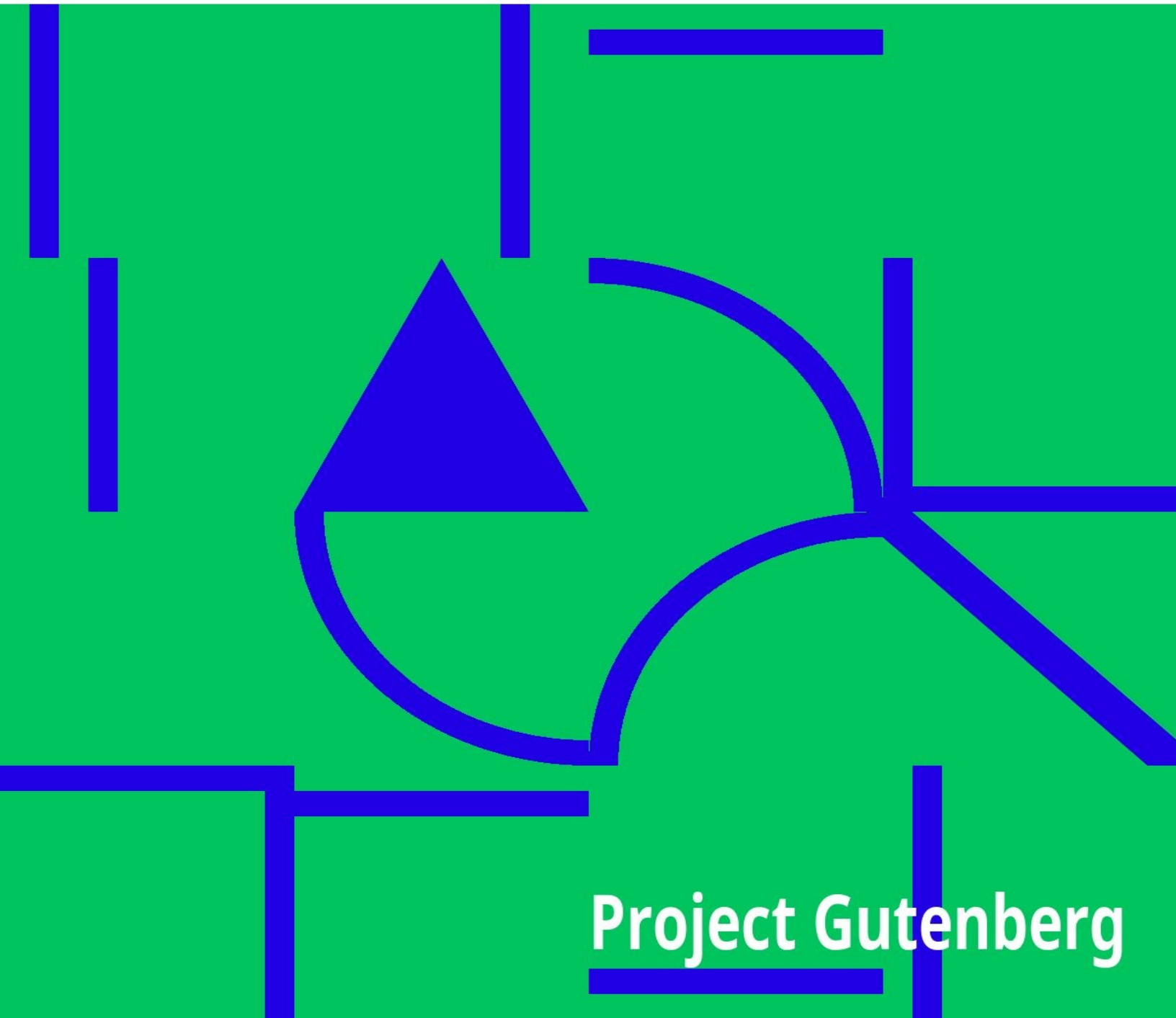
The Bail Jumper

Robert J. C. Stead



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BY

ROBERT J. C. STEAD

LONDON
T. FISHER UNWIN
ADELPHI—TERRACE

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CONTENTS

THE BAIL JUMPER

CHAPTER I—A FRIEND AND AN ENEMY

"We have felt the cold of winter—cursed by those who know it not—
We have braved the blizzard's vengeance, dared its most deceptive plot;
We have learned that hardy races grow from hardy circumstance,
And we face a dozen dangers to attend a country dance;
Though our means are nothing lavish we have always time for play,
And our social life commences at the closing of the day;
We have time for thought and culture, time for friendliness and friend,
And we catch a broader vision as our aspirations blend."

Prairie Born.

The short winter day was at an end. The gloom of five-o'clock twilight gathered about the frost-shrouded team and the farm sleigh which crunched complainingly behind. For twenty miles the team had plodded, steadily, laboriously—their great heads undulating with their gait, through the snow-blocked roads. The two fur-clad men had long ago dropped all attempt at conversation, and an occasional swing of their arms, in an effort to revive the chilled circulation, was the only evidence that the vital spark still burned in their deep-bosomed bodies.

Suddenly a shape loomed through the grey mist of the night. The horses lurched back upon the double trees, their trace-chains clattering with the slack. The shape took form; a frightened team were seen plunging in the deep snow by the roadside; the vehicles interlocked.

"What d'ye mean by crowdin' me off the road like that?" cried an angry voice, as a man's form rose in the opposing cutter.

"I didn't crowd you off," returned the driver of the sleigh. "It was your own reckless speed that got you into trouble. See, man, your nigh horse is down; I'm thinkin' he needs your attention more than me."

"But it's you will have it first," came the savage reply, as the speaker sprang from the cutter on to the side of the sleigh. But almost before he landed a great

bear-like arm shot out, and the assailant would have fallen in a crumpled mass beside his struggling horses, had not the same arm jerked him forward into the sleigh.

In the deep gloom the two men thrust their faces close, then drew suddenly back.

“And what way is this to greet a neighbour on the public road, Hiram Riles?” demanded the driver of the sleigh. “Ye’ll have strange tales for the wife to-night, I’m thinkin’, by the breath o’ you. Away home with ye, and mind the road. It’s no fit night for a man in your shape, Hiram.”

The other murmured thickly, “I’m all right,” but showed no further belligerent tendencies; and when the team had been extricated from their entanglement and set upon the road again, the two old-timers parted in their opposite directions.

“It’s a sore temptin’ o’ Providence for a man to venture on the country roads a winter’s night without all his senses, Raymond,” said the elder man, as they drove on. “See ye’re no guilty of it. There’s many a tragedy blamed to the climate that’s begun in the gin-shop.”

Already the town lights were peering mistily through the haze, and in a few minutes the sleigh drew up at the door of Gardiner’s general store. The two men got out and lifted a trunk to the sidewalk, when the elder resumed his seat in the sleigh.

“Hadn’t you better put in the team and stay all night, father? The horses are dog-tired, and it’ll be better driving in the morning.”

“No, Raymond. I’ll push back as far as Mathesons’, and spend the night there. I’m no hand for stayin’ in town. I’ll be leavin’ now, and mind, boy, we’re expectin’ you to make good.”

The two men grasped hands in a moment’s clasp; the next, sleigh and driver had disappeared in the night.

The young man stood on the sidewalk, in the momentary irresolution of the stranger. He had been in Plainville before, and knew Mr. Gardiner by sight; but then, he met him as a customer, and now it was to be as employee. Overcoming his bashfulness, he pushed open the store door and entered. The white glare of the gasoline lights revealed a boy of twenty-one, sturdy and well set up, although

of somewhat smaller stature than the average in the country; with clean, weather-beaten face and eyes accustomed to look squarely before them. The nose rose strong and resolute from the cheeks, but in the quiet mouth there was a lurking sadness suggestive of melancholy.

Raymond Burton unbuttoned his coat and threw back the collar, when a cheery voice said, “Hello, Burton, you got in? Hardly expected you to-night, the roads are so full. Throw off your coat and warm yourself, and then go up to Mrs. Goode’s boarding-house and make yourself at home. I have arranged accommodation for you there. She is one of our best customers, and she runs a good house.”

There was nothing stand-offish about Gardiner. He met his employees on a basis of friendship and equality, and had a ready way with him that was continually swelling his list of customers, notwithstanding the competition of the Sempter Trading Co., the oldest and strongest mercantile firm in the town. Indeed, Gardiner was little more than a boy himself, who, a few years before, had come up from one of the Eastern Provinces to engage in business in the West.

Gardiner walked around to the boarding-house with Burton, after giving a boy a quarter to deliver the trunk. Mrs. Goode, herself, answered the bell. She was a sprightly, motherly woman, with a quick step, a ready tongue, and a hearty laugh; hair that hinted of fifty, but a smile that said she was twenty-five; and, withal, not entirely blind to her own accomplishments.

“This is my new clerk, Mr. Burton, Mrs. Goode,” said Gardiner. “I brought him here because I knew the house you run. He has driven most of the day, and just needs one of your hot suppers to make him feel the luck he has in being one of Mrs. Goode’s boarders.”

“Well, I do give a good supper, if I say it myself,” said Mrs. Goode. “No hungry people in my house, if I know it. But you want to go to your room. Alice, show Mr. Butler to room sixteen. Sweet sixteen, I call it, and I always save it for the young men,” she added, with a coquettish glance at her new customer.

Alice Goode, aged eighteen, emerged from the dining-room, and Burton having been introduced, as “Mr. Garden’s new clerk,” she demurely led the young man upstairs. “I hope you will like your room,” she said, and, the business obligations of the situation discharged, continued, “Do you dance?”

“Why, a little,” Burton admitted. “But I never learned, properly. Just country dances, you know.”

“Gee, that’s all is any good, anyway. None of your city camel-strides for me, but a good turkey-in-the-straw alamen-lefter an’ you can count me in every trip. There’s a hop on at Grant’s to-night. Going?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t an invitation, and I don’t even know the people.”

“That don’t matter. There’ll be some loads goin’ out from town, an’ you better just roll into one of them. It’s about five miles, an’ the ride will be dandy. Besides, Grant’s are the best there is, an’ you’ll be as welcome as a rich sinner in church. The hoe-down is in honour of their niece, who has come out from the East, an’s goin’ to live with them. They say she’s pretty an’ a swell singer. It’ll be quite a show-ring affair, I expect, but all to the good.”

“Al-i-c-e!” cried her mother. “Set them good silver knives an’ forks, cause Mr. Burtle’s here, an’ get a two-step on yuh now or never a foot will yuh go to the dance to-night.”

Alice disappeared, and Burton was left to examine his quarters. They were small and cheaply furnished, but comfortable enough. “At any rate,” he soliloquised, “I shall not be very lonely, if Miss Alice is a sample of Plainville society.”

The smell from Mrs. Goode’s supper table justified that lady’s high opinion of it. When Burton came in he was introduced to each boarder in turn. There were two lady school-teachers, two bank clerks, a couple of store employees, a young lawyer, and several who might be termed “not classified.” A spirit of good fellowship prevailed, and Burton was surprised at the point to which banter was carried. Alice waited on the table, while Mrs. Goode presided in the kitchen. Mr. Goode, a tall, cadaverous man, moved shyly about the house, in which he occupied a minor position. It was understood that Mrs. Goode held him in much disfavour on account of his emaciated appearance, which she felt to be a reflection upon her boarding-house.

“How can I expect to prosper when I have a walkin’ sign-post like that?” she lamented to her neighbour, Mrs. O’Brien.

“Fade him on breakfast food with a little ‘barm’ in til’t,” was that honest woman’s advice.

After supper Burton was reading in his room, when a knock came at the door, and Gardiner burst in.

“Say, Burton, come with me to the dance at Grant’s to-night,” said the visitor. “I’m driving out in my cutter, and I want company. They’re O.K. people, and there’s a new-comer out there we all want to see. As for an invitation—well, I have instructions to see that all the desirables are asked, and I figure you in that bunch. Come along. The sooner you get acquainted here the better, both for yourself and from a business point of view.”

Burton surmised that the “business point of view” had a good deal to do with most of Gardiner’s attitudes, but he was glad enough to accept the invitation. The drive, in a top cutter, behind a spirited team, was so different from the dreary monotony of the afternoon that Raymond could scarce believe it was the same country. There were many rigs on the road, but the trail was banked so high (for in prairie countries the winter roads rise high above the surrounding snow) that it was impossible to pass, and before reaching Grant’s the scattered rigs had gathered into a long procession.

The Grant boys, George and Harry, were at the stable with lanterns, and hurried about, exchanging greetings while they wrestled with frozen tugs, and directed drivers blinking in the light. The young ladies became the charge of Susy Grant, who bundled them in at the front door of the house, while her brothers herded the swains into the kitchen, for be it known, that while women may be ushered into parlour or bedroom, the kitchen is the proper reception place for men. There they sit on stools and wood-boxes, or crowd into corners, exchanging anecdotes or revelling in amusement furnished by the wits of the countryside. Burton was introduced by his employer to a few of the men and boys nearest by, but none Waited for an introduction when there was occasion to speak. They were a mixed company, some from the town, and others from the country district in which the Grant homestead lay, but all were acquainted and most were friends. Presently the door opened and a new-comer ambled in; a strange human contrivance, half man, half boy, who tripped over his long coat on the doorstep and projected himself in a heap in the midst of the laughing crowd.

“Hello, London, what flew up an’ hit you?” said one, as the boy scrambled clumsily to his feet. “Been to town on your way over?”

“Hit’s my bloomin’ coat,” explained London. “Hi fall w’en hever Hi try to stand

hup.”

“Take it ’hoff,’” shouted the crowd, as London proceeded to remove his outer garments. This operation revealed the fact that London, as the Barnardo lad was popularly called, although a boy in stature, aspired to the wearing of man’s clothes, with the result that his trousers were turned up almost to his knees and his coat hung down below them, the two extremes meeting, as it were, about a foot from the floor. His commodious boots had been recently blacked, and a heavy brass chain stretched from pocket to pocket of his vest; but, most glorious of all, was the bright red tie speared with a pin in the form of a horseshoe and intended, doubtless, to indicate that its wearer was a sport of the first blood.

“How did you get away to-night, London? Couldn’t Riles find anything for you to do?”

“’E could. ’E’ll find work for them as comes to ’is funeral. But ’e’s comin’ ’imself, an’ has Hi was specially named in Missus Grant’s hinvitation”—this with an air of profound importance—“’e could ’ardly ’elp letting me come, ’specially has Hi said Hi would burn down the ’ouse hif they came with-hout me.”

“Good boy, London,” was the comment. “That’s the way to bring him to time.”

“Hi drownded a pig hin the well one day ’e went to town an’ wouldn’t take me,” said London, proudly. “Hand another time——”

What happened another time was never made public, for at that moment Big Jack McTavish, official caller-off and master of ceremonies at every dance in the Plainville district for a dozen years, strode into the dining-room and shouted, “Partners for the Circashyun Circle.”

The men from the kitchen swarmed into the dining-room and parlour, which had been cleared of carpets and furniture. The piano stood in the hall, where it was presided over by Miss Green, the school-teacher; on a chair alongside sat old Dave Cottrell, the fiddler, who had spent the sixty-odd years of his life in struggle to draw the maddening music from his violin, and had succeeded in that, and in nothing else; along the stairs, and in the bedrooms above, were crowded the girls and young women. This was partners’ dance, and in a few moments the floor was crowded. Then the music struck up and the feet kept time, and the dance had started. In the intricacies of the Circassian Circle every

couple is made to dance with every other couple, so that all have a chance to exchange greetings before the first set is over, and it affords as appropriate an opening selection as Old Hundred at morning service. Before Big Jack's ample hands came together as a signal that the first dance was ended the last atom of reserve had been swept away, and everybody was in tune to make a night of it. Gardiner danced with every lady in the room, from Alice Goode to little Miss Green, who was persuaded to leave the piano for just one set, and even London found young women who did not scorn his clumsy advances. The dances were quadrilles, lancers, schottisches and reels, with an occasional waltz or two-step just to indicate that if they did not give city dances the place of prominence it was through choice, not ignorance.

Among the ladies was one whom Burton knew to be the guest of honour, even before he was told; a young woman his own age, or older, dressed in a creamy white, with a single real rose in her hair. Her dark, full eye-lashes, the finely shaped nose and ears, the firm but sympathetic mouth, electrically responsive to every wave of emotion of her alert brain, were not lost upon the country youth. There were many graceful dancers, many radiant, happy-faced girls, but hers was a grace distinct from theirs and a happiness more subtle, more delightful, more pervading. The little tricks of speech which distinguish between the intelligent and the well-educated; the little delicate courtesies which distinguish between the well-meaning and the well-bred; the inborn and self-effacing refinement which is the touchstone of true culture—these were evidenced in every word, every motion, every gesture. Burton forgot about dancing, forgot that he was expected to dance, as he drank in a music unheard by the less discerning ears about him, and revelled in an intoxication not of wine. It was not until Gardiner came to his corner and, with a friendly slap, said, "Burton, old man, get up and dance. What are you moping for?" that he was recalled to his surroundings.

"I'm not moping; just dreaming," he said, springing to his feet.

"Never dream while you are awake; it doesn't pay. There's Alice Goode; she has glanced your way a dozen times—and there's worse girls than Alice."

Burton took the hint, and in a few moments was threading his way through the meshes of a quadrille amid the pepsin aroma of the sweet Alice. He discharged his obligation with credit, thanked his partner courteously, and retired into his corner until supper was called at midnight.

Mrs. Grant supervised the work in the kitchen, while willing, although not always skilful, hands assisted in the distribution of the refreshments. This was the stage of the evening's entertainment at which the social spirit flowed highest; men and women, boys and girls, sat or stood about in disorganised groups, eating sandwiches, cake and pie, and consuming great cups of hot coffee, the while sharpening their wits at each other's expense and joining as heartily in the laugh when it happened to be at their own.

A middle-aged gentleman whose appearance stirred some old memory in Burton, seeing the young man seated a little by himself, came over and engaged in conversation.

"If my old eyes do not deceive me, you are a son of John Burton's," said he.

"I am Raymond Burton. And you—surely I should remember you?"

"Man, man, I know your father like my own brother. Sure you've heard him speak of Dick Matheson? We shantied together on the Muddywaski, and a better man than John Burton never rode a log in the Ottaway country, which is sayin' a good deal. I do not see you dancin' much. I'm thinkin' you will have your father's quiet way; like a sleepy kitty, he was, when left alone, but a roarin' lion when put to the bit. But times are changed, and men win more now with soft speech than we did with hard knuckles. And whichever the game, a Burton should be to the fore. Grant," he said, addressing the head of the house, as he was about to pass, "this is Raymond Burton. I knew his father on the Muddywaski." To honest Dick Matheson no further credentials seemed necessary.

"Glad to meet you," said Mr. Grant, cordially. "Have you been introduced to my niece? Dear me, I'm afraid the reception committee are too busy with the sandwiches. Myrtle, just a moment," as the young lady emerged from an eddy of humanity, "let me present Mr. Burton. Mr. Burton—Miss Vane," and the two elder gentlemen allowed themselves to be swept into the vortex of the crowd.

Miss Vane took Burton's hand in a friendly grip—a grip that was not afraid to speak of the soul behind it. "I am a stranger here, and I meet so many people, but I shall remember you," she said in quiet, musical tones, in such striking contrast, Burton thought, to the strident country voices about him.

"I am a stranger too," the young man answered for want of a better thing to say.

“Then we at least have something in common,” said Miss Vane, and it occurred to Raymond that he had said the best thing possible.

In a moment the young lady was claimed by other guests. But Burton was satisfied.

When supper was over and the conversation began to lag, some one suggested that Miss Vane should sing. The proposal was received with applause.

