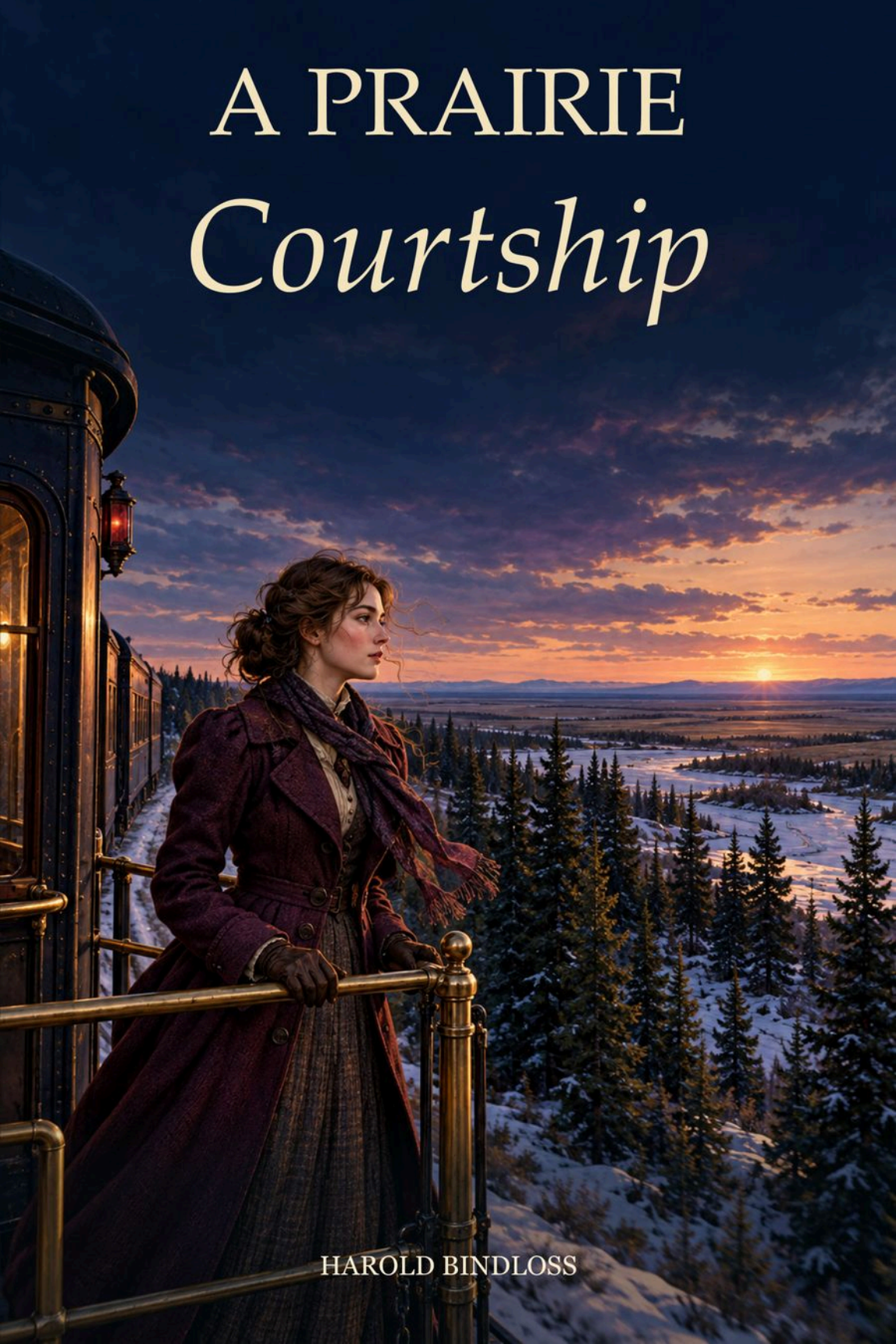
A PRAIRIE *Courtship*

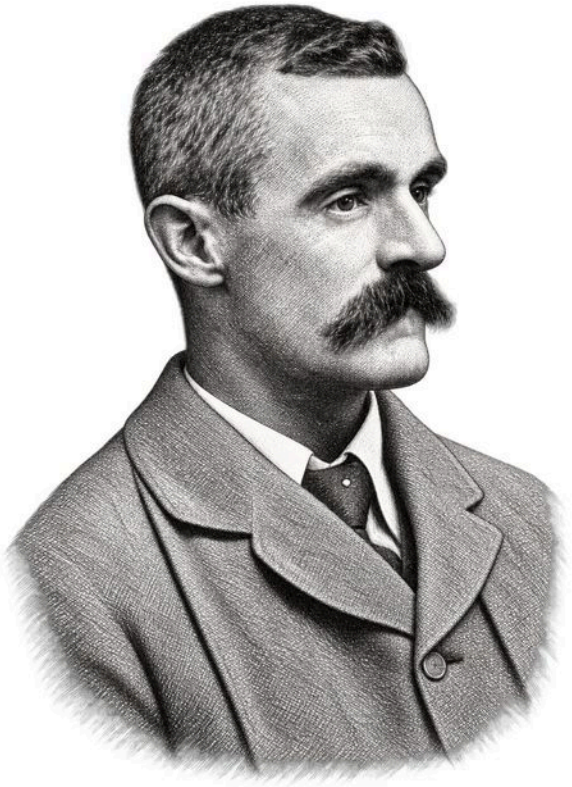


HAROLD BINDLOSS

A Prairie Courtship

Harold Bindloss

THE AUTHOR



Harold Bindloss

1866 - 1945

AI-created interpretation after photograph published in The Bookman, New York, March 1909.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harold Bindloss

Harold Bindloss was an English novelist, born in Liverpool in 1866. Travel and work took him to places including western Canada and Africa before he established his literary career. These experiences supplied settings and practical concerns that recur throughout his extensive body of popular fiction.

After returning to Britain in the 1890s, he turned to journalism and books. *In the Niger Country*, published in 1898, drew on his African experiences. Fiction increasingly occupied his attention, and many of his novels concerned settlement, work and adventure in the Canadian West.

Titles such as *Alton of Somasco*, *A Damaged Reputation* and *Delilah of the Snows* belong to this substantial output. Bindloss brought distant landscapes to readers through stories of ambition, difficulty and personal relationships. He continued writing for many years and died in 1945.

Readers can follow the practical arrangements that make an adventure possible: finding work, securing supplies, travelling or meeting an obligation. These details often test a character more revealingly than a statement of principle. The stories also invite attention to their historical assumptions about land and settlement. Considering whose experiences are described, and whose remain outside the narrative, adds perspective to the accounts of opportunity and endurance.

Biographical references: BC BookWorld and contemporary literary records. Portrait source: photograph published in The Bookman, New York, March 1909. Full source records retained in the edition archive.

CHAPTER I
A COLD WELCOME

It was falling dusk and the long emigrant train was clattering, close-packed with its load of somewhat frowsy humanity, through the last of the pine forest which rolls westward north of the Great Lakes toward the wide, bare levels of Manitoba, when Alison Leigh stood on the platform of a lurching car. A bitter wind eddied about her, for it was early in the Canadian spring, and there were still shattered fangs of ice in the slacker pools of the rivers. Now and then a shower of cinders that rattled upon the roof whirled down about her and the jolting brass rail to which she clung was unpleasantly greasy, but the air was, at least, gloriously fresh out there and she shrank from the vitiated atmosphere of the stove-heated car. She had learned during the past few years that it is not wise for a young woman who must earn her living to be fastidious, but one has to face a good many unpleasantnesses when traveling Colonist in a crowded train.

A gray sky without a break in it hung low above the ragged spires of the pines; the river the track skirted, and presently crossed upon a wooden bridge, shone in the gathering shadow with a wan, chill gleam; and the bare rocky ridges that flitted by now and then looked grim and forbidding. Indeed, it was a singularly desolate landscape, with no touch of human life in it, and Alison shivered as she gazed at it with a somewhat heavy heart and weary eyes. Her head ached from want of sleep and several days of continuous jolting; she was physically worn out, and her courage was slipping away from her. She knew that she would need the latter, for she was beginning to realize that it was a rather hazardous undertaking for a delicately brought up girl of twenty-four to set out to seek her fortune in western Canada.

Leaning upon the greasy rails, she recalled the events which had led her to decide on this course, or, to be more accurate, which had forced it on her. Until three years ago, she had led a sheltered life, and then her father, dying suddenly, had left his affairs involved. This she knew now had been the fault of her aspiring mother, who had spent his by no means large income in an attempt to win a

prominent position in second-rate smart society, and had succeeded to the extent of marrying her other daughter well. The latter, however, had displayed very little eagerness to offer financial assistance in the crisis which had followed her father's death.

In the end Mrs. Leigh was found a scantily paid appointment as secretary of a woman's club, while Alison was left to shift for herself, and it came as a shock to the girl to discover that her few capabilities were apparently of no practical use to anybody. She could paint and could play the violin indifferently well, but she had not the gift of imparting to others even the little she knew. A graceful manner and a nicely modulated voice appeared to possess no market value, and the unpalatable truth that nothing she had been taught was likely to prove more than a drawback in the struggle for existence was promptly forced on her.

She faced it with a certain courage, however, for her defects were the results of her upbringing and not inherent in her nature, and she forthwith sought a remedy. In spite of her mother's protests, her sister's husband was induced to send her for a few months' training to a business school, and when she left the latter there followed a three-years' experience which was in some respects as painful as it was varied.

Her handwriting did not please the crabbed scientist who first engaged her as amanuensis. Her second employer favored her with personal compliments which were worse to bear than his predecessor's sarcastic censure; and she had afterward drifted from occupation to occupation, sinking on each occasion a little lower in the social scale. In the meanwhile her prosperous sister's manner became steadily chillier; her few influential friends appeared desirous of forgetting her; and at last she formed the desperate resolution of going out to Canada. Nobody, however, objected to this, and her brother-in-law, who was engaged in commerce, sent her a very small check with significant readiness, and by some means secured her a position as typist and stenographer in the service of a business firm in Winnipeg.

For the last three days she had lived on canned fruit and crackers in the train, not because she liked that diet, but because the charges at the dining-stations were beyond her means. She had now five dollars and a few cents in her little shabby purse. That, however, did

not much trouble her, for she would reach Winnipeg on the morrow, and she supposed that she would begin her new duties immediately. She was wondering with some misgivings what her employers would be like, when a girl of about her own age appeared in the doorway of the vestibule.

"Aren't you coming in? It's getting late, and I'm almost asleep," she said.

Alison turned, and with inward repugnance followed her into the long car. It was brilliantly lighted by big oil lamps, and it was undoubtedly warm, for there was a stove in the vestibule, but the frowsy odors that greeted her were almost overwhelming after the fresh night air. An aisle ran down the middle of the car, and already men and women and peevish children were retiring to rest. There was very little attempt at privacy, and a few wholly unabashed aliens were partially disrobing wherever they could find room for the operation. Some lay down upon boards pulled forward between two seats, some upon little platforms that let down by chains from the roof, and the car was filled with the complaining of tired children and a drowsy murmur of voices in many languages.

Alison sat down and glanced round at the passengers who had not yet retired. In one corner were three young Scandinavian girls, fresh-faced and tow-haired, of innocent and wholesome appearance, going out, as they had unblushingly informed her in broken English, to look for husbands among the prairie farmers. She was afterward to learn that such marriages not infrequently turned out well. Opposite them sat a young Englishman with a hollow face and chest, who could not stand his native climate, and had been married, so Alison had heard, to the delicate girl beside him the day before he sailed. They were going to Brandon on the prairie, and had not the faintest notion what they would do when they got there.

Close by were a group of big, blonde Lithuanians, hardened by toil, in odoriferous garments; a black-haired Pole; a Jewess whose beauty had run to fatness; and her greasy, ferret-eyed husband. Farther on a burly Englishman, who had evidently laid in alcoholic refreshment farther back down the line, was crooning a maudlin song. There was, however, an interruption presently, for a man's head was thrust out from behind a curtain which hung between the roof and one of the platforms above.

"Let up!" he said.

The song rose a little louder in response, and a voice with a western intonation broke in.

"Throw a boot at the hog!"

"No, sir," replied the man above; "he might keep it; and I guess they're most used to heaving bottles where he comes from."

The words were followed by a scuffling sound which seemed to indicate that the speaker was fumbling about the shelf for something, and then he added:

"This will have to do. Are you going to sleep down there, sonny?"

The Englishman paused to inform anybody who cared to listen that he would go to sleep when he wanted and that it would take a train-load of Canadians like the questioner, whose personal appearance he alluded to in vitriolic terms, to prevent him from singing when he desired; after which he resumed the maudlin ditty. Immediately there was a rustle of snapping leaves, as a volume of the detective literature that is commonly peddled on the trains went hurtling across the car. It struck the woodwork behind the singer with a vicious thud, and he stood up unsteadily.

"Now," he said, "I mean to show you what comes of insulting me."

He moved forward a pace or two, fell against a seat in an attempt to avoid a toddling child, and, grabbing at his disturber's platform, endeavored to clamber up to it. The chains rattled, and it seemed that the light boards were bodily coming down when he felt with one hand behind the curtain, part of which he rent from its fastenings. Then his hand reappeared clutching a stockinged foot, and a bronzed-faced man in shirt and trousers dropped from a neighboring resting-place.

"You get out!" thundered the Englishman. "Teach you to be civil when I've done with him. Gimme time, and I'll settle the lot of you, and the sausages"—he presumably meant the Lithuanians—"afterward."

The man above contrived to kick him in the face with his unembarrassed foot, but he held on persistently to the other, and a general fracas appeared imminent when the conductor strode into the car. The latter had very little in common with the average

English railway guard, for he was a sharp-tongued, domineering autocrat, like most of his kind.

"Now," he demanded, "what's this circus about?"

The Englishman informed him that he had been insulted, and firmly intended to wipe it out in blood. The conductor looked at him with a faint grim smile.

"Go right back to your berth, and sleep it off," he advised.

He stood still, collectedly resolute, clothed with authority, and the Englishman hesitated. He had doubtless pluck enough, and his blood was up, but he had also the innate, ingrained capacity for obedience to duly constituted power, which is not as a rule a characteristic of the Westerner. Then the conductor spoke again:

"Get a move on! I'll dump you off into the bush if you try to make trouble here."

It proved sufficient. The singer let the captive foot go and turned away; and when the conductor left, peace had settled down upon the clattering car. The little incident had, however, an unpleasant effect on Alison, for this was not the kind of thing to which she had been accustomed. It was a moment or two before she turned to her companion.

"I shall be very glad to get off the train to-morrow, Milly—and I suppose you will be quite as pleased," she said.

The girl blushed. She was young and pretty in a homely fashion, and had informed Alison, who had made her acquaintance on the steamer, that she was to be married to a young Englishman on her arrival at Winnipeg.

"Yes," she replied; "Jim will be there waiting; I got a telegram at Montreal. It's four years since I've seen him."

The words were simple, but there was something in the speaker's voice and eyes which stirred Alison to half-conscious envy. It was not that marriage in the abstract had any attraction for her, for the thought of it rather jarred on her temperament, and it was, perhaps, not altogether astonishing that she had of late been brought into contact chiefly with the seamy side of the masculine character. Still, lonely and cast adrift as she was, she envied this girl who had somebody to take her troubles upon his shoulders and shelter her, and she was faintly stirred by her evident tenderness for the man.

"Four years!" she said reflectively. "It's a very long time."

"Oh," declared Milly, "it wouldn't matter if it had been a dozen now. He's the same—only a little handsomer in his last picture. Except for that, he hasn't changed a bit—I read you some of his letters on the steamer."

Alison could not help a smile. The girl's upbringing had clearly been very different from her own, and the extracts from Jim's letters had chiefly appealed to her sense of the ludicrous; but now she felt that his badly expressed devotion rang true, and her smile slowly faded. It must, she admitted, be something to know that through the four years, which had apparently been ones of constant stress and toil, the man's affection had never wavered, and that his every effort had been inspired by the thought that the result of it would bring his sweetheart in England so much nearer him, until at last, as the time grew rapidly shorter, he had, as he said, worked half the night to make the rude prairie homestead more fit for her.

"I suppose he wasn't rich when he went out?"

"No," replied Milly. "Jim had nothing until an uncle died and left him three or four hundred pounds. When he came and told me of it I made him go."

"You made him go?" exclaimed Alison, wondering.

"Of course! There was no chance for him in England; I couldn't keep him, just to have him near me—always poor—and I knew that whatever he did in Canada he would be true to me. The poor boy had trouble. His first crop was frozen, and his plow oxen died—I think I told you he has a little farm three or four days' ride back from the railroad." The girl's face colored again. "I sold one or two things I had—a little gold watch and a locket—and sent him the money. I wouldn't tell him how I got it, but he said it saved him."

Alison sat silent for the next moment or two. She was touched by her companion's words and the tenderness in her eyes. Alison's upbringing had in some respects not been a good one, for she had been taught to shut her eyes to the realities of life, and to believe that the smooth things it had to offer were, though they must now and then be schemed for, hers by right. It was only the last three years that had given her comprehension and sympathy, and in spite of the clearer insight she had gained during that time, it seemed strange to

her that this girl with her homely prettiness and still more homely speech and manners should be capable of such unfaltering fidelity to the man she had sent to Canada, and still more strange that she should ever have inspired him with a passion which had given him power to break down, or endurance patiently to undermine, the barriers that stood between them. Alison had yet to learn a good deal about the capacities of the English rank and file, which become most manifest where they are given free scope in a new and fertile field.

"Well," she said, conscious of the lameness of the speech, "I believe you will be happy."

Milly smiled compassionately, as though this expression of opinion was quite superfluous; and then with a tact which Alison had scarcely expected she changed the subject.

"I've talked too much about myself. You told me you had something to do when you got to Winnipeg?"

"Yes," was the answer; "I'm to begin at once as correspondent in a big hardware business."

"You have no friends there?"

"No," replied Alison; "I haven't a friend in Canada, except, perhaps, one who married a western wheat-grower two or three years ago, and I'm not sure that she would be pleased to see me. As it happens, my mother was once or twice, I am afraid, a little rude to her."

It was a rather inadequate description of the persecution of an inoffensive girl who had for a time been treated on a more or less friendly footing and made use of by a certain circle of suburban society interested in parochial philanthropy in which Mrs. Leigh had aspired to rule supreme. Florence Ashton had been tolerated, in spite of the fact that she earned her living, until an eloquent curate whose means were supposed to be ample happened to cast approving eyes on her, when pressure was judicially brought to bear. The girl had made a plucky fight, but the odds against her were overwhelmingly heavy, and the curate, it seemed, had not quite made up his mind. In any case, she was vanquished, and tactfully forced out of a guild which paid her a very small stipend for certain services; and eventually she married a Canadian who had come over on a brief visit to the old country. How Florence had managed it,

Alison, who fancied that the phrase was in this case justifiable, did not exactly know, but she had reasons for believing that the girl had really liked the curate and would not readily forgive her mother.

"Well," said Milly, "if ever you want a friend you must come to Jim and me; and, after all, you may want one some day." She paused, and glanced at Alison critically. "Of course, so many girls have to work nowadays, but you don't look like it, somehow."

This was true. Although Alison's attire was a little faded and shabby, its fit was irreproachable, and nobody could have found fault with the color scheme. She possessed, without being unduly conscious of it, an artistic taste and a natural grace of carriage which enabled her to wear almost anything so that it became her. In addition to this, she was, besides being attractive in face and feature, endued with a certain tranquillity of manner which suggested to the discerning that she had once held her own in high places. It was deceptive to this extent that, after all, the places had been only very moderately elevated.

"I'm afraid that's rather a drawback than anything else," she said in reference to Milly's last observation. "But it's a little while since you told me that you were sleepy."

They climbed up to two adjoining shelves they drew down from the roof, and though this entailed a rather undignified scramble, Alison wished that her companion had refrained from a confused giggle. Then they closed the curtains they had hired, and lay down, to sleep if possible, on the very thin mattresses the railway company supplies to Colonist passengers for a consideration. An attempt at disrobing would not have been advisable, but, after all, a large proportion of the occupants of the car were probably more or less addicted to sleeping in their clothes.

There was a change when Alison descended early in the morning, in order at least to dabble her hands and face in cold water, which would not have been possible a little later. Even first-class Pullman passengers have, as a rule, something to put up with if they desire to be clean, and Colonist travelers are not expected to be endued with any particular sense of delicacy or seemliness. As a matter of fact, a good many of them have not the faintest idea of it. It was chiefly for this reason that Alison retired to the car platform after hasty

ablutions, and, though it was very cold, she stayed there until the rest had risen.

The long train had run out of the forest in the night, and was now speeding over a vast white level which lay soft and quaggy in the sunshine, for the snow had lately gone. Here and there odd groves of birches went streaming by, but for the most part there were only leafless willow copses about the gleaming strips of water which she afterward learned were sloos. In between, the white waste ran back, bleached by the winter, to the far horizon. It looked strangely desolate, for there was scarcely a house on it, but, at least, the sun was shining, and it was the first brightness she had seen in the land of the clear skies.

Most of the passengers were partly dressed, for which she was thankful, when she went back into the car; and after one or two of them had kept her waiting she was at length permitted to set on the stove the tin kettle which was the joint property of herself and her companion. Then they made tea, and after eating the last of their crackers and emptying the fruit can, they set themselves to wait with as much patience as possible until the train reached Winnipeg.

The sun had disappeared, and a fine rain was falling when at last the long cars came clanking into the station amid the doleful tolling of the locomotive bell. Alison, stepping down from the platform, noticed a man in a long fur coat and a wide soft hat running toward the car. Then there was a cry and an outbreak of strained laughter, and she saw him lift her companion down and hold her unabashed in his arms. After that Milly seized her by the shoulder.

"This is Jim," she announced. "Miss Alison Leigh. I told her that if ever she wanted a home out here she was to come to us."

The man, who had a pleasant, bronzed face, laughed and held out his hand.

"If you're a friend of Milly's we'll take you now," he said. "She ought to have one bridesmaid, anyway. Come along and stay with her until you get used to the country."

Milly blushed and giggled, but it was evident that she seconded the invitation, and once more Alison was touched. The offer was frank and spontaneous, and she fancied that the man meant it. She

explained, however, that she was beginning work on the morrow; and Jim, giving her his address, presently turned away with Milly.

After that Alison felt very desolate as she stood alone amid the swarm of frowsy aliens who poured out from the train. The station was cold and sloppy; everything was strange and unfamiliar. There was a new intonation in the voices she heard, and even the dress of the citizens who scurried by her was different in details from that to which she had been accustomed. In the meanwhile Jim and Milly had disappeared, and as she had been told that the railroad people would take care of her baggage until she produced her check, she decided to proceed at once to her employers' establishment and inform them of her arrival.

A man of whom she made inquiries gave her a few hasty directions, and walking out of the station she presently boarded a street-car and was carried through the city until she alighted in front of a big hardware store. Being sent to an office at the back of it she noticed that the smart clerk looked at her in a curious fashion when she asked for the manager by name.

"He's not here," he said. "Won't be back again."

Alison leaned against the counter with a sudden presage of disaster.

"How is that?" she asked.

"Company went under a few days ago. Creditors selling the stock up. I'm acting for the liquidator."

Alison felt physically dizzy, but she contrived to ask another question or two, and then went out, utterly cast down and desperate, into the steadily falling rain. She was alone in the big western city, with very little money in her purse and no idea as to what she should do.

She stood still for several minutes until she remembered having heard that accommodation of an elementary kind was provided in buildings near the station where emigrants just arrived could live for a time, at least, free of charge, though they must provide their own food. As she knew that every cent was precious now, she turned back on foot along the miry street.

CHAPTER II
MAVERICK THORNE

Alison slept soundly that night. The blow had been so heavy and unexpected that it had deadened her sensibility, and kindly nature had her way. Besides, the very hard berth she occupied was at least still, and she was not kept awake by the distressful vibration that had disturbed her in the Colonist car. Awakening refreshed in the morning, she sallied out to purchase provisions for the day, and was unpleasantly astonished at the cost of them. She had yet to learn that a dollar goes a very little way in a country where rents and wages are high.

Returning to the emigrant quarters which were provided with a cooking-stove, she made a frugal breakfast, and then after a conversation with an official who gave her all the information in his power, she spent the day offering her services at stores and hotels and offices up and down the city. Nobody, however, seemed to want her. It was, she learned, a time of general bad trade, for the wheat harvest, on which that city largely depends, had failed the previous year.

Day followed day with much the same result, until Alison, who never looked back upon them afterward without a shiver, had at last parted with most of her slender stock of garments to one of the Jew dealers who then occupied a row of rickety wooden shacks near the station at Winnipeg. He gave her remarkably little for them; and one night she sat down dejectedly in the emigrant quarters to grapple with the crisis. By and by a girl who had traveled in the same car and had spoken to her now and then sat down beside her.

"Nothing yet?" she asked.

"No," said Alison wearily; "I have heard of nothing that I could turn my hands to."

"Then," advised her companion, "you'll just have to do the same as the rest of us. You're almost as good-looking as I am." She lowered her voice a little. "I dare say you have noticed that those Norwegians have gone?"

Alison had noticed that, and also that two or three lean and wiry men with faces almost blackened by exposure to the frost had been hanging about the emigrant quarters for a day or two preceding the disappearance of the girls. The blood crept into her cheeks as she remembered it, but her companion laughed, somewhat harshly.

"Oh," she explained, "they're married and gone off to farm; but what I want to tell you is that I'm going to follow their example to-morrow. It's quite straight. We're to be married in the morning. He says he's got a nice house, and he looks as if he'd treat me decently." She laid her hand on Alison's arm, and seemed to hesitate. "A neighbor, another farmer, came in with him—and he hasn't found anybody yet."

Alison shrank from her, white in face now, with an almost intolerable sense of disgust, but in another moment or two the blood surged into her cheeks, and her companion made a half-ashamed gesture.

"Oh, well," she said, "I think you're foolish, but I won't say any more about it. Besides, I had only a minute or two. Charley's waiting in the street for me now."

She withdrew somewhat hastily, and Alison sat still, almost too troubled to be capable of indignation, forcing herself to think. One thing was becoming clear; she must escape from Winnipeg before the unpleasant suggestion was made to her again, perhaps by some man in person, and go on farther West. After all, she had one friend, the one her mother had persecuted, living somewhere within reach of a station which she had discovered was situated about three hundred miles down the line, and Florence might take her in, for a time at least. She decided to set out and try to find her the next day. Rising with sudden determination, she walked across to the station to make inquiries about the train, and as she reached it a man strode up to her. It was evident that he meant to speak, and as there was just then no official to whom she could appeal, she drew herself up and faced him resolutely. He was a young man, neatly dressed in store clothes, though he did not look like an inhabitant of the city, and he had what she could not help admitting was a pleasant expression.

"You're Miss Leigh," he said, taking off his wide gray hat, and his intonation betrayed him to be an Englishman.

"How did you learn my name?" Alison asked chillingly.

"I made inquiries," he confessed. "The fact is, I asked Miss Carstairs to get me an introduction, and to tell the truth I wasn't very much astonished when she said you wouldn't hear of it."

Alison recognized now that the man was the one her companion had alluded to as her prospective husband's neighbor, and for a moment she felt that she could have struck him. That feeling, however, passed. There was a hint of deference in his attitude; he met the one indignant glance she flashed at him, which was somehow reassuring, and since she could not run away ignominiously she stood her ground.

"That's why I thought I'd make an attempt to plead my cause in person," he added.

"What do you want?" Alison asked in desperation, though she was quite aware that this was giving him a lead.

The man's gesture seemed to beseech her forbearance.

"I'm afraid it will sound rather alarming, but in the first place I'd better—clear the ground. The plain truth is that I want a wife."

"Oh," cried Alison, "how dare you say this to me!"

"Well," he answered quietly, "the fact that I expected you to look at it in that way was one of the things that influenced me. A self-respecting girl with any delicacy of feeling would naturally resent it; but I'm not sure yet that it's altogether an insult I'm offering you. Let me own that I've been here some little time, and that I've spent a good deal of it in watching you." He raised his hand as he saw the indignation in her eyes. "Give me a minute or two, and then if you think it justified you can be angry. I want to say just this. We live in a pretty primitive fashion on our hundred-and-sixty-acre holdings out on the prairie, and conventions don't count for much with us. What is more to the purpose, we are forced to make some irregular venture of this kind if we think of marrying. Now, I have a comparatively decent place about two hundred miles from here, and my wife would not have to work as hard as you would certainly have to do in a hotel or store. That's to begin with. To go on, I don't think I've ever been unkind to any one or any thing, and, though it must seem a horrible piece of assurance, I said the day I saw you get out of

the train that you were the girl for me. I would do what I could, everything I could, to make things smooth for you."

Alison felt that, strange as it seemed, she could believe him. The man did not look as if he would be unkind to any one. What was more, he was apparently a man of some education.

"Now," he added, "what I should like to do is this. I'd find you quarters in a decent boarding-house, and just call and take you round to show you the city for an hour or two each afternoon. I'd try to satisfy you as to—we'll say my mode of life and character, and you could, perhaps, form some idea of me. I don't want to form any idea of you—I've done that already. Then if my offer appears as repugnant as I'm afraid it does now, I'd try to take my dismissal in good part; and I think I could find you a post in a creamery on the prairie, if you would care for it."

He broke off, and Alison wondered at herself while he stood watching her anxiously. Her anger and disgust had gone. She could see the ludicrous aspect of the situation, but that was not her clearest impression, for she felt that this most unconventional stranger was, after all, a man one could have confidence in. Still, she had not the least intention of marrying him.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "What you suggest is, however, quite out of the question."

The man's face fell, and she felt, extraordinary as it seemed, almost sorry that she had been compelled to hurt him; but once more he took off his soft hat.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I must accept that, and—though I don't know if it's a compliment—I shall go back alone. There's just another matter. If you have any knowledge of business I could have you made clerk at the creamery."

Urgent as her need was, Alison would not entertain the proposal. She felt that it would be equally impossible to accept a favor from or to live near him.

"No," she replied; "it is generous of you, but I am going West to-morrow."

The man, saying nothing further, turned away, and she thought of him long afterward with a feeling of half-amused good-will. It was the first offer of marriage she had ever had, made in a deserted,

half-lighted station by a man to whom she had never spoken until that evening. She was to learn, however, that the strangeness of any event naturally depends very largely on what one has been accustomed to, and that one meets with many things which at least appear remarkable when one ventures out of the beaten track.

She went on with the west-bound train the next afternoon, and early in the morning alighted at a wayside station which consisted of one wooden shanty and a big water-tank. A cluster of little frame houses stood beneath the huge bulk of two grain elevators beyond the unfenced track, which ran straight as the crow flies across a bare, white waste of prairie. As the train sped out along this and grew smaller and smaller Alison stood forlornly beside the half-empty trunk which contained the remnant of her few possessions. She had then just two dollars in her pocket. It was a raw, cold morning, for spring was unusually late that year, and a bitter wind swept across the desolate waste. In a minute or two the station-agent came out of the shanty and looked at her with obvious curiosity.

"I guess you've got off at the right place?" he said in a manner which made the words seem less of a statement than an inquiry.

Alison asked him if he knew a Mr. Hunter who lived near Graham's Bluff, and how it was possible to reach his homestead.

"I know Hunter, but the Bluff is quite a way from here," the man replied. "The boys drive in now and then, and a freighter goes through with a wagon about once a fortnight."

He saw the girl's face fall, and added, as though something had suddenly struck him:

"There's a man in the settlement who said he was going that way to-day or to-morrow, and it's quite likely that he'd drive you over. Guess you had better ask for Maverick Thorne at the hotel."

Alison thanked him and, crossing the track, made for the rude frame building he indicated. Her thin boots were very muddy before she reached it, for there was no semblance of a street and the space between the houses and elevators was torn up and deeply rutted by wagon wheels. She now understood why a high plank sidewalk usually ran, as she had noticed, along the front of the buildings in the smaller prairie towns.

It was with a good deal of diffidence that she walked into the hotel and entered a long and very barely furnished room which just then was occupied by a group of men.

Several of them wore ordinary city clothes and were, she supposed, clerks or storekeepers in the little town; but the rest had weather-darkened faces and their garments were flecked with sun-dried mire and stained with soil, while the dilapidated skin coats thrown down here and there evidently belonged to them. Some were just finishing breakfast and the others stood lighting their pipes about a big rusty stove. The place reeked of the smell of cooking and tobacco smoke, and looked very comfortless with its uncovered walls and roughly boarded floor. There was, however, no bar in it, and it was consoling to see a very neat maid gathering up the plates.

"Is Mr. Maverick Thorne here just now?" she asked the girl.

She was unpleasantly conscious that the men had gazed at her with some astonishment when she walked in, and it was clear that they had heard her inquiry, because several of them smiled.

"Quit talking, Mavy. Here's a lady asking for you," said one, and a man who had been surrounded by a laughing group moved toward her.

She glanced at him apprehensively, for after her recent experience she was signally shy of seeking a favor from any of his kind. He was a tall man, bronzed and somewhat lean, as most of the inhabitants of the prairie seemed to be, and the state of his attire was not calculated to impress a stranger in his favor. His long boots were caked with mire and the fur was coming off the battered cap he held in one hand; his blue duck trousers were rent at one knee and a very old jacket hung over his coarse blue shirt. Still, his face was reassuring and he had whimsical brown eyes.

"Mr. Thorne?" she said.

The man made her a respectful inclination, which was not what she had expected.

"At your command," he replied.

She stood silent a moment or two, hesitating, and he watched her unobtrusively. He saw a jaded girl in a badly creased and somewhat shabby dress who nevertheless had an air of refinement about her which he immediately recognized. Her face was delicately pretty and

cleanly cut, though it was weary and a little anxious then, and she had fine hazel eyes. Still, the red-lipped mouth was somehow determined and there was a hint of decision of character in the way she looked at him from under straight-drawn brows. Her hair, as much as he could see of it, was neither brown nor golden, but of a shade between, and he decided that the contrast between the warm color in her cheeks and the creamy whiteness of the rest of her face was a little more marked than usual, as indeed it was, for Alison was troubled with a very natural embarrassment just then.

"I want to go to Graham's Bluff," she said. "The man at the station told me that you were driving there."

He did not answer immediately, and she awaited his reply in tense anxiety. It was evident that she could not stay where she was, even if she had been possessed of the means to pay for such rude accommodation as the place provided, which was not the case. In the meanwhile it occurred to the man that she looked very forlorn in the big, bare room, and something in her expression appealed to him. He was, as it happened, a compassionate person.

"Well," he replied, "I could take you, though as I've a round to make it will be quite a long drive. I had thought of starting this afternoon, but we had perhaps better get off in the next hour or so."

He turned to the girl who was gathering up the plates.

"Won't you try to get this lady some breakfast, Kristine?"

The girl said that she would see what she could do, but Alison was not aware until afterward that it was only due to the fact that the man was a favorite in the place that food was presently set before her. The average Westerner gets through his breakfast in about ten minutes; and as a rule the traveler who arrives at a prairie hotel a few minutes after a meal is over must wait with what patience he can command until the next is ready.

In any case, Alison was astonished when porridge and maple syrup, a thin hard steak and a great bowl of potatoes, besides strong green tea and a dish of desiccated apricots stewed down to pulp, were laid in front of her. It was most unlike an English breakfast, but she was to learn that there is very little difference between any of the three daily meals served in that country. Its inhabitants, who rise for the most part at sunup, do not require to be tempted by dainties,

which is fortunate, since they could not by any means obtain them, and in a land where the liquor prohibition laws are generally applied and men work twelve and fourteen hours daily, morning appetizers are quite unnecessary.

In the meanwhile Thorne and his companions had disappeared, for which Alison was thankful, though they left an acrid reek of tobacco smoke behind them; but when Kristine presently demanded fifty cents she realized with a fresh pang of anxiety that she had now just a dollar and a half in her possession, and she scarcely dared contemplate what might happen if Florence Hunter should not be disposed to welcome her. Besides this, there was the unpleasant possibility that the man might expect more than she could pay him for driving her to Graham's Bluff, and it was with some misgivings that she rose when he appeared an hour later to intimate that the team was ready.

Going out with him she saw two rough-coated horses apparently endeavoring to kick in the front of a high, four-wheeled vehicle, until they desisted and backed it violently into the side of the hotel. There are various rigs, as they term them—buckboards, sulkies and the humble bob-sleds—in use in that country, but the favorite one is the narrow, general-purpose wagon mounted on tall slender wheels, which will carry a moderate load though light enough to go reasonably fast.

Thorne helped Alison up, and as he swung himself into the vehicle several loungers hurled laughing questions at him.

"Aren't you going to trade that man the gramophone? You'd get him sure in half an hour," called one.

"Webster wants a tonic that will fix his wooden leg," cried another; and a third suggested that a Chinaman in the vicinity was open to purchase some hair-restorer. Alison did not know then that, probably because he wears only one tail of it, a Chinaman's hair usually grows without the least assistance three feet long.

Thorne smiled at them and then, calling to Kristine, who was standing near the door, he leaned down and handed her a bottle which he took from an open case.

"I guess you haven't much use for anything of this kind, but that elixir will make your cheeks bloom like peaches if you rub it in," he

informed her. "I sold some round Stanbury down the line not long ago and there wasn't an unmarried girl near the place when I next came along."

"There was only two before, and one of them was cross-eyed," said a grinning man.

Thorne, without answering this, told Alison to hold fast and flicked the horses with the whip. They plunged forward at a mad gallop, scattering clods of half-dried mud, and the wagon bounced violently into and out of the ruts. It seemed to leap into the air when the wheels struck the rails as they crossed the track, and then Thorne's arms grew rigid and there was a further kicking and plunging as he pulled the team up outside the little station shed. A man who appeared from within condescended to hand Alison's light trunk up, which she did not know then was a very great favor, and in another moment or two they were flying out across the white waste of prairie.

It ran dead level, like a frozen sea, to where it met the crystalline blueness that hung over it, for the grasses which had lain for months in the grip of the iron frost shone in the sunlight a pale silvery gray. There was not a trail of smoke or a house on it, only here and there a formless blur that was in reality a bluff of straggling birches or a clump of willows, and, to complete the illusion, when Alison looked around by and by, the houses had sunk down beneath the rim and only the bulk of the wheat elevators rose up like island crags against the sky.

It was, however, warm at last, and a wonderful fresh breeze which had the quality of an elixir in it rippled the whitened grass. Alison felt her heart grow lighter. The vast plain was certainly desolate, but it had lost its forbidding grimness. It had no limit or boundary; one felt free out there and cares and apprehensions melted in the sunshine that flooded it. She began to understand why she had seen no pinched and pallid faces in this new land. Its inhabitants laughed whole-heartedly, looked one in the eyes, and walked with a quick, jaunty swing. They seemed alert, self-confident, optimistic and quaintly whimsical. It was hard to believe there was not some nook in it that she could fill.

In the meanwhile she was becoming more reassured about her companion. She decided that his age was twenty-six and that he had

a pleasant face. His eyes were clear and brown and steady, his nose and lips clearly cut, and there was a suggestive cleanness about his deeply bronzed skin which was the result of a simple and wholesome life led out in the wind and the sun. Alison was puzzled, however, by something in both his manner and his voice that hinted at a careful upbringing and intelligence. It certainly was not in keeping with his clothes or his profession, which was apparently that of a pedler. She had already noticed the nerve and coolness with which he controlled the half-broken team.

"I'm afraid you started before you were quite ready," she said at length.

The man laughed.

"I might have planted a gramophone on to one of the boys and a few bottles of general-purpose specifics among the rest. They are"—his eyes twinkled humorously—"quite harmless. Anyway, I've no doubt I can unload them on to somebody next time. So far, at least, I haven't any rivals in this neighborhood."

"Then you sell things?"

"Anything to anybody. If I haven't got what the buyer wants I promise to bring it next journey, or bewilder him with an oration until he gives me a dollar for something he has no possible use for. That, however, isn't a thing you can do very frequently, which is why some folks in my profession fail disastrously. They can't realize that if you sell a man what he doesn't want too often he's apt to turn out with a club on the next occasion." He paused and sighed whimsically. "If I hadn't been troubled with a conscience I could have been running a store by now. That is, it must be added, if I had wanted to."

"You find a conscience handicaps you?" Alison inquired, for she was half amused and half interested in him.

"I'm afraid it does. For instance, I came across a man with a badly sprained wrist the other day and he offered me two dollars for anything that would cure it. Now it would have been singularly easy to have affixed a different label to my unrivaled peach-bloom cosmetic and have supplied him with a sure-to-heal embrocation. As it was, I got my supper at his place and recommended cold-water

bandages. There was another man I cured of a broken leg, and I resisted the temptation to brace him up with hair-restorer."

"What remedy did you use for the broken leg?"

"Splints," said Thorne dryly, "after I'd set it."

"But isn't that a difficult thing? How did you know how to go about it?"

"Oh, I'd seen it done."

"On the prairie?"

"No," replied Thorne, with a rather curious smile; "in an Edinburgh hospital."

Something in his manner warned her that it might not be judicious to pursue her inquiries any further, though she was, without exactly knowing why, a little curious upon the point. It occurred to her that if he had been a patient in the hospital the injured man would in all probability not have been treated in his sight, while it seemed somewhat strange that he should now be peddling patent medicines in Canada had he been qualifying for his diploma. He, however, said nothing more, and they drove on in silence for a while.

CHAPTER III
THE CAMP IN THE BLUFF

They stopped in a thin grove of birches at midday for a meal which Thorne prepared, and it was late in the afternoon when Alison, who ached with the jolting, asked if Graham's Bluff was very much farther. It struck her that the fact that she had not made the inquiry earlier said a good deal for her companion's conversational powers.

"Oh, yes," he answered casually, "it's most of thirty miles."

Alison started with dismay.

"But—" she said and stopped, for it was evident that her misgivings could not very well be expressed.

"We're not going through to-night," Thorne explained. "The team have had about enough already, and there's a farmer ahead who'll take us in. If we reach the Bluff by to-morrow afternoon it will be as much as one could expect."

Alison did not care to ask whether the farmer was married, though as there seemed to be singularly few women in the country she was afraid that it was scarcely probable. There was, however, no doubt that she must face the unusual and somewhat embarrassing situation.

"I had no idea it was a two days' drive," she said.

"It's possible to get through in the same day if you start early," Thorne replied. "I've a call to make, however, which is taking me a good many miles off the direct trail. Anyway, if you hadn't come with me you would have had to wait a week at the hotel."

"Do you know Mrs. Hunter?"

"Well," answered Thorne with a certain dryness, "we are certainly acquainted. When you use the other term in England it to some extent implies that you could be regarded as a friend of the person mentioned."

"I wonder whether you like her?" Alison was conscious that the speech was not a very judicious one.

Thorne's eyes twinkled in a way that she had noticed already.

"I must confess that I liked her better when she first came to Canada. She hadn't begun to remodel arrangements at her husband's homestead then. Hunter, I understand, came into some money shortly before he married her, and—" he paused with a little laugh—"most of my friends are poor."

This was not very definite, but it tended to confirm the misgivings concerning her reception which already troubled Alison. She noticed the tact with which the man had refrained from making any inquiries as to her business with Mrs. Hunter. Indeed, he said nothing for the next half-hour, and then, as they reached the crest of a low rise, he pointed to a cluster of what seemed to be ridiculously small buildings on the wide plain below.

"That's as far as we'll go to-night," he said.

The buildings rapidly grew into clearer shape, until Alison recognized that one was a diminutive frame house which looked as though it had been made for dolls to live in. It rose abruptly from the prairie, without sheltering tree or fence or garden; but near it there was a pile of straw and two shapeless structures, which seemed to be composed of soil or sods. Behind them the vast sweep of silvery gray grass was broken by a narrow strip of ochre-tinted stubble.

Presently they reached the lonely homestead and a neatly dressed woman with hard, red hands and a worn face appeared in the doorway when Thorne helped Alison down. The girl felt sincerely pleased to see her.

"I've no doubt you'll take my companion, who's going on toward the Bluff to-morrow, in for the night and let me camp in the barn," said Thorne. "Is Tom anywhere around? I want to see him about a horse he talked of selling."

The woman said that he had gone off to borrow a team of oxen and would not be back until the next day, and then she led Alison into a little roughly match-boarded room with an uncovered floor and very little furniture except the big stove in the middle of it. A child was toddling about the floor and another, a very little girl, lay with a flushed face in a canvas chair. The woman asked Alison no questions, but set about getting supper ready, and after a while Thorne, who had apparently been putting up the team, came in. As he did so the child in the chair held out her hands to him.

"Candies, Mavy," she cried. "Got some candies for me?"

Thorne picked her up and sat down with her on his knee, and taking a parcel out of his pocket he unwrapped and handed some of its contents to her. While she munched the sweetmeats he glanced at her mother interrogatively.

"Yes," declared the woman, "I'm right glad you came. She's been like this three or four days. I don't know what to do with her, or what's the matter."

Thorne looked down at the child before he turned toward his hostess.

"Well," he said, "I have at least a notion. A little feverish, for one thing."

He asked a question or two, and then held the child out to her mother.

"Will you take her while I get a draught mixed? I'm not sure that she'll sit down again in her chair."

The child bore this out, for she would neither sit alone nor go to her mother.

"If Mavy goes out I sure go along with him," she persisted.

The man got rid of her with some difficulty and, going out to where his wagon stood, he came back with a little brass-strapped box in his hand. He asked for some water and disappeared into an adjoining room, out of which there presently rose the clink of glass and a slight rattling. Then he called the woman, who gave the child to Alison, and when she came back somewhat relieved in face she laid out the supper. It much resembled the breakfast Alison had made at the hotel, only that strips of untempting salt pork were substituted for the hard steak.

An hour or two later she was given a very rude bunk filled with straw and a couple of blankets in an unoccupied room, and being tired out, she slept soundly. Lying still when she awakened early the next morning she heard the woman moving about the adjoining room until the outer door opened and a man whose voice she recognized as Thorne's came in.

"I'll go through and look at the kiddie, if I may," he said.

Alison heard him cross the room, and when he came back his hostess evidently walked toward the outer door of the house with him.

"You'll have to be careful of her for a few days, but if you give her the stuff I left as I told you, she'll cause you no trouble then," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't see Tom, but we'll have to get on after breakfast."

"What am I to give you for the medicine?" the woman asked.

Alison, who listened unabashed, heard Thorne's laugh.

"Breakfast," he answered; "that will put us square. I've been selling gramophones and little mirrors by the dozen right along the line, and when I've struck a streak of that kind I don't rob my friends."

Though she did not know exactly why, Alison had expected such an answer, and she remembered with a curious feeling that he had said his friends were poor. She heard the woman thank him, and then a flush crept into her face, for she certainly had not expected the next question.

"Are you going to quit the peddling and take up a quarter-section with the girl?"

"No," laughed Thorne; "I don't know where you got that idea."

"She's your kind," replied his hostess, and this appeared significant to Alison. "I've seen folks like her back in Montreal."

"It's quite likely," said Thorne. "She's going to Mrs. Hunter."

"Mrs. Hunter? Why didn't they send for her? What's her name?"

"I haven't a notion. She walked into Brown's hotel yesterday looking played out and anxious, and said somebody had told her I was going to the Bluff. As I felt sorry for her I started at once."

"Well," responded the woman, "I guess you couldn't help it. It's just the kind of thing you would do."

Thorne apparently went out after this and Alison lay still for a time while her hostess clattered about the room. She was troubled by what she had heard, for although she recognized that she had need of it, there was something unpleasant in the fact that she was indebted to this stranger's charity. He had confessed that he was sorry for her. Rising a little later she breakfasted with the others, and

then, when Thorne went out to harness his team, she diffidently asked the woman what she owed her.

"Nothing," was the uncompromising reply.

"But—" Alison began, and the woman checked her.

"We're not running a hotel. You can stop right now."

Alison realized that expostulation would be useless, and this, as a matter of fact, was in one respect a relief to her, for just then there were but two silver coins in her possession. A few minutes later Thorne helped her into the wagon and they drove away.

The prairie was flooded with sunlight, and it was no longer monotonously level. It stretched away before her in long, billowy rises, which dipped again to vast shallow hollows when the team plodded over the crest of them, and here and there little specks of flowers peeped out among the whitened grass or there was a faint sprinkling of tender green. The air was cool yet, and exhilarating as wine. Alison, refreshed by her sound sleep, rejoiced in it, and it was some time before she spoke to her companion.

"I felt slightly embarrassed," she said. "That woman would let me pay nothing for my entertainment. She can't have very much, either."

"She hasn't," replied Thorne. "Her husband had his crop hailed out last fall. Still, you see, that kind of thing is a custom of the country. They're a hospitable people, and, in a general way, when you are in need of a kindness, you're most likely to get it from people who are as hard up as you are." He paused with a whimsical smile. "One can't logically feel hurt at the other kind for standing aside or shutting their eyes, but when they proceed to point out that if you had only emulated their virtues you would be equally prosperous, it becomes exasperating, especially as it isn't true. So far as my observation goes, it isn't the practice of the stricter virtues that leads to riches."

"Why didn't you say your experience?" Alison inquired. "It's the usual word."

"It would suggest that I had tried the thing, and I'm afraid that I've only watched other people. To get knowledge that way is considerably easier. But I presume I was taking too much for granted

in supposing that you had—any reason for agreeing with my previous observation."

Alison felt that this was a question delicately put, so that if it pleased her she could avoid a definite reply. She did not in the least resent it, and something urged her to take this stranger into her confidence.

"If you mean that I don't know what it is to be poor you are wrong," she confessed. "At the present moment I'm unpleasantly close to the end of my resources."

"But you said that you were going to Mrs. Hunter's."

"I don't know whether she will take me in. I shouldn't be astonished if she didn't."

The man saw the warmth in her face and looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "you have courage, and that goes quite a way out here. I don't think you need be unduly anxious, in any case."

He flicked the team with his whip and by and by they reached a straggling birch bluff on the crest of a steeper slope. A rutted trail led between the trees, and as the team moved a little faster down the dip the wagon jolted sharply. Then one of the beasts stumbled, plunged, and recovered itself again, and Thorne, seizing Alison's arm as she was almost flung from her seat, pulled them up and swung himself down. Looking over the side she saw him stoop and lift one of the horse's feet. It was a few minutes before he came back again.

"A badger hole," he explained. "Volador fell into it. An accident of that kind makes trouble now and then."

He drove slowly for the next few miles, but, so far as Alison noticed, the horse showed no sign of injury, and it was midday when they stopped for a meal beside a creek which wound through a deep hollow. On setting out again, however, the horse began to flag and Thorne, who got down once or twice in the meanwhile, was driving at a walking pace when they reached a birch bluff larger than the last one. He pulled the team up and springing to the ground looked at Alison a few minutes later.

"Volador's going very lame," he said. "It would be cruelty to drive him much farther."

Alison was conscious of a shock of dismay. Sitting in the wagon on the crest of the rise she could look down across the birches upon a vast sweep of prairie, and there was no sign of a house anywhere on it. It almost seemed as if she must spend the night in the bluff.

"What is to be done?" she asked.

"Can you ride?"

Alison said she had never tried, and the man's expression hinted that the expedient he had suggested was out of the question.

"Do you think you could walk sixteen miles?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I couldn't," Alison confessed, though if the feat had appeared within her powers she would gladly have attempted it.

"Then you'll have to camp here in the wagon, though I can fix it up quite comfortably."

He held up his hand.

"You may as well get down, and we'll set about making supper."

