrence's justice and Spiers' joyous carelessness were strangely attractive.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FIRST-FRUITS

A LIGHT wind dried the dew and the oats shone like silver in the rising sun. Sometimes the tall stalks bent and where the slow ripple crossed the field the color changed and the feathery heads went yellow and gray. Across the chocolate-brown fallow, the stiff wheat glimmered like red gold. The sky was calm and blue.

Helen mechanically noted the glowing color, but she would sooner be useful, and when Spiers fixed the spool of twine she held the horses. The three big animals were harnessed to a new binder and stamped impatiently. Another team and binder waited a few yards back and Lawrence got into the iron saddle. Helen wondered why he did not start, particularly since Heath and an Ontario harvester loafed about.

The men's clothes were scanty. One saw their brown skin, red throats, and muscular arms. They were like athletes stripped for a race, and all knew they must use some speed. Autumn is short, the crop was large, and before the frost began the last sheaf must be thrashed. By and by Spiers pulled a lever, and lifting her to the saddle gave her the reins.

"All's ready, ma'am," he said, swinging up his hand as if he saluted an officer. "We wait for you to lead us round the field."

Helen smiled, for she liked his joke. "But I have not driven a binder, Geoff. I might keep you back."

"The horses know you. All you have got to do is to steer them straight along the edge and use the full sweep of the knife," Spiers replied. "The crop is yours, My Lady. But for you, I doubt if it would have been sown, and we want you to cut the first swath."

He let the team go and the noisy machine rolled ahead. Dust blew from the horses' feet, the knife sparkled, and the tall stalks bent and fell. The shining wooden arms revolved like paddle-wheels in breaking yellow waves, and strewed the binder's wake with silver-tipped sheaves. For a time Helen concentrated, but the horses went steadily and at the corner of the oblong she risked a glance about.

Twenty yards off, Lawrence's machine crashed through the falling grain; Helen saw his athletic figure sway behind the horses' heads. Farther back,

Heath seized the sheaves. His short, thick body and legs were bent, and he lurched about awkwardly in the tall stubble, for the Western wheat-grower does not cut much straw. His mouth was firm and his face shone with sweat. Helen thought him marked by something of a bulldog's clumsiness and tenacity. The Lancashire man was slow and raw, but he meant to hold on. Sometimes the lean Ontario harvester took the sheaves Heath seized, and built them, for a model, in a compact stook. For a moment Heath studied the neat pile, and then frowned and plunged ahead.

The clash of the knives was musical, the horses' feet and the binders' revolving arms beat a measured rhythm. The sky was blue, the wheat was ruddy gold, and bracing wind and glowing color fired Helen's blood. Besides, Spiers' remarks had moved her. She felt she triumphed and her mood was emotional.

Helen's habit was not to philosophize, but facing the splendid crop, she reviewed her rash adventure, of which the wheat was perhaps the consequence. To some extent, she was frankly primitive, and she believed a woman's business was to help her mate and build a home. She obeyed instinctive impulses, and since nobody in the Old Country wanted her, she took the plunge. Now she knew the risk she had run was daunting, but it looked as if the risk were gone. Her husband at length was really hers. She had not weakly humored him; where firmness was needed she had been firm. Yet she had conquered. Perhaps it was strange, but Geoff *respected* her. She liked his bantering title, "My Lady."

Then she recaptured words and similes that on the Canadian harvest field carried a significance she had not felt in smoky Lancashire. *One reaped where one had sowed*; perhaps one was forced to reap all one sowed! At Pine Creek she had not sowed carelessly; she had used thought and effort, and although sometimes the effort was not wisely planned, she was steadily vanquishing Geoff's drawbacks and hers. Anyhow, the material reward was generous, and for a few moments Helen indulged a queer emotional thrill. A phrase about the *first-fruits* haunted her and when she looked up her eyes were wet.

Ten yards behind her binder, Lawrence held his team. Heath stretched his arms and the Ontario man rubbed the sweat and dust from his eyes. Helen saw that while she brooded she had kept them back, and at the corner she got down from the machine.

"Harvest has begun, Geoff, and until you carry the last sheaf I hope our luck will stand," she said. "Well, I am not a harvester; my business is to cook for the men in the field, but you declared the crop was mine. Suppose I ask you for all my machine can cut on the first day?"

"It is yours," said Geoffrey, smiling. "If you claimed all both machines could cut, I would not grumble, and I expect Lawrence will agree. Well, I'll note my debt. How much do you reckon it stands for, Larry?"

Lawrence calculated and named a sum.

"I'm rather Geoff's partner than his creditor, Mrs. Spiers, and I hope you will take the lot. It might perhaps help you fix your house."

"Thank you," said Helen. "But you must make a note. I must not be generous with money that is not really ours, and I want nothing for the house." She turned to Spiers and her voice was not altogether steady when she resumed: "We will send the money to a hospital, Geoff; if possible somewhere they help sick strangers and emigrants. Not long ago I was a stranger and it's hard to be alone."

Lawrence said he liked the plan, and when Geoffrey sent the check he hoped Mrs. Spiers would let him know. He had come across in order to try the machine, and now he was glad his going justified his lifting his hat. He hated to be theatrical, but Geoffrey's wife commanded his respect. When he went for his horse Helen called the Ontario man to take her binder.

"You must cut all a good team and machine can cut in a day, Sam."

"I certainly will, and then some," said the fellow, and signed Heath. "Get to it, Lancashire. This job is Mrs. Spiers' job and you have got to sweat!" He started the horses and waved his battered hat. "We'll give you a square deal, ma'am. You watch us go!"

The horses strained, the noisy machines rolled forward, and Helen went happily to the house. Obstacles that she had feared were vanishing and Geoffrey's extravagance was not the handicap she had thought. He had queer, attractive qualities; the men he hired were rather his friends than servants. Helen admitted she was happy, but she must get busy. She had four men to cook for and harvesters must be fed.

A day or two after Spiers began his harvest, Margaret, one hot morning, occupied a shady spot behind a stook in Ogilvie's field. Ogilvie was not generous about engaging domestic help, and although Mrs. Ogilvie labored pluckily, Margaret was tired. Flies swarmed about the hot kitchen, she had been baking since sunrise, and for half an hour she meant to rest.

A row of binders followed the edge of the wheat, and Ogilvie, in his light buggy, watched their progress. Margaret wondered whether he was satisfied, for although the machines and teams were the best one could get, the men who piled the sheaves rather obviously were not. Two wagon-loads of emigrants and broken men from the cities had not long since arrived. Several, finding they were something like blacklegs, went off, but others

stopped and Ogilvie had got the inexpert gang to work. But for the men who drove the binders, it looked as if nobody knew his job and, for the most part, the men were frankly sullen. Margaret studying them, saw lined faces, bent shoulders, shabby clothes, and broken boots.

Yet she knew her father, and she imagined the harvesters would earn their pay. In a sense, he was not a bully; he was ruthlessly logical, and reckoning by economic rules, used the power they gave, but his foreman drove his raw helpers as a lumber boss drives an unwilling gang. Sometimes when his remarks carried, Margaret's face got hot. Thinking about Spiers and Lawrence, she blushed for her father.

The noisy binders clattered by, and gasping men whose heads were bent and legs spread wide crashed through the tall stubble. None had long boots or leggings, and the stiff, sharp stalks pierced their ragged overalls. Their arms were scratched, and Margaret thought the fresh pink color of their skin significant. They had obviously not labored in the fields, and she imagined they did not know all they undertook when they engaged for harvesters. Stooking the sheaves clumsily, they pushed on behind the machines.

The last binder slowed and the driver looked up.

"You are going to crowd us again," he shouted. "Pitch your blasted stooks where they won't block our track next round!"

"If you drive straight, you've got all the room a full-size team can use," one rejoined. "The trouble is, you couldn't steer your horses along a wide dirt road."

The driver, perhaps unconsciously, let go the reins and clenched his fist.

"If I get down, I'll show you, you d—d city slob!"

He stopped, for the horses went ahead. One stumbled and jostled another, the machine rocked, and they plunged violently into the wheat. The teamster felt for his reins and swore, for the line he wanted had entangled the frightened animals' legs. A lad threw down the sheaf he carried and jumped for the horses' head, but the team was alarmed and dragged him from his feet. He held on by the links, and when the driver joined him they forced back the struggling animals.

"Can't you hold a horse?" the driver inquired.

"Doesn't look as if you could show him," the harvester he had first addressed rejoined. "Get on your machine and quit yapping. You make us tired!"

For a few moments both let themselves go, and then the foreman advanced and the binder rolled ahead. The young fellow who had stopped the horses pulled up his torn overalls and examined his discolored leg.