“If it will give you any pleasure,” said the young lady. Miss Green resumed her seat at the piano, and in a few moments human tones such as never before had been heard in Plainville district filled the sturdy house from kitchen to attic. Deep, melting, melodious tones—the cultured expression of the greatest musical instrument God Himself could devise—the human voice! To what degrading uses it is so often put! She sang, not the popular airs of the day, nor classical selections beyond the ken of her audience, however dear to herself, but the old Scotch songs which are strong enough to force a way to the roughest intellect, yet fine enough to stir the slightest chord in the galaxy of human accomplishment; deep enough to send men raging to battle and gentle enough to croon little children to sleep. As she wandered on and on, through the heroic, the pathetic, the tenderly sentimental, the dancers sat in the rapture of a spell as new to them as the angel chorus to the shepherds of Palestine, and when at last the low voice poured forth the sanctified lament of “The Land o’ the Leal,” Big Jack’s wife went sobbing to the kitchen, and Mrs. Grant slipped a motherly arm around little Mrs. Dale, whose misty eyes were seeing a year-old mound and a little white slab that stared stolidly through the snow:

> “Our bonnie bairn’s there, Jean,
> She was baith gude and fair, Jean,
> And oh, we grudged her sair,
> Tae the Land o’ the Leal.”

Even London forgot to dangle his watch-chain, and his employer, Riles, who had sold his soul to Mammon twenty years ago, laughed quietly at the tear on the boy’s cheek.

When the singer had finished, and the spell was broken by the commonplace talk which someone always finds necessary to introduce on such occasions, Dick Matheson got up and said, “We have all listened to Miss Vane with great delight,

and feel that she is no longer a stranger among us. But we have another stranger here to-night, and it is but fair that we should hear him too. Burton, let's hear from you. Your father could sing 'The Death of Jimmie Whalen' with any man in the shanties. I knew his father on the Muddywaski," he explained.

Burton blushed and made excuses, but a popular suggestion in such a company is tantamount to a command. Surrendering to the inevitable, he arose, saying, "I do not sing at all, but I will repeat some verses, if you insist."

"We insist," came the chorus, and, when silence was secured, he began in a strong, human voice, lacking the finish of culture, but vibrant with sympathy with the spirit of the poem:

"This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sails the unshadowed main—
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the siren sings——"

He had not repeated four lines until he discovered that he had made a mistake. The soul may respond to music it cannot comprehend, as a rusty wire may thrill with vibrations from the throat of a Melba, but the mind of man makes no answer to poetry beyond its grasp. Burton was forcing himself against an immovable resistance; projecting a thought, live, warm, charged with the germs of a million inspirations, against a stone wall of mental vacuity. And yet he was sustained, as in an electric coil a single wire thinner than a human hair may support the current that flashes on two oceans at once, and he proceeded. In the second stanza his eyes met Miss Vane's, and heaven was opened before him. She understood! Her mind was pacing the "caves of thought" with his; her mentality was producing the current that he transformed into speech. He remembered the advice of a great orator—"Speak to one soul in your audience, and forget all others," and he obeyed. Not again did he look at Miss Vane; he dared not double-circuit the delicate current that carried him on, but he poured forth the solemn cadences of Holmes' great poem with a fire and enthusiasm that commanded the attention of the company until, focusing his energy in the last stanza, the walls trembled with the vibrations of his intensity:

"Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll;

Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea."

There was a clapping of hands, which Burton knew to be a courtesy rather than a compliment, and Susy Grant went so far as to say that it was a very nice piece. Matheson justified all by repeating that he "knew his father on the Muddywaski," but the young man cared not what they said or thought. For a dozen years he had spent the long winter evenings on the farm in reading and self-culture, thereby opening to himself a door through which none of these could follow. None—save one. And she had followed. She understood!

The dancing was then revived, more vigorously, if possible, than in the earlier part of the evening. Burton noticed that Gardiner twice engaged Miss Vane as his partner, but himself did not dare claim so great a boon. He was but a country boy, and Gardiner was a town man, a business man, and—his employer.

Before the dance broke up a laugh was caused by the discovery of London in the kitchen, deep amid the sandwiches and pie.

"You must be hungry, London," said one of the young men, as a group gathered round him.

"You bet Hi ham," answered the lad, unabashed. "Hi 'aven't 'ad wot you'd call a decent meal hin a month."

"Fill your pockets, then; there's lots there," was the good advice given, which London proceeded to take.

At the back of the group was a coarse, animal-looking man, with heavy, scowling features and an eye whose natural repulsiveness was heightened by a deep scar along the brow, which caused the livid eye-lids to loop outward as they approached the nose. He noted the incident, and as he heard the conversation a look of malignant hate deepened in the glaring eyes, and the mouth twitched in a brutal lust for revenge. It was Riles.

At last it was time to go home, and the gathering broke up. Gardiner lingered a moment with Miss Vane, and Burton proceeded to the stable. On the way he

passed near by the Grant summer-house, now little more than a great mound of snow. Through his fur covering he fancied he heard a strange noise; he turned down the collar, and listened. Unmistakable sounds of violence, of muffled cursing, of hard, short breathing, came from beyond the summer-house. Burton ran in that direction, and the gibbous moon which now shone dimly through the scattering clouds revealed a form in the snow and another above kicking viciously, endeavouring to sink the heavy boots in the face of the fallen man. As the victim threw up his arms to protect his face he received the blows in the chest, driving the breath from his lungs in great gasps. Burton, seeing how desperate was the situation, rushed upon the assailant, and, crossing his arms about the other's neck, gripped his throat in a strangle-hold that sent him to his knees in a moment. Every effort to break loose was vain; the vital supply of air was shut off, and in a few seconds the big frame rolled helplessly in Burton's arms. The muscles relaxed, the head fell back, the face turned up to the pale light of the moon, and the eyes, glaring and misshapen, glared into his. It was Riles.

London, seeing help at hand, sent up a lusty shriek, and in a few minutes a big crowd had gathered about the combatants. Gardiner hurried to Burton's side and whispered, "Let him go, that's not what I hired you for." Burton released his grip and Riles fell in the snow, London sending up a fresh series of shrieks when he saw his oppressor again at liberty. The big man soon recovered himself and scrambled to his feet, and the crowd rapidly dispersed. But before Riles went he found occasion to hiss in Burton's ear, "You got the drop on me that time, young meddler, but I'll square it with ye yet, if I do murder for it."

Burton laughed, but the words left an unpleasant taste.

CHAPTER II—SECRETS OF SUCCESS

"I envy no man what he fairly wins;
In life's hard battle each must fight his fight;
But some, methinks, are honoured for their sins,
And some ignored because they do the right;
Some seem to find their fortune ready-made,
And others miss it, howsoe'er desired—
The man's a fool who thinks that he can grade
Society by what it has acquired:
The noblest souls are often least renowned;
In humble homes God's greatest men are found."

Prairie Born.

A month's experience in the general store business brought much new light to Burton. He had imagined that a man who stood behind the counter, wearing good clothes, talking pleasantly to ladies and joking with men, commencing work at eight in the morning and quitting, well, he didn't just know when—such a man surely was a favoured individual. He had contrasted a business career with life on the farm: Up at five; breakfast by lamplight; cows and horses to care for in evil-smelling stables; innumerable chores before the day's work was properly begun; then the long, heavy labour, in crackling frosts, in suns that burned the flesh like a searing iron, in miserable, damp, murkiness; in dust laden winds that filled the eyes and choked the lungs, in all the numberless vagaries of climate; the coarse clothing demanded by such a vocation; the plain fare and simple home comforts; and then, tired to the point of exhaustion, bed, which was alike the end of one day's labours and the starting point of another round of continuous toil, irksome and often ill-requited. Such comparisons had, to some extent, influenced his decision to seek his future in a life of commercial activity; and, while he had not admitted any regret, there now were nights when he felt that a good day's labour in the harvest field or on the plough would be a welcome and refreshing diversion. He had not guessed that a business career demanded so much physical energy; it was a new discovery to him that the closing of a difficult sale was more exhausting than forking to the top of a stack.

Nevertheless, he had set his hand to the plough, and he was determined to finish the furrow, and the very knowledge that physical energy played so great a part in the commercial battle of the age came to him as an encouragement and a fresh hope. But where bodily strength and a fair degree of intelligence might, unaided, win success in agricultural pursuits, he had discovered that another element was absolutely essential in the business world. It was tact. No energy was sufficiently indomitable, no brain sufficiently farseeing and alert, to win success in the surroundings in which he now found himself without the magic touchstone of tact. Energy, intelligence, and tact; these three, but the greatest of these is tact.

It was in the middle of winter, the dull season after the Christmas trade, and before the spring activity begins, and Gardiner had allowed a higher priced clerk to go, believing that he could handle all the business with the assistance of Burton. This, although it entailed more work, was to the young man's advantage, as it brought him into close and almost constant contact with his employer, and forced him to attempt many things that he would otherwise have left to more experienced hands. Already he found it unnecessary to summon Gardiner when a lady asked for three-quarters of a yard of velvet, cut on the bias; could discuss the merits of Dongola and calf with the assurance of an expert, and tell at a glance whether goods would "wash." But there were other things he found more difficult to learn.

Mrs. Mandle was in search of cotton—good, strong cotton, not too dear. Burton showed her an eight-cent web which he thought conformed to her specifications. After a lengthy examination, the good lady admitted that it satisfied her in some ways, but not in others. "The price is about what I wanted," she said, "but the quality is very poor."

"Indeed, we have sold a great deal of that cotton, and it seems to give good satisfaction."

"Oh, so it might, for some work, but it hardly suits me. I guess I will just step around to the Sempter Trading Company and see what they can let me have."

"Well, look at this," said Burton, producing another web.

"Yes, that's about what I wanted. And what will the price on that be?"

"Ten cents."

“Ten cents! What a dreadful price for a piece of cotton. My, everything is getting so dear, I can’t see what we farmers are comin’ to. Mrs. Winters sent to Winnipeg for hers, and you ought to see it—the very loveliest cotton, and only six and a half cents, and a box of slate pencils thrown in for the children. No, dear me, I couldn’t pay such a price as that. I might, yes, I would be willing to pay eight cents for it, the same as the other, now, an’ you’re makin’ a good profit on it at that.”

“I am sorry, Madam,” said Burton, trying not to be annoyed at her attempt to take charge of the firm’s business, “but our prices are as close as we find it possible to handle the goods, especially on staples like cotton. That is a really good article; may I cut off the amount you require?”

“Yes, at eight cents——”

Burton returned his scissors to his pocket, and the lady started for the door, when Gardiner, who had finished with his customer and stood listening to the dialogue, called her back.

“Don’t be in a hurry, Mrs. Mandle,” he said, in a winning voice that appealed to the lady’s instinct for flattery, “there is a web here that Mr. Burton didn’t know about, and perhaps it will suit you.”

Gardiner went behind the counter and pulled out the very eight-cent piece that had been already shown.

“Now here is a ten-cent line that I can recommend to you,” he said, leaning well across the counter and speaking in a confidential voice. Burton was about to point out his mistake, when something in the eye of his employer warned him that the transaction had been taken out of his hands. “This is a regular ten-cent line, and extra value at that, but I got something a little special on it by taking an unusual quantity from the factory at one time. Of course, we generally figure when we get a snap on a purchase that at least part of the bargain should be ours, but with an old and valued customer like you hard and fast rules don’t always apply. It’s something I really should not do, but under the circumstances I will let you have anything up to twenty yards off this web for eight cents.”

Mrs. Mandle beamed with pleasure. “That’s like you, Mr. Gardiner, I always find that I can deal with you. Not that I have anything against this young man——” she continued, as though anxious not to place Burton in an unfavourable light.

“Oh, that’s all right,” laughed Gardiner. “Mr. Burton has general instructions applying to our regular customers, but when he knows you better he will meet your requirements as well as I do, I am sure. Now shall it be twenty yards?”

“I only wanted twelve,” Mrs. Mandle confessed, “but since it is what you might call a bit of a bargain, I believe I will just take the twenty.”

Gardiner smiled genially and measured off the cloth, but Burton observed that as he did so he had a crook in each thumb, which allowed about a half an inch of over-lap on each yard measured. Mrs. Mandle paid for her purchase, and left with a smile to Gardiner and a friendly nod to Burton, and said she would probably be in in a few days with a case of eggs and some other produce.

“Bring them right in here, Mrs. Mandle,” said Gardiner, as he closed the door after her. Coming back to the counter, he said to Burton, half-apologetically, “I forgot to tell you, Burton, to put up all prices on Mrs. Mandle. She is one of those dear souls who, as a matter of principle, will never buy unless they think they are getting some concession in price. It’s a simple matter to raise the price and drop it again, and it pleases them.”

Burton flushed a little. He had been brought up to believe that strict honesty was the best policy, and it seemed to him that the very foundations of his conception of business success were being swept away. These great merchant princes, who were lauded in the papers and welcomed in the most distinguished circles, were they men of high standards and noble principles, or were they consummate liars and cheats?

“I do not mean to question your methods,” he said, at length, “but—is it, such a transaction as that, I mean, exactly honest?”

If he expected Gardiner to be angry at his frankness his fear was soon dispelled.

“Why not?” laughed his employer. “The cotton is ours; we can sell it for what we like, can’t we? If we ask fifty cents for it that’s our business, or if we choose to give it away, that’s our business. These people who are always trying to beat us down really don’t mean any harm, and we don’t do them any harm. We just make them happy. Take Mrs. Mandle, for instance. She thinks she saved forty cents, and that thought will lighten her troubles for a week. As a matter of fact, she bought eight yards more than she needed, but no doubt it will come handy sometime.”

“I think I would give a real cut, if I pretended to,” persisted Burton.

“You can’t afford to. See, that ten-cent cotton costs me six and three-quarter cents. You may think I could sell at eight and get out on it. I can’t. Let me explain my position, so you will understand it better. Last year I sold thirty-seven thousand dollars worth of goods. My net profits were four thousand five hundred dollars, or just about thirteen per cent. Now, no matter what an article may cost me, if I give fifteen per cent. off the established selling price, I am losing money. Isn’t that clear? And as some people have the bargain mania, we have to give them fictitious bargains, just as the doctor prescribes fictitious drugs for patients who think they can’t get well unless they take something.”

Burton said no more, but he was not convinced.

A few days later a customer asked for a pound of fifty-cent black bulk tea. Burton found the fifty-cent bin empty. “I’m sorry,” said he, “but we appear to be out of the fifty-cent line. How would this suit?” and he was about to offer another brand when Gardiner, who had overheard the remark, called across the store, “That’s fifty-cent tea in the left-hand bin.”

Now the left-hand bin contained thirty-five cent tea, and Burton knew it.

To refuse to fill the order from the bin indicated would amount to resigning his position, yet he was determined not to take advantage of any customer. For a moment he hesitated. Then he weighed the tea out of the thirty-five cent bin, but he gave the customer a pound and seven ounces.

Under the grocery counter were a number of swinging standards on which sugar and salt barrels were swung in and out as desired. The reserve supply was kept in a warehouse at the back, and on a quiet day it occurred to Burton to bring in a number of barrels and fill all the standards. Gardiner observed him and suggested that the barrels should be left outside until needed. Burton answered that he thought it would be an advantage to have them in; besides, it was damp in the shed, and the sugar showed some disposition to cake, while the salt became very hard.

“Yes,” admitted Gardiner, “but it will weigh two per cent. more as it is than after it stands in here for a week, and we handle sugar on less than five per cent.”

In selling a gallon of coal oil Burton discovered that the oil pump brought rather

less than a gallon at a stroke. He reported the matter, thinking the pump needed repairing.

“How much do you estimate it is running short?” asked his employer.

“About five per cent.”

“That’s too bad. It should be ten.”

“But surely you don’t mean to short-measure our customers? When we sell a gallon, we sell a gallon, do we not?”

“Theoretically, yes. But some things do not work out in practice quite the same as in theory. Look here, Burton,” and Gardiner’s voice took on a serious tone, “I have sold coal oil for ten years, for myself and others, and in all that time I have never opened a barrel that gave the merchant full measure. If he gets off with a ten per cent. loss he can consider himself lucky. I have seen barrels that were quite empty, yet we had to pay for full measurement. It’s all very well to have principles and theories, but what are you to do when you are face to face with such conditions?”

“Raise the price until it will show a profit, but give full measurement.”

Gardiner laughed. “You wouldn’t sell a barrel in a year,” he said. “The public would refuse to pay your price. They would rather be cheated, and not know it, than pay an honest price, and know it. The public bring these things upon themselves. They place a premium upon dishonesty. They will actually coax a man to lie to them. Tell a man, or better still, a woman, that you are selling a two dollar article for a dollar, and she will fight her way to the counter; but tell her the truth, that you are selling an article worth a dollar for a dollar, and she will pass your store in search of a merchant who has fictions more to her liking. If the public want us to play fair, why do they refuse to set the example, or at least show some appreciation of fair treatment? They are never tired of telling of the dishonesty of their merchants; I could relate deeds of trickery resorted to by customers which make the devices we practise look like the harmless sport of little children. But, to return to the subject, we could adulterate the coal oil and give them full measurement, if that would please you better.”

“But isn’t adulteration against the law?”

“So are turkey raffles.”

Burton winced. He had attended one of these country gatherings the previous evening, and come home considerably lighter in pocket although without any feathered trophies.

“I do not mean to be personal,” Gardiner said, kindly enough. “I merely want to show that, after all, the law takes very little notice of the man who steals in a gentlemanly way. Robbery is an art, and it is the crude thief that gets into trouble.”

“Speaking of adulteration reminds me of one of my employers, who was a druggist as well as a general store keeper. He was an honest, well-intended fellow, but he didn’t propose to let any one get very much the better of him. Now it happened that the rural municipality required a thousand ounces of strychnine, put up in half-ounce bottles, for gopher poison. The drug at that time was worth fifty-eight cents an ounce wholesale, and when the council came to the boss for his price he quoted seventy-five cents, which was not unreasonable, seeing that he had to furnish the bottles and labels and do the bottling—not a job to be desired. But these councillors, being anxious to safeguard the interests of their good friends the ratepayers, and incidentally give a lesson in good bargaining, sent to the city for prices. When they came back and told the boss they could get their supply for sixty cents I expected he would tell them to go and get it, and to make certain other calls while they were about it, but he just laughed and said if the city firm could do it for that he guessed he could, and he took the order. And he cleared three hundred dollars on that transaction.”

“How could that be possible, if the strychnine cost him fifty-eight cents, and he sold for sixty?” queried Burton.

“Because Epsom salts cost him four cents a pound and the gophers never knew the difference.”

Both men laughed, and at that moment the store door opened, and a farmer, furred and frost covered, struggled in with a case of eggs.

“Where will you have the eggs, Mr. Gardiner?” he called, kicking the door shut with his heel.

“Just set the case down, Mr. Mandle, we will attend to them,” but the obliging

Mr. Mandle insisted on carrying it to the rear of the store.

“The missus will be in in a minute, an’ fight it out with ye,” announced Mr. Mandle. “She got off at the post-office. She’s wantin’ a bit coat, an’ she’s been writin’ to the city for prices, an’ I’m thinkin’ she’s expectin’ an answer to-day. But just let me have half a pound of MacDonald chewin’ an’ she can do as she likes with the rest.”

In a few minutes Mrs. Mandle appeared, and was promptly taken in hand by Gardiner. The selling of the coat was, as he expected, a difficult matter, but she was finally persuaded that a regular $24.50 coat at $20 was good buying. The price-tag, which Gardiner had deftly slipped off the coat before showing it, was marked $18.

“I suppose it isn’t necessary to ask you,” said the merchant, after the purchases had been wrapped up, “but, just to assure ourselves, those eggs are all quite fresh, aren’t they?”

“Fresh? My goodness, there isn’t one of them ten days old. Our hens are laying wonderful for this time of the year.”

“That’s what comes of understanding poultry,” remarked Gardiner. But as soon as his customer was gone he told Burton to take the eggs down to the cellar and candle them.

“She sold me a six-pound block of ice in a tub of butter once, and I’ve watched her ever since,” he explained.

When Burton had finished his task he reported.

“Two dozen and a half bad, and six dozen short. There were two layers without any eggs in them.”

Gardiner made a rapid calculation. “Eight-and-a-half times thirty—is two-fifty-five. And I did her two dollars on the coat. There’s fifty-five cents coming to me yet.”