She was glad that he spoke without any sign of diffidence or hesitation, which would have suggested that he expected her to be embarrassed by the situation, though this was undoubtedly the case. It seemed to her that his manner implied the possession of a certain amount of tact and delicacy. For all that, she looked out across the prairie with her face turned away from him when she reached the ground.

"Now," he said presently, handing down a big box, "if you will open that and fill the kettle at the creek down there among the trees, I'll bring some branches to make a fire."

She moved away with the kettle, and when she came back the horses had disappeared and she could hear the thud of her companion's ax some distance away in the bush. When he reappeared with an armful of dry branches she had laid out a frying-pan, an enameled plate or two, a bag of flour, a big piece of bacon, which, however, seemed to be termed pork in that country, and a paper package of desiccated apples. She was looking at them somewhat helplessly, for she knew very little about cooking. Thorne made a fire between two birches which he hewed down for the purpose, and laid several strips of pork in the frying-pan, which she heard him call a spider. These he presently emptied out on to a plate

laid near the fire, after which he poured some water into a basin partly filled with flour.

"Flapjacks are the usual standby in camp," he informed her. "If I'd known we would be held up here I'd have soaked those apples. Do you mind sprinkling this flour with a pinch or two of the yeast-powder in yonder tin, though it's a thing a sour-dough would never come down to."

"A sour-dough?" inquired Alison, doing as he requested.

"An old-timer," explained Thorne, who splashed himself rather freely as he proceeded to beat up the flour and water. "Sour-dough has much the same significance as unleavened bread, only that our pioneers kept on eating it more or less regularly in the land of promise. For all that, I wouldn't wish for better bread than the kind still made with a preparation of sour potatoes and boiled-down hops stirred in with the flour. In this operation, however, the great thing is to whip fast enough."

He splashed another white smear upon his jacket, and rubbed it with his hand before he poured some of the mixture into the hot spider, out of which he presently shook what appeared to be a very light pancake. Three or four more followed in quick succession, and then he poured water on to the green tea and handed Alison a plate containing two flapjacks and some pork. She found them palatable. Even the desiccated apples, which from want of soaking were somewhat leathery, did not come amiss, and the flavor of the wood smoke failed to spoil the strong green tea. Then Thorne poured a little hot water over the plates, and as there was no vessel that would hold them, she overruled his objections when she volunteered to go down and wash them thoroughly in the creek. When she came back she found that he had made up a clear fire and spread out a blanket as a seat for her.

"You are satisfied now?" he asked.

Alison smiled. She was astonished to find herself so much at ease with him.

"Yes," she answered; "I felt that I could at least wash the plates. In a way, it wasn't altogether my fault that I could do nothing else. You see, I was never taught to cook."

"Isn't that rather a pity?" Thorne suggested.

"It's more," said Alison with what was in her case unusual warmth. "It's an injustice. Still, there are thousands of us brought up in that way yonder, and when some unexpected thing brings disaster we are left to wonder what use we are to anybody. I suppose," she added, "the answer must be—none."

Thorne expressed no opinion on this point, but presently took out his pipe.

"You won't mind?" he asked. "I suppose they taught you something?"

"Yes," answered Alison; "accomplishments. I can play and sing indifferently, and paint simple landscapes if there are no figures in them—because figures imply serious study. I can follow a French conversation if they don't speak fast, and read Italian with a dictionary. Before any of these things will bring a girl in sixpence she must do them excellently, and they seem very unlikely to be of the least service in this part of Canada."

She was angry with herself for the outbreak as soon as she had spoken, as it seemed absurd that she should supply a stranger with these personal details; but the longing to utter some protest against the half-education which had been merely a handicap during the last three bitter years was too much for her. Thorne, however, made a sign of sympathetic comprehension.

"Yes," he assented, "that kind of thing's rather a pity. Did you never learn anything—practical?"

"Shorthand," replied Alison. "I can generally, though not always, read what I've written, if it hasn't exceeded about eighty words a minute. Then I can type about two-thirds as fast as one really ought to, and can keep simple accounts so long as neatness is not insisted on. I naturally had to learn all this after I left home. It seems to me that to bring up English girls in such a way is downright cruelty."

Thorne laughed.

"It's not remarkably different in our case. There's a man in a town not far along the line who used to shine at the Oxford Union and is now uncommonly glad to earn a few dollars by his talents as an auctioneer; that's how they estimate oratory on the prairie. There's another who devoted most of his time at Cambridge to physical

culture, and as the result of it he gets pretty steady employment on the railroad track as a ballast shoveler."

Then he changed his tone.

"Have you any idea as to what you will do if you don't stay with Mrs. Hunter?"

"No," confessed Alison, somewhat ruefully.

"Well," said Thorne, "as I believe I mentioned, I don't think you need worry about the matter. It's very probable that some of the small wheat-growers' wives would be glad to have you."

"But I can't even sew decently."

The man's eyes twinkled.

"In a general way, they're too busy to be fastidious."

There was silence for a little after this and Alison cast one or two swift unobtrusive glances at her companion, who lay smoking opposite her on the other side of the fire. The sun now hung low above the great white waste and the red light streamed in upon them both between the leafless birches. Again she decided that he had a pleasant face and, what was more, in spite of his attire, his whole personality seemed to suggest a clean and wholesome virility.

She had seen that he could be gentle, in the sick child's case, and she suspected that he could be generous, but there was something about him that also hinted at force. Then she remembered some of the men with whom she had been brought into unpleasant contact in the cities—many who bore the unmistakable mark of the beast, the cheap swagger of others, and the inane attempts at gallantries which some of the rest indulged in. They were not all like that, she realized; there were true men everywhere; but now that her first shrinking from the grim and lonely land was lessening it seemed to her that it had, in some respects at least, a more bracing influence on those who lived in it than that other still very dear one on which she had turned her back. Then she realized that she was, after all, appraising its inhabitants by a single specimen. She had yet to learn that they are now and then a little too aggressively proud of themselves in western Canada, though it must be said that the boaster is usually ready to pour out the sweat of tensest effort with ax and saw or ox-team to prove his vaunting warranted.

After a while the sun dipped and it grew chilly as dusk crept up from the hazy east across the leagues of grass. Thorne brought her another blanket to lay over her shoulders, and lying down again relighted his pipe. There was not a breath of wind, and though she could hear the knee-hobbled horses moving every now and then the silence became impressive. She felt impelled to break it presently, for it seemed to her that casual conversation would lessen the probability of the somewhat unusual situation having too marked an effect on either of them.

"How is it that you have so many provisions in your wagon?" she asked.

Thorne laughed.

"I live in it all summer."

"And you drive about selling things? Is it very remunerative?"

"No," admitted Thorne dryly; "I can't say that it is; but, you see, I like it. I'm afraid that I've a rooted objection to staying in one place very long, and while I can get a meal and the few things I need by selling an odd bottle of cosmetic, a gramophone, or a mirror, I'm content." He made a humorous gesture. "That's the kind of man I am."

Then he stood up.

"It's getting rather late and you'll find the wagon fixed up ready. If you hear a doleful howling you needn't be alarmed. It will only be the coyotes."

He disappeared into the shadows and Alison turned away toward the wagon.

CHAPTER IV
THE FARQUHAR HOMESTEAD

When she reached the wagon Alison found it covered by a heavy waterproof sheet which was stretched across a pole. Loose hay had been strewn between a row of wooden cases and one side of the vehicle and the space beneath the sheeted roof was filled with a faint aromatic odor, which she afterward learned was the smell of the wild peppermint that grows in the prairie grass. When she had spread one blanket on the hay the couch felt seductively soft, and she sank into it contentedly. Tired as she was, however, she did not go to sleep immediately, for it was the first night she had ever spent in the open, and for a time the strangeness of her surroundings reacted on her.

The front of the tent was open, and resting on one elbow she could see the sinking fires still burning red among the leafless trees, and the pale wisps of smoke that drifted among their spectral stems. At the foot of the slope there was a wan gleam of water and beyond that in turn the prairie rolled away, vast and dim and shadowy, with a silver half-moon hanging low above its eastern rim. To one who had lived in the cities, as she had done, the silence was at first so deep as to be almost overwhelming, but by degrees she became conscious that it was broken by tiny sounds. There was a very faint, elfin tinkle of running water, a whispering of grasses that bent to the little cold breeze which had just sprung up, and the softest, caressing rustle of the lace-like birch twigs. Then, as the moon rose higher the vast sweep of wilderness and sky gathered depth of color and became a wonderful nocturne in blue and silver.

In the meanwhile a pleasant warmth was creeping through her wearied body and she began to wonder with a sense of compunction how many blankets Thorne possessed, and where he was. It was at least certain that he was nowhere near the fire, for she had carefully satisfied herself on that point. Then a wild, drawn-out howl drifted up to her across the faintly gleaming prairie and she started and held her breath, until she remembered that Thorne had said there was no reason why she should be alarmed if she heard a coyote. He was, she felt, a man one could believe. The beast did not howl again, but she continued to think of her companion as her eyes grew heavy. There

was no doubt that he had a pleasant voice and a handsome face. Then her eyes closed altogether and her yielding elbow slipped down among the hay.

The sun was where the moon had been when she opened her eyes again. Climbing down from the wagon she saw no sign of Thorne. A bucket filled with very cold water, however, stood beneath a tree, where she did not remember having noticed it on the previous evening, and a towel hung close by. A few minutes later she took down the towel and glanced at it dubiously. It was by no means overclean and she wondered with misgivings what the man did with it. It seemed within the bounds of possibility that he dried the plates on it and, what was worse, that he might do so again. In the meanwhile, however, the hair on her forehead was dripping and the water was trickling down her neck, so she shut her eyes tight and applied the towel, after which she concealed it carefully in the wagon.

A quarter of an hour later Thorne appeared and she was relieved upon one point at least. Whether he had slept with blankets or without them, he did not look cold, and his appearance indeed suggested that he had been in the neighboring creek. She was astonished to notice that he had brushed himself carefully and had sewed up the rent in the knee of his overalls. Clothes-brushes, she correctly supposed, were scarce on the Canadian prairie, but it seemed probable that he would require a brush of some kind to clean his horses.

"If you wouldn't mind laying out breakfast I'll make a fire and catch the team," he said. "It's a glorious morning; but once the winter's over we have a good many of them here."

"Yes," assented Alison; "everything is so delightfully fresh."

His eyes rested on her for a moment and she was unpleasantly conscious that her dress was badly creased and crumpled as well as shabby; but he did not seem to notice this.

"That," he said, "is what struck me a minute or two ago."

He busied himself about the fire, and when he strode away through the bluff in search of the horses she heard him singing softly to himself. She recognized the aria, and wondered a little, for it was not one that could be considered as popular music.

They had breakfast when he came back and both laughed when she prepared the flapjacks under his direction. She felt no restraint in this stranger's company. Indeed, she was conscious of a pleasant sense of camaraderie, which seemed the best name for it, though she had hired him to drive her to Mrs. Hunter's and was very uncertain as to whether she could pay him.

He harnessed the team when the meal was over and explained that although Volador was still lame they might contrive to reach Graham's Bluff at sundown by proceeding by easy stages, and Alison tactfully led him on to talk about himself as they drove away. Though there were one or two points on which he was reserved, he displayed very little diffidence, which, however, is a quality not often met with among the inhabitants of western Canada.

"Well," he said with an air of whimsical reflection in answer to one question, "I suppose my chief complaint is an excess of individuality. They beat it out of you with clubs in England, unless you're rich—really rich—when you can, of course, do anything. On the other hand, the man who is merely stodgily prosperous is hampered by more rules than anybody else. This is, I must explain, another notion I've arrived at by observation and not from experience."

"One supposes that a certain amount of uniformity and subordination is necessary to progress," commented Alison.

"Oh, yes," agreed Thorne; "that's the trouble. Progress marches with massed battalions and makes so much dust that it's not always able to see where it's going. Perhaps it's that or the bewildering change of leaders that renders so much countermarching unavoidable."

"Then you prefer to act with the vedettes and skirmishers?"

"No," said Thorne; "not that exactly. Some of us are more like the camp-followers. We collect our toll on the booty and when that's too difficult we live on the country. After all, mine's an ancient if not a very respectable calling. There were always pilgrims, minstrels and pedlers."

"It can't be a luxurious life."

Thorne looked amused.

"Are you quite sure you didn't mean a useful one?"

Alison felt uncomfortable, because this idea had been in her mind.

"I'll answer the question, anyway," continued Thorne. "These people and those in the wheat-growing lands across the frontier work twelve and fourteen hours every day. It's always the same unceasing toil with them—they have no diversions. We go round and carry the news from place to place, tell them the latest stories, and now and then sing to them. We don't tax them too much either—a supper when they're poor—a dollar for a mirror or a bottle of elixir, which it must be confessed most of them have no possible use for."

"Did you never do anything else?" Alison inquired; "that is, in Canada?"

"Oh, yes," replied her companion. "I was clerk in an implement store which I walked out of at its proprietor's request after an attack of injudicious candor. You see, a rather big farmer came in one day and spent most of the morning examining our seeders and pointing out their defects. Then he inquired why we had the assurance to demand so much for our implement when he could buy a very much better one several dollars cheaper. I asked him if he was sure of that, and when he said he was I suggested that it would be considerably wiser to go right away and buy it instead of wasting his time and mine. The proprietor desired to know how we expected him to make a living if we talked to customers like that, and I pointed out that we couldn't do so anyway by answering insane questions."

Alison laughed delightedly. She felt that this was not mere rodomontade, but that the man was perfectly capable of doing as he had said.

"Had you any more experiences of the same kind?" she asked.

"I was shortly afterward projected out of a wheat broker's office."

"Projected?"

Thorne grinned.

"I believe that describes it. You see, they were three to one; but I took part of the office fittings along with me. I must own that I lost my temper and insulted them."

"But why did you do so?"

"Well," answered Thorne reflectively, "I like the Colonial, and especially the Westerner, though he's rather fond of insisting on his superiority over the rest of mankind. One gets used to this, but it now and then grows galling when he compares himself with the folks

who come out from the old country. On the day in question the trouble arose from a repetition of the usual formula that if it wasn't for the ocean they'd have the whole scum of Europe coming over. I, however, shook hands with the man who said it not long afterward, and he told me that after I had gone, which was how he expressed it, they sat down and laughed until they ached, thinking what the wheat broker, who was out on business, would say when he saw his office."

Alison was genuinely amused and she ventured another question.

"Did you leave your situations in England in the same fashion?"

The man's face darkened for a moment.

"As it happened, I hadn't any."

Alison turned the conversation into what promised to be a safer channel, and they drove along very slowly all morning. When they set out again after a lengthy stop at noon Thorne asked her if she would mind walking for a while, as Volador was becoming very lame. He added that he would make for an outlying homestead, where they would find entertainment, instead of Graham's Bluff, and that they should reach Mrs. Hunter's on the following day.

It was six o'clock in the evening when they arrived at a frame house which stood, roofed with cedar shingles, in the shelter of a big birch bluff. There was a very rude sod-built stable, a small log barn, and a great pile of straw, which appeared to be hollow inside and used as a store of some kind. A middle-aged man with a good-humored look met them at the door, and his wife greeted Alison in a kindly fashion when Thorne explained the cause of their visit. Indeed, Alison was pleased with the woman's face and manner, though, like many of the small wheat-growers' wives, she looked a little worn and faded. Though the men toil strenuously on the newly broken prairie, the heavier burden not infrequently falls to the woman's share.

Farquhar, their host, went out to work after supper but came back a little before dusk, and when they sat out on the stoop together, Thorne got his banjo and sang twice at Mrs. Farquhar's request; once some amusing jingle he had heard in Winnipeg, and afterward "Mandalay."

The song was not new to Alison, but she fancied that she had never heard it rendered as Maverick Thorne sang it then. It was not

his voice, though that was a fine one, but the knowledge that had given him power of expression, which held her tense and still. This man knew and had indulged in and probably suffered for the longing for something that was strange and different from all that his experience had touched before. He was one of the free-lances who could not sit snugly at home; and in her heart Alison sympathized with him.

She had never seen the glowing, sensuous East and South, but the new West lay open before her in all its clean, pristine virility. A vast sweep of sky that was duskily purple eastward stretched overhead, a wonderful crystalline bluish green, until it changed far off on the grassland's rim to a streak of smoky red. Under it the prairie rolled back like a great silent sea. There was something that set the blood stirring in the dew-chilled air, and the faint smell of the wood smoke and the calling of the wild fowl on a distant sloo intensified the sense of the new and unfamiliar. One could be free in that wide land, she felt; and as she thought of the customs, castes, and conventions to which one must submit at home, she wondered whether they were needed guides and guards or mere cramping fetters. They seemed to have none of them in western Canada.

She said "Thank you!" when Thorne laid down his banjo, and felt that the spoken word had its limits, though she was careful not to look at him directly just then, and soon afterward she retired. This house was larger and much better furnished than the one she had last slept in, though she supposed that it would have looked singularly comfortless and almost empty in England. There was, for one thing, neither a curtain at a window nor a carpet on the floor.

When she joined the others at breakfast the next morning her host informed Thorne that if they could wait until noon he could lend him a horse to replace the lame Volador. He had, he explained, sent his hired man off with a team on the previous day for a plow which was being repaired by a smith who lived at a distance, and he had some work for the second pair that morning. The men went out together when breakfast was over, and Mrs. Farquhar sat down opposite Alison after she had cleared the table.

"Thorne tells me you are going to Mrs. Hunter's, though you don't know yet whether you will stay with her or not," she said.

It occurred to Alison that this was a tactful way of expressing it, though she was not sure that the delicacy was altogether Thorne's, for she had no doubt that her hostess had once been accustomed to a much smoother life in the Canadian cities.

"No," she replied, "I really can't tell until I get there."

"Then, in case you don't decide to stay, we should be glad to have you here."

Alison was astonished, but in spite of her usual outward calm there was a vein of impulsiveness in her, and she leaned forward in her chair.

"I don't suppose you know that I am quite useless at any kind of housework," she said. "I can't wash things, I can't cook, and I can scarcely sew."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled.

"When I first came out here from Toronto it was much the same with me, and there was nobody to teach me. It's fortunate that men are not very fastidious in this part of Canada. In any case I had, perhaps, better mention that while I would be glad to pay you at the usual rate and you would be required to help, you would live with us as one of the family. I want a companion. With my husband at work from sunup until dark, it's often lonely here. Besides, the arrangement would give you an opportunity for learning a little and finding out how you like the country."

Alison thought hard for a few moments. What she was offered was a situation as a servant, but she decided that it would be more pleasant here than she supposed it must generally be in England. She felt inclined to like this woman, and her husband's manner was reassuring. There was no doubt that they would treat her well.

"I'm afraid that in a little while you would be sorry you had suggested it," she said.

"The question is, would you like to try?"

"I'm quite sure of that," declared Alison impulsively. "I don't suppose you know what it is to be offered a resting-place when you arrive, feeling very friendless and forlorn, in a new country."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled.

"Then if you don't care to stay with Mrs. Hunter you must come straight back here. It would, perhaps, be better if you went to her in the first instance."

"But don't you want any references?"

"I don't think I do. In this case, your face is sufficient, and from experience we don't attach any great importance to vouchers of the other kind. Harry sometimes says that when a man is found to be insufferable in the old country they give him a walletful of letters of introduction, crediting him with all the virtues, and send him out to us. Besides, even if you were really quite dreadful, your friends wouldn't go back on you when I wrote to them."

Alison laughed, and as the hired man appeared at noon with Farquhar's team she drove away with Thorne soon after dinner. When they had left the house behind she turned to him.

"You have been talking about me to Mrs. Farquhar," she said.

"Yes," admitted Thorne with a smile, "I must confess that I have. Is there any reason why you should be angry?"

"I'm not," Alison informed him. "But why did you do it?"

"I'm far from sure that you will like Mrs. Hunter. In fact, I'd be a little astonished if you did; and if you were a relative of mine I'd try to make you stay with Mrs. Farquhar."

"I wonder whether that means that Mrs. Hunter doesn't like you?"

Thorne laughed good-humoredly.

"Oh, I'm much too insignificant a person to count either way. Mrs. Hunter is what you might call *grande dame*."

"Have you any of them in western Canada?"

"Well," answered Thorne, with an air of whimsical reflection, "there are certainly not many, and in spite of it the country gets along pretty well. We have, however, quite a few women of excellent education and manners who don't seem to mind making their children's dresses and washing their husband's clothes. Anyway, if she's at home, you can form your own opinion of Florence Hunter in an hour or two."

"Is she often away?"

"Not infrequently. Every now and then she goes off to Winnipeg, Toronto, or Montreal."

"But what about her husband? Can he leave his farm?"

"Hunter," Thorne replied dryly, "invariably stays at home."

His manner made it clear that he intended to say no more on that subject, and they talked about other matters while the wagon jolted on across the sunlit prairie.

CHAPTER V
THORNE GIVES ADVICE

It was early in the evening when they drove into sight of the Hunter homestead, and as they approached it Alison glanced about her with some curiosity. Long rows of clods out of which rose a tangle of withered grass tussocks stretched across the foreground. Thorne told her that this was the breaking, land won from the prairie too late for sowing in the previous year. Farther on, they skirted another stretch of more friable and cleaner clods, shattered and mellowed by the frost, and then they came to a space of charred stubble. Beyond that, a waste of yellow straw stood almost knee-high, and Thorne said that as the latter had no value on the prairie it was generally burned off to clear the ground for the following crop. He added that wheat was usually grown on the same land for several years without any attempt at fertilization.

Alison, however, knew nothing of farming, and it was the house at which she gazed with most interest. It stood not far from a broad shallow lake with a thin birch bluff on one side of it, a commodious two-storied building with a wide veranda. It was apparently built of wood, but its severity of outline was relieved by gaily picked-out scroll-work and lattice shutters; and in front of the entrance somebody had attempted to make a garden. The stables and barns behind it were new frame buildings, and there were wire fences stretching back from these. After her experience of the last few days, Alison had not expected to see anything like it in western Canada.

Then she began to wonder whether Florence Hunter's life in the West had made much change in her. She recollected her as a pretty but rather pallid girl, with a manner a little too suggestive of self-confidence, and a look of calculating tenacity in her eyes. Alison had continued to treat her as a friend after she had incurred the hostility of Mrs. Leigh, but she realized that it was chiefly Florence's courage and resourcefulness that had impressed her, and not her other qualities. She had not seen Florence's husband.

A few minutes later Thorne drove up to the front of the house, and Alison saw a woman, who hitherto had been hidden by one of the pillars, lying in a canvas chair on the veranda with a book in her

hand. The sunlight that streamed in upon her called up fiery gleams in her red hair and shimmered on her long dress of soft, filmy green. Alison promptly decided that the latter had come from New York or Montreal. There was no doubt that Florence Hunter's appearance was striking, though her expression even in repose seemed to indicate a dissatisfied, exacting temperament. At length she heard the rattle of wheels, for she rose.

"Alison, by all that's wonderful!" she cried.

There was astonishment in the exclamation, but Alison could not convince herself that there was any great pleasure, and it was with a certain sense of constraint that she permitted Thorne to help her down. He walked with her up to the veranda, and acknowledged Mrs. Hunter's casual greeting by lifting his hat.

"Sit down," said the latter to Alison, pointing to another chair. "Where have you sprung from?"

"From Winnipeg. I came out to earn my living, and nobody seemed to want me there."

Florence laughed.

"You earn your living! It's clear that something very extraordinary must have happened; but we'll talk of that after supper. So you decided to come to me?"

It was, Alison realized, merely a question and nothing more.

"I'm afraid I was a little presumptuous," she replied. "There is, of course, no reason why you should have me."

Her companion looked at her with a curious smile.

"You are still in the habit of saying things of that kind? I suppose it runs in the family."

Alison winced, for she remembered that her mother could on occasion be painfully rude.

"You haven't said anything to convince me that I was wrong."

"Was it necessary?" Florence asked languidly. "I was never very effusive, as you ought to know. Of course, you'll stay here as long as it pleases you."

The invitation was clear enough, but there was no warmth in it; and Alison was relieved when a man came up the steps. He was rather short in stature, and there was nothing striking in his

appearance. He had a quiet brown face and very brown hands, and he had evidently been working, for he wore long boots, a coarse blue shirt, and blue duck overalls. He shook hands with Thorne cordially, and then turned toward Alison.

"My husband," said Florence. "Miss Leigh, Elcot; I used to know her in England. She has just arrived."

Alison noticed that Hunter favored her with a glance of grave scrutiny, but he did not seem in the least astonished, nor did he glance at his wife. This indicated that he was in the habit of accepting without question anything that the latter did. Then he held out his hand.

"I'm very glad to see you, and we'll try to make you comfortable," he said with a smile which softened the girl's heart toward him. Then he turned to his wife.

"Is supper ready? I want to haul in another load of wood before it's dark."

"It should have been ready now. I don't know what they're doing inside," was the careless reply.

It occurred to Alison that her hostess might have gone to see, but she was half annoyed with Thorne when she noticed his badly dissembled grin. Then Hunter inquired if she had had a comfortable journey.

"Not very," she answered. "You see, I traveled Colonist."

"How dreadful!" Florence exclaimed.

Her husband smiled at Alison.

"It depends," he said. "It's good enough if you can wait until after the steamboat train. I used to travel that way myself once upon a time; I had to do it then."

"Elcot," his wife explained, "is one of the most economically minded men living. He grudges every dollar unless it's for new implements."

Hunter did not contradict her. He and Thorne left the veranda, and soon after they returned from leading the team to the stable, a trim maid appeared to announce that supper was ready. Hunter led Alison into a big and very simply furnished room. A long table ran down one side, and half a dozen men attired much as Hunter was took their places about the uncovered lower half of it. There was a

cloth on the upper portion, with a gap of several feet between its margin and the nearest of the teamsters' seats. It occurred to Alison, who had been told that the hired man generally ate with his employer on the prairie, that this compromise was rather pitiful, though she did not know that Hunter had once or twice had words with his wife on the question. As the meal, which was bountiful, proceeded, he now and then spoke to the men; but Florence confined her attention to Alison, until at length she addressed Thorne.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of seeing you?" she inquired.

"In the first place, I came to bring Miss Leigh; she hired me."

Thorne laid a very slight stress upon the hired. It seemed to indicate that he recognized his station in relation to a guest of the house, and Alison felt a little uncomfortable. For one thing, though that did not quite account for her uneasiness, she remembered that she had not paid him.

"Then," he added, "I called in the usual course of business. I have for disposal a few tablets of very excellent English soap, a case of peach-bloom cosmetic, and one or two other requisites of the kind."

Alison regretted that she laughed, but she felt that Florence's attitude toward the man had rendered the thrust admissible, and she saw a faint smile in Hunter's eyes. Her hostess, however, was equal to the occasion.

"If they're not as rubbishy as usual, I'll buy a few things and give them to the maids. Is that the whole of your stock?"

"I've a box of new gramophone records."

Florence looked at her husband, and Alison fancied that she had noticed and meant to punish him for his smile.

"You'll buy them, Elcot."

"You haven't tried the other lot," Hunter protested. "Besides, the instrument seemed to have contracted bronchitis when I last had it out."

"It will do to amuse the boys when the nights get dark," replied Florence. Then she turned to Alison. "One could hardly get a dollar out of him with a lever."

"Doesn't it depend on the kind of lever you use?" Alison asked.

Thorne grinned, but Florence answered unhesitatingly.

"Oh, in the case of the average man it doesn't matter, so long as it's strong enough and you have a fulcrum. We'll admit that the type can be generous, but it's only when it throws a reflected luster on themselves. Otherwise judicious pressure is necessary."

"Are you going to camp with us to-night?" Hunter asked Thorne.

"No," answered the latter. "I have some business at the Bluff, and I want to get off again early to-morrow."

In a few more minutes the teamsters rose, and Hunter, making excuses to Alison, went out with them. Florence looked after them, and then turned to the girl with a disdainful lifting of her brows.

"Cormorants," she commented. "They've been very slow to-night. Eight minutes is about their usual limit. I don't think they even look at their food—it just goes down. I have once or twice suggested to Elcot that he is wasting his money by giving them the things he does. It's difficult, though, to make him listen to reason."

Alison said nothing, and after a while Florence rose.

"We'll have a talk on the veranda while they clear away."

She pointed to a chair when they reached the veranda, and then sank languidly into one close by.

"Tell me all about it," she said.

It was not a pleasant task to Alison, for it entailed the mention of her father's death and an account of the difficulties that had followed, but she spoke for a few minutes, and her companion casually expressed her sympathy.

"I can understand why you came out," she added with a bitter laugh. "When I first met you I was earning just enough to keep me on the border line between respectability and—the other thing—that is by the exercise of the most unpleasant self-denial. What I should have done without the extra twelve pounds your mother's guild paid me for playing the piano twice a week at the working girls' club I don't like to think. That is why I made no complaint when they added to my duties the teaching of a class on another evening and the collecting of the subscriptions to the sewing society. Your mother, I heard, informed the committee that in her opinion twelve pounds was a good deal too much, and I believe she added that such a rate of payment was apt to make a young woman of my class far too independent."

Alison's cheeks burned, for she knew that Florence had been correctly informed; but she had no thought of mentioning that she had expostulated with her mother on the subject.

"Well," said Florence, "it was not your fault, and I'm sorry for you. I suppose you had—difficulties—with some of your employers? No doubt one or two of them tried to make love to you?"

Alison made a little gesture of disgust.

"Oh," laughed Florence, "I know. You probably flared out at the offender, and either got your work found fault with or lost your situation. I didn't. After all, a smile costs nothing, though it's a little difficult now and then. In my case, it led to shorter hours, higher wages, an occasional Saturday afternoon trip to the country. I got what I could, and in due time it was generally easy to turn round upon and get rid of the provider. Still, it was just a little humiliating with a certain type of man, and it was a relief when Elcot took me out of it. I try to remember that I owe him that when he gets unusually wearisome, though one must do him the justice to admit that he never refers to it."

Alison sat silent, shrinking from her companion. She had faced a good many unpleasant things during the past few years, but they had wrought but little change in her nature. The part her hostess had played would have been a wholly hateful one to her.

"Where did you come across Thorne?" Florence asked.

Alison told her, and she looked thoughtful.

"When was that? I supposed you had come straight from the station."

"Four days ago," answered Alison unhesitatingly, though she would have much preferred not to mention it.

"Four days! And you have been driving round the country since then with Thorne?"

Alison felt her face grow hot, but her answer was clear and sharp.

"Of course; I couldn't help it. We should have been here earlier, only a horse went lame. In any case, after what you have told me, I cannot see why you should adopt that tone."

Florence raised her brows.

"My dear," she said, "I was a working woman of no account in England when I first met you—but things are rather different now. It doesn't exactly please me that a guest of mine should indulge in an escapade of this description. Doesn't it strike you as hardly fitting?"

Hunter, who had come up the steps unobserved, stopped beside them just then.

"Rubbish!" he said curtly. "It was unavoidable. I've had a talk with Leslie; he told me exactly what delayed him."

Florence waved her hand.

"Oh," she replied, "let it go at that. I couldn't resist the temptation of sticking a pin or two into Alison. What has brought you back?"

"We broke the wagon pole. It didn't seem worth while to put in a new one to-night."

He moved away and left them, and Alison turned to her companion.

"Did he mean Mr. Thorne by Leslie?"

"Of course."

"But isn't his name Maverick?"

"Did you call him that?"

"I can't remember, though I suppose I must have done so. Some of the others certainly did."

Florence looked amused.

"I suppose you haven't an idea what a maverick is?"

Alison said that she had none at all, and her companion proceeded to inform her.

"It's a steer that won't feed and follow tamely with the herd, but goes off or gets wild and smashes things, and generally does what's least desirable. As you have spent some days with him you will no doubt understand why they have fixed the name on Thorne."

Alison glanced at her with a sparkle in her eyes.

"I can only say this. I have met a few men one could look up to—after all, there are good people in the world—but I haven't yet come across one who showed more tact and considerate thoughtfulness than Maverick Thorne."

Florence was evidently amused at this—indeed, to be sardonically amused at something seemed her favorite pose.

"I shouldn't like to disturb that kind of optimism—and here he is; I'll leave you to talk to him. As it happens, Elcot looks rather grumpy, and the mail-carrier has just brought out a sheaf of my bills from Winnipeg which he hasn't seen yet."

She sailed away with a rustle of elaborate draperies, and Thorne sat down.

"I'm going on to the bluff in half an hour," he informed her.

Alison was conscious of a certain hesitation, but there was something to be said.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked.

"Half a dollar."

Alison flushed.

"Why didn't you say four or five dollars?"

"Since you evidently mean to insist on an answer, there are several reasons for my modesty. For one thing, you would have to borrow the money from Mrs. Hunter, which I don't think you would like to do. For another, if you were a Canadian I'd say—nothing—but as you're not used to the country yet you wouldn't care to accept a favor from a stranger."

"But it would be a favor in any case."

"Then you can get rid of the obligation by giving me half a dollar."

The girl looked at him sharply as she laid the silver coin in his hand, but he met her gaze with a whimsical smile.

"Thank you," he said. "I suppose you are going back to Mrs. Farquhar?"

"Yes," replied Alison impulsively. "I believe I am; but I may wait for a few days."

"I think you're wise. You wouldn't find things very pleasant here."

"Why?"

"If you'll permit me to mention it, you're too pretty."

Alison straightened herself suddenly in her chair.

"You don't like Mrs. Hunter, but does that justify you in saying what you have? You can't mean that she would be—jealous?"

"That's exactly what I do mean."

He saw the angry color mantle in the face of the girl, and raised his hand in expostulation.

"Wait a little; I want to explain. First of all, she wouldn't have the slightest cause for jealousy. You're not the kind to give her one, and Elcot Hunter is one of the best and straightest men I know. In fact, that's partly what is troubling me."

"Why should it trouble you?" Alison interrupted.

Thorne appeared to reflect, and, indignant with his presumption as she was, the girl admitted that he did it very well.

"If you urge me for a precise answer, I'm afraid I'll have to confess that I don't quite know. Anyway, because Hunter is the sort of man I have described, he'd try to make things pleasant for you, and there's no doubt that his wife would resent it. Whether she's fond of him at all, or not, I naturally can't say, but she expects him to be entirely at her beck and call, and I don't think she'd tolerate any little courtesies he might show you."

Alison sat silent for a moment or two when he stopped, looking at him with perplexed eyes, though she felt that he was right.

"It's curious, isn't it?" she said at length. "Florence must have had a very unpleasant time in England, where she had to practise the strictest self-denial. One would have thought it would have made her content and compassionate now that she has everything that she could wish for."

"No," responded Thorne, "in a way, it's natural. That kind of life often has the opposite effect. Those who lead it have so much to put up with that if once they escape it makes them determined never even to contemplate doing the least thing they don't like again."

"Oh," declared Alison impulsively, "I shouldn't care to think that."

"Well," said Thorne, with unmoved gravity, "I don't know whether you have had as much to face as you say that she has, though one or two things seem to suggest it, but it certainly hasn't spoiled you."

Then he rose.

"As I want to reach the bluff to-night, I'll get my team harnessed."

Alison watched him go down the steps with a somewhat perplexing sense of regret. She had met the man only four days ago, but she felt that she was parting from a friend.

A few minutes later Florence Hunter called her into the house; and she stayed with her a week before she went to Mrs. Farquhar. She admitted that Florence had given her no particular cause for leaving, but she at least made no objections when Alison acquainted her with her decision.

CHAPTER VI
THORNE CONTEMPLATES A CHANGE

Alison had spent a few days with Mrs. Farquhar without finding the least reason to regret the choice she had made, when one evening Farquhar helped her and his wife into his wagon in front of the little hotel at Graham's Bluff, where he had passed the last half-hour in conversation with an implement dealer. When they had taken their places he drove cautiously down the wide, unpaved street, which was seamed with ruts. On either side of it, straggling and singularly unpicturesque frame houses, destitute of paint or any attempt at adornment, rose abruptly from the prairie, though here and there the usual plank sidewalk ran along the front of them. Alison was convinced that she had rarely seen a more uninteresting place, though she had discovered that its inhabitants were not only quite satisfied with it, but firmly believed in its roseate future. This seemed somewhat curious, as a number of them had come there from the cities, but she did not know then that the optimistic assurance with which they were endued is common in the West, and that it is, as a rule, in due time justified.

Turning a corner, they came out into a wider space from which a riband of rutted trail led out into the wilderness. Farquhar pulled up his team. Close in front of them, a crowd had gathered about a wagon, and a man who stood upon a box in it seemed to be addressing the assembly. Alison could not see his face, and his voice was, for the most part, drowned by bursts of laughter, but he was waving his hands to emphasize his remarks, and this and his general attitude reminded her of the itinerant auctioneers she had now and then seen in the market-place of an English provincial town, though the crowd and the surroundings were in this case very different.

The prairie, which was dusty white, stretched back to the soft red glow of the far horizon, and overhead there was a wonderful blue transparency. The light was still sharp, and the figures of the men stood out with a curious distinctness. Most of them were picturesque in wide, gray hats and long boots, with blue shirt and jacket hanging loose above the rather tight, dust-smeared trousers, though there

were some who wore black hats and spruce store clothes. These, however, looked very much out of place.

"Thorne's pitching it to the boys in great style to-night," chuckled Farquhar. "We'll get a little nearer; I like to hear him when he has a good head of steam up."

He started the team, but Alison was sensible of a slight shock of displeasure. She was aware that Thorne sold things, because he had told her so, but she had never seen him actively engaged in his profession, and this kind of thing seemed extremely undignified. She had got rid of a good many prejudices during the past few years, and was, for that matter, in due time to discard some more; but it hurt her to see a friend of hers—and she admitted that she regarded him as such—playing the part of mountebank to amuse the inhabitants of a forlorn prairie town.

Farquhar drew up his team again presently. Alison fancied that Mrs. Farquhar was watching her, and she fixed her eyes upon the crowd and Thorne. His remarks were received with uproarious laughter, but she was quick to notice that there was nothing in what he said that any one could reasonably take exception to.

Presently there was an interruption, for a man in white shirt and store clothing pushed forward through the crowd, with another, who was big and lank and hard-faced, and wore old blue duck, following close behind him.

"Now," exclaimed Farquhar expectantly, "we're going to have some fun. That's Sergeant, the storekeeper, who sells drugs and things, and he's been on Mavy's trail for quite a while. So far, Mavy has generally talked him down, but to-night he's got a backer. Custer has the reputation of being a bad man, and it's generally supposed that he owes Sergeant a good deal of money."

"Hadn't we better drive on if there's likely to be any trouble?" suggested his wife.

Farquhar said that Thorne would probably prove a match for his opponents without provoking actual hostilities, and added that they could go on later if it seemed advisable. Alison laughed when a hoarse burst of merriment followed the orator's last sally.

"It was really witty," she said. "In fact, it's all clever. I wonder how he learned to talk like that."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled.

"It's probably in the blood. I believe one of his close relatives is a bishop."

"It doesn't quite follow," objected Farquhar. "I heard one of them, an English one, in Montreal, who wasn't a patch on Mavy. Anyway, if you want to hold the boys here you have to be clever."

Then a protesting voice broke in upon Thorne's flowing periods.

"Boys," it said, "that man has played you for suckers 'bout long enough, and this kind of thing is rough on every decent storekeeper in the town. We're making the place grow; we're always willing to make a deal when you have anything to sell; and we're generally open to supply you with better goods than he keeps, at a lower figure."

"In my case," Thorne pointed out, "you get amusing tales and sound advice thrown in. You can at any time consult me about anything, from the best way to make your hair curl to the easiest means of getting rid of the mortgage man, which in most cases is to pay his bill."

"I could tell 'way funnier tales than you do when I was asleep," interrupted the storekeeper's friend.

Thorne disregarded this.

"I've nothing to urge against the storekeepers, boys. They're useful to the community—it's possible that they're more useful than I am—but it doesn't seem quite fitting to hold them up as deserving objects of your compassion. If you have any doubt on that point you have only to look at their clothes. I don't like to be personal, but since there are two men here from whom I don't expect very much delicacy, I feel inclined to wonder whether that is a brass watch and guard Mr. Sergeant is wearing."

"No, sir," snapped the other, who was evidently too disturbed in temper to notice the simple trap, "it's English gold. Cost me most of a hundred and twenty dollars in Winnipeg."

Thorne waved his hand.

"That's the point, boys. Mine, which was made in Connecticut, cost five. I think you can see the inference. If you don't, I should like you to ask him where he got the hundred and twenty dollars."

There was applauding laughter, for the men were quite aware that they had furnished it, but Thorne proceeded:

"It's likely that I could buy things of that kind, and keep as smart a team as our friend does, if I struck you for the interest he charges on your held-over accounts."

"That's quite right!" somebody cried. "They don't want no pity. They've got bonds on half our farms. Guess the usual interest's blamed robbery."

Once more the storekeeper lifted up his voice.

"You wouldn't call it that, if you'd ever tried to collect it. You stand out of your money until harvest's in, and then when you drive round the homestead's empty, and somebody's written on the door, 'Sorry I couldn't pack the house off.'"

This was followed by further laughter, for, as Farquhar explained to Alison, pack signifies the transporting of one's possessions, usually upon the owner's back, in most of western Canada, and the notice thus implies that the defaulting farmer had judiciously removed himself and everything of value except his dwelling, before the arrival of his creditor.

"You could shut down on the land, anyway," retorted one man.

"Could I?" Sergeant inquired savagely. "When it's free-grant land, and the man hadn't broke enough to get his patent?"

The crowd, encouraged by a word or two from Thorne, seemed disposed to drift off into a disquisition on the homestead laws, but Sergeant pulled them up.

"We'll keep to the point," he said. "When you buy your drugs at my store you get just what you ask for with the maker's label stuck fast on it. Maverick keeps loose ones, and if you ask him to cure your liver it's quite likely that he'll give you hair-restorer."

Farquhar chuckled.

"I'm afraid there's some truth in that," he admitted. "Still, it's to Mavy's credit that when the case is serious he generally prescribes a visit to the nearest doctor."

In the meanwhile the storekeeper had secured the attention of the assembly.

"What I said, I'll prove!" he added vehemently. "Get up and tell them how he played you, Custer."

His companion waved his hand.

"I'll do that, in the first place, and when I've got through I'll do a little more. I went to Maverick most two weeks ago when my stomach was sour, and he gives me a bottle for a dollar."

"He's perfectly correct so far, except that he hasn't produced the dollar yet," Thorne assented. "I should like to point out that I can cure the kind of sourness he said it was every time, but I can't do very much when the trouble's in the man's sour nature. You took that stuff I gave you the day you got it, Custer?"

"I did. I was powerful sick next morning."

He turned to the crowd, speaking in a tragic voice.

"Boys, he'd run out of the cure I wanted and gave me the first bottle handy, with a wrong label on. I've no use for a man who doses you with stuff that makes your inside feel like it was growing wool."

There were delighted cries at this, but Custer appeared perfectly serious, and Thorne looked down at him.

"No," he drawled, "in your case it would grow bristles."

The laugh was with him now, but it was a moment or two before Custer, who was evidently slow of comprehension, quite grasped the nature of the compliment which had been paid him. The term hog is a particularly offensive one in that country. Then he proceeded to clamber up into the wagon, and Thorne addressed those among his listeners who stood nearest it.

"Hold on to him just a moment," he cried, and two men did as he directed. "I merely want to point out that our friend has supplied the explanation of the trouble—he said he was sick the next morning. Well, as my internal cure is a powerful one, there are instructions on every bottle to take a tablespoonful every six hours, which would have carried him on for several days. It's clear that he felt better after one dose, which encouraged him to take the lot for the next one."

"He has probably hit it," commented Farquhar. "They do it now and then."

"Now," continued Thorne to the men below, "you can let Mr. Custer go. If it's the only thing that will satisfy him, I'll get down."

"You'll get down sure," bawled Custer. "If you're not out when I'm ready, I'll pitch you."

Farquhar started his team.

"I've no doubt Sergeant had the thing fixed beforehand, but I'm inclined to fancy that Custer will be sorry before he's through. Anyway, we'll get on."

He had driven only a few yards when his wife looked at him with a smile.

"Was it a very great self-denial, Harry?"

"Since you ask the question, I'm afraid it was," laughed Farquhar.

"Then I won't mind very much if you get down and see that they don't impose on Mavy—I mean too many of them. I don't want him to get hurt if it can be prevented."

Farquhar swung himself over the side of the wagon.

"It's hardly probable. The boys like Mavy, but, as Sergeant has one or two toughs among the crowd, I'll go along."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled at Alison as she drove on.

"One mustn't expect too much," she said. "After all, if he comes home with a swollen face it will be in a good cause."

Alison made no comment. She was slightly disgusted, and her pride was somewhat hurt. She had made a friend of this man, perhaps, she thought, too readily, and the fact that he had laid himself out to amuse the crowd and had, as the result of it, been drawn into a discreditable brawl was far from pleasant. She was compelled to confess on reflection that he could not very well have avoided the latter, but it was equally clear that he had not even attempted it. Indeed, she had noticed that he jumped down from his wagon with a suspicious alacrity.

Half an hour later a fast team overtook them and Farquhar alighted from a two-seated vehicle. He smiled at his wife as he sat down beside her.

"There was very little trouble," he announced. "Mavy's friends kept the toughs off, and I believe he'll sell out everything he has in his wagon."

"And Custer?"

"I don't think he can see quite as well as he could an hour ago—as one result," replied Farquhar dryly.

Then he flicked the team, and they drove on faster into the dusk that was creeping up across the prairie.

The next morning Alison was standing in the sunshine outside the house when Thorne drove into sight from behind the barn which cut off the view of one strip of prairie. He got down from his wagon and appeared disconcerted when he saw the girl, who fancied that she understood the reason, for he had a discolored bruise on one cheek and a lump on his forehead.

"I want a few words with Farquhar," he explained. "I saw him at the settlement last night, but I couldn't get hold of him."

"No," returned Alison disdainfully, "you were too busy." Then something impelled her to add, "You don't seem a very great deal the worse for your exploit."

Thorne leaned against the side of the wagon, though she noticed that he first pulled the brim of his soft hat lower down over his face.

"That fact doesn't seem to cause you much satisfaction," he observed.

"Why should it?"

"We'll let that pass. On the other hand, there's just as little reason why you should be displeased with me."

"Are you sure that I am displeased?" inquired Alison, suspecting his intention of leading her up to some definite expression of indignation. This would, as she realized, be tantamount to the betrayal of a greater interest in his doings than she was prepared to show.

"Your appearance suggested it; but we'll call it disgusted, if you like," he retorted with amusement in his eyes.

It occurred to Alison that as he had evidently taken her resentment for granted it might after all be wiser to prove it justifiable.

"Then," she said, "a scene of the kind you figured in last night is naturally repugnant to any one not accustomed to it."

"Did it jar on Mrs. Farquhar?"

"No," Alison admitted, "I don't think it did."

"Then she's not accustomed to such scenes either. Rows of any kind really aren't very common in western Canada—but she seems to have more comprehension than you have."

This was turning the tables with a vengeance, and Alison was a trifle disconcerted, for instead of standing on his defense the man had unexpectedly proceeded to attack.

"Do you care to explain that?" she asked.

"I'll try," Thorne replied genially. "Perhaps because she's married, Mrs. Farquhar seems to understand that there are occasions when a man is driven into doing things he has an aversion for. In a way, it's to his credit when he recognizes that the alternative is out of the question. Can you get hold of that?"

"I'm not sure. You see, you suggest that there may be an alternative."

"It's often the case. The difficulty is that now and then the consequences of choosing it are a good deal worse than the other thing."

Alison could grasp the gist of this. There was something to be said for the resolution that could boldly grapple with a crisis as soon as it arose, instead of seeking the readiest means of escape from it.

"Now," added Thorne, "I was quite sure when the storekeeper appeared on the scene that he had hired the biggest tough in the settlement to make trouble for me. Of course I could have backed down, or at least I could have tried it, but the result would naturally have been to make the opposition more determined on the next occasion. It seemed wiser to face the situation then and there."

Again Alison felt that he was right, and she shifted her point of attack.

"You wish to assure me that it was with very great reluctance you jumped down from your wagon last night?"

Thorne laughed softly.

"No," he acknowledged; "if one must be honest, I can't go quite so far as that."

The girl was a little astonished at herself. In spite of his last confession her disgust—though she felt that was not the right word—with his conduct had greatly lessened, and she was conscious of a certain curiosity about his sensations during the incident.

"You were not in the least afraid?" she asked.

"No; but, after all, that's no great admission. You see, with most of us what we call courage is largely the result of experience. Now, I knew I was a match for Sergeant's tough. The man is big, but he has only a hazy notion when to lead off and how to parry."

"How did you know that—from experience?"

"Oh, no," returned Thorne, smiling. "I once watched him endeavoring to convince another man that he was utterly wrong in maintaining that the country derived the least benefit from the liquor prohibition laws. He succeeded because the other man didn't know any more than he did."

Alison laughed.

"After all, I don't think the subject is of very great interest. I wonder why you went to so much trouble to explain the thing to me."

The man gazed at her a moment in somewhat natural astonishment and then he took off his wide hat ceremoniously, though as a smile crept into his eyes she could not be sure whether it was done in seriousness or whimsically. In any case, he spoiled the effect by remembering his bruised face and hastily clapping it on again.

"May I say that I should like to retain your favorable opinion if it's possible?" he replied, and leaving his team plucking at the grass he turned away and entered the house. As it happened, Farquhar had just come in for dinner, which was not quite ready, and Thorne sat down opposite him.

"If your wife has no objections, I want you to do me a favor, Harry," he said.

His host expressed his readiness, but Mrs. Farquhar looked at him inquiringly.

"It's just this," he explained. "You deal with Grantly at the railroad settlement, and it's possible that he may not have formed a very accurate opinion of my character. In fact, I shouldn't wonder if odd things the boys have said have prejudiced him against me."

"It's quite likely," Farquhar admitted with a grin.

"Then I want you to assure him that I'm a perfectly responsible and reliable person."

Mrs. Farquhar laughed outright.

"Aren't you asking rather more than Harry could consistently do?"

"Well," Thorne replied thoughtfully, "it might serve the purpose if he told Grantly that I generally paid my bills. I don't ask him to guarantee my account or back my draft. It wouldn't be reasonable."

"It wouldn't," assented Mrs. Farquhar with uncompromising decision. "Are you going to make some new venture?"

"I have a hazy notion that I might take up a quarter-section and turn farmer."

His hostess flashed a significant glance at her husband, who smiled.

"But why?"

"If you don't get your crop hailed out, droughted, or frozen, you can now and then pick up a few dollars that way," Thorne explained. "Besides, a farmer is a person of acknowledged status on the prairie."

"Have you any other reasons—more convincing ones?"

Thorne regarded his hostess with undiminished gravity.

"If I have, they may appear by and by—when, for instance, I've doubled my holding and raised a record crop on three hundred and twenty acres."

"It isn't done in a day," warned Farquhar.

"It depends on how you begin; and commencing with a tent, a span of oxen, and one breaker-plow doesn't appeal to me. I want a couple of horse teams, the latest implements and the best seed I can get my hands on."

"I guess my word alone won't induce Grantly to let you have them—still, I'll do what I can."

Thorne spread out his hands.

"If anything more is wanted Hunter will be given an opportunity for supplying it. I don't see any reason why I shouldn't distribute my favors."

"And when does the rash experiment begin?"

Thorne straightened himself in his chair.

"It won't be an experiment. If I take hold, which isn't quite certain yet, I'll stay with the thing."

Then he broke into his usual careless laugh.

"I'll take a long drive round all the outlying settlements and work off a last frolic first."

"Yes," observed his hostess, "the carnival before Lent."