"Another time I'm not going to meddle," he said firmly. "If I went to the house, maybe they'd give me some liniment."

He limped across the stubble, and when another joined him the foreman waved them back.

"Why in thunder are you slouches quitting?"

"I'm going to tie up my partner's leg," one rejoined. "We don't like that kind of talk and his *arm's* all right."

The foreman hesitated. The young fellow's look was resolute and Ogilvie's buggy was not far off. He might perhaps down the tenderfoot, but a fight would stop the others. He let them go and a few minutes afterwards Ogilvie pulled up his horses in front of Margaret.

"Taking a rest? Well, that's right," he said. "I expect all's up to schedule at the house."

"You ought to get mother proper help," Margaret replied. "I am young and an extra effort does not bother me, but harvest is a strain and she is tired. A hired girl is not very expensive and you are rich."

Ogilvie smiled. "Your mother does not want help. When she hustles around she's happy. If I sold out the farm, I might give her a smart house and servants at Montreal, but she'd pine for the washboard and baking pan, and I'd be sick because I had to loaf. Some folks are like that. We don't work because we're forced; we get the habit——" He turned and indicated the harvesters. "There's the other sort!"

Margaret, on the whole, agreed, but her glance followed the mutinous gang.

"Men who feel they're entitled to grumble will not work properly. Perhaps to satisfy your helpers pays."

"You cannot satisfy mean trash; they have got to be driven," Ogilvie rejoined. "Sentimental generosity is not good business and an easy boss gets stung. You pay for as much as you think you'll get."

Margaret's eyes sparkled. Her father seized all he claimed was his; Lawrence and Helen Spiers gave. Their harvesters labored willingly. One heard them joke and sing, and the comparison was painful. In fact, when Margaret thought about Helen, she was moved by a strange jealousy.

"The wheat must be thrashed while Indian summer lasts, and if the frost came soon, to cut your wages bill might not be economical. I don't think our men will use much effort."

"That is so," Ogilvie agreed and knitted his brows. "But for your romantic friends I'd have kept the gang I had. They were a better bunch than

this——" He stopped and his glance was keen when he resumed: "Mrs. Spiers called my bluff. She is boss at Pine Creek and her word goes at the Elliot farm. Looks as if Hart took a shine to her and Larry's her man. Well, I allow the milliner has some qualities."

Margaret turned her head, for she felt the blood come to her skin. Ogilvie had struck the jarring note before and she speculated about his object. All the same when he implied that Larry was Helen's lover Margaret rebelled. But for her father's stubbornness and greed, she knew Larry was hers. Well, she had tried to be stanch and for her mother's sake she had stayed at the Crossing, but her mother did not really need her, and she had borne enough.

"When harvest is over, I think I'll visit with my friends at Montreal," she said. "They have a large new house and Florence wants me to stay for the winter."

Ogilvie nodded. "After the freeze-up not much is doing and I guess you'd like the snowshoe clubs, skating-rinks, and toboggan-slides. If your mother is willing, I'll let you go."

He started his horse and Margaret, rather moodily, went to the house.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BREAKING STRAIN

THE hard day was nearly over and a blue haze crept across the plain. The sun was down behind a bluff and all would soon be dark, but the thrasher clanked and rattled and a long black plume of smoke floated above the tossing dust. Wheels crashed in the stubble and Lawrence pulled out his watch. He could hardly see the dial and his cramped hand shook.

"Can you put through another load?" he shouted. A man on the noisy separator waved his hand, and his voice faintly pierced the din.

"Sure we will! Bring the stuff along. You can't crowd this bunch."

The engine's throb got louder and Lawrence jumped on his wagon. For a minute or two he would not be wanted, and he looked about. The wheat was gone, and the stooked sheaves, glimmering in the blue dusk, dotted the wide field. The outside rows were broken, and beyond them an empty belt of stubble streaked the fading plain.

In western Canada wheat is not stacked. One thrashes in the field and as soon as possible the grain goes to the elevators. The haul to the railroad however, was long, and since his teams could not yet carry all, Lawrence used the prairie wheat-bin.

A long spout like a crane jib went up from the separating-mill and from its top short, beaten straw poured down on a yellow mound. In the mound was a central cavern where sweating men stowed the wheat-bags; and when the hole was full the stream from the elevator would build a yellow pyramid above the grain.

Chaff and dust and cinders blew about the machine, and at one spot a noisy jet of steam pierced the tossing cloud. The thrashers were paid by the bushel and drove their engine savagely. On the plains winter is long and when one loafs about a boarding-house one's money melts.

Lawrence himself had labored for twelve hours. His back hurt, his arms were stiff, and his skin was blackened by sweat and soot and dust. For all that, when the thrashers' foreman signalled he began to throw the sheaves in his wagon across to the separator. Dusk was falling and all got indistinct, but when he stopped another load must be in the bin.

After a few minutes he turned his head. In the dust, two men lifted a bag of grain across a short stick. One staggered and let go his end; the bag fell and burst. The man reeled against the wheat-bin and sat down in the straw. Lawrence jumped from the wagon and ran to the spot. A four-bushel bag of wheat is a heavy load.

George, resting limply against the bin, gave him an apologetic glance, but his mouth was crooked and his face was lined.

"My leg!" he gasped. "A sciatic wrench; I think that's all. My back has bothered me since morning, but I meant to hold on."

"You ought to have stopped," said Lawrence. "Let me help you to the house. If you can wait until we're through, you can go in the wagon."

"Send Pete. You must see the load put up and I expect I can make it," George replied, and seizing Lawrence's hand, got up awkwardly.

Lawrence called a man, and when George limped off, mechanically resumed his labor. He was disturbed; for some time George had been slack and tired, although he refused to rest. Lawrence, however, dared not stop. Two or three men and teams were at the railroad, all at the farm were needed, and somebody must superintend.

At length the engine stopped, the dust rolled away, and in the cool dark the tired men crossed the crackling stubble. Lawrence got a bath and put on fresh clothes. To do so was something of an effort, but he must not begin to be negligent.

When he had inquired about George he joined his men in the kitchen. He had engaged a Chinese cook for harvest and supper was a Homeric feast. The men ate like giants and the big room rang with the clash of knives on thick plates and the rattle of heavy cups. Muscular hands seized the dishes the hurrying cook brought, brown faces flushed after hot drink and food. For about ten minutes all were sternly quiet, and then the plates were thrown back and the hoarse jokes began. In the morning two teamsters and their wagons would be back and the field gang undertook to crowd the thrashers and choke the mill.

Lawrence went to the other room. Millicent was checking some grocery bills and George was on the couch. Now Lawrence thought about it, his brother had used the couch in the evenings for the last two months.

"Are you easier?" he asked.

"So long as I keep my leg straight, I don't feel much pain. Lifting the last bag made the trouble. The stick slipped and the weight was thrown on the sore spot in my back and hip. I expect the wrench stirred up the big

nerve. However, if I lie off for a day or two, I ought to get about again, and I'm sorry I was forced to quit."

"You ought to have gone easy two or three weeks ago," Lawrence rejoined. "Anyhow, I'd like you to take a holiday. I'd try a week at Winnipeg and then go on to Canora. You might camp by the lake and get some fishing, and perhaps some shooting, from a canoe."

George smiled and Millicent put up her bills. Lawrence knew they had been talking and he lighted a cigarette. Since he took control he had borne some strain and after the binders rolled into the wheat he had used all the effort flesh and blood could make. At length, however, the load he had carried was getting light. The crop would pay all debts but Orthwaite's and then leave a larger sum than he needed when he sowed again in spring.

To some extent, he admitted he ought to be content. All for which he had planned and labored would soon be his, but so far he had concentrated on the struggle. In fact, he dared not look in front. Now, however, he might be forced to do so. The wheat would soon be sold, and his brother and sister had rather obviously been pondering.

"Unless my leg is worse than I think, I hope to see you through harvest," said George, and glanced at Millicent as if for support. "When the last bag of grain is shipped off I may quit for good."

Lawrence gave him a disturbed glance, and George resumed:

"We won't bother about politeness, Larry; let's try to weigh facts. I can drive a straight furrow and handle a team, but an up-to-date farmer needs qualities I do not think are mine. Then at Fairholm you are boss, and although I'm the older brother, you ought to have got the farm. I know you'd willingly carry me along, but I'd hate to load you up, and after all I'd, so to speak, sooner use my own feet. There's another thing. Western farming's strenuous, and it's evident I cannot stand for much muscular fatigue. In fact, I must look for a softer job."

Lawrence turned to Millicent.

"I don't know if the plan is yours, but I imagine you agree."

"I am forced to agree. George's weak leg is an awkward handicap. Besides, you are a first-class farmer, and he acknowledges he is not."