“What shall I do with the bad eggs, Mr. Gardiner?” asked the clerk.

“Put them under the counter and sell them to the restaurants,” were the

instructions.

“That last barrel of vinegar seems to be very strong,” remarked Gardiner one day.

“I should say it is,” Burton agreed. “I took down a quart for Mrs. Goode yesterday, and she said it was the strongest she had ever bought since she came West.”

No more was said on the subject, but in the afternoon Burton, who was standing at the front of the store dreamily surveying the wintry landscape, saw his employer tip the vinegar barrel on end, knock out the faucet, substitute a funnel, and pour in two pails of water. At that moment the merry sound of sleigh bells was heard, and a cutter and dashing team swung down the street. Burton caught a hurried glimpse as they passed. It was Mr. Grant and Miss Vane.

And then, by some strange law of telepathy or suggestion, the words went throbbing through his brain:

> “Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
> As the swift seasons roll——”

The door opened, and with a smothered execration the young man turned to wait on a lady who was quite sure that in the city three spools were sold for ten cents.

CHAPTER III—TWO ON THE TRAIL

"We have felt the April breezes warm along the plashy plains;
We have mind-marked to the cadence of the falling April rains;
We have heard the crash of water where the snow-fed rivers run,
Seen a thousand silver lakelets lying shining in the sun;
We have known the resurrection of the Springtime in the land,
Heard the voice of Nature calling and the words of her command,
Felt the thrill of Springtime twilight and the vague, unfashioned thought
That the season's birthday musters from the hopes we had forgot."

Prairie Born.

"Plainville has a sure-enough singer at last," declared Alice Goode to her mother the morning after the Grant party.

"That'll be the new-comer at Grand's," said Mrs. Goode, who had a talent, amounting almost to genius, for mispronouncing proper names.

"You're on," Alice agreed. "I don't claim to be much of a judge of warbles, but I like her samples."

"You'll be gettin' her into the choir, for the Grands are Presbyterians. You want to speak to the minister about her, Alice."

"Sure I do, but it means war with Mrs. Fairley. She's led the choir so long and so far she's sure to flare up at the prospect of a real singer breakin' in. But I don't care. She only keeps me because she knows I can't sing either. Here's where the fat goes into the fire."

Alice went to the telephone and called up the Rev. Andrew Guthrie.

"Hello—that you, Mr. Guthrie?—hello—Alice Goode speaking—yes—say, you ought to been at Grant's dance last night—what's that?—Oh, that don't matter—Me?—well, I just went on church business, rustlin' new chickens for your flock, an' I caught one, a lulu—Mr. Grant's niece, an' she can sing some. Say, Mr.

Guthrie, you get after her to join the choir, before the Methodists get busy.... No, don't leave it to Mrs. Fairley, she's too jealous. Just get her to sing with us once, an' Mrs. Fairley can come in or stay out, as the weather suits her.... Perhaps, but she's an old crank, anyway. She spoils the effect of the sermons, an' that ain't fair to you, Mr. Guthrie. That's why I go to dances instead of prayer-meeting.... That's right, drive out and see her. She'll change the look of those empty pews, or I'm no guesser."

Whether it was due to the doubtful compliments of this conversation or the unquestionable sincerity which prompted Alice Goode's suggestion may never be known, but the fact is that the Reverend Mr. Guthrie called that afternoon on Mrs. Fairley, and deftly announced that a friend of the Grants' was staying with them, and, he understood, would be willing to take advantage of the facilities afforded by the choir. Now, Mrs. Fairley, good woman, never attended anything so worldly as a dance, and supposed that the recruit was some country girl anxious for a chance to be seen by the congregation. She had no objection to an additional worshipper in the choir—the meanest service of the Lord must not be despised, Mr. Guthrie—so long as she proved bidable, Mr. Guthrie, and did not spoil the effect of those who could sing. Armed with this authority from the autocrat of the choir, Mr. Guthrie hitched up horse and cutter and drove to the Grant homestead. It was a place where he always found a warm welcome, and he would gladly have called oftener, had it not been for the jealousy of some of his parishioners who objected when he failed to visit them, and gave him little courtesy when he did. He remained to tea, and, indeed, long after, and when at last he drove home it was with feelings of mingled gratification and mistrust.

"Well, Mary," he announced, as his wife helped to remove his great-coat, "I have found an addition for our choir. But I rather suspect that she will soon be the choir, and the present members will constitute the addition. Mrs. Fairley made two conditions; that the new-comer should not spoil the music, and should be amenable to those in authority, meaning herself. Both these conditions I will guarantee, but there are cases when authority forsakes officials and returns to its original source—the people. And when the congregation have heard Miss Vane sing, they will insist on a change in the leadership of the choir."

"Oh, it may not be so bad as that," said his wife, always eager to smooth the difficulties from the path of her over-worked and under-paid husband.

"So good as that, you mean," exclaimed Andrew Guthrie, exultantly.

The next Sunday saw a new face in the choir, and the expectant glances of the congregation indicated that a large percentage of Mr. Guthrie's flock had not attained to the godliness of Mrs. Fairley, who eschewed dances.

The opening hymn was announced, and before three bars were sung a buzz of excitement was electrifying the congregation. At the end of the first line Mrs. Fairley stopped and looked straight at Miss Vane. For ten years, whenever Mrs. Fairley stopped singing, the music stopped, and so accustomed had the organist become to this understanding, that she expected always to double back when the familiar voice was no longer heard. But this morning a new precedent was established. Mrs. Fairley stopped, but the music went on. The new singer sang on, quite unconscious of the epoch-making nature of her hardihood. For one full line Mrs. Fairley remained silent, and in that brief space of time she surrendered for ever the leadership of the choir of Plainville Presbyterian church.

After the service Mrs. Fairley went to the minister. Her chagrin was apparent, and it was evident that she blamed him for no small share of her undoing.

"I think it was quite unnecessary to bring that young woman into the choir," she said. "We were getting along very well, and the music was all that Plainville desired."

"No one, surely, will complain of the music," said Mr. Guthrie, very mildly, "but if this young woman wishes to take part in the singing, how shall we despise even the meanest service of the Lord? And how shall we avoid accepting that service? We must not ask her to remain away, and we cannot ask her not to sing when we rise to worship Him with psalms and hymns. It is, therefore, merely a question of whether she shall sing in the choir or in the congregation."

This view of the situation was a bomb-shell to Mrs. Fairley. If Miss Vane's presence in the choir was aggravating, in the congregation it would become demoralising. As argument failed her she answered, hotly:

"Well, if the people don't want my singing, they won't have to listen to it."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Mr. Guthrie. "We must all give what service we can——"

But Mrs. Fairley had flounced down the aisle and out of the church.

So it came about that Miss Vane was officially declared leader of the choir. Her position necessitated her coming to town twice on Sundays and once during the week, and although her cousins were always glad enough to drive her in, it was observed that Mr. Gardiner frequently relieved them of the duty.

Burton, also, was afforded the opportunity of meeting Miss Vane at church, and occasionally waiting on her in the store, but their acquaintance developed slowly. He found himself while in her presence hampered by a self-consciousness amounting to bashfulness. Thus, while they frequently met at the rink, he had never asked her to skate. He wondered whether she thought of him at all.

And so the winter wore on, and at length the spring was in the land. For five months the wind had studiously avoided the south-west, but now it fell into that favoured quarter, and the snow shrank before its balmy breath. The sun beat down with June brilliancy; the creeks and ponds filled with blue snow-water; the life that had lain dormant since November stirred itself in sod, and flower, and leaf. In the town the period of depression was followed by one of great activity; every merchant, implement dealer, and tradesman was working under high pressure to keep up with the demands of his customers. Gardiner's store shared in the general prosperity; in fact, as the proprietor thought, they were receiving rather more than their share. This meant busy days for Burton and his employer, but both were eager for work, and from week to week Gardiner postponed his intention of engaging another clerk. He was well satisfied with Burton, and had freely congratulated himself upon securing for a moderate wage a young man of so much value to his store. But circumstances were already in the mould which were destined to alter his opinion.

On an evening late in May, Gardiner left the store early, saying his horse needed exercise, and as the day's work was practically over he would go out for a drive. Burton remained to tidy the store and lock up, but he noticed that Gardiner's horse took the well-known road to Grants'.

As he was sweeping behind the counter a young woman entered the store, and Burton, looking up, was surprised to see Miss Vane.

"I hope I am not too late, Mr. Burton. I have had a number of errands to do for Aunty, and it always takes longer than one expects. I wonder if you will let me have this small bill of groceries?"

“You are not too late; you are just in time,” assured Burton, who felt that the moment was the most opportune of the whole day.

He quickly filled the order, and said, “If you will tell me where your buggy is, Miss Vane, I will take your packages around and put them in it.”

“Oh, I have no buggy this time, I’m walking.”

“Walking! You surely do not intend to walk home with all these parcels?”

“They are not heavy, and besides, I am to walk only as far as Mrs. Delt’s. Harry will meet me there later in the evening. They are very busy on the farm at present, and I told them it was quite unnecessary to drive me to town.”

Burton wrestled with his thoughts. Here, surely, was an opportunity to offer a service which could be construed only as a business courtesy.

“If you can wait until I close the store—it will be only a minute—I should be very glad to carry your parcels.”

“Oh, that is too much—I could not expect you to do that.”

“It is not too much—unless you say it is.”

Miss Vane laughed. Hers was a quiet, mirthful laugh, like a vocal smile.

“If your offer is made as a kindness to me, I cannot accept it; if it is your own desire, I cannot refuse.”

“It is my desire,” said Burton. There was no other answer, although he felt that the reply shattered his theory about a business courtesy.

Soon they were walking gaily along the road leading out of the village. This ran by the amusement grounds, where the young men of the town were gathering for an evening’s baseball practice. Burton and his companion were not unnoticed.

The talk was of the commonplace: the weather, the seeding, the life of town and country; Burton careful, discriminating in his speech; Miss Vane frank, impetuous, but correct. They had almost reached Delt’s when the young woman, placing her fingers to her throat, uttered a cry of dismay.

“I believe I’ve lost my brooch,” she explained, in answer to Burton’s anxious inquiry. “It was a gift from Brother Harry, and——”

She found no words to express her emotion, which Burton knew to be greater than she cared to admit.

“I don’t think you need worry,” the young man said. “The sun is just setting, and we still have an hour of fair light. I noticed the brooch when we left the store, so it must be on the road. I will hurry back and find it.”

“We will,” she corrected.

Burton set the packages down a little way from the road, and the two hurried back through the gathering twilight, keeping a keen look-out as they walked. It was not until they were almost at the recreation grounds that a faint glint in the dust attracted Burton’s eye. He lifted the precious trifle and restored it to the delighted owner, whose profuse thanks called forth blushes that might be seen even in the dusk which was now silently enwrapping all the familiar objects of the prairie and roadside. Retracing their steps they walked more slowly; it became quite dark, but a mild wind blew from the south-west, and there was just enough eeriness in the situation to suggest the necessity of a man’s protection. Finally they arrived at Delt’s gate, where Harry Grant and young Mrs. Delt were awaiting Miss Vane with growing anxiety.

A horse and buggy swung past them as they left the main road, and Harry Grant called out:

“Ah, here you are at last! And who is this? Why, I declare, if it isn’t our friend Burton. That accounts for the delay. ‘In the spring a young man’s fancy,’ you know.”

Gardiner, returning from his fruitless drive to the Grants’ home, heard the words and recognized the voice.

And they troubled his sleep that night, and for many nights to come.

CHAPTER IV—CROTTON'S CROSSING

"We have heard the cattle lowing in the silent summer nights;
We have smelt the smudge-fire fragrance—we have seen the smudge-fire lights —
We have heard the wild duck grumbling to his mate along the bank;
Heard the thirsty horses snorting in the stream from which they drank;
Heard the voice of Youth and Laughter in the long slow-gloaming night;
Seen the arched electric splendour of the Great North's livid light;
Read the reason of existence—felt the touch that was divine—
And in eyes that glowed responsive saw the end of God's design."

Prairie Born.

"Why don't you come out and see us sometime, Burton?"

It was Harry Grant speaking at the door of the store one evening early in June.

"I should like to very much," was the reply, "but you see I am busy all day."

"But not all night, surely. Come, you are ready to close up now, and I am just going home. I guess I'll have to come back later in the night for the vet.; he's out of town at present. Hustle round now, and lock 'er up, and I'll be here in a few minutes with the team."

"But I need a shave, and I'm just in my working garb."

"Nonsense; we're farmers at our house."

"Not all of you," said Burton, and was suddenly astonished at his own temerity.

"Oh, that's how the land lies," said Harry, looking quizzically at the other. "Well, if I had any ambitions in which a young lady figured, which, by the way, doesn't seem to be in my line, I'd rather let her see me in my working clothes than not at all. Besides, you are taking her at the same disadvantage. Now, hustle; I'll be back in ten minutes."

As they drove out along the country road Harry remarked, as though the thought had just occurred to him—

“Ever been out to Crotton’s Crossing?”

“No, I haven’t, though a quiet day there is one of the treats I promise myself. Let’s see; it’s about ten miles from here, isn’t it?”

“Twelve, and as fine a drive on a June Sunday as you could think about. Myrtle has been coaxing me for a month to take her out, but when a fellow pegs along all week on the farm he likes to lay up on Sundays.”

This was rather unlike Harry, for it was well known that twelve hours a day on the land were not enough to keep him off the baseball diamond in the evening.

Burton made some remark about his old opinions of farm-work, and how life in a store had led him to revise them, and was about to dismiss the subject from his mind when Harry, avoiding his eye with a bashfulness usually foreign to his nature, said:

“Well, haven’t you got a thought?”

“Nothing to speak of,” his friend admitted. “What would you like me to think?”

“See here,” said the other, “must I force an idea into your head with these horny hands? You’re bright enough on some subjects but denser than hotel coffee on others. In brief: You want to spend a day at the crossing; so does my cousin. Now do you see light?”

“Do you mean that I should ask her to go with me?” said Burton, almost overwhelmed with the possibility.

“Oh no, not that you should. There’s nothing compulsory about it, and if you don’t take her, no doubt some one else will. It’s my guess that Gardiner wouldn’t need a second hint. But it’s your privilege to invite her. The worst she can do is refuse. And she won’t do the worst, either.”

“But the choir?”

“Oh, fight that out with her; I’m not her guardian.”

They drove in silence for some distance, their thoughts accompanied by the rhythmic cadence of the jangling trace-chains. The sun was an hour from the setting, and the golden glow of its oblique rays across the prairies and over the fast-greening wheatfields shed an amber radiance that danced along the trail. The shouts of men at their evening's amusement, the lowing of cattle, the occasional bark of a dog, the far off drumming of prairie chicken, came through the quiet stillness of the air. When at last Burton spoke it was in a confidential note he had never used since he had helped lay his mother in the hillside.

"Harry," he said, "men don't often talk of these things, but you've guessed my great desire. I know I am foolish; it's unreasonable of me to entertain such ambitions, but our great hopes, like our great sorrows, come to us unbidden. I cannot help what I feel, but I hope I can help what I do. I appreciate beyond expression the words you have said to me, with all that they imply, but would it be fair, if, indeed, it were not presumptuous, for one like me—I mean a boy, for I am nothing more, on a small wage, and with no other means of support—would it be fair that I should meddle in what every one will say are much more appropriate arrangements?"

"You are referring to Gardiner," said Harry. "And in the first place, I want you to know that every one will not say that that would be a more appropriate arrangement. It may be true that you are young, that you have your own way to make in the world, but all that is in your favour. You are well educated; better than most town boys, for you have learned to spend your idle hours to advantage, which they, as a rule, do not; you have a good constitution and a clear conscience, and the girl who isn't willing to face the battle of life with a companion so equipped isn't worthy to be his wife. In this country women do not marry men who have achieved distinction; in almost every case where wealth or honour come, they come after marriage. If you think my cousin isn't wise enough to know that in the battle of life as it must be waged in this great new country a man's mental and physical equipment count for more than any cash capital, you do her intelligence a grave injustice. But I want to warn you that I am not speaking for her; I have not been given, and I have not asked, her confidence in these matters. But I know Gardiner well, and I know you a little, and I have my cousin's happiness sufficiently at heart to say what I have said."

This was a remarkable speech for the young farmer, who usually disposed of a subject in a sentence, and Burton felt that it was, indeed, a great compliment to him. He knew that Harry had spoken in all sincerity; had opened a corner of his

heart to one who was little more than a stranger, and he resolved to follow the cue he had been given.

Mrs. Grant, Susy Grant, and Miss Vane were in the garden as the young men drove up. They greeted Burton cordially, and as Harry went to look after his team entertained their visitor with a walk through the garden and a discussion of the various flowers in which Mrs. Grant so much delighted. Presently, however, the elder lady felt the night air becoming chill, and, reminding Susy that the separator would be ready to wash, entered the house, accompanied by her daughter.

“Oh, you haven’t seen my pony, have you, Mr. Burton?” said Miss Vane. “He’s the dearest little fellow. Uncle gave him to me because he said he couldn’t have me walking to town and getting home at midnight, although when he knew I had your protection he admitted that altered the circumstances. I keep him in the pasture—the pony, you know. Shall we walk over and see him? Then you can lead him home, and I will ride.”

Nothing pleased the young man better, and in a few minutes they were tripping along the well-beaten cowpath that led into the pasture. Night was setting in, and when they reached the stream, girded with dense willows, it was quite dark. The pony was not easily found, and several times they approached cattle in mistake; but at length Miss Vane’s call brought his answering whinny, as he came running to her, through the bushes.

“Now sir, I shall ride you home,” she said, rubbing her pet’s nose, “and Mr. Burton will lead you. This is Mr. Burton, Frisky.”

“But you have no saddle,” said Burton.

“Surely I am westernised enough to ride without a saddle by this time,” said the young woman, “especially as the gait is not to exceed a walk. But I am afraid I shall have to have some assistance before we can start.”

She stood with her right arm over the pony’s back. In the darkness he seemed unusually tall.

For a lady in an ordinary habit to mount a horse, especially without the assistance of a saddle, is a feat of some difficulty, as Burton discovered before it was accomplished. As they journeyed slowly back to the farmhouse the young

man inquired if Miss Vane had ever been to Crotton's Crossing.

"No, indeed, and they say it is one of the most delightful drives. I have been at Harry a dozen times to take me, but he always has some excuse, and George—well, I must admit that George seems to be more interested in our friend Miss Green than in his little orphan cousin."

"I was wondering," said Burton, mustering all his resolution for the task, "if you would accept an invitation to drive there with me next Sunday?"

"One can never tell," said the young woman demurely.

"Tell what?" asked Burton, a little piqued at the irrelevance of the remark.

"What one will do under certain circumstances, until the circumstances occur."

"By which you mean?"

"Well, if I must be blunt, Mr. Burton, I cannot tell you whether I would accept such an invitation until I receive it."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Raymond, and both laughed. "Miss Vane, will you honour me with your company to Crotton's Crossing on Sunday?"

"Rather formal, but strictly correct," commented Miss Vane. "But there is the choir——"

"Ah, yes, I had thought of that."

"And what solution had you discovered?"

"Not any, I fear."

"Under those circumstances it seems I will not be able——"

"Of course," Burton admitted, "they can't get along without you in the choir."

"Do you think so? Well, that is too bad, because next Sunday—they'll have to."

Sunday dawned, cloudless and warm. The rainy season had not set in in earnest, and, although farmers complained, the liverymen were well pleased that the

roads were conducive to pleasure drives. A light wind blew from the south-east, just fresh enough to keep the air in motion, as at 9 a.m. Burton drove out of town with as good an equipage as the place afforded. The fields wore a heavy coat of dark green grain, waving in the breeze like ripples on a pond; the mirthsome gophers frolicked on the road, and clear-voiced barnyard fowl rent the air with their morning dissertations. As Burton drove up to the Grant farmhouse he was met by Harry and George; the former in his working clothes, but his brother dressed in his Sunday best.