After that she proceeded to lay out dinner and they let the subject drop, but Alison, who entered the room just then, wondered why Mrs. Farquhar flashed a searching glance at her.

CHAPTER VII
A USEFUL FRIEND

Thorne drove away after dinner and, for it must be admitted that he preferred other people's cookery to his own, he contrived to reach the Hunter homestead just as supper was being laid out one evening some days later. During the meal he announced his intention of staying all night, but he did not explain what had brought him there until he sat with his host and hostess on the veranda while dusk crept up across the prairie. He felt inclined to wonder why Mrs. Hunter had favored them with her company, for he supposed that it was not altogether for the sake of enjoying the cool evening air. This surmise, as it happened, was quite correct. She had another purpose in her mind, for since Alison's visit she had taken a certain interest in the man.

"Is there anything keeping you about the bluff?" she asked at length. "I hear you have been in the neighborhood several days."

"Four," said Thorne, "if one must be precise. For one thing, there seemed to be a good demand for gramophones; for another, I wanted a talk with Elcot, and somebody said he was in at the railroad yesterday."

"I suppose you want to borrow a team from him again?"

"No," Thorne replied tranquilly; "in this case my object is to borrow money—or, at least, I want to raise it in such a way that if I don't meet my obligations your husband will be liable."

He turned toward his host.

"Do you think you could guarantee me to the extent of, say, a thousand dollars?"

"If it's merely a question of ability, I believe I could. Whether it would be judicious is quite another matter. What are you going to do with the money?"

Thorne explained his purpose much as he had done to Farquhar and Hunter listened with quiet amusement.

"The whim might last a month, and then there'd probably be an auction of your stock and implements, and we would get word that you had gone off on the trail again," he said. "A quiet life wouldn't

suit you. You tried it once with Bishop and it's generally understood that you turned his house inside out one day during the winter you spent with him."

"There's just a little truth in that," Thorne confessed. "Bishop's a nice man, but he has the most exasperating ways, and one would need more patience than I have to stand them. Try to imagine it—three months of improving conversation and undeviating regularity. Breakfast to the minute; the kettle to stand always on the same spot on the stove; the potato pan on another. Your boots must be put in exactly the same corner."

"It's unthinkable," laughed Mrs. Hunter. "We once had him here for a day or two. But what was the particular cause of trouble?"

Her husband smiled.

"House cleaning, I believe. Bishop undertakes it systematically once a month in the winter."

"Oftener," interjected Thorne. "That is, when the temperature's high enough for him to wash the floor."

"It wasn't high enough on the day in question," Hunter proceeded; "but I understand that he insisted on putting his furniture outside so that he could brush the place thoroughly, and Thorne told him to get the door open and stand carefully clear."

"Well?" Mrs. Hunter prompted.

"Thorne fired the things, you see, as quick as he could lift them; first the chairs and table, then the whole outfit of plates and cups and pots and pans. When he got half-way through, Bishop, who was horror-struck, made a protest. Thorne told him he would have the things put out, and out they were going."

Mrs. Hunter laughed and addressed her guest.

"Did you get a bump on your forehead on that occasion? Still, I suppose one could manage it by falling out of a wagon."

"I didn't," replied Thorne. "For any further particulars about this one I'm afraid you must apply at the settlement; but it seems to me that the subject I'm most anxious to talk about is being tactfully avoided."

"When you have so many friends up and down the prairie, why did you come to Elcot?"

"Your husband," explained Thorne unblushingly, "has the most money. Each will, however, be provided with an opportunity for contributing according to his ability. I'll borrow a team from one and a plow from another; the man who can't spare either can lend me a mower. In addition to this I'll have to arrange a second loan."

"Do you mean to stay with it?" Hunter asked.

"Give me a show and I'll convince you," Thorne assured him with a sudden intentness in his eyes. "I'm dead serious now."

Hunter looked at him quietly for a minute or two before he answered.

"Then," he said, "I'll guarantee you for a thousand dollars, payable after harvest."

Thorne thanked him and presently strolled away to get something out of his wagon. When he disappeared Florence turned to her husband.

"Elcot," she protested, "you are going to throw every dollar of that money away."

"I'm far from sure of it," returned Hunter quietly.

"In any case, it's only a few days since you told me you couldn't face the expense when I said that I wanted to spend a month in Toronto this spring."

"I should like to point out that you spent a good deal of the winter in Montreal."

"Would you expect me to live here altogether?"

Hunter made a gesture of weariness.

"I did expect something of that kind once upon a time; I'm sorry you have made it clear that I was wrong."

Florence favored him with a mocking smile.

"After all, you have stood it rather well. It's only during the last few months you have been getting bitter; but that's beside the question. Why are you so willing to waste on that man the money you can't spare for me?"

"To begin with, I'm by no means certain that I'll have to pay it. There's good stuff in him, and I want to give him an opportunity for becoming a useful citizen. In the next place, the line must be drawn

somewhere, and the crop I'm putting in wouldn't stand the cost of a spring in Toronto, if it's to be anything like the winter in Montreal."

Florence saw that he meant it and changed the subject, for there were times when she realized that it was not advisable to drive her husband too far. After a while he strolled away toward the stables in search of Thorne, and a few minutes later they sat down together on the summit of a low rise. Hunter lighted his pipe and, resting one elbow in the grass, lay smoking thoughtfully for a while before he spoke to his companion.

"Mavy," he said, "you are going to do what would be the wisest thing in the case of the average man—but I'm not wholly sure it would be that in yours. After all, there's a good deal to be said for the life you lead."

"It will hurt a little to give it up," Thorne acknowledged. "But isn't there something to be said for—the other kind?"

Hunter pointed with his pipe to where the rise ran into the birches.

"I spent my first summer as a farmer in a tent yonder, and in several ways it was the happiest one I've ever known. I couldn't cook, and as a rule when I unyoked my oxen after the day's work I was too played out to light a fire. I lived on messes that would probably kill me now, and my clothes went to bits before the summer was half-way through, but I was bubbling over with aspirations and a whole-hearted optimism then. I had scarcely a dollar, but I had what seemed better—an unwavering belief in the future. It was just as good then to lie down, healthily tired, and listen to the little leaves whispering in the cool of the dusk as it was to get up with the dawn without a care, fit and ready for what must be done."

"Oh, yes," assented Thorne, "I know. They never cast a stove in a foundry that would give you the same warmth as the red fire in the birch bluff, and the finest tea that goes to Russia wouldn't taste as good as what you drink flavored with wood smoke out of a blackened can. Then there's the empty prairie with the long trail leading on to something you feel will be better still beyond the horizon. Silence, space, liberty. How they get hold of you!"

"Then, what do you expect instead of them when you give them up?"

"It strikes me that you should be able to tell me."

Hunter smiled in a rather weary fashion and glanced back toward his house.

"Well," he said, "I've a place that's generally supposed to be the smartest one within sixty miles, and some status in the country, whatever it may be worth—my wife sees to that. The Grits would make me a leader if I cared for politics."

"Then why don't you? Your wife would like it."

"I think you ought to know. We both escaped from the cities, and while you drive your wagon I follow the plow. Men like you and I have nothing to do with wire-pullers' tricks, juggling committees, and shouting crowds. It's my part to make a little more wheat grow."

Thorne looked at him with a thoughtful face.

"I wonder," he said, "why you want to prevent me from doing the same?"

"I don't. I only want to warn you that if you make a success of it you can't own a house and land and teams without facing the cost."

"And that is?"

"Unconditional surrender. In a little while they'll own you. It's probable that you'll add a wife to them, and then, unless she's a woman of unusual courage, you'll find yourself shackled down to half the formulas you have run away from."

"Still, you get something in return."

"Yes," assented Hunter slowly. "I'm optimist enough to believe that—but it's an elusive quantity. I suppose it depends largely on what you expect."

He stood up and emptied his pipe.

"It's getting late and I have to start again at six to-morrow."

They went back to the house together and Thorne drove away early the next morning. Soon after midday Hunter set out for Graham's Bluff, where he had some business. When he had gone Florence carried a bundle of papers out to a little table placed in the shadow on the veranda, and sitting down before it looked at them with a frown. Most of them were bills, which she had once half thought of showing to her husband, though she had not done so, chiefly because the bankbook which she had recently sent up to be

balanced revealed the fact that there was then just eighty dollars standing to her credit. As Florence seldom filled in the counterfoils of the checks she drew, this information had been a painful shock to her. It was evident that she had spent a good deal more money in Montreal than she had supposed, and that she could not pay the bills, and there was no doubt that her husband would be signally displeased.

As a rule he was very patient. She was willing to own that, though she now and then did so with a certain illogical irritation at his complacency; but when it was a question of money he could be inflexible. He had, however, treated her liberally, and to save her the necessity of applying to him he paid so many dollars into her bank twice a year and within that limit left her to control the domestic expenses as she pleased. This, indeed, was what chiefly troubled her, for there should have been enough to her credit to carry her on until harvest, when the next payment would be made. This, however, was unfortunately not the case. There was no doubt that she had to grapple with a financial crisis.

She added up the bills several times and signally failed to make them any less, though it was now perfectly clear that it would not be advisable to show them to her husband. Thrusting them aside, she leaned back in her chair and presently decided, with the renewal of an existing grievance, that the situation was the result of Elcot's absurd retiring habits. If he would only go about with her now and then, or bring a few smart people out in the summer, she might be able to take pleasure in less costly diversions and, to some extent at least, avoid extravagance. On the other hand, however, there were, as she had already realized, one or two reasons why it seemed just as well that Elcot should stay at home. He now looked very much like a farmer, though he had not been reared as one, and she fancied that his rather grim reserve, which was broken now and then by attacks of sardonic candor, was scarcely likely to be appreciated in the world she visited. As a matter of fact, his own relatives with whom she sometimes stayed were in the habit of smiling significantly when they mentioned him. He had, it seemed, flung up excellent prospects when, in spite of his family's protests, he went West with very inadequate means as a prairie farmer. That he had succeeded was, she understood, largely due to the fact that an eccentric relative who

agreed with him had subsequently died and left him a few hundred dollars.

In the meanwhile these reflections brought her no nearer a solution of the difficulty. There was a big deficit, and she had no idea how she was to meet it. Then she remembered that when she was married Elcot had among other things settled a certain strip of land on her. He had failed to interest her in its management, though she was pleased to receive the proceeds of its cultivation, which he handed her after each harvest. They were sowing again now, and she had heard that it was possible to sell a crop, or at least to raise money on it in some way, beforehand. She determined to question Nevis, who carried on a general business at the railroad settlement, about the matter when he next drove over, which he had said he would probably do during the next day or two. He might even turn up that afternoon and, as Elcot was out of the way, she wished he would. He was a man of prepossessing appearance and easy manners, and he had now and then paid her a deferential homage which was not unpleasant. Indeed, she had once or twice contrasted him with Elcot, and the comparison had not been altogether in the latter's favor.

Half an hour later he drove up in a light buggy and handed the horse over to one of the teamsters. Then he walked up on the veranda, where Florence was still sitting with the bills before her. Turning around when he had greeted her, he pointed to the plodding teams which moved down the long furrows that ran back from the house.

"I didn't see Elcot at work with the boys as I drove by," he said.

"He is away and probably will not be back until after supper."

"I'm sorry I can't wait so long," Nevis replied, taking the chair to which she pointed. "Anyway, it isn't a matter of much importance, and I'll try to call again."

Florence sent for some tea, though it is seldom that refreshments of any kind are provided between the regular meals on the prairie, and then leaned back in her chair watching him while he sat with his cup in his hand. He was, as she had decided on other occasions, a well-favored man, dark-haired and dark-eyed, and, as usual, he was artistically dressed. The hat he had laid on a neighboring chair was a

genuine Panama, such as Mexican half-breeds spend months in weaving; his rather tight, light-colored clothes were excellently cut; and once more it struck her with a sense of injury that it was a pity Elcot insisted on attiring himself as his teamsters did.

"I had half expected to find you gone," he said; "you mentioned a visit to Toronto when I last saw you. After all, if your husband can spare you, it must be nice to get away. You must feel that you are rather wasted here."

This was a point on which Florence was convinced already and she did not in the least object to his mentioning it.

"Elcot," she replied dryly, "has his farm."

"Well," responded Nevis, "I'm glad you haven't gone. The rest of us can badly spare the one bright light which shines upon our primitive obscurity."

His hostess did not check him. The man was usually rather daring, and she seldom resented a speech of this kind, no matter from whom it came.

"In any case, I am not going," she informed him. "That"—she pointed to the bundle of papers—"is the reason."

"Bills? Permit me."

Before she could prevent it he took them up and flicked them over. Then he turned and looked at her with a smile in his dark eyes.

"On examination of them I'm inclined to think the reason's a good one."

Florence recognized that he had ventured further in the last few minutes than Elcot would have done in a month before he married her, and, though she was not greatly displeased, she changed the subject, for a time.

"What did you want to see my husband about?" she asked.

"I'm anxious to disarm his opposition to the part I feel like taking in the Bluff Creamery scheme. I'm willing to back the experiment on reasonable terms, but I understand that Elcot's dubious about permitting it; and Thorne has been advising the boys to have nothing to do with me. Rough on a man who's ready to finance them, isn't it?"

Florence did not care whether it was rough or not. Except that she would have liked to spend double her husband's income, financial questions seldom interested her.

"I suppose you wish to do it to encourage them—out of philanthropy?" she suggested with a yawn.

Nevis laughed good-humoredly.

"You can put that question to your husband or Thorne. I'm willing to confess that in these affairs I'm out for business pure and simple, though that doesn't prevent my taking an interest in my friends' difficulties now and then." He tapped the bills with his fingers. "You are at present short of three hundred dollars?"

"I'm short of nine hundred," corrected Florence with candor.

The next question was difficult. In fact, it was one that could not well be put directly, and the man's voice became judiciously sympathetic.

"Wheat sold badly last fall, and Elcot has, no doubt, his share of worries?" he suggested. "You naturally wouldn't like to add to them?"

They looked at each other and Florence was quite aware that he would go a little farther as soon as he had ascertained whether she had any intention of mentioning the deficit to her husband. She also recognized that the fact that she had drawn his attention to the bills would make this seem improbable.

"I'm not sure that I'm so unselfish," she said with a laugh. "In any case, I'm independent; I don't care to bother other people with my troubles."

The man leaned forward, looking at her as though begging a favor.

"I suppose it hasn't occurred to you that such a course might be a little rough on some of them. Do you never make an exception?"

"I haven't done so yet."

"Then," said Nevis eagerly, "if you'll try it in this instance I'll tell you what I'll do. The thing's in my line of business and I'll find those nine hundred dollars for you."

Florence sat silent, watching him for a few moments. She meant to agree, and though she quite realized that general opinion would have regarded this as tantamount to placing herself in the man's power,

that did not trouble her. She had never yet been in any man's power and she did not intend to be.

"Well," she consented at length; "but it mustn't be a favor."

Nevis tactfully declared that it could be done on a purely business footing, with which object he suggested, after a few judicious questions, that she should give him an order for the delivery of so many bushels of wheat after harvest, which she did. That the document was most informal and merely scribbled on a half-sheet of note-paper did not seem to concern him. Then he wrote her out a check.

"I don't mind saying that I'm going to make eight per cent. out of you, which is enough to content me," he explained. "You see, I never let an opportunity go by."

Florence made no comment. Whether or not he would continue to be content with the mere interest on the money was a question with which she would be competent to deal when it arose.

In a few minutes he prepared to take his departure. He bowed over her hand in a manner that was not common on the prairie, and she watched him with a meaning smile when he drove away.

CHAPTER VIII
A FIT OF TEMPER

It was two days later that Nevis led his worn-out horse up the side of one of the deep ravines which every here and there wind through the prairie. It was then about the middle of the afternoon and almost unpleasantly hot in the sheltered hollow. The crest of it shut out the wind that swept the open levels, and the sunshine struck down between the birches, which were just then unfolding lace-like streamers of tiny leaves. There were no other trees except the willows wrapped in a bright emerald flush along the banks of a little creek.

Nevis felt unpleasantly weary. Although a man of fine proportions, he did not care for physical exertion and avoided it as far as possible; but the commercial instinct was strong in him and he had driven a long way in pursuit of money during the last few days. It was supposed that he picked up a good deal of it in the most unlikely as well as the more obvious places, for he was troubled by few scruples and was endued with the faculty of getting money. He was a young man, evidently of excellent education, though nobody seemed to know where he had received it or where he came from. Beginning as an implement dealer and general mortgage broker on a humble scale two or three years earlier, he had extended his field of operations rapidly.

It appears to be an unfortunate fact that the grip of the money-lender is firmly fastened on the small agriculturalist in many countries, and, strange to say, perhaps more particularly in those where the soil he tills is his own. In the new wheat-lands of the West the possessions of the small farmers and ranchers on both sides of the frontier are as a rule mortgaged to the hilt, or at least they were a few years ago. They lived, and no more, for when the seasons vouchsafed them a bountiful harvest, storekeeper, land agency man, or mortgage jobber usually swept the proceeds into his coffer. It must, nevertheless, be said that many a man would be forced to abandon the struggle after an untimely frost in fall without the money-lender's help, and that the latter has often to face a serious hazard which varies with the weather.

Nevis was half-way up the slope when his jaded horse refused to go on, and he sat down on a fallen birch, wondering where he could borrow another one or, if this were not possible, how he could reach the settlement. He was then, he supposed, eight or nine miles from the nearest farm, and it seemed very probable that even if he succeeded in reaching it every horse would be engaged in plowing. He had no provisions with him, and he had eaten nothing since breakfast that morning. He was unpleasantly conscious of this fact, for he usually lived well.

A few minutes later a drumming of hoofs fell across the birches from the plain above, and he saw a team swing over the brink of the declivity. For a moment or two the horses disappeared among the trees, but by the rapid beat of hoofs which mingled with the rattle of wheels they seemed to be coming down at a gallop. Nevis was aware that the prairie farmers as a rule wasted very little time in breaking young horses, but harnessed them to plow or wagon as soon as they were amenable to any control at all.

As the team above broke out furiously from among the trees a hoarse shout reached him directing him to pull his buggy clear; but he decided to let it stay exactly where it was. He fancied that the driver, who could not get by, could stop his team if he made a determined effort, and this surmise proved correct, for a minute or two later Thorne, braced backward on the driving-seat, looked down at him with a wrathful face.

"What did you stop me for? Couldn't you get out of the way?" he asked.

"Why were you driving at that breakneck pace?"

"A jack-rabbit bolted right under Volador's feet. I'll get on again if you'll move your buggy."

Nevis sat still.

"Are you open to earn a few dollars?"

"It depends," replied Thorne, "on what I'm expected to do and whom they're coming from."

"I'm anxious to get hold of somebody who'll drive me to the settlement. This horse is played out."

"In that case I'm not open. I'm too busy."

"I'll give you your own price for your time. It will probably pay you better than—selling mirrors."

Thorne noticed the half-contemptuous stress upon the last words.

"You should have been content with the reason I offered," he retorted. "As you were not, I'll give you another; I'm not a very particular person, but I shouldn't like to touch your money."

Nevis stood up with a laugh of half-veiled malevolence.

"Do you think that kind of thing is wise?"

"I haven't troubled to ask myself the question. I've never been remarkably prudent, and when I saw that you meant to hold me up my first impulse was to drive smash into your buggy. It was only out of regard for the horses that I didn't do so."

"Is there any particular reason for this gratuitous insolence?"

"There are two," explained Thorne. "In the first place, I don't like being stopped on an open trail; and in the next, I've spent the last few days borrowing things for a friend of mine whom you pitched out on to the prairie with his wife and child."

Nevis smiled.

"I might have guessed it was something of that kind. You're rudimentary and haven't the crudest notion of what you have up against you. It would be about as sensible for one of your horses to start kicking because it didn't like your style of driving."

"That," returned Thorne, "is just where you're wrong. I've no complaint against human nature in general or the way this country's run. My dislikes are concentrated on a few particularly obnoxious people who live in it, of whom you're one. You're a discredit even to the profession which you follow."

"It's not as dangerous to the people I deal with as yours is," Nevis retorted.

"We'll let that pass. I've already stopped here talking with you longer than I care about. Will you pull your buggy out of the way?"

Nevis felt a strong inclination to let the buggy remain where it stood. It was galling to be spoken to in that fashion by a wandering pedler, and even more annoying to be left stranded nine miles from anywhere with a worn-out horse; but a glance at the lean,

determined face of the man on the driving-seat of the wagon decided him, and he drew his rig aside. Then Thorne looked down again.

"There's one thing you can do, and that's to unyoke the beast and hobble it, and then strike for Taylor's on your feet," he advised. "The walk will probably do you good, if only by convincing you that it doesn't pay to drive a horse to the verge of exhaustion."

He swung his whip, and the team plunged forward down the declivity with the wagon jolting and rattling behind them. Two or three hours later he pulled up in front of Farquhar's homestead, where, as he informed its owner, he meant to stay the night; and when the dusk was closing in he sat with the others on the stoop.

"Did you meet anybody on the trail?" Mrs. Farquhar asked.

"Nevis," answered Thorne genially. "I believe I insulted him. Anyway, I meant to, but he's tough in the hide, and I'm half afraid I wasn't quite up to my usual form."

"But why did you want to insult him?"

"Well," replied Thorne, with an air of reflection, "I think it was his clothes that irritated me."

"His clothes?" Alison broke in.

Thorne turned to her with a smile.

"Yes," he said; "unreasonable, isn't it? Still, you see, the man was so immaculately neat, from his tie, which was a marvel, to his very elegant pointed shoes. I dare say he'll find them most uncomfortable before he has walked nine miles in them."

"But why should that annoy you?"

"If you mean the thought of his limping across the prairie for miles and getting very hot and dusty, it certainly didn't. If you mean his apparel, too much neatness always acts as a red rag on me, and in this case the manner in which he was got up seemed symbolical. It hinted that only the best of everything would content him, and that he meant to get it, no matter what it cost anybody else. There was his horse, for instance, played out, foul with dust, and thirsty—with a creek close by. He'd driven the poor brute almost to death the last few days sooner than cut out a single visit to any one he wanted to see about the creamery."

"We have got to head him off that scheme," declared Farquhar; and his wife joined in again.

"Haven't you some other grievance against him?"

"If another one is needed, there's Langton's case," answered Thorne. "The man's a crank, of course, which is partly why I like him, and he has some eccentric notions about farming; but he has paid Nevis his interest for quite a while, besides buying everything he used from him at double prices, and now the first time the money's not forthcoming he's sold up. Nevis turned him out, with his wife still ailing, and the child."

Mrs. Farquhar started with a flush of indignation in her face.

"It's the first I've heard of it. Why didn't you send us word?"

"Langton's rather out of your district, and the boys have fixed him up. They got a few things together, and he's camped in a tent on Government land. I believe they're going to build him a sod and birchpole house."

"I suppose," interjected Farquhar, "you were somewhere about?"

"That's certain," laughed his wife. "Who went round and got the tent and the other things you mentioned, Mavy?"

Thorne smiled.

"As soon as they heard of it, the boys brought them in."

Alison cast a quick glance at him. He was quite devoid of self-consciousness, and it was evident that he took the thing lightly; but she fancied that there were strong chivalrous impulses in this humorous vagabond which would on due occasion lead him to ride a reckless tilt against overwhelming odds in the cause of the helpless and oppressed. Her heart warmed toward him, as it had done once or twice before, but she said nothing, and it became evident that Mrs. Farquhar shared the thought that was in her mind.

"Mavy," she cautioned, "I'm afraid you'll get yourself hurt some day by doing more than is wise or needful. Nobody could find fault with you for helping Langton, but you should have stopped at that. Insulting men like Nevis just because they dress well, or for other reasons, is apt to lead to trouble."

Then Farquhar broke in, and Alison recognized that he meant to follow his wife's lead.

"It was Langton's misfortune that he wouldn't fall into line," he said. "If he had, he wouldn't have been forced to borrow money from Nevis. For instance, what has the electrical tension in the

atmosphere he used to fret about to do with one's harrowing, anyway, unless it brings down rain, and why must he cut his prairie hay two or three weeks after all his neighbors have theirs in?"

"He says he likes it thoroughly ripened," Thorne answered with a laugh. "Still, I can't see why a man should be hounded down because he won't do exactly what everybody else does. What do you think, Miss Leigh?"

"It's rather a pity, but I'm afraid men of that kind generally have to pay," replied Alison. "That is, unless they're very strong and fortunate, and then they lead. What was supposed to be a craze of theirs becomes a desirable custom, and the others humbly copy them."

"And if the others won't?" questioned Farquhar.

"Even then, it's perhaps just as well there are a few men with the courage of their convictions who will couch the lance in the face of any opposition that can be brought against them, and ride right home. There must be something in their fancies, and the stir they make clears the air. Stagnation's unwholesome."

Mrs. Farquhar regarded her severely.

"You shouldn't encourage him. It's quite superfluous. He'd charge a locomotive any day with pleasure," she said.

"Well," laughed Thorne, "you will no doubt be consoled to hear that I've come into line. There are now one hundred and sixty acres of virgin prairie recorded in my name, and I believe a carload of sawed lumber and general fixings will arrive at the station in the next few days. When they do, I'll borrow your wagon and hired man to haul them out, though I'll have to camp in a tent until I get my first crop in."

Farquhar and his wife looked astonished, and both laughed when he gravely reproached them for not believing that he would carry out the project which he had already mentioned. Then the two men strolled away toward the barn together, and Alison was left with Mrs. Farquhar. The prairie was wrapped in shadow now, and a half-moon was rising above its eastern rim. It was very still, and there was a wonderful freshness in the chilly air. Looking out upon the vast sweep of dusky grass, it seemed to Alison that this wide country gave one clearness of vision and breadth of character.

"Does Thorne really mean to turn farmer?" she asked at length.

"It looks as if he does," answered Mrs. Farquhar. "Why shouldn't he?"

"I can't think of any reason," replied Alison. "Still, it isn't what I should have anticipated. What can have influenced him?"

"I have a suspicion that he means to get married. He couldn't expect his wife to set up housekeeping in a wagon, though, for that matter, I don't know whether he lives in the vehicle or camps on the ground beside it."

Alison knew, however, and on the whole she was glad that it was too dark for her companion to see her face clearly. It was, for no very ostensible reason, not exactly pleasant to think of Thorne's getting married at all. The idea of his being willing to contemplate marriage, so to speak, in the abstract, as the men who went to Winnipeg for their wives did, was repugnant to her, and the alternative possibility that he had somebody in particular in view already afforded her no great consolation.

"I suppose he wouldn't have very much trouble if that was his idea," she said with a trace of disdain.

"No," responded Mrs. Farquhar; "there would be very little trouble in Leslie Thorne's case. Whatever that man may lack it won't be the love of women."

It occurred to Alison that there was truth in this. She could even confess that the man's light-hearted manner, his whimsical generosity and his daring appealed to her.

"He doesn't seem to get on very well with Florence Hunter," she said reflectively.

Mrs. Farquhar laughed.

"I think I may tell you a secret which Mavy has never guessed. He could have got on a good deal better with Mrs. Hunter had he been anxious to, and she hasn't forgiven him because he didn't realize it."

Alison started, and a warmth crept into her face, but her hostess proceeded:

"I don't mean very much by that. Mrs. Hunter merely wished to—annex—him; to command his respectful homage, which he was quite ready to pay her as Elcot's wife, though that wasn't quite what she intended. There's an unpleasant streak in that woman's nature."

Alison sat silent a moment or two, for she was forced to confess that this sounded correct.

"But Florence can have no complaint against her husband," she objected. "He seems to indulge her and treat her generously."

"That's half the trouble," was the answer. "Some day she'll wear his patience out, and then he'll take the other way—and they'll get on better afterward. However, that's a matter that doesn't concern us." She paused a moment, with a smile. "Anyway, I'm glad you decided to come to me."

"Thank you," said Alison quietly.

She had never regretted her choice. The work she had undertaken was certainly not what she had expected to do when she came to Canada, and she smiled as she remembered the indignation her mother had expressed concerning it in her last letter; but her duties were not unpleasant, and she was growing fond of the unassuming but very sensible people with whom she dwelt. Their view was narrowed by no prejudices, and they disdained pretense; they toiled with cheerful courage and were as cheerfully willing to hold out an open hand to the stranger and the unfortunate. The latter fact was once more made evident when Farquhar, followed by Thorne, strolled up to the door.

"I think I'll start off at sunup and drive over to see how Langton's getting on," he said. "I couldn't very well be back the same night, but you'll have Miss Leigh with you."

"Of course," assented his wife, smiling. "It was only yesterday that you declared you didn't know how you were going to get through with the sowing. I suppose you'll want to take a few things along with you?"

Thorne produced a strip of paper and handed it to her.

"I can't always trust my memory," he explained.

They went into the house, where a light was already burning, and Mrs. Farquhar glanced at the paper with a smile.

"Well," she said, "I suppose I can manage to let you have about half of what you ask for." Then she turned to Alison. "As soon as he mentioned the matter I expected this."

CHAPTER IX
THE RAISING

One afternoon when the prairie was flooded with sunshine and sprinkled with a flush of tender green, Farquhar drove his wife and Alison up to Thorne's new holding. A tent with loose curtain flapping in the breeze stood on a slight rise, with sundry piles of boards and framed timber lying on the grass about it, while Thorne and a young lad stood beside a fire above which a four-gallon coal-oil can hung boiling. His face was smutted and there was grime on his hands; while near him smoke was issuing from a beehive-shaped mass of soil which Mrs. Farquhar informed Alison was an earth oven.

The girl waited behind a few moments when her companions greeted Thorne, looking about her with some curiosity. An oblong of shattered clods, almost hidden by the fresh green blades of oats, stretched across the foreground, and beyond it there was the usual vast sweep of grass. On one side of the plowed land, however, a thin birch bluff in full leaf straggled up the rise, and a little creek of clear water wound through a deep hollow not far away. The situation, she decided, was an attractive one. Then she glanced at the piles of timber, which seemed to be arranged in carefully planned order, and surmised from the quantity of sawdust strewed among the grass that a good deal of work had been done on it by somebody. There was also a row of birch logs, evidently obtained from the bluff, with notches cut in them, and a heap of thin strips of wood which had a sweet resinous smell. These were red-cedar roofing shingles from British Columbia.

Alison strolled forward and joined the group about the fire.

"It will be a couple of hours yet before the boys turn up; and, considering everything, it's just as well," Thorne was explaining. "Still, the bread ought to be ready, and I'd be glad if somebody would get it out to cool. I want the oven for the chickens."

"Where are they?" Mrs. Farquhar inquired.

Thorne suddenly stooped over the big coal-oil can.

"I was almost forgetting them; they're here. Dave should have fished them out some time ago."

Alison glanced into the improvised cauldron and saw to her astonishment what looked like a mass of bedraggled fowls.

"Oh," she cried, "have you boiled them with their feathers on?"

"Well," replied Thorne, somewhat ruefully, "I certainly didn't mean to. In fact, I put them in to bring their feathers off, though I've hitherto generally done it beneath the blow-down valve of a thrashing engine."

He turned to his young companion.

"Be quick! Fish them out!"

The lad did it with a strip of shingle, and when a number of dripping birds were strewed upon the grass Alison was more astonished still.

"Where have their heads gone?" she exclaimed.

"I'll leave Dave to tell you that; I believe it's his first attempt at dressing fowls," chuckled Thorne. "I just sent his employer word that I wanted chickens, and this is how they were brought."

The lad colored, for he was very young.

"Jackson drove off as soon as he'd told Stepney and me to get them," he explained. "We're both of us just out from Toronto, and we didn't know how to set about the thing." He paused and looked at Alison. "I don't mind admitting that neither of us enjoyed it, but it had to be done."

"I must add that he told me he made Stepney use the ax," laughed Thorne.

"I had to hold them, anyway—and that wasn't very much better," retorted the lad.

Thorne turned to Farquhar.

"You'll have to pluck; I dare say Mrs. Farquhar and Miss Leigh will get out the bread and what crockery there is. The boys will probably bring some plates and things along with them; that is, if they're wise."

He moved away and Alison sat down on the grass and laughed.

"I believe he can cook better than I can, but he's primitive in some respects," she commented. "Shall we all have to use the same things if the boys don't bring the cups?"

"Oh, no," Mrs. Farquhar assured her. "He'll no doubt provide a few old fruit cans. Anyway, you must not expect too much of him. He has been working his fingers off for the last six weeks, and as there has been moonlight lately it's very probable that he has cut himself down to an hour or two's sleep. Perhaps you haven't noticed that it shows on him."

As a matter of fact, Alison had done so. She had seen very little of Thorne for the last few weeks, and now it struck her that his face was leaner and browner than it had been and that there were signs of tension in his eyes. Then she glanced at the strip of plowed land and the piles of timber.

"Has he done all that?" she asked.

"Most of it, anyway. Some of the boys helped him when they could, which wasn't very often. I believe he has done about twice as much as Harry considered possible. I've an idea that Mavy is going to open his neighbors' eyes."

Alison glanced at the empty prairie and wondered where the neighbors lived; but just them Mrs. Farquhar called her to the oven, which she opened with a spade, and they raked out several big and somewhat blackened loaves. After that, they proceeded to the tent and busied themselves laying out the provisions it contained.

It was an hour or two later when the guests arrived in dusty rigs of various kinds and different stages of decrepitude, and Alison noticed that those who were accompanied by their wives and daughters also brought baskets with them. They were evidently acquainted with the limitations of bachelor housekeeping. For the most part, however, the new arrivals were young men, deeply bronzed and wiry, though one, whom they seemed to regard as leader, had a lined face and grizzled hair. He gathered them round him when the horses had been unyoked and tethered.

"Boys," he said, "you haven't come here just for fun, though you're going to get that later. In the first place you have to earn your supper." He turned to Thorne. "Will you send us to our places and tell us what to do?"

"No," replied Thorne; "I'd rather leave the thing to the best man on the ground. I'll take my orders from him and stand in among the crowd."

The elder man made a sign of acquiescence, for he now knew where he stood and etiquette was satisfied. He and Thorne walked round and examined the piles of timber. Then he sent the men to their places; one with a hammer here, two or three with long, steel-shod poles there, another with a saw at a corner, and the rest spread out in a row.

"Now," he directed, "if you're ready we'll get the house on end. The girls are watching you!"

They went at the work with a rush, and the little oblong marked out upon the prairie sod became alive with toiling figures. Tall birch posts rose as by magic, with struggling men thrusting with the long pike-poles beneath them; stringers, plates and ties seemed to fly into place; and Alison, sitting on the grass with Mrs. Farquhar, wondered as the skeleton of the house grew moment by moment before her eyes. She had never thought it possible that a dwelling could be built in a night; but the men were clearly on their mettle, and they worked with an almost bewildering activity. They were on the ground one minute, hauling ponderous masses of timber, and the next climbing among the framing; were standing with one foot on a slender beam, or crawling along another on hands and knees. There was a constant thudding of ax-heads on wooden pegs, a sharper ringing of hammers on heavy nails; curt orders broke through the clatter of boards and the persistent crunch of saws. Still, there seemed to be no confusion. Each man knew exactly what to do, for, though houses are by no means invariably raised in this fashion on the prairie, some of the men had learned their work in the bush of Michigan, and some in Ontario. When the hammers clattered more furiously and the skeleton became partly clothed, there were cries of encouragement from the women.

"Jake will have that plate pinned down before your spikes are in!" called one.

"Are you going to let the boys from across the creek get ahead of you?" protested another.

A third ran forward with both hands full of nails.

"They're catching you up!" she shouted. "Get them in! I can't have the laugh put on my man."

Husband, sweetheart and brother responded gallantly, and the pace became faster still, until at length Thorne shouted and waved his hand.

"We're through. It's time to quit," he said. "You've done 'most twice as much as I ever figured on your getting in to-night."

They had worked willingly, but it was evident that most of them were as willing to stop. Hammers, saws, and axes were flung together, and the men stood in groups, hot and gasping, in the early dusk. Thorne walked up to their leader.

"I can only say 'Thank you!' though that doesn't go far enough," he said. "What makes the thing seem more to me is that I haven't the least call on one of you."

There was a murmur of denial and then they waited until he turned to Mrs. Farquhar, though he addressed the company generally.

"Now," he invited, "I'll ask you to come in and look at my place."

He moved on ahead with Mrs. Farquhar, while the others fell in behind; but it seemed that the selection he had made did not satisfy all of them, for there was a laugh when somebody cried:

"She has got a good man already! It isn't a square deal!"

Then, and how it came about Alison was never sure, though she had a suspicion that her employer must have connived at it, Mrs. Farquhar either moved or was quietly pushed aside, and she and Thorne were left to cross the threshold together at the head of the company. This appeared to please his guests, for there was further laughter when another voice cried:

"It's the first time. Didn't they teach you manners in the old country, Mavy? What's the matter with giving her your arm?"

Alison was conscious of a certain embarrassment, but she moved on quietly and shot one swift glance at Thorne. He was looking up at the beams above him, of which she was glad, for she was wondering whether the others attached any particular significance to the fact that she was the first woman to enter his new house with him. Dismissing the question as troublesome, she glanced about her and saw the roof framing cutting black against the soft blue of the night overhead. The house, she supposed, would eventually contain four rooms, two on the ground floor and two above, and though only the

principal supports had been placed in position yet, she once more wondered how the man and his companions had accomplished so much.

"What you have done is really astonishing!" she exclaimed. "I suppose you had everything ready, but even then you are not a carpenter or a builder."

Thorne laughed.

"The fact that I can sell patent medicines to people who haven't the least use for them ought to be a guaranty of my ability to do anything in reason."

"He's not quite right," interposed Farquhar, appearing from behind them. "In a general way, the man who's smart at business is good at nothing else. Most of those who are couldn't hammer a nail in. Anyway, Mavy hasn't the least bit of the true commercial instinct in him."

"Haven't I?" Thorne appealed to Mrs. Farquhar. "Is there another man round here who could start off for a month's drive and sell out most of a wagonload of mirrors and gramophones?"

"No," laughed Mrs. Farquhar; "I don't think there is; but that's not quite the point. The proof of commercial ability lies not in the sales but in the margin after them, and you never seemed to get much richer by your efforts. You don't sell your things because you're a smart business man, but because the boys like you."

The rest had evidently heard her, for there were cries of assent, and Alison was conscious of a little thrill of sympathy when Thorne turned to his other guests.

"I should be a proud man if I were quite convinced that that is right."

They assured him of it, and there was no doubt about their sincerity. A few minutes later they trooped out again, when somebody announced that supper was ready. There were neither chairs nor tables, and though the dew was falling they sat down on the grass, while a full moon that had sailed half-way up the heavens poured down a silver light on them. The crockery proved insufficient, and husbands and wives or sweethearts shared each other's cups, but they made an astonishing feast, for the inhabitants

of that land eat with the same strenuous vigor with which they work and live.

In the meanwhile Alison became interested in watching the women. They were not very numerous, and one and all were dressed in garments that were obviously the work of their own fingers. They were not bronzed like the men, and even in the moonlight it struck her that their faces lacked the delicate bloom of the average Englishwoman's skin. Their hands were hard, and in most cases reddened; but for all that there was a brightness in their eyes and an optimistic cheerfulness in their manner which she fancied would hardly have characterized such an assembly in the old country.

Then she noticed that one young woman sat at Thorne's side not far away, and that they seemed to be talking confidentially. She could not be sure that they had not one cup between them, and this possibility irritated her. The girl, she confessed, was not ungraceful, although slighter and generally straighter in figure than most young Englishwomen, and she had rather fine hair. It shone lustrously in the moonlight, and there were golden gleams in it. There was also no doubt that she had fine eyes. Alison could think of no reason why Thorne should not talk to whom he liked, but she was, in spite of this, not pleased with what she had noticed.

After a while somebody tuned a fiddle, and when they began dancing on the grass, Alison realized that most of them danced very well. Thorne led her out once, but he seemed preoccupied, and soon afterward he and the girl she had already noticed once more drew apart from the rest. Alison watched them sitting out two dances in the shadow of the house, and she felt curious as to what they had to say to each other. As a matter of fact, Thorne was looking at his companion very thoughtfully just then.

"Lucy," he said, "I'm afraid what Jake has done is going to get him into trouble."

"I tried to make him see that, but he said as they'd seized his homestead he couldn't stay here, and he allowed that, one way or another, he'd paid off all he owed," the girl replied. "Nevis put up all kinds of charges on him and bled him dry the past few years."

"Of course he did," assented Thorne. "Still, that's not likely to count for a great deal in his favor. The trouble is that they could jail

him for selling off those cattle after he got notice of foreclosure. What made him do it?"

Lucy looked down.

"You may not have heard that we were to have been married most three years ago, but my father said Jake must wipe off his mortgage first. When he died he left us nothing but the teams and implements, and mother and I tried to run the place with a hired man, but we've been going back ever since, and Jake was getting deeper in debt all the while."

Thorne made a sign of sympathy.

"Now that Nevis has shut down on him, I suppose he's going away to work on the new branch line until he can get hold of another place farther West and send for you."

"Yes," returned Lucy slowly, "now you understand the thing, or, anyway, most of it. Only—" and she looked up at him with appealing eyes—"Jake hasn't got very far yet, and we had word that the police troopers are out after him."

"Where is he?"

Lucy turned and pointed toward the bluff.

"Yonder."

Thorne started, but he sat still again, rather grim in face, and his companion went on:

"He hasn't a horse. He got out in a hurry with no provisions, and if he went into the settlement for some it would put the troopers on to his trail." She laid a hand on Thorne's arm. "Mavy, you're sure not going to let them get him."

"If I'd a grain of sense that's just what I would do; as I haven't, I suppose I must try to get him off. Well, it would be better for several reasons that Jake shouldn't see me, but if you'll stuff a basket with eatables I'll quietly drive a horse round toward the bluff. While you're getting the things together I'll have another dance."

He led out a flushed matron, and when at length he left her breathless, only Alison and one other person saw him slip away over the edge of the hollow through which the creek flowed. There was something in the way he moved that aroused Alison's curiosity, and she walked forward a few yards until she reached the crest of the slope, from which she saw him saddle one of the two hobbled horses

that browsed apart from the rest. She wondered why he did so, but it was some relief to notice that the girl he had spoken to was not with him, and when he moved on again toward the bluff she turned back to where the others were.

He reappeared a few minutes later and claimed a dance, which she gave him, and some time had passed when a drumming of hoofs grew rapidly louder and two shadowy figures materialized out of the prairie. Then the music stopped as a couple of mounted police drew bridle in front of the astonished guests. One who carried a carbine across his saddle threw up his hand commandingly.

"Is Jake Winthrop here?" he asked.

"No," answered Thorne, who strode forward; "he certainly is not, Corporal Slaney."

"Have you seen him to-night?"

"I haven't," was the quiet answer.

"Then," said the corporal, "you may be surprised to hear that he was seen heading for this bluff two or three hours ago, and that we struck his trail where he crossed the creek not a mile back."

He turned in his saddle and looked at the others.

"Can you give me any information?"

Their faces were clear in the moonlight, and Alison felt that they at least had nothing to conceal; but the corporal did not look quite satisfied with the assurances they offered him. Addressing two or three, one after another, he interrogated them sharply.

"I'll have to trouble you to lead up your horses, boys," he said at length.

They did it with some grumbling, and when the corporal was convinced that not a beast was missing, he turned to Thorne.

"You keep a team here, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," replied Thorne carelessly, though he had dreaded this question.

The corporal swung round and looked at his companion, who had quietly slipped away for a few minutes when they first rode in.

"There's one beast hobbled by the creek," announced the trooper. "I can see no sign of the other."

The corporal looked at Thorne.

"Do you feel like making any explanation?"

"No. If you have anything against me I'll leave you to prove it."

The corporal then turned to one of the guests.

"You rode in. Where did you put your saddle?"

"On the ground with the rest."

"Can you produce it?"

"No," admitted the man; "I may as well allow that I can't, if the trooper has been round counting them."

The corporal looked at him steadily.

"Well," he said, "what we have to do first of all is to pick up Winthrop's trail. It's quite likely we'll have a word for Thorne and you later."

He spoke to his companion and they rode out across the prairie. When they disappeared, Thorne called to the fiddler to strike up another tune, and the dance went on again.

CHAPTER X
THORNE RESENTS REPROOF

Farquhar was sitting with his wife and Alison on the stoop in the cool of the evening a week or two after the house-raising, when Thorne rode up out of the prairie, leading a second horse. He tethered the two beasts to a fence before he approached the house, and Alison noticed that he looked very lean and jaded. He sat down wearily and flung off his hat when he had greeted the party.

"I've come to borrow your mower, Farquhar," he announced. "I suppose I may as well get some hay in."

"You don't seem very sure about it," remarked Farquhar.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not enthusiastic about cutting that hay. I've been putting in sixteen hours a day lately, and I expect I'm getting a little stale. Among other things, I'd got most of the shingles on the house when one of the boys came along and told me I'd fixed them wrong. Then the police have been round again worrying me."

"Have you got your horse back?" asked Mrs. Farquhar.

"Yes," replied Thorne, with a soft laugh. "It was found near the railroad a day or two after it disappeared, and a friend of mine sent it along. I understand, however, that Corporal Slaney has failed to pick up Winthrop's trail."

Mrs. Farquhar regarded him severely.

"Why did you mix yourself up in that affair?"

"The thing rather appealed to me," declared Thorne. "I believe Jake was justified ethically; and anybody who takes a way that's not the recognized one has my sympathy."

"Now you've reached the point," Farquhar laughed. "On the whole, the fact you mention is unfortunate."

"I'm not sure," Thorne answered moodily. "Plodding along the lauded beaten track now and then palls on one, and it isn't the least bit easier than the other. Anyway, I only did what I had to; Lucy said she had counted on me."

This last confession, which he seemed to make in a moment of forgetfulness, stirred Alison to a sense of irritation that astonished her a little.

"Were you compelled to help a defaulting debtor escape?" she demanded. "I understand that is what Winthrop is."

"If you knew the whole story you would hardly call him that," Thorne retorted with an indignant sparkle in his eyes.

"But he borrowed money on his cattle, among other things, didn't he, and then sold them, and ran away when the man who lent it to him wanted it back?"

"He did," Thorne assented with some dryness. "I'm sorry I must confess it, because a baldly correct statement of the kind you have just made which leaves out all extenuating details is often a most misleading thing."

"How can a statement of fact be misleading?"

Farquhar smiled and Thorne made a grimace.

"The aspect of any fact varies with one's point of view. You evidently can't get away from the conventional one."

Alison was growing angry, though subsequent reflection convinced her that this was not due to his last observation. She had sympathized with his attitude when he had in the first instance mentioned his dislike of Nevis; and his willingness to side with the injured against the oppressor had certainly pleased her. In the abstract, it appeared wholly commendable; but, in particular, that it should have led him to take up the cause of a girl against whom for no very clear reason she felt prejudiced was a different thing.

"Well," she responded, "it has by degrees become evident to society in general that it can only look at certain matters in a certain way; and if you insist on doing the opposite, you must expect to get into trouble. I'm not sure you don't deserve it, too."

"That," returned Thorne, grimly, "is their idea in England, and I must do them the justice to own that they act up to it. I had, however, expected a little more liberality—from you. Anyway, I'm not in the least sorry for what I've done."

He rose and turned toward his host.

"Hadn't we better get that mower, Farquhar?"

They strolled away, Thorne leading his team, and Mrs. Farquhar laughed.

"Mavy's very young in some respects. I'm almost afraid you have succeeded in setting him off again."

"Is the last remark warranted?"

Mrs. Farquhar nodded.

"He has been sticking to what he probably finds a very uninteresting task with a patience I hardly thought was in him. Just now he's no doubt ready for an outbreak."

"An outbreak?"

"I'll say a frolic. It won't be anything very shocking, though I should expect it to be distinctly original."

Alison made a sign of impatience.

"Isn't it absurd that he should fly off in this unbalanced fashion because of a few words?"

"One mustn't expect perfection; and it wasn't altogether what you said—that merely fired the train. Mavy has been going steady for an unusual time, and as a rule it doesn't take a great deal to drive him into some piece of rashness. For instance, he was quite willing to involve himself in trouble with the police at a word from Lucy Calvert."

She fancied from Alison's expression that this was where the grievance lay, but the girl made no comment, and they sat silent for a while until Farquhar came back alone.

"Mavy's gone off with the mower—he wouldn't come back," he explained. "In fact he seemed a little out of temper."

Farquhar was correct in this surmise. Thorne was somewhat erratic by nature, and any insistence on the strictly conventional point of view, even when it was backed by sound sense, usually acted upon him as a red rag. After all, he could not help his nature, and he had been reared in an atmosphere of straight-laced respectability which had imposed on him an intolerable restraint. What was, perhaps, more to the purpose, he had been demanding too much of his bodily strength during the last two months, and had been living in a Spartan fashion on badly cooked and very irregular meals, until at length his nervous system began to feel the strain. That being so, he felt himself justified in resenting Alison's censorious attitude;

though it was not the mere fact that she had disagreed with what he had done that he found most irritating. It was, he knew, because she had disappointed him. He had regarded her as a broad-minded, clear-sighted girl, emancipated from the petty prejudices and traditions which were the bane of most young Englishwomen, and now he had discovered that she was as exasperatingly narrow as the rest of them.

It was late when he reached his homestead, and after sleeping a few hours he rose with the dawn, and lighting a fire, left the kettle to boil while he clambered to the roof to nail on cedar shingles. He could not, however, get them to lie as he wanted them, and, being very dry, they split every now and then as he drove in the nails. Besides this, it was difficult to work upon the narrow rafters, and when at length he descended for breakfast he found that the fire had gone out in the meanwhile. He surveyed it and the kettle disgustedly, with brows drawn down; and then, restraining a strong desire to fling the vessel into the birches, he sat down and fished out of the congealed fat in the frying-pan a piece of cold pork left over from the previous day. This, with a piece of bread that had acquired a rocky texture from being left uncovered, formed his breakfast, and when he had eaten it he went back moodily to the roof. He had for some time in a most determined manner concentrated his energies on a task generally regarded as a commendable one in that country, but there was no doubt whatever that it was beginning to pall on him.

He lay up on the rafters for several hours with a hot sun blazing down on his neck and shoulders while he nailed on shingles; but in spite of every effort, things would go wrong. Nails slipped through his fingers; he dropped his hammer and had to climb down for it; while every now and then a shingle he had just secured rent from top to bottom. Finally, in a state of exasperation, he struck a vicious blow at a nail which had evaded his previous attacks, and hit his thumb instead. This was the climax, and he savagely hurled the hammer as far as he could throw it out upon the prairie. Then he swung himself down, and, walking resolutely to his tent, dragged out a box containing about a dozen small cheap mirrors. There were a few gramophone records in another box; and after putting both cases, a blanket or two and a bag of flour into his wagon, he drove away across the sweep of grass at a gallop. The horses, which had done

nothing worth mentioning for the last few weeks, seemed as pleased with the change as he did.

The next morning a man who was passing Farquhar's homestead pulled up his team to deliver its owner a note.

"Mavy sent you this," he said with a grin. "Guess he's out on the trail again. He had the boys sitting up half last night at the Bluff Hotel."

Farquhar read the note, which was curt.

"Thanks for the mower. Better go for it if you want the thing," it ran. "I'm off for a change of air, and haven't the least notion when I'm coming back. I've discovered that one has to get seasoned to a quiet life."

Going back into the house, he handed the note to his wife, who was sitting with Alison at breakfast, and she gave it to the girl in turn when she had read it.

"It's too bad, though I must say I expected it," she remarked, regarding her with reproachful eyes.