"Not long since I was a cotton manufacturer," Lawrence remarked dryly. "The important thing is, I was luckier than George, and when all goes as you calculate, to farm is not hard. The bad years broke him; a large crop helped me."

George smiled. "Your object's good and we know your modesty, but you must be logical——"

"Very well. I am the junior partner. You inherited Fairholm; it's properly yours."

"The drawback was, I could not hold the farm," George replied in a sober voice. "Let's face things. I have had enough and I want to quit. Besides, Lamond wants me to join him. Although he's a stranger, his business goes ahead; I can use the machines he sells and the boys know me. Anyhow, he's rather keen about it and implies that he'd take me for partner on favorable terms. In the circumstances, to raise the sum I'll need might not embarrass you, but nothing will be fixed until the wheat is sold. When I know all particulars, we'll talk about it again."

Lawrence pondered. George had borne the strain of the bad years and it had cost him much. Now the tide had turned, to let him go was shabby. Yet Lawrence saw he was resolved, and Millicent remarked his knitted brows.

"You mustn't worry about George. I feel he takes the proper line," she said. "When he goes, I go with him. We have got an option on Marvin's house."

"Marvin's house fronts the dusty street and has not even a garden lot. The sidewalk's up against the front, and the elevators are but fifty yards off. After the quiet and space at Fairholm, you will not like it, and anyhow the settlement is a dreary spot."

"Ah," said Millicent, "you are like Father—you must have space and freedom! In a way, you know, he was something of an aristocrat. He hated the traffic; he hated pushing, greedy crowds. I think he was feudal, but perhaps he dated farther back and his type was the old Greek shepherds' type. He must rule by strength rather than cunning, he was willing to labor, so long as he was in the frost and sun, and when he looked about he liked to feel all he saw was his."

"On the whole, the portrait's accurate, but it's not my portrait, and I don't see that it has much to do with your going to the settlement."

"Where you would be happy, I might not," Millicent rejoined. "A woman's point of view is different; as a rule, she likes a crowd, and sometimes in winter Fairholm is deadly quiet. Perhaps the settlement is not attractive, but the men it satisfied are vanishing. The new lot are keen and ambitious; they want a wider life, and the railroads and machinery will make it possible. Then the harvest has given the farmers freedom, and when they prosper the prairie towns leap ahead. We are going to plant shade-trees and lay out a park. The men are planning nobler buildings; the women talk about musical societies and social guilds. In a few years you'll see an opera-house and a stone post-office. Where all is moving I expect to find my occupation."

“It’s possible,” said Lawrence. “You are the sort they want to give the rest a lead. Well, perhaps I’m selfish. But what about me?”

“You mean to be nice; but when George is gone, the woman who rules at Fairholm ought to be your wife. I think you know the proper girl.”

“The drawback is, I know her father,” Lawrence remarked moodily.

“Ah,” said Millicent, “Ogilvie is old, but Margaret and you are modern. You have done with all that’s gone; your business is to look in front and push forward. If Margaret agrees to help, I expect you’ll make some progress.”

Lawrence knitted his brows. “I don’t know if she will agree; so far, I dare not urge her. A dry summer and autumn frost might have forced me to take a hired man’s post and at one time I thought I must go broke. The wheat is not yet on the cars, and when the last load’s hauled away I’ll know I’ve won. Then I’ll ask Margaret.”

“If you persuade her, I’ll be happy,” Millicent replied.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OGILVIE CUTS HIS LOSS

THE night was dark and a cold wind shook the window-shades in Lawrence's room. He was tired, but for all his bodily fatigue his active brain disturbed his sleep. In his dreams he heard the engine throb and wagon wheels crush the stubble. Somebody shouted that the gang was waiting and Lawrence whipped his team. The mill must not stop. The wheat was not yet thrashed and the days got short.

He jerked his head from the pillow and knew his skin was wet by sweat. Recently the strain he must bear since daybreak did not slacken much when he went to bed, and in his sleep he stubbornly faced some fresh obstacle. Now he was awake he frowned. If he wanted to hold on until the wheat was thrashed, he must banish dreams like that.

The strange thing was, he did hear wheels and rattling harness. In the dark a wagon plunged noisily along the homestead trail, and after a few moments somebody shouted. Lawrence jumped for the window. The wagon was at the porch and two or three indistinct figures were on board.

"Come down, Larry. You're wanted," one called.

The voice was Spiers' voice, and Lawrence pulled on his clothes. When he reached the porch he saw Helen, Geoffrey, and Heath. George, on the floor above, pushed up his window and inquired why they disturbed tired folks.

"Ogilvie's in trouble," Spiers replied. "Looks as if his homestead burned and Helen thought we ought to start——" He saw Lawrence and resumed: "She imagined you would like to know."

"The Crossing gang is pretty numerous," George remarked.

"I doubt if all are eager to help. My lot were not."

"It's possible," George agreed. "Well, to get out of bed bothered me, and since I cannot go I must be philosophical. I admit it's not very hard."

He shut the window and Spiers laughed.

"I expect George is justified, and anyway he's sick. Heath stands for my gang and I believed he joined us mainly to indulge my wife. But we mustn't loiter. Are you going, Larry?"

Lawrence ordered him to wait, and jumping down the steps, shouted for his harvesters.

"I want one or two good hands to fight a fire at Ogilvie's," he said. "That's all we can carry, but if some more would like to come along, you can harness up a team."

It did not look as if anybody was remarkably willing. The men were tired, and they knew Ogilvie had cut his harvesters' pay. For all that, one or two stepped forward, and Lawrence sent them to the wagon. When the party was on board Spiers started his horses.

"Sometimes economy is extravagant," he remarked. "Where Ogilvie imagined himself prudent he was very rash. I wonder how the old fellow likes to meet the bill."

"After all, he is our neighbor, and you ought not to joke about his misfortune," said Helen. "Not long since we needed help."

"That is so, but we did not get much help from the Crossing. However, you know my modesty, and I'm satisfied to state that Larry's generous. Although his horses and men have had enough, he plunges into the fight for his parsimonious antagonist."

"The horses are yours," said Lawrence. "Send them along. Anyhow, I expect the generosity was Mrs. Spiers'. But for her, we might have stayed in bed."

Spiers laughed. "Helen is a charitable soul, but she's flesh and blood, and a fire or a function calls a woman. She likes to be where people are, and when something's going on I doubt if she would stop for a broken leg."

"The homestead is burning," said Helen. "Your business is to get there."

In front, but some distance off, a dark bluff on rising ground cut the party's view. All one saw was rolling smoke, pierced by dull reflections. The horses labored in sandy soil and Spiers left them alone. The load was heavy, and but for two or three hours' rest, the tired animals had since daybreak hauled his wheat across the stubble. At the top of the rise the ground was firm and sloped downhill, and the team went faster. In front, pale flashes leaped from the smoke. For a few moments vague buildings got distinct and then melted in the dark.

"Ogilvie's barn! The house would not burn like that," Spiers remarked. "He cut all the hay in his neighborhood and some in ours. I expect the stuff has settled and got compact."

Lawrence agreed. In the bad years, when the small farmers occupied rude log shacks and dug-outs in banks, few could afford a barn, but Ogilvie's was large and well built. His machines and hay must be properly

housed. Then Lawrence looked up and smiled. Perhaps excitement accounted for something; perhaps the men were moved unconsciously by the rattle of harness and roll of wheels, but one began to sing a song popular on the plains. Others joined and Spiers with ironical humor helped the jingling chorus:

"My Bonnie lies over the ocean,
My Bonnie lies over the sea— —"

Nobody's voice was musical and Lawrence frankly laughed. Roared by the big muscular harvesters, the sentimental verse was ridiculous. The horses, alarmed by the noise, tossed their heads and stretched their wearied legs; the wagon, rocking and jolting, crashed along the uneven trail.

At the homestead fence Spiers pulled up and tied his horses. Smoke rolled across the grass and frightened animals plunged about behind the wire. Ogilvie had got his horses from the stable, and since the building was near the fire that was something. The dark roof cut the leaping reflections, and then for a minute or two all one saw was smoke. Lawrence thought Spiers' surmise accurate; the wild hay, mown some time before, had consolidated and so far burned sullenly; but by and by the thick vapor rolled back and he stopped to look about.

At one spot two or three men crouched on the roofing shingles of the barn. Another at the top of a ladder hoisted a bucket; at the bottom, a row of indistinct figures, spaced a yard or two apart, went back into the gloom. In the background the light touched a tall windmill-pump, but the rods were quiet and the wheel did not revolve. It looked as if the men passed the buckets along the row from the old open well, and Lawrence thought their labor futile. Moreover, so far as he could see, nobody hurried.