“Wish I could get the fever too,” lamented Harry. “Here’s George with a special engagement at church, and Susy tidying up for a caller, and pretty cousin Myrtle putting the final tiffics on her fascination, while I come down to the prosaic business of running milk through the separator. But mind you, Burton, a word of warning. They say the road to a popular resort is paved with good intentions. There’s many in this district will aver the road to Crotton’s Crossing is paved with broken hearts.”

“Don’t pay any attention to him, Ray,” called Susy Grant from the verandah. Susy never troubled to “mister” her male acquaintances after the second meeting. “Harry’d be only too glad to take your drive himself if Myrtle was somebody else’s cousin.”

“And he’d be no man if he wouldn’t,” declared George. “Hang it, I’m kind o’ sorry I’m barred, myself.”

“Don’t say that,” said Harry. “Many a good wife has graduated from pedagogy.”

This allusion to Miss Green had the effect of silencing the younger brother, and in a moment Miss Vane appeared. She wore a dress of creamy white, such as on the night Raymond had first seen her. From the toes of her little kid shoes to the tip of her modest hat she was white, absolutely white, save where one large red rose nestled in the hat’s protecting shelter, and an historic brooch gleamed at her half-exposed throat. Her dark, waving hair, the wonderfully deep, lustrous eyes, the electrically sensitive mouth, the superb lines of her chin and neck, the whole supported by a figure chaste, symmetrical and beautiful, asked no grander setting than the emblem of purity she wore. Burton had thought her beautiful on the night he first met her, but he told himself it was her mentality that had so irresistibly attracted his, and as their acquaintance had ripened his delight had been in her alert intellect, her glorious voice, her easy grace of manner, gesture,

and speech; but this morning he saw in her a ravishment of personal, physical beauty such as he thought had never before been vested in woman. The joy he felt in her mere presence, which had been to him a delightful and inexplicable mystery, was revealed in an instant as though a great cloud had been swept away. He recognised the magnet and the steel, wedded in an affinity defying every analysis of man, but everlasting and indissoluble as the eternal hills. In one brief glance the great light and the great responsibility had burst upon him, and his heart swelled and throbbed in a panic of prayer that he might be able to keep his secret.

“I bet you have forgotten something,” cried Mrs. Grant, to her niece, as Burton tightened the reins.

“I never bet,” laughed Miss Vane, “but Mr. Burton will defend my memory.”

“In that case, I bet she didn’t,” declared Burton, gallantly.

“Well, here is the proof,” said Mrs. Grant, advancing with a well laden basket.

“It isn’t mine,” said Miss Vane. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“But it’s yours, just the same. It’s well you have an aunty to think about you, dearie. You are so excited over your drive with Mr. Burton that you would let the poor boy starve for his trouble.”

For a moment the young woman looked aghast. “Oh, Aunty, you darling,” she cried, as the basket was tucked in the back of the buggy, “and you with so much other work. You should have told me to do it.”

“Hush, hush, child. You may please the young gentleman’s eyes best, but I’m thinkin’ your old aunty still knows the short cut to a man’s heart.”

In the pioneer days the Poplar river had presented a serious obstacle to traffic in the spring and early summer freshets, until old Simon Crotton had squatted on the bank and constructed a passable ford. Simon had a team of shaganappies whose only virtue seemed to be that they were proof against every form of abuse, and when the settler, with his wagonload of rude implements or household effects, became entangled in the river, old Simon, if not too thoroughly intoxicated, could be depended upon to lend the assistance of himself and team, receiving therefore such dole as the settler could afford or his

generosity prompted. A fine steel bridge now spanned the river at the spot, and Simon Crotton had long ago been gathered to his fathers, but the place retained the name of Crotton's Crossing and will probably so be known until the end of time. In such humble ways do common men leave their indelible impress upon a new country.

The road from Grant's to the crossing lay through a well-settled farming district where almost every acre except the road allowances had come under the plough. At one time the country had been partly covered with shrub, and willows and poplars still grew along the road, affording cover for prairie chickens and resting roosts for their relentless enemy, the hawk. The air was laden with the smell of wild flowers, of bursting buds, of fragrant red willows and balm-of-Gileads. For a mile or two there was little conversation; Burton knew not what to say, and Miss Vane was so enwrapped in the beauty of the country, so thrilled with its glorious air, so inspired with its immensity, that she seemed to have almost forgotten her companion's presence. At last, as they crested a hill, and a vista of long, narrow road, of neat, quadrangular farms, of comfortable homes, of pastures fencing sleek, drowsy cattle and horses turned out for their Sunday holiday, with a white church and school-house by the road, opened before them, she turned to Burton with a strange mildness in her eyes, and exclaimed, "And still people with means at their command, who are in a measure the masters of their destiny, live in the cities!"

"Then you prefer the country?"

"Prefer! How is any other choice possible? What great thing has ever been that could not be traced to the land?"

"Yet our great men go to the cities, and these men you see about you, these farmers, every one of them laments his lot. They feel that the hands of all mankind are against them."

"The same spirit prevails in the city, especially among the labouring classes. They think how fortunate they would be if they were wringing their living from the soil, instead of in the service of what they call capital."

"But the intellectual advantages of the city?"

"Ah, there you have it. And yet, although you have had no college education, no free lectures, no public night schools, no young men's clubs, I venture to think

you are better prepared for the battle of life than many of those whom, you imagine, are more fortunately situated."

The words recalled Harry Grant's statement, and Burton did not pursue the subject.

It was mid-day when they wound down the steep banks of the Poplar river to the broad, elm-studded parkland below. Burton swung the team to the left, and they plunged into the recesses of the forest along an old and little used trail, which presently brought them to the edge of the water. Here they unhitched and Burton tied the horses where they could find a little grass, while Miss Vane spread the contents of the lunch basket on a rug beside the water. The long drive in the bright morning sunshine had whetted their appetites, but no sauce of hunger was necessary to give flavour to Mrs. Grant's chicken sandwiches and currant jelly, with a thermos bottle of hot coffee. After the luncheon they gathered up the fragments, and climbing gingerly down to the stones which studded the shallow water, washed their hands in the stream that rippled by their feet. Then they picked their way across the river on the stones, for the water was low, and found a path leading through enchanted corridors fenced with great elms, and so they delved into the fastness of the wood. Finally, tired with their explorations, they recrossed the stream, startling a lazy fish that lay, head against the current, in the shelter of a stone, and found a great flat rock that overlooked the water. Here they sat, gazing down into its silvery depths, while the ripple of the running water caricatured their reflections. The faces below them were one moment long and sober, the next broad and merry, and then, by a little freak of the current, suddenly blended into one.

Both laughed. "The water is teasing," said Miss Vane.

Burton sat in a great happiness of body and soul.

Aloud he repeated in a gentle undertone,

"And here and there a foamy flake,
Upon me as I travel;
With many a silvery waterbreak,
Above the golden gravel.

"I steal by lawns and grassy plots,

I slide by hazel covers;
I move the sweet forget-me-nots
That grow for happy lovers.”

He stopped short, half ashamed; the poet had tricked him into a word he had not meant to use.

The hours fled faster than they knew, and it was not until the setting sun burst in great golden bars between the trunks of the stately elms that they realized it was growing late.

“We must go,” said Miss Vane. “’Twill be dark before we can reach home. And yet I am loath to leave a scene of so much happiness.”

“The day will be a mile-post in my memory,” said Raymond. “It has been to me a season of delight. But how could it be otherwise with such companionship?”

It was his first attempt at a compliment.

“Please do not speak to me in that way,” said Miss Vane, and there was a ring, not so much of anger as of pain, in her voice.

Burton was crushed. He had understood that compliments were always acceptable to a woman.

“Listen,” she continued, with a sudden deep kindliness in her voice, “I would not have you misunderstand me. My environment has, all my life, been very different from yours. I was brought up in the city, in an atmosphere of refinement and, if not luxury, at least moderate wealth. My associations were among what were called the best circles in the city. I met many men, handsome, wealthy, clever men, and I will not pretend that I did not know their attitude toward me. But I found that these men, although they could discuss affairs of government, of finance, of literature and art, in the frankest manner among themselves, could not address to me the commonest remark without wrapping it in a compliment. To a man they would speak as an equal, a rational being, but a woman must be flattered and cajoled. They say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, which I do not believe; but still more foolish is the idea, held by most men, that the way to a woman’s heart is through her vanity. Whoever adopts such an attitude toward a woman, every compliment from his lips is an insult. We women may be frail, and foolish, and unreasonable, but

surely, surely we deserve the truth. And this morning, when I said I loved the country, it was, most of all, for its sincerity. I have sometimes thought I could, perhaps, love a man, if I found one who was not a liar."

The hard word came out with a crash; the wonderful, electric mouth closed in a firmness that might have led men to battle, the deep eyes lit up with a blaze that was not from the setting sun.

Burton mumbled an apology. "But I meant what I said, Miss Vane!"

She looked fairly in his eyes.

"I believe you," she said, simply.

It was late when Burton reached town. It was Sunday night, and the business section was in darkness. Miss Vane had given him some letters to post and, as he passed the store, it occurred to him to go in and get the necessary stamps, which would save him a special trip to the post-office in the morning. The firm's supply of stamps was kept in the cash drawer in the safe, and Burton, having his keys with him, entered. Striking a match he groped his way to the little office at the back of the store where, by the light of more matches, he opened the combination, known to only himself and Gardiner, and took out the necessary stamps, which he would replace from his own in the morning. Then he locked the safe and, seeing an unfinished book lying above it, slipped it under his arm and left the store. The door fastened with a spring lock, although a key was necessary to open it; he drew it to, and as he did so he fancied he heard a footstep. The thought gave him no uneasiness and he started blithely down the street, still revelling in the delights of the happiest day his life had known. The little lecture he had received from Miss Vane had only the effect of deepening his attachment for her, and he was beginning to think, or at least to hope, that she returned some measure of his regard. He properly concluded that she would not have spoken so frankly to one in whom she felt no interest.

Suddenly a dark object flew by his face, and a moment later a beer bottle crashed in a thousand pieces on the brick wall at his side.

Burton turned quickly, but the streets were in darkness; he could see nothing. He ran in the direction from which the missile appeared to have been thrown, but his search was fruitless. As he continued his walk home he turned the strange

occurrence over in his mind; it seemed unreal, like a bad dream. He began to doubt whether it had actually occurred, or was it some insane freak of imagination? He resolved to say nothing of the incident; it might have been accidental, which seemed incredible, or the attack might have been meant for someone else, which was much more likely. But if it were possible that he had secret enemies, he would prepare himself to deal with future emergencies. If his assailant were a man he would meet him as a man, with the weapons his Creator gave him; but if a sneak and an assassin he must take other measures. He would buy a revolver in the morning.

CHAPTER V—UNDER SUSPICION

"'Thou shalt not steal,' the Law declares, and the sinner must pay the price,
For the world abhors the petty thief who falls to the common vice,
But the rich and the good and the powerful may steal—if they do it well—
And the world sends them to heaven, but it sends the poor—to hell!"

The Empire Builders.

The absence of Miss Vane from church on the Sunday reported in our last chapter was noted by every member of the congregation. None of the Grants were in, which deepened the mystery, and although he might have telephoned the Grant homestead and learned the cause of her absence, it occurred to Gardiner that his horse needed exercise, and he drove out early in the afternoon to investigate the situation for himself. He trusted that Miss Vane was not ill, and he anticipated with some pleasure an invitation to remain to tea. As a matter of fact the invitation was given, but Gardiner did not remain. The discovery that Miss Vane had gone to spend the day, the whole day, with Burton in the woods, and alone; that she had ignored her official position in the choir to do so, and, most of all, that she had given him no hint or inkling of her intention, was, to say the least, disconcerting. He had been surprised to find her walking with his clerk on the country road, and after dark, but the explanation he had afterwards learned had quieted his mind on that score, and he felt that his suit, although as yet he had not announced it as such, was progressing favourably. It seemed preposterous that he and his clerk should be rivals for the affection of the same woman, but still more amazing that the clerk's rivalry should be encouraged. Burton was but a boy, only twenty-one, with no experience of life save what he had learned on his father's farm, and without means of support except the twelve dollars a week he drew from his employer. It was true that Burton was one of those quiet, thoughtful fellows who are seldom sought by ladies for flirtations, but are always in demand as husbands; it was true that Burton's book learning far exceeded his own, that the young man read poetry while he might be playing pool, and could quote the masters by the page, but that was a sign of weakness rather than strength. But as for Gardiner, he reflected with some satisfaction that he too was still a young man, just thirty-two, and therefore a much more

desirable age for the consideration of Miss Vane, who could not be less than twenty-three; he had an established business and an ample income, judged by the standards of a country town; he was in appearance not the inferior of Burton, and he fancied that his popularity among his acquaintances was at least as great. After all, Burton was nothing but what he had made him; he had opened up this life before the young man, and he could also close it; on a week's notice even the slender support of twelve dollars could be withdrawn. The thought afforded a ray of pleasure, but it was for the moment only; his own good sense told him that from a business point of view he could not afford to do without his clerk, whom he considered better than many much higher-paid salesmen; moreover, he had little doubt that a rival firm would be very glad to find a position for Burton, probably at an advance of salary.

Taking the question in all its aspects it was one that demanded deep consideration, and Gardiner spent the afternoon by himself.

In addition to the duties of the general store, Gardiner had the business and responsibilities of cashing wheat tickets for one of the grain companies operating elevators in Plainville. This is a branch of trade usually left with the banks, but as these institutions at Plainville had seen fit to impose a small charge for their services, the grain firms, in their anxiety to avoid bankruptcy, had arranged with different merchants to do the work gratis. Although Gardiner received no pay directly for his work in this connection, it was considered some advantage to do the business. The company at Winnipeg was notified by wire or mail as money was needed, and the desired currency came promptly by express. When the wheat season was at its height the amount sent was often as high as five thousand dollars at a time, and this comfortable sum frequently happened, about the fourth of the month, to be a godsend to the merchant who did not have to account for it until the end of the week. Moreover, as farmers had to come into the store to cash their tickets, the merchants knew when they had a considerable sum of money in their possession, and could force sales accordingly; or, if the customer was slow to pay, and already in debt, an excellent opportunity was afforded for collecting the account. Taking these things into consideration Gardiner felt that the benefits derived from cashing wheat tickets were sufficient to justify him in undertaking the responsibility and labour the service entailed.

During the summer deliveries of wheat are usually slow, but farmers frequently over-estimate the amount they will require for seed, and the wealthier ones also make a point of carrying some of their wheat in their granaries until summer to

take advantage of the artificial prices which are invariably effected by speculative manipulating after the cereal is supposed to have passed out of the hands of the producers. As seeding was now finished deliveries were freshening, and a package of “wheat money” containing two thousand dollars in ten dollar bank bills had been received on Saturday evening by express and, the banks being closed, was left in Gardiner’s safe over Sunday.

Monday morning, although the unpleasant event of the previous night seemed to Burton more than ever to be an unreal remembrance, he resolved to carry out his intention. He knew that the action was one his father would hardly commend; his father had old-fashioned Ontario ideas about carrying revolvers; but the situation was unusual, and he felt justified in taking such measures as he could for his own protection. Accordingly, on his way to the store he stopped at a hardware, and spent some time selecting a modest weapon which he felt could be depended upon in case of emergency. He pretended to the clerk that he wanted to try his marksmanship on the gophers; secured a box of cartridges, and put the loaded weapon in his pocket.

As he neared Gardiner’s store he felt in his pockets for his keys. They were gone! He hesitated a moment, and recalled having used them the night before; then, seeing the door was opened, he entered.

Gardiner was in the office at the back of the store.

“Burton, come here, please,” he called. His voice seemed strained and hollow, and as Burton’s eyes accustomed themselves to the store’s comparative darkness after the bright light outside, he saw that his employer’s face was as colourless as death.

“Why, what is the matter? Are you unwell?” cried Burton in alarm.

Gardiner steadied himself against a chair, and after one or two attempts to speak whispered hoarsely, “The package is gone.”

“Gone!” cried Burton, and would have walked to the safe, but Gardiner stopped him.

“Just a minute,” he said, having somewhat recovered his composure; “I want to ask you a question or two.”

Burton stopped and faced his employer unflinchingly.

“Have you missed anything this morning?”

“Why, no.”

“Think again.”

Burton hesitated. “Oh, yes,” he said at length, “I did. When I came to the door I couldn’t find my keys.”

“Do you identify those?” asked Gardiner, holding up a ring having several keys attached.

“They are mine. Where did you get them?”

“*In the safe!*”

“Impossible!”

“Unfortunately not. They hung in the lock of the cash compartment. Burton, whoever took that money used those keys!”

The young man looked at his employer as though his eyes would pierce him through. “Gardiner,” he said, in a hard, cold voice that seemed to be coming from the depths of some terrible emotion, “do you accuse me of this?”

It was the first time he had ever omitted the mister in addressing his employer. He was speaking now as man to man.

“No,” said Gardiner. “I accuse you of nothing. Even if I had the positive evidence before my eyes I could not believe you guilty. But the situation is baffling, and I am afraid—I am afraid suspicion will be directed toward you. Let me give you the facts as I have found them and as I, of course, will be obliged to report them to the police. When I came down to the store this morning my first thought was for that package. I came at once to the safe. Before it were lying a number of half-burnt matches. This aroused my fears, and I tried the door. It was locked. I operated the combination, and it opened. Inside, this bunch of keys hung in the lock, but the cash drawer was locked. I turned the key and opened it. The package was gone. Nothing else was disturbed, but another burnt match lay

in the cash box. Whoever opened that safe knew the combination. Whoever opened that safe had the key of the cash drawer. Burton, you and I are the only men in God's world who know that combination and have the keys."

Burton listened to this recital with growing dismay. If he had deliberately set about to put his feet in a trap he did not see how he could have done it more effectively. He realised the great weight of circumstantial evidence that was piling up against him, and in his heart he felt that Gardiner was not to be blamed for his suspicions. The incident of the smashing beer bottle again flew through his memory, recalling also his fancy that he heard a stealthy step, but what would such trifling and unsupported tales as these avail?

"At least I can explain about the keys," he said at last. "I came into the store as I was going home last night about midnight, and I opened the safe——"

"You admit you were in the safe last night!" shouted Gardiner, in a passion of excitement.

"No, I do not admit it; I declare it. If you are determined to condemn me unheard, on the strength of evidence which is at best only circumstantial, I have nothing more to say. I suppose it is unnecessary for me to go through the formality of tendering my resignation?"

"Do not take that view of it. The shock has unnerved me and excited you; we must not do anything hastily. Notwithstanding the evidence, I believe in your innocence. To prove that I mean what I say, I will add that your resignation is not demanded, and, if tendered, will not be accepted. I shall, as you know, be obliged to report the facts as I have found them, but something new may develop, and in the meantime I ask you to go on with your work in the store as if nothing had happened. Furthermore, I apologise to you for my momentary distrust. I—I was rather upset, you know."

Burton stood for a few moments undecided. A great darkness had arisen out of his cloudless sky of yesterday. For the present, at least, there seemed no course but to continue his service in the store, and trust that time would reveal the true solution of the robbery.

"It is very decent of you, Mr. Gardiner, to speak as you have. And as, if I were to leave your employ under the present circumstances, it might be construed unjustly toward both of us, I shall remain."

The news of the theft from Gardiner's safe quickly spread through the little town of Plainville. The first impulse of the citizens was to attribute the crime to bad men from "the other side," who had chosen Saturday night for the theft, trusting to their thirty-six hours' start to place them at a safe distance from the scene of their operations. But as it became known that no violence had been used, that the safe had been opened and re-locked, and that the contents and location of the package were secrets known to only Gardiner and Burton, the wise ones shook their heads and murmured something about the folly of placing young men in positions of great temptation. And when it leaked out that Burton's keys had been found in the safe the street-corner clubs located the criminal without further difficulty.