"If he has a singularly unbalanced nature, can I help it?" Alison asked.

Her companion appeared to consider.

"I don't know which to be most vexed with; you or Lucy. He would be quietly cutting prairie hay now if you had both left him alone."

Farquhar watched them with a smile.

"Mavy," he observed, "will in all probability require a good deal of breaking in; but that's no reason why one should despair of him. I've known a young horse turn out an excellent hauler and go steady as a rock in double harness, after in the first place kicking in the whole front of the wagon."

"Why double harness?" his wife inquired with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Well," replied Farquhar, "perhaps I was anticipating things."

He lounged out, and Alison went on with her breakfast with an expressionless face, though Mrs. Farquhar noticed that she seemed preoccupied after that.

Three or four days later Thorne sat on the veranda of a little wooden hotel after supper. A couple of men lounged near him

smoking, and in front of them a double row of unpicturesque frame-houses straggled beside the trail that led straight as the crow flies into a waste of prairie.

"I've had a notion that Jake Winthrop would look in here," Thorne remarked presently.

One of his companions glanced round toward the house, but there did not seem to be anybody within hearing just then.

"He did," he confided. "Baxter once worked with him on the railroad, and Jake crawled up to the back of his shack at night. Baxter gave him a different hat and a jacket."

"That's quite right," said the other man. "I figured the troopers would know what he was wearing. I drove him quite a piece toward the railroad early in the morning, and I've a notion he got off with a freight-train that was taking a crowd of boys from down East to do something farther on up the track. If he did, he must have jumped off quietly when they stopped to let the Pacific express by. Next thing, two or three troopers turned up, and I guess they heard about the train and wired up the line; but they haven't got Winthrop yet. Corporal Slaney, who sent two of them south, is in the settlement now. He's plumb sure that Jake's hanging round here waiting to make a break for the U. S. boundary."

"What had he on when he first struck you?" Thorne inquired.

Baxter told him, and he laughed.

"Then," he declared, "Slaney's trailing a man with an old black plug hat and a brown duck jacket; the latter would certainly fix him, as blue's much more common. Now if he saw that man riding south at night he'd probably call off the troopers, and they'd work the trail right down to the frontier. As they wouldn't get their man, they'd no doubt give the thing up, deciding he'd already slipped across."

"But how's he going to see him, when Jake's up the track?"

"It strikes me there ought to be a black plug hat and a brown duck jacket somewhere in this settlement," drawled Thorne. "I'll leave you to find them."

A light broke in upon his companions, and they laughed; but one of them pointed out that Thorne might find himself unpleasantly situated if Corporal Slaney overtook him. Thorne, however, smiled at this.

"I've been driving easy the last few days, and it's hardly likely the police have a horse that could run Volador down," he said. "Besides, if he should press me too hard, I could lose my man somehow in the big bluff on the mountain."

They agreed with this, and proceeded to elaborate a workable scheme. Suddenly Baxter turned to Thorne, as though a thought had just struck him.

"Why do you want to do it?" he asked. "Jake Winthrop wasn't a partner of yours."

Thorne broke into a whimsical smile. Now that he endeavored to analyze his reasons calmly, he was conscious that none of them appeared sufficient to warrant any action at all on his part. He was only certain that he disliked Nevis, and that an anxious girl had not long ago looked at him with an appeal in her eyes.

"Since you ask me the question, I don't quite know," he confessed.

Baxter laughed, and turned to his comrade.

"He's a daisy, sure. Anyway, I'll look round for a hat and jacket like the one I burned. You get him a saddle, Murray."

Thorne left them presently and drove away toward a ravine some miles from the settlement, and soon after he started Baxter saddled a horse and rode out to an outlying farm. In the meanwhile Corporal Slaney sauntered into the general room of the hotel, where Murray and several others were then sitting smoking. There was a box of crackers, a soda-water fountain, and a bottle of some highly colored syrup on one table, but that was all the refreshment the place provided.

Seating himself in a corner, the corporal sat unobtrusively listening to the conversation, which Murray presently turned into a particular channel for his especial benefit. It was a hot evening, and he sat astride a bench, clad only in blue shirt and trousers, with a glass of soda-water in front of him and a pipe in his hand. A big tin lamp burned unsteadily above him, for all the doors and windows were open, and a hot smell of dust and baked earth flowed into the room. The walls were formed of badly rent boards, and there was as usual no covering on the roughly laid floor.

"As I've often said," he observed, "the police will never get another man like old Sergeant Mackintyre. He ran his man down right away every time."

Slaney pricked his ears, and another of them broke in:

"Mackintyre would have had Jake Winthrop jailed quite a while ago. The boys aren't up to trailing now."

"Seems to me they didn't want Winthrop much," drawled Murray. "They went prowling round the homesteads, worrying folks who didn't know anything about him, while he hit the trail for the frontier."

A third man turned to Slaney.

"Didn't you send two of the boys off Dakota way, Corporal?"

"We did," answered Slaney shortly. "That's about all I'm open to tell you."

"Two troopers couldn't cover a great deal of prairie," remarked another. "Guess he might have slipped through between them; that is, if he's not hanging round here somewhere waiting for a chance to break away."

Murray saw the gleam in the corporal's eyes, and he broke in again.

"Now," he said, "when you think of it, that's quite likely, after all. There's three or four big bluffs a man could hide in, and if he was stuck for a horse he wouldn't care to try the open. If he lay by a while he might fix it up with somebody to bring him one. Of course, he might have got away up the track, but they'd wire on to watch the stations. Didn't you do that, Corporal?"

"We did," Slaney answered.

Murray turned to the others.

"Then, one would allow that Winthrop couldn't have cleared by train. If he'd done that, they'd sure have got him." He paused, and, hearing a beat of hoofs, added thoughtfully, "It looks mighty like he was still in the neighborhood."

Something in Slaney's expression suggested that he shared this opinion; but the drumming of hoofs was growing louder, and a man strolled toward the doorway.

"It's Baxter," he announced.

A few minutes later Baxter came in, flushed and dusty, and helped himself at the soda-water fountain before he turned to the others with a cracker in his hand.

"It's powerful warm, boys, and I've had a ride for nothing," he informed them. "Been over to Lorton's place and he wasn't in."

"He's at Cricklewood's," said Murray. "If you'd waited a little you would have met him on the trail."

"I didn't, anyway," was Baxter's indifferent reply; "I only met a stranger."

Corporal Slaney had no reason to suspect that the brief conversation which had followed Baxter's arrival had been carefully prearranged for his benefit.

"Where did you meet that stranger?" he asked.

"About two miles east of the bluff."

"Did you speak to him?"

Baxter smiled.

"I didn't; he didn't give me a chance. He was going south as fast as his horse could lay hoofs to the ground."

"What was he like? Did you see him clearly?"

"Well," drawled Baxter, "it's only a half-moon, and the man wasn't very close, but I think he'd a black plug hat. As most of us wear gray ones, that kind of struck me. I've a notion that his overall jacket was brown."

He sat down as Slaney vanished through the open door. In a few moments there was a clatter of hoofs, and the men crowding about the entrance saw a mounted figure riding at a gallop down the unpaved street. Then Murray looked at his comrade with a grin.

"Must have had his horse saddled ready," he chuckled. "We've fixed the thing."

CHAPTER XI
AN ESCAPADE

The night was still and clear when Thorne rode out of the ravine, in the hollow of which he had left his wagon and one hobbled horse. Reaching the level, he drew bridle and sat still in his saddle for a minute or two looking about him. The dew was settling heavily on the short, wiry grass, which shone faintly in the elusive light, with patches of darker color where his horse's hoofs had passed. Ahead, the prairie rolled away, a vast dimly lighted plain, to the soft dusky grayness which obscured the horizon, and he knew that somewhere beyond the dip of the latter stood the mountain, a broken stretch of higher ground covered with birches and willows, where if Corporal Slaney held on so long he must endeavor to evade him.

Volador seemed fit and fresh, for which he was thankful, for it was nearly twenty miles to the mountain, and he was, after all, a little uncertain about the speed of the policeman's horse, though the appearance of the beast, which he had seen in the hotel stable, did not suggest any great powers in this respect. It was, however, not the one Slaney usually rode, which he fancied might, perhaps, be significant. At length he leaned down and patted Volador's neck.

"You'll have to go to-night, old boy," he said.

The beast responded to his voice and a shake of the bridle, and they set off southward at a trot. The moon already hung rather low in the western sky, and he calculated that in another couple of hours it would have dipped beneath the grassland's rim. By then he should reach the mountain, and the darkness would be in his favor if he had not already outdistanced his pursuer. It was in a singularly buoyant mood that he rode quietly on, and it was reluctantly that he checked the horse which once or twice attempted to gallop. After the last few months of prosaic and unremitting toil, the prospect of a mad night ride, and the zest of the hazard attached to it, proved strangely exhilarating to one of his temperament. He admitted that, as Winthrop was not a particular friend of his, there was no reason why he should have undertaken the thing at all; but he remembered the appeal in Lucy Calvert's eyes, and that and the lust of a frolic was

sufficient for him. There are men of his kind who, in their hearts, at least, never grow old.

He had covered two or three miles when he saw a mounted man following the trail to the settlement, and he rode on across the trail with a wave of his hat. He did not feel inclined for conversation, and everything had already been arranged. The mounted figure presently sank out of sight again, and he pulled Volador up to a slow walk. He would give Baxter half an hour to reach the settlement and put Slaney on his trail, and there was no use in wasting his horse's strength in the meanwhile.

It was nearly an hour later, and he was riding slowly, a lonely, moving speck in the center of a great level waste whose boundaries steadily receded before him, when a faint drumming of hoofs came out of the silence. Then he pulled Volador up altogether, and sat still, listening, for a while, until he felt sure that his pursuer, who was apparently riding hard, would hear him. He did not wish the man to draw too close, but it would, on the other hand, serve no purpose if he rode south unless Slaney followed him. It seemed only reasonable to suppose that once the police decided that Winthrop had got safely away to Dakota they would abandon the search for him in western Canada.

Then something in the sound, which was rapidly growing louder, struck him as curious, and he listened more closely with a frown, for it was now becoming evident that instead of one pursuer he had two to deal with, which was certainly not what he had desired or expected. Touching Volador with his heels, he let him go, and for five or six minutes they fled south at a fast gallop with a thud of hoofs on sun-baked sod ringing far behind them. Then he pulled the horse up with a struggle, and listened again. He was at length certain that the police had heard him and were following as fast as possible. There was no cover until he reached the mountain; nothing but an open wilderness, unbroken by even a ravine or a clump of willows, and he must ride.

Once more he let Volador go, and the cool night air streamed past him, whipping his hot face and bringing the blood to it, while long billowy rises came back to him, looking in the uncertain moonlight like the vast undulations of a glassy sea underrun by the swell of a distant gale. Each time he swung over the gradual crest of one, a

rhythmic staccato drumming became sharply audible, and sank again as he dipped into the great grassy hollows. Volador seemed fresh still, which was consoling, for there was no doubt that the sound of the pursuit was as clear as it had been. This was a fresh surprise.

Half an hour passed, and they swung out upon a wide, high level, where for the first time he twisted in his saddle and looked behind him. He could see, rather more plainly than he cared about, two dim figures, spread out well apart on the verge of the plateau, and it was evident that they were not dropping behind. It would, he recognized, lead to unpleasant complications if they overtook him. He raised a quirt he had borrowed, but, reflecting, he let his arm drop again. After all, it might be desirable to let Volador keep a little in hand. Then he glanced to the westward, and was pleased to see that the moon was rapidly nearing the rim of the plain. It would be dark when he reached the mountain.

Volador was flagging a little when at length they swept up the slope of another rise. On crossing the top of this Thorne was conscious of a difference in the drumming of hoofs behind. One of the pursuers was clearly falling back, which was satisfactory, though he fancied that the other man was still holding his own. Then he saw away in front of him a blurred mass with an uneven crest which cut dimly black against the sky. It stretched broad across his course, and he struck Volador with the quirt, for he recognized it as the mountain, and knew that he must ride in earnest now. A mounted man would make a good deal of noise descending the ravines which seamed it and smashing through the undergrowth beneath the birches, and it was desirable that he should reach their shelter well ahead of the troopers.

The horse responded gallantly, but the beat of hoofs which he longed to get away from grew no fainter, and when five minutes had flown by he plied the quirt again. He was very hot, and somewhat anxious, but the moon was now near the verge of the prairie. It was large and red, and already the light was failing, though a long black shadow still fled beside him across the dewy grass.

At last he fancied he was drawing ahead, and a mad fit came upon him as they went flying down a rugged and broken slope to a water-course, while the mountain rose higher and blacker ahead.

Stones clattered and rattled under them, clouds of light soil flew up, and then there was a great splashing as the horse plunged through the creek. After that the pace grew slower as they faced the ascent; and he swung low in the saddle when they sped in among the birches. A branch struck him in the face and swept his hat away, but it had done its work and he decided that he was better rid of it.

A semblance of a trail that dipped into hollows and swung over rises led through the mountain, though as a rule any one riding south skirted this. Thorne had already decided that he must leave it somewhere as quietly as possible and let Corporal Slaney go by. He could not hear the trooper now, and this was reassuring, for he would have to stop soon and he did not wish his pursuer to notice that the noise in front of him had suddenly ceased.

Two or three minutes later, however, the sound he was beginning to dread once more reached him, breaking in upon the crackle of dry sticks under his horse's hoofs and the crash he made as he now and then blundered into a brake or thicket. It was very dark in the bluff; he could scarcely see the spectral trunks of the flitting trees, and to pick the way or avoid the obstacles around which the trail here and there twisted was out of the question. He faced the hazards as they came and rode savagely; but the thud of pursuing hoofs and the smashing and crackling which mingled with it sounded very close when he reached the brink of a ravine which he understood it was almost impossible to descend on horseback. To dismount would, however, as he realized, entail his capture; and setting his lips tight he drove the failing horse at the almost precipitous gully. They plunged down with soil and stones sliding and rattling after them, splashed into a creek, and were half-way up the opposite side when a second clatter of falling stones was followed by a heavy downward rush of loosened soil. Then there was a dull thud and afterward a curiously impressive silence.

Thorne pulled up his badly blown horse and, twisting in his saddle, looked back across the ravine. He could see nothing but a shadowy mass of trees which stood out dimly against a strip of soft blue sky. He could feel his heart beating, and the deep silence troubled him. Indeed, it was with difficulty that he refrained from shouting to the fallen man, but he reflected that as he had now and then spoken to Slaney, the latter would probably recognize his voice.

Then he heard the man get up, and the sounds which followed indicated that he was urging his horse to rise. Thorne once more tapped Volador with his quirt.

A hoarse cry rang after him, commanding him to stop, but this was on the whole a consolation, for it did not seem likely that Slaney was badly hurt if he could shout, and Thorne rode on with a laugh. He scarcely supposed the policeman's horse would be fit for much after a heavy fall, but there was another trooper somewhere behind who might turn up at any moment. He purposely rode through a brake or two in order that the crackle of undergrowth might make it clear that he was going on, and then, when some time had passed and there was no sign of any pursuit, he turned sharply off the trail and headed into the bush. It soon became necessary to dismount and lead his horse, and finally he looped the bridle round a branch and sat down wearily.

He fancied that half an hour had passed when he heard an increasing sound which suggested that two mounted men were riding cautiously along the trail some distance away. He could hear an occasional sharp snapping of rotten branches and the crash of trodden undergrowth as well as the beat of hoofs. Listening carefully, he decided that the riders were pushing straight on, and he was sure of it later, when the sound began to die away. He sat still, however, for almost another hour, and then succeeded with some difficulty in finding the trail. Following it back until it led him out of the mountain, he stripped off his duck jacket and flung it where anybody who passed that way could not well help seeing it, and then he took out a soft gray hat he had carried rolled up in his belt. Clad in blue shirt and trousers, he rode on slowly into the prairie. The dawn found him some miles from the mountain and at least as far from any trail, in the open waste. Reaching a ravine, he lay down at the bottom of it beside a creek and ate the breakfast he had brought with him, while Volador cropped the grass. Then he went quietly to sleep.

It was midday when he awakened, and falling dusk when he eventually reached the ravine near the settlement, where he had left his wagon and the other horse. There was nothing to suggest that anybody had visited the place in his absence, and after making an excellent supper he lay down again inside the vehicle with a sigh of content. Everything had gone satisfactorily, and it was most unlikely

that Winthrop would be further troubled by the police. He did not know much about the extradition laws, but it was generally believed that when a man once got across the frontier the troopers contented themselves with notifying the authorities and nothing further was heard of the matter, unless the fugitive were guilty of some very serious offense. A good deal of the boundary then ran through an empty wilderness, and it was difficult to trace any one who managed to reach the settlements on its southern side. Indeed, it was seldom that a determined attempt was made.

Early on the following morning Thorne set out for his holding, and on the day after he got there he set about cutting prairie hay. As a rule, nobody sows artificial grasses when taking up new land, but as some fodder for the teams is required it is generally cut in a dried-up sloo where the water gathers in the thaw. In such places the grass grows tall, and as it rapidly ripens and whitens in the sun all the farmer need do is to cut it and carry it home.

Thorne was stripped to shirt and trousers, besides being grimed all over with dust, when looking around for a moment he saw Mrs. Farquhar and Alison in a wagon not far away. A black cloud of flies hovered about his head and followed his plodding horses, while a thick haze of dust rose from the grass that went down before the clanging mower. He stopped, however, and looked around with a tranquil smile when Mrs. Farquhar pulled up her team.

"You seem astonished to see me," he said.

Mrs. Farquhar turned and pointed to the long rows of fallen grass.

"I'm certainly astonished to see all that hay down."

"I wonder," quizzed Thorne, "if you intended that to be complimentary. You see, I rather cling to the idea that I can do as much as other people when I'm forced to it."

"You must have had the team out at sunup and have made the most of every minute since," laughed Mrs. Farquhar.

"It looks like it, unless I had them out the previous evening."

"You hadn't," declared Alison, and her companion broke in again.

"She is quite right. You were not here yesterday. It was partly to satisfy her curiosity that Harry drove round to see."

Thorne fancied that Alison was not exactly pleased with this statement, but she made no attempt to contradict it.

"What strikes me most," she said, "is the fact that you look as if you had never been away."

"That," returned Thorne, "is the impression I wished to give people. Now that I've had my frolic, I want to forget it. It's a natural desire. On the whole, I'm sorry you took the trouble to ascertain that I've just come back."

"The question is, what have you been doing while you were absent?" asked Mrs. Farquhar severely.

"Selling things most of the time. It's another example of what you can do if you try. I'd given up half a case of tarnished mirrors as quite unsalable, and somehow or other I got rid of every one of them."

"Anything else?"

"Well," replied Thorne with a thoughtful air, "I had a rather pleasant ride. In fact, I feel so braced up by the whole trip that I expect I shall be able to go on steadily for another few months, at least."

"And then?" Alison inquired.

Thorne looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh," he said, "if any of my friends make too persistent attempts to reform me it's quite possible I shall go off on the trail again."

"I don't think you need anticipate any further trouble of that kind," Alison assured him.

Thorne turned to Mrs. Farquhar.

"May I drive over to supper to-morrow evening? I'd like a talk with Harry—among other things."

"Of course," responded Mrs. Farquhar. "As a matter of fact, though I don't suppose it would have much result, I should like a talk with you. In the meanwhile we'll get on. It wouldn't be considerate to keep you back when you're seized by a fit of sensible activity."

She drove away with the clang of the mower following her and a few minutes later she smiled at Alison.

"He's very far from perfect, and that's probably why he has so many friends," she observed. "I should very much like to hear an unvarnished account of all his doings since he went away."

Alison, though she would not confess it, was sensible of a similar curiosity.

CHAPTER XII
HUNTER MAKES AN ENEMY

The committee of the new creamery scheme were sitting in a room of the Graham's Bluff Hotel one evening after supper when Nevis laid his plan for the financing of the project before them. He had come there at their invitation for that purpose, and when he finished speaking they looked at one another with uncertainty in their faces. There were six of them, including Hunter, the chairman; prairie farmers who had been chosen by their neighbors to decide on a means of raising the necessary capital. All of them owned a few head of stock, for they were beginning to raise cattle as well as wheat in that district, and one or two more fortunate than their companions had an odd thousand dollars to their credit at the bank, which was a somewhat unusual thing in the case of men of their calling. The venture they contemplated would not have been justified now, for the Government has lately erected creameries where there is a reasonable demand for them. In a few moments Nevis, a little astonished at his companions' silence, spoke again.

"You have heard my views, gentlemen," he said. "I'm prepared to find you half the money on the terms laid down. It remains for you to decide whether you will bring my scheme before the next meeting—in which case it will, no doubt, be adopted."

Still nobody said anything and he leaned on the back of a chair with a strip of paper in one hand, watching them out of keen, dark eyes. As usual, he was almost too neatly dressed in light, tight-fitting clothes, and this and his white, soft-skinned hands emphasized the contrast between him and his audience. Among the latter were one or two men of liberal education, but their faces, like those of the others, were darkened by exposure to stinging frosts and scorching sun and their hands were hard and brown. They looked what they were, men who lived very plainly and spent their days in unremitting toil. Two, indeed, wore old, soil-stained jackets over their coarse blue shirts, and there was no attempt at elegance in the attire of the others.

Hunter, whose appearance was wholly inconspicuous, sat at the head of the table with a quiet face, waiting for somebody to speak,

though the reticence of his companions did not astonish him. Nevis was a power in that district, and Hunter had grounds for believing that three of those present were in his debt. This made it reasonably evident that they would not care to offend a man who was generally understood to be an exacting creditor. Hunter had their case in his mind when at length he spoke.

"Mr. Nevis's scheme seems perfectly clear, on the face of it, and we have now to make up our minds whether we'll support it or not. If none of you have any questions to put we'll ask him to excuse us for a few minutes while we consider the matter and vote on it. I would suggest a ballot—to be decided by a simple majority."

A gleam which Hunter noticed crept into Nevis's eyes and hinted that the suggestion did not meet with his approval. It is possible he had expected that some of the men would not care to vote against him openly.

"That," said one briefly, "strikes me as the squarest way; I'll second the proposition."

"Well," assented Nevis, "I won't embarrass you if you want to talk it over. You can send for me when you want me. I'll go down for a smoke."

There was less reserve when he withdrew, and they discussed his plan guardedly without arriving at any decision until Hunter laid six little strips of paper and a pencil on the table.

"We'll vote on the scheme—the words for or against will be sufficient without your names," he said.

Each wrote on a scrap of paper and flung it into a hat in turn, but two of them, it was noticeable, hesitated for a moment or so. Then Hunter shook out the papers and counted them.

"It's even—three for and three against," he announced. "Since that's the case I'll exercise my chairman's option. It's against."

There was satisfaction in some of the faces and in the others uncertainty, which, however, scarcely suggested much regret. Then they decided on Hunter's recommendation to raise what capital they could among their friends, even if they had to content themselves with a smaller outlay. Nevis, who was called in, heard the result with an easy indifference.

"Well," he said, "I can't complain. There was a risk in the thing, anyway, and I guess you know what you want best."

He went out again, and soon afterward the meeting broke up; but Hunter, who remained after the others had gone, was not astonished when Nevis presently strolled into the room. He sat down opposite Hunter and lighted a cigar.

"I suppose I have you to thank for this," he began.

"You mean the choosing of the alternative scheme? How did you find out that you owed it to me?"

It was a difficult question, put with a disconcerting quietness. As it happened, none of the committee had informed Nevis that the matter had been decided by the chairman's vote, and he was naturally reluctant to admit that three of them were under his influence.

"I didn't find out," he answered. "I assumed it."

"On what grounds?"

This was still more troublesome to parry, as it appeared quite possible to Nevis that if he furnished Hunter with a hint of the truth the latter would find means of getting rid of men who might under pressure be tempted to betray the confidence of their comrades. He was beginning to realize that the plain, brown-faced farmer with the unwavering eyes was a match for him, which was a fact he had not suspected hitherto, though he had been acquainted with him for some time. Then Hunter smiled significantly.

"We'll let it pass," he said. "I don't mind admitting that you were correct in your surmise. The thing turned upon my vote and I gave it against your scheme. What follows?"

It was not a conciliatory answer, but it at least furnished Nevis with the lead he desired.

"Your decision isn't quite final yet," he declared. "You have to report it to a general meeting, and a good deal will depend on whether you merely lay your views before those present or urge them upon them. Now, as my proposition isn't an unreasonable one, I'll ask you right out what your objections to it are?"

"I haven't any—to the scheme. As you say, it's reasonable, and it would save our raising a good deal of money."

Nevis was not particularly sensitive, but something in his companion's manner brought the blood to his cheek.

"Then you object to me—personally. Will you explain why?"

"Since you insist," replied Hunter. "To begin with, we propose to start the creamery for the benefit of the stock-raising farmers in this district, and several things lead me to believe that if you once get your grip on the management it will in process of time be run for your benefit exclusively. That is one reason I voted against your scheme, and I'm rather glad the decision rested with me, because"—he paused a moment—"I, at least, don't owe you any money."

Nevis with difficulty repressed a start at this. If Hunter was not in his debt his wife undoubtedly was, and something might be made of the fact by and by. In the meanwhile he was keenly anxious to secure an interest in the creamery. Once he could manage it, he apprehended no insuperable difficulty in obtaining control; but he could not get the necessary footing in the face of Hunter's opposition.

"It strikes me we're only working around the point and shifting ground," he said. "What makes you believe I don't mean to act straight?"

"What happened in Langton's and Winthrop's case?"

Nevis sat silent a moment or two. There was a vein of vindictiveness in him, but he was avaricious first of all, and he could generally keep his resentment in the background when it was a question of money.

"Are you a friend of either of them?" he asked.

"Not exactly; but I took a certain interest in Winthrop—I liked the man. In fact, I helped him out of a tight place once or twice, and might have done it again, only that I realized the one result would be to put a few more dollars into your pocket. That"—and Hunter smiled—"didn't seem worth while."

"It was a straight deal; I lent him the money at the usual interest. He couldn't have got it cheaper from anybody else."

Hunter looked at him in a curious manner and Nevis wondered somewhat uneasily how much this farmer knew. He had been correct as far as he had gone, but he had, as he recognized, left one opening

for attack when he had foreclosed on Winthrop's stock and homestead. There are exemption laws in parts of Canada which to some extent protect the small farmer's possessions from seizure for debt unless he has actually mortgaged them. Winthrop had done this, but the mortgage was not a heavy one, and Nevis had afterward lent him further money, with the deliberate intention of breaking him. When the value of the possessions pledged greatly exceeds what has been advanced on them, which is generally the case, it is now and then profitable to foreclose, even though any excess above the loan realized at the sale must ostensibly be handed to the borrower. There, are, however, means of preventing him from getting very much of it, and though the process is sometimes risky this did not count for much with Nevis.

"Well," said Hunter quietly, "I'm not sure that what you tell me has any bearing on the matter."

This might mean anything or nothing, and Nevis, determining to force an issue, leaned forward confidentially.

"Let's face the point," he replied. "I want a share in this creamery—I can make it pay. There's only you who really counts against me. I may as well own it. Now, can't we come to terms somehow? I merely want you to abandon your opposition, and you would have no difficulty in preventing my doing anything that appeared against the stockholders' interests."

"I've already made up my mind that it would be safer to keep you out of it."

"That's your last word?"

"Yes. I don't mean to be offensive. It's a matter of business."

His companion took up his hat. He had failed, as indeed he had half expected to do, but he bade Hunter good-evening tranquilly and went out with strong resentment in his heart. Henceforward he meant to adopt an aggressive policy, and the farmer who had thwarted him must stand upon his guard. This decision, however, was largely prompted by business reasons, for Nevis had now no doubt that Hunter, who was looked up to as a leader by his neighbors, would use his influence against him in other matters besides the creamery scheme unless something could be done to embarrass or discredit him. The farmer, he thought, was open to

attack in two ways—through his wife and through the defaulting debtor he had befriended.

When Hunter walked out of the hotel a few minutes afterward he also was thinking of Winthrop. He found Thorne harnessing his team.

"Did Winthrop ever show you his mortgage deed or any other papers relating to his deal with Nevis?" he asked.

"No," answered Thorne; "I was only in his place three or four times. Why do you ask?"

"There's a point in connection with it that occurs to me; but I dare say he took them with him."

Hunter paused and flashed a quick glance at his companion.

"Do you know where he is?"

"I don't. As a matter of fact, I don't want to, though it's possible that I could find out. The trouble is that if I made inquiries it might set other people—Nevis, for instance—on his trail."

"Yes," assented Hunter, "there's a good deal in that. On the whole, it might be wiser if you kept carefully clear of the thing, particularly if Corporal Slaney feels inclined to move any further in the matter. Well, as I've a long drive before me I must be getting on."

He turned away toward the stables and Thorne grinned cheerfully. He had a respect for the astuteness of this quiet, steady-eyed farmer, and he was disposed to fancy that Nevis would share it before the struggle which he forecasted was over. What was more, he was quite ready to act in any way as Hunter's ally, and he believed that between them they could give the plotter something to think about.

It was getting dark when Hunter reached home and found his wife waiting for him in the general living room. She was evidently a little out of temper.

"You are very late," she said. "I suppose you have been to one of those creamery meetings again?"

Hunter sat down where the lamplight fell upon his face, and there was a trace of weariness in it.

"Yes," he answered; "I had to go. On the whole, I'm glad I did."

"A crisis of some kind? You haven't been increasing your interest in the scheme?"

"No," replied Hunter with a smile; "not in money, anyway. You will, no doubt, be pleased to hear it."

"I am," retorted Florence. "If you had been ready to give those people anything they asked for it wouldn't have been flattering. You're not remarkably generous where I'm concerned."

Hunter made a gesture of protest.

"I'm not giving them anything at all. Once we make it a success I can get back the money I'm putting into the undertaking at any time; and if I don't I expect every bit of it to earn me something."

He looked around at her directly, for he knew where the grievance lay.

"That's a very different matter from handing you a big check for your expenses in Toronto or Montreal."

"Oh, yes," pouted Florence; "the latter would give me pleasure."

She paused and there was a sudden change in her expression.

"Elcot," she added, "can't you realize that now and then you can lay out money without getting anything back for it, and yet find that it pays you well?"

The man looked at her hesitatingly. He knew what this question meant and he was half disposed to yield. Living simply and toiling hard, he had treated her generously in comparison with his means, which, after all, were not large; but he remembered that he had yielded rather often of late and that each concession had merely led to a fresh demand.

"There's a limit, Flo," he said. "Still, if three hundred dollars will meet the case I might stretch a point. I suppose you are determined on that visit to Toronto?"

The woman knew that any further attempt to win him round would fail, and, this being so, it seemed a pity to waste energy on him. The three hundred dollars would by no means suffice for the purpose. This in itself was unpleasant, but in the fact that he could not be induced to make what appeared to be a small sacrifice for her pleasure there lay an extra sting. It was, perhaps, a pity that she had of late given him small cause for suspecting anything of the kind.

"It would be better than nothing," she said coldly, and then leaned back in her chair in a sudden fit of impatience with him and the whole situation.

"I sometimes wonder how I stand with you!" she exclaimed.

"First," declared the man, and he spoke the simple truth; but unfortunately he was not wise enough to content himself with the brief assurance. "Still," he added, "I have other duties."

"To Maverick Thorne, and Winthrop, and everybody in the district generally!"

"Well," replied Hunter, with the hint of weariness creeping back into his expression, "I suppose that more or less fits the case. You have all along been first with me, and I think I have done what I could to please you—and done it willingly. Still, there are these others—I owe them something. When I came here, a poor man, they held out their hands to me; one lent me a team, another, when I had no mower, cut and carried in my hay, and some came over night after night to build my log barn. I think I should have gone under if it hadn't been for them." He looked up at his wife with resolute eyes. "Now that I can pay them back without, in all probability, its costing me a dollar I'm at least going to try."

Florence's lips set scornfully. She had no liking for the surrounding farmers. They were, in her estimation, mere unlettered toilers—simple, unimaginative, brown-faced men who thought about nothing but the seasons and the price of wheat. What was, perhaps, as much to the purpose, she had a suspicion that most of them were not greatly impressed in her favor. Now her husband was, it seemed, anxious to waste his means for their benefit.

"Elcot," she asked abruptly, "has it never occurred to you that you could make more of your life than you are doing here?"

Hunter faced the question humorously.

"It would be astonishing if it hadn't, since you have suggested it more than once, but the answer is in the negative. This place is paying pretty well, and my means would certainly not keep us in Winnipeg, Toronto or Montreal; anyway, not in the comfort with which, after all, you have been surrounded. Of course, I might, for instance, try to run a store, but it doesn't strike me that this would be of much benefit to you. Would the kind of people you like welcome you as readily if your husband were retailing hats or groceries in the neighborhood?"

Florence knew that it was most improbable, though she would not confess it. Instead, she decided to see if it were possible to irritate him.

"After all," she retorted, "there is no great difference between a storekeeper and a farmer. All my city friends know what you are, and I can find no fault with the way they treat me."

Hunter laughed as he glanced down at his hard brown hands and dusty attire.

"The point is that in your case the farmer husband does not put in an appearance. It might be different if he did."

Florence looked at him in silence for a moment or two. Though he had been to the creamery meeting he was very plainly dressed; his bronzed face and battered nails told their own tale of arduous toil in the open, and there was no doubt that he looked a prairie farmer. Yet he was, as she realized now and then, well favored in a way; a man who might have made his mark in a different station, widely read and quietly forceful. Indeed, his inflexibility on certain points, though it sometimes angered her, compelled her deference.

"Oh," she cried at length, "it doesn't cost you much self-denial to stay behind. It's easy for you to be content. You like this life."

"Yes," returned Hunter quietly; "I'm thankful that I do. It's what I was made for. However, I don't wish to force too much of it on you, and so I'll give you a check for the three hundred dollars."

He crossed the room and, opening a desk, sat down at it for a minute or two. Then he came back and laid a strip of paper on the table in front of Florence.

"After all," she conceded, "as I was away a good deal of last winter, it's rather liberal, Elcot."

Hunter, without answering her, went quietly out.

CHAPTER XIII
NEVIS PICKS UP A CLUE

A week had slipped by since the meeting of the creamery committee and it was about the middle of the afternoon when Nevis lay, cigar in hand, in the shadow of a straggling bluff. It was pleasantly cool there and scorching sunshine beat down upon the prairie, across which he had plodded during the last half hour, and he had still some miles to go before he could reach the farm at which he expected to borrow a team. He was not fond of walking, but the man who had driven him out from the settlement, being in haste to reach Graham's Bluff, had set him down some distance from the homestead he desired to visit. Nevis found it advisable to look his clients up every now and then and see how they were getting on. This enabled him to sell to those who were not too deeply in his debt implements and stores at top prices, and to put judicious pressure upon the ones whose payments had fallen behind.

He was, however, thinking of Hunter as he lay full length among the grass with a frown on his face. It seemed desirable to let the man who had deprived him of what looked like a promising opportunity for lining his pockets feel that it would be wiser to refrain from interfering with his affairs in future, and he fancied that if Winthrop, whom Hunter had confessed to befriending, should be brought to trial it would convey a useful hint. This course was also advisable for other reasons. It must be admitted that the bondholder does not always come out on top, especially in bad seasons, and Nevis had already decided that the arrest of Winthrop would serve as a warning to any of his neighbors who might feel tempted to evade their liabilities in a similar fashion. He was still on the absconder's trail, though as yet it had not led him very far.

By and by he heard a soft beat of hoofs and a rattle of wheels, and looking up was pleased to see Mrs. Hunter drive around a corner of the bluff. He had of late been conscious of a growing delight in her company, and, what was almost as much to the purpose, he had partly thought out a plan of attacking her husband through her. He had, however, too much tact to force himself on her, and he lay still,

apparently unobservant of her approach until she pulled up the horse.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Resting," replied Nevis, rising to his feet. "I'm going across to Jordan's place. Walking's no doubt healthy, but I'm afraid I'm not fond of it."

He waited to see whether she would take the hint, which he had made as plain as possible, and as he did so a gleam crept into his eyes. Florence had an eye for color and an artistic taste in dress, and she was attired then in filmy draperies of a faint, shimmering green—the color of clear sea-water rippling over sand. They suggested the fine contour of her form and emphasized the shifting tones of burnished copper in her hair and the clearness of her eyes. What she saw in his expression did not appear, but she smiled at him.

"Then if you will get in I can drive you part of the way," she said graciously.

Nevis did not wait for a second invitation and she turned to him when he had taken his place at her side.

"You haven't come back to call on us."

"No," responded Nevis; "I saw your husband at one of the creamery meetings and I'm sorry to own there were one or two matters upon which we couldn't agree."

He watched her to see how she would receive this, but she laughed.

"I'm not responsible for all Elcot's opinions, and I must do him the justice to say that he seldom attempts to force them on me. For all that, I shouldn't wonder if he were right."

Nevis was far too astute to disparage the man he did not like openly to his wife, so he made a sign of assent.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, "it's possible that he was. In one sense, he generally is. Elcot's what one might call altruistic; he has a finer perception of ethical right than the rest of us, and one could fancy it occasionally makes difficulties for him. Indeed, it's bound to when he rubs against ordinary mortals who're content to look out for what's going to benefit them."

His companion recognized the truth of this, and, as he had expected, it irritated her. Deep down in her nature there was a hidden respect for the quiet, resolute man who, though he seldom proclaimed them, lived in what she now and then considered too strict compliance with his principles. He recognized his duty toward her and had discharged it, in most respects, with a conscientious thoroughness; but that accomplished, he had also recognized his duty to others, and had unwaveringly insisted on fulfilling this in turn. There, as Nevis had cunningly suggested, lay the grievance. It would have been more pleasant for her, and—she confessed this—in many little ways also for him, had she stood alone in his eyes, instead of merely standing first. There was a marked and often inconvenient distinction between the two things. Now and then his point of view appealed to her, but more often her pride received a jar and she thought of him bitterly when he befriended his neighbors, as she tried to convince herself, at her expense. She could, she felt, have loved the man, and perhaps have made an unconditional surrender to him, but he must first be hers altogether and think of nobody else.

Then Nevis interrupted her thoughts with a veiled purpose, and once more touched the tender spot.

"Most of the boys think a good deal of Elcot, and I guess it's natural. He has given quite a few of them a lift now and then. There's Winthrop and Thorne, for instance—he guaranteed Maverick for a thousand dollars, somebody told me—and now he's putting a good deal more into this creamery scheme. From experience of their habits, I should say he must find that kind of thing expensive now and then. Perhaps, if one might suggest it, that is why he lives as plainly as he does. In a way, it's rather fine of him, though it wouldn't appeal to me."

There was no doubt that any self-denial on her husband's part in which she might be compelled to share did not appeal to Florence either, but she noticed the tact with which Nevis had refrained from supporting his statement by a reference to his loan or the unpaid bills.

"Well," she declared, "I, at least, believe in getting the most one can out of life."

"That," said Nevis, "is my own idea, and it leads up to the question why you haven't gone away yet? Have your husband's benefactions made it impossible?"

He had at last attained his object. Florence had longed for the visit, and had resented the fact that Elcot had not been willing to indulge her in it at any cost. He had certainly given her a check, but, while Toronto is a cheaper place than Montreal, three hundred dollars will not go very far in any Canadian city, at least when one is satisfied with only the best that is obtainable.

"They have certainly helped," she replied curtly.

Nevis recognized that she would not have admitted this had she not been disposed to treat him on a confidential footing, and it was clear that the indignation she had displayed in her answer was directed against her husband and had not been occasioned by his presumption.

"Then," he suggested, "if you really wish to go, there's a way in which it could be managed; though it's an act of self-sacrifice on my part to further such an object."

Florence swallowed the last suggestion and looked at him sharply.

"You mean?"

"I could find you the money—on the same terms as the last." He added the explanation hastily lest her pride should take alarm.

There was silence for a moment, and during it Florence's resentment against her husband grew stronger. She was anxious for the visit, but had he been poor she would have given it up more or less willingly. That, however, was not the case, for, as her companion had cunningly hinted, he was at least rich enough to bestow his favors on men like Winthrop, the absconder, and the pedler Thorne. Now she blamed him for driving her into borrowing from the man at her side.

"I should be glad to have it on those conditions," she said at length.

She pulled up the horse presently while Nevis took out a fountain-pen and his pocketbook, and when she drove on again she held a check of his in her hand. Twenty minutes later he looked around at her as the horse plodded more slowly up a slight rise.

"I think I'll get out here," he said. "It's only half a mile to Jordan's place; you can see the house from the top."

There was not a great deal in the words, but Florence grasped their hidden significance. They conveyed a delicate suggestion that it might not be desirable for her to be seen in his company, and she was quite aware that to fall in with it would imply that there was already something in their relations that must be kept concealed from their neighbors' gaze. For a moment she felt inclined to insist on driving him up to the homestead door, and then the feel of his check in her hand restrained her. She stopped the horse and smiled when he got down.

"Thank you again," she said.

"That's a little superfluous," returned the man. "It's a business deal; but if you can spare a few minutes when you are in Toronto you might manage to write a line. After all, I can, perhaps, ask that much."

"I won't promise," Florence laughed. "Still, it's possible that I may make the effort."

She drove away and Nevis climbed the rise feeling very well satisfied. He had got a firmer hold on Hunter now and he meant to break ground for the next attack by picking up Winthrop's trail. In this also, fortune favored him, for when he drew up his hired rig outside Farquhar's house on the following evening he found that both he and his wife were out. Alison was in, however, and when she said that they would probably reach home shortly he got down and sat a while talking with her on the stoop, which in the summer frequently serves the purpose of a drawing-room at a prairie homestead. Alison had met him once or twice before and was sensible of a slight dislike toward the man, though she could not deny that he was an amusing companion. By and by a girl drove along the trail two or three hundred yards away in a wagon, and he gazed rather hard at her.

"She recognized you, didn't she?" he questioned. "I can't quite fix her."

"Lucy Calvert," Alison informed him.

"It's rather curious that I haven't seen her before, as I should certainly have remembered it, though I had once or twice a deal with her father."

Alison was conscious of a slight irritation, which, indeed, any reference to the girl in question usually aroused in her.

"Then," she said, "if Lucy has any say in the matter you are scarcely likely to do any further business with the family."

Nevis raised his eyebrows.

"I wonder what you mean?"

"Only that it's generally supposed Miss Calvert was to have married Winthrop. Whether she still intends to do so is more than I know."

She was puzzled by the sudden intentness of the man's face and for no particular cause half regretted the speech.

"It's the first time I've heard of it," he said thoughtfully. Then he smiled. "Anyway, she can't be very wise if she's anxious to marry him."

Alison, who had watched him closely, fancied that his smile was meant to cover his interest in the information she had given him. She also noticed how quickly he changed the subject, and they talked about other matters until at last, as Farquhar did not make his appearance, he stood up.

"I'll look in another time," he told her. "It's getting late, and I'm due at the bluff to-night."

Soon after he had driven away Farquhar turned up with his wife and Thorne, and Alison noticed the frown on the latter's face when she informed Mrs. Farquhar of Nevis's visit.

"I'm astonished that you have him here at all," he broke out.

"Why shouldn't I?" his hostess asked.

"That question," returned Thorne, "strikes me as a little superfluous, considering that he's an utterly unscrupulous, scoundrelly vampire. Still, I dare say you can forgive him a good deal for the sake of his appearance."

Mrs. Farquhar laughed.

"The last, I suppose, is after all his chief offense."

Alison saw that this shot had reached its mark by the way Thorne drew down his brows. The man, as she had heard, had a quick temper, but she was not displeased that he should obviously resent the fact that Nevis had spent half an hour in her company. Then, remembering that Winthrop was a friend of Thorne's, she felt a little guilty, and when later on they all sauntered out across the prairie, she drew him aside.

"There's something I think I should mention," she said. "I told Nevis that Miss Calvert was to have married Winthrop. He seemed unusually interested."

Thorne started and looked hard at her.

"What on earth made you do that?" he asked sharply. "Did he lead up to it?"

"No," replied Alison with some reluctance, "I don't think he did. So far as I can remember, I volunteered the information."

There was no doubt about the man's displeasure.

"He certainly would be interested, and I'm very much afraid you have made trouble. But you haven't told me why you did it."

"I spoke on the spur of the moment—without thinking."

"Without thinking clearly," Thorne corrected. "For all that, it's possible you had a kind of subconscious motive. You can't deny that you are prejudiced against Winthrop."

Alison was sensible of a certain relief, and she smiled at him. The man had shown some insight, but he had not gone quite far enough in his surmises, for it was not Winthrop but Lucy Calvert against whom she was prejudiced.

"What have I done?" she asked. "If it's any harm, I'm sorry."

Her companion's face relaxed. He never cherished his anger long.

"Well," he explained, "I'm afraid you have put Nevis on Winthrop's trail, though the thing's not certain. After all, it's possible that there's another reason for his interest."

"And that is?"

"He's a man with a weakness for pretty faces, which will probably get him into trouble by and by, though he's generally supposed to be a clever—philanderer. It's not quite the thing to abuse any one you don't like when he's absent, but in spite of that I can't help saying

that he's absolutely unprincipled and should be avoided by every self-respecting woman."

Again Alison smiled. He had spoken strongly, though he had carefully picked his words, and she had little difficulty in following the workings of his mind, which on the whole were amusing. He had meant the speech as a warning to her.

"I suppose Miss Calvert could be called good-looking?" she suggested.

"That," answered Thorne, with a trace of sharpness, "is not quite the point. She's a girl who has a good deal to contend with and is making a very plucky fight. Whether she's wise in being as fond of Winthrop as she seems to be is another matter; one that doesn't concern us. Anyway, she has difficulties enough without it. It's not easy for two women to make a living out of a farm of the kind they're running when it's burdened with a heavy debt."

Alison could forgive him a good deal for his chivalrous pity, though the fact that it was Lucy Calvert who had excited it still somewhat irritated her. It seemed, however, that he had a little more to say.

"In any case," he added, "I'm glad you told me."

Then he turned back toward the others and she had no opportunity for further speech with him. She noticed, however, that he seemed unusually thoughtful during the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER XIV
WINTHROP'S LETTER

After breakfast the next morning Alison sat sewing in a thoughtful mood. She now genuinely regretted having given Nevis the information about Lucy Calvert, and in addition to this Thorne's reserve on the previous evening somewhat troubled her. He had not thought fit to tell her what he meant to do, but she was convinced that he would do something, and the most obvious course would be to warn Lucy against any attempt which Nevis might make to trace her lover. It was possible that the man might cunningly entrap her into some admission that would be of assistance to him. On the other hand, Alison realized that Thorne's task was not so simple as it appeared on the face of it. Though quick-witted, he was, she suspected, by no means subtle, and she supposed that he would find it difficult to put Lucy on her guard without betraying the part that she had played in the matter. She was quite sure that nothing would induce him to let this become apparent.

It was, however, necessary that Lucy should be warned as soon as possible, and Alison decided that as she was the one who had made the trouble it was she who should set it right. This would be only an act of justice, besides which it would give her an opportunity for forming a clearer opinion of Lucy than she had as yet been able to do. As the result of it all, she obtained Mrs. Farquhar's permission to visit the Calvert homestead, which was not very far away, during the afternoon.

In the meanwhile Nevis had been considering how he could best make use of the information she had supplied him, and his mind was still occupied with the question when he drove across the prairie that afternoon. It was a fiercely hot day, and the wide grassland, which had turned dusty white again, was flooded with dazzling light. The usual invigorating breeze was still, and Nevis's horse had fallen to a walk, pursued by a cloud of flies, when he made out the mail-carrier plodding slowly down the rut-marked trail in front of him. Nevis was quite aware that a prairie mail-carrier is usually more or less acquainted with the affairs of every farmer in the district he visits, and he pulled up when he overtook him.

"What's the matter with your horse?" he asked. "Isn't it stipulated that you should keep one?"

"That's so," assented the man. "The trouble is that you can't get a horse that won't go lame on a round like this. I had to leave him at Stretton's an hour ago."

"Going far?" Nevis asked.

"Round by Mrs. Calvert's to the ravine."

Nevis decided that he was fortunate, but he carefully concealed any sign of satisfaction.

"I can give you a lift as far as the first place, if you like to get in."

The man was glad to do so, and Nevis presently handed him a cigar.

"Do you get letters for all the farms every round?"

"No," replied his companion; "I'm quite glad I don't; guess I'd use up two horses if I did. It saves me a league or two when I can cut out some of my visits."

"Yes," agreed Nevis, who had a purpose in pursuing the topic. "One can understand that. It's the people back from the trail who will give you most trouble. It must be a morning's ride to Boyton's or Walthew's; and Mrs. Calvert's is almost as much off your round. Do you have to go there often?"

The question was asked casually, with no show of interest, and the mail-carrier evidently suspected nothing.

"Most every trip the last few weeks," he replied.

Nevis felt that the scent was getting hot. He made a sign of sympathy.

"That's rough on you; anyway, if you have to pack out any weight," he said. "Some of these people get a good many implement catalogues and circulars from Winnipeg, no doubt?"

"In Mrs. Calvert's case it's one blamed letter takes me most a league off the trail."

Nevis asked no more questions; they did not seem necessary. He had discovered that somebody wrote to Mrs. Calvert or her daughter once a week, and he had no trouble in deciding who it must be. He also remembered that letters bore postmarks, and he had a strong desire to ascertain where Winthrop was then located.

"If you like, I'll hand that letter in," he offered. "I'm calling on Mrs. Calvert anyway, and you can go straight to the next place if you give it to me."

The man hesitated a moment, and then shook his head.

"I'm sorry it can't be done," he said. "It's safer to stick to the regulations, and then if you have any trouble nobody can turn round on you."

Nevis was too wise to urge the point, though he meant, if it could by any means be managed, to get the letter into his hands.

"Well," he assented, "I guess you're right in that."

They drove on to the Calvert homestead, which was rudely built of birch logs sawed in a neighboring bluff, and Nevis sprang down first when an elderly woman with a careworn face appeared in the doorway. The mail-carrier, who followed him more slowly, stood still a moment fumbling in his bag until the woman spoke to him.

"Got something to-day, Steve?"

"I've got it all right," was the answer. "Letter for Lucy. The trouble is to find the thing."

Nevis, standing nearer the house, waited until the man took out an envelope. Then he stretched out his hand, as though willing to save him the trouble of walking up to the door, but the mail-carrier either did not notice the action or was too punctilious in the execution of his duty to deliver the letter to him.

"Here it is, Mrs. Calvert," he said. "Thank you, Mr. Nevis."

He strode away and Nevis turned to the woman with a smile.

"May I come in?" he asked. "I'll leave the horse here; he'll stand quietly."

Mrs. Calvert made no objections, though he noticed that she laid the envelope on a table across the room when he sat down.

"It's two or three years since I was in this house," he began.

"Three," corrected the woman.

"I suppose it is," acknowledged Nevis, who seemed to reflect. "I got on with your husband pleasantly, and I'm sorry in several ways that our connection has been broken off. I don't think the thing was any fault of mine."

Mrs. Calvert did not answer at once. Winthrop was not a great favorite of hers, and although she had made no attempt to turn Lucy against him she had on the other hand not altogether sympathized with the latter's views concerning her present visitor. She remembered that her husband had liked the man, and there was no doubt that the goods he supplied were of excellent quality. Nevis was certainly not scrupulous, and he had treated some of those who dealt with him with harshness, but he at least never descended to any petty trickery over the sale of a machine. For one thing, he was too clever; he recognized that it was not worth his while.