The front of the barn was open, and a group rather languidly cut out and loaded up the unburned hay. The fellow who held the horses strained and swore; the others obviously did not bother much. Fifty yards off, another lot sat in the grass and smoked their pipes, as if they were an interested audience. Then the smoke got thick and the picture melted.

Pushing through the vapor, Lawrence collided with Ogilvie. A red flame leaped from the barn and he saw the old fellow's look was very grim.

"Hello! The concert party's yours?" said Ogilvie, and indicated the loafing group. "I suppose you'll join your friends and watch us from the stalls. You don't need to buy a ticket. The show is free."

"We thought we might help, but I doubt if you can save the barn," Lawrence replied in a quiet voice.

"I'm going to try. If I had a live gang, it wouldn't beat me, but these stiffs are scared to move and until I put up two dollars a head not a man would go."

"You have got a hosepipe. Why don't you start the windmill-pump?"

"The pump won't work. A crosshead's jambed, and the plunger-rod is bent. I don't know how she got bent, but I reckon to find out—"

Flame flickered round the barn and the men jumped from the hay. Two on the roof steered for the ladder and a bucket scattered the group below. Ogilvie swore and was going off, but Lawrence seized his arm and shouted for Heath.

"Mr. Ogilvie will give you some tools and a lantern, Tom. Try to start the pump."

They vanished and Lawrence turned to Spiers.

"The barn ought to come down. When the roof burns the fire might blow across to the stable and the house."

"Ogilvie will not let the barn go until he's forced," said Spiers. "I'll try to hustle the bucket gang. You might cut out the hay."

They got to work, and by and by Heath, dragging a big pipe, crawled across the stack where Lawrence was engaged.

"She's going," he said. "Perhaps we could get hose on top."

The hay did not reach the roof and they dragged the hose up its notched front and into the smoke. After a few moments they were forced to stop and lie in the warm, damp hay. Water splashed from the broken shingles and sometimes a flame leaped through the hole, but so far the wet roof did not burn. A few yards in front, the stack had sunk into a sort of red crater. For the most part, the consolidated stuff rather smouldered than burned, but when enough was gone for the air to penetrate the charring mass, Lawrence imagined all would blaze. The jet from the hose was slack and sometimes nearly stopped.

"She's not lifting much water," he said to Heath.

"I straightened pump rod," the other gasped. "A crosshead takes the thrust and shoe was biting on t' slide. I couldn't wrench her loose. Looks as if she'd got a knock from a big hammer."

Lawrence had imagined something like that, but in the meantime it did not matter much. His face was scorched and he choked in the pungent smoke. Besides, the feeble jet the hose threw rather provoked than checked the fire; the ascending steam perhaps helped the draught. There was not much use in his staying, and when the heat got insupportable he crawled

back to the spot where he had climbed the pile. His foot slipped across the edge and he was on the ground.

So far as he could distinguish, only Heath was about. The roof had begun to burn and showers of sparks fell upon the stable, which was not high. The wooden house was not far behind the stable, and the wind got fresh. Giving the hose to Heath, Lawrence looked for Ogilvie. Ogilvie was at the bottom of the ladder. The men had left the roof and Lawrence thought the old fellow meant to go up, but Spiers blocked the way.

"My slobs are scared," said Ogilvie in a scornful voice. "Let me pass, and if your bunch have any gall, hurry them along. I'll show the gang the roof will carry us."

"The roof will not carry you," Spiers rejoined firmly. "The barn is done with and you ought to concentrate on saving the other buildings. Isn't that so, Larry?"

Lawrence nodded. "I think Geoff is right, sir. When the shingles fall the fire will have room to burn, and the sparks and cinders will light the stable. If the stable burns, the blaze might reach the house. Your plan's to cut the main posts and bring down the barn. The wreck will burn, but the fire will be low and the sparks cannot travel far."

Ogilvie frowned. If he tried to save the barn, he risked the lot, but to sacrifice the costly building was hard. Lawrence waited rather scornfully and Spiers' eyes twinkled. Then Ogilvie shrugged.

"Sometimes one must cut one's loss. Can you get at the posts?"

"We must work from the inside and to reach three or four will be awkward. When you and George graded the road across the ravine you used giant powder. Have you some sticks left?"

Ogilvie nodded and started for the house. At the porch he signed the others to wait and vanished. A flame behind the stable drove back the gloom, and the light touched Lawrence's face. His skin was stained by soot and water and dotted by small burned spots. He heard steps and when he turned his head Margaret and Mrs. Spiers crossed the veranda. Margaret's clothes were wet, as if she had joined the bucket gang, and her eyes sparkled.

"You really are noble, Lawrence!" she remarked, and he did not know if she mocked. "Anyhow, I hope you like your triumph. Your men support you; all ours think about is to save their skin, and I cannot shame them to work. But perhaps you don't think it strange?"

Lawrence smiled deprecatingly. Margaret was highly strung.

"I certainly don't want to triumph. All I want is some dynamite and Mr. Ogilvie has gone for the box."

"You, of course, are practical," Margaret rejoined. "To philosophize is a woman's line! All the same, I expect you see your men's willingness is a reproach to us. One hates to be humiliated, particularly where the humiliation's logical; but I don't suppose you're interested. Why do you want the dynamite?"

"We are going to cut the barn posts."

"Then you must work inside the barn," said Margaret thoughtfully. "One will bore the holes; the other will fix the fuses and push in the powder sticks. Our men will not want to venture, but I must find you somebody to carry the magazine——"

She stopped, for Ogilvie came from the house. He gave Lawrence a small box and an auger, and they plunged down the steps. Ogilvie and some more carried the hose to the stable roof; Lawrence and Spiers went to the barn. The posts were thick spruce poles, but to bore the soft wood was not difficult and when Spiers used the auger Lawrence cautiously loaded the holes. Before they began he had bedded the fuses and detonators in the plastic dynamite.

When they advanced farther into the barn the smoke got very thick and sparks rained down in the hay through which they stumbled. Water ran from Lawrence's eyes and the stinging vapor cut his breath. If the sparks lighted the fuses he had placed, the barn might crash in flaming wreckage about his head, and so far the help Margaret promised to send had not arrived.

By and by, as he felt for the magazine, a stick of powder was pushed into his hand, and when the hole was loaded a beam from an electric torch touched the next post. Lawrence turned to see who carried the torch, but the light flashed across his face and dazzled his eyes. Some posts could not be reached, although he hoped, when the others went, the plates and stringers would pull them down. They bored the last in choking smoke and Lawrence acknowledged his helper's cool efficiency. Sparks showered about them and they carried a dangerous load, but when he wanted a fresh charge the stick was by his hand. Yet he could not see the fellow. All he saw was the electric beam that leaped to the proper spot.

"We are through! Warn Ogilvie to watch out, Geoff," he gasped, and pushed his invisible help. "Bring along your torch. We must light the fuses."

He imagined Spiers tried to seize the torch, but was baffled; anyhow he went off, and Lawrence and the other crept back along the wall. The small bright beam searched for the posts and stopped and Lawrence rubbed a match. The fuse sparkled and they went faster. At length, he touched his companion.

"The last! She'll go in two or three minutes. Get from under!"

They jumped for the barn's open front. Red flame curled about the hay, and Lawrence saw a dark slim figure a yard or two before him.

"Margaret!" he gasped and seized her arm. "The timbers may fall outward. Come on!"

They stopped by a fence and Margaret leaned against the wire. Her hat was gone and her breath was labored, but when she turned to Lawrence she laughed.

"Was I useful, Larry? Would you trust me another time?"

Lawrence thrilled. Her courage stirred him, but that was not all. He wondered whether Margaret, for example, would have carried the powder through the smoke for Spiers.

"I know your pluck, but I hate to think about your risking an explosion. You ought not to have done so."

Margaret gave him a baffling smile.

"Oh, well. I did not remark that you hesitated, although to save our barn was not your business. Then my father was saving the stable, and since the boys were afraid, I felt somebody must carry the magazine. Our habit is not to allow strangers to fight for us, and in a way perhaps I stood for my house."

"Ah," said Lawrence, "I know you do feel like that. There's the trouble, Margaret. But somehow you imply you had another object."

"I wonder——" said Margaret, carelessly, and stopped.

The barn roof tilted, broke, and sank, and for a few moments the gap was like a furnace mouth. Then the walls slanted inward and crashed. Cinders fell in glittering showers; the pillar of flame vanished, and then began to break through the glowing wreck. The blaze, however, was low, and Lawrence heard Ogilvie shout for his bucket gang. When he looked round, Margaret had vanished, and he went to search for Spiers.