The Attorney-General's department was at once communicated with, and the local constable, Bill Hagan, was instructed to take preliminary steps pending the arrival of an officer from the city. Hagan was a harmless but inefficient individual, whose chief qualifications for his position lay in his ability to avoid trouble and vote right at election time. He made a minute examination of the safe, and announced that he had discovered a clue. Great excitement prevailed as to the nature of the discovery, but Bill's lips were sealed. Previous attacks of this nature had been relieved by means of liberal applications of stimulants, and presently the constable found himself the centre of a circle of depositors who instituted a run on their favourite bank—the hotel bar. This unsealed Bill's lips, but only for entrance; so far from revealing his discovery he presently forgot all about it, and his convivial friends were left with a haunting suspicion that the clue had been a ruse which had accomplished its purpose.

The following day, however, the officer from the city appeared on the scene. He was a man of large stature and swarthy appearance, but with an excessive colouring of his facial eminence which indicated that he too was a regular patron of the financial institution which absorbed most of Bill Hagan's income. Officer Elton, after a conference with his subordinate, visited Gardiner's store, and heard from the lips of the merchant a detailed account of such facts as had come to light concerning the crime.

Burton was waiting on a lady customer while his employer and the two policemen discussed the affair in the office; presently they came out, and Elton, indicating Burton, said in a voice that could be heard through the store—

"So this is the young man you speak of, who alone beside yourself knows the

combination of the safe? Well, my young friend, you've got yourself into a fine mess this time."

Burton flushed. His father's shanty-man blood surged in his veins.

"If you are here to solve this mystery, go ahead and unearth the facts, and no one will welcome the truth more than I; but if you are come to throw insults at innocent people, I would enjoy your company for about two minutes on the street."

"Not so fast, not so fast, my young blood," said Elton. "It would be more to the point if you made a clear breast of this matter. Just hand over that money intact and I have no doubt your employer will be disposed to take a lenient view of the case, and it need not come before the courts at all. I think I can promise you that much. I have some influence with the department," he added, pompously, looking about on the crowd of curiosity seekers who had gathered in the store.

"I have nothing to confess," said Burton, hotly. "I know nothing, absolutely nothing, of what became of that package."

"You'll have a job making a jury believe that, and if you turn down the fair offer I made you, I will just place you under arrest."

"By whose authority?"

"By whose authority? By MY authority!"

"Your authority carries no weight with me," said Burton. "It may be as fictitious as the courtesy of the police."

"Well then, look at that," said Elton, leaning forward and exposing a police button.

"That proves nothing. You may have stolen it. Produce your papers."

Burton's anger had risen to a pitch where, although he appeared outwardly calm, every fibre of his being was charged with wild, rioting emotion. The disgrace of suspicion was keen enough, but the crude, brutal manner of the arrest, and Elton's apparent delight in the humiliation he was inflicting, were unbearable. He rightly guessed that the officer had no warrant, but was trying to carry

matters with a high hand to impress his personal importance on the simple country folk about him, and he determined that the glory should not be all on one side.

“You say I stole it!” cried Elton, white with rage. “I’ll put you in irons for this.”

Burton stood behind the grocery counter, a short counter, about ten feet long. The store was now filled with excited onlookers, who, however, kept a little distance from the storm centre.

“Come out from behind that counter!” thundered Elton.

“Come in and bring me out,” challenged Burton. “The people want to see you do it.”

This direct appeal to Elton’s weakness for self-aggrandisement decided the officer.

“Hagan, go in at that end,” he commanded, with the air of a general mustering his legions. “We’ll show this young blackleg where he gets off.”

Hagan, with some trepidation, entered the passage behind the counter and the grocery shelves at one end; Elton forced his way in at the other. Taking in the situation at a glance, Burton caught up a weight off the scales and threw it at the head of the hesitating Hagan; that gentleman, in his eagerness to avoid the missile, slipped on the oily floor and sprawled behind the counter. Burton turned his attention to Elton, who was now upon him; he feinted a blow at the officer’s face, which caused him to throw up his guard, but instead of striking he seized his adversary by the collar and administered a quick jerk forward which landed the policeman full-length flat on the hapless Hagan. A roar of delight greeted Burton’s achievement, for, despite the weight of circumstantial evidence, many of the townspeople, and especially the young men, believed him innocent; and all were delighted to see this indignity heaped upon a bombastic bully who on several previous occasions had rendered himself obnoxious to the people of Plainville by his brutal arrogance. The weight of the law lay heavily upon Hagan, but the onlookers showed no disposition to lighten the burden, and the two men were left to extricate themselves from their narrow quarters as best they could. Elton, being on top, was first to get free, and as he emerged from behind the counter a great cheer broke from the lips of the now thoroughly delighted spectators. But if Elton was angry before, the jeers and laughter, with the

knowledge that his dignity had suffered an irreparable collapse, filled him with maniacal fury. Seeing Burton standing in the middle of the floor he rushed toward him with a roar of imprecations, and the crowd quickly shifted to allow room for action. But in his rage Elton failed to benefit from the lesson he had so recently experienced; he guarded his face from the threatened blow, only to be again seized by the collar and flung headlong on the floor with a violence that left him momentarily stunned. He rose slowly, but the shock had sobered him; he waited until his half-dazed eyes had properly located Burton; then, with the quickness of a cat he threw his hand to his hip and covered the lad with a revolver. Then, for the first time, came to Burton the realization that he too was armed; but while he feared no man with Nature's weapons he was no expert with pistols, and he had sense enough to realise that a fight under such conditions would be suicide. Elton advanced slowly, gloating over the revenge that was now within his grasp, but suddenly his feet shot from under him and he again collapsed on the floor, the revolver flying from his grasp as he fell. Two great hands closed about his throat; his nerveless jaw fell against the puffy wrinkles of his neck, and when he looked up it was into the face of old Dick Matheson, who had wandered in to see the cause of the excitement. Few who knew the mild-mannered farmer deemed him capable of such anger, nor of the vivid flow of sulphuric adjectives which he poured upon the now thoroughly cowed officer.

"Start a rough-house in Plainville, would you? Pull a revolver on this boy? Show these people how much of a fool can sometimes buy himself into a government salary? You, an officer of the law, attempting an unlawful act, and thoroughly trounced by a boy for doing it." He emphasized every sentence with a vicious shake of the helpless head. "Burton would have submitted in a minute to a properly qualified officer. But for you—bah! You are an insult to every honest officer, a stench in the nostrils of Plainville, and if you are within the boundaries of this town in thirty minutes the vigilance committee will call on you." So saying he started to drag his prisoner to the door; willing hands crowded around with assistance, and this victim of a little brief authority was dumped unceremoniously into the street.

Elton gathered himself up and without a word started to walk to the railway station. "Now, get!" was Old Dick's last advice to him. Then turning to the crowd the farmer explained it all, half-apologetically, with the remark, "You see, I knew his father on the Muddywaski."

CHAPTER VI—THE ARM OF THE LAW

"All things are in the Beginning,
All things are to the End,
Though few may know the secret,
And none may comprehend;
And some must paint in error.
And some must paint aright;
For some paint in the shadow,
And some paint in the light."

The Empire Builders.

If there was one thing upon which the people of Plainville prided themselves it was their law-abiding disposition. This is an attribute of Canadians generally, and, it may be said, particularly of the Canadians of the prairie provinces. That the dweller in the land of the maple should possess a reverence for law which does not distinguish any other nationality of the Western Hemisphere is not so much a matter of constitutional difference, or of the law itself; the secret lies in the manner in which the law has been administered and enforced, and in the fortunate circumstance that Canada has, as a rule, been able to secure the services of intelligent and incorruptible officers. The tact, consideration and efficiency of the police have won for them the appreciation and support of the masses, and the remarkable security of life and property prevailing throughout the vast and sparsely settled country is due more to the incorruptible service, gentlemanly bearing and unquestioned personal bravery of her police than to all the rifles in her armouries.

But of recent years the police had fallen, comparatively, into disrepute. The mounted police had been withdrawn, and the local officers were selected more with a view to rewarding past political services, and furnishing a retainer for services yet to be performed, than from any consideration of mental or physical efficiency. This fact was undermining the public loyalty to the police, and the crowd who discussed Burton's attempted arrest as they waited at the post office for their mail were obviously in sympathy with the young man.

“I’m in favour of the law, an’ of the law bein’ carried out,” said Big Jack McTavish, “but when my hired man thinks he’s more important about the farm than I am, I gen’rally manage pretty soon to make a change. An’ that seems to be about the attitood of these here policemen like we have now-a-days. We hire ’em, an’ give ’em a job an’ a clean soot, an’ they ain’t got the crease outa their pants before they get the idea we was just created for their convenyunce.”

“Taint just the police,” said Tim O’Brien; “it’s the whole joodishary. Where do they get the judges, will you tell me that? Lawyers, bedad, an’ no recoord uv their conversion, nayther.”

“Wheest, man,” said Big Jack. “Don’t ye know that’s contempt of coort? You can criticise ev’ry public official from the pound-keeper to the king, but your thoughts about the joodishary must be kept to yourself. That’s because this is a free country. All the same, Tim, I don’t know that the contempt gets any less by bein’ bottled up.”

Tim removed his pipe preparatory to a more lengthy speech.

“Oi mind when Ould Dave Cottrell was up before the beak, which in them days was Noah Chapman, fer shootin’ a dog o’ Mrs. Mandle’s. The dog had worried Ould Dave’s sheep, and one day, d’ye moind, the ould fellow up an’ shot him. Av coorse, the decision was against Dave, an’ as he pays his fine he up an’ says, ‘That’s what comes uv bein’ tried by a relative uv the deceased,’ says he.

“‘Oi fine ye foive dollars for contimpt uv coort,’ says ould Chapman, just loike the Czar sintencing a gineral to be shot, he says, ‘an’ what’s more, ye’ll pay it afore ye go out.’

“Ould Dave looked at him a minute, and thin he pulled out tin dollars an’ handed it to him, solemn as if he was gettin’ married.

“‘Kape the change,’ says ould Dave.”

There was a general laugh at this recountal of old Dave’s wit, when one of the crowd mentioned that a “policeman-lookin’” fellow had got off the train and gone up to Gardiner’s.

“That’ll be another come out to round up young Burton,” said Big Jack. “It’s a pity they wouldn’t send the whole force an’ be done with it.”

“There’ll be no need of any more,” said another. “Burton will come round quiet enough this time. That fellow yesterday just rubbed on a raw spot on his nerves, and he got what was comin’ to him.”

It proved to be as the last speaker had predicted. Upon the failure of Elton to land his man it dawned upon those in authority that it might be as well to send someone a little more familiar with the game, and Officer Macdonald was placed on the case. Upon his arrival at the store he had a long talk with Gardiner, and finally Burton was called into the private office. He recounted briefly the facts of the case as far as he knew them.

“The situation is most unfortunate, Burton,” said Macdonald. “It is not for me to judge you, nor even to imply that you have guilty knowledge of this matter. However, as you understand, I am sent here to unravel this case if possible, and I must act on the evidence at hand. Further evidence may develop at a later date and entirely change the aspect of the affair, but at present I must act upon the information available, and I feel that that information demands that a warrant for your arrest be issued and you placed in custody.”

“The warrant is unnecessary,” said Burton, “except as a matter of formality. I am ready to go with you.”

“Hang it, Gardiner, I hate to do this thing,” said Macdonald. “I’ve been hunting criminals for twenty years, and my judgment fails me if we have the right one this time.”

“It is certainly very baffling,” Gardiner replied. “As I have told him different times, I am convinced that Burton is innocent, but, as you say, the evidence just now points rather strongly against him. It is a difficult situation all round.”

“Burton,” said the officer, “there is no use of you and me walking down the street together. People in these little towns are so fond of a scene, and I like to disappoint them. Mr. Sempter, I believe, is a magistrate; you might go down to his office and await me there. I will be responsible for you until after your preliminary trial, and then no doubt you can arrange bail.”

“I will be pleased to go bail for you,” interrupted Gardiner. “Telephone me when you reach that stage and I will fix it up for Mr. Sempter.”

The consideration, and the contrast in treatment, brought the tears to the boy’s

eyes. “It is very good of you—both of you,” he stammered. “I only hope that in the end you may know your confidence was not misplaced.”

The preliminary hearing before a magistrate was held the following day, and the little courtroom was crowded to the doors. No new evidence, at first, was adduced. Gardiner told about leaving the package in the safe, and finding it gone on Monday morning. The finding of Burton’s keys in the lock of the cash drawer seemed the most damaging evidence offered by the prosecution. No witnesses were called for the defence, but Burton on his own behalf explained that he had gone to the cash drawer late Sunday night for stamps to mail some letters, and knew nothing more of the matter. The magistrate was about concluding that there was not sufficient evidence to warrant holding the accused, when a new and rather unwilling witness was introduced. It was Billy Haynes, hardware clerk.

“What do you know of this case, Mr. Haynes?” asked the magistrate.

“Nothing,” answered the young man.

“Nothing!” exclaimed the magistrate. “Then why are you here?”

“Indeed, and it’s not my wish that brings me here, sir, and I really know nothing about the case, but I was foolish enough to say down town that Burton had bought a revolver from me Monday morning. He said he thought he would shoot gophers with it.”

“What have you to say about this?” said Mr. Sempter, addressing Burton. “The purchase of a revolver is not in itself an offence, but, in conjunction with the evidence we already have, it does not improve the appearance of your case. Can you state any logical reason why you should go to a hardware store the first thing Monday morning—the first thing after this robbery appears to have been committed—and buy a revolver?”

“I fear my reason will hardly seem logical,” said Burton, “but after I left the store Sunday night a bottle flew by my head and smashed against the wall. I tried to find my assailant, but it was very dark, and I could see no one. I felt that I was likely to be the object of attack from unknown sources, and I made up my mind to buy a revolver.”

The magistrate looked the young man over for a full minute. “I am sorry for your

sake that this last evidence came in," he said at length. "Of course, your explanation of the purchase of the revolver may be quite correct, but it is a little hard to believe that a young man like you, who appears to be quite popular in the town"—there was a murmur of approval and a nodding of heads among the young men in the crowd—"I say it is a little hard to believe that anyone is lying in wait for you with murderous intent. In view of this new development and the mystery of the whole matter, I feel that I must let this case go before a judge. You will be required to appear at the fall assizes to answer to the charge of stealing a package said to contain two thousand dollars from the safe of Alfred Gardiner. You should have little difficulty in obtaining bail, and I will be glad to give you what assistance I can in that connection."

Burton heard the words as though he were already under sentence, but he recognised the spirit of fairness that prompted Mr. Sempter, and he could only say, "Thank you, sir."

Gardiner had pressed up to the magistrate's desk. "Let me go bail," he said. "I will answer for Burton's appearance at the proper time."

"It can no doubt be arranged," answered Mr. Sempter. "In fact, I am so confident that your bail will be accepted that I will take it upon myself to place the young man at liberty at once, on his parole to appear again when required. You promise that, Burton?"

"I do," the lad answered, and was immediately released from custody.

The first who spoke to him as he was about to leave the building was Billy Haynes, the hardware clerk.

"Gee, Burt, old man, I'm sorry I got you into that mess. That's what comes of blatting things in a two-by-four burg like this. If I'd kept my trap shut this whole thing would have fallen through. Old man Sempter was just ready to turn you loose with a clean sheet. Of course you know I don't believe a word of it—that is, that you had anything to do with this affair. Whoever threw that beer bottle knows more about it than any of us. You ain't sore at me, Burt, are you?"

"No, I'm not sore. On the whole, it seems better that the matter should go before a judge and be settled for ever. If Mr. Sempter had turned me loose, as you say, the robbery would have remained as much a mystery as before, and some people would always have thought me guilty. I can't see how it is to be accomplished,

but I hope and trust that the real facts will come to light before fall."

"Sure they will," said Billy. "Everybody believes in you. Look at Gardiner there, stepping right up to go your bail. There's a score of others would do the same, but it was mighty white of him." In fact, Gardiner's magnanimity was the principal topic of discussion by the crowd which now stood in groups about the courtroom floor.

At the door Burton was met by Harry Grant, who shook his arm as though he intended to acquire that member.

"Easy, Harry," Raymond cried. "Goodness, spare the arm. They may give me hard labour, and then I'll need it. One would think I had just been acquitted, instead of sent down for trial."

"So you are acquitted—acquitted with honour," exclaimed his friend. "When a magistrate accepts parole on his own responsibility, and the aggrieved party offers bail for the accused, a man's innocence is as good as established. But say, Burton, why didn't you tell about that bottle incident before? That's the only clue to the whole affair. The finding of the keys was nothing. I know about the letters and I know some one who would have got up in court and sworn to your errand, if you had given her a chance. Why didn't you?"

"Harry, your cousin's name must not be connected with this affair. It is good of you—and her—to suggest it, but she really must have nothing to do with it."

"When you know my cousin better you'll handle that word 'must' with more care, young man. She's not one of those girls who can be 'musted' into silence when a friend's reputation is at stake. Before the trial comes off she'll cut a big figure in this case, or I'm not Harry Grant. By the way, when are you coming out to see us again?"

"Not until this thing is cleared up, and I am either proved innocent or—pshaw, can't you see that it is out of the question at present?"

"No, I can't, and if you don't come willingly I'll bring in one of the plough teams and 'snake' you out," laughed Harry, as they parted at the corner. "So long. I'll see you at the store one of these days."

Burton went back to his work in the store with a heart lighter than he could have

thought possible. He was under the shadow of a crime, but in the hour of adversity he was beginning to discover the worth of a few true friends. Gardiner's action in guaranteeing his bail had gone far toward removing the sting of the suspicion with which he felt his employer had regarded him the morning after the robbery. Harry Grant's old time friendliness seemed intensified by the circumstances, and Billy Haynes' sincere regret for his share in the affair also helped to lighten the load. But most of all, and most significant of all, was the fact that Miss Vane was prepared to stand by him; nay, that she would *insist* on standing by him, even to the length of testifying, if necessary, in his defence. A great pride filled his heart as he thought of it, and with the pride came the determination that come what would he would fight the fight through to a finish. He was convinced that there was not sufficient evidence to convict him, but he would be satisfied with no negative results. He must be exonerated; his reputation must emerge without a stain. And then, perhaps—

That night on his way to supper he passed Riles, who came reeling out of a bar-room, and the leer on the farmer's face was not a good thing to see. "And so, young meddler," he hissed, "you are buying revolvers now, but I guess you'll soon be where you won't meddle in decent folks' affairs again for awhile, eh?"

CHAPTER VII—ONLY A BARNARDO BOY

"They'll abuse him as a youngster, they will mock him as a man,
They'll make his life a thorny path in every way they can,
Till he curses his existence and the day that it began,
And he wishes he was rotting in the sod."

The Empire Builders.

Hiram Riles and his wife lived on a farm about two miles from the Grant homestead. They had come out from the East in the early days, when Riles was a strong, sinewy fellow to whom money-getting had not yet become a mania, and his wife still retained some of the roses and some of the sentiment of youth. But it's a hardy rose that survives twenty years of pioneer life, and it's a deep-rooted sentiment that can weather prosperity unelevated by culture and unsweetened by self-sacrifice. And in the Riles' home culture had come to be a thing misunderstood, and self-sacrifice a thing unknown. There was only one end in life—to make money; and there was only one way this could be done—by labour which amounted to slavery, and stinginess which amounted to theft. Nothing which could not be expressed in dollars and cents had any value to Riles; no doctrine but mammon-worship had any part in his creed.

The years had dragged on and he had prospered after the standard of the world, gaining money and losing everything that money cannot buy. Quarter section had been added to quarter section, bought when land was cheap and paid for by dint of untiring labour and at the sacrifice of physical comforts and mental advantages which Riles considered of no moment. But as, labouring from dawn to dusk, he added quarter to quarter, the time came when even his dauntless energy could not keep up with the growth of the farm. True, his wife helped him to the limit of her strength, driving the plough and the binder, stooking in the fields, or, drenched to the waist, working in the garden on days when the rain prevented harvesting, and milking her dozen cows after the neighbours were in bed. She was a model wife, as Riles admitted, but even in the admission he took rather more credit to himself for selecting and "breaking her in" than he allowed to her for her strength and industry. But when their combined efforts could no

longer furnish the labour needed on the farm, Riles found it necessary to get a hired man. It took him months to make up his mind that the expenditure was unavoidable, but at length he drove to town and announced to a group of idle men that he was looking for a good strong man, not afraid of work, and would pay twenty dollars a month, board and keep.