"Well," he added, "I don't like for old friends to leave me, and I decided to look you up again. Will you want a new binder or a back-set plow this fall?"

"We'll want a binder," answered his hostess, who was a woman of somewhat yielding nature. "Still, I guess we'll get it from Grantly."

"His things are good enough, though he stands out for the top price," responded Nevis, who was too wise to disparage openly a rival's goods. "Just now, however, I'm rather loaded up, and the orders aren't coming along, so I'm making a special cut. I'll knock an extra four dollars off the list figure for the binder, and wait for the money until you have hauled in your wheat."

Nobody would have suspected that he did not care in the least whether he secured the order or not, or that he had long ago decided that any business he was likely to do with the woman was not worth his attention. She, however, appeared to consider the offer.

"It's cheap, and that's a fact," she said. "It's most a pity I can't buy the thing from you."

"I suppose that trouble over Winthrop has turned Miss Calvert against me?"

"You have got it," was the answer. "Lucy's mad with you. She runs this place, and she deals with Grantly."

This was the lead Nevis had been waiting for, and he seized upon it.

"If she's about, I'd like a talk with her. I might reason her out of her prejudice against me."

"It wouldn't be easy. She drove over to the bluff, but she should be back at any time now."

Nevis had no particular desire to see Miss Calvert, but he had made up his mind to wait for an opportunity to examine the postmark on the letter, if it could be managed. Taking a catalogue out of his pocket, he proceeded to talk about the machines and implements described in it, until at length there was a rattle of wheels outside and, somewhat to his astonishment, Alison walked in. He rose when she greeted Mrs. Calvert, and noticed that there was something which suggested hostility in her eyes when for a moment she let them rest on him.

"Farquhar's hired man brought me; he's going to Bagshaw's place," she announced. "I came over to see Lucy, but she seems to be out."

Mrs. Calvert asked her to wait a little, and when she was seated Nevis sat down again. Alison, however, noticed that he had now moved to another chair which was nearer the table than the one he had previously occupied, and she wondered whether he could have had any particular motive for changing his place. Then, leaning one elbow on the table, she looked around the room.

There was only one window in it, for even with double casements it is difficult enough to keep a small prairie homestead warm in winter, and the place was somewhat shadowy. The log walls were uncovered, and she could see the chinking of moss and clay which had been driven into the crevices in them; and there was, as usual, nothing on the very roughly boarded floor. One bright ray of sunshine, however, streamed in, and fell dazzlingly across the table, upon which an apparently unopened letter lay. The white envelope which caught the light seized her attention, and she remembered that the mail-carrier visited the district that day. As Lucy Calvert was not in, it was reasonable to suppose that the letter was addressed to her, which would explain why her mother had not opened it, and this supposition carried her a little farther. The most likely person to write to the girl was her lover, and Alison was almost sure that it was a man who had inscribed the address on the envelope. By and by she saw Nevis glance at the square of paper in what did not appear to be an altogether casual fashion, and the half-formed idea in her mind grew into definite shape. There was a reason why he should be interested in the letter, and she decided to sit him out. She opened a conversation with Mrs. Calvert, and some time had slipped away

when a distant rattle of wheels rose out of the prairie. Nevis, rising, addressed his hostess.

"I guess that's Miss Calvert, and as there's a point or two about our binder which I believe I forgot to mention, I'd like to explain the thing before she turns up," he said. "I want to get on again as soon as possible after I've had a word with her. No doubt Miss Leigh will excuse us for a minute."

He moved forward toward the table with what appeared to be a photograph of some harvesting machinery in his hand, and as he did so Alison, who remembered that they had been laughing and speaking rather loudly during the last three or four minutes, fancied she heard a footstep outside the open window. She was, however, not quite sure of this, and she watched the man with every sense strung up as he approached her hostess. It struck her that his object was to get near enough to see the writing or the postmark on the envelope, which would probably be impossible after Lucy arrived.

Leaning forward a little, she rested one arm farther on the table, which was covered with a light cloth, and drew the latter toward her with a slight movement of her elbow until a wider strip of it overhung the edge. She could not warn her hostess in the hearing of the man, when she had only suspicion to act on, but she was determined that he should not discover Winthrop's whereabouts if she could help it. Nevis's eyes, as she noticed, were fixed on the envelope, but he was evidently still too far off to read the postmark, and she waited another moment, watching him with mingled disgust and anger at the means he used.

In the meanwhile it was clear that Mrs. Calvert had no suspicion of what was going forward, for there was nothing to show that Alison's heart was beating a good deal faster than it generally did, or that the man was conscious of a vindictive satisfaction. His approach had been ostensibly careless, and there was only a faintly suggestive hardness in his eyes. The girl sat very still, and if her face was a little more intent than usual her hostess did not notice it.

Alison fancied that she heard a sound outside the window again, but she paid no heed to it, and as Nevis was about to lay his hand on the table and lean over it she moved her elbow sharply. The next moment the cloth slid down into a heap on the floor, and the letter disappeared.

Nevis closed one hand viciously, but he opened it again immediately as he turned to Alison. The man was quick, and held himself well in hand, and she felt a certain satisfaction in outwitting him, for it was clear that he had not suspected her of having any motive for jerking the cloth off.

"Am I accountable for the accident?" he asked.

"No," replied Alison; "it was my fault."

The danger, however, was not quite over. Alison quietly felt with one little, lightly shod foot beneath the cloth, part of which had caught and rested on her dress. Her shoe touched something that seemed harder than the soft fabric, and she contrived to draw it toward her.

"You knocked a letter off the table," said Nevis. "It must have fallen somewhere near. Permit me."

He stooped to pick up the cloth, and Alison saw that Mrs. Calvert was at last uneasy. It was obvious that she did not wish Nevis to lay his hands on the envelope. He raised the cloth, and after a glance beneath it moved a pace or two and shook it vigorously, but nothing fell out, and Alison quietly pushed back her chair.

"It's here beneath my skirt."

She picked it up and handed it to Mrs. Calvert, who laid it on a shelf across the room. After that there was a moment's silence, during which the two women looked at each other curiously, while Nevis, whose face was expressionless, looked at them both. Then the awkward stillness was broken by the entrance of Thorne. Ignoring Nevis completely, he turned to Mrs. Calvert with a smile.

"I don't know whether I need an excuse for this visit, but it occurred to me that I could drive Miss Leigh home," he explained. "I was hauling in logs for Gillow when Farquhar's hired man came along and told me he'd brought Miss Leigh over but wasn't sure when he could come back for her. Lucy will be here in a minute."

He leaned on a chair, talking about the wheat crop, until the rattle of wheels, which had been growing louder, stopped, when he moved toward the door, saying that he would help Lucy with the team. It was some time before he reappeared with her, and then the girl turned imperiously to Nevis.

"You here!" she exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"I was trying to sell your mother a binder," Nevis answered blandly.

Lucy, standing very straight, looked at him with a snap in her eyes.

"Then I guess you're wasting time. While there are implements to be had anywhere between here and Winnipeg we'll buy none from you."

Nevis favored her with a single swift glance, and then took up his hat.

"In that case I may as well get on again. I dare say your mother and Miss Leigh will excuse me."

He did not offer to shake hands with either of them, which may have been due to the fact that Mrs. Calvert's face was now hard and suspicious, and Alison carefully looked away from him. There was, also, a gleam of ironical amusement, which probably had some effect, in Thorne's eyes. Soon after he disappeared, Mrs. Calvert asked Thorne to come out and look at a mower which she said the hired man had had some trouble with, and when they left the room Lucy leaned back in her chair with her eyes fixed on Alison in a significant manner. They were of a clear blue, and Alison admitted that, with the somewhat unusual color in her cheeks and the light on her mass of gleaming hair, the girl was aggressively pretty.

"I'm glad they've gone—I guess I have to thank you for what you did," she said. "It was right smart, and I'm not sure my mother caught on to the thing."

"How did you know?" Alison asked in rather disturbed astonishment.

Lucy laughed.

"Mavy saw you through the window. The mail-carrier told him Nevis was here, and it was quite easy to figure what he was after. That's why Mavy hitched his team behind the willows and crept up quiet to see what was going on, so he could spoil his game, but he left it to you when he saw that you were on to it. Said he felt quite sure you could fix the man."

Alison remembered the footstep at the window, but she was curious about another aspect of the matter.

"Why did he tell you?" she asked.

Lucy's manner changed, and there was a hint of hardness in her expression.

"Well," she answered, "perhaps he wanted me to know what you had done, and, anyway, he had to put me on my guard. Still, though Mavy's quick, they're none of them very smart after all, and there was a point that didn't seem to strike him. He wasn't clear as to why Nevis would try to pick up Jake's trail through me."

The last words were flung sharply at the listener, and Alison made a gesture of appeal.

"Of course," she returned, "he wouldn't tell you that."

"No," declared Lucy; "nothing would have got it out of him. That's the kind of man he is." She paused a moment. "What made you send Nevis after me?"

"It was done without thinking. I couldn't foresee that it might make trouble. I was sorry afterward; I am sorry now."

Her companion looked at her with disconcerting steadiness.

"We'll let it go at that. There's just this to say—you haven't any reason to be afraid of me. I don't know a straighter man than Mavy Thorne—but I don't want him! Jake's quite enough for me, and there's trouble in front of him, with Nevis on his trail."

It cost Alison an effort to retain a befitting composure. This plain-speaking girl had obviously taken a good deal for granted, but Alison was uneasily conscious that she had certainly arrived at the truth. It was a relief to her when Mrs. Calvert and Thorne presently entered the room together.

CHAPTER XV
ON THE TRAIL

Nevis was not, as a rule, easily turned aside when he had taken a task in hand, and his failure at the Calvert homestead only made him more determined to run Winthrop down. Besides, he had not failed altogether, for he had at least caught a glimpse of the stamp on the letter, and he had no doubt that it was a Canadian one. There was an appreciable difference in the design and color of the American stamps. This indicated that in all probability Winthrop was still in Canada, in which case there would be no difficulty in arresting him once his whereabouts could be discovered. The tracing of the latter promised to be less easy, but Nevis set about it, and shortly afterward fortune once more favored him.

His business was an extensive one; he had money laid out here and there over a wide stretch of country, and he had already discovered that it required a good deal of watching. As a matter of fact, the latter was advisable, for some of the men to whom he lent it were addicted to disappearing without leaving any address or intimation as to what they had done with the movable portion of their hypothecated possessions. It is true that they generally had repaid Nevis a large part of his loan, as well as an exorbitant interest for a considerable time, but then had abandoned the struggle in despair. From his point of view, however, neither fact had any particular bearing on the matter. He expected a good deal more than the value of a hundred cents when he laid down a dollar.

One night a week or two after he called on Mrs. Calvert, he strolled out on to the platform of a train that had been run on to a lonely side-track beside a galvanized iron shed and a big water-tank. He was leaning on the rails, when the conductor came out of the vestibule behind him.

"We're not scheduled to stop," he commented.

"No, sir," replied the conductor. "Guess the company had once a notion of making a station here, but they cut it out. It's used as a section-depot and side-track, and now and then a freight pulls up for

water. There's a soft spring here, and you can't get good water right along the line. Any kind won't do in a locomotive boiler."

The man was unusually loquacious for a western railroad hand, and Nevis, who had been glancing out at the shadowy sweep of prairie, amid which the straight track lost itself, felt inclined to talk.

"But what's holding us up?" he asked.

"Montreal express. She's on the next section, and it's quite a long one. They side-track everything to let her through."

A thought took shape in Nevis's mind. The point that suggested itself appeared at least worth attention, and he asked a question:

"Would a wire to anybody in the district be sent to the station ahead?"

The conductor said that it would, and added that the man in charge of the place where they were then stopping was called up only in case of necessity to hold a train on the side-track. He explained that although the instruments clicked out any message sent right along the circuit the operators, as a rule, listened only when they got their particular signal. This had a certain significance to Nevis.

"Is there often a freight-train waiting here when you come along?" he asked.

"That's so," said his companion. "We take the section if the Atlantic flyer's late, and they have to cut out the pick-up freight if she's in front of us. When she was standing yonder one night a little while back I saw what struck me as quite a curious thing. Just as we struck the tail switches a man dropped off a caboose coupled on behind the freight-cars; it was good clear moonlight, and I watched him. He kept the train between him and the shack behind you, and started out over the prairie as fast as he could. Then we ran in behind the freight-cars, but as soon as we were clear the engineer pulled them out, and as I looked back the man dropped into the grass like a stone. Bill, who runs this place, was standing outside his shack, and that may have had something to do with it."

"It sounds strange," commented Nevis. "Can you remember when it was?"

The conductor contrived to do so, and Nevis was not astonished when he heard the date. He decided that it would be wise to compare

his conclusion with any views his companion might have about the matter.

"It's possible it was only one of the boys stealing a ride," he suggested.

"In that case he needn't have been so scared of Bill," was the answer. "It's most unlikely he'd have got out on the prairie after him. Strikes me the man was mighty anxious nobody should see him. Anyway, I thought no more about the thing, and only remembered it to-night."

Just then the scream of a whistle came ringing up the track, and the conductor pointed to a fan-shaped blaze of brightness which swept up out of the prairie.

"The express; I'll have to get along. We'll be off in two or three minutes now."

Nevis lighted a cigar as soon as he was left alone, and by the time the great express had flashed by with a clash and clatter he felt convinced that Corporal Slaney had erred in assuming that Winthrop had escaped across the frontier. Having arrived at this decision, he strolled back into the lighted car as the train crept out across the switches on to the waste of prairie. He had now something to act upon.

In the meanwhile, a weary man, dressed in somewhat ragged duck, sat one evening outside a tent pitched in the hollow of a prairie coulée, with a letter in his hand. His attitude was suggestive of dejection, but he clenched the paper in hard, brown fingers, and there was an ominous look in his weather-darkened face. It was careworn, though he was young, and his general appearance and expression seemed to indicate that he was a simple man who had borne a burden too heavy for him, until at last he had revolted in desperation against the intolerable load.

A new branch line crept along the side of the shallow coulée, which wound deviously across the great white sea of grass, and the trestles of a half-finished bridge rose, a gaunt skeleton of timber, above the creek that flowed through the valley. A cluster of tents and a galvanized iron shack, with a funnel projecting above it, crowned the crest of a neighboring ridge, and a murmur of voices and laughter rose faintly from the groups of men who lay about them.

Winthrop, however, had pitched his camp a little distance from the others, so as to be nearer his work, which consisted in removing the soil from the side of the coulée to make room for the road-bed. He had obtained a team from a neighboring rancher, and a satisfactory rate of payment from the railroad contractor. Indeed, during the last few weeks he had almost fancied that he was at last leaving his troubles behind him, and then that afternoon another blow had suddenly fallen. The letter from Lucy Calvert contained the disturbing news that Nevis, who seemed to have discovered that he had not left Canada, was still in pursuit of him.

Presently two of his comrades from the camp strolled up to his tent and stretched themselves out on the harsh, white grass in front of it. They were attired as he was, and they had toiled hard under a scorching sun all day handling heavy rails, but one was a man of excellent education, and the other had owned a wheat farm until the frost had reaped his crop and ruined him.

"You're looking blue to-night," commented the latter.

"Well," acknowledged Winthrop grimly, "there's a reason. I've put quite a lot of work in on that road-bed the last few weeks, but the trouble is I won't get a dollar unless I stay with it and keep up to specification until next pay-day."

"Of course!" said the man who had spoken. "Why should you want to quit?"

Winthrop glanced at the letter.

"I've had a warning. Guess I'll have to pull out again sudden one of these days."

There was silence for a few moments after this. The men had gone on well together, and within certain limits the toilers in a track-grading camp make friends rapidly, but for all that there are unwritten rules of etiquette in such places, and questions on some points are apt to be resented.

Still, Winthrop's face was troubled, and his expression hinted that it might be a consolation to take somebody into his confidence.

"Creditors?" one of his companions ventured to suggest.

"You've hit it first time, Drakesford. Bondholder who's been bleeding me quite a few years now. Raked in what I made each harvest—left me not quite enough to live on—until I began to see

that I'd have to work a lifetime to get clear of him. When I knocked a little off the debt one good year he piled up something else on me. Then I was short last payment, and he shut down on my farm."

Drakesford turned to his companion.

"Ever hear anything like that before, Watson?"

There was a trace of dryness in the other man's smile.

"I have," he answered; "it's not quite new on the prairie. One or two of the boys I know have been through that mill."

He turned toward Winthrop.

"How did the blamed insect first get hold of you?"

"I'd a notion of getting married, and meant to raise a record crop. Went along to the blood-sucker, who was quite willing to back me, and took out a mortgage. Pledged him all the place and stock for what he let me have."

"Probably a third of its value," interposed Drakesford.

"About that," Winthrop agreed. "A big crop might have cleared me then, but we had frost that year, and he commenced to play me. Made me insure stock and homestead in his company—and I guess he stuck me over that. Then I had to buy implements and any stores he sold from him, at about twice the usual figure; and one way or another the debt kept piling up."

"Couldn't you have gone short in your payments before it got too big, and let him sell the place?" suggested Drakesford. "In that case, anything over and above what he advanced would have had to be refunded to you. Still, the man you dealt with would probably have provided for that difficulty."

Watson grinned.

"A sure thing! He wouldn't shut down until it was a year when wheat was cheap and farms were bringing mighty little. Then he'd sell him up and buy the place in through a dummy, 'way down beneath its value. After that he'd rent it out until wheat went up and he'd get twice what he gave for it from some sucker."

It is possible that the farmer had arrived at something very near the truth, but his companion, who still seemed thoughtful, looked at Winthrop.

"When you got notice of foreclosure I suppose you cleared out and left him the place," he said. "How does that give him a hold on you?"

"I sold the team and stock first," replied Winthrop grimly. "He sent the police after me."

The man made a sign of comprehension.

"Naturally! But haven't you got some homestead exemption laws in this part of the country?"

"They don't apply to mortgaged property," Watson broke in. Then he looked up sharply. "But, I guess you've hit it. The debt secured by mortgage wasn't a big one, and the man piled up more on to it afterward. The law would exempt from seizure on that."

Winthrop considered this moodily.

"Well," he answered at length, "suppose you're right. Who's going to take up my case, and where am I to get the money to put up a fight? The only lawyer in the district wouldn't act against the bondholder, and I couldn't get at my mortgage deed anyway. It's in the man's hands, and I haven't a copy. I got out with the price of a few beasts, and left the rest to him." He paused, and clenched a big, brown hand. "If he's wise he'll be content with that, and quit; but you can't satisfy that man. He's got my farm; he's made my life bitter; brought three years of trouble on the girl I meant to marry; and now he's after me again. Seems to me I've laid down under it about long enough!"

He broke off and sat silent a while, gazing out across the prairie toward where the red glow of sunset burned far off on the lonely grassland's rim. Iron shack and clustered tents stood out against it sharply now, and the faint sound of voices that came up through the still, clear air seemed to jar on the man.

"They can laugh," he complained. "I could, once."

Then Watson changed the subject.

"Butler had a notion he'd try a shot or two to-morrow where the road goes through the rise, and he sent some giant-powder along. He wants you to clinch the detonators on the fuses and put them in."

Now dynamite is not often used in prairie railroading, but Winthrop had once handled it in another part of the country, and had mentioned the fact to a foreman who was disposed to experiment with it.

"It's no use in that loose stuff," he pointed out.

"Butler wants to try it," answered Watson. "There's no reason why you shouldn't let him. I dumped the magazine he sent you in the coulée. I didn't want to lie about smoking too near the detonators."

He walked away a little distance and came back with a case, out of which Winthrop took what looked like several yellow wax candles. Then he cut off three or four pieces of fuse, and carefully pinched down a big copper cap on the end of each of them. These he inserted into different sticks of the semi-plastic giant-powder in turn, and his companions drew a little away from him as he did so. It was getting dark now, but they could still see his face, and it was very hard and grim. It impressed them unpleasantly as they watched him handle the yellow rolls which contained imprisoned within them such tremendous powers. Giant-powder is a somewhat unstable product, as Winthrop knew from experience and the other two had heard, and in case of a premature explosion there was very little doubt as to what the fate of the party would be. Annihilation in its most literal sense was the only word that would describe it, for there was force enough in those yellow sticks to transform material flesh and blood into unsubstantial gases. The fulminate in the detonators he cautiously imbedded was even more terrible, and sitting with his bent form outlined darkly against the shadowy waste of grass, he looked curiously sinister. He finished his task at last and handed one of them the magazine.

"Shouldn't there be another stick?" Watson asked. "Have you left it in the grass?"

"You can look," said Winthrop curtly, as he moved aside.

Watson glanced round the place where he had been sitting.

"I can't see it, anyway. I dare say I couldn't have brought another one, after all."

He moved away with Drakesford and looked at the latter when they were some distance from the tent.

"It's curious about that stick," he observed. "I'm not convinced yet that I've got as many as I brought with me."

"Why should he want to keep one?" his companion asked.

"I don't know," Watson confessed. "But there was something in his face that didn't please me."

"Yes," agreed Drakesford; "I've once or twice seen overdriven men look like that, and so far as I can remember there was trouble afterward."

They said nothing further, and while they proceeded along the crest of the coulée Winthrop, still sitting beside his tent, took a stick of giant-powder from his pocket.

CHAPTER XVI
CORPORAL SLANEY'S DEFEAT

The sun had just dipped, and there was a wonderful invigorating coolness in the dew-chilled air. Winthrop sat in the cook-shed which was built against the back of the iron store-shack. Outside, as he could see through the doorway, the prairie ran back, a vast gray-white stretch, to the horizon, beneath as vast a sweep of green transparency. The little shed, however, was growing shadowy, and a red twinkle showed through the front of the stove in which the sinking fire was still burning.

The cook was somewhere outside talking with the boys, and Winthrop, who wished to beg a cotton flour-bag from him to use in mending his clothes, sat quietly smoking while he waited until he should come back. He felt no inclination to join the others, for he had grown anxious and morose since Lucy's warning had reached him a week or two earlier. He was quite aware that there was some danger in remaining at his work, but pay-day was approaching and he meant at least to wait until he could collect the money due him. After that he would disappear again if anything transpired to render it necessary. Just then Watson looked into the shed.

"I guess you'd better come right out," he said hurriedly. "There are two strangers riding into camp."

Winthrop was on his feet in a moment, and the haste with which he rose betrayed his anxiety. Going out, he ran forward until he could obtain an uninterrupted view of the plain. The waste of grass was growing dim, but two mounted figures showed up black on it. Watson indicated them with outstretched hand.

"Notice anything interesting about them?"

"Yes," Winthrop answered grimly; "they ride like police troopers."

"That's just how it seemed to me," exclaimed Drakesford. "They're coming from southward, and if they'd left the trunk line soon after the Vancouver train came in they would get here about now. They could have borrowed horses from the rancher near the station."

Winthrop watched them steadily before he spoke.

"They're troopers, sure," he said at length. "The short one looks like Corporal Slaney, who's out after me; and they'll be in before I could catch either of my horses. I turned them out in the soft grass some way back in the coulée."

"You have got to do something," declared Watson, "and do it right now!"

Winthrop glanced out across the great, level plain, and his face grew set.

"They'd sure search the coulée, and, except for that, there isn't cover for a coyote for a league or two. It won't be dark for half an hour yet, and they'd ride me down in three or four minutes in the open."

This was obvious, and silence followed until Winthrop spoke again.

"I haven't a gun of any kind."

"That's fortunate," said Drakesford. "What do you want a gun for, anyway? Plugging one of the troopers wouldn't help you."

In the meanwhile, the mounted figures were rapidly drawing nearer. The three men stood tensely watching them until Winthrop suddenly swung round toward his companions.

"You can tell them where my tent is, and they'll waste some minutes going there. That's all I want you to do."

Watson looked at him inquiringly, but he made a sign of impatience.

"I'm going back to the cook-shed. You can't help any. Keep out of this trouble."

Moving away from them, he disappeared into the shadowy interior of the shed, and his companions waited until the rest of the men came running up as the police rode in. The latter asked a few questions which Watson answered truthfully, and then they rode off toward Winthrop's tent. Presently one dismounted trooper reappeared, and proceeded to search the other tents, amid ironical banter and a few protests. This took him some time, and darkness was not far off when he reached the iron shack, the door of which was unusually difficult to open, though Watson, who had visited it in the meanwhile, could have explained the cause of it. Then the other

trooper came back, and led both horses out upon the prairie. Leaving them there, he joined his comrade, who addressed the men.

"Boys," he said, "we're holding a warrant for your partner, and we've got to have him."

"Nobody's stopping you," one of them answered. "We haven't a place to hide him in unless he's crawled down a gopher-hole."

As a gopher is smaller than an ordinary squirrel, the point of this was evident, and while a laugh went up the policemen conferred together in front of the iron shack; then, after looking in, they walked around to the back of it. They had no doubt already noticed the cook-shed, but as it was very small and the door stood partly open, it appeared a most unpromising place for the fugitive to seek refuge. Now, however, they moved close to it, and Winthrop, sitting back in the shadow, became dimly visible.

"Come out! We've got you!" one trooper cried.

The man did not move, but he had something in his hand, which was stretched out toward the stove. One of the pot-holes in the top of the stove was open, and a faint glow shone upon the object he held clenched in his fingers. It bore, as Corporal Slaney noticed, no resemblance to a pistol.

"Come out!" he repeated. "There's no use in making trouble."

Winthrop laughed in a jarring fashion.

"I guess I'll stay a while right where I am."

Then he raised his voice.

"If you're wise you'll wait outside, Corporal."

Slaney stood still just outside the door, peering into the shed; and the trooper behind him had his carbine ready.

"Don't be foolish, Jake. We've got you sure," he called.

He moved a pace nearer, and Winthrop leaned forward a little farther over the pot-hole.

"See what this is?" he inquired, glancing down at the object in his hand.

"It's not a gun, anyway," said the trooper to his superior.

"It's a stick of giant-powder. There's a detonator in it and an inch or two of fuse. As soon as you're inside the door I drop it in the stove."

Slaney promptly recoiled a yard or two. Having had some experience in dealing with men driven to extremities, he knew that Winthrop's warning was not empty bluff. There was something in the man's voice that convinced him that he meant what he said. For the next few moments he and the trooper stood irresolutely still, wondering what they should do, while the motionless figure quietly watched them through the doorway. The corporal was by no means timid or overcautious, and had Winthrop held a pistol it is highly probable that he would have attempted to rush him. Except in the hands of a master of it, the short-barreled weapon is singularly unreliable, and shots fired by a man disturbed by fear or anger as a rule go wide; but the stick of dynamite meant certain death. Slaney had not the nerve to face that, and, besides, as he rightfully reflected, it would serve no purpose except to nip in the bud the career of a promising police officer. Then Winthrop spoke again.

"You'll have to haul off this time, Corporal. Letting this thing drop is quicker than shooting, even if you had me covered."

"We could plug you from a distance through the shack," Slaney pointed out.

"That's so," Winthrop assented calmly; "I guess you could; but I'm not sure your bosses would thank you for doing it."

There was, as the corporal recognized, some truth in this. The police would be held blameless for shooting down a fugitive who refused to surrender, but after all the exploit would not count to their credit unless the man were a desperado guilty of some particularly serious offense. It was their business to capture the person for whom they had a warrant.

Drawing back a little farther, the corporal conferred with the trooper, who suggested several ways of getting over the difficulty, none of which, however, appeared altogether practicable. For one thing, he said, they could wait, sleeping in turn, until from utter weariness Winthrop's vigilance relaxed; but that, it was evident, would most likely take more time than they could spare. They could also seek the assistance of the trackgraders and arrange with them to make a diversion while they crept up unobserved. Against this there was, however, as the corporal pointed out, the probability that the men were more or less in sympathy with the fugitive, and that as a result any assistance they might be commanded to render could not

be depended on. He added that he would rather wait for daylight, and then, if it should be absolutely necessary, fire into the shed.

In the meantime Watson was discussing the affair with Drakesford.

"That man has some kind of plan in his mind, though I can't tell you what it is," he declared. "Anyway, it would be better that the troopers hadn't their horses handy in case he gets out in the dark and makes a break for the prairie."

"They're back behind the tents," observed Drakesford, pointedly.

"Picketed," grinned Watson. "They should have knee-hobbled them. A horse will now and then pull a picket out when the soil's light."

It was too dark to see his companion's face clearly, but Drakesford appeared to smile in a manner that suggested comprehension, and they strolled a little nearer the corporal, who had just sent for the cook. The corporal explained that he had ridden a long way since his dinner, and asked for a can of coffee and some eatables, and the cook proceeded dubiously toward the shed. He came back empty-handed in a minute or two.

"I can't get you anything," he said. "The man you're after won't let me in."

The corporal expressed his feelings somewhat freely, but the cook grinned.

"You want to be reasonable," he protested. "How do you expect me to get in, when he's holding off the two of you, and you've got arms?"

Watson touched his companion's shoulder.

"It's my opinion that our friend would better get out to-night," he whispered. "The boys are holding off in the meanwhile, but if they can't get their breakfast there'll probably be trouble."

Drakesford agreed with this, and shortly afterward he proceeded circuitously toward the troopers' horses.

In the meanwhile, Slaney and his subordinate sat down on the grass well apart from each other and about sixty yards from the cook-shed, and, rolling their blankets about them, prepared to spend the night as comfortably as possible. It was not very dark, though there was no moon, and a slight haze, which promised an increased

obscurity, was now creeping across the sky. They could see the black shape of the shed, and it was evident that nobody could slip out from it without their observation; and they had their carbines handy. Slaney would have crept up a little nearer, only that he felt it desirable to keep outside the striking range of the giant-powder, in case Winthrop happened to get drowsy and drop it in the stove.

After a while the track-graders, who had sat among the grass smoking and watching the troopers, began to drift away to their sleeping-quarters. The drama was interesting, but they had no part in it, and they would certainly have to rise soon after sunup to a long day's arduous toil. In the meanwhile, their attitude could best be described as reluctantly neutral. There were a few toughs among them who had no doubt sufficient reason for not loving a policeman of any kind, but the rest recognized the inadvisability of any interference with constituted authority. On the other hand, though they did not know the rights or wrongs of the matter, the desperate, cold-blooded courage of the hard-pressed man appealed to them, and they decided that Corporal Slaney need not look for any effective assistance which it might be in their power to render. Most of them were simple men who lived and toiled in the open, and, as is usual with their kind, their sympathies were with the weaker party.

In an hour or two the last of them had vanished, and if a few still watched outside their tents there was, at least, nothing that suggested their presence to Corporal Slaney. He lay resting on one elbow, with his eyes fixed on the shed, while a little chilly breeze set the dry grasses rustling about him. It was now slightly darker than it usually is on the prairie in summer-time, for the haze had gradually spread across most of the sky. The tents had faded almost out of sight, though the black shape of the shack remained, and now and then, when the breeze sank away, the silence grew almost oppressive. Once the corporal started as he heard a sound in the shed, but he sank down again when he recognized the clatter and rattle that succeeded it. Winthrop, who evidently did not mean to neglect any precaution, was, he decided, putting more fuel into the stove. After that the howl of a coyote came faintly up the breeze, which grew stronger, and the low murmur of the grasses began once more.

A pearly light was growing clearer on the eastern rim of the prairie when at length Slaney, damp with the dew, rose to his feet with a shiver and softly called the trooper, who announced that he had heard nothing suspicious during the night. After a brief parley they crept up cautiously a little nearer the shed, but there was, so far as they could make out, no sign of life within. Indeed, the stillness was becoming suspicious. Moving nearer still, they could look into part of the shed through the open door, and, for the light was getting clearer, it became evident that Winthrop was no longer sitting beside the stove. This was encouraging, because it looked as if he had fallen asleep.

Making a short detour, so as to keep to one side of the entrance, they crept up closer, with faces set and hearts beating a good deal faster than usual; but there was no sound except a faint crackle, apparently from the stove. Then Slaney lay down in the grass and crawled up to the doorway, where he rose and suddenly sprang into the shed. The next moment his voice rang out hoarse with anger, for the place was empty. He waited until the trooper joined him, and then pointed to a little door in the back of the larger building.

"That explains the thing!" he exclaimed. "You looked round the shack?"

"I did," the trooper admitted, and added, somewhat tactlessly, "so did you."

Slaney frowned at this reminder, but it was evident that a discussion as to whose fault it was that Winthrop had got away would in no way assist them in his capture, and they proceeded into the larger building, where they had no trouble in finding an explanation of his escape.

Men working on the prairie or in the bush of Canada are usually boarded by their employers at a weekly charge, and there were a good many of them engaged on the track. As a result of it, the iron shack was partly filled with provisions, and when Slaney and the trooper entered by the front they had seen a pile of cases and flour-bags apparently built up against one wall. It was, however, growing dark then, and neither of them had noticed that there was a narrow space behind the provisions which had been left to facilitate the entrance of the cook. Winthrop, it was clear, had slipped out through it in the darkness, and the shack had prevented either of the

watchers from seeing him crawl away across the prairie. It occurred to Slaney that from the position of the tents it was scarcely likely he had got away quite unnoticed, but he had reasons for believing that it would be difficult to elicit any reliable information on that point from the man's comrades.

There was only one thing to be done, and that was to mount as soon as possible and endeavor to pick up the fugitive's trail; but when they reached the spot where they had left their horses there was no sign of them, and it was half an hour before the trooper came upon them some distance up the coulée. Slaney was quite convinced that neither of the beasts had succeeded in dragging the picket out of the ground unassisted, but this was a thing he could not prove; and when the cook had supplied them with a hastily prepared breakfast he and the trooper rode away across the prairie.

CHAPTER XVII
A COMPROMISE

Thorne was driving Alison home from Graham's Bluff one afternoon about a week after Winthrop's escape when a couple of horsemen became visible on the crest of a low rise. The girl glanced at them from under her white parasol, which shone dazzlingly in the fierce sunlight, and then fixed her eyes on her companion.

"They're coming this way, aren't they?" she asked.

"They seem to be," replied Thorne. "One of them looks like the corporal, and I shouldn't wonder if he wanted a word with me."

He saw the girl's slight start, but was not greatly flattered, as he could not be sure whether it resulted from concern on his behalf or mere annoyance. He knew what she thought of Winthrop.

"There's no cause for alarm," he added with a laugh. "I haven't done anything particularly unlawful for some time."

He had half expected Alison to explain that she was not alarmed at all, but she disappointed him, and he wondered whether there was any significance in this. He had already discovered that she did not invariably reveal exactly what she felt.

"What can he want?" she asked.

"It probably concerns Winthrop. I don't think I told you that they almost caught him a little while ago, though he got away again."

"You didn't. Was that because you were afraid you could not trust me?"

A tinge of deeper color crept into her companion's face, and she decided rightly that this was due to displeasure. In the encounters which were not altogether infrequent between them she now and then delivered a galling thrust, but this, he thought, was striking below the guard.

"What a question, Miss Leigh!"

"It wouldn't have been unnatural if you had considered it wiser to be reticent. What happened on the last occasion would have justified it."

"If you are referring to Nevis's visit to Mrs. Calvert, I should be quite willing to leave you to outwit him again. The way you secured the letter was masterly. Still, in view of the opinions you expressed about Winthrop, I don't understand why you did it, and, so far as I can remember, you haven't explained the thing."

"I meant his visit to the Farquhar homestead when I told him about Lucy; but I'll try to answer you. For one reason, I wanted to make amends for my previous—rashness."

Alison paused at the word, as she remembered that Lucy had suggested that what she now termed rashness was jealousy.

"Well," laughed Thorne, "you were certainly rash, but I feel inclined to wonder whether you were anything else. Your hesitation just now was—significant."

Alison recognized that she had a quick-witted antagonist.

"I believe I have already admitted that I was prejudiced against Winthrop."

"That," returned Thorne, "is, perhaps, from your point of view, no more than natural. In fact, I'm not sure I could say he was right in everything he has done." He paused a moment. "But, I shouldn't like to think that your prejudice extends to Lucy."

Alison had not expected this, and she wondered with some resentment exactly what he meant to imply.

"Of course," he added, "some of her ideas and some of the things she says might jar on you, but that doesn't count for very much, after all. The girl's staunch all through, and the way she has stuck to Winthrop in his trouble and the way she has run the farm would compel the respect of any one who understood what she has had to put up with."

Alison wondered whether he wished to reassure her concerning Lucy's devotion to her lover, which, as she remembered, the girl herself had already done; but she scarcely fancied that he would adopt such a course as this. It would, at least, be very much out of harmony with his usual conduct.

"I venture to believe that Lucy and I will be good friends in the future," she said.

Slaney and the trooper were now rapidly approaching, and a minute or two later Thorne pulled up and turned to the corporal, who reined in his horse close beside the wagon.

"You have something to say to me?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Slaney; "it's this: Do you know where Jake Winthrop is?"

"No," answered Thorne; "on the whole, I'm glad I don't. What's more, I haven't the least suspicion."

They looked at each other steadily, and it struck Alison that the little gesture Slaney made was a striking testimonial to her companion's character. It indicated that the corporal had no hesitation in taking the word of the man with whom he was at variance. Though she and Thorne occupied the same seat they were far enough apart for her to see his face, and as he sat with his broad hat tilted back, smiling down at Slaney, she recognized that in spite of the old blue duck he wore there was a virile grace in every line of his figure. In addition to this, by contrast with the smartly uniformed corporal, he looked, as she felt it could most fittingly be described, thoroughbred, and there was something in his half-whimsical manner that curiously pleased her.

"I guess you heard what happened up the track?" Slaney next inquired.

"I did. Rather amusing in some respects, wasn't it? I understand that you and the trooper sat out most of the night watching an empty shack."

"Well," asserted Slaney grimly, "there was nothing very amusing about the giant-powder. I tell you the man meant to drop it into the fire."

"From what I know of Winthrop, I'm inclined to believe he did. In fact, in my opinion, it would be considerably wiser of Nevis if he left that man alone. I'm not sure he has a very good case against him, anyway; though, of course, that's no concern of yours or mine. You can't pick up his trail?"

"That's a cold fact," declared the corporal. "I guess you wouldn't mind getting down and walking along a few yards with me?"

"It's not worth while. I've no objections to Miss Leigh's hearing what you have to say, and I'm afraid Volador wouldn't stand unless I

kept the reins. The flies are bothering him, and he doesn't seem quite easy when you're in the neighborhood." Thorne paused and laughed. "In a way, that's not astonishing."

Slaney disregarded the last observation.

"Then," he said, "I'm not the man to make useless trouble—anyway, unless it's going to give me a shove up toward promotion—but you're worrying me. The fact is, wherever I pick up Winthrop's trail I strike yours too. Now there was a night some while back when we ran one of you down close to the frontier."

Thorne saw Alison glance sharply at the corporal, and he smiled.

"Why should I ride for the frontier with the police after me?"

"That's what I don't exactly know, but I have my views. I want to say that we picked up a black plug hat when we were coming back along the trail. The point is that the thing was new. Then we found a brown duck jacket with a tear in it, but I figured the tear had been made quite lately."

"I don't think you could prove very much from that."

"Well," said Slaney, "I could try. It would look bad if I put the other matter of the horse Winthrop found near your homestead alongside it. Now I'll ask you right out—Are you going to mix yourself up with Jake's affairs any more?"

"In return, I'd like to hear whether you have any notion of carrying your investigations further?" Thorne parried.

They looked rather hard at each other, and then Slaney smiled.

"I guess it will depend a good deal on your answer; that is, unless Nevis gets hold of the thing."

"Then it's my intention to drop Jake Winthrop now. There's very little probability of his wanting any further assistance that I could render him."

"Well, let it go at that," replied Slaney simply. "I guess it will save you trouble. Good-day to you."

He rode away, and Alison turned to her companion when they drove on again.

"One could have imagined that you and the corporal were making a bargain," she suggested.

Thorne laughed.

"Well," he admitted, "I'm afraid it was quite illegal, but it amounted to something very much like that. The bargain, however, is only a provisional one. If Nevis chances on the truth, he may upset it by forcing Slaney's hand."

"But, after all, you gave each other only a vague hint. It would be difficult even to reproach the corporal if, as you say, he went back on it."

"Oh, yes," assented Thorne dryly. "Still, I haven't the least reason for believing that probable."

Alison made no comment, though the attitude of both men appealed to her. They were enemies in some respects, and yet once the indefinite understanding had been arrived at neither seemed to have the slightest fear that the other would violate it. They were, she remembered, men who lived in the open, who broke and rode wild horses, and who faced exposure and strenuous toil. Why this should be conducive to reliability of character was not very clear, but it apparently had that result. Then she remembered what the corporal had mentioned.

"You have been doing something to help Winthrop to escape since the night you let him have the horse?"

Thorne admitted it, and when she pressed him for the story he told it whimsically; but this time Alison felt no anger. A few plain words spoken by Lucy Calvert had obviated that, for it was now quite clear that the man had been prompted by mere chivalrous pity and lust of excitement, and had no desire to win the girl's favor.

"That was splendid!" she exclaimed.

Thorne smiled, though he looked at her in a somewhat curious fashion. Then at her request he related how Winthrop had held off the police. As it happened, he could tell a story with dramatic force, and both the brief narratives had their effect on Alison. She had imagination, and could picture the man who now sat beside her smashing furiously through the tangled bluff in the blackness of the night, and the other sitting grimly resolute beside the stove with the stick of giant-powder in his hand. After all, they were, she realized, the doings of primitive men; but charity that did not stop to count the cost, and steadfast, unflinching valor, were rudimentary too, and all the progress of a complex civilization had evolved nothing finer.

Man could add nothing to them. They were perfect gifts to him, though there was reason for believing that they were not distributed broadcast.

Then they chatted about other matters, and Alison was almost sorry when the Farquhar homestead and its barns and stables rose, girt about with a sweep of tall green wheat, out of the prairie. Thorne stayed for supper, and he was standing beside his team with Farquhar an hour afterward when the latter suddenly made an excuse and moved away as his wife came out of the doorway. Thorne grinned at this, and there was still a gleam of amusement in his eyes when his hostess stopped beside him. He indicated the retreating Farquhar with a wave of his hand.

"Harry remembered that he'd want the wagon to-morrow, and there's a bolt loose," he explained. "It didn't seem to occur to him until he noticed you. I suppose one could call it a coincidence."

"Have you any different ideas on the subject?" Mrs. Farquhar inquired.

"Since you ask the question, it looks rather like collusion."

"Well," laughed Mrs. Farquhar, "I certainly wanted a little talk with you. To begin with, I should like to point out that we have had a good deal of your company lately."

"That's a fact. Perhaps I'd better say that quite apart from the pleasure of spending an evening with you and Harry there's another reason."

"The thing has been perfectly obvious for some time; indeed, it has had my serious consideration. You see, I hold myself responsible for Alison to some extent."

"You feel that you stand *in loco parentis*—I believe that's the correct phrase—but in one way it doesn't seem to apply. Nobody would believe you were old enough to be her mother."

Mrs. Farquhar glanced at him in half-amused impatience, but his manner swiftly changed.

"It's my intention to marry Alison as soon as things permit," he added. "Anyway, that is what I should like to do, but whether I'll ever get any farther is, of course, another matter. It's one on which I'd be glad to have your opinion; and that suggests a question. Can my views have been perfectly obvious to Alison?"

His companion looked thoughtful.

"That's a little difficult to answer; though I feel inclined to say that they certainly ought to have been. On the other hand, it's possible that she may believe you merely saw in her what we'll call an intellectual equal—somebody you would have more in common with than you would, for example, with Lucy. This seems the more likely because I don't think that marriage in itself has any great attraction for her. Indeed, I'm inclined to fancy that it was rather a shock to her to discover how it is regarded by some people in this country. It's unfortunate that she fell in with one hasty suitor who was anxious to marry her offhand immediately on her arrival. That being the case, it strikes me that you had better proceed cautiously and avoid anything that may suggest a too materialistic point of view."

Thorne made a gesture of comprehensive repudiation.

"I'm thankful that nobody could call me smugly practical. But, it must be admitted that, as she is situated, marriage seems to be her only vocation in this country."

"If you let her see that you think that, you may as well give up your project." Mrs. Farquhar hesitated a moment. "Have you ever tried to formulate what you expect from Alison?"

Thorne's smile made it evident that he guessed what was in her mind.

"I can at least tell you what I don't expect. I've no hankering for a house and domestic comforts—in my experience they're singularly apt to pall on one. I don't want a woman to mend my clothes and prepare me tempting meals—that way of looking at the thing strikes one as almost unthinkable, and there never was a banquet where the fare was half as good as what you turn out of the blackened spider in the birch bluff. I want Alison, with her English graces and English prejudices; her only, and nothing else."

"That is a sentiment which would no doubt appeal to her; but one has to be practical; and you would in any case have to do a good deal before you got her. She couldn't, for instance, dress in flour-bags and live in the wagon. Nor do I think that Bishop would feel equal to entertaining a married couple during the winter."

"The point of all this is that you want to be satisfied that I can give up my vagabond habits?" suggested Thorne. "Well, I must try to

convince you, though I want to say that it was a willing sacrifice. Haven't I gone into harness—yoked myself down to a house and land, with a mortgage on both of them; haven't I slept for several months now under at least a partly shingled roof? If any more proof is wanted, haven't I come to terms with Corporal Slaney and given up the excitement of bluffing the police; and haven't I decided, as far as it's possible for me, to leave Nevis unmolested? Aren't all these things foreign to my nature?"

Mrs. Farquhar laughed.

"Mavy," she asked, "do you find living in some degree of comfort, and devoting your intelligence to a task that will probably pay you, so very intolerable?"

Thorne smiled and made a little, confidential gesture.

"I must confess that I don't find it quite as unpleasant as I had expected. But you haven't given me your opinion on the point that concerns me most."

"Then," said Mrs. Farquhar, with an air of reflection, "while Alison has naturally not said anything to me on the subject, I don't think you need consider your case as altogether desperate."

She smiled at Thorne, who swung himself up into his wagon and drove away.

CHAPTER XVIII
NEVIS'S VISITOR

Florence Hunter had lately returned from Toronto and was sitting on the veranda toward the middle of the afternoon in an unusually thoughtful mood. Among other reasons for this, there was the fact that she had spent a good deal of money while she was away, and she was far from sure that she had received its full value. Most of the people she had met in Toronto appeared to be endued with irritatingly respectable, old-fashioned views, and as a result of it they could not be induced to forget that she was a married woman separated for a few weeks from a self-sacrificing husband. Indeed, one or two of them went so far as to condole with her for his absence, and their general attitude imposed on her an unwelcome restraint. There was certainly one exception, but this man had no tact, and the lady who stood sponsor for her openly frowned at his too marked devotion, while some of the others laughed. Florence at length got rid of him summarily, and then half regretted it when nobody else aspired to fill his place.

It had, further, occurred to her in Elcot's absence that he had a number of strong points, after all. He was quiet and steadfast, not to be moved from his purpose by anger or cajolery, and though this was sometimes troublesome, there was no doubt that he was a man who could be relied upon. She had nothing to fear, except, perhaps, her own imprudence, while she was in his care. Then, although she would hardly have expected it before she went away, she found the spacious wooden house pleasantly cool and quiet after the stir and rush of life in the hot city, and Elcot's unobtrusive regard for her comfort soothing. He never fussed, but when she wanted anything done he was almost invariably at hand. She determined to be more gracious to him in the future, for she was troubled with a slightly uncomfortable feeling that he might have had something to complain of in this respect in the past.

On the whole, her thoughts were far from pleasant, and in addition to this the temperature, which was a good deal higher than usual, had a depressing effect on her. There was no breeze that afternoon, and the air was still and heavy; the white prairie flung

back a trying light, even on to the shaded veranda, and she felt restless, captious and irritable. At length, however, she took up a book and endeavored to become engrossed in it. She so far succeeded that she did not hear a buggy drive up, and it was with a start that she straightened herself in her chair as Nevis walked quietly on to the veranda.

"I never expected you!" she exclaimed.

The man smiled in a deprecatory fashion.

"I heard at the station that you arrived yesterday."

Florence frowned at this. The inference was too obvious; he evidently wished to imply that it would have been unnatural had he delayed his visit.

"Well," she said, "you startled me. Do you generally walk into places that way—like a pickpocket?"

Nevis laughed, and when he sat down rather close to her, uninvited, she favored him with a gaze of careful and undisguised scrutiny. Florence could be openly rude upon occasion, and though his visits hitherto had afforded her some satisfaction, she now felt that she would have been better pleased had he stayed away. He was, as usual, tastefully dressed; there was no doubt that his clothes became him; but somehow it struck her that, although she had not realized this earlier, the man looked cheap, which on consideration seemed the best word for it.

"I suppose you enjoyed yourself while you were away?" he began.

"No," replied Florence; "on the whole, I don't think I did."

She broke off and added irritably:

"Why do you always come at this time? If you drove over in the evening you would find Elcot at home."

She was genuinely provoked by her companion's smile. It so tactlessly implied that she did not mean what she had said. His signal lack of delicacy jarred on her now, though she remembered with faint wonder that she had on previous occasions found a relish in his conversation.

"Well," he answered, "for one reason, I generally call here when I'm going to the bluff. It's convenient to get there for supper."

Florence was annoyed at the opening words. The hint that there was a stronger reason which he had not mentioned was so crude that it savored of mere impertinence. Somehow she felt disappointed in the man. She had, as she realized at length, expected clever compliments from him, firmly finished, subtle boldness that would be just sufficiently apparent to convey a pleasurable thrill, and, with the latter exception, a wholly respectful homage. As to what he had expected she was far from clear, but that was a point of much less account. The polish, however, seemed suddenly to have been rubbed off him, and there was nothing into which she cared to look beneath. Even Elcot would have been capable of something more skilful than his too familiar inanities. What had brought about this change in the way she regarded him she did not know, but there was no doubt that she felt all at once disillusioned. She was in her caprices essentially variable.

"Your supper is evidently a matter of importance to you," she said.

Nevis looked at her sharply.

"Not more than it is to most other men. In return, I wonder if I might point out that you don't seem quite as amiable as usual to-day?"

Florence laughed.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not. Nobody could feel very pleasant at this temperature; and I'm disappointed—with several things." She leaned back languidly in her chair with an air of weariness. "When that happens it's a relief to be disagreeable to anybody who comes along. Besides, you're not in the least entertaining this afternoon."

There was something in her manner that stung the man, and he ventured upon an impertinence.

"I suppose that means that Elcot hasn't proved amenable, as usual; but it's a little rough on me that I should have to meet the bill after a long and scorching drive."

Florence laughed again, scornfully.

"Elcot," she retorted, "is accustomed to carrying his own load, and on occasion other people's too, which is a weakness with which I'd never credit you. Besides, if he'd traveled for a week to see me he wouldn't think of reminding me of it."

"You seem inclined to drag his virtues out and parade them to-day."

There was no doubt that the man was going too far, and that led Florence to wonder whether he could be driven into going any farther.

"That," she replied, "would be quite unnecessary in Elcot's case. In fact, his virtues have an almost exasperating habit of meeting you in the face, which is no doubt why it's rather pleasant to get away from them—occasionally."

"You prefer something different on the off-days?"

"Yes," Florence answered reflectively, "I like a change; but it must be admitted that I invariably feel an increased respect for Elcot after it."

Nevis winced at this. She had made it clear that it was his part to amuse her at irregular intervals and enhance her husband's finer qualities by the contrast. It was not, however, one that appealed to him, and he had a vindictive temper. As it happened, she presently gave him an opportunity for indulging it.

"I wish I'd never gone to Toronto," she said petulantly.

"Considering everything, that's quite a pity," Nevis pointed out. "The visit probably cost you a good deal of money; and"—he added this with a grim suggestiveness—"wheat is steadily going down."