CHAPTER XXIX

SPALDING'S RETURN

SPIERS' tired horses went slowly, and now the strain was over Lawrence felt that all was flat. The night was cold, his clothes were wet, and he was dull with fatigue. He hated to think he must soon resume his labor in the harvest field, but the thrashers would not wait and the noisy mill must be supplied.

Although his party had perhaps saved the homestead, Lawrence reflected with dry humor that their return was not at all triumphant. In fact, he did not think the others knew they went. The Ogilvies were not a hospitable lot, and Lawrence doubted if the old fellow had bothered to thank Spiers. He certainly had not thanked him, and when the fire was conquered the party, so to speak, stole away. Well, Lawrence had not reckoned on much gratitude, and Margaret had carried the magazine. In the smoke and raining sparks she had nobly seen him out. Her pride to some extent perhaps accounted for her rashness, but Lawrence imagined it did not account for all.

Where they cut the Fairholm trail Spiers stopped his team, and the hired men got down, but he did not let Lawrence go.

"After my rather unusual efforts, I cannot relax, and although I'm cold and tired, I don't want to go to bed," he said. "If you feel you cannot sleep, come on over to my place and Helen will give us some coffee. I'd like to show you a letter I got from a grain broker at Winnipeg."

Lawrence agreed, and by and by a window glimmered in the dark. Helen, with some surprise, remarked the dull illumination.

"It's queer," she said. "Somebody is carrying about the small hand-lamp."

After a few moments the light vanished, and when Spiers took the homestead trail Mrs. Heath crossed the field.

"A stranger got down an hour back, and tied his horse," she said. "He wouldn't tell me who he was, but he lighted his pipe and said he'd wait. As you wasn't expecting anybody, I thought I wouldn't go to bed."

Spiers sent off Heath with the horses, and the others went to the house. When they were at the door somebody asked:

"Who's with you, Geoff?"

"My wife and Lawrence Elliot."

"Then you can come right in," the other replied.

"Thanks! I believe the house is mine," said Spiers, and getting a light, exclaimed, "Spalding!"

Spalding shut a window at the back and gave Helen an apologetic smile.

"You see, I dassen't take chances, ma'am, and my horse is saddled. He has carried me thirty miles since sundown. I reckoned you'd sooner I came along in the dark."

"The plan has some advantages, Tom," Spiers agreed. "However, to begin with, we'll put your horse in the stable."

They went off and Helen frowned.

"It's too bad, Larry! We risked something for the man before, and now we're winning out, I wish he'd left Geoff alone!"

She rather impatiently put the kettle on the stove and got some plates and cups. After a few minutes the others came back and Lawrence studied Spalding. The fellow's clothes were good, he was fatter, and his pinched, hunted look was gone. In fact, although he had used some caution, Lawrence sensed returning confidence. Helen gave them coffee and slabs of cold pie, and Spalding began to narrate his adventures.

"When I got across to Dakota I hit a job at a livery-stable. The boss was a pretty good sort, and although the settlement wasn't a long ways from the frontier, I reckoned I'd stay. You see, if the police made good a claim for extradition, they'd get me anyhow. Besides, if I was near the boundary, I might get some news. When I quit, the red-coat boys had not found Hart."

"Nobody has yet done so," Spiers remarked.

"Sure they have not," said Spalding with a smile. "Now I'll tell you something! Hart isn't dead. He was at the livery-stable three or four days ago!"

"By George!" said Spiers, and although Helen said nothing, her relief was obvious.

Spalding turned and gave her a deprecating glance. "Now you see why I bothered you this time, ma'am. I had to get going, and my friends are roughnecks like me. They'd loan me a horse and cover my tracks, but that's not all I want. Well, your husband is sure a sport and Mr. Elliot's his partner. When you got to think up a tough proposition you can bet on Larry."

Lawrence thought Helen's face went red and he frowned. Spiers laughed.

"Comparisons are embarrassing, Tom. Suppose you go ahead?"

Spalding resumed his narrative. When he cleaned some harness one evening two strangers arrived at the livery-stable and ordered a team to go back three or four miles for their car. The trail was sandy and at a steep pitch she took the bank and something broke.

Lawrence nodded. Cars were not yet much used on the plains, and he knew prairie trails that bothered a good team. Spalding said the strangers were annoyed about it and one told the livery-man they had planned a trip to Canada. His voice puzzled Spalding, who imagined he had heard it before, but he was some distance off and when the boss called him the fellow had gone to the hotel. Spalding harnessed a team and he and the other went for the car.

While his companion experimented with the engine he saw some small illustrated folders on the seat and he picked up one. The pamphlet stated that a live man willing to invest a thousand dollars could soon get rich by speculating in a Canadian farm.

"We know the stuff," Spiers observed. "The Canadian Northwest is not yet a farmer's paradise, and when you cannot pay the interest the land company takes back the mortgaged block; but I imagine the Dakota men do not expect too much. The American farmer carries a heavy load."

Lawrence agreed and lighted a cigarette. He was not bored by the particulars Spalding rather generously supplied. As a rule, emigration is from Canada to the United States, but sometimes a sort of reflux from Dakota and Montana flows across the fertile prairie belt, and American settlers had begun to buy Canadian farms. Lawrence knew one or two; hard, sternly frugal men, whose wives were worn by household cares. Spalding's companion was obviously a real estate speculator and perhaps thought to work up a boom.

"Go on, Tom," he said. "I expect you made some inquiries about the fellows?"

Spalding had done so. The real estate house was a pretty good house and the hotel-keeper reckoned they were putting through a big deal in Manitoba. One fellow was very mad because they might be forced to use a team; it looked as if he did not want to remain across the boundary long. Anyhow, he had ordered the blacksmith to bust the blasted machine if he could not make her go.

Spalding's curiosity was excited, but the real estate men entertained some farmers in their room and he was forced to wait. All the same, he found out where they were going first, and at length the mended car rattled noisily up the street. Spalding was then at the pool-room, and he ran for the

hotel. The night was rather dark and when he was fifty yards off, the strangers got in the car. A beam from the lamps touched one's face, and Spalding pushed savagely through the group at the steps. The fellow was Hart.

He did not know if Hart saw him, but the car went ahead. Somebody pulled Spalding back and he was left to storm in the tossing dust. Now he asked Spiers to picture his emotions. Hart certainly was not dead. The brute had cheated him and sold his farm, and afterwards used their fight to help him make his get-away; Spalding began to think somebody in Canada, a creditor perhaps, was on the blamed hog's track, which might explain his unwillingness to be long on British soil. For all that, he was going to exploit some suckers who wanted to sell land, and very possibly to rob the American real estate house.

The livery-stable keeper was a good sort, and when Spalding gave him his confidence he loaned him a horse. In Canada Spalding sent back the animal and borrowed another, on which he started for Pine Creek. He did not know what he ought to do, but he reckoned Lawrence might put him wise. For one thing, Hart did not use his proper name and was a clever crook. Suppose he did rob his American partners and vanished another time? The police might not believe Spalding's romantic tale; all they would have to go upon was his statement that the land-agent was Hart. In fact, Hart must not be allowed to recross the frontier.

Well, the others knew all Spalding knew, and he was very tired. In the morning Lawrence might think up a plan. Spiers fixed a bed for him with the harvesters, and when he returned to the house lighted his pipe.

"We are very tired, but the gang starts at daybreak and to keep the mill supplied will occupy all my thinking powers. We ought perhaps to arrange our program before we go to bed. What are you going to do about it, Larry?"

"So far, I don't see much farther than Spalding sees," Lawrence replied. "To begin with, I believe Hart is a crook, and it's very possible he had an object for vanishing, although nothing indicates whom he feared. There's another thing that supports Spalding's surmise; when Hart thought he could not use the car he was savagely annoyed. Since he was keen to travel fast, the implication is, for him to stay long in Canada might be dangerous. Well, when he recrosses the frontier, to get on his track might baffle us, and in the meantime the police want Spalding. My notion is, we must try to find the man Hart is afraid to meet."

Helen looked up and her eyes sparkled.

"I believe I *know*— — Not long after the hail-storm, Ogilvie came across and talked about Geoff's lending somebody a horse. He tried to bully me, but I said nothing about Spalding and at length he asked if *Hart* had got the horse. I told him I hated the brute, I think he believed me, for he went. I thought it queer, but now I begin to see a light. Ogilvie did not mind if Spalding escaped; he wanted Hart and doubted if he was dead."

"By George!" said Spiers. "You have solved another puzzle. All the same, our line is not yet very obvious."

"Perhaps yours is not," Helen rejoined with a smile. "In the morning I'll go over to Ogilvie's. If Hart is in Canada, I think the old fellow will find him."

Lawrence got up. "Since you are going to help us, I mustn't meddle, and now I think about it, I ought to get home."