Riles honestly believed that as soon as he made this offer all the idle men in the town would crowd around him competing for the position, and he was not prepared for the indifference with which they regarded it.

“Well, who wants it?” he demanded. “Speak up quick, I got no time to lose. I’ve a field of oats there waitin’ stookin’, and if you fellows don’t want the job there’s lots that does. Who’s comin’?”

Nobody moved, and at last one of the men said, “I guess you better try somewhere else, Mr. Riles. Everybody here seems to know you.”

“They do, hey? And what of it? Ain’t I good? Don’t I pay my bills? Just yuh walk down to the bank and ask ’em if Hiram Riles ever turned down a bill he owed, and I guess you’ll find——”

“I wasn’t thinking about the bills,” the man replied. “You pay them because you have to. You’re worth it, and you can’t get out of it. But you’re as much a slave-driver as ever cracked a whip over a nigger in a cotton field. Nobody ’at knows you’ll work for you. You better get a green Englishman—some poor fool that doesn’t know any more than be a victim for a blood-sucker of your class.”

With an oath Riles jumped from his buckboard and struck a savage blow at the frank labourer, but years of hardship in the fields had taken greater toll than he guessed. The fist he aimed at the face of his critic cut a circle in thin air as a sledge-hammer blow caught Riles under the jaw and he fell with tremendous force against a hub of the buckboard. When he staggered to his feet the flesh of his forehead was cut in two and the eyes lobed forward as though they would fall out.

Riles had the wound dressed by a doctor and met the evening train, where he engaged a harvester just out from Ontario. They drove home through the darkness, the hired man so tired with three days and nights of bumping in a slat-seated colonist car that he would have fallen out of the buckboard had Riles not held him in. When the horses were stabled the new comer was shown to his

bedroom, which was reached by climbing up steps nailed to the studs of the shanty where Riles and his wife lived. In the loft was a little window looking out of a gable, a straw mattress covered with two discarded horse-blankets lay in a corner, and a kitchen chair, from which the back had been broken, completed the furniture of the little room. It was, however, also used as a store-house for old clothes and for drying vegetables, and the mice scampered in great excitement at the approach of the lantern.

Long before daylight Riles wakened the hired man by thumping the wall with a stick of firewood. “Come, yuh barnyard savage,” he said, in his playful humour, “roll out. Do yuh think I’m goin’ to pay yuh twenty dollars a month to *sleep*? Get down here an’ get at those oats, an’ be quick about it, or I’ll fire yuh before noon.”

The sleepy harvester crawled out of the musty blankets, drew on his clothes, and opened his suit-case. From a jumble of socks and underwear he drew a revolver and a murderous-looking knife. Slinging the suit-case by a strap over his shoulder, with the knife between his teeth, the revolver in one hand and the lantern in the other, he made the precipitous descent into the kitchen.

“What in thunder does this mean?” demanded the astonished Riles, as he caught sight of the animated arsenal.

“I’m going after those oats,” the man replied, in a hoarse whisper. “They’re wild oats, ain’t they?”

“No, they’re not wild oats, my smart young fellow. They’re tame oats, if yuh know the difference.”

“Then if they’re tame oats,” said the other, in a wheedling tone, “if they’re tame oats, don’t you think, Mr. Riles, if we were careful, we might manage to sneak up on them in daylight?” And before the astonished Riles could find an answer the hired man continued, “Ta, ta, Mr. Riles. Much obliged for the night’s lodging. Hope you catch the oats,” and had swung out into the darkness to find his way back to town.

His first experience with hired men was rather disconcerting, but out of it dawned an important light. The illumination came upon Riles as he stooked the oats himself that forenoon. After dinner he drove back to town and called casually upon Bill Perkins, the lawyer. It was no part of Riles’ policy to

encourage any such useless class as lawyers or doctors by paying a fee, but he usually succeeded in getting the desired information in process of conversation, and without appearing to have sought it. He had already benefited several times by advice given by Perkins in this way, and the lawyer had determined to be even with him.

Perkins was busy with a transfer of land when Riles dropped in, and for a few minutes the conversation was of crops and harvest and the weather. Skilfully enough the farmer introduced the subject of hired help, lamenting how difficult it was to get good men and how the hired men now-a-days took all the profit from the farm and left the owner with the expense, in all of which Perkins concurred. As he was about to leave the office Riles remarked—

“Oh, by the way, I guess there’ll be a job fer one o’ yuh fellows one o’ these days. I heard this mornin’ of a hired man quittin’ work before the month was up, and the farmer wouldn’t pay him, an he’s goin’ to have the law on him. How’ll a case o’ that kind come out, do yuh think?”

“If the servant left without due provocation before the period of his employment had expired, he will have difficulty in collecting his wages.”

“I was thinkin’ so, Mr. Perkins. Well, it’s a fine afternoon, an’ I must be gettin’ back.”

“Just a minute, Mr. Riles,” the lawyer called, as his client was stepping out of the office. “There is a small fee for the information just given you. Five dollars, please.”

“Five devils!” shouted Mr. Riles. “You go to ——. I beg yer pardon, Mr. Perkins. I didn’t mean to be so out-spoken, but yer little joke kinda took me by surprise. Ha! ha! a very good one, too. There’s no bein’ even with a lawyer.”

“It’s no joke, Mr. Riles. You’ve been sponging your legal advice around this office long enough. To-day you will pay for it or I will collect it at court.”

“I’ll pay it, will I? I’ll see yuh in hell first,” said the farmer, now thoroughly beside himself.

“Very well,” said Perkins. “There’ll be no trouble here. But if it isn’t paid by Saturday night you know what will happen.”

Riles started down town in a rage, and Perkins reached for his telephone.

“Mr. Bradshaw? Hello, Bradshaw, this is Perkins speaking. Just had a visit from Riles—sponging advice as usual. Socked him a fiver and threatened if he didn’t come through by Saturday night I’d have him up. He’s mad enough to eat the town, but he’ll likely be round to you. Fix him plenty.... That’s right, George, go to it.” Mr. Perkins set down his telephone, sat back in his chair, and indulged in one of the few hearty smiles to which he found occasion to treat himself.

Meanwhile Riles, stampeding down town, reached the door of Bradshaw’s office. Bradshaw stood on the step drinking in the afternoon autumn sunshine. The warm rays rested graciously on his slightly bald cranium.

“Good-day, Mr. Riles. How is it you’re not cutting to-day?”

Riles collected himself, and forced a smile. “A little business in town, Mr. Bradshaw. I’ve just been in talkin’ with that measly opposition o’ yours, and what d’ye s’pose the cur did?”

“Who, Perkins? Oh, you can never tell what he’ll do. I gave it up long ago.”

“Well, sir, we was just talkin’ about things in general an’ I told him likely there’d be a case one of these days about a man quittin’ before his time was up, an’ I asked him how’d it likely come out. He said the quitter would lose, an’ yuh can eat me, Bradshaw, if he didn’t try to charge me five dollars fer it, and threatened soot if I didn’t pay by Saturday night.”

Bradshaw laughed. “You can never be up to Perkins,” he said. “But I must say it serves you right for going to him at all. Why didn’t you come to me in the first place?”

“That’s what I will do next time, you may be sure. But he can’t collect that five, can he, George?”

“I’m afraid he can, Hiram. Yes, I rather think you’d better settle with him.”

“Well, it’s a strange law. Lawyers get everything their own way.”

“Once in awhile it happens that way,” Mr. Bradshaw agreed. “And when you’re settling anyway there will be a ten-spot coming to me.”

“To you? For what?”

“Legal advice,” answered Mr. Bradshaw, placing his thumbs in the upper pockets of his vest with an air of great complacency. “Haven’t I just told you you’d have to pay it?”

Riles was so dumbfounded that he pulled out ten dollars, threw it at the smiling lawyer, and proceeded down street without a word.

But having paid fifteen dollars for legal advice Riles was too shrewd a business man not to profit by it. That night he engaged another “barnyard savage,” being careful to hire him for a month. The man worked for four days and quit. Riles refused to pay him any wages, and hired another stranger on the same terms. In this way he was able to get through the fall without any direct outlay for help.

But the system was not very satisfactory. Too much time was lost hunting for new men, and the labourers always quit before they got into Riles’ way of managing the farm. The suggestion of the man who knocked him into the wheel of the buckboard stayed with him almost as tenaciously as the scar he then received. “Hire a green Englishman—some poor fool that doesn’t know any more than be a victim of a blood-sucker of your class.” Of course the words were rather strong—even Riles objected to them—but the sentiment was all right. Besides, it was doing the Englishman a good turn. It brought him away from a congested country and gave him an insight into life in a new land. With industry and application even an Englishman might become—*might become*—as prosperous and successful a farmer as he himself! There was something for a young man to look forward to!

A good scheme had been worked by one or two of Riles’s neighbours. These men—transplanted Englishmen themselves—who, to tell the truth, had made a very indifferent success of agriculture, had hit upon the idea of giving instruction to young Englishmen of good family in the art of farming as it is practised in the Canadian West. They had no difficulty in finding fond fathers who, for reasons that need not be entered into here, were anxious that their sons should have a “colonial” experience, and were willing to pay from fifty to two hundred pounds a head per year (according to the state of the paternal exchequer and the desirability of the exodus) for the board, lodging and instruction of their sons in the “colony.” Of course it never occurred to these worthy parents that there are state-controlled institutions for giving just the instruction needed, where their

sons would be brought in contact with the best influences in the land. Even had they known of these institutions they would probably have preferred to place their young hopefuls with some old acquaintance whose Munchausian reports of his success in Canada were accepted as gospel, but whose real accomplishments consisted mainly in supporting the brewery and dodging the bailiff—two occupations which usually go hand in hand.

But Riles was not of the blood. He knew no one in England, and one or two advances which he made to the English neighbours mentioned with a view to "getting in on a good thing" were met with a coldness which amounted to a rebuff. There remained only one thing to be done—adopt a Barnardo boy. Riles would have much preferred a grown-up man, but on consultation with some of the neighbours who had adopted these boys he was assured that they could be depended upon to do as much work as a man, and were more easily controlled. Twenty years ago the latter consideration would not have appealed to Riles, but he recalled the incident where he received his scar, and he knew enough about Englishmen to know that if they excelled in anything it was in their ability to protect themselves from physical damage, and incidentally to administer a thrashing to their assailants. On the whole, perhaps a boy would suit his purpose better.

Before being entrusted with the foster-parentage of an English orphan, Riles found that he must have his application supported by the recommendation of two reputable citizens and a resident clergyman. He at once appealed to his neighbour, David Grant, than whom there was no more respected farmer in the community. He hardly was prepared for Mr. Grant's frankness.

"No, Hiram, I can't sign that paper. If one of my boys, ten or twelve years old, were to be left an orphan, I wouldn't want him to come under your influence for the next five years of his life. You're a good farmer, Riles, but being a good farmer is one thing, and being a good father's another. A great many people in this country seem to think it more important that a man should be able to break in a colt than bring up a boy."

"Oh, well," Riles answered, good naturedly enough, "if it was yer son of course it 'ud be different. They've always had a good home, better'n most boys, I'm thinkin'. But these English brats, herded out of the streets an' turned loose in this country to live or die—it's a charity for anyone to take them in. They don't know nothin', an' never will, but eat an' sleep an' lie an' steal when they get a chance.

They’ve got to be broke in severe, an’ I reckon Hiram Riles can do it ’s well as the next one. ’Course, if yuh’ve got conscientious objections,” continued Riles, the habitual sneer creeping back into his disfigured face, “I won’t press you to sign the paper.”

“After a speech like that I think you had better not,” said Grant, quietly, but there was a significance in his voice that did not appear on the surface.

Nothing daunted, Riles called on his two English neighbours who were giving instruction in agriculture at so much per head. They signed his recommendation without question. A clergyman who had never been in Riles’ home, who had never met Mrs. Riles, who knew nothing of their style of living, put his name to the paper, as he did so speaking some cheap platitudes about the privilege of giving a Christian home to “one of these little ones.”

And so it came about that Wilfred Vickery, already introduced to the reader as “London,” became the bond-servant of Hiram Riles and his wife, Eliza Riles.

For a week or so the little orphan boy found everything so strange and unreal that he went around as one in a trance. Pure English was difficult enough for him, but the slangy colloquialism of the Riles’ home was almost unintelligible. Half the time he did not know what they said to him, but stared in a vacant, meaningless way which they ascribed to downright stupidity. When he spoke they mocked his language, although using an equally corrupted tongue themselves. For a few weeks, while under the direct care of responsible officers of the Home, the little fellow had experienced a kindness and a personal interest which had begun to unfold before him a life of which he had never dreamed. He had been taught to sing a few hymns, he had been taught to utter a simple prayer, he had been taught that there is a great Father to whom every child is dearer than to even the kindest earthly father. He had never known what an earthly father was, but in the new, great land to which they were going he should soon know—he should find that for every little child in all God’s world some heart beats with the joy of a father’s love, some bosom swells with the wealth of a mother’s devotion. He had been taught these things, and some glimpse of that great real world which lies just beyond the realm of the intellect had come to his poor dwarfed soul and fired his spirit with the unutterable yearning that no man has ever answered in terms of time and sense. He had learned that life is not merely a battle to fill the belly, that the earth is not only for fighting and swearing in, that Love is a *real* thing, more powerful than hate. The slumbering germ of his

spiritual life, deafened by a decade of London's roar, had been wakened by a brief contact with kindness, and in the birth of imagination the world had taken on a new interest and a new possibility. All these hidden emotions, touched to sudden life, were clamouring for expression, for utterance, when he had come—to this.

The boy's disillusionment was terrible and complete. They thought him stupid, but he found the guise of stupidity serve his purpose well, and he was more cunning than they. He stole to fill his stomach; he lied to cover his theft. He shirked his labour whenever he could; he destroyed property whenever he dared. When they cuffed him he cursed them; when they swore at him he swore back, and he had the advantage of vocabulary. When they made him milk cows he would pour the milk on the ground and say the cow kicked it; when he was old enough to drive a team he would let it run away whenever opportunity offered. He was to have been sent to school, but he went only on those rare occasions when nothing could be found for him to do on the farm, but he was compelled to write periodical letters to the Home saying how happy he was and how kind Mr. and Mrs. Riles were to him. He was held up as an object of contempt before neighbours and strangers; he was the butt of their coarse humour and the victim of their bullying authority.

The kind officers of the Home had taught him a little prayer, and told him never to forget the good people who were to be his foster-parents in the new land. And every night as he crawled to his musty mattress and blankets in the mouse-chamber already described he would kneel by the broken chair and repeat:

> "Jesus, tender shepherd, hear me,
> Bless Thy little lamb to-night,
> Through the darkness be Thou near me.
> Keep me safe till morning's light.
> God bless Mr. and Mrs. Riles and make me a good boy, for Jesus' sake, Amen."

He had repeated this prayer nightly for months. One night he had difficulty getting the calves into their pen; they would run every direction except the way he would have them go. He still had his cows to milk, his pigs to feed, his wood and water to carry in, but the calves refused to be housed. When he had them almost in they broke away, and raced into the darkness of the pasture field, jumping and frisking in appreciation of the joke. He ran after them as fast as his

tired little legs would take him, sobbing and swearing as he ran, but without success. They could not be found in the darkness, and as he came back, defeated and utterly played out, he met Riles, who had just returned from town and was none the better for his potations. Without a word the ruffian knocked the boy down with a swinging blow on the face, and kicked him almost into insensibility. As he crawled to bed that night, stiff, bruised and battered, he knelt before his broken chair and repeated his nightly prayer. When he came to the words “God bless Mr. and Mrs. Riles” he stopped. The significance of the words dawned upon him in a way he had never quite understood. He was only a little boy, against whom environment and ancestry seemed to have conspired, but he was no hypocrite. He was praying for a man he hated, and the words stuck in his teeth. For a long time he remained there on his knees, looking at the misty light in the half-blackened lantern, and thinking, thinking. He was fighting one of those great fights which come earlier in boyhood than we sometimes think, and which decide in large measure the whole course of after life.

Finally his jaws closed with a snap. “Damn Mr. Riles,” he said, and climbed into bed.

CHAPTER VIII—A MYSTERIOUS ACQUAINTANCE

> “There are times when most folks figure that their life has been a blank;
> You may be a homeless hobo or director of a bank,
> But the thought will catch you nappin’—catch you sometime unawares—
> That your life has been a failure, and that no one really cares.”
>
> *Prairie Born.*

As the spring lengthened into summer the business in Gardiner’s store increased. The wheat had stooled well, and a couple of showers early in May had relieved the drought that threatens before the thunder-storms of June and July set in. The country was glorious in its verdure of growing crops and green pastures, ponds of bright water not yet tinged with the murkiness of vegetation, and little streams murmuring through the night on their easy descent to the lower levels. Everything pointed to a prosperous season, and the farmers, who, with Western optimism, always buy on the prospects of the future, were patronising the local merchants liberally. Gardiner and Burton had so far been able to keep up with the rush, but when George Graves arrived on the afternoon train in search of a position in a store, and showed Gardiner his references, he was promptly engaged.

From the first Graves showed an interest in Burton amounting to an attachment. He tried to get rooms at Mrs. Goode’s in order that they might be near each other, but the landlady too was enjoying a prosperous season, and was unable to accommodate him.

“No, Mr. Grain, my house is quite plumb full, more’s the pity, an’ I’m thinkin’ o’ you when I say it. It don’t take folks long to find where they can get a good meal, an’ there ain’t a boarder at my table but speaks for himself. William!”—this in response to her husband’s footsteps in the hall—“William, go down and get the mail. I’m looking for a letter from the new girl.” Mrs. Goode considered her inferior half a poor advertisement, and generally contrived to keep him out of the way when customers were in prospect.

“No, Mr. Grange,” she continued, “the work has got so heavy, what with all home cookin’ and sweepin’ the upstairs every day, for if there’s one thing I says a young man wants it’s a clean room and a good meal that’s cooked all through, an’ what with it all I’m getting a new girl, all the way from Torontuh, an’ it’ll be doublin’ up as it is when she gets here, an’ two sleepin’ in the parlour already.”

Graves’ disappointment was so evident that Mrs. Goode was touched by the implied compliment, and ventured to suggest, “Maybe Mr. Burtle would share with you.”

This seemed a solution, but Burton was one of those young men who enjoy their own company too much to forfeit it altogether, and although sorry to refuse he could not be persuaded to let the new clerk room with him. Graves, however, took no umbrage at Burton’s refusal; on the contrary, he seemed to seek the boy’s companionship more than ever, and they soon found they had many interests in common and proved to be congenial associates.

But in Burton’s eyes, at least, the arrival of the new clerk was much eclipsed by the arrival of the new “girl” for Mrs. Goode’s boarding-house. Polly Lester was a lithe, dark young thing, with black eyes accustomed to sleep dreamily through ordinary experiences, but they glowed like a flame-shot thundercloud when aroused. Her hair, black and luxuriant, her well-cut nose, thin but sensitive lips, and chin that sat in a square, feminine defiance made her a girl to demand a second glance. The neck sloped gently into the fold of her dress, clasped with a modest black ornament at the throat, and when she spoke it was in a voice low and vibrant, suggestive of moonlight walks and confidences whispered in a friendly ear. Her step was quiet, almost stealthy, but every poise from the ankle to the chin spoke courage and self-reliance. A strange girl, this, to leave a city and seek a menial position in a country boarding-house. She was a girl to direct, to command, to engineer, and to execute; but here she waited on tables, made beds and swept floors. When she looked at Burton, before she had so much as spoken his name, he felt himself under the witching power of those eyes—eyes that looked into him so calmly, but yet with such irresistible attraction.