Florence gazed at him with a hardening face. He evidently meant it as a reminder that she owed him money. The man was becoming intolerable.

"Is it?" she asked indifferently. "In any case, I shall no doubt manage to meet my debts when they fall due."

Nevis had reasons for believing that it would be more difficult than she seemed to anticipate, but he talked about something else, and then, finding that his companion did not favor him with very much attention, he took his leave. When he was getting into his buggy Hunter came up and stopped him.

"I'm rather busy, but I can spare you a few minutes if it's necessary," he said.

Nevis looked at him with a provocative smile.

"It isn't," he answered. "It was your wife I came to see; she entrusted me with the arranging of a little matter."

He gathered up the reins, and added, as though to explain his departure:

"There are several things I want to get through with at the bluff this evening."

"Then I won't try to keep you."

Hunter walked up on the veranda and, leaning on the balustrade, looked at his wife.

"You have had a deal of some kind with that man?"

A flush of anger swept into Florence's cheek.

"He told you that?" she exclaimed; and then added, with a harsh laugh, "As it happens, he was quite correct."

Hunter stood still with an expressionless face for a moment or two, apparently waiting in case she had anything else to say; and then, with a gesture which might have meant anything, he moved away along the veranda. Florence's conscience accused her when he disappeared into the house; but she was most clearly sensible that she was now a little afraid of Nevis and disposed to hate him. However, she lay quietly in her basket-chair until word was brought her that supper was ready.

Two or three days later Nevis sat late one night in his office at the railroad settlement. It was situated at the back of his implement store, on the ground floor of a very ugly wooden building which had a false front that rose a little beyond the ridge of roof. One door opened directly on to the prairie; the other led into the store, from which there exuded a pungent smell of paint and varnish. A nickeled lamp hung over Nevis's head, and the little room was unpleasantly hot, so hot, indeed, that he sat in his shirt-sleeves before a table littered with papers. Not far away a small safe stood open. This contained further papers tied up in several bundles and neatly endorsed. There was nothing else in the room except a few shelves filled with account books; and there was no covering on the floor. Nevis, like most commercial men in the small western towns, wasted very little money on superfluous accessories. He found that he could employ it much more profitably.

He had, as it happened, a troublesome matter to decide on, and seeing no way out of the difficulties which complicated it, he rose at length, and, lighting a cigar, opened the outer door and stood leaning against it. It was cooler there, and he noticed that the night was unusually dark. The stream of light that flowed out past him, forcing up his figure in a sharp, black silhouette, only intensified the thick obscurity in which it was almost immediately lost. It was also very still, and he could hear his white shirt crackle at each slight movement of the hand that held the cigar. Everybody in the little wooden town was, he surmised, already asleep, though he knew that a west-bound train would stop there in half an hour or so.

He did not know how long he remained in the doorway, but by degrees the stillness became oppressive, and at last he started as a sound rose suddenly out of the darkness. It was a faint, metallic rattle, and he leaned forward a little, listening in strained attention. The noise was so unexpected that it jarred on him.

Then he recollected that some of his neighbors were addicted to dumping empty provision cans and similar refuse into a clump of willows which straggled close up to the back of the town not far away, and he decided that one of them had fallen down or rolled over. After that he went back to his table, leaving the door open for the sake of coolness, and he was once more occupied with his papers when he heard a sharp knocking at the front of the store. Pushing his chair back he took out his watch. Somebody who was going west by the train that was almost due apparently desired to see him, though it seemed a curious thing that the man had not called earlier. He rose and entered the store, where he fell against the projecting handle of a plow in the darkness. This ruffled his temper, and he spent some time impatiently fumbling for and undoing the fastenings of the outer door. Then he flung it open somewhat violently, and strode out into the darkness. There was, so far as he could see, nobody in the vicinity, and when, moving forward a few paces he called out, he got no answer.

Feeling slightly uneasy as well as astonished, he stood still for, perhaps, a minute, gazing about him. He could dimly see the houses across the street, with the tall false fronts of one or two cutting black against the sky, but there was not a light in any of them, and there was certainly no sound of footsteps. He was neither a nervous nor a

fanciful man, and it scarcely seemed possible that his ears had deceived him. Swinging around suddenly, he went back into the store and fastened the outer door before he reentered his office. The door at the back of the office and the safe stood open just as he had left them. Crossing the room he looked into the safe.

As a rule, a man's possessions are as secure in a small prairie town as they would be in, for example, London or Montreal, but Nevis seldom kept much money in his safe. He usually made his collections after harvest, and remitted the proceeds to a bank in Winnipeg. A small iron cash-box, however, occupied one shelf, and it was at once evident that this had not been touched, which seemed to prove that nobody with dishonest intentions had entered the place in his absence. This was satisfactory, but a few moments later it struck him that one of the bundles of docketed papers was not lying exactly where he had last placed it. He could not be quite sure of this, though he was methodical in his habits, and he took the bundle up and examined it. The tape around it was securely tied and the papers did not seem to have been disturbed. Besides this, they were in no sense marketable securities.

He laid them down again and closed the safe. Then, locking the outer door behind him, he proceeded through the silent town toward the track. As he did so the clanging of a locomotive bell broke through a slackening clatter of wheels, and when after a smart run he reached the station, hot and somewhat breathless, the lights of the long train were just sliding out of it. He strode up to the agent, who stood in the doorway of his office shack with a lantern in his hand.

"Did anybody get on board?" he asked.

"No," replied the agent. "Nobody got off, either. Did you expect to catch up any one?"

"I fancied somebody called at the store a few minutes ago. It occurred to me that the man might want to leave some message and had forgotten it until he was going to catch the train."

"I guess it must have been a delusion," remarked the agent.

Nevis had almost arrived at the same conclusion. He waited a few minutes, and then they walked back together through the settlement. The agent left him outside the store, above which he had

a room, and dismissing the matter from his mind he went tranquilly to sleep half an hour later.

CHAPTER XIX
THE MORTGAGE DEED

Alison was sitting alone in the general living-room of the Farquhar homestead about an hour after breakfast when she laid down her sewing with a start as a man whom she had not heard approaching suddenly appeared in the doorway. He stood there, looking at her with what she felt was a very suspicious curiosity, and there was no doubt that his appearance was decidedly against him. His clothing, which had been rudely patched with cotton flour-bags, was old and stained with soil; his face was hard and grim; and she grew apprehensive under his fixed scrutiny.

"Where's the rest of you?" he asked after an unpleasant silence of a few moments.

Alison felt that it would be singularly injudicious to inform him, and while she hesitated, wondering what to answer, he strode into the room and fell heavily into the nearest chair.

"You'll excuse me," he apologized. "I'm played out."

The signs of weariness were plain on him, and Alison became a little reassured. After all, she remembered, there was nothing of very much value in the homestead; and she had never as yet had any reason to fear the men she had come across upon the prairie. In fact, though one had wanted to marry her offhand, their general conduct compared very favorably with that of one or two whom she had met in English cities.

"Have you come far?" she asked.

"From the railroad—on my feet," answered the man. "I left it about midnight two nights ago, and since then I've only had a morsel of food." Then he smiled at her. "You haven't told me yet where Harry Farquhar and his wife have gone."

It was clear that he had already satisfied himself that they were out, and Alison reluctantly admitted it.

"Mrs. Farquhar has driven over to the bluff," she said. "She took her husband with her, but she was to drop him at the ravine where the birches are. He wanted to cut some poles."

The look of annoyance in the man's face further reassured her, as it implied that he regretted Farquhar's absence almost as much as she had done a few moments earlier.

"It's a sure thing I can't wait till they come back, and the trouble is I can't make Mrs. Calvert's place without a rest, either."

He paused and gazed searchingly at Alison.

"You're Miss Leigh, aren't you? I guess you could be trusted; I've heard of you."

Alison's astonishment was evident, and he smiled.

"It's quite likely," he added dryly, "that you've heard of me. My name's Jake Winthrop."

Alison sat very still, and it was a moment or two before she spoke.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Breakfast, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. Then, as Farquhar's out, there's a piece of paper I'd like to give you. Guess it would be safer out of my hands; the police troopers are after me."

Alison set the kettle and frying-pan on the stove. She was compassionate by nature, and the man looked very jaded and weary. When she sat down again he handed her a rather bulky folded paper which appeared to be some kind of legal document.

"What am I to do with this?" she asked.

"You can give it to Farquhar, or keep it and hide it," said the man. "I guess the last would be wisest. Nobody would figure you had the thing, and I can't give it to Lucy, because Nevis would sure get after her."

"Is it very important?"

"It might be. I can't go and ask a lawyer now. Guess the man would feel it was his duty to put Slaney on my trail, and I couldn't go near the settlement in daylight without doing the same. Anyway, it's my mortgage deed, and I have a notion that it might give me a pull on Nevis if the troopers get me. If I'm right, he'll be mighty anxious to get it back again."

"I don't understand," returned Alison. "If he was afraid of your using it against him, he wouldn't have given it to you at all."

Winthrop grinned.

"He didn't. I got him out of his office late at night and crept in for it. I knew where he kept the thing because I'd seen him put it in his safe."

Alison was far from pleased with this confession, but while she considered it another point occurred to her.

"But don't people generally get a duplicate of a paper of this kind?" she asked.

"I had one, but Nevis wanted me to do something that didn't seem quite what we had agreed on, and I went over with the deed to show him he was wrong. He said I'd better leave it, and somehow or other I could never get it out of his hands again."

"Ah," said Alison softly, "I think I wouldn't mind helping you against that man. But you must tell me exactly what you mean to do."

"I'm going across to see Lucy—and out West somewhere after that. If I can get away, and strike anything that will pay me, it's quite likely that I'll leave Nevis alone. If I can't, or there's a reason for it later, I'll write you, and Farquhar or Thorne could take the deed to a lawyer and see if he could get at Nevis with it. In the meanwhile it would be wiser if you just hid the thing away. If Farquhar knows nothing about it, I guess it would save him trouble."

Alison did not answer for a moment or two. She felt that she was acting imprudently in allowing herself to be drawn into the affair, but she was sorry for the man. He was a friend of Thorne's, and that counted for a good deal in his favor. In addition to this, the idea of playing a part, and possibly a leading part, in something of the nature of a complicated drama appealed to her, and there was, half formulated at the back of her mind, the desire to prove to Thorne just what she was capable of.

"Well," she said at length, "you may leave it with me."

Then she set about getting him a meal, and a little while later he limped wearily away. He left her with the impression that it would be wise of Nevis to abandon his pursuit of him, for there was something in the man's manner which indicated that he might prove dangerous if pressed too hard. The morning had slipped away before she could get the thought of him out of her mind.

In the meanwhile, he was plodding across the white wilderness under a scorching sun. The atmosphere was crystallinely clear, and an almost intolerable brightness flooded the wide levels. A birch bluff miles away was etched in clean-cut tracery upon the horizon, but though the weary man kept his eyes sharply open he felt reasonably safe from observation, which it seemed desirable to avoid. He did not believe that any of the scattered farmers would betray him, even if some pressure should be put upon them with the view of extracting information, but it was clear that they would be better able to evade any attempts Nevis or Slaney might make to entrap them into some incautious admission if they had none to impart. Winthrop based this decision on the fact that a man certainly cannot tell what he does not know.

It was consoling to remember that the wide, open prairie is by no means a bad place to hide in. A mounted figure or a team and wagon shows up for a vast distance against the skyline, while a few grass tussocks less than a foot in height will effectually conceal a man who lies down among them with the outline of his body broken by the blades from anybody passing within two or three hundred yards of him. Winthrop was aware, however, that it would be different if he attempted to run away; and once he dropped like a stone when a buggy rose unexpectedly out of a ravine. The man who drove it was an acquaintance of his, but he seemed to gaze right at the spot where Winthrop was stretched out without seeing him. The latter was not disturbed again, but he cast rather dubious glances round him as he resumed his march. There was another long journey in front of him that night, and he did not like the signs of the weather. It struck him as ominously clear.

He was, as it happened, not the only person who noticed this, for other people who had at different times suffered severely in pocket from the vagaries of the climate had arrived at much the same opinion that afternoon, with more or less uneasiness according to their temperament. The wheat was everywhere standing tall and green, and the season had been on the whole so propitious that from bitter experience they almost expected a change. As the small cultivator has discovered, the simile of a beneficent nature is a singularly misleading one, for the stern truth was proclaimed in ages long ago that man must toil with painful effort for the bread he eats,

and must subdue the earth before he can render it fruitful. In the new West he has made himself many big machines, including the great gang-plows that rip their multiple furrows through the prairie soil, but he still lies defenseless against the fickle elements.

Elcot Hunter, at least, was anxious that night as he sat in the general living-room of his homestead opposite his wife. She was not greatly interested in the book she held, and she glanced at him now and then as he sat poring over a newspaper which was noted for its crop and market reports. They afforded Hunter very little satisfaction, for they made it clear that the West would produce enough wheat that season to flood an already lifeless market.

The windows of the room were open wide, and the smell of sun-baked soil damped by the heavy dew came in with the sound made by the movements of a restless horse or two. The fall of hoofs appeared unusually distinct. The wooden house, which had lain baking under a scorching sun all day, was still very hot, but the faint puffs of air which flowed in were delightfully cool, and at length Florence, who was very lightly clad, shivered as one that was stronger than the rest lifted a sheet of Hunter's paper.

"It is positively getting cold," she remarked.

"Cold?" returned Hunter. "I wouldn't call it that."

He resumed his reading, and three or four minutes had slipped by when Florence turned to him with irritation in her manner.

"Haven't you anything to say, Elcot?" she broke out. "Are those crop statistics so very fascinating?"

Hunter looked up at her with a rather grim smile. She lay in a low cane chair beneath the lamp, with her figure falling into long sweeping lines, attired in costly fripperies lately purchased in the East, but there was not the least doubt that they became her. Indeed, with the satiny whiteness of her neck and arms half revealed beneath the gauzy draperies, and her hair gleaming lustrously about a face that had been carefully shielded from the ravages of the weather, she seemed strangely out of place in the primitively furnished room of a western homestead. The man noticed it, as he had done on other occasions, with a pang of regret. There had been a time when he had expected her to rejoice in his successes and console him in his defeats, and it had hurt when she had made it clear that any

reference to his occupation only irritated her. He had got over that, as he had borne other troubles, with an uncomplaining quietness, and, though she had never suspected this, he had often felt sorry for her. Still, he was a man of somewhat unyielding character, and there was occasionally friction when he did what he considered most fitting, in spite of her protests.

"Well," he said in answer to her question, "they have, anyway, some interest to a farmer who has a good deal at stake." He threw the paper down. "Things in general aren't very promising, and I may be rather tightly fixed after the harvest. I seem to have been spending a great deal of money lately."

Florence felt guilty. After all, as she was the principal cause of his expenses, it was generous of him to put it as he had done. Indeed, she decided to make a confession about the loan from Nevis sometime when he appeared to be in an unusually favorable mood.

"You have a splendid crop, haven't you?" she asked.

"The trouble is that I may not get much for it, and a wheat crop is never quite safe until it's thrashed out. I'm uncertain about the weather."

"The aneroid has gone up; I looked at it."

"It's gone up too much and too suddenly," said Hunter. "That sometimes means a bad outbreak from the north."

Florence was moved by a sudden impulse. The man was bronzed and toughened by labor, but there was, as she had noticed since she came home, a jaded look in his face.

"Elcot," she asked, "do you think I oughtn't to have gone away?"

The man seemed to consider this.

"No," he answered, "I don't think that, so long as you were able to manage it with the little help I could give you." He paused a moment, and looked puzzled, for there was a suspicion of heightened color in Florence's face. "On the whole, I'm glad you went, if you enjoyed the visit."

"You don't seem very sure. Wasn't it rather dull for you here?"

It was, so far as he could remember, the first time she had displayed any interest on this point, and he smiled.

"Oh, I had the place to look after, as usual. It's fortunate that it occupies a good deal of my attention."

Florence leaned forward suddenly.

"Elcot, won't you tell me exactly how much you mean by that?"

It was a moment or two before Hunter answered.

"Well," he said gravely, "since you have suggested it, perhaps I better had, though it means the dragging in of questions we've talked over quite often already. I took up farming because I couldn't stand the cities and it seemed the thing I was most fitted for. On that point I haven't changed my opinions. Where I did wrong was in marrying you." He checked her with a lifted hand as she was about to speak. "If you had never met me, you would probably have taken the next man with means who came along."

"Yes," admitted Florence, meeting his gaze. "I think that's true. Having gone so far, hadn't you better proceed?"

"I'm trying to look at it from your standpoint; I've never been sorry on my own account."

Florence laughed in a strained fashion.

"That's a little difficult to believe. Still, one must do you the justice to own that you have, at least, never mentioned your regrets."

"I don't think I've often mentioned my expectations either. That's one reason I'm speaking now. You seem—approachable—to-night."

"I suppose they were not fulfilled?"

"If they were not, it was my own fault. I took you out of the environment you were suited to and content with."

"I wasn't," Florence declared sharply. "Things were horribly unpleasant to me then. I was struggling desperately to earn a living, and had to put up with a good deal from most disagreeable people."

Again a faint, grim smile crept into her husband's eyes.

"After all, perfect candor is a little painful now and then; but let me go on. At least, I brought you into an environment with which you were not content. The kind of life I led was irksome to you; you could not help me in it; even to hear me talk of what I did each day was burdensome to you. I couldn't speak of my plans for the future, or the difficulties that must be met and faced continually. For a while I felt it badly."

"Yes," Florence acknowledged, "it must have been hard on you, Elcot."

"It could be borne, but there was another side of the matter. It was clear that you were longing for company, stir, gaiety—and I could not give them to you. As I've often said, I'm not rich enough to make a mark in any of the cities, unless I went into business, for which I've neither the training nor inclination, and most of my money is sunk in the land here. It's difficult to sell a farm of this size for anything like its value unless wheat is dear. Besides, the friends you would wish to make wouldn't take to me. That is certain; I lived among people of their description before I met you. I couldn't in any way have helped you to make yourself a leading place in the only kind of society that would satisfy you. All this has stood between us—no doubt it was unavoidable—but it made the troubles I could share with no one a little worse to bear, and my few successes of less account to me. After all, since I could, at least, send you to the cities now and then, it was fortunate that I had my farm." He stopped a moment and added deprecatingly: "Whether you will be able to get away next winter is more than I know. As I said, the outlook is far from promising in the meanwhile."

Florence did not answer immediately. At last, she could clearly grasp the man's point of view. Indeed, she realized that during the few years they had lived together she had taken all he had to offer and had given practically nothing in return. She felt almost impelled to tell him that her last visit to the cities had brought her very little pleasure, and that she would be willing to spend the next winter with him at the lonely homestead; but she could not do so. A surrender of any kind was difficult to her, and she had by degrees built up a barrier of reserve between them that could not immediately be thrown down. Besides, there was in the background the memory of Nevis's loan.

"Things may look better by and by," she said lamely.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, and it seemed to Florence that the room grew perceptibly colder, while once or twice a little puff of air struck with a sudden chill upon her face. Then there was a sharp drumming, which ceased again abruptly, upon the shingled roof, and she followed Hunter when he strode out on the veranda. An impenetrable darkness now overhung most of the sky,

and there was a wild beat of hoofs as three or four invisible horses dashed across the paddock. Florence knew that the beasts were young, and understood that they were valuable. Her husband moved toward the steps.

"I'll put them into the stable, or, if I can't manage that, turn them out on the prairie," he said. "I'm afraid of the new fence. They're not accustomed to it yet, and there are two barbed strands in it."

"Take one of the hired men with you," Florence called after him, but he made no answer, and the next moment a mad beat of hoofs once more broke out as the uneasy horses galloped furiously back across the fenced-in space.

CHAPTER XX
HAIL

The air had grown very still again when Florence leaned on the veranda balustrade, gazing into the darkness, which was now intense. The brief shower of heavy rain had wet the grass, and waves of warm moisture charged with an odor like that of a hothouse seemed to flow about her and recede again, leaving her almost shivering in her gauzy dress, for between whiles it was by contrast strangely cold. She could hear Hunter calling to the horses, which apparently broke away from him now and then in short, savage rushes, but she could see nothing of him or them. Presently the sharp cries of one of the hired men broke in, and Florence, who felt her nerves tingling, became conscious of an unpleasant tension.

Then for a second, or part of it, the figures of moving men and beasts became visible, etched hard and black against an overwhelming brightness, as a blaze of lightning smote the prairie. The glare of it was dazzling, and when it vanished Florence was left gripping the balustrade, bewildered and wrapped in an intolerable darkness. After that a drumming of hoofs and a hoarse cry broke upon her ears, but both were drowned and lost in a deafening crash of thunder. It rolled far back into the distance in great reverberations, and while her light skirt fluttered about her in an icy draught another sound emerged from them as they died away.

It grew nearer and louder in a persistent, portentous crescendo, for at first it suggested the galloping of a squadron of horse, then a regiment, and at length the furious approach of a division of cavalry. Holding fast to the balustrade, she could even imagine that there were mingled with it the crash of jolting wheels and a clamor of wild voices as of a host behind pressing onward to the onslaught. The din was scarcely drowned by a tremendous rumbling that twice filled the air; and there was forced upon her a vague perception of the fact that it was a very real attack upon the things that enabled her to have the ease she loved. Wheat and cattle, stables and homestead must, it almost seemed, go down, and there were, as sole and pitiful defense, two men somewhere out in the darkness exposed to the outbreak of elemental fury. There was now no sign of her husband or his

companion. It was quite impossible to hear any sound they made, and she stood quivering, until, loosing her hold of the balustrade with an effort, she ran down the steps.

"Elcot!" she cried.

No answer reached her. She knew it was useless to call, but an overmastering fear came upon her as she remembered the mad flight of the terrified horses, and she ran on a few paces over the wet grass, crying out again. Then she was beaten back, gasping, with her hands raised in a futile attempt to shield her face and her dress driven flat against her, as a merciless shower of ice broke out of the darkness. It swept the veranda like the storm of lead from a volley, only it did not cease; crashing upon the balustrade and lashing the front of the house, while the very building seemed to rock in the savage blast. She staggered back before it, too dazed and bewildered to notice where she was going, until she struck the wall and cowered against the boards. There was a narrow roof above her, but it did not keep off much of the wind-driven hail, and she could not be sure that the whole of it was now standing. The veranda was wrapped in darkness, for the lamp had blown out.

She never remembered how long she stood there. For a time, every sense was concentrated on an effort to shelter her face from the hail which fell upon her thinly covered arms and shoulders like a scourge of knotted wire. Then, faint and breathless, she crept forward toward where she supposed the door must be, and staggered into the unlighted room. She struck a chair, and sank into it, to sit shivering and listening appalled to the cataclysm of sound.

Then a terror which had been driven out of her mind for the last few minutes crept back. Elcot was out amid the rush of hurtling ice; and she knew him well enough to feel certain that he would stay in the paddock until the horses were secured. She could picture him trying to guide the maddened beasts out between the slip-rails, heading them off from the perilous fence they rushed down upon at a terror-stricken gallop, or, perhaps, lying upon the hail-swept grass with a broken limb. It was horrible to contemplate, and she became conscious of a torturing anxiety concerning the safety of the man for whose comfort she had scarcely spared a thought since she married him.

Though it was difficult, she contrived to shut the door and window, and to relight the lamp, and then she glanced round the room. Elcot's paper had fallen to pieces and had been scattered here and there, while a long pile of hail lay melting on the floor. She could understand now why she felt bruised all over except where the fullness of her dress had protected her, for she had never seen hail like this in England. The jagged lumps were of all shapes, and most of them seemed the size of hazelnuts. Then she became conscious that her hair was streaming about her face and that her dress clung saturated to her limbs. This, however, appeared of no moment, for her anxiety about her husband was becoming intolerable.

Nerving herself for an effort, she moved toward the door. It was flung back upon her when she lifted the latch, and she staggered beneath the blow. Then, panting hard, she forced it to again and went back limply to her chair. It was utterly impossible for her to face that hail. She had the will to do so, and she was no coward, but the flesh she had pampered and shielded failed her, which was in no way astonishing. Wheat-growers, herders, police troopers, and, unfortunately, patient women learn that the body must be sternly brought into subjection to the mind by long repression before one can face wind-driven ice, snow-laden blizzard, or the awful cold which now and then descends upon the vast spaces of western Canada.

In a few more minutes the uproar subsided. The drumming on the walls and roof suddenly ceased and the wind no longer buffeted the house. The tumult receded in gradations of sinking sound, until at last there was silence, except for the drip from the veranda eaves. It was shortly broken by quick footsteps and Florence turned toward the door as Hunter came in.

His face showed where the hail had beaten it, for his hat had gone; the water ran from him, and one hand was bleeding. He looked limp and exhausted, but what struck her most was the sternness of his expression.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

Hunter glanced down at his reddened hand.

"Nothing to speak of. I got a rip from the fence somehow, and one leg's a little stiff; one of the horses must have kicked me. Guess I'll know more about it to-morrow."

"And the horses?"

"We managed to get them out. But what were you doing outside? Your dress is dripping."

Florence hesitated. It seemed extraordinary that while she had seldom felt the least diffidence in dealing as appeared expedient with any of the men she had known, she was unable to inform her husband that she had been driven into the storm by anxiety for his safety; but somehow she could not get the words out. She recognized that it had never occurred to him that she could have been actuated by any motive of this kind, though she was forced to own that, considering everything, this was no more than natural. The thought brought a half-bitter smile into her eyes.

"I was on the steps when the hail began, and I could scarcely get back into the house," she said. "Can it have done very much harm?"

Hunter made a gesture of dejection.

"That's a point I'm most afraid to investigate, and it can't be done to-night. In the meanwhile, hadn't you better get those wet things off?"

His preoccupied manner indicated that he was in no mood for conversation, and Florence left him standing moodily still. It was some minutes before he felt chilly and went upstairs to change his clothes, but he came back almost immediately and took some papers and a couple of account books from a bureau. After this he lighted his pipe and sat down to make copious extracts, with a view to discovering how he stood. He had no great trouble in ascertaining his liabilities, for he was a methodical man, but it was different when he came to consider what he had to set off against them. He had counted on his wheat crop to leave him a certain surplus, but it now seemed unfortunately probable that there would be no harvest at all that year. Admitting this, he busied himself with figures in an attempt to discover how far it might be possible to convert what promised to be a crushing disaster into a temporary defeat, and several hours slipped by before any means of doing so occurred to him. His expenses had been unusually heavy, there were many

points to consider and balance against each other, and a gray light was breaking low down on the rim of the prairie when at length he rose and thrust the books back into the bureau. The night's labor had at least convinced him that if he were to hold his own during the next twelve months it could be only by persistent effort and stern economy, and he had misgivings as to how his wife would regard the prospect of the latter.

On going out on to the veranda a few minutes later he was astonished to hear footsteps behind him, and when he turned and waited Florence came out of the doorway.

"I heard you moving and I came down," she said. "Are you going to look at the wheat?"

"Yes," replied Hunter. "I'm afraid there won't be very much of it to see."

The light was growing a little clearer and Florence noticed the weariness of his face. He seemed to hold himself slackly and she had never seen him fall into that dejected attitude. The man was, however, physically jaded, for a day of severe labor had preceded the struggle in the paddock and the hours he had spent in anxious thought, and he had, as he was quite aware, a heavy blow to face.

"May I go with you?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Why?"

The question was not encouraging, nor was his manner, and Florence felt reluctant to explain that her request had been prompted by a desire to share his troubles. She was conscious that a statement to this effect would probably appear somewhat astonishing, as she had never offered to do anything of the kind hitherto.

"If you must have a reason, I'm as anxious to see what damage the hail has done as you are. It can't very well affect you without affecting me."

"Yes," agreed Hunter, "that's undoubtedly the case. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me and the homestead for the next twelve months. It's quite likely that there'll be very few new dresses, either."

Florence endeavored to keep her patience. It was not often that she felt in a penitent mood, and he did not seem disposed to make it any easier for her.

"Do you suppose new dresses are a matter of vital importance to me?" she asked.

"Well," answered Hunter, "since you put the question, several things almost lead me to believe it."

He turned abruptly toward the steps.

"If you are coming with me, we may as well go along."

They crossed the wet paddock together, and now and then Florence glanced covertly at her husband's face. It was set and anxious, but there was no sign of surrender in it. She had, however, not expected to see the latter, for she knew that Elcot was one who could, when occasion demanded it, make a very stubborn fight.

At length they stopped and stood looking out across what at sunset had been a vast sea of tall, green wheat. Now it had gone down, parts of it as before the knife of a reaper, while the rest lay crushed and flung this way and that, as though an army had marched through it. Lush blades and half-formed ears were smashed into the mire and the odd clusters of battered stalks that stood leaning above the tangled chaos only served to heighten the suggestion of widespread ruin.

Florence watched her husband, but she did not care to speak, for there are times when expressions of sympathy are superfluous. When he walked slowly forward along the edge of the grain she followed him, without noticing that her thin shoes were saturated and her light skirt was trailing in the harsh wet grass. The ground rose slightly, and stopping when they reached the highest point he answered her inquiring glance.

"It looks pretty bad," he said. "Some of it—a very little—may fill out and ripen and we might get the binders through it, but the thing's going to be difficult."

"Will this hit you very hard, Elcot?"

Hunter turned and looked at her with gravely searching eyes, and she shrank from his gaze while a warmth crept into her face.

"Oh," she broke out indignantly, "I'm not thinking—now—of what I might have to do without. Still, I suppose it was only natural that you should suspect it."

The man's gesture seemed to imply that this was after all a matter of minor importance, and it jarred on her.

"Well," he answered, "I guess I can weather the trouble, though it will mean a long, stiff pull and a general whittling down of expenses. I spent most of last night figuring on the latter, and I've got my plans worked out, though it was troublesome to see where I was to begin."

Florence's heart smote her. Her allowance was a liberal one, but she knew it would only be when every other expedient had failed that he would think of touching that. It would have been a relief to tell him he could begin with it, but she remembered Nevis's loan. The thought of that loan was becoming a burden, and she felt that it must be wiped off somehow at any cost.

"Yes," she sympathized, "it must have been difficult. You don't spend much money unnecessarily, Elcot."

He did not answer, and she glanced at his hands, which were hard and roughened like those of a workman. There was an untended red gash which the fence had made across the back of one. Another glance at his clothing carried her a little farther along the same line of thought, for his garments were old and shabby and faded by the weather.

"Anyway," he said, apparently without having heeded her last observation, "I'm thankful I have no debts just now."

It was an unconscious thrust, but Florence winced, for it wounded her, and she began to see how Nevis had with deliberate purpose strengthened the barrier between her and her husband. What was more, she determined that the man should regret it. Why she had ever encouraged him she did not know, but there was no doubt that she was anxious to get rid of him now. She would have made an open confession about the loan then and there, but the time was singularly inopportune. It was out of the question that she should add to her husband's anxiety.

"After all, it doesn't often hail," she encouraged him. "Another good year will set you straight again."

The man seemed lost in thought, but he looked up when she spoke.

"We can make a bid for it," he replied. "I must have bigger and newer machines. Like most of the rest, I've been too afraid of launching out and have clung to old-fashioned means. There will have to be a change and a clearance before next season."

It was very matter-of-fact, but Florence knew him well enough to realize what it implied. Defeat could not crush him; it only nerved him to a more resolute fight, for which he meant to equip himself at any sacrifice with more efficient weapons. Again she was conscious of a growing respect for him.

"I'm afraid I have been a drag on you, Elcot, but in this case you can count upon my doing—what I can."

He scarcely seemed to hear her, and she realized with a trace of bitter amusement that her assurance did not appear of any particular consequence to him.

"I have teams enough," he continued, picking up the course of thought where he had broken off. "Anyway, one should get something for the old machines."

Florence set her lips as they turned back toward the house. This was a matter in which she evidently did not count; but there was no doubt that in the light of past events the man's attitude was justified. It would be necessary to prove that he was wrong, and, with Nevis's loan still to be met, that promised to be difficult.

"Elcot," she said, "I don't think I've told you yet how sorry I am."

He looked at her in a manner which implied that his mind was still busy with his plans.

"Yes—of course," he replied.

CHAPTER XXI
A POINT OF HONOR

Florence Hunter sat in her wagon in front of the grocery store at Graham's Bluff waiting until the man who kept it should bring out various goods she had ordered. Though a fresh breeze swept the surrounding prairie the little town was very hot, and it looked singularly unattractive with the dust blowing through its one unpaved street. In one place a gaily striped shade, which flapped and fluttered in the wind, had been stretched above the window of an ambitious store; but with this exception the unlovely wooden buildings boldly fronted the weather, with the sun-glare on their thin, rent boarding and the roofing shingles crackling overhead, as they had done when they had borne the scourge of snow-laden gales and the almost Arctic frost. They were square and squat, as destitute, most of them, of paint as they were of any attempt at adornment; and in hot weather the newer ones were permeated with a pungent, resinous smell.

Where Florence sat, however, the odors that flowed out of the store were more diffuse, for the fragrance of perspiring cheese was mingled with that of pork which had gained flavor and lost its stiffness in the heat, and the aroma of what was sold as coffee at Graham's Bluff. Florence, indeed, had been glad to escape from the store, which resembled an oven with savory cooking going on, though after all it was not a great deal better in the wagon. The dust was beginning to gather in the folds of her dainty dress, the wind plucked at her veil, and the fierce sun smote her face.

On the whole, she was displeased with things in general and inclined to regret that she had driven into the settlement, which she had done in a fit of compunction. Hitherto she had contented herself with sending the storekeeper an order for goods to be supplied, without any attempt to investigate his charges, but now, with Elcot's harvest ruined it had appeared her duty to consider carefully the subject of housekeeping accounts. She rather resented the fact that her first experiment had proved unpleasant, for she had shrunk from the sight of the slabs of half-melted pork flung down for her inspection, and having hitherto shopped only in England and

eastern Canada she had found the naïve abruptness of the western storekeeper somewhat hard on her temper. Retail dealers in the prairie settlements seldom defer to their customers. If the latter do not like their goods or charges they are generally favored with a hint that they would better go somewhere else, and there is an end of the matter. It really did not look as if much encouragement was held out to those who aspired to cultivate the domestic virtues. At length the storekeeper appeared with several large packages.

"You want to cover this one up; it's the butter," he cautioned. "Guess you're going to have some trouble in keeping it in the wagon if the sun gets on to it. Better bring a big can next time, same as your hired man does."

The warning was justified, because when the inexperienced customer brings nothing to put it in, butter is usually retailed in light baskets made of wood, in spite of the fact that it is addicted to running out of them in the heat of the day. The man next deposited a heavy cotton bag in the wagon, and while a thin cloud of flour which followed its fall descended upon Florence he laid his hands on the wheel and looked at her confidentially.

"I guess if your husband meant to let up on that creamery scheme you would have heard of it," he suggested.

"Yes," replied Florence; "I don't think he has any intention of doing so."

The man made a sign of assent.

"That's just what I was telling the boys last night. There were two or three of them from Traverse staying at the hotel, and when we got to talking about the hail they allowed that he'd have to cut the creamery plan out. I said that when Elcot Hunter took a thing up he stayed with it until he put it through."

His words had their effect on Florence. This, it seemed, was what the men who dealt with Elcot thought of him. After a few more general observations about the creamery her companion went back into his store, and as he did so Nevis came out of a house near by. He stopped beside her team.

"I didn't know you were in the settlement," he said, and his manner implied that had he been acquainted with the fact he would have sought her out.

Florence glanced at him sharply as she gathered up the reins. The man seemed disposed to be more amiable than he had shown himself on the last occasion, but she now cherished two strong grievances against him. He had cunningly saddled her with a debt which was becoming horribly embarrassing, and he had given her husband a hint that she had dealings of some kind with him. As the latter course was, on the face of it, clearly not calculated to earn her gratitude, she surmised that he must have had some ulterior object in adopting it.

"I've been buying stores," she answered indifferently.

"That's a new departure, isn't it?" Nevis suggested. "You generally contented yourself with sending in for them."

Florence did not like his tone, and he seemed suspiciously well informed about her habits. This indicated that he had been making inquiries about her, and she naturally resented it. She disregarded the speech, however.

"I suppose you're here on business?"

"Yes," answered Nevis, and there was something significant in his manner; "I thought it wiser to look up my clients after the hail we had two nights ago. It's going to make things very tight for many of the prairie farmers."

"And a disaster naturally brings you on the field. Rather like the vultures, isn't it?"

She was about to drive on, but Nevis suddenly laid his hand on the rein.

"I think you ought to give me a minute or two, if only to answer that," he said with a laugh. "You compared me to a pickpocket not long ago, and I'm not prepared to own that you have chosen a very fortunate simile now."

"No? After the fact you mentioned it struck me as rather apposite; but I may have been wrong. The point's hardly worth discussing, and I'm going on to the hotel."

She had expected him to take the hint and drop the rein, but he showed no intention of doing so, and it suddenly dawned on her that he meant to keep her talking as long as possible. Everybody in the settlement who cared to look out could see them, and she had no doubt that the women in the place were keenly observant. It almost

seemed as if he wished the fact that they had a good deal to say to each other to attract attention, with the idea that this might serve to give him a further hold on her. It was an opposite policy to the one he had pursued when she had driven him across the prairie some time ago, but the man had become bolder and more aggressive since then.

"Will you let that rein go?" she asked directly.

Nevis did not comply, and though he made a gesture of deprecation the look in his eyes warned her that he meant to let her feel his power.

"Won't you give me an opportunity for convincing you that I'm not like the vultures first? You see, they gather round the carrion, and I don't suppose you would care to apply that term to the farmers in our vicinity. Most of them aren't more than moribund yet."

It struck Florence that he was indifferent as to whether she took offense at this or not; and he was undoubtedly determined to stick fast to the rein. There were already one or two loungers watching them, and, if he persisted, she could not start the team without some highly undesirable display of force. The man, she fancied, realized this, and an angry warmth crept into her face. Then, somewhat to her relief, she saw Thorne strolling down the street behind her companion. He wore a battered, wide gray hat, a blue shirt which hung open at the neck, duck trousers and long boots, and though he was freely sprinkled with dust he looked distinctly picturesque. What was more to the purpose, he seemed to be regarding Nevis with suspicion, and she knew that he was a man of quick resource. In any case, the situation was becoming intolerable, and she flashed a quick glance at him. She fancied that he would understand it as an intimation that he was wanted, and the expectation was justified, for although she had never been gracious to him he approached a little faster. In the meanwhile Nevis, who had seen nothing of all this, talked on.

"There are, of course," he added, "people who are prejudiced against me; but on the other hand I have set a good many of the small farmers on their feet again."

"Presumably you made them pay for it?"

The man had no opportunity for answering this, for just then Thorne's hand fell heavily upon his shoulder.

"You here, Nevis?" he cried.

Nevis dropped the rein as he swung around and Florence wasted no time in starting her team. As the wagon jolted away down the rutted street Nevis, standing still, somewhat flushed in face, gazed at Thorne.

"Well," he demanded, "what do you want?"

Thorne leaned against the front of the store with sardonic amusement in his eyes.

"Oh," he replied, "it merely occurred to me that Mrs. Hunter wished to drive on. I thought I'd better point it out to you."

Nevis glanced at him savagely and then strode away, which was, indeed, all that he could do. An altercation would serve no useful purpose, and his antagonist was notoriously quick at repartee.

Thorne proceeded toward the wooden hotel and crossing the veranda he entered a long roughly boarded room, where he found Alison and Mrs. Farquhar as well as Florence Hunter waiting for supper. Mrs. Farquhar told him that supper would be served to them before the regular customers came in for theirs. They chatted a while and then a young lad appeared in the doorway and stopped hesitatingly.

"I'm sorry if I'm intruding," he apologized. "I meant to have supper with the boys, and Symonds didn't tell me there was anybody in the room."

Thorne turned to Mrs. Farquhar, and she smiled.

"Then unless you would prefer to take it with the boys, Dave, there's no reason why you should run away," he said.

He led the lad toward Alison when Mrs. Farquhar had spoken to him.

"I think you will remember him, Miss Leigh. He's the young man who boiled the fowls whole at the raising."

Alison laughed and shook hands with him, but after a word or two with her he looked at Thorne significantly and moved a few paces toward the door.

"Did you know that Winthrop was in the neighborhood?" he whispered.

Alison still stood near them and Thorne fancied that she started slightly, which implied that she had overheard, though why the news should cause her concern was far from clear to him.

"I didn't," he said sharply. "It's a little difficult to believe it now. You're quite sure?"

"I saw him," the lad persisted. "I was riding here along the trail and I'd come to the ravine. It's quite likely the birches had hidden me, for when I came out of them he was sitting on the edge of the sloo on the south side, near enough for me to recognize him, eating something. The next moment he rolled over into the grass and vanished."

"Then you didn't speak to him?"

"He was too quick. It looked as if he didn't want me to see him, and I rode on. I had to call at Forrester's and I found Corporal Slaney there. One or two things he said made it clear that he hadn't the faintest notion that Winthrop was within a mile or two of him."

He was apparently about to add something further when Thorne looked at him warningly. They were standing near the entrance, the approach to which led through the veranda, and the next moment Nevis walked into the room.

"Have you been picking up interesting news?" he asked. "I believe I caught Winthrop's name."

It was spoken sharply, in the expectation, Thorne fancied, that his companion, taken off his guard, would blurt out some fresh information; but the lad turned toward Nevis with an air of cold resentment.

"I was talking to Mr. Thorne," he replied.

Nevis laughed, though Thorne noticed that he did not do it easily.

"Well," he said, "I'm sorry if I interrupted you."

Then he turned toward the others as if he had just noticed them.

"I didn't know that Symonds had placed the room at your disposal; I've no doubt that will excuse me."

Nobody invited him to remain, but he withdrew gracefully, and when he had gone Thorne led the lad out on to the veranda. It was

unoccupied, but as it stood some little height above the ground he walked to the edge of it and looked over before he spoke.

"Now, Dave, I want you to tell me one or two things as clearly as you can."

The lad answered his questions, and in a minute or two Thorne nodded as if satisfied. Then he pointed to the room.

"Go in and talk to Mrs. Farquhar. Keep clear of Nevis, and ride home as soon as you can after supper. If you feel compelled to mention the thing, there's no reason why you shouldn't to-morrow. It won't do much harm then."

He went down the steps and along the street, and when he came back some time later he found Alison waiting for him on the veranda.

"So you heard what Dave told me? I thought you did," he said.

"Yes," assented Alison. "The question is whether Nevis heard him too."

"He certainly heard part, but there are one or two things he can't very well know. For instance, it was Slaney's intention to ride in to the railroad as soon as he'd had supper."

"Forrester's place must be at least two leagues from here," commented Alison.

"About that," Thorne agreed with a smile. "It's far enough to make it exceedingly probable that anybody who started from this settlement when he'd had his supper would only get there after Winthrop had gone."

"But Nevis might send a messenger immediately."

Thorne shook his head.

"It strikes me as very unlikely that he'd get any one to go. There are only one or two horses in the place, and I've been round to see the men to whom they belong."

Alison's eyes sparkled approvingly.

"But suppose he goes himself?"

"He won't until after supper. Nevis is not the man to deny himself unless it seems absolutely necessary, and he'll naturally assume that Slaney is spending the night with Forrester. But there's a certain probability of his setting out immediately after the meal."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

Thorne's expression became regretful.

"I'm very much afraid I can't do anything. You see, the—arrangement—with Corporal Slaney stands in the way."

"You never thought that Winthrop would come back here when you made it," Alison suggested.

"No," acknowledged Thorne; "the point is that the corporal didn't either."

Alison appeared to reflect, and he watched her with quiet amusement.

"I've changed my mind about Winthrop," she told him at length. "I want him to get away."

Thorne made no answer, and she continued:

"Lucy Calvert is, no doubt, a good deal more anxious than I am that he should escape, and it would be only natural if you wished to earn her thanks. I think she could be very nice, and her eyes are wonderfully blue."

Thorne met her inquiring gaze with one of contemplative scrutiny.

"Yours," he said, "are usually delightfully still and gray—like a pool on a moorland stream at home under a faintly clouded sky; but now and then they gleam with a golden light as the water does when the sun comes through."

His companion hastily abandoned that line of attack. His defense was too vigorous for her to follow it up.

"You feel that your hands are absolutely tied by the hint you gave Slaney that afternoon?" she asked.

"That's how it strikes me," Thorne declared. "In this case I'm afraid I'll have to stand aside and content myself with looking on."

"But haven't you already made it difficult for Nevis to get a messenger?"

"I've certainly given a couple of men a hint that I'd rather they didn't do any errand of his to-night. That may have been going too far—I can't tell." He paused and laughed softly. "Except when it's a case of selling patent medicines, I'm not a casuist."

Alison realized his point of view and in several ways it appealed to her. He had treated the matter humorously, but, though so little had

been said by either of the men, it was clear that he felt he had pledged himself to Slaney, and was not to be moved.

"Well," she urged, "somebody must stop Nevis from driving over to Forrester's."

"It would be very desirable," Thorne admitted dryly. "The most annoying thing is that it could have been managed with very little trouble."

"How?" Alison asked with assumed indifference.

Thorne, suspecting nothing, fell into the trap.

"Nevis's hired buggy is a rather rickety affair. It wouldn't astonish anybody if, when he wished to start, there was a bolt short."

A look of satisfaction flashed into Alison's eyes.

"Then he will certainly have to put up with any trouble the absence of that bolt is capable of causing. As there doesn't seem to be any other way, I'll pull it out myself. Your scruples won't compel you to forbid me?"

The man expostulated, but she was quietly determined.

"If you won't tell me what to do, I'll get Dave," she laughed. "I've no doubt he'd be willing to help me."

Thorne thought it highly undesirable that they should take a third person into their confidence, and he reluctantly yielded.

"Then," he advised, "it would be wiser to set about it while the boys are getting supper; there'll be nobody about the back of the hotel then. In the meanwhile, we'd better go in again and talk to the others."

CHAPTER XXII
ALISON SPOILS HER GLOVES

Mrs. Farquhar and her friends had finished supper, and the men who got their meals there were trooping into the hotel, when Alison found Thorne waiting on the veranda.

"You're ready, I suppose?"

"I've no intention of keeping you waiting, anyway," Thorne replied.

Alison looked at him with a hint of sharpness.

"If you would very much rather stay here, why should you come at all? Now that you have told me what to do, it really isn't necessary."

Thorne smiled.

"Well," he said, "on the whole, it strikes me as advisable."

He walked down the steps with her, and, sauntering a few yards along the street, they turned down an opening between the houses and stopped at the back of the hotel. There were only two windows in that part of the building, and the rude wooden stable would shield anybody standing close beneath one side of it from observation. Several gigs stood there to wait until their owners were ready to drive back to their outlying farms, and behind them the gray-white prairie ran back into the distance, empty and unbroken except for the riband of rutted trail. There was no sound from the hotel, for the average Westerner eats in silent, strenuous haste, and the two could hear only the movements of a restless horse in the stable.

Alison walked up to a somewhat dilapidated buggy and inspected it dubiously.

"This must be the one, and I suppose that's the bolt," she said. "There seems to be a big nut beneath it, and I don't quite see how I'm to get it off. Would your scruples prevent your making any suggestion?"

Thorne appeared to consider, though there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"I might go so far as to point out that if you went into the stable you would find a spanner on the ledge behind the door. It's an instrument that's made for screwing off nuts with."

Alison disappeared into the stable and came back with the spanner in her hand. Thorne noticed that she had put on a pair of rather shabby light gloves, with the object, he supposed, of protecting her fingers. Stooping down behind the buggy she stretched out an arm beneath the seat, and became desperately busy, to judge from the tapping and clinking she made. Then she straightened herself and looked up at him, hot and a trifle flushed.

"It won't go on to the nut," she complained. "Is it quite out of the question that you should help me?"

She saw the constraint in his face, and was pleased with it. She did not wish the man to break his pledge, and it is probable that she would have refused his assistance; but she was, on the other hand, very human in most respects, and she greatly desired to ascertain how strong the temptation to help her was.

"In the first place, you might try turning the screw on the spanner a little," he advised. "It will make the opening wider."

She did so, and had no more difficulty on that point, but the bolt was rusty and the nut very stiff. While she struggled with it there was a sound of footsteps, and Thorne, moving suddenly forward, snatched the tool from her.

"Stay there until I make it possible for you to slip away!" he whispered sharply; then he stepped swiftly back a few paces and leaned against a wagon with the spanner in his hand.

He had scarcely done so when a man came out of the opening between the houses, and Alison felt her heart throb unpleasantly fast. If the newcomer should look around toward the stables it seemed impossible that he should fail to notice Thorne. The latter, however, stood quietly still, with his shoulders resting against the wagon wheel, and the spanner in full view in front of him. The other man drew abreast of them, but he did not look around, and Alison gasped with relief when he vanished behind one of the neighboring buildings.

Then she turned impulsively to her companion.

"Oh," she cried, "you meant him to see you!"

Thorne raised his hand in expostulation.

"Hadn't you better get the thing out before somebody else comes along?"

There was no doubt that he was right in this, and Alison attacked the nut again. In two or three more minutes she moved away from the buggy with the bolt in her hand.

"What had I better do with it?" she asked.

"I might suggest dropping it into a thick clump of grass. If you don't mind, we'll stroll out a little way on the prairie. There's too much dust to be pleasant blowing down the street."

They had left the wooden buildings some distance behind when Alison next spoke to him.

"That was a generous thing you did just now."

Thorne looked confused, but he made no attempt to evade an answer.

"It was necessary."

"If the man had seen you with the spanner, Corporal Slaney would, no doubt, have heard of it afterward. That would have hurt you?"

"It certainly wouldn't have pleased me."

"Then why did you do what you did?"

"I think I have just told you."

"You said it was necessary," replied Alison, looking at him with eyes which just then had what he thought a very wonderful light in them. "You haven't convinced me that it wasn't—rather fine of you."

Thorne was manifestly more embarrassed, and embarrassment of any kind was somewhat unusual with him.

"Then," he said, "you compel me to try. If we had remained standing as we did when the man first came out from behind the houses and he had noticed you, it's exceedingly probable that he would have noticed me. Even if he hadn't, it's almost certain that several people must have seen you leave the hotel in my company. They wouldn't have had much trouble in figuring out the thing."

"Of course!" exclaimed Alison, a little astonished that this had not occurred to her earlier. Then her face grew suddenly warm. "You

mean they would have recognized that I was acting—on your instructions?"

Thorne looked at her with a disconcerting steadiness.

"You haven't quite grasped the most important fact yet. They would have wondered how I was able to get you to do it—in other words, what gave me such a hold on you. The trouble is that there's an explanation that would naturally suggest itself."

"Yes," murmured Alison, with her eyes turned away from him; "that would have been unpleasant—for both of us."

Thorne did not quite know what to make of the pause, though he had a shadowy idea that it somehow rendered her assertion less positive, and left the point open to doubt. In any case, it set his heart beating fast, and he had some trouble in holding himself in hand. Outwardly, however, he was graver than usual.

"Well," he added, "I didn't think it desirable in several ways. You see, a pedler is, after all, a person of no account in this part of Canada. He has no particular interest in the fortune of the country; he doesn't help its progress; his calling benefits nobody."

"But you are a farmer now," protested Alison, glancing at him covertly.

"Strictly on probation. In fact, there's very little doubt that my new venture is generally regarded as a harmless eccentricity. It will be some time before my neighbors realize that I'm capable of anything that's not connected with an amusing frolic." He stopped a moment, and smiled at her. "On the whole, I can't reasonably blame them. My situation's a very precarious one; a frozen crop would break me."