They let him go and he languidly crossed the harvest field. The long rows of stooks were melting, and when he reached the high wheat-bin he stopped. He was worse tired than he had thought, and when he sat down the straw was soft. For a few minutes he would weigh Spalding's narrative and Helen's conclusions.

To begin with, he had rather vaguely felt that the small farmer's independence was threatened. When he arrived Fairholm was mortgaged, Spalding's farm was sold, and Hart had meant to seize Pine Creek. Moreover, Lawrence knew others. . . . Methods were changing and pluck and muscle could not compete with gasolene and steel. To use modern machines, however, implied the support of a good bank-roll. In fact, it might imply the consolidation of capital and central management. But Lawrence's brain was dull and he had pondered something like this before. He did not want to indulge in abstract speculations about agricultural economy.

The important thing was, the new forces gave the rich man fresh power, and it looked as if somebody had planned to use the power for his neighbors' impoverishment. Well, Hart was greedy and unscrupulous, but Lawrence doubted if he had the talent and imagination a big consolidation scheme required. Yet he might be an agent, employed by another who plotted to crush the small men and seize their land. Lawrence's back was sinking in the straw and his head bent, but he suddenly braced up. Mrs. Spiers had solved the puzzle that had baffled him for long. Margaret's father was the man!

Well, Nature had beaten the plotter; the noble harvest had broken his power and given his victims freedom. Although they had pinched and sweated, now they triumphed.

But Margaret was Ogilvie's daughter and she was loyal. Lawrence began to see her pride sprang from humiliation. She doubted her father and was ashamed for him. Her lover's business was to give her liberty and break the old fellow's domination. Well, when Lawrence knew he had made good, he would try to do so.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LOSER PAYS

IN the morning Helen went to Ogilvie's and waited for some time on the shady porch. Ogilvie was in the field, but Margaret sent for him, and at length he arrived. Although Helen imagined him unwilling to be disturbed, his look was inscrutable and hers was not at all apologetic.

"I have got about ten minutes, ma'am," he said.

"Thank you," said Helen tranquilly. "Ten minutes is enough; but I doubt if you will go back to your harvesters afterward. Well, some time since you asked if my husband lent Hart a horse. It looked as if you knew he was not dead. Let's be frank. Did you really know?"

Ogilvie knitted his brows, but he did not hesitate.

"Spalding stopped Hart by the bridge, and it's pretty obvious he thought he knocked him out. I allow I was not quite sure."

"Perhaps you had some grounds to doubt!"

"Suppose you go ahead; I'll wait," said Ogilvie dryly.

"Then, you imagined Hart might be willing for you to think him dead? In fact, the fight gave him the chance he wanted to steal away?"

"You are clever, ma'am. One begins to see why Spiers makes good," Ogilvie remarked.

Helen's color rose. "Geoffrey is a better farmer than you imagine, but I want to talk about something else. Hart was afraid of you?"

"I guess he was; he robbed me," Ogilvie agreed.

Margaret had not left them and she looked up. "Then, you knew Spalding had not hurt Hart! For all that, you allowed the police to search for him?"

"That is so. I calculated Spalding had made the frontier, and if Hart reckoned he had fooled me, why I'd sit tight. By and by he might take a chance; and then I'd get him. But it has nothing to do with you. Go on, Mrs. Spiers."

Margaret looked straight in front. There was no use in talking and she knew her father's ruthlessness, but when she pictured all the hunted man had borne she rebelled. Although Helen felt some pity for the girl, she dared not

sympathize. Margaret was very proud and the grim old fellow was her father. Perhaps his not sending her away was typical. When Ogilvie fixed his line he did not mind who disapproved.

"Very well," said Helen, and her glance was as stern as his. "Hart has taken a chance, and I might perhaps put you on his track. I don't yet know if I will."

"Then I wait your proposition."

"You must undertake to leave my husband and the Elliots alone. You mustn't cut our wood and hay; you mustn't meddle with anything that's ours."

Ogilvie smiled. "Suppose I agreed? Are you not afraid I might go back on you afterwards?"

"No," said Helen. "You are very hard, but I don't think you cheat."

"Then, so long as you are at Pine Creek, I'll agree not to bother your husband and your friends, although I doubt if Larry needs your help. He is not a fool. Now, if you can trust me, you can go ahead."

Helen told him all she had learned from Spalding. When she stopped, Ogilvie nodded.

"I guess I've got the thief! However, we must get to work and I want you to lend Spalding a good horse. He must ask for me at the settlement at six o'clock. I'll expect him then. Thank you, ma'am!"

He got on his horse, and riding across the field, shouted for his foreman. Helen looked about, but Margaret had vanished and she did not wait. She rather thought she knew why Margaret stole away, but in the meantime her business was to see Spalding started for the settlement.

Spalding went, and two days afterward he and Ogilvie and two mounted policemen stopped at a little wooden town. Spalding led the party and Ogilvie imagined he had at the lonely farms they passed got news the occupants might not have given the police. All the traffic across the frontier is not recorded by the customs officers. When the group approached the settlement the horses had had enough, and the light was going, but the marks of automobile tires were distinguishable in the black gumbo dust.

Near the first small wooden houses the trail forked, and one branch went south to the frontier, across broken, wooded country. The ground rose, and in the distance dark bluffs loomed against the sky. Spalding knew the trail was sandy and the slopes were steep. The other fork joined the wheel-torn street, at the end of which the hotel windows glimmered.

When the party got down a battered car was at the steps. Spalding knew the car, and he signed the police corporal, who sent for the ostler. The hotel

was the common, wooden, prairie type. A veranda occupied the front, and the second-floor windows opened on its roof. A light burned behind one upper window, but the shades were down, and the other windows in the row were dark.

The ostler admitted that the men the police inquired about had stopped for food and two or three more had joined them.

"I reckon you can get out to the stables from the other side of the house?" said the corporal, and when the ostler agreed, ordered his companion to tie the horses and watch the other door. "Now, Mr. Ogilvie, we'll look for our man. I guess he's in the room upstairs," he resumed.

They went up the steps, as fast as possible, for the troopers' arrival had excited some curiosity and the veranda chairs were occupied. Nobody dared meddle with the horses, but Spalding stopped in the passage commanding the entrance. The others climbed the stairs and at the top the corporal pushed back a door.

The room was a sort of show-room for commercial travellers, but an inner door apparently opened to a bedroom; the corporal had noted the doors in the passage and knew one could not get out that way. Four or five men were smoking and talking, and one studied some documents. Hart, a long cigar in his mouth, turned over a thick roll of paper currency. When Ogilvie came in he jumped to his feet; and then, seeing the corporal, recoiled a few steps and leaned against the wall. His eyelids flickered and the color left his skin. Another of the group got up noisily and gave the young officer an angry look.

"The room is ours. We are American citizens, transacting business in the town, and the Canadian police have nothing to do with us."

"I expect that is so, but we have something to do with the gentleman you brought along," rejoined the corporal. "Walthew Hart, I hold a warrant for your arrest——"

"On what charge?"

"You're entitled to know," said the corporal, and pulled out the document.

He faced the light and when he began to read he turned his head. Hart moved a little, and leaned against the post of the inner door, as if for support. His head was bent and his hand shook, and Ogilvie imagined his nerve was gone. The others were quiet and concentrated on the corporal's reading. When he stopped, an American turned to Ogilvie.

"You reckon to make your case good in court?"

"Sure," said Ogilvie. "Are you interested?"

All were interested and the American glanced at one.

"For the sum of five thousand dollars you agreed, when full payment was made, you'd transfer to my company section forty occupied by the Nelson and Melbourne farms. Hart negotiated the deal."

"Then, I guess you got stung," Ogilvie remarked. "The Nelson three-twenty-acre block is plastered all she'll carry, and if you take the farm, you have got to take the debt. I don't know about Melbourne, but Nelson doesn't meet his bills."

"Our agent looked up the register——" the American replied and stopped.

"Hart?" said Ogilvie, with a dry smile. "Well, I guess he's plausible; the fellow cheated me. All the same, the game was risky, and the loser pays."

The corporal signed him to be quiet and faced the others.

"If you have a fresh charge against my prisoner, you must look up the division superintendent. My job's to carry out the warrant and we must be going."

The American frowned, and his companion turned angrily to an embarrassed Canadian opposite. For a moment nobody bothered about Hart; and then a crashing report shook the room, the shattered lamp-chimney rattled on the table, and all was dark. The corporal jumped for the inside door, but the panel jarred his shoulder. Two others flung themselves against the wood and the broken door went back.

"Come on!" one shouted. "The d—— crook has got away with our wad!"