One night, a few days after Polly Lester’s arrival at Plainville, Burton closed the store and walked down to the little stream which the country people dignified with the name of river. It was late in June, and heavy rains had swollen the creek until it slipped by in rapid, muddy silence. Through the clear evening air came the sound of the baseballers practising for the great tournament on Dominion

Day, now almost at hand; although a mile away he heard the bass voice of the umpire calling balls and strikes, and the cheers of the townspeople who sat about the diamond when one of the boys made a hit or a sensational catch or contributed to a double play. And although he could not hear them he knew that in another part of the town eight young men and women were flushed and laughing in the height of their excitement over a close fought game of tennis, while on a score of verandahs little groups lounged after the heat of the day and speculated on the outcome of “The First,” or sipped ice cream and nibbled cake. A muskrat across the stream sat on the muddy bank and shot occasional cheeky glances at the intruder; a bird in the willow overhead twittered snatches of her evening lullaby. The very air was vital and vitalising, the lungs leaped in response to the optimistic oxygen. It was a good world—for some. But to Burton it was a hard world, and it was growing harder. He was under the shadow of a crime, and it seemed the shadow would darken into a cloud that should blight his whole life. Time was passing on, and nothing had occurred to relieve him of the weight of suspicion which had fallen upon him. He would have to face it out, he would probably be acquitted, but simply for lack of evidence. His wages were small; under the circumstances he could ask no more; indeed, he felt under an obligation to Gardiner for retaining him in his employ at all. He had had a conference with his father, and the memory did not reassure him. His father had made it plain that even he was reserving judgment. A good lawyer would be engaged and every chance given the lad to prove his innocence, but if he failed! Then there was Miss Vane. He had met her once or twice in the store since the robbery, and she had spoken to him as though nothing had happened. Indeed, he even thought there was a soft tenderness in her words which he had not detected before, but whether of love or pity, how should he discern? In any case he could say nothing, do nothing, hope nothing until this ordeal was over. And what could he hope then? What dared he hope? It was folly, folly! He should love her always; he should paint her always in the portrait gallery of his soul as he had seen her that exquisite morning, ages ago, creamy white, from the tip of her shoes to the tip of her hat, save where the rose nestled in her hair and a little brooch glowed against the pink-veined ermine of her throat. Ah, that glimpse that comes but once, that treasure to be hoarded for ever in the chambers of the mind, where no minions of the law could find it, where no judge and jury could wrest it away, where even life and death could not lay tax, that was his, his for ever, for ever.... And as his eyes moistened with the joy of that great revelation a vision rose from the mist, dimly and undefined at first, but gradually revealing itself as clear as if cut from a block of granite—a vision of raven hair and eyes with the slumbering glow of the pent-up heavens. Burton gazed as though at an

apparition, and the fine features of Polly Lester stood reflected in the mirror of his brain. At first the truth numbed him, but presently he had grasped it at its real value. The polygamous instinct of the human mind crushed in with a cruel shattering of ideals; his soul was running riot with a chaos of overturned emotions.

He sprang to his feet. “My God,” he cried, “and must I lose this too? Can I not guard even the treasures of my own heart?”

“You are agitated, Mr. Burton,” said a low voice at his side. “Have you been seeing visions—in the water?”

He turned and looked in the face of Polly Lester.

“Not visions,” he managed to say, “but reflections.”

“Reflections should not disturb you, Raymond”—she used his first name as though she had been his mother—“but you are straining your nervous system to the breaking point. Here is a dry log—shall we sit down?”

She led him to the log and seated herself beside him. The sun was setting after the long midsummer day, and the smooth, muddy water took on a surface of quicksilver. Their faces looked back at them out of the stream, and up from the young man’s memory rushed a similar scene, staged at Crotton’s Crossing. And just as the thought struck home, by a trick of the waving water the faces blended into one!

“You wonder that I, who have known you a week, should follow you here, do you not?” she was saying. “I should have stayed behind, I should have let you learn my secret for yourself. It is woman’s lot to carry her secret in her heart, guarded as a precious thing, until the object of that secret pries it forth. But I am not a woman, as other women are. I defy traditions; I defy conventions. I claim the right God gave me to live my life as I will, where I will, how I will, with whom I will. When first I looked into you—when first your eyes met mine, I knew—what you knew. Why should we deceive ourselves? Why should we mock our own destinies?”

“You speak strangely,” said Burton. “I—I do not understand.”

“Why do you lie to me, Raymond?” she asked, still in that low voice, deep and

vibrant, but without a suggestion of anger. “Why do you seek to conceal—that which we both know?”

“You are a strange woman. I do not understand you.”

“Oh, that is different. Of course you do not understand me. Nobody does. I am so different. Instead of pretending I don’t care for you, instead of pretending I don’t know that you care for me, I admit it all. I am frank. I am truthful. I am, as you say, a strange woman.”

“What are you doing in Plainville?” the young man demanded. “Why do you work for Mrs. Goode, sweeping her boarders’ rooms—a menial servant, a—a chambermaid?”

“Fie on you, sir!” she cried, but there was a playful note in her voice. “All honest work is honourable. There is nothing menial—except being menial.”

“But you—you don’t need to do this. You are educated. Your speech proclaims it. I have seen your handwriting; it is that of a business woman. You have appearance. You have presence. You don’t need to do this work. Why do you do it?”

“Why should I answer that question?” she parried.

“I don’t know. I suppose there is no reason. But you said you—you loved me ____”

“I didn’t.”

“You let me know it.”

“You divined it. You found it out yourself. That saves me. If I had told you I would be a shameless woman, but if you find it out my honour is unscathed. Such are the decrees of convention.”

“At any rate, now you have admitted it. Will you answer my question. Why are you in Plainville?”

“Do you admit as much? You are interested in me. Do yourself the justice to believe that I am interested in you.”

“Admit that I love you? Yes, I believe I do.”

The sun was down. Dusk was settling over the plain. The water ran black before them. They sat for some time, gazing into its smooth depths. At last she broke the silence.

“Do you know, Mr. Burton, you are rather undemonstrative in your declaration of love.” There was a sly, fascinating banter in her voice.

Burton made no answer. He saw a figure in white, and heard a voice saying, “I have sometimes thought I could, perhaps, love a man, if I found one who was not a liar.” And he was wondering, weighing these two women, each so powerful in her personality, although differing so much in manner of expressing it. Miss Vane he understood, or at least thought he did, but this girl was something so altogether different. He knew that most men, and all women, would question her motives; he would be sincere with her. At least he would not be a liar, active or passive.

“Perhaps I admitted more than I really meant,” he ventured, at length.

“More than was true?”

“Yes, more than was quite true.”

“Then you love another. It is that love that has made you honest with me. I congratulate her. Tell me about her.”

“You take rejection easily.”

“Silly boy! A woman is never rejected while she lives. Is she pretty?”

“Yes, as pretty as you.”

“How nice! And good?”

“Yes, better than you.”

“Now I *am* interested. How quickly you learn to be honest! I am hunting the world for a man who isn’t a liar.”

The similarity of the expression was not lost on Burton, but his companion continued:

“And you are going to be——”

“No.”

“No? Why?”

“You know my trouble, don’t you—Polly?”

“I have heard of it. But I believe nothing. Does she?”

“No, I am convinced she is as true as steel. But while this cloud is over me I can say nothing—I can do nothing.”

“But it will soon be gone. Your trial will come in the fall. All the boarders say you can’t be convicted. You will be free.”

“Yes, free, with this stain of infamy upon me. Free to go West, to lose myself in the great new country, to forget my past—if I can. But free to marry her—never!”

“You mean that the real culprit must be found. There must be a positive verdict, not a negative one?”

“That’s it. The criminal must be run to earth. The money must be discovered, if possible.”

It was quite dark. Night blanketted the prairies, and night on the prairies is always cold. Miss Lester shivered. Silently her form nestled into the arms of Burton. A hand fell against his, and he shook as though struck by an electric current. She raised her face to his, her warm breath flooded his cheeks and eyes and stole into his nostrils and his lungs.

“Raymond dear,” she whispered. “You are carrying too much alone. You will break down. I can help you. Will you let me? Will you—do you trust me?”

And in a voice so low that she caught it by instinct rather than hearing he answered, “I do.”

“Then tell me—all.”

“All?”

“Yes, tell me who took the money, and why, and where to find it, and I pledge you my word—my honour—that you shall walk out of court not only free, but justified. Remember, you trust me. You say you trust me—you do trust me.” She raised her hand and held the spread fingers, pointed, towards his temples, her eyes were within a palm’s width of his. “Remember, you trust me, Raymond, you trust me. This log shall rise in witness against you before I do. You trust me—tell me—ALL.”

With a curse he threw her from him. “This, then, is your love, your honour, your—your perfidy. God judge between me and you this night!”

CHAPTER IX—A FUGITIVE

"Ever the sun sets in the west;
Yellow and gold;
Ever a face to a window prest;
Can it behold,
Large in the lens of the dying light,
Wandering boy, in joy or plight,
Trudging sturdily into the night,
Fearless and bold?"

The Empire Builders.

Dominion Day was the big day of the year at Plainville. Then the baseball teams from all the towns around gathered in the Agricultural Grounds for the final contest of the season, as the approach of haying time would soon give the young men other outlets for their energy. Baseball was the great game of the district, but in order to afford some variety of attraction there would also be a football match between the English and Canadian born—an event usually marked with much friendly enthusiasm. The Englishmen had been schooled in the rudiments of the game on the playgrounds of the motherland, but years behind the plough or in the harvest field had left the flesh strangely unequal to the spirit. The Canadians, on the other hand, knew less of the game but trusted more to the pioneer qualities of force and endurance, although George Grant said his chief difficulty was in dodging the h's dropped by his opponents. Then there were pony races, usually won by some unheralded farm plug, to the disgust of the "sports"; a tug-of-war, married men against single, in which the benedicts, thanks to avoirdupois, were invariably victorious, while the Plainville brass band discoursed uncertain music to the appreciative throng.

But it is not with the celebration of Dominion Day that you and I are concerned, much as we should enjoy an afternoon with the husky young athletes of the prairie. Other events, essential to the progress of our story, were under way, and demand our attention.

By common consent the Plainville stores remained open on Dominion Day until eleven in the forenoon, when they closed to enable the proprietors and their staffs to enjoy the day's celebration. It had been a busy forenoon, and Burton was hurriedly sweeping up behind the grocery counter after the blinds had been drawn, when Graves approached and leaned over the counter, watching him. Burton was conscious of the eyes upon him, and at length looked up. It was evident his fellow employee had something on his mind.

"I want to say that I have a rather disagreeable piece of information for you, Burton," said Graves, after a moment's hesitation. "Did you ever wonder why I came out here and took this job with Gardiner?"

"No, I can't say that I did," the other replied. "I supposed you were looking for employment and this was the first thing to turn up. But there has been nothing disagreeable to me about it."

"Unfortunately there will be, shortly, and I assure you the whole thing, as it is turning out, is little to my liking. Burton, you're not suspicious enough for a criminal career. Do I look like a store clerk?"

There was a touch of sarcasm in the last two words which did not escape his hearer, but the reference to a criminal career had cut much deeper.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "What right have you to speak to me in this way?"

"Now don't get angry," said Graves. "You lost your temper here once before, and while I don't say I blame you, the rough-house with Elton didn't improve your case any. Fact is, if you can't see it for yourself, that I'm not here to sell goods, but to *watch you*!"

"Watch me?" exclaimed Burton, straightening up and taking in the other man at a glance as though measuring him physically. "Then you're a——"

"A detective. Yes."

"Well, what have you found? Can you add anything to a bunch of keys and a suspicion?"

"I haven't found much yet, but I expect to shortly. That's why I wanted to speak

to you now. I have a warrant to search your room and personal belongings, and I propose to do so to-day. It's altogether unprofessional in me to tip you off, but, hang it, I like you, Burton, and if there's any changes you want to make down there slip away and get them done, and I won't be down for half-an-hour."

"Changes? What changes should I want to make? Your words are an insult, Graves, and if it were not for your evident sincerity I'd start making the changes right here and now. No, I want no changes! Bring all the world along, and let them see me searched in public."

"You carry it with a high hand, my young friend," said Graves. "However, I can do no more than warn you. Shall we go now? There should be at least one other present."

"Mr. Gardiner has just gone down to Goode's with some butter. We will detain him as a witness, if you think it necessary," was Burton's reply; "come, I am ready."

The two young men walked down the street, thronged with buggies, wagons and automobiles, until they reached Mrs. Goode's boarding-house. At the door they met Gardiner.

"Mr. Gardiner, will you do me a favour? I find that I have been working alongside of a detective, instead of a store clerk, as I imagined. He has a warrant to search my room. Will you come along, as a witness?"

"Why, yes, if you ask me to. This is a surprise for me. Graves, you need not report for work to-morrow morning."

The three went up to room sixteen. As they were about to enter Polly Lester came out. "I was just finishing tidying up," she explained to Mr. Gardiner. Since the night at the river Burton had not spoken to her nor recognised her existence.

The detective began with Burton's clothes. He searched all the pockets and felt the fabric generally to ascertain if anything might be quilted into it. Then he examined the bed, feeling the pillows and mattress very carefully. Then the washstand and bureau received attention, but without revealing anything of moment.

"There is only the trunk left," said Graves. "Will you let me have the key?"

“Go ahead; it isn’t locked,” Burton returned. “I wish you joy of all you find.”

Each article in the trunk was lifted out and set on the bed, carefully. Graves was at least a thorough workman. At last there were only a few items in the bottom of the trunk, and Gardiner was about congratulating Burton, when the detective cried, “Hello, what have we here?”

Both spectators rushed to his side. At the very bottom of the trunk lay a large envelope, on which two large wax seals were visible.

“That looks like it,” said Gardiner, in a tense voice. “Dig it out.”

The package was produced and held before Burton. The young man was too astonished for speech.

“Well, what have you to say about it?” said Graves, at last.

“It is the stolen package,” said Burton, with a dry sob. “But how it got there God only knows.” He put his hand to his head; he looked around as one dazed, bewildered; his eye fell on the crack of the door, and through that crack he caught the gleam of another eye, blue-black as a hail-cloud on a summer night. He gasped, and would have rushed for the door, but Graves detained him.

“There’s no hurry, Burton,” he explained. “Perhaps you will see your way to make a clear breast of this business. If Mr. Gardiner gets his money back I think he might be big-hearted enough to withdraw the charge, although you have no right to expect such treatment from him, after betraying his trust in this way, and then trying to brazen it out as you have done. Of course, it’s a criminal charge, and out of Gardiner’s hands, but there’s more ways of killing a dog than choking it with butter. I have something to do with the Department, and I promise you that if you come out and clean this thing up and express your regret there’ll be no true bill found against you. The money is all there, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know any of it was there. I——”

Gardiner picked up the package and turned it over in his hands; suddenly it almost dropped from his fingers. “This package has been opened,” he said to Graves.

The detective took it and withdrew the bills. They were bright, new ten dollar

bank notes. He counted them.

“Well, I congratulate you, Gardiner. The package has been opened, but only one bill is gone. And the serial letter and number compare with the memo, furnished us by the bank. You have your money back, practically complete. What am I to do with this man?”

“Let him go. Burton, I’m sorry,” said Gardiner.

“No, I won’t let him go,” said Graves. “He has refused a fair chance of liberty; now he must take the consequences. I advise you, Gardiner, to withdraw your bail. One of these days this fine fellow will be across the line.”

“Leave that to me,” said Gardiner, shortly.

Within an hour the finding of the stolen money in Burton’s trunk was a general topic in the town; by evening it was common knowledge among all the crowd assembled for the sports.

Burton went straight to the store and locked himself in. Neither the streets nor the grounds were any place for him that day. Presently Gardiner let himself in and discovered the young man in the office.

“Burton,” he said, speaking with some difficulty, “this is a bad mess. There was every reason to expect your acquittal until this turned up. Now—well, now you’re in for it.”

The young man sat with his face between his hands, and made no reply.

At length Gardiner continued. “I hate to think you guilty, Burton, I really do, for your own sake, and for your father’s, and for your—friends! But what else can I think? And if I, who have stood by you, protesting you innocent, all along, must admit your guilt, what will the people in the town and country, who are only too glad to believe evil, think of you? You will be a marked man, and an avoided man. I don’t like to say it, but it is quite impossible for me to keep you any longer in my employ. The fact is, Burton, you’re up against it. I don’t want to see you go to jail, but if you come to trial that’s what’s going to happen. If you take my advice you’ll get out while the coast is clear.”

“But you are my bondsman! You will have to forfeit the bail!”

“I know. But I am willing to do that, to see you safe at liberty. I may lose the bail, but I have the money back, so I’m really nothing more out. You can get across the line to-night, and work west or south or east. The world is big, and if you straighten up you will soon find chances of useful life. If you go to jail your life is ruined, but if you take my advice you may still be a credit to yourself.”

“They’ll follow me,” the young man moaned. “They’ll get me anywhere.”

“No, they won’t. If you were a murderer, or a criminal of that sort, public opinion would keep them after you, but a case of this kind is really a private matter after all, and will soon be forgotten. Have you money?”

“A little.”

Gardiner took a roll from his pocket. “There is a hundred dollars,” he said. “That should see you out of harm’s way.”

“I can’t take it, Mr. Gardiner; I really can’t. You have done too much for me already.”

“Take it as a loan, then.... Well, think it over. I’ll leave it here in the till, and if you’re as wise as I take you to be, both you and the money will be missing to-night. Good-bye, Burton,” he said, but without offering to shake hands. “I have to drive out to Grant’s.”

There was a significance in the last remark that did not escape Burton. As he sat in the dimly lighted office in the dark, empty, silent store, the ruins of his life came crashing down upon him. He tried to think calmly, to collect his thoughts, but his mind was a chaos of emotions. Out of the maze of perplexities, complete mysteries and half known truths more baffling still, a few characters, a few incidents, gradually distinguished themselves. The night at Grant’s, the singer, and his recital, spoken to an audience but aimed at one soul; the sacramental day at Crotton’s Crossing, again in memory he rehearsed it; he recalled the great stone, he saw the faces blend in the smiling water, and the solemn red sun look through the serried bars—! Ah, the bars! Prophetic vision which he had left unread! Bars, bars between him and the sunlight! Yes, bars, and cold, wet stone walls. They stared at him now, they glared at him, wet and shiny, out of the dark corners. They circled him, they compassed him, they crowded him. Bars, and stones, and water! They would strip him of the dress of civilization and clothe him in the garb of infamy. They would feed his body with prison fare, but his

soul they would leave to shrivel and starve. However innocent he might go in, only a criminal could he come out. There was something worse than being a fugitive. Better to defy the law and the officers of the law than to let them thrust him into the criminal mill. Gardiner was right. He would fly. The world was large, there still was a chance for him, he would learn to live—and forget.

A mental numbness followed the strain of these thoughts; he did not sleep, but he lost consciousness of time. When he came to himself it was quite dark, and he was hungry. He groped his way through the store and found some cheese and biscuits, which he thrust into his pocket. Then he remembered the money Gardiner had left, but as he reached to take it from the drawer his hand paused, irresolute. Surely Gardiner had done enough for him; Gardiner, who had gone his bond and then urged him to fly. He turned away, the money untouched.

Burton let himself out by a side door; the outer air was strangely hot and oppressive. He heard many voices, and a babel of strange, confused sounds; horses being hurried into shafts, automobiles whirring along the streets. He made his way to a lane, and a large drop of rain spat on his face. His eyes were as yet unaccustomed to distant objects, but he turned to the west and beheld the heavens a-seethe with lightning—not a vivid glare that blinds the beholder, but a bright silvery flush playing like the aurora behind a mass of dark-blue cloud. Burton knew the country well enough to read the menace at a glance; the heavy blue-black cloud riding ahead of the storm never hunts except for big game. The air was oppressively still, but shortly it would be torn with the violence of the tornado; the half-obscured lightning, now playing all the way from the horizon to the zenith, would break in jagged, white-hot thunder bolts through the uneven atmosphere, and at its heels would come the deluge of rain and, perhaps, hail. It was not an uncommon scene; once or twice a season these terrifying storms were to be expected, and farmer and merchant alike watched anxiously for the straight, misty, greyish cloud and listened for the accompanying rumble of the dreaded hail.