Alison wondered what the drift of these observations could be, for she imagined that he must have had some particular purpose in saying so much. It was, so far as her experience went, a very unusual thing for a man to confess that he was an object of amusement to his neighbors, or that there was a probability of his failing to make his mark in his profession.

"I suppose," she suggested, to help him out, "you're not content with such a state of things?"

"That is just the point. It's my intention to alter it as soon as possible, and a bonanza harvest this year would go a long way toward setting me on my feet. In the meanwhile, it seems only fitting

that I should put up with popular opinion, and try to bear in mind my disabilities."

He was far from explicit, but explicitness was, after all, not what Alison desired, and she fancied she understood him. It had not been without a sufficient reason that he had, to his friends' astonishment, turned farmer, and now he meant to wait until he had made a success of it, and had shown that he could hold his own with the best of them, before going any farther. This naturally suggested the question as to what he meant to do then, and she fancied that she could supply the answer. She had already confessed to herself that she liked the man, and this was sufficient for the time being.

"I heard that your wheat escaped, as Farquhar's did."

Thorne, glancing at her, surmised that this was a lead, and that he was not expected to pursue the previous subject.

"Yes," he replied, "I'm thankful to say it did. Most of the grain a few miles to the west of us was blotted out, including Hunter's—I'm sorry for him. The storm seems to have traveled straight down into Dakota, destroying everything in its path. My place lay just outside it, and at present everything promises a record crop." He broke off, and glanced down at her hands. "Have you noticed your glove?"

Alison held it up and displayed a large rusty stain across the palm and part of the back of it.

"Yes," she answered; "I did that getting the bolt out, and I'm rather vexed about it. Mrs. Farquhar will, no doubt, notice the stain, and I don't feel anxious to explain how it was done."

"Then you'll have to take the glove off," advised Thorne.

Alison smiled.

"I'm not sure that simple expedient would get over the difficulty. Of course, I might leave them behind altogether." Then she shook her head. "No; the person who found them would see the stain and guess whose they were. I don't think that would do, either."

"It wouldn't," Thorne agreed.

Then they began to talk of something else, and presently they turned back together toward the hotel. When they reached it, Florence Hunter and Mrs. Farquhar were sitting on the veranda, while two or three men occupied the lower steps, and another group lounged about near them, pipe in hand. A few minutes later Nevis

appeared striding down the street with his lips set and some signs of temper. He stopped in front of the hotel, and Alison glanced at Thorne significantly when he turned to the lounging men.

"You folks seem mighty prosperous in spite of the hail," he sneered. "I can't find a man in this town who's open to earn a couple of dollars."

Some of them grinned, but none made any answer. His tone was offensive, in the first place, and, while nobody is overburdened with riches on the prairie, the average Westerner has his own ideas as to what is becoming.

Nevis signed to one of them.

"Get my buggy, Bill!"

The man hesitated, and though he strolled off toward the stables, Nevis's sharpness cost him several minutes' unnecessary delay. Eventually the buggy was brought out, and nobody said anything when Nevis got in and flicked the horse smartly with a whip, though the tilt of the seat must have been evident to most of the lookers-on. Alison touched Thorne's arm.

"Hadn't you better call to him?" she suggested.

The next moment the warning was rendered unnecessary, for there was a crash, and the seat of the buggy collapsed. Nevis lurched violently forward, but he managed to recover his balance and pull up the horse. Then he swung himself down, and after crawling under the vehicle, stood up with a frowning face while the loungers began to gather about him.

"There's a bolt out. I didn't notice it when I drove up," he grumbled. "It's three-eighths by the hole, I think. Ask Bill if he's got anything of the kind in the stable."

Bill, who had been standing near, sauntered away, and it was at least five minutes before he came back, empty-handed.

"I've nothing that will fit," he announced.

"Then go in and see if they've got one at the hardware store," ordered Nevis. "I ought to have thought of that earlier."

Bill was away a long while this time, and when he returned he held up an unusually long bolt for inspection.

"Guess it won't be any use," he said. "Thread doesn't go far enough to let the nut to the plate."

"Then what in thunder did you bring it for?" Nevis asked with rising anger.

Alison looked at Thorne and laughed.

"Have you been giving that man a hint?" she inquired.

"No," answered Thorne, smiling; "it would have been wasted in any case. Nevis has succeeded in riling him. He couldn't have managed the thing better if I had prompted him."

In the meanwhile Bill languidly affected to consider Nevis's question.

"I guess I wanted to be quite sure it wouldn't fit," he replied at length. "If it doesn't, I could see if he has got a shorter one in another package."

Nevis flung out his arms in savage expostulation.

"Well," he cried, "I've never yet struck anybody quite as thick as you. Couldn't you have brought the shorter one along?"

"Those bolts," Bill answered solemnly, "don't run many to the dollar, and I'd a kind of notion I might find a big nut or some washers I could fill up with in the stables."

"No," snapped Nevis; "you have wasted time enough! If it won't do, take the thing back into the store and ask Bevan to cut the thread farther along it!"

Bill strolled away at a particularly leisurely gait, and Thorne took out his watch.

"It's highly probable that Slaney will have left Forrester's before our friend gets off," he said. "In that case, it will no doubt be noon to-morrow before the police make their first attempt to get on Winthrop's trail. I wonder whether anybody except Dave can have seen him."

"I did," Alison told him; "the morning before the hail."

Thorne turned toward her with a start.

"Where?"

"At the homestead. Farquhar and his wife were out."

"What brought Winthrop there?"

"That," smiled Alison, "I may tell you some day, but not just now. I wonder what has kept him in the neighborhood?"

"It's easily figured out. He'd head for Mrs. Calvert's, and probably stay an hour or two there; then he'd go on to Brayton's place—they're friends—at night. Jardine's would be his next call, and he'd be striking west away from the larger settlements when Dave came across him."

This struck Alison as probable, but just then Bill came out of the store again.

"Beavan hasn't anything shorter, and he's doing up his accounts. He can't cut threads on bolts, anyway," he announced. "It's Pete who does that kind of thing for him."

Judging from his face, it cost Nevis a determined effort to check an outbreak of fury.

"Then where in thunder is Pete?" he shouted.

It appeared that the man had gone home to supper, and a quarter of an hour passed before he came upon the scene. Then it took him quite as long to operate on the bolt and fit it in the buggy, and Nevis's face was very hot and red when he flung himself into the vehicle. He used the whip savagely, and there was some derisive applause and laughter when the horse went down the street at a gallop with the buggy jolting dangerously in the ruts behind it.

Thorne descended the steps and disappeared. When he came back Mrs. Farquhar's wagon was being brought out, and he walked up to Alison with a parcel in his hand.

"I think," he said, "that's the best way of hiding the stain."

Alison opened the parcel, and was conscious of a curious thrill, in which pleasure and embarrassment were mingled, when she found a pair of gloves inside. It was the first gift he had made her.

"Thank you," she murmured. "They fit me, too. How did you guess the size?"

"Oh," laughed Thorne, "it was very simple. I just asked for the smallest pair they had in the store."

Then Mrs. Farquhar came up, and he helped her and Alison into the wagon.

CHAPTER XXIII
AN UNEXPECTED DISASTER

Several weeks had slipped away since the evening Nevis drove out of Graham's Bluff in search of Corporal Slaney, and there had been no news of Winthrop, when Thorne plodded across the prairie beside his team, hauling in a load of dressed lumber for the new creamery. Hunter had contracted with him to convey the necessary material from the railroad, and in the interval between sowing and reaping Thorne had found the arrangement a profitable one. He had a use for every dollar he could raise, and all through the heat of the summer he had worked double tides.

It was blazing hot that afternoon, and the wide plain lay scorching under a pitiless glare. Thorne was not sorry when the Farquhar homestead with its encircling sea of wheat took shape ahead. The trail led past it, and, though time was precious to him then, he felt that he could put up with an hour or two's delay in case Mrs. Farquhar invited him to wait for supper. It was now a fortnight since he had seen Alison.

The wooden buildings rose very slowly, though he several times urged the jaded horses. They had made a long haul that day, and the man, who had trudged at their head since early morning, was almost as weary. On the odd days that they had spent in the stable he had toiled arduously on his house and half-finished barn, beginning with the dawn and ceasing at dark. Now he was grimed with dust and dripping with perspiration, and a tantalizing cloud of flies hovered over him. All this was a decided change from driving a few hours daily in a lightly loaded wagon, but what at first had appeared an almost unexplainable liking for the constant effort had grown upon him. He would not have abandoned it now had that course been open to him.

By degrees the sea of grain grew nearer, its edge rising in a clean-cut ridge above the flat white sweep of dazzling plain. It had changed from green to pale yellow in the past few weeks, but there were here and there vivid coppery gleams in it. It promised a bounteous yield when thrashing was over, and he thought of his own splendid crop with the clean pride of accomplishment. Then he

noticed that a buggy was approaching from the opposite direction, and when he reached the homestead a man in white shirt and store clothes had just pulled up his horse. He shook hands with Thorne, who had already recognized him as a dealer in implements and general farming supplies from the railroad settlement.

"Glad I met you. It will save my going on to your place," he said.

Thorne noticed that the man, who was usually optimistic and cheerful, looked depressed.

"Did you want to see me about something, Grantly?" he asked.

"Yes. To cut it short, I'm going out of business."

The full significance of this announcement did not immediately dawn upon Thorne.

"I expect most of the boys will regret it as much as I do," he said. "One could rely on anything sent out from your store, and there's no doubt that you have always treated us liberally."

"That's just the trouble. I've been too blamed easy with some of you. If I'd kept a tighter hand on the folks who owed me money it's quite likely I'd have been able to meet my bills."

"Is it as bad as that?" Thorne inquired with genuine sympathy.

Grantly turned to Farquhar, who had joined them in the meanwhile.

"The fact is, things have been going against me the last three years. Nevis has been steadily cutting into my trade; but I held on somehow, expecting that a record harvest or a high market would put me straight. I'd have been able to get some of my money in again then. In the meanwhile I was getting behind with the makers who supplied me, and now one or two of them have pulled me up; I guess it was the hail that decided them. It's a private compromise, but the point is that Nevis takes over my liabilities."

Thorne's face suddenly hardened, and Farquhar looked grave.

"It's bad news," said the latter. "Is he paying cash?"

"Part," Grantly answered. "The rest in bills. He has Brand, of Winnipeg, behind him, and he's good enough. In fact, I believe the man has been backing Nevis right along." He turned to Thorne. "Anyway, I've got to give the store up, and you'll have Nevis for a

creditor instead of me. That's really what brought me over. The note you gave me calls for a good many dollars and it's due very soon."

Thorne endeavored to brace himself after the blow, which had been as unexpected as it was heavy. He had obtained all his implements and most of the materials he required for his house-building from Grantly, giving him a claim upon his possessions as security, in addition to a promise to pay at a date by which harvest was usually over; but owing to an exceptionally cold spring, harvest was late that year.

"It was understood that you wouldn't press me if I should be a few weeks behind," he reminded him.

"That's quite right," Grantly assented. "The trouble is that it was only a verbal promise, and it won't count for much with Nevis. He's been after you for some time, and I guess he'll stick to the date on the note. If you're not ready with the money he'll break you."

Farquhar made a sign of concurrence.

"I'm afraid it's very probable. What are you going to do about it, Mavy?"

Thorne stood silent for almost a minute, and the bronze faded a little in his face, which was very grim.

"That note will have to be met. You told Grantly I was to be relied upon, and I'm not going back on you. It's not my intention to let Nevis do what he likes with me, either. In a general way, I'd have gone to Hunter, and I've no doubt that he would have financed me; but that's quite out of the question now. He has all the trouble he's fit to stand on his hands already."

"A sure thing," Farquhar agreed.

"Well," Thorne added, "the oats are about ripe, and though I'd rather they had stood another week or so, I'll put the binder into them at sunup to-morrow. The wheat should be nearly ready by the time I'm through, and I'll hire the help I could have borrowed if I had been able to wait a while. I'll have to let up on the haulage contract and work right on, almost without stopping, until I can get the thrashers in; but I'll put the crop on the market before the note is due!"

"You couldn't do it, Mavy, if you worked all night."

Thorne laughed in a harsh fashion.

"Just wait and see! It has to be done! In the meanwhile, please make my excuses to Mrs. Farquhar for not calling. I must be getting on."

"You can't do anything to-night," Farquhar objected.

"I can ride over to Hall's and get back to my place by sunup with his team."

He called to his horses, and with a creaking of suddenly tightened harness the wagon jolted on, but as he passed the door of the homestead Alison came out. Thorne stopped, while the team slowly plodded forward, and it seemed to her that there was a striking change in the man. Nothing in his manner suggested that he had ever regarded life as a frolic and taken his part in it with careless gaiety. His eyes were very grave and there was a look she had never seen in them before, while his face seemed to have set in sharper lines. He looked strangely determined and forceful; almost, as she thought of it, dominant.

"What is the matter? You are in some trouble?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said Thorne simply. "Farquhar will no doubt explain the thing. There's a very tough fight in front of me. I don't think I could have undertaken it six months ago." He spread out his hands. "It's unthinkable that I should be beaten!"

Alison felt strangely stirred by something in his voice.

"Then," she urged, "you will have to win! You must; I want you to!"

Thorne looked at her with a gleam in his eyes that set her heart throbbing painfully fast.

"Now," he laughed, "the thing seems almost easy!"

He turned away after his wagon, and Alison waited until Farquhar came up with Grantly.

"What has Thorne undertaken?" she asked.

Farquhar smiled.

"I'll try to tell you after supper. In the meanwhile, I can only say that he seems determined on breaking himself up by attempting a task that in my opinion is beyond the power of any man on the prairie."

He went into the house with Grantly, and it was an hour or two later before Alison was able to form a fairly accurate idea of the situation. Then her heart grew very soft toward Thorne, and she thought of him with a sense of pride. It was for her sake he had braced himself for this most unequal fight, and she knew that he meant to win.

In the meanwhile Thorne was urging on his team, and dusk was closing in when he flung down the lumber from his wagon. After that, he drove through the soft darkness for two or three hours, and finally roused an outlying neighbor from his well-earned slumber. The man, descending, roundly abused him, but became a little mollified when he heard his story.

"The thing surely can't be done, and just now you can't count on much help, either. The Ontario boys are only just starting West, and the first of them will be snapped up before they get to Brandon. Anyway, I'll come along with you and do what I can." He moved toward a cupboard. "If you left Farquhar's when you said, you couldn't have got your supper."

"Now that you mention it," laughed Thorne, "I don't think I did."

His friend set food before him, and an hour later they drove off in the darkness, leaving Thorne's jaded team behind them. Eventually they reached his homestead in the early dawn, and Thorne, who had been on foot most of the time since sunrise on the previous morning, sat down wearily on the stoop and took out his pipe while he looked about him. Eager as he was to get to work, he could not begin just yet, for the night had been clear and cold, and the grain was dripping with the heavy dew.

He had his back to the house, which was at last almost ready for habitation, but the half-finished barn and the rude sod stable rose before him blackly against the growing light. Beyond these, the sweep of grain stretched back, a darker patch on the shadowy prairie, with another dusky oblong just discernible on the short grass some distance away. Determined as he was, his heart sank as he gazed at them. He had undertaken a task that looked utterly beyond his powers.

Had he been content to begin on his hundred-and-sixty-acre holding on the scale usual in the case of men with scanty means, he

would probably have had no great trouble in harvesting all the crop he could have raised; but he had seen enough during his journeyings up and down the prairie to convince him that there was remarkably little to be made in this fashion. As a result he had staked boldly, breaking practically all his land, with hired assistance and the most modern implements that could be purchased, though this necessitated the borrowing of money. He had, in addition, secured the use of a neighboring holding, part of which had been under grain before, from a man who had worked it long enough to secure his patent and had then discovered that he could earn considerably more as a subcontractor on a new branch railroad.

In consequence of this, Thorne had a large crop to garner, and very little time in which to do it, for he was convinced that Nevis would press for payment immediately the note was due. It could not be met until the grain was thrashed and sold, and he realized that any delay would place him in the power of a man who would not fail to make the utmost use of the opportunity. Besides this, it would render it impossible for him to obtain any further loans, and he scarcely expected to finance his operations unassisted for some time yet. It was only Hunter's guarantee that had made the venture possible, and there was no doubt in his mind that unless he could satisfy Nevis's claim his career as a farmer would terminate abruptly before the next month was over.

Then he recalled the months of determined labor he had expended upon the house and holding, the noonday heat in which he had toiled, and the chilly dawns when he had gone out, aching all over after a very insufficient sleep, to begin his task again. Sixteen and often eighteen hours comprised his working day, and out of them he had spared very few minutes for cookery. His clothes had gone unmended, and it must be confessed that he had not infrequently slept in them when he was too weary to take them off, and that they were by no means regularly washed. In fact, once or twice when he was about to drive over to the Farquhar homestead he remembered with a slight shock that it was several days since he had made any attempt worth mentioning at a toilet. In the meanwhile, he had grown leaner and harder and browner, while there had by degrees crept into his face that curious look which one may see now and then in the faces of monks, highly trained athletes, and even of those who

unconsciously practise asceticism from love of a calling that makes stern demands on them; a look which, though it does not always suggest the final triumph of the mind over the body, is never a characteristic of full-fed, ease-loving men. His eyes were strikingly clear and unwavering, his weather-darkened skin was singularly clean, and his whole face had grown, as it were, refined, though the man was as quickly moved to anger, impatience, or laughter as he had always been. It would seem that a good many purely human impulses usually survive the partial subjugation of the flesh, which is, after all, no doubt fortunate.

He rose stiffly, damp with the dew, when he had smoked one pipe out, and gazed toward where the sun was rising fiery red above the rim of the prairie. His expression was very resolute.

"A low dawn, Hall; we'll have all the heat we want by noon," he commented. "The oats will be drying by the time we're ready with the team. If you'll look after them I'll oil the binder."

His companion grinned.

"It strikes me the first thing is to set the stove going. Guess if I'm going to get on a record hustle I want my breakfast."

Thorne frowned impatiently, but he carried an armful of birch billets into the house, and when half an hour later he called in his companion, the latter glanced with undisguised disgust at the provisions on the table and the contents of the frying-pan.

"Well," he ejaculated, "if you can raise steam on that kind of truck, I most certainly can't. The first of the boys who drives by to the settlement is going to bring us out something fit to eat, if I have to pay for it."

"What's the matter with this?" Thorne asked indifferently.

Hall raised a fragment of half-raw pork upon his fork.

"It would be wasting time to tell you, if you can't smell it," he retorted.

Then he took up a block of bread and banged it down on the table.

"Not a crack in it! You want to bake some more and sell it to the railroad for locomotive brakes."

Thorne laughed.

"Send for anything you like. Hunter's hired man will probably be going in."

CHAPTER XXIV
LUCY GOES TO THE RESCUE

About four o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the beginning of his harvest, Thorne sat heavy-eyed in the saddle of a binder which three horses hauled along the edge of the grain. He had been at work since sunrise, except for a brief rest at midday, and he was wondering whether the team could hold out until nightfall. The binder had not quite reached its present efficiency then, and the traction was heavy. It was fiercely hot, and there was only the faintest breeze, while a thin cloud of dust that made his eyes smart and crept into his nostrils eddied about him. The whirling wooden arms of the machine flashed in the midst of it as they flung out the sheaves, and there was a sharp clash and tinkle as the knife rasped through the tall oat stalks.

As he neared a corner, driving wearily, he turned and glanced back along the rows of piled-up sheaves which stood blazing with light down the belt of gleaming stubble. The latter was narrow, for although it was the result of two days' determined labor, he had somehow accomplished less than he had anticipated. Half the time he had spent, turn about with Hall, in the saddle and the rest gathering up the tossed-out sheaves in the wake of the machine. It was desirable to keep pace with the binder, though the task is one that is beyond the strength of a single man in a heavy crop, and it was only by toiling with a savage persistency that he and his companion had partially accomplished it. Now, however, his heart sank as he looked round at the sea of grain.

It rose in a great oblong, glowing with tints of ochre, silvery gray and cadmium, relieved here and there by coppery flashes and delicate pencilings of warm sienna, and over it there hung a cloudless vault of blue. It looked very large, and there was another oblong yet unbroken some distance away. Thorne's head ached, and his eyes ached, and his back hurt him at each jolt of the machine. He had been almost worn-out when he began the task, and since then he had lain down for only a few hours, and then had not been able to sleep.

Beyond the grain, the prairie stretched away, intolerably white in the sun-glare, to the horizon. Thorne fancied that he had seen a moving object upon it some time earlier. The machine had, however, engrossed most of his attention, and he was not sure. He reached the turning and was proceeding away from the house when a voice hailed him, and as he pulled up the team Lucy Calvert appeared.

"What brought you over?" he asked in dull astonishment.

Lucy smiled coquettishly.

"It's generally allowed that you and I are friends. Anyway, if you'd rather, I can go home again."

Thorne looked at her with drawn-down brows. He was worn-out, his brain was heavy, and he did not feel equal to any attempt at repartee.

"You had better stop for supper first," he suggested.

"I guess I'm going to," Lucy laughed. "Still, you won't want it for two hours yet, and it looks as if there's something to be done in the meanwhile. I didn't come over for supper or to talk to you; I met Farquhar on the prairie, and he told me all about the thing."

She turned and pointed to a row of sheaves which were still lying prone.

"Why haven't you got those on end? Where's Hall?"

"Gone over to his place for my team."

"Then," said Lucy, "you can get off that machine right now and set the sheaves up while I drive. I'll stay on until it's too dark to see, and come round again first thing in the morning. We don't expect to get our binders in for a week yet."

Thorne was touched, and his face made it plain. He needed assistance badly, and did not know where to obtain it, for his friends whose crops the hail had spared were either beginning their own harvest or preparing for it. Besides, there was not the slightest doubt that Lucy was capable.

"Get down right away!" she ordered laughingly. "I don't want thanks from—you."

Thorne was never sure afterward whether he attempted to offer her any, but he set to work among the sheaves when she took her place in the saddle and the binder went clinking and clashing on

again. In spite of his efforts, it drew farther and farther away, though he toiled in half-breathless haste and the perspiration dripped from him. As he was facing then, the sun beat upon his back and shoulders intolerably hot. At length, when the shadows of the stooked sheaves had lengthened across the crackling stubble in which he floundered, Lucy stopped her team a moment and looked back at him.

"I'll unyoke them at the corner and get supper," she said. "You get into the shade there and lie down and smoke. If I see you move before I call you, I'll go home again."

She drove away before he could protest, but it was, after all, a relief to obey her, and flinging himself down with his back to a cluster of the sheaves, he took out his pipe. It was a little cooler there, and his eyes were closing when a summons reached him across the grain. Getting up with an effort, he walked toward the house, and was hazily astonished when he entered it. Exactly what Lucy had done he could not tell, but the place looked different. For the first time it seemed comfortably habitable. There was a cloth, which was a thing he did not possess, on the table, and his simple crockery, which shone absolutely white, and his indurated ware made a neat display. The provisions laid out on it looked tempting, too; in fact, he did not think that Hall could have found any fault with them, and it presently struck him that they included articles which he did not remember purchasing.

He sat down when Lucy told him to, and it was pleasant to find what he required ready at hand, instead of having to walk backward and forward between the table and the stove. He did not remember what she said, but they both laughed every now and then, and after the meal was over he was content to sit still a while when she bade him. The presence of the girl somehow changed the whole aspect of the room; but he was conscious of a regret that it was she and not another who occupied the place opposite him across his table. It was not Lucy Calvert he had often pictured sitting there. At length he pointed through the doorway to the grain.

"Lucy," he said, "that crop doesn't look by any means as hard to reap as it did an hour ago."

"I guess it's the supper," Lucy suggested cheerfully.

"I don't think it's that exactly, though there's no doubt it's the best meal I've had for a considerable time."

Lucy leaned back in her chair.

"Well," she observed, "it's company you want, and it's quite nice being here. You and I kind of hit it, don't we, Mavy?"

"Of course. We always did," Thorne assented, though there was a hint of astonishment in his tone.

"Then if you'll get rid of Hall—send him off again for something—I'll get supper for you the next two or three evenings."

"I don't see why he should be done out of his share," protested Thorne cautiously. He felt that Lucy was more gracious than there was any occasion for.

"Don't you, Mavy?" she asked, with lifted brows. "Now, I've a notion that anybody else would kind of spoil things."

Until lately Thorne had seldom shrunk from any harmless gallantry, but he did not respond just then with the readiness which the girl seemed to expect.

"It's a relief to hear you say it," he declared. "I'm afraid I'm a dull companion to-night."

Lucy nodded sympathetically.

"Well," she replied, "I have seen you brighter, but you're anxious and played out. Sit nice and still for half an hour while I talk to you."

"I ought to be stooking those sheaves," Thorne answered dubiously.

"You can do it by and by," Lucy urged. "It won't be dark for quite a while yet."

She adroitly led him on to talk, and presently bade him light his pipe. He had always hated any unnecessary reserve and ceremony, and by degrees his natural gaiety once more asserted itself. At length, when they were both laughing over a narrative of his, he stretched his arm out across the table and it happened by merest accident that their hands met. Lucy did not draw hers away; she looked up at him with a smile.

"Mavy," she teased, "I wonder what Miss Leigh would say if she could see you."

Thorne straightened himself somewhat hastily in his chair. Nothing in the shape of a tactful answer occurred to him, and he grew uneasy under his companion's smile.

"Would you like to see her walk right in just now?" she persisted.

There was no doubt that this would not have afforded the man the slightest pleasure, but he could not admit it.

"It's scarcely likely to happen," he evaded awkwardly.

Then to his relief Lucy laughed.

"Mavy, I've sure got you fixed. The curious thing is they allow at the settlement that you could most talk the head off any of the boys."

"I really don't see what satisfaction you expected it to afford you," Thorne rejoined.

"I guessed it would help to put Nevis out of your mind. I'd an idea you wanted cheering up—and I felt a little like that myself."

The girl's manner changed abruptly as she rose, and there was only concern in her eyes.

"I wonder," she added softly, "where Jake is and what he is doing now."

Thorne felt that he had been favored with a hint.

"You haven't heard from him?"

"He hasn't sent a line; it wouldn't have been safe. It's kind of wearing, Mavy."

"I'm sorry," sympathized Thorne. "But it's most unlikely that the troopers will get him."

Lucy, without answering this, went out, and when they reached the binder Thorne turned to her with a smile.

"Lucy," he said, "I don't quite understand yet what possessed you a little while ago."

"Did you never feel so worried that it was kind of soothing to do something mad?"

"I'm afraid I have once or twice," Thorne confessed. "On the other hand, my experience wouldn't justify me in advising other people to indulge in outbreaks of the kind. Suppose I'd been—we'll say equal to the occasion?"

Lucy laughed, but there was a snap in her eyes.

"Then," she retorted, "it's a sure thing you would never have tried to be equal to it again. Anyway, I didn't feel anxious about you. You looked real amusing, Mavy."

"Perhaps I did. Still, I don't quite think you need have pointed it out."

They set to work after this, Lucy guiding the team along the edge of the grain and Thorne stooping among the sheaves in the wake of the machine. They were thus engaged, oblivious to everything but their task, when Mrs. Farquhar reined in her team close beside them, and Alison gazed with somewhat confused sensations at the pair.

Lucy had obviously made her dress herself, of the cheapest kind of print, but it was light in hue, as was her big hat, and in addition to falling in with the flood of vivid color through which she moved it flowed about her in becoming lines, and when she pulled up her horses and turned partly toward the wagon her pose was expressive of a curious virile grace. Behind her, straight-cut along its paler upper edge, where the feathery tassels of the oats shone with a silvery luster against the cold blue of the sky, the yellow grain glowed in the warm evening light. The glaring vermilion paint on the binder added to the general effect, and it occurred to Alison that the girl, with her brown face and hands and the signs of a splendid vitality plain upon her, was very much in harmony with her surroundings. The lean figure of the man stooping among the sheaves, lightly clad in blue that had lost its harshness by long exposure to the weather, formed a fit and necessary complement of the picture.

They were, Alison recognized, engaged upon humanity's most natural and beneficent task, and as she remembered how she had seen that soil lying waste, covered only with the harsh wild grasses, in the early spring, it was borne in upon her that there could be no greater reward than the bounteous harvest for man's arduous toil. Then she became troubled by a vague perception of the fact that this breaking of the wilderness and rendering the good soil fruitful was one of the sternest and most real tests of man's efficiency. Meretricious graces, paltry accomplishments, and the pretenses of civilization availed one nothing here. The only things that counted were the elemental qualities: slow endurance, faith that held fast through all the vagaries of the weather, and the power of toughened

muscle that might ache but must in spite of that yield due obedience to the will. Alison regarded Lucy, who could play her part in the reaping, with a troubled feeling that was not far from envy.

Then Thorne looked up, partly dazzled with the level sunrays in his eyes, and walked toward the wagon. When he stopped beside it Mrs. Farquhar greeted him.

"We have been across to Shafter's place," she explained. "Harry asked me to drive round and see how you were getting on. He'll try to send you over his hired man in a day or two."

Thorne pointed to the rows of stooked sheaves.

"Thanks; I haven't done as much as I should have liked. Hall has gone back for my other team, and if it hadn't been for Lucy I'd have been a good deal farther behind."

"How much has she cut?" Mrs. Farquhar asked.

Thorne was quite aware that an answer would fix the time the girl had spent with him. Before he could speak, however, Lucy had approached the wagon and she broke in.

"I guess Mrs. Shafter would give you supper?"

Mrs. Farquhar said that she had done so, and Lucy smiled.

"That's going to save some trouble. Mavy and I had ours together most an hour ago and the stove's out by now."

Thorne imagined that this intimation, which struck him as a trifle superfluous, was made with a deliberate purpose; but one of the binder horses, tormented by the flies, began to kick just then, and he turned away to quiet it, while Lucy, who stood beside the wagon, smiled provocatively at Alison.

"You'll have to excuse Mavy—he's been hustling round since sunup, and he's played out," she said. "Still, you needn't get anxious. I'll look after him."

Mrs. Farquhar laughed, while Alison's attitude grew distinctly prim. She considered that in taking her anxiety for granted and alluding to it openly Lucy had gone too far. She also felt inclined to resent the girl's last consolatory assurance.

"Can I drive you home?" Mrs. Farquhar inquired. "I suppose you will be going soon, and it won't make a very big round."

"No," replied Lucy decisively, "you needn't trouble. I've a horse here, and I guess Mavy's not going to make love to me. For one thing, he's too busy. Besides, I want to cut round that other side before I go."

"Then I suppose we had better not keep you," said Mrs. Farquhar.

She waved her hand to Thorne and drove away, and when they had left the oats behind she turned to Alison.

"Lucy," she observed, "is now and then a little outspoken, but I'm curious as to what she meant when she said that Thorne was not likely to make love to her. Of course, the thing's improbable, anyway, but she spoke as if he had been offered an opportunity."

Alison's face flushed with anger.

"Leaving the fact that she's to marry Winthrop out of the question, the girl must have some self-respect. She would surely never go so far as you suggest."

"Well," smiled her companion, "she might go far enough to place Thorne in an embarrassing position, purely for the sake of the amusement she might derive from it. In fact, when I remember how she laughed, I'm far from sure that she didn't do something of the kind."

Alison sat silent for a minute or two. There was no doubt that she was very angry with Lucy, but she was also troubled by other sensations, among which was a certain envy of the girl's capacity for work that was held of high account in that country. Thorne's attitude and his weary face as he toiled among the sheaves had been very suggestive. He was, she knew, hard-pressed, engaged in a desperate grapple with a task that was generally admitted to be beyond his strength, and she could only stand aside and watch his efforts with wholly ineffective sympathy.

Then she became conscious that Mrs. Farquhar was glancing at her curiously.

"I feel humiliated to-night!" she broke out. "There's so little that seems of the least use to anybody here that I can do; and my abilities scarcely got me food and shelter in England. Isn't it almost a crime that they teach so many of us only fripperies? Were we only made to be taken care of and petted?"

Her companion smiled.

"If it's any consolation, I may point out that we haven't found you useless at the Farquhar homestead, and I can't see why you shouldn't be just as useful presiding over a place of your own. After all, since you raise the question what you were made for, that seems to be the usual destiny, and I haven't found it an unpleasant or ignoble one."

She broke off, and for a minute or two the jolting of the wagon rendered further conversation out of the question.

"There's another point," she added presently; "it's my opinion that an encouraging word from you would do more to brace Mavy for the work in front of him than the offer of half a dozen binders and teams."

Alison made no answer, and they drove on in silence across the waste, which was beginning to grow dim and shadowy.

CHAPTER XXV
THE ONLY MEANS

Alison sat one afternoon in the shadow of a pile of sheaves in Farquhar's harvest field. She had a little leisure, and it was unpleasantly hot in the wooden house. There was some sewing in her hand, but even in the shade the light was trying and she leaned back languidly among the warm straw with half-closed eyes. Two men were talking some distance behind her as they pitched up the rustling sheaves, and the tramp of horses' feet among the stubble and the rattle of a binder which she knew Farquhar was driving drew steadily nearer. Presently another beat of hoofs broke in, and a minute or two later Hall rode past, looking very hot, apparently without seeing her. Then the rattle of the binder ceased and she heard the newcomer greet Farquhar.

"If you've got one of those bent-end-spanners you could let me have I'd be glad," he said. "I've mislaid mine somehow, and there's a loose nut I can't get at making trouble on my binder."

Farquhar sent his hired man for one and Hall referred to the grain.

"So you have made a start. Looks quite a heavy crop. Good and ripe, too, isn't it?"

"We put the binder in yesterday," answered Farquhar. "I'd have done it earlier only that I sent Pete over to Thorne's place for a few days after you left him."

"I was kind of sorry I had to leave. He's surely going to be beaten. I looked in on him yesterday."

Alison became suddenly intent. She drew her light skirt closer about her, for she did not wish it to catch the men's eyes and betray her, as she thought it probable that they would speak to each other unreservedly and she would hear the actual truth about Thorne. When she had questioned Farquhar he had answered her in general terms, avoiding any very definite particulars, and she now strained her ears to catch his reply to Hall.

"I was afraid of it after what Pete told me," he said. "I would have helped him more if I could have managed it, but I can't let a big crop like this stand over when I've bills to meet."

"That," declared Hall, "is just how I'm fixed, though I stayed with him as long as I could. The trouble is that he hasn't been able to hire a man since I left him. There seem to be mighty few of the Ontario boys coming in this season, and so far they've been snapped up farther back along the line."

"Has he tried any of the men who had their crops hailed out west of the creek?"

"They cleared as soon as they saw they had no harvest left. Most of them are out track-grading on the branch line, and I heard the rest went East. Mavy's surely up against it; he was figuring last evening that even if the weather held he'd be most a month behind."

"Then I'm afraid he'll have to give the place up. Nevis will come down on him the day that payment's due."

"Couldn't he raise the money somehow, for a month?" Hall inquired.

"It's scarcely likely. I can't lend him any, with wheat at present figure, and Hunter, who has already guaranteed him a thousand dollars, is very tightly fixed. Besides Mavy couldn't expect anything more from him. It wouldn't be much use going to a bank, either. With the bottom dropping out of the market they're getting scared of wheat, and he has nothing to offer them but a crop that isn't reaped, with Grantly's note calling for most of it."

"Then I guess he has just got to quit. Hunter would no doubt have lent him a binder and a couple of hired men, but he has them busy trying to straighten up his hailed crop and cut patches of it."

"It's a pity," Farquhar assented in a regretful voice. "It will hurt Mavy to give the place up."

The man arrived with the spanner and Alison heard Hall ride away. When the clash and rattle of the binder began again she lay still for a long time beneath the sheaves. The men's conversation had made it clear that Thorne would shortly be involved in disaster, and that alone was painful news, though by comparison with another aspect of the matter it was of minor importance. The man loved her, and it was for that reason he had undertaken this most unfortunate

farming venture. Everybody seemed to know it, though he had never told her what was in his mind, and she had been content to wait. Now, however, she had no doubt that she loved him, and he would, it seemed, shortly go away and vanish altogether beyond her reach—at least, unless something should very promptly be done. She knew he would not claim her while he was an outcast and a ruined man.

She closed one hand tight and a flush crept into her face as she made up her mind on one point, and she was thankful while she did so that she was on the Canadian prairie, where the thing seemed easier than it would have done in England. In that new land time-honored prejudices and hampering traditions did not seem to count. Men and women outgrew them there and obeyed the impulses of human nature, which were, after all, elemental and existent long before the invention of what were, perhaps, in the more complex society of other lands, necessary fetters. Thorne, the pedler, farmer, railroad hand, or whatever he might become, should at least know that she loved him and decide with that knowledge before him whether he would go away.

Then, growing a little more collected, she considered the second point. Though Hall and Farquhar had cast considerable doubt upon his ability to help, there was just a possibility that Hunter might hold out a hand, and she would stoop to beg for any favor that might be shown her lover. This latter decision, however, she prudently determined to keep from Thorne in the meanwhile.

By and by she walked quietly back to the house and busied herself as usual, though late in the afternoon she asked Mrs. Farquhar for a horse and the buggy. Her employer did not trouble her with any questions as to why she wanted them, though she favored her with a glance of unobtrusive but very keen scrutiny, and soon after supper the hired man brought the buggy to the door. Then Alison came out from her room, where she had spent some time carefully comparing the two or three dresses she had clung to when she had parted with the rest in Winnipeg, one after another. She had attired herself in the one that became her best, for she felt that there must be nothing wanting in the gift she meant to offer her lover. She recognized that this was what her intention amounted to. What other women did with more reserve, veiling their advances in disguises which were

after all so flimsy that nobody except those who wished could be deceived, she would do with imperious openness.

The days were now rapidly growing shorter, and when she reached Thorne's homestead the sun hung low above the verge of the great white plain. The man was not in sight, which struck her as strange, as there would be light enough to work for some time yet, but she was not astonished that he had evidently not heard her approach, because she had driven slowly for the last mile, almost repenting of her rashness and wondering whether she should not turn and go back again. Once she had set about it, the thing she had undertaken appeared increasingly difficult. Indeed, she knew that had the man been less severely pressed nothing would have driven her into the action she contemplated. It was only the fact that he was face to face with disaster, beaten down, desperate, that warranted the sacrifice of her reserve and pride.

Getting down at length, she left the horse, which was a quiet one, and walked toward the house. The door stood open when she reached it, and looking in she saw the man sitting at a table, on which there lay a strip of paper covered with figures. His face was worn and set, and every line of his slack pose was expressive of dejection. He did not immediately see her, and a deep pity overwhelmed her and helped to sweep away her doubts and hesitation as she glanced round the room. It was growing shadowy, but it looked horribly comfortless, and the few dishes that were still scattered about the table bore the remnants of a singularly uninviting meal. There was a portion of a loaf, blackened outside, sad and damp within; butter that had liquefied and partly congealed again in discolored streaks; a morsel of half-cooked pork reposing in solid fat; and a can of flavored syrup, black with flies. She wondered how any one coming back oppressed with anxiety from a day of exhausting toil could eat such fare. Then she noticed a small heap of tattered garments, which he evidently had no leisure to mend, lying on the floor, and while it brought her no sense of repulsion, the sight of them further troubled her. These were things which jarred on the beneficent, home-making instincts which suddenly awoke within her nature, and they moved her to a compassionate longing to care for and shelter the lonely man.

Then he looked up and saw her, and she flushed at the swift elation in his face, which, however, almost immediately grew hard again. It was as though he had yielded for a moment to some pleasurable impulse, and had then, with an effort, repressed it and resumed his self-control.

"Come in," he invited, rising with outstretched hand, and she suddenly recalled how she had last crossed that threshold in his company. There had been careless laughter in his eyes then, he had moved and spoken with a joyous optimism, and now there was plain upon him the stamp of defeat. Even physically the man looked different.

She sat down when he drew her out a chair, but he remained standing, leaning with one hand on the table.

"Is Mrs. Farquhar outside?"

"No; I drove across alone."

He looked at her with a hint of astonishment and something that suggested a natural curiosity as to the cause for the visit, which she now found it insuperably difficult to explain.

"You haven't been at work this evening?" she asked.

"No," replied Thorne. "I rode in to the railroad early yesterday and I've just got back after calling at two or three farms west of the creek. It seemed possible that I might be able to hire a couple of men I'd wired for back along the line, but I found that somebody else had got hold of them at another station. As a matter of fact, I had expected it."

"Then you must have made the journey almost without a rest!"

"Volador's dead played out," answered Thorne. "I had to do something, though it seemed pretty useless in any case."

"Ah!" Alison exclaimed softly; "then you mean to go on?"

"Until I'm turned out, which will no doubt happen very shortly."

"I suppose that will hurt you?"

He looked at her for a moment with his face awry and signs of a sternly repressed longing in his eyes.

"Yes," he answered, "it will hurt me more than anything I could have had to face. In fact, the thought of it has been almost unbearable; but it's now clear that I shall have to go through with it."

This was satisfactory to Alison in some respects, and she was quick to sympathize.

"It must be very hard to give up the farm on which you have spent so much earnest work."

"Yes," assented Thorne, with something in his tone that suggested half-contemptuous indifference to the sacrifice; "it won't be easy to give up even the farm."

Then for the first time it occurred to him that there was an unusual hint of strain in her manner, and that he had never seen her dressed in the same fashion before. She did not look daintier, for daintiness was not quite the quality he would have ascribed to her, but more highly cultivated, farther beyond the reach of a ruined farmer, though there was a strange softness—it almost seemed tenderness—shining in her eyes. He gripped the table hard and his face grew stern as he gazed at her. He felt that it was almost impossible that he would ever have the strength to let her go.

"What will you do then?" she asked with what seemed a merciless persistency.

"Go away," declared Thorne. "Strike west and vanish out of sight. I've no doubt somebody will hire me to load up railroad ballast or herd cattle." He smiled at her harshly. "After all, it will be a relief to my few friends. They may be a little sorry—but my absence will save their making excuses for me."

Alison looked up at him steadily, though there was a flush of color in her cheeks.

"You must be just to them," she said. "Why should they invent excuses—when you have made such a fight with so much against you? Besides, you are wrong when you say they might be—a little sorry. Can you believe that it would be easy to let you go away?"

Thorne frowned as he met her gaze. He did not know what to make of this, but there was a suggestiveness in her voice that was almost too much for him.

"Is there any one who would have much difficulty in doing that?" he asked with a quietness that cost him a determined effort.

"Yes," murmured Alison, with suddenly lowered eyes; "there is at least one person who would feel it dreadfully."

He gazed at her, straining to cling to the resolution that had almost deserted him, though his face was firmly set.

"It is quite true," she added, with flaming cheeks. "I must say it. I mean myself."

He drew back a pace and stood very still, as though afraid to trust himself.

"Don't make it all unbearable!" he cried at length. "There's only one course open to me. It's hard enough already."

Alison faced him with a new steadiness.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "you can only look at it from your point of view—can't you understand yet that there is another? If you had meant to go away you should have gone—some time ago."

Thorne closed his hands firmly.

"I'm afraid you are right; but I believed that I might make a success of this farming venture."

The girl laughed with open scorn.

"Dare you believe that would have mattered so very much to me? Do you think I didn't know why you turned farmer, and why you have since then done things that none of your neighbors would have been capable of?"

"It seemed necessary," explained Thorne, still with the same expressive quietness. "I did so because I wanted you, and that is exactly what makes defeat so bitter now."

"And you imagined that you had hidden your motive? Can you believe that a man could change his whole mode of life and take up a burden he had carefully avoided, as you have done, without having the woman on whose account he did it understand why? Are we so blind or utterly foolish? Don't you know that our perceptions and intuitions are twice as keen as yours?"

"Then you understood what my object was all along—and it didn't strike you as absurd and impossible?"

Alison smiled at him.

"Why should it seem absurd that I should love you, Mavy?"

He came no nearer, but stood still, looking at her with elation and trouble curiously mingled in his face, and she realized that the fight was but half won. He had of late sloughed off his wayward

carelessness and she knew that there had always been a depth of resolute character beneath it. He was a man who would do what he felt was the fitting thing, even though it hurt him.

"Well," he said, speaking slowly in a tense voice, "ever since I first saw you I longed that this should come about. It was what I worked for, and nothing would have been too hard that brought me nearer you, but it's almost a cruelty that I should have succeeded—now."

"Why?" asked Alison, bracing herself for another effort, for the strain was beginning to tell. "Is what you have won of no value to you?"

Thorne spread out his hands as if in desperation.

"It is because it is so precious that I shrink from involving you in the disaster that is hanging over me. I am a ruined, discredited man, and in a few more weeks I will be driven out of my homestead without a dollar. It will be three or four years at least before I can struggle to my feet again."

"Is that so very dreadful, Mavy?" Alison smiled. "I almost think that in the things that count the most many of you are, after all, more bound by traditions than we are. Your wildest flight was the driving about the prairie with a load of patent medicines, and now your imagination is bounded by a homestead and household comforts. You could teach a woman to love you, and then go away, driven by some fantastic point of honor, because you could not realize that her views might be wider than yours."

"I could hardly suppose that you would care to live in a wagon."

"I did it once—and it was not so very dreadful. I really think, if it were needful, I could do it again."

She leaned forward toward him.

"It would be very much worse, Mavy, if you went away and left me behind."

At length he came toward her and seized both her hands.

"Dear," he cried, "I have tried to do what I felt I ought—and now I'm not sorry that I find I'm not strong enough. I can't tell you how I want you—but I'm afraid you could not face what you would have to bear with me."

"Try!" said Alison simply.

He drew her to him with an exultant laugh.

"I've done what I could, and it seems I've failed. Now let Nevis turn me out and I'll almost thank him. After all, there are many worse places than a camp beside the wagon in the birch bluff."

Alison was not at all convinced that it would end in that, and indeed she did not mean it to if she could help it; but in another moment she felt his arms about her and his lips hot upon her face, and it was half an hour later when they left the homestead together. The sun had dipped, and the vast dim plain stretched away before them under a vault of fading blue, but she drove very slowly while Thorne walked beside the buggy for almost a league.

As a result of this, it was very late when she reached the homestead, and she was relieved when Mrs. Farquhar came out alone as she got down. The light fell upon the girl's face as she approached the doorway, and her companion flashed a smiling glance at her.

"I suppose you have been to Thorne's place?"

"Yes," answered Alison quietly. "I am going to marry him."

Mrs. Farquhar kissed her.

"It's very good news. Still, from what I know of Mavy and how he's situated, I'm a little astonished that you were able to arrange it."

"Why do you put it that way?" Alison asked with a start.

Her companion laughed.

"My dear, I'm only glad that you had sense enough not to let him go. That man would be afraid of even a cold air blowing on you. Anyway, you have got the one husband I would most gladly have given you to."

Then she drew Alison into the house and called to Farquhar.

"Harry, take the horse in, and it isn't necessary for you to hurry back."

She drew Alison out a chair and sat down close beside her.

"The first thing you have to do is to drive over and see Florence Hunter. Her husband's the only person who can pull Mavy out of this trouble."

"I had thought of that."

"I believe it's necessary. We can't let Mavy be turned out now, and if he won't ask a favor of a man who would grant it willingly if he could, somebody must do it for him."

Then she laid her hand caressingly on the girl's shoulder.

"I haven't been so pleased for a very long while. Keep a good courage. We'll find some means of outwitting Nevis."

CHAPTER XXVI
OPEN CONFESSION

It was about the middle of the afternoon when Alison reached the Hunter homestead, and she was slightly astonished when, on inquiring for Florence, a maid informed her that the latter was busy and could not be with her for some minutes. Alison had imagined from what she had seen on previous visits that in the warm weather Florence invariably spent her afternoons reclining in a canvas chair on the veranda. A couple of chairs stood on it when she arrived, and after the maid had gone she drew one back into the shadow, and sitting down looked out across the great stretch of grain in front of the house.

All round the edge of it there were scattered men and teams, but they were moving very slowly, and almost every minute the clatter of one or another of the binders ceased and she saw stooping figures busy in front of the machine. Though she could not make out exactly what they were doing, the state of the harvest-field seemed to explain why the delays were unavoidable. Great patches of the wheat lay prone; the part that stood upright looked tangled and torn, and there were wide stretches from which it had partially disappeared, leaving only ragged stubble mixed with crumpled straw. Alison had, however, seen other crops that had been wholly wiped out by the scourging hail. She waited about a quarter of an hour before Florence appeared, looking rather hot and dressed with unusual plainness.

"You'll have to excuse me for keeping you, but I'm glad you came," she said. "I've been busy since seven o'clock this morning, and now that I've a little leisure it's a relief to sit down."

A gleam of amusement crept into Alison's eyes, and her companion evidently noticed it.

"It is rather a novelty in my case," she laughed. "On the other hand, there's no doubt that the exertion is necessary. The waste that has been going on in this homestead is positively alarming."

It cost Alison an effort to preserve a becoming gravity. Florence, who had presided over the place for several years, spoke as if the fact

she mentioned, which had been patent to those who visited her for a considerable time, had only dawned upon her very recently.

"You are trying to set things straight?" she suggested.

"It threatens to prove a difficult task, but I'm making the attempt while I feel equal to it; and there's a certain interest even in looking into household accounts. For instance, I had an idea this morning that promised to save me three or four dollars a month, but when I mentioned it to Elcot he only grinned. There are one or two respects in which I'm afraid he's a little extravagant."

Alison laughed outright. The idea that Florence, who had hitherto squandered money with both hands, should trouble herself about the saving of three dollars and complain of her self-denying husband's extravagance was irresistibly amusing.

"When did the desire to investigate affairs first get hold of you?" she asked.

"I believe that it was when I came back from Toronto," answered Florence thoughtfully. "Afterward we had the hail, and it became clear at once that there would have to be some cutting down of our expenses." Her face grew suddenly anxious as she glanced toward the grain. "That," she added, "ought to explain why the subject's an interesting one to me."

Alison was somewhat puzzled. There were signs of a change in her companion, who hitherto had, so far at least as she had noticed, taken only a very casual interest in her husband's affairs.

"Yes," she replied, "it does. I was very sorry when I heard about it."

Florence made a little abrupt gesture, as though in dismissal of the topic.

"What brought you over? You haven't been very often."

It was difficult to answer offhand, and Alison proceeded circuitously.

"You and I were pretty good friends in England, weren't we?"

"Of course," assented Florence. "You stood by me when your mother turned against me, and I've always had an idea that you suffered for it. We'll admit the fact. What comes next?"

Her manner was abrupt, but that was not infrequently the case, and Alison, who was fighting for her lover, was not readily daunted.

"Well," she said, "I have never troubled you for any favors in return."

Florence regarded her in a rather curious fashion.

"No," she admitted, "you haven't. You made no claim on me, as, perhaps, you were entitled to do, when you first came out here. In fact, I have once or twice felt slightly vexed with you because you went to Mrs. Farquhar."

Alison smiled as she remembered that her companion had not shown the least desire to prevent her doing the thing she now resented.

"Then there's a favor that I must ask at last; but first of all I'd better tell you that I'm going to marry Leslie Thorne."

"Mavy Thorne!" Florence gazed at her in open wonder. "I heard a whisper or two that seemed to point to the possibility of your doing something of the kind, but I resolutely refused to believe it."

"Why?"

Florence laughed.

"Oh, in half a dozen ways it's ludicrous. If you really mean it, you are as absurd as he is."

Alison rose with an air of quiet dignity.

"If you are quite convinced of that, there is nothing more to be said. You couldn't expect me to appreciate your attitude."

Her companion laid a restraining hand on her arm as she was about to move away.