The corporal drew his pistol. He knew Hart could not reach the passage, and they began to feel about, for the cheated real estate men were willing to risk a shot. After a few moments the corporal found the window. The frame was open behind the shade, and an engine rattled in the street. People on the veranda shouted, and the corporal ran for the stairs.

When he reached the street the car had vanished. The engine's throb was getting faint, but he thought he heard another noise, as if somebody rode in hot pursuit. The ostler had loosed the horses, and the constable from the other side of the house, pushing through the group, seized his and melted in the dark.

"Your man has beat it; he came down across the roof," a lounger remarked. "Another fellow went after him, but if he reckons to catch the auto he has got some gall."

"Spalding!" said the corporal, and jumping up, let his horse go.

Spalding was four or five hundred yards in front. Waiting in the ground-floor passage, he heard a pistol shot and a noise on the veranda roof. It looked as if Hart had cheated the police, but Spalding, running for the door, collided with the startled loungers outside. When he leaped down the steps Hart had started the car, and all Spalding saw was rolling dust. He got his horse, but when he was mounted half a minute had gone.

The horse was tired and he did not imagine he could overtake the car. He, however, knew the frontier trail, and the broken ground two or three miles off was pierced by ravines and dotted by thick bluffs. The prairie folk called the wooded ridge the *Mountain*. A stranger might get entangled and the steep, loose banks were awkward for an automobile.

Where the trail curved round a sandy belt Spalding took the scorched grass. He rather thought he heard horses' feet in the dark behind, but he did not turn his head. He had got away before the police and he meant to follow Hart as long as his horse could carry him. When he rejoined the trail he imagined the car was not very far in front. The sandy soil was soft and he had cut out a loop. The throb of the laboring engine had got distinct and by and by a silver beam flickered across a bluff. That was something, for Spalding knew Hart would not use his lights unless he were forced.

Pushing on as fast as possible, he calculated. The car must keep the main trail, which followed the top of a curving ravine, but a man on horseback might shove across the ridge and rejoin the road on the other side. The drawback was, the main trail forked, and if Hart knew the Mountain, he might get away. All the same, something must be risked; Spalding's horse would soon feel the strain, but the car would not.

He steered for the woods, and for a time scrambled up and down sandy hills and pushed through thin birch groves. When he reached a high spot commanding the trail he stopped and got his breath. Where the stirrup leathers rubbed, the horse was white and Spalding's skin was wet by sweat.

A hundred yards off, below the spot he occupied, a thick bluff loomed vaguely in the dark. The night was calm and Spalding heard an automobile engine although he could not locate the noise. If the car was in front, Hart was gone for good, and Spalding set his mouth and waited. After a few moments he thought he heard a faint measured beat. It looked as if the police had kept the trail, and Spalding knew their horses were good. The Royal North-West were a stubborn lot and so long as their man was in front they would not stop.

Then bright reflections pierced the wood, and Spalding used the quirt. The horse plunged down the hill, and scorched grass and scattered birches shone in silver light. The trail through the wood went uphill, and the noise

indicated that the car labored up the sandy, wheel-torn incline. Spalding, going down obliquely, hoped to cut the trail before Hart passed the spot. Yet he did not know; the chances balanced, and a few seconds might tip the beam.

Dazzling light enveloped him, and he rode savagely for the tossing lamps. When he was two or three yards off he thought the dark figure behind the wheel turned. The fellow did not mean to stop, and Spalding wondered whether he tried to pull his gun. Sliding his foot from the stirrup, he swerved his horse and jumped. He rather thought a pistol flashed, but all he really knew was he was on the running-board.

His fist crashed on the other's jaw, and Hart let go the wheel. The car swerved and went up the bank; Spalding climbed across the door and he and Hart fell against the wind-shield. Then the car struck a birch, the glass smashed, and they were on the floor, but Spalding was on top and the other's legs were jambed under the seat. Spalding sat upon his chest and knocked his head against the steering-post.

Three or four minutes afterward the police arrived, and Spalding shouted for the corporal.

"I've got your man, and maybe you're lucky I didn't knock him out for good."

They pulled Hart from the car, and he sat down limply on the running-board.

"But for this fellow I'd have beaten Ogilvie and you," he said. "Well, I'm not going to make trouble. When I recrossed the frontier I took some chances and now I've got to pay."

The corporal said nothing. He searched the car for Hart's pistol, and Spalding went off to look for his horse.

CHAPTER XXXI

LAWRENCE'S TRIUMPH

SUPPER was over at Fairholm and Lawrence in an easy-chair stretched his legs. Dusk was falling and the evenings began to be cold, but the cordwood snapped cheerfully in the stove and after his ride from the settlement he was glad to rest. Geoffrey and Mrs. Spiers had come across for supper, but they talked to George and Millicent, and Lawrence brooded tranquilly.

A wide belt of stubble streaked the prairie, for the rows of stooks had melted and the last were indistinct behind the strawpile bin. Dark had stopped the thrashers, although a faint smoke-plume floated across the field, and at daybreak the engine would throb and the loaded wagons crash through the straw. In a few days, however, the gang would haul away the mill and the Fairholm teams would carry the wheat to the settlement. Already some was gone, and Lawrence recaptured a picture he had studied four or five hours since.

Smoke and dust rolled about the elevator tower, wheels rattled behind the iron walls, and the street was blocked by loaded wagons. Smoke-plumes leaped up explosively and a bell tolled where the yard-engine pushed along the big freight-cars. On the side-track, couplings clashed and wheels began to groan. A giant locomotive's snorts pierced the confused noise and the cars clanged across the switches. Black smoke blew across shabby houses and plunging horses, and the half-mile wheat-train pulled out for the Lakes.

The picture was moving and Lawrence thrilled. His wheat was on board and he had bought every bushel by the sweat of his body and anxious thought. He felt the locomotive bells and throbbing wheels struck a triumphant note. On the plains one fought for all one got and the fight was stern; but in the whistle that rolled back along the rails he heard the call of victory. . . .

George got a light, the stooks and gray plain faded, and Lawrence listened to the others' talk.

"My red Fyffe is particularly good and the Winnipeg mills will take the lot," said Spiers. "At length I think we have made it, but sometimes I was doubtful and I admit Helen is accountable for my getting there. Then you

and Larry gave me a useful boost that might have cost you something, because if I had gone broke, you must have stood for a serious loss."

"Shucks!" said Lawrence. "We were forced to link up; the coöperation helped us both."

"Oh, well, at the beginning we were up against a particularly mean combine," Spiers agreed. "In fact, when you talked about a sort of plot to seize and consolidate the small farms your judgment was sound. For all that, I was puzzled. Hart had not the qualities one needed to carry out the ambitious scheme, and I did not see who supported him, until Helen spotted the man. However, it's now obvious the brute was Ogilvie's agent."

"That is so. I expect he'll go to jail," said George.

"He's held for trial, and if I were a crook, Ogilvie is not the man I'd try to rob. Anyhow, we know who meant to break us and Helen declares he's beaten."

"Ogilvie agreed to leave us alone. After all, his word goes," said Helen, and gave Lawrence a sympathetic glance. "Margaret, of course, had nothing to do with his plans and when she found out I expect she got a nasty knock. She must not be blamed for her father's greediness; Margaret is generous."

"You are a good friend, Mrs. Spiers," Lawrence remarked.

Helen smiled and signed her husband.

"Geoffrey, we have stopped some time."

They went off soon afterward and Millicent turned to Lawrence.

"We can get the house at the settlement when we like and as soon as the wheat is at the elevators you will not need George. Lamond wants to know when he will join him."

"I hate to let you go and I'll wish you back."

"One likes to be wanted," said Millicent, smiling. "For all that, Fairholm will not long be lonely."

"I wonder——" said Lawrence in a moody voice and, for he thought Millicent had an object for her remarks, resumed: "Since the beginning I was up against Ogilvie. Margaret is proud, and I doubt if she'd be willing to marry her father's antagonist. Until the crop was harvested, I dared not urge her. Ogilvie is rich, but my reserves were gone, and when the wheat ripened a frosty night might break me. I felt I must wait until the grain was on the cars."

"The wheat will soon be shipped and you cannot wait much longer," Millicent rejoined. "Margaret is proud, and perhaps she thought your hesitation strange. In a few days she goes to Montreal for the winter."

"Then I must risk it. If she goes, she must first refuse me," said Lawrence in a resolute voice.

Millicent kissed him. "Carry her away, Lawrence. One likes a determined lover, and Margaret is the girl I chose for you. If I know she rules at Fairholm, I'll be content."

She went off and Lawrence's mouth curved in a crooked smile, for he resolved to try her plan.