"Sit down! If I vexed you, I'm sorry; but you really shouldn't be so quick in temper. Besides, you shouldn't have flung the news at me in that startling fashion. After all, I've no doubt he has something to recommend him. Most of them have a few good qualities which now and then become evident when you don't expect them."

She paused and looked up at Alison with a smile in which there was a hint of tenderness.

"For instance, it has been dawning on me of late that there's a good deal that's rather nice in Elcot. Now try to be reasonable, and tell me what the trouble is."

Alison's indignation dissipated. It was, after all, difficult to be angry with Florence, and she supplied her with a brief account of how Thorne was situated. Her companion listened with more interest than she had fancied her capable of displaying, and when Alison stopped she made a sign of comprehension.

"You want me to ask Elcot to send him over some of our men? I wish I could—I almost feel I owe you that—but it's difficult. Elcot's trying desperately to save the remnant of his crop. He has been very badly hit."

Alison sat silent in tense anxiety. She could not urge Florence to do anything that would clearly be to her husband's detriment, and she did not see how Hunter could help Thorne without neglecting his own harvest. Then her companion turned to her again.

"I quite realize that Thorne will be turned out unless he clears off the loan, but you haven't mentioned the name of the creditor who wishes to ruin him."

"It's Nevis."

An ominous sparkle crept into Florence's eyes, and her face grew hard.

"Then I'll try to explain it all to Elcot to-night, and if he can drive off Nevis by any means that won't cost him too great a sacrifice I think you can count on its being done."

Alison felt inclined to wonder why the mention of Nevis's part in the affair had had such an effect on her companion, but that, after all, did not seem a very important point, and when she drove away half an hour later she was in an exultant mood. When she had gone, Florence supervised the preparations for the men's supper, and after the meal was over she stopped Hunter as he was going out again through the veranda.

"If you can wait for a few minutes I have something to tell you," she said. "To begin with, Alison Leigh is going to marry Thorne."

Hunter did not look much astonished.

"I think Mavy has made a wise choice, but I'm very much afraid there's trouble in front of them," he said.

"That," returned Florence, "is exactly what I meant to speak about. Alison was here this afternoon, and she mentioned it to me. I want to save them as much as I can."

Hunter's face remained expressionless. It was the first time, so far as he could remember, that Florence had concerned herself about any other person's difficulties.

"Well," he asked gravely, "how do you propose to set about it?"

"In the first place, I thought I'd mention it to you."

A dry smile crept into Hunter's eyes.

"Then you'd better give me all the particulars in your possession. I have some idea as to the cause of the trouble, but I haven't been over to Mavy's place for some time, and he has sent no word to me."

Florence told him what she knew, and when she had finished he gazed at her reflectively.

"You want me to send him all the men and binders I can spare? That's the only useful course."

Florence hesitated, and when she spoke her manner was unusually diffident.

"I feel it's rather shabby to promise a favor and then hand on the work to you, but in this case I'm helpless. I should like you to get Thorne out of his trouble, if it's only on Alison's account; but on the other hand I don't want you to increase your own difficulties by sending men away. You stand first with me."

Hunter made no allusion to the last assurance.

"It seems very likely that what the boys are now doing will in the end come to much the same thing as changing a dollar and getting about ninety cents back for it, which naturally prevents me from feeling that I would be making very much of a sacrifice in discontinuing the operation."

"I don't quite understand how that could be. Even if the hail has almost spoiled the crop, you have the men, and it won't cost you any more if you keep them busy saving as much of it as is possible."

"That," explained Hunter, "is partly why I'm doing so, and the other reason is that I must have something that will keep me occupied just now. On the other hand, before I can get anything for the wheat it must be thrashed and hauled in to the elevators. Now, thrashing is usually done by contract—at so much the bushel—in this country, and I've reason to believe that the thrasher boys will charge me considerably more than the average rate. Considering the state of the crop, they'll have to do a great deal of work for a very little wheat.

Besides, that little's damaged and would bring less than the market price, which is a particularly low one this year. Then there's the cost of haulage, which is an item, because it would entail keeping the hired men on, and I've the option of paying them off as soon as harvest's over."

"In short," said Florence in a troubled voice, "it would probably be more profitable to let the whole crop rot as it stands."

"I'm afraid that's the case," Hunter agreed.

Florence sat silent for almost a minute watching him covertly. It once more struck her that he looked very jaded, and she was touched by the weariness in his face. Then, though the occasion seemed most inopportune, she was carried away by a sudden impulse which compelled her to mention Nevis's loan.

"Elcot," she blurted out, "I have made things worse for you all along—and now there's another trouble I have brought upon you."

For a minute or two she poured out disjointed sentences, and though the man listened gravely, almost unmoved in face, she found the making of that confession about the most difficult thing she had ever done.

"How much did you borrow?" he inquired.

She told him; and raising himself a little from his leaning posture he looked down upon her with an embarrassing quietness.

"I was half afraid there might be something of that kind in the background," he said at length. "There's one point I must raise. Presumably, you wouldn't allow a man who was to all intents and purposes a stranger to lend you money?"

He spoke as if the matter were open to doubt, and Florence found the situation rapidly becoming intolerable, but it was to her credit that she recognized that half-measures would be useless then.

"No," she acknowledged.

"Then I must ask exactly what kind of interest you took in the man, and how far your acquaintance with him went?"

Florence's face burned, but she roused herself to answer him.

"He was amusing," she said slowly, picking her words. "He came here once or twice when you were out, and on a few occasions I met him by accident on the prairie and at the settlement. I suppose I

was—pleasant—to him, but nobody could have called it more than that. Then there was a change in his attitude."

"It was to be expected," Hunter interposed dryly. "Do you wish me to understand that you were astonished?"

Florence rose and turned on him with hot anger in her eyes.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, "I was astonished and—you must believe it—horribly mortified! He tried to make me feel that I was in his power!"

She paused and clenched one hand tight before she cried:

"What can I do to convince you? I hate the man! I want you to crush and humble him!"

Hunter greeted this outbreak with a smile, but he made no answer; and growing calmer in a few moments she looked at him again.

"What are you going to do about it, Elcot?" she asked.

"In the first place, those two notes of yours must be paid when they fall due. After that I shall act—as appears advisable."

Florence sat down with relief in her face.

"Raising the money will be another difficulty," she said. "I will give up my allowance until it is paid off."

"That," replied Hunter, with undiminished dryness, "will no doubt have to be done."

He turned away from her and leaned heavily on the balustrade for a minute or two, apparently watching the hired men toiling among his ruined wheat. Then he slowly looked around again.

"Well," he observed, "I'm glad you have told me about the thing; but I'm somewhat surprised that you didn't realize that you could have disarmed Nevis—and freed yourself—by mentioning it earlier."

"I was ashamed—though there was in one sense no reason why I should be. It would have looked—so suggestive."

Hunter interrupted her with a little bitter laugh.

"No; when I asked you what interest you took in Nevis it wasn't quite what I meant. I merely thought your answer might throw some light on his views, which I wanted to be sure of. You are too dispassionate, and too much alive to your own benefit, to make much of a sacrifice for the sake of any man."

Florence winced at this, but she rose and laid her hand on his arm.

"Try me, Elcot," she begged. "I know I'm fond of ease and luxury—perhaps it's because I had so little of them before I married you, but now you must give me nothing for the next twelve months. Cut the household expenses down by half and send everybody but one maid away."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be prepared for something of the kind," replied Hunter quietly. "In the meanwhile, I'll take the boys and the binders over to Thorne's place in the morning."

He moved away toward his ruined crop without another word, but Florence did not resent the attitude he had adopted. Indeed, his uncompromising directness had appealed to her in his favor. When, soon after their marriage, she had by various means made it plain that he was expected to keep his distance and leave her largely to her own devices it had been a relief that he had fallen in with her views without protest, though it had been evident that it had grievously hurt him. Then his forbearance and apparent content with the situation had by degrees grown galling, and now, when at last he seemed inclined to assert himself, she was not displeased. It had, as she had admitted to Alison, begun to dawn on her that she had somehow never recognized her husband's good qualities, and that there were unexpected possibilities in the simple farmer. Besides this, she was seized with a fit of wholly genuine penitence.

In the meanwhile Hunter climbed into the seat of a binder which he drove slowly through the tangled grain, and Florence, still lingering on the veranda, noticed the carefulness with which he and his men stooked the sheaves of wheat which might never be sold. The rows of black shadows behind them lengthened rapidly, until at last they coalesced and the stubble lay dim, while the western face of the grain along which the binders crept alone glowed with a coppery radiance as the red sun dipped. Then a wonderful exhilarating coolness crept into the air, and there was a stillness not apparent earlier through which the clash and clatter of the machines rang harshly distinct. They moved on with the bent figures which grew dimmer toiling behind them for another half-hour, and then while the others trooped off to the stables Hunter walked slowly toward the house. Florence noticed the suggestive slackness of his bearing and her heart smote her, for she knew it was not mere physical

weariness which had crushed the vigor out of the man. When he came up the steps she turned to him.

"Is the wheat looking no better?"

"No," answered Hunter simply; "It's looking worse. I'm going in to write a letter—to the bank."

He strode on and disappeared into the house, but Florence, who presently saw a light stream out from one of the windows, sat still, though the dew was getting heavy and it was chilly now.

CHAPTER XXVII
A HELPING HAND

Lucy Calvert came over as often as she was able; but at length she was compelled to discontinue her visits to Thorne. Soon after she had done so, there was a welcome change in the almost torrid weather, and grass and grain lay still under a faintly clouded sky when he toiled among the sheaves one clear, cool afternoon. The binder which flung them out moved along the edge of the oats in front of him, and another man was busy among the crackling stubble a pace or two behind, for a neighbor had driven across to help him on the previous evening, and the station-agent had at last sent him out a man from the railroad settlement. They had been at work since early morning, but each time Thorne glanced at the oblong of standing grain he realized more clearly the futility of what he was doing.

The belt of knee-high stubble, which shone, a sweep of warm ochre tinting, against the white and gray of the parched grass beyond it, was widening steadily as the crop went down before the binder, but he had a good deal yet to cut, and there was another oblong of untouched grain running back from a deserted wooden shack some distance away. Thorne had followed the custom of the country, sowing oats on the newly broken land and wheat on that which had been worked before, though in the latter case he had agreed to pay a share of the proceeds to the owner of the soil. He had secured an option of purchasing this second holding, but it was quite out of the question that he should exercise it now, and a very simple calculation convinced him that at his present rate of progress less than half the crop would be ready when Grantly's note fell due.

There was no doubt that his activity was illogical, as it was obvious that the result of every hour's strenuous labor would only be to put so much more money into Nevis's pocket, but he could not force himself to give up the fight until the last moment. He still clung to a faint expectation that something might transpire to lessen the odds against him. He admitted that there was nothing to warrant this view, but in spite of it he toiled on savagely, and the stooked sheaves rose before him in lengthening golden ranks as he floundered with

bowed shoulders and busy arms through the crackling stubble. The soil beneath the straw was dry and parched, and the dust which rose from it crept into his eyes and nostrils. Now and then he gasped, but he worked on with no slackening of effort, for that part of the crop was heavy and the sheaves were falling thick and fast in the wake of the machine. At length, however, it stopped at a corner, and Thorne straightened his aching back when the man who drove it got down.

"She wants a drop of oil," he explained, and looking round him pointed out across the prairie. "Seems as if Shafter was through with his harvest, and I guess he has to sell. Some of the storekeepers have been putting the screw on him."

Thorne gazed toward the spot he indicated and saw two or three teams and wagons etched upon the horizon where a low rise ran up to meet the sky. They were so far off that they appeared stationary, and it was only when one of the binder's arms hid the first of them a moment or two later that he could see they moved. Then as he watched the others a hot fit of resentment and envy came upon him. It was clear that Shafter, who had plowed unusually early, had cut and thrashed his grain, for stacking is seldom attempted in that country, where very few farmers have any money in hand and storekeepers generally look for payment once the crop is in. In the latter case it is put on the market as soon as possible, though now and then the last of it is hauled in on the bob-sleds across the snow. Shafter, at least, could clear off his liabilities, and though Thorne did not grudge the man this satisfaction, the sight of his loaded wagons crawling slowly to the elevators was bitter to him. He could have done what Shafter was doing, and so escaped from Nevis's clutches, had he only been allowed a little longer time.

"When you're through with that oiling, we'll get on," he said harshly.

His companion made no answer, but climbed into the saddle and the binder moved steadily along the edge of the grain until they came to the second corner. Turning it, the driver looked out across a stretch of prairie which a birch bluff on one hand of them had previously hidden. Then he pulled up his team excitedly.

"Mavy!" he cried, "there's quite a lot of teams back yonder to the eastward, beyond the creek!"

Thorne sprang up on the binder, for where he had been standing a cluster of sheaves obscured his view. He saw that there undoubtedly were horses on the sweep of grass in the distance. What was more, they were moving in his direction.

"There's one wagon," declared his second companion. "I can't quite make out the other things. If there was hay in the sloos still I'd say they were mowers."

Thorne's heart seemed suddenly to leap, and the man in the saddle of the machine burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Well," he said, "nobody would figure you'd been farming, unless you use the scythe down in Ontario. They're sure binders!"

He turned and smote Thorne encouragingly upon the shoulder.

"Mavy, it's the Hunter crowd! Guess you're going to have no trouble getting your crop in now!"

Thorne got down and leaned against the wheel of the binder. His face had grown paler than usual, and he felt almost limp with the relief which was too great for him to express. It was several moments before he broke the silence.

"They can't be here for a while. I think I'll have a smoke."

His companion nodded sympathetically.

"That's what you want, Mavy. Then you'll be fresh for a hustle; and we'll have to move quite lively to keep ahead of the Hunter boys. Hunter's no use for slouches and he knows how to speed up the crowd he hires."

He called to his horses, and the other man fell to work behind him when the machine clattered on, but Thorne sat down among the sheaves. He could now allow himself a brief relaxation, and for once his grip was nerveless, for his heart was overfull. His cares had suddenly vanished, and there was, he almost thought, victory in front of him. He had some trouble in shredding the tobacco to fill his pipe, and when the operation was accomplished he lay resting on one elbow watching the teams draw nearer with a satisfaction which came near to overwhelming him. By the time he had smoked the pipe out, however, he had grown a little calmer, and rousing himself he stood up and walked out upon the prairie to meet the newcomers. Hunter was driving a wagon in front of them and he stopped his team when he was a few yards away.

"We'll soon clean that crop up," he declared cheerily when Thorne had clambered to the seat beside him. "I've brought the smartest of the boys and the newest machines along."

"Thanks," Thorne replied simply. "Just now I can't say anything more, except that in one way I'm sorry you were able to come."

Hunter's face grew suddenly grave.

"I can believe it, Mavy. Had things been different it's quite likely I'd have had to keep the boys at home; I was only sure that I was throwing my time away yesterday. Anyway, I'm thankful that one hailed crop won't clean me out."

He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand.

"As a matter of fact," he added, "though I'd probably come in any case, it was really Mrs. Hunter who sent me along."

"Mrs. Hunter!" ejaculated Thorne in what afterward occurred to him was very tactless astonishment.

"Sure!" laughed his companion. "She had a visitor shortly before she spoke to me about it, which may have had something to do with the thing, but the possibility of the notion's having struck Miss Leigh first wasn't any reason why I shouldn't come across. Mavy, it's my opinion that you're a very lucky man."

"It's mine, too," Thorne answered with a light in his eyes. "Still, I almost felt ashamed to admit it half an hour ago. The outlook seemed very black to me just then."

Hunter made a sign of comprehension.

"Well," he said, "from what I've seen of her, I don't think Miss Leigh would have fallen in with your point of view, though it was a very natural one. It strikes me there's a good deal of courage and a capacity for making the most of things in that girl. Anyway, there ought to be considerably fewer difficulties in front of both of you when we get this crop in; and that brings up another matter. The thrashers are leaving Shafter's for Tom Jordan's place to-morrow. Hadn't you better write to them right away and arrange for them to come along as soon as we're ready?"

Thorne recognized that this would be judicious, particularly as he expected that a neighbor who had spoken to him that morning would pass close by in the next hour or two. The man, who lived near Jordan, would, he felt confident, undertake to hand on the letter. A

few minutes later he got down and entered his dwelling while Hunter drove on toward the grain. He found, however, that his ink had almost dried up, and when he sat down to write it was difficult to fix his thoughts on what he had to say. The relief he had experienced a little while ago had been great enough partly to bewilder him, and some time had passed before he produced a fairly intelligible letter. Putting it into his pocket, he went out again, and stopped a moment or two just outside the threshold with a sense of exultation that sent an almost painful thrill through him as he saw that Hunter had already got to work.

Plodding teams and machines, marshaled in careful order, were advancing in echelon through the grain, which melted away before them. Behind each, bowed, bare-armed figures set up the flung-out sheaves, which rose in ranks that now lengthened reassuringly fast. The still air was filled with the sounds of a strenuous activity; the crackle of the stubble, the rasp and tinkle of the knives, and the rustle of falling grain. Already there was a wide gap, which extended while he gazed at it, bitten out of one corner of the golden oblong. Along its indented edges the arms of the binders whirled and gleamed, half-buried in yellow straw, through which, as most of them were new, he caught odd glimpses of streaks of flaring vermilion and harshest green, while the dull blue garments and bronzed skin of the men who moved on stooping showed against the sweep of ochre and coppery hues. It was a medley of vivid color and a blending of stirring sound, and the jaded man forgot his aches and weariness as he gazed. The crop he had despaired of reaping was falling fast before his eyes.

Then he saw that his own team was leading, and there was only one figure struggling with the sheaves behind it. In another moment it became apparent that the man in the saddle was waving to him, and he set off at a run. When he reached the grain one of his companions glanced at him reproachfully.

"See where that binder's got?" he grumbled. "We went in first, but though I've most pulled my arms off they're crowding right on top of us with the next Hunter team. Do you want the boys to put it on us that we can't keep ahead of them?"

Thorne saw that the team of the following binder was very close behind, and that a wide strip of stubble strewed with fallen sheaves,

which had accumulated in his absence, divided him and his companion from the machine that belonged to him.

"Well," he said with a cheerful laugh, "there's a good deal to pull up, but it has to be done."

They set about it vigorously, and drew away foot by foot from the men behind. Thorne had toiled hard before, but now he felt that he could do half as much again. After all, the grim courage of the forlorn hope provides a feebler animus than the thrill of victory. At length, however, his companion turned to him with a gasping expostulation.

"I guess you have me beat," he exclaimed. "We'll hook Jim off the binder and put you on instead. I'll own up I'd rather have him along with me just now."

They made the change, and Thorne contrived to drive a little faster than the other man had done. Hunter's men could not let him draw too far ahead, and everywhere the effort grew tenser still. Nobody objected when, as the supper hour drew near, Hunter said that since the days were shortening fast they would go on until dark fell before they made the meal, instead of working afterward. Still, as the time slipped by, a man here and there drew his belt tighter or stopped a moment to straighten his aching back, and by degrees the horses moved more and more slowly amid the falling grain. The clatter of the binders grew less insistent, there were halts to oil or tighten something now and then; and at last, when all the great plain was growing dim, it was with relief that the men desisted when Hunter called to them. He and Thorne loosed their teams, and the latter looked uneasy when they walked toward the house together.

"There's a thing that only struck me a few minutes ago, and I'm rather troubled about it," he confessed. "The boys have worked hard enough already without being set to making flapjacks and cooking their supper, while I really don't know how I'm to tide over breakfast to-morrow."

Hunter laughed.

"That's not going to prove much of a difficulty, particularly as it's one Mrs. Hunter has provided for. As it happens, Hall looked in on us last night, and I gathered that he hadn't a very high opinion of your cookery and catering."

A minute or two later they came out from behind the barn into view of the house and Thorne saw that a bountiful meal was already spread out on the grass in front of it. A man, whose absence he had not noticed, was carrying a kettle and a frying-pan out of the doorway. It was the climax of a day of unexpected happenings and vanishing troubles, and when he looked at Hunter he found it difficult to speak. The latter, however, laughed.

"Mavy," he said, "you sit right down yonder. Supper's ready, and the boys are waiting."

Thorne took his place among the others, who ate in such determined fashion that in a very few minutes there was nothing left of the meal. Then two or three of them gathered up the plates, and the others, lying down on the grass, took out their pipes. In the meanwhile it had grown almost dark, though a few pale streaks of saffron and green lingered low upon the prairie's western verge. The long rows of sheaves stood out dimly upon the stubble, but the standing crop had faded into a blurred and shadowy mass, one edge of which alone showed with a certain distinctness above the sweep of the darkening plain. Near the house, however, a little fire which somebody had lighted—probably because there was not room for all the cooking utensils on Thorne's stove—burned redly between the two birch logs, and its flickering glow wavered across the recumbent figures of the men.

Some of them lay propped up on one elbow, some had stretched themselves out full-length among the grass, and now and then a brown face or uncovered bronzed arm stood out in the uncertain radiance and vanished again. The men spoke in low voices, lazily, wearied with the day's toil, though at irregular intervals a hoarse laugh broke out, and once or twice the howl of a coyote came up faint and hollow out of the waste of prairie. A little apart from the others, Thorne and Hunter sat with their shoulders against the front of the house, talking quietly.

"I'll see you through with the hauling in," Hunter promised. "We'll start right away as soon as the thrashers can give us a load, and in my opinion you should have a reasonable surplus after clearing off Nevis's claim."

"Yes," assented Thorne with deep but languid content; "it looks almost as if another moderately good harvest would wipe out my last

obligation and set me solidly on my feet. Once I'm free of Nevis, I don't anticipate any trouble with the other men. So long as they get their interest they'll hold me up for their own sakes."

"That's how it strikes me," Hunter agreed. "They don't run their business on Nevis's lines; which reminds me that I picked up a little information that suggested that he might have to make a change, when I was over at Brandon a week or two ago. I may say that as I had reasons for believing that the man hadn't a great deal of money of his own I've been rather astonished at the way he has gone on from one thing to another during the last few years, until Farquhar told me something which seemed to supply the explanation. He got it from Grantly, who declares that Brand, of Winnipeg, has been backing Nevis all along. Well, I spent an evening with one of the big milling people in Brandon, and he told me it was generally believed that Brand has been severely hit by the fall in wheat. It turns out that he and a few others were at the bottom of the late rally, which, however, only made things worse for them. The point is that if Brand is getting shaky he'll probably call in any money he has supplied to Nevis."

"Nobody would be sorry if he pulled him down altogether."

"It's almost too much to expect," replied Hunter, dismissing the subject with a wave of his hand. "By the way, I had a look round your house after supper, and it's my opinion that you only want a wagon-load of dressed lumber and a couple of carpenters for two or three days to make the place quite comfortable. A few simple furnishings won't cost you much, and you can, of course, add to them as you go on."

Thorne realized that this statement covered a question, and he smiled in a manner that indicated unalloyed satisfaction.

"I intend to consult with Alison about ordering them as soon as the thrashing's over."

His companion rose and stretched himself.

"Well," he yawned, "if we're to start at sunup we had better get off to rest."

He turned to the others.

"You'll find your blankets in the wagon, boys, and you can camp in the house. If you're particular about a soft bed there's hay in the barn."

CHAPTER XXVIII
THE RECKONING

Thorne's last load of wheat had been hauled in, and he had duly met his obligations, when he drove into Graham's Bluff early one evening. The days were rapidly getting shorter, and though it was not yet dark there was a chill in the air, and here and there a light blinked in the window of a store. Odd groups of loiterers stood about the sidewalk or strolled along the rutted street, for it was Saturday evening, and now that harvest was generally over the outlying farmers had driven in to purchase provisions or to gather any news that might be had, in accordance with their usual custom. It was about their only relaxation, and of late a supplementary mail arrived on Saturdays, which was another excuse for the visit.

Thorne was in an unusually optimistic mood. He had left his troubles behind him, there was an alluring prospect opening out ahead, and he expected to meet Alison and Mrs. Farquhar at the hotel. Besides, he had driven fast, and the swift motion had stirred his blood. He answered with a cheerful laugh when some of the loungers called to him. As he drove by one corner Corporal Slaney raised a greeting hand, and Thorne, wondering what he was doing there, waved his whip. It was, as a rule, only when he had some particular business on hand that the corporal was seen at Graham's Bluff. Supper had been over some time when Thorne stopped his team at the back of the hotel, and getting down handed it over to a man who came out from the stable.

"Has the mail-carrier got in yet, Bill?" he asked.

"No; he's most an hour behind his usual time. Guess you're late, too. They've cleared the tables quite a while ago."

"I got supper with Forrester as I came along. I suppose you haven't any idea as to what has brought Slaney over?"

Bill grinned.

"It is my opinion that's about the one thing Slaney's not going to explain, though he was in the stable talking, and I saw him looking kind of curious at Lucy Calvert. She's in town, and so is Mrs. Hunter.

She came in alone, but somebody told me that Hunter had ridden round by Hall's place and would be along by and by."

"Are there any of my other friends about?"

"I don't know if you'd call Nevis one, but he's in the hotel; when I last saw him he looked powerful mad. Mrs. Hunter had pulled up before the dry-goods store when he walked up and started to talk to her. I don't know what she said to him, but it kind of struck me she'd have liked to lay into him with the whip, and Nevis came back across the road mighty quick. After that Mrs. Farquhar drove in with Miss Leigh and left word that you were to wait at the hotel."

Bill paused a moment and grinned at Thorne mischievously.

"Guess they didn't want you trailing round after them in the dry-goods store. Looks as if they'd been buying quite a lot, for it's most half an hour since they went in. The lawyer man who came to see Miss Leigh has gone off up the street."

"The lawyer man!" exclaimed Thorne in some astonishment, for, though he could guess what Alison was buying, the last piece of news roused his interest.

"Parsons—from somewhere down the line. He has been in the settlement once or twice lately. Wanted to know where Miss Leigh was, and when she'd be back again."

Thorne, without asking any more questions, walked round to the front of the hotel, where he found Nevis talking to several farmers on the veranda. He was inclined to think the man had not noticed his arrival, and sitting down he took out his pipe without greeting him. He had treated Nevis to a somewhat forcible expression of opinion when he had met Grantly's note a few days earlier, and they had by no means parted on friendly terms. Soon after he sat down Symonds, the hotel-keeper, came out on the veranda.

"Are you going to stay here to-night, Mr. Nevis?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Nevis. "I didn't intend to when I drove in, but I think I'll stop over until Monday morning. I'll drive on to Hunter's place after breakfast then."

Thorne, remembering what Bill had told him, wondered how far Nevis's meeting with Mrs. Hunter might explain his change of mind. He could think of no very definite reason that would warrant the conjecture, but a stream of light from the room behind the veranda

fell on the man's face and its expression suggested vindictive malice. Just then two or three newcomers strolled on to the veranda, and a teamster, who had been sitting at the farther side of it, moved toward Nevis.

"What do you want to go to Hunter's for?" he asked bluntly. "You and he haven't had any dealings since he beat you out of the creamery."

Thorne watched Nevis closely, and imagined that the ominous look in his face grew plainer still.

"Well," he said, with a jarring laugh, "Mrs. Hunter is a customer of mine."

There was a murmur of astonishment and the men gathered round the speaker, evidently in the expectation of hearing something more.

"Is that a cold fact?" one of them inquired.

"Certainly," answered Nevis; and Thorne joined the group.

"Even if it is, this isn't the place to discuss it!" he broke in. "Perhaps I'd better mention that if Hunter isn't in town already he will be very soon."

Nevis looked around at him, and Thorne fancied that the man, who was evidently filled with savage resentment, intended, with some vindictive purpose, to take the gathering group of bystanders into his confidence. Several more men were ascending the steps.

"Have you any reason to doubt what I'm saying?" he asked.

"Well," drawled Thorne, "there's your general character, for one thing."

Some of the others laughed, but it occurred to Thorne that his interference had not been particularly tactful when one of them asked a question.

"Are you telling us that Hunter, who has plenty of money, lets his wife go borrowing from people like you?"

"I can't say that he lets her," Nevis retorted meaningly. "I've the best of reasons, however, for being certain that she does so."

There was an awkward silence, which indicated that all who had heard it grasped the full significance of the last statement. Nevis smiled as he glanced round at them.

"You mean he doesn't know anything about it?" somebody exclaimed.

"If you insist, that's about the size of it," Nevis answered. "Since her husband cuts down her allowance to the last dollar, it's not an altogether unnatural thing that Mrs. Hunter should borrow from her friends without mentioning it to him."

The speech was offensive on the face of it, but there was in addition something in the man's manner which endued it with a gross suggestiveness. It implied that he could furnish a reason why the woman should have no hesitation in borrowing from him. Thorne stood still fuming. He recognized that an altercation with Nevis would in all probability only provide the latter with an opportunity for making further undesirable insinuations.

Just then, however, the group suddenly fell apart and another man strode across the veranda. He carried a riding-quirt, and his face showed white and set in the stream of light.

"It's a malicious lie!"

He raised the plaited quirt, and the hotel-keeper flung himself in front of Nevis.

"Stop there!" he cried. "Hold on, Hunter!"

Thorne, springing forward, grasped his friend's arm. He felt it his duty to restrain him, though it was one that he undertook most reluctantly.

"Thrashing him wouldn't be an answer," he insisted. "After what he has just said, it would be very much better if you gave us your account of the thing."

There was a murmur of approval from the assembly. The men had heard the accusation cunningly conveyed, and although the prospect of a sensational climax in which the riding-quirt should figure appealed to them, they felt it only fitting that they should also hear it proved or withdrawn.

"I'll do that—first," consented Hunter, very grimly. "I have just this to say. I'm perfectly aware that Mrs. Hunter borrowed from this man on two occasions, and to bear it out I'll state the fact that the loans fall due on Tuesday."

Nevis made no attempt to deny it, and one of the bystanders spoke.

"We can let it go at that, boys; Nevis said he was going over to Hunter's place on Monday."

"In that case," continued Hunter, "he will have the notes my wife gave him in his pocket. I'll mention what the amounts are, and afterward ask Nevis to produce the papers, and Symonds will tell you if I'm correct."

"Then if he doesn't want us to strip him he had better trot them out!" cried another man.

Nevis, who saw no help for it, produced two papers, which the hotel-keeper seized. The latter made a sign of agreement when Hunter spoke again.

"Yes," he confirmed; "you have given the figures right."

Hunter once more turned to the waiting men.

"I think I've made out my case. Are you convinced that he's a dangerous liar, boys?"

There were cries of assent.

"Lay into the hog with the quirt!" somebody added.

Thorne chuckled at the sight of Nevis's face. It was suffused with blood and dark with baffled malevolence. The man evidently recognized that he was discredited and would get no further hearing now. It occurred to Thorne, however, that his friend had succeeded better than he could reasonably have expected, for, after all, he had not disproved the fact that his wife had, in the first place at least, borrowed the money without his knowledge. The others, he thought, had not noticed that point.

Then Hunter raised his hand for silence.

"I'll ask Symonds and Thorne to come into the room with Nevis and me," he said. "I want a table to write at, for one thing."

It did not look as if Nevis were particularly anxious to accompany them, but Symonds, who was a powerful man, hustled him forward, and Thorne took his place with his back to the door to keep out the others, who seemed desirous of following them. Hunter, sitting down at a table, wrote out a check and pocketed the papers Nevis gave him in exchange for it. Then he rose and took up the strongly plaited quirt.

"Now," he said, addressing Nevis, "I'll ask you to walk out on to the veranda and inform our friends outside that you wish to express your regret for the malicious statements you have lately made, and that you declare they were completely unjustified."

"I'll see you damned first!" muttered Nevis with a dangerous glitter in his eyes.

The events of the next few moments were sudden and confusing, and Thorne was never able to arrange them clearly in his mind. It speedily became evident, however, that the equity of his cause does not necessarily render a man either invincible or invulnerable. Nevis, although a person of somewhat lethargic physical habits, appeared when forced to action sufficiently vigorous, and Hunter was hampered by the quirt to which he persistently clung. Though he managed to use it once or twice it was a serious handicap when they came to grips. In the meanwhile, the dust flew up from the uncovered floor and obscured the view of the men on the veranda, who crowded about the window and clamored furiously to get in. Then in the midst of the turmoil the lamp went out and Thorne felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Let them out!" the hotel-keeper cried.

As Thorne was forcibly driven away from the door, it swung open and a man sprang out on to the veranda with another close behind, while confused cries went up.

"Head him off from the stairway!"

"Leave them to it!"

"Get a light!"

In a few moments, Bill pushed through the crowd with a lantern in his hand, but before he crossed the veranda another light sprang up again in the room and streamed out through the door and window. It fell upon the waiting men and the two dominant figures in the narrow clear space in front of them—Nevis, standing still, looking about him savagely with a darkly suffused face, and Hunter, gripping his quirt, very quiet and very grim. He was, however, breathing heavily, and signs of the conflict were plain on both of them.

There was an impressive silence, and everybody stood tensely expectant, until it was suddenly broken by a murmur and a movement of those nearest the steps. They drew back, and Mrs.

Farquhar and Mrs. Hunter, with Alison and Lucy Calvert, came up on the veranda. Moving forward a few paces they stopped in very natural surprise, and the stillness grew deeper when Hunter suddenly flung down his quirt. This was a change in the situation which nobody had anticipated.

Then a cry rose sharply from somewhere below.

"Miss Leigh! Get back there! Let me up!"

It was followed by a shout from the crowd.

"Winthrop!"

The next moment a man came scrambling up the steps. He was hot and dusty and apparently in desperate haste, but to Thorne's astonishment he ran toward Alison. As he did so, Nevis sprang toward the veranda rails.

"Slaney!" he shouted.

He was still almost breathless from the struggle, and it scarcely seemed possible that his hoarse voice would carry far, but Winthrop turning suddenly, grabbed up a shotgun that lay on a chair. One of the outlying farmers had brought it with him, for there were duck about just then.

"Call out again and I'll plug you sure!" he threatened, and the look in his face suggested that he fully meant it. "You've hounded me from place to place up and down the prairie; you've got my money, more than you lent, and that wouldn't satisfy you. Two weeks ago I was working quietly when you put the blamed police on my trail again. Now I guess I've got you, and we're going to straighten things."

He broke off as Lucy stepped forward and laid her hand on the gun, and Thorne noticed that she placed it with deliberate purpose over the muzzle.

"Let me have it, Jake! The boys will see that he doesn't call out."

There was a murmur of assent from the crowd, and Thorne seized Winthrop's arm.

"What do you want Miss Leigh for, anyway?" Lucy asked Winthrop.

The instinct which had prompted the question seemed so natural to Thorne that, strung up and intent as he was, he smiled; but just then Winthrop lowered the gun and turned to Alison.

"Have you got that mortgage deed and shown it to the lawyer man?" he asked.

"It's here," said Alison. "Mr. Parsons is in the settlement; I expect to see him in the next few minutes."

It struck Thorne that Nevis started, but before any of those most concerned could speak there was a rapid thud of horse-hoofs approaching down the street. Then a man on the steps cried out:

"Here's Slaney and a trooper! You've got to quit, Jake!"

Winthrop plunged into the lighted room and the door closed behind him with a crash; a moment or two later another door banged somewhere below and the men poured tumultuously down the steps. Lucy followed them, and almost immediately the veranda was deserted except for Thorne and Alison and Hunter, who remained there with his wife, though he did not speak to her. Mrs. Farquhar had apparently been hustled down the steps by the others in their haste, and Nevis had also vanished. Nobody had noticed what became of him in the confusion that succeeded Winthrop's flight.

The thud of hoofs, which had ceased for a moment, almost immediately began again. Once the corporal's voice rose sharply, and then there were disconnected cries, a sound of running feet, and a clamor that rapidly receded down the street. When it grew very faint Thorne turned to Alison.

"Haven't you got something to explain?" he asked.

"It's very simple," said Alison. "Winthrop gave me his mortgage deed some time ago; he said it would be wiser not to hand it to Lucy. Nevis had got it from him by an excuse, but he crept into his office for it late one night. I understand it proves that Nevis hadn't an indisputable claim to the cattle he sold. About a fortnight ago, Winthrop wrote to me that the police were on his trail again and I was to show the deed to a lawyer and see if it would clear him. I don't know why he came here, unless it was because the troopers had cut off any other means of escape and he fancied some of his friends

would hide him; and it's also possible that he took the risk of being arrested because of his anxiety to find out what the lawyer thought."

Thorne nodded.

"That probably accounts for it; though there are still one or two points which are far from clear."

A few minutes later, a distant clamor broke out again, and by degrees confused voices and a sound of footsteps drew nearer. Then while Thorne and Alison leaned over the balustrade a crowd poured past in front of the hotel with a mounted figure showing above the shoulders of those about it. Thorne looked round at the girl.

"They've got him at last," he said.

Hunter crossed the veranda and drew him into the adjoining room, and Alison was left alone with Mrs. Hunter. The latter said nothing to her and she sat silent for some time until the lawyer walked up the steps.

"I was told that I should find Miss Leigh here."

Alison said that was her name, and the man, drawing a chair forward, sat down opposite her.

"I understand that you have Winthrop's mortgage deed in your possession. He now desires you to hand it to me."

"I shall be very glad to get rid of it," declared Alison, taking the document out of a pocket in her light jacket. "Will you be able to get him off with it?"

"That's a matter on which I can't very well express an opinion until I have read the deed and had a talk with Winthrop. I've no doubt you have heard that he has just been arrested while endeavoring to escape, but I contrived to get a word or two with him and Corporal Slaney. The latter considers it advisable to get his prisoner out of the settlement as soon as possible, and I understand he means to spend the night at a homestead a few miles away. He has promised me an opportunity for speaking to Winthrop when he gets there."

"I should very much like to hear what you decide," Alison informed him.

The lawyer rose.

"It's probable that I may find it necessary to make a few inquiries in connection with the affair, and I have another piece of business which will keep me a day or two in the neighborhood. If Winthrop has no objections, I could no doubt call on you at the Farquhar homestead on Monday."

Alison thanked him, and soon after he withdrew Hunter came out of the hotel with Thorne. Alison accompanied Thorne down to the street in search of Mrs. Farquhar. Then Hunter turned toward his wife.

"If you have nothing more to do here, we may as well be getting home," he said.

CHAPTER XXIX
THE NEW OUTLOOK

It was unusually dark when Florence Hunter drove out of the settlement with her husband riding beside the wagon, and the roughness of the trail made conversation difficult. Florence was, on the whole, glad of this, because, although she felt that there was a good deal to be said, she could not express herself befittingly while her attention was concentrated on the team. Besides, she wanted to see the man and watch his face when she spoke to him.

She was accordingly content that he should ride in silence except for an occasional disconnected observation about the horses or the trail, to which she merely made a casual answer. It was late when they reached the homestead, and though a light or two was burning nobody seemed to be about, which was, however, only what she had expected. Hunter led the horses away toward the stables, and entering the house she sat down to wait for him somewhat anxiously, though she realized that the possibility of his being angry would not have troubled her a little while ago.

He came in at length and stood looking down at her. Now that the light was better than it had been on the veranda of the hotel, she noticed that his lips were cut and that there was a bruise above one cheekbone. His jacket was also torn and there was no doubt that, taking it all round, his appearance was far from reputable. That, however, did not trouble her, for she had seen enough at the hotel to realize that the man had been injured while fighting in her cause. Still, she was wise enough not to begin by pitying him.

"Elcot," she said, "I want you to tell me exactly what happened at the settlement."

"I hadn't arrived at the beginning of it," the man replied. "I had a talk with Thorne afterward, however, and he confirmed my conclusion that Nevis had been informing anybody who cared to hear that you were in the habit of borrowing money from him. This was objectionable in itself, but he added in my hearing that I knew nothing about your action, and the way in which he said it was insufferable."

Florence's face flushed.

"What did you do about it?"

"First of all, I denied the most damaging statement—that I knew nothing about the thing. It seemed necessary to prove the contrary, which I did, though I had to admit the borrowing."

"And then?"

"I paid off the loans."

Hunter paused, and taking out two strips of paper threw them on the table.

"Here are your notes. I feel compelled to say that unless you get my consent beforehand you must never incur a liability of the kind again."

"I shall never wish to," Florence answered penitently. "We'll talk about that afterward; I want you to go on. You haven't told me the whole of it yet."

"What do you expect to hear?"

Florence's eyes flashed.

"I should like to hear that you had thrashed the man until he could scarcely stand!"

Her husband's face relaxed into a grim smile.

"Well, I'm afraid I didn't go as far as that, though it wasn't because the desire to do so failed me. As it happens, there's a good deal more courage in the fellow than I ever gave him credit for, and it's unfortunate that virtuous indignation doesn't make up for an inequality in muscular weight." He stopped a moment and laughed outright. "Still, I believe I got in once or twice with the quirt, which is consoling to remember, and I dare say I should have left another mark or two on him if the lamp hadn't suddenly been put out. On taxing Symonds with it afterward, he admitted that he was afraid his wife would make trouble if the room should be wrecked."

"Would it please you, Elcot, if I were to say that I'm very proud of that cut on your lip—though I'm horribly ashamed of being the cause of it? In any case, it's the simple truth."

"We'll take it for granted," replied Hunter, looking at her searchingly. "The trouble is that this matter has forced on a crisis. It's evident that our relations can't remain as they are just now."

"You don't find them satisfactory?"

"No." Hunter broke into a harsh laugh. "I don't know how I have borne with them as long as I have, though I've resolutely tried to fall in with your point of view. Anyway, I can't go on living with, and at the same time utterly apart from, you. It might have been possible if I had never been fond of you."

"Nobody could have blamed you if you had grown out of that regard for me," Florence suggested.

"The difficulty is that I haven't done so," Hunter declared more quietly, though there was still a trace of harshness in his tone. "As you imply, it's perhaps unreasonable of me, but there the fact is. The question is, What am I going to do?"

Florence stretched out her hands and her voice was very soft.

"Elcot," she murmured, "I really must have tried your patience very hard now and then, but just now I'm glad you find this state of things unbearable. Would it be very difficult to go back a few years and begin again—differently?"

The man moved nearer her and then stopped, hesitating.

"I'm afraid," he answered slowly, "there are respects in which I can't change. To begin with, I don't see how I am to provide for you as I should like if I abandon the life you chafe at and give up the farm. I have told you this often; but, even if it stands between us, it's a truth that must still be faced."

Florence rose and laid her hands in his.

"Then it's fortunate that a change is not impossible to me—in fact, I think I've changed a good deal already. It rather hurt me, Elcot, that you didn't seem to notice it."

The man stooped and kissed her.

"I noticed it," he said; "but I was almost afraid."

"Afraid it wouldn't last?" Florence reproached him. "Well, I suppose that is not so very astonishing—but I think this change will go on, and grow greater steadily. Anyway, I want it to."

Then she drew away from him.

"You're rather a reserved person, Elcot, and it will no doubt be a relief to you if we become severely practical. Besides, I want to show you how determined I am. Now that you have paid off my debts,

we'll get out the account-books, and you shall decide how I'm to carry on the homestead."

Hunter laughed.

"No accounts to-night. It's beginning to strike me that both of us might have been happier if I hadn't thought about them so much. After all, I dare say it isn't wise to give economic questions the foremost place."

"Ah!" exclaimed Florence, "it's a pity it has taken you so long to learn that truth. I suppose I'm fond of money—at least, I'm fond of the things I used to fancy it could buy, but by degrees I found out that it can't buy those that are really worth the most. Now it almost looks as if I could get them at home—without any cost."

She paused while she sat down, and then once more she smiled up at him.

"Well," she continued, "I'll probably embarrass you if I go on in this strain—you seem to get uneasy when you venture ever so little out of your shell. For a change, you can read me the paper you brought from the settlement, and I won't grumble if it's about the markets and the price of wheat."

Hunter took up the paper. He was, where his deeper feelings were concerned, a singularly reticent man, which was, perhaps, an excuse for Florence and one explanation of the coldness that had grown up between them. Now he felt that there was to be a change, and because the prospect brought him a fervent satisfaction he refrained from speaking of it. He had, however, scarcely opened the paper when he started.

"Here's a piece of striking news!" he exclaimed. "Brand, of Winnipeg, has gone down—a disastrous smash. The fall in wheat has broken him. It appears that his liabilities are enormous, and there's practically nothing to meet them with."

He laid down the paper.

"I wonder," he added, "if Nevis could have heard of it before he left the settlement—though I think he must have done so, for the mail was already in. Anyway, when I was getting your team Bill told me that the man had driven off a few minutes earlier as fast as he could go."

"But how could the failure in Winnipeg affect Nevis?"

"Brand has been backing him, finding him the money to carry on his business, and now that he has gone under it may pull him down. The creditors will at once try to call in all outstanding loans, and I expect Nevis has his money so scattered that he can't immediately get hold of it. It's possible that the failure may drive him out of this part of the country."

They talked over the matter at some length, and the man was slightly astonished at the acumen his wife displayed. When at last he rose, it was with a deep content. He felt that a vista of happier days was opening up before them both.

On the following Monday he drove over to the Farquhar homestead, where Thorne was already waiting to hear what the lawyer had to tell. The latter, however, did not arrive until the evening, and Farquhar took him into the general-room where the others were sitting.

"You can, of course, speak to Miss Leigh privately, if you prefer," he said. "On the other hand, we are all of us acquaintances of Winthrop's, and, what is as much to the purpose, nobody you see here is very fond of Nevis."

Parsons smiled.

"As a matter of fact, I have Winthrop's permission to tell his friends anything they desire to learn, and he mentioned you and Mr. Thorne particularly. To begin with, I must excuse myself for the delay, but I found it necessary to go on to the railroad to meet Sergeant Williamson, and I had to call at Mrs. Calvert's. To proceed, after considering Winthrop's mortgage deed, it's my opinion that if he can substantiate his statements he has no cause for serious anxiety about the result in the event of his being brought to trial."

"It would be difficult to get over the fact that he sold the cattle," contested Farquhar.

"It would be impossible," Parsons corrected him. "Still, there's very little doubt that Nevis went farther than the homestead laws permit, and while our friend would very likely be found guilty of the offense there's so much to mitigate it that I'm inclined to believe it would be regarded very leniently. In fact, it's scarcely reasonable to suppose that Nevis would have proceeded to extremities unless he

had counted on being able to retain possession of the mortgage deed."

"But couldn't he have been compelled to produce it in court?" Thorne inquired.

"Yes; if Winthrop had been ably represented. It must, however, be borne in mind that he has no great education, and he would probably not have set out matters clearly to any one who undertook to plead for him. He admits that he never thought of the mortgage deed until somebody suggested that he should try to recover it. Besides this, I'm inclined to fancy that Nevis was influenced by the fact that what appears to be a simple police case based upon an indisputable act—in this case the selling of the cattle—is apt to be rather casually handled by the court."

"Then you believe he will get off?"

"It's by no means certain yet that he will be tried."

They heard the announcement with varying astonishment, and Parsons continued.

"I endeavored to impress the views I have laid before you on Sergeant Williamson," he explained. "The matter, of course, does not rest with him, but he has come over to make inquiries, and what he has to say will be listened to. I also pointed out to him that one would expect the police case to break down if the man who had instituted it was either absent or reluctant to press it." He stopped a moment and looked round with a confidential air. "You have heard that Brand, of Winnipeg, has failed disastrously? There are reasons for believing that Nevis is involved in his fall; in any case, his office is closed, and it is known that he left the settlement, presumably for Winnipeg, by the last Montreal express."

There was only satisfaction in the faces of those who heard him. Then Mrs. Farquhar broke the silence.

"I wonder whether you could add anything to the last piece of information?"

"Well," smiled Parsons, "prediction is generally dangerous, and in my case it would be unprofessional, but I may confess that from one or two things I gathered I shouldn't be greatly astonished if Nevis failed to come back again."

Thorne laughed outright.

"After that," he said, "we'll take the thing for granted, and I haven't the least hesitation in declaring that it's a great relief to hear it."

Then the group broke up, and Alison strolled out with Thorne across the prairie. A half-moon hung above its eastern rim, and the great sweep of grass ran back into the dim distance faintly touched with the pale silvery light. It fell upon the girl's face when at length she stopped and stood looking about her with the man's hand on her shoulder. A long rise of ground, so slight as to be almost imperceptible, had cut off the lights of the house, and they stood alone in the empty waste surrounded by a deep stillness.

"It seems such a little while since I first saw the prairie, and I shrank from it then," she said. "It looked so bare and grim and utterly forbidding."

"And now?" Thorne prompted her.

Alison laughed, a little, happy laugh.

"Now its harshness has vanished and it has grown beautiful. When it lies under the moonlight it is steeped in glamour and mystery. Even the tiny grasses make elfin music when everything is still. I came out at sunrise this morning when a faint breeze got up and listened to them."

"Ah!" exclaimed Thorne softly, "it is only a few who can hear that music at all, and those, I think, must have it in their hearts already. It is a sign that you belong to the wilderness and it has laid its claim on you."

Alison smiled.

"Now that I have learned to know it, a fondness for the wilderness has crept into my blood; but, after all, your views are narrow; you don't go quite far enough. I think one could sometimes hear the music I spoke of in the noisy cities. Only, as you say, it must be in one's heart already."

Thorne looked down at her with a glow in his eyes.

"Ours are in unison."

"No," protested Alison, smilingly, "I think we should not benefit if that were possible. The most we can look for is a complex harmony. In the strain humanity raises there must be many different notes and many different parts."

Thorne laughed rather strangely as, with a little instinctive movement, he straightened himself.

"But the same insistent throb in all that is worth listening to."

"Ah!" murmured the girl; "then you recognized the note of unrest and endeavor, though you tried to shut your ears?"

"Now I know I heard it in crowded places; in the pounding of the forges, and the rumble of the mills. I've heard it a little plainer in the wash beneath the liner's bows and the din the Pacific express made crossing the silent prairie with the Empress mails. Still, as you suggested, I wouldn't grasp its message until one night I sat in the bluff and heard the birch twigs whispering while you rested in the wagon. Then I knew I was an idler and a trifler; one who stood aside while the others took their fill of the joys and pains of life."

Alison glanced up at him.

"Then you were awake that night?"

"Yes; I sat beneath a tree, and I don't know how often I smoked my pipe out, but my mouth was parched at sunrise, and there was a new purpose growing into shape at the bottom of my mind. You see, I realized that I must fall into line and toil like the rest if I wanted you."

"But you had seen me for only two or three days!"

Thorne laughed softly.

"I think if I had seen you for only an hour it would have had the same result. Anyway, I tried farming, and—though I was very nearly beaten—you can see what I have made of it."

He stooped a little toward her.

"The house is almost ready, dear, and I want you to drive in to the railroad with me to-morrow. A man from Winnipeg will be at the hotel then, and I should like you to choose what you think is needed from his lists of furnishings."

Alison looked down, for she was conscious of a warmth in her cheeks. "If you will come over early, I'll be ready."

Thorne drew her hand within his arm and they moved on slowly in the faint moonlight that etherealized the plain.

"It is a marvelous night!" he exclaimed. "The wilderness gripped me when I came out, but I don't think I ever realized how wonderful

it is as I do just now. And there are people who can see in it only an empty, wind-swept land!"

He drew her impulsively to him.

"Still, there are excuses for them. Only part of the glamour is in the prairie. The rest of it is due to the supreme good fortune that has fallen to me."

"You are very sure of that?" murmured Alison.

"Yes," declared Thorne, with resolute decisiveness, "it's a certainty that will only grow deeper as the years roll on!"

THE END

THE END

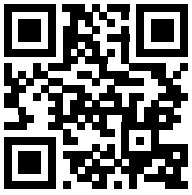
A Prairie Courtship

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