In the morning and all the afternoon he was wanted in the harvest field, but the days were short and when tranquil evening fell he started for the Crossing. He went very soberly and his mouth was tight, for he felt the Ogilvie homestead was something like an enemy's camp. By and by he stopped and his heart beat. In the dusk a girl on horseback crossed the plain, and he knew Margaret's figure. Cutting her line to the farm, he seized the bridle and stopped her horse.

"Why did you not let me know you were going to Montreal?" he asked.

Margaret gave him a baffling glance. "For one thing, I had not much grounds to think you'd be interested."

"That's ridiculous!" said Lawrence. "As a rule, you're not afraid to face things. Let's be honest. When I was a boy I was your lover——"

"One forgets," said Margaret. "When you came back to Fairholm you did not know me."

"The night was dark. Then, you see, in England I had pictured my plucky little, hot-tempered pal. Somehow I didn't reckon on her growing up —growing strangely beautiful——"

"You stated something like that, and I doubted if you were very nice," Margaret remarked. "However, now I think about it, the night was stormy, and you rather obstinately concentrated on seeing I did not cross the log."

"I don't want to joke," said Lawrence. "After all, I expect you know my reason for staying at Fairholm."

"One tries to be modest, Larry. Besides, your reserve was rather inscrutable," Margaret rejoined.

Lawrence gave her a crooked smile. "My dear, I doubt if I was ever inscrutable to you; but perhaps some reserve was justified. Your father was not my friend; I think he hated my father and he tried to break George. You were rich. All I had was a sum I borrowed from my English relation and I risked it all. If I lost the crop, Fairholm must go. Before I claimed you, I must try to justify the plunge I wanted you to take. Besides, I wanted an argument Mr. Ogilvie might weigh——"

"Then, you calculated on his refusing?"

"That is so, Margaret. I would sooner satisfy him, but it's not important. If he is obstinate, and you are not daunted, I'll carry you off."

"Your habit is not to take the easy line, but, after all, one fights when one is forced. In the meantime, perhaps you are not afraid to go to the Crossing and meet my father?"

"I'll go now," said Lawrence, and started the horse.

Although he thought Margaret smiled, she said nothing, and they silently crossed the plain. Ogilvie was at the corral fence and when Lawrence stopped the horse he looked up.

"Well," he said dryly. "Did you reckon my gang had lighted another fire?"

"I did not, sir. I have asked Margaret to marry me and she thought you ought to know. In fact, I suppose you ought——"

"You have got some gall," Ogilvie remarked. "Well, I guess her mother will be interested. Come on to the house."

He went in front, and when they went in Mrs. Ogilvie gave him a disturbed glance.

"Mr. Elliot wants to marry Margaret," he remarked with ironical calm. "Larry's a fastidious Britisher and he allowed he ought to put us wise."

Mrs. Ogilvie's color came and went, but her look got resolute.

"If Margaret agrees, you mustn't meddle. When I married you my folks were mad, but you were the man I wanted and I didn't hesitate. For all the old folks' warnings, we made out. Lawrence is the sort I'd like my girl to marry and he has shown you he can run a farm; Margaret has your cleverness, and although she's not as hard, they may go farther than we have gone. Anyhow, she's entitled to choose her husband and must not be bullied. When one gets old one hates trouble, but she's my daughter——"

"She's yours and mine," said Ogilvie. "Folks trust and love her mother, and it looks as if she'd inherited some qualities I haven't got." He turned to Margaret. "Well, the young fellow wants you, and although his bank-roll is not large, I allow he can support a wife who's willing to pinch and work. What are you going to do about it?"

Margaret blushed like a rose, but her look was proud.

"Had Larry been beaten and lost his farm, I would have married him and gone where he went. So far, however, he has won, but if the years in front are hard, I'll try to see him out."

"Then it's fixed," said Ogilvie. "Your man's not my type, Margaret, and I guess all his highbrow notions are not economical, but he's got some sand and I admit he's white." He turned to Lawrence. "The girl's my daughter. I don't want to boast, but when I married her mother I was a sick store clerk and now the Crossing is the best farm on the plain. Well, my wife helped me make good and I guess yours will do as much. You start where we did not and take an easier trail, but if you hit a rough piece, she will help you along."

Lawrence's thanks were awkward; the old fellow was kinder than he had thought. Mrs. Ogilvie kissed him, and when he left the homestead he was altogether satisfied.

In the morning Ogilvie went to Fairholm and sent a harvester for George. Millicent received him and he gave her a queer smile.

"My aim's not to bother you and I hope our disputes are done with," he said, and when George arrived went on: "Your brother is to marry Margaret and we must try to fix things for the young folks."

"All I can do is to allow Lawrence to take the farm," George rejoined. "To some extent, you are responsible for my poverty."

"Maybe so. Anyhow, Margaret's ambitious and Larry's not a hick. I'd like them to start with all they need to help them go ahead."

"Then, you approve the marriage?" Millicent inquired.

"I don't grumble," said Ogilvie dryly. "When you get old, Miss Elliot, you don't look for fresh trouble, and perhaps I lose my vim, because not long since three people have beaten me; your brother, Mrs. Spiers, and Hart, who goes to jail. Anyhow, I can take a knock, and when I saw Larry wanted Margaret I thought I'd try him out. His reckoning me his antagonist was the sort of joke I like. You see, the girl is all I've got, she has talents, and all that's mine is hers. I meant her to be rich and Nature planned the Crossing and Fairholm blocks for one big farm. Consolidation implies prosperity; you have got to use economical rules."

"In Canada, the small man claims an equal chance," George remarked.

"Maybe so," said Ogilvie, and his eyes twinkled when he resumed: "Your brother's blood is red and he has got some sand. I guess he reckoned he beat me; but I don't know—— I wanted Fairholm for Margaret and *it's going to be hers*. Well, we must draft something for the lawyer, and since you can't help, why, I'll put up the wad."

He asked for paper and got to work, and when he left the homestead Millicent frankly admitted he was much less hard than she had thought.

A few days afterward, Margaret and Lawrence one evening started for Pine Creek. The thrashers had hauled away their mill, the stooked sheaves had vanished, and only the tall strawpile bins broke the sweep of stubble. Harvest was over, Indian summer was nearly gone, and in the melting sunset all was strangely calm. After the long strain, Lawrence was willing to indulge a soothing reaction, although he knew when day broke he and his teamsters must start for the railroad. Margaret was happily quiet. Sometimes when one is happy one does not want to talk.

Geoffrey and Helen Spiers occupied the bench by the homestead door; Heath and an Ontario harvester smoked their pipes in the grass. Nobody else was about, and when Lawrence glanced at the empty field Spiers smiled.

"The last bushel is in the bin and the thrasher gang is gone. Helen made the boys a feast and until I get back from the settlement she and Mrs. Heath must starve. I imagined Heath and the other could hold out for three or four days."

"Sometimes one likes to be royally extravagant; I rather think one ought," Helen rejoined. "Besides, they were a first-class lot and when they went off the boss was very nice——"

Lawrence knew a thrashing boss is not as a rule polite, and he imagined Mrs. Spiers had captured the gang. She, however, turned to Margaret.

"Then you have not started for Montreal?"

Margaret blushed and Lawrence smiled.

"When Margaret goes she goes with me. As soon as the wheat is off the farm we start."

Helen kissed Margaret and gave Lawrence her hand.

"Oh, I am glad," she said. "Lawrence helped us, and I wanted you to marry him. For his sake and yours, I hoped he could persuade you."

"You helped us all," said Margaret in a gentle voice, for the other's frank sincerity touched her.

"The new combine's a strong combine," Spiers remarked. "I see Larry going far, and his habit is to carry his friends along. I have cause to know he's not daunted by an awkward load."

"We must have another feast," said Helen. "Larry has the proper wife, we have reaped a splendid harvest, and the tide has turned. Not long since I was a frightened stranger; now I've got all I hoped for, I'm proud and thankful and I want to celebrate——"

"One reaps where one sows," said Spiers quietly, and then saw Helen had turned her head.

Two Royal North-West troopers took the homestead trail and stopped their horses a few yards off.

"Hart goes to jail, and Spalding was thanked in court," said the corporal. "We thought you'd like to know, Mrs. Spiers. You bluffed us about the horse your husband lent."

"Oh, well, I knew Spalding was not the proper man," said Helen in an apologetic voice.

The young fellow laughed. "That is so; I reckon our officers knew and we hunted Spalding to help us get the other. Anyhow, we don't grumble. You gave us a bully breakfast and we thought you a sport. Well, we're for the settlement. Your servants, ma'am!"

They saluted her like an officer, the big horses took the trail, and Spiers, smiling, said in a quiet voice, "All are your servants, Helen the Conqueror."

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 *Pine Creek Ranch*, by Harold Binloss.]