But to the fugitive the threatened storm meant nothing. The warfare of the elements could tear no deeper than the warfare of his own soul; the fire-edged death from heaven would furnish honourable end to a discouraging struggle. Avoiding the main roads, he made his way into the country, but on every trail were rigs driving by at high speed. The drivers and occupants were much too concerned with the problem of getting home dry and safe to pay attention to pedestrians on the road, and he walked on mechanically, confident that none

recognised him and that none cared.

The early darkness closed down quickly; the great cloud in advance of the storm, rolling in the heavens like a mighty fish, had swept far to the eastward; the lightning now played in dazzling flashes from cloud to cloud and from cloud to earth, its zig-zag course marking the rarer atmospheres, and accompanied by a growing, growling chorus of thunder as the menagerie of the skies roared and crackled on the crest of the storm. The blinding light left the eyes useless in the dark, and it was with difficulty Burton followed the trail.

Presently the rain came on. Swept by a mighty wind that overturned more than one top buggy that night, a few great, scattered drops dashed against the ground, then the wind subsided and was followed by a sudden stillness so intense it could be felt. But it was for an instant; a great rift of lightning shook the clouds asunder and their pent-up load of moisture poured out upon the earth. In a moment Burton was drenched to the skin; the prairie roads were running in water; and as he floundered on a cold wind struck him that brought a shiver, not for himself, but for the farmers whose fortunes were all on the growing fields. Then the thought came to him that if he should be caught unprotected in the hail he would be killed. He had faced the lightning without fear, but the prospect of being gradually pummelled to death was not inviting, and he began to look about for some place of shelter. It was not until now that he realised he had paid no attention to the course he took, and although most of the country was familiar to him in daylight he had no idea where he was. To his great relief a warm breeze sprung up, which indicated that the hail strip was narrow and had probably chosen another course, and he struggled on through mud and water hoping that every flash of lightning would reveal some place of shelter. But the country seemed strangely desolate, and the night must have been half spent before he caught an instant’s glance of a building. He pressed toward it, and another flash revealed a deserted log hut which he now recalled as being only a few miles from town and but a short way from the main road that led to Grant’s. The windows were gone and the door was off its hinges, but it would at least be better than outside, and he hurried toward it. As he did so through the darkness he fancied he saw a gleam of light in the deserted building. It was not lightning, and yet he could have sworn it was no trick of the imagination or the nerves. As he drew nearer he saw it again—a dull flicker lighting up the square framed by the empty window. Stealthily he approached the building.

CHAPTER X—PLAYING THE GAME

"Hear ye a little lesson—can ye the truth divine?
Milk ye may mix with water, and water will mix with wine;
Mix as ye may on your prairies, mix in your hope and toil,
But know in all your mixing that water won't mix with oil!"

The Empire Builders.

With only one run to the good, Harry Grant in the pitcher's box, the bases full and nobody out, the finish of the ninth inning in the last game of the Dominion Day tournament looked gloomy enough for Plainville. The sun was gilding the crest of a great cloud which was already casting its shadow over the prairie, the air was close and hot, the band had long since exhausted their repertoire, and its members, big-lipped from their day's exertions, gazed dry-throated at the tragedy on the diamond; the Plainville backers, who all day long had placed their two to one on the home team, were stamping up and down behind the ropes that winged the grounds, chewing their cigars and swearing vaguely. The "rooting" was over; there is a point beyond which no loyalty can "root"; the situation was too dramatic for speech. Even the supporters of the opposing team were too excited to hollo, they had holloed all day against discouraging odds, and now, when a little lung power might well have been brought to the support of their favourites, they found themselves voiceless from sheer exhaustion and surprise.

In a buggy facing the grounds from the right fielder's corner sat Gardiner and Miss Vane. The bright face and the electric mouth seemed intent upon the game before them, but in the eyes was a hollow look that might have told any keen observer the brain was wandering in far fields.

"It's bad," said Gardiner. "The worst possible. He can never climb out of that hole."

"At any rate he will try," said the girl, absently. "You think he will run away?"

Gardiner turned and looked at his companion quizzically. She gave a little start and a flush stole through the deep ivory of her cheeks and forehead. "I—I beg

your pardon," she stammered. "I was thinking."

"You are thinking too much. If I had known it would spoil your day's enjoyment I would not have told you."

"How could you think otherwise? You know he was, that is, he is, our friend."

"Just a friend—is that all?" Gardiner pressed the question.

"Oh, look, that is two strikes. Harry is keeping his head. Let us watch the game," and Miss Vane seemed lost in the scene before her.

The ropes along the wings stretched and swung with the mass of humanity leaning over them; in the grand-stand every eye was on the pitcher, as tense as though life itself depended upon the delivery of the next ball.

Harry saw one crooked finger below his catcher's mitt, and prepared a hot in-shoot. An out and a drop were responsible for the batter's two previous abortive swats, and this change should fool him. A right hand batter seldom looks for an in-shoot with the bases full; the chance of a walk is so big it frightens most pitchers, but Harry's catcher had decided on heroic measures.

The base runner from third led up. Standing on his right foot, an inch outside the pitcher's box, Harry feinted at third and drove the adventurous runner back; the next instant he was back in the box and had delivered the ball to the batter.

But his caution was his undoing. He purposely threw a little wide, to avoid the possibility of striking the batter. Six feet from the base the ball broke and cut straight for the centre of the plate. It was only a fraction of an instant, but in that fraction the batter swung and caught it a straight drive over second. A yell broke from his sympathisers as he dashed for first.

Billy Haynes, the hardware clerk, was holding down second. Billy was long and agile and a rapid thinker. He had the two first requisites of a baseballer—a quick eye and a quick brain. As he saw the hot shot coming four feet above his head he sprang two steps backward, jumped, and brought it to earth, dropping it as he fell. The next instant he had one hand on his base and the other on the ball, and almost before the umpire could detect the play he had thrown, not to home, but first. For an instant the third base runner hesitated, fearing a caught fly, and that instant cost his side the game. He fully expected Haynes would play home, and

hesitated again; when he saw the ball delivered to first he dashed forward, but he was too late. The sphere seemed hardly to stop at first at all; it simply changed its course there and shot home, beating the runner to the plate by a good two feet. The game was over. Plainville had won. It was the only triple play seen on that diamond for many a day, and the crowd went wild with enthusiasm. Billy Haynes was borne aloft by his admirers, and the other participants in the play were thumped and shaken by the hero-hungry mob. By dint of much profanity the band leader was able to muster two cornets, a trombone and a base drum to play the National Anthem as the crowd hurried from the grounds. It would soon be closing time at the village bars, and there were many thirsts to liquidate.

But even as they walked the short distance from the grounds to the town the minds of the visitors were turned to another matter. The sun was obscured, and up from the west a great mass of cloud heaved higher and higher. The old-timers needed no second glance; a Dominion Day storm was considered as much a matter of course as the baseball tournament and the football game between English and Canadians, and young men and old hurried to the livery stables and the stock-yards, where their horses were tied, in an endeavour to get home before the weather broke.

Gardiner drove up town for a waterproof, and by the time he and Miss Vane were at last on the road to the Grant homestead it had grown quite dark. It was the eastern girl’s first experience with a severe electric storm on the prairie; several thunder showers had swept by during June, but nothing so terrifying as this. The lightning became more and more vivid, and after every flash the horse would pause, uncertain of his footing in the darkness. Then the distant growl of the thunder added its accompaniment, steadily growing in volume and intensity. Gardiner was not an expert horseman and had some difficulty in keeping the animal on the road. The poor creature had little relish for the trip and would have much preferred to hurry back to his stable in town.

Suddenly a terrific squall of wind burst upon them, and before Gardiner had time to square the horse up to it it had tipped the buggy and whipped the reins from his hand. The animal, terrified by the storm, staggering over one shaft, and feeling all control removed, dashed in a panic across the prairie. Presently the rig struck a post, the shafts were torn free, and the horse disappeared in the darkness.

Gardiner extricated himself from the wreckage. “Are you hurt, Miss Vane?” he

asked, anxiously.

“No, I think not,” said the girl, as she dragged herself free. “Oh!” A smothered cry escaped her lips.

“You are hurt,” said Gardiner, as he raised her in his arms. “You are hurt. Tell me. Let me help you.”

The gale had swept by, and the air was very still and warm.

“No, I am not hurt—much,” she answered. “But we cannot stay here. It will rain soon, and the lightning is—” She closed her eyes. ”Can’t we go somewhere? Can’t we walk home?”

“I am afraid we must try,” said her companion. “Or I might go back to town for another rig?”

“No, we will walk home. We must be more than half way. Let me see—what direction is that?”

“South, I think.”

“No, it must be west. Surely it is west?”

“Let us follow the fence; it must lead somewhere.”

At that moment a tongue of fire came leaping along the upper wire of the fence. Both drew back, as though to dodge the electric current.

“The further from the fence the better,” said Gardiner. “There is no place so dangerous in a thunderstorm. Let us keep to the middle of the roadway.”

They moved to the right, but at the first step a groan escaped the girl’s lips. “My ankle,” she moaned. “I—I must have hurt it.”

Gardiner stood irresolute. “Can you lean on it at all?” he asked.

She placed her weight gently upon the ankle, but a flash of lightning revealed a wince of pain across her face.

“I must carry you somewhere,” said Gardiner. “We cannot stay here. The rain is

coming on, and perhaps hail with it. We shall be drenched, at least."

"I think I can walk if you will help," she ventured bravely. "Stand here, to the right. Let me rest my arm on your shoulder."

He obeyed. Resting her right hand on his left shoulder she limped painfully a short distance through the darkness. The rain began to fall in great scattered drops, then a vicious rent of lightning seemed to shake the whole heavens, and it fell in floods.

They had worked their painful way about fifty yards. The road was now running in water, and the slippery mud made walking still more difficult. One little shoe drew off and was lost. At every flash they took their bearings for a few feet further, but it became more and more evident they would be unable to reach shelter.

"You must leave me," she said at last, shouting in his ear to make herself heard. "I cannot go much further. You can find your way to town, or perhaps to a neighbour's, and get another buggy. I will stay here."

"Then I will stay with you," her companion answered. "I cannot leave you alone on the prairie in such a night. Besides, I don't know where we are. I would never find my way back. We must—hello, what is that?"

"What? I saw nothing."

"Look this way." He pointed through the darkness. "Watch for the next flash."

They had not long to wait. In a moment another bolt lit up the prairie in all directions.

"It is a building—an old house, I think," she said. "I can walk that far. It will be better than the prairie."

With much effort they dragged their way toward the building. It proved to be a little log structure, built by a homesteader in the early days. The windows were gone and the door was off its hinges, but inside was comparatively dry. In an inner pocket Gardiner found some matches that gave promise of a light. He struck one; it flared for an instant and was whipped out by the breeze. But it had revealed a partition running through the middle of the building. They groped

their way around it and found a more protected corner. Here he struck another match. It burned steadily, disclosing a little, low room, papered with heavy building paper. Against the logs of the outer wall tar paper had been nailed, but years of damp and wind had loosened this pioneer protection, and the paper now hung in long shreds or curled in uncertain rolls about the bottom of the walls. The floor was decayed and broken through in several places, as though cattle had walked on the rotten boards, and from the sod roof the water trickled in little streamlets.

With a sigh of relief Miss Vane seated herself in a corner. “This is better than outside at least,” she said.

“Yes, indeed,” Gardiner agreed. “By means of this tar paper and some of these broken boards we will start a fire. We can surely find water enough to hold it in check.”

In a few minutes he had a little fire burning. Part of a broken crock was found, and with this filled with water he stood guard over man’s best servant.

As the fire flickered up its light fell on the face of the girl, pale and drawn with pain. The young man looked at her helplessly, and then ventured, “You are suffering, Miss Vane. I wonder if you would let me be surgeon?”

“Yes,” she answered, simply.

He removed the shoe. The buckles were cutting into the flesh.

“No bones broken, I think,” he said, after a brief survey, “but a bad sprain.”

With the scissors which every store clerk carries he cut away the foot of the stocking. The ankle was badly swollen and discoloured.

Gardiner removed his coat and deftly cut the lining out of it. This he cut into strips, and, dipping the strips in water, bandaged the injured member. Presently the inflammation was somewhat relieved and the pain became more bearable.

“You are very good,” the girl whispered. “I feel better now.”

“I am glad of that,” he answered. “The accident is most regrettable, and the fault is all mine.”

“Not at all. It was an accident, and an accident is not a fault.”

“Do you believe that these accidents are preordained—that they are part of some great scheme of management, that we but vaguely recognise?”

“I don’t know. I suppose there is a purpose to all things—even to this sprained ankle.” She smiled faintly. “If there is no purpose in little things there can be no purpose in life, as life is made up of little things.”

He seized at her answer. “And what purpose, can you guess, lay behind this mishap?”

“A warning, no doubt, in future to be home before dark,” she answered, with a return of her natural spirit. “And I shall have such splendid hair after this rain-water bath.”

The little fire flickered and shifted with every gust of wind that stole into even this protected corner. The rain fell in torrents on the sod roof and washed down the log walls of the hut. The lightning was incessant, the thunder terrific, and as they spoke the trumpetings of heaven often choked the words in their mouths.

“No,” said Gardiner at length, “there was a deeper purpose in your misfortune. It seems too bad to profit by it, but don’t you know—can’t you see, Miss Vane, that I have wanted so long an opportunity to talk with you alone?”

She drew up slightly in the corner where she sat, but did not speak.

“You must know that I have sought your company—your company, and none but yours—since the night I first saw you. My interest—my attention—must have told you long ago—that which I would speak to you in words to-night.”

He was standing, gazing at her across the fire. For months he had rehearsed his declaration, and he felt that he had made a good start. She had not stopped him, and he was encouraged.

“I am very tired,” she murmured.

“As you said a little while ago, surely there must be a purpose in all things,” he continued. “Surely it was such a purpose that brought you to Plainville, and permitted me to know the charm of your personality—the sweet delight of your

companionship. Miss Vane—Myrtle—I love you—have loved you since first my eyes fell on your fair face—shall love you always. May I hope?”

She looked up; in her eyes was a strange gleam that sent the young man’s pulses throbbing. Had he known her better he would have read a different meaning in that deep light.

She waited until the echoes of a crack of thunder died away, and then asked, very quietly, “Is it quite fair to press your question after all that has happened to-day?”

For the moment he was taken back. “Of course, you know, I don’t mean to take any advantage,” he stammered. “Certainly you are suffering, and I must wait your answer until you can think it over calmly. Is it very painful?”

“Oh, the ankle? I wasn’t thinking about it.”

“What then?”

“What, you ask? Oh, cannot you see, either? Must I tell you in so many words?”

“Burton!” he exclaimed. “It is of him you are thinking?”

“How could I forget—so soon? You said he would fly—even now he is probably a fugitive from jus—from the law.... It is a fitting night for such a tragedy in his life. And still, black as it all looks, I cannot think but he is more sinned against than sinning.”

“Your loyalty does you credit. Burton is fortunate in having such a friend.” Under the soft voice there was just the suggestion of a sneer.

“Nevertheless,” she said, ignoring his remark, “Burton will come back to trial, if indeed he ever leaves. His innocence will yet be established.”

“Your faith is equal to your loyalty,” he answered. “I wish I could have the same confidence. Indeed, I did believe in him until this latest development, but now—one must believe his eyes,” he said, with a shrug of the shoulders. “I suppose I shall lose the amount of his bail, but I forfeit it gladly for the sake of his liberty. I count such losses nothing, if only I may hope to gain—what I have asked to-night.”

“I cannot answer you now. You have been too good to me, and to my friend, to be denied without at least the courtesy of consideration.”

“Your words carry little encouragement. Listen. While I do not press for an answer, surely I may state my case. I can offer you much that appeals to every woman. I am not rich, but I have a profitable business. No woman in Plainville will be better provided for. In a few years I hope to have saved enough to enter business in a larger centre, and introduce you to circles where your personality will command the admiration it deserves. As for this boy——”

She made a gesture of dissent. “Your argument makes no appeal to me, Mr. Gardiner. A profitable business is a small thing to offer for a woman’s affections. You undervalue the prize you seek. And if social status were a consideration to me——” She left the sentence unfinished, but Gardiner thought he understood.

“Forgive me if I have seemed to place too much stress on material things. I merely wish to satisfy you that my declaration—my love—is reasonable, and that I am in a position to carry it out to its logical conclusion. Now, tell me I may hope?”

“Hark! What was that?” she whispered, her face tense with excitement. “Surely I heard a sound?”

“It is nothing. The thunder, or the wind, or the rain. On such a night the air is full of sound.”

“But this was different; a real sound, a *human* sound. I was sure I heard it.”

“Your nerves are playing tricks on you to-night, Miss Vane. I assure you there was no sound but the elements. Compose yourself, and tell me I may hope.”

“I can tell you nothing now.”

“Then to-morrow?”

“No, not to-morrow.”

“When then? Set a limit to my uncertainty.”

“Not until after the trial.”

“Burton’s trial. If he should be acquitted?”

“You will know your answer.”

“And if convicted?”

“Then I will take time. Oh, please don’t force me to be unkind. I cannot give myself—you would not take the gift—without love. I must analyse my own heart, and I cannot do that while this cloud hangs over—us. When it has dispersed, or settled, I will know.”

He took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. “You are kind,” he said, “and fair.”

CHAPTER XI—A FRIEND IN NEED

> “Oh, I take ’em from the counter, the factory, the mine,
> They are rough-and-ready rascals till I lick ’em into line;
> They are coming, coming, coming, from the land of Who-Knows-Where,
> Black and white and many-tinted, brown and yellow, dark and fair;
> They are coming from the valley, from the prairie, from the hill,
> They are coming from the ‘May I?’ to the country of ‘I will!’
> And for some the smart of failure, and for some Achievement’s crown,
> As I roll ’em out Canadians—all but the yellow and brown.”
>
> *The Empire Builders.*

Burton looked cautiously through the window. A little fire was burning on the wet floor, and between him and the fire stood Gardiner, facing the corner in which Miss Vane sat, pale and troubled. With a gasp he sank to the earth. What tragedy was this, enacted before his eyes? Why were these two here, in such a place, at such a time? Could not revengeful Providence spare him even this? Why had he been led through that howling night to this spot, to this scene, of all the places on the great prairie?

His first impulse was to rush in, throttle Gardiner, and escort Miss Vane home. He stole back to the window with this determination in his heart, but a second look at the girl made him pause. Whatever the explanation of her presence here she was evidently not a prisoner. She was talking with Gardiner, talking in a low voice which he could not hear for the din of the night. But there was no anger in her eyes, rather a deep sorrow, and the sympathetic quiver of her lip, which passed across it even more quickly than the uncertain flicker of the fire, brought a lump to the boy’s throat and banished every thought of forcible intrusion. After all, Gardiner had been a good friend to him. Had he withdrawn his bond after the discovery of the money, as most men would, Burton at this moment would not have been at liberty. And, while he could not understand their presence here at such a time and in such a manner, it might be that after all a satisfactory explanation could be given. Certainly he could not improve the situation by intruding.

They were talking earnestly, in short, tense sentences. Then Miss Vane spoke at a little greater length, kindly, as he thought, as one may do who does not wish to wound a friend, and Gardiner took her hand in his and raised it to his lips.

Burton waited for nothing more. He drew away from the window as quietly as he had come and started his tramp through mud and water back to town. He had now one thought only, to get away, to escape, to forget Plainville and Plainville people for ever. The last thin, silvery, cord, stronger in its slender weave than any cable of steel, which had bound him to the place was broken, snapped at the distant end. It still wound round his heart and would deepen and tighten there forever, but its other anchorage was gone. The pain was there but the restraint was removed; Plainville was now less to him than any town of the great new West. And to that great new country he would take himself, as quickly and as cunningly as he knew. They would think he had crossed the line, that would be the natural conclusion; instead, he would beat his way into one of the new provinces and lose himself in the desolation of a homestead far from the furthest edge of civilisation.

Burton thought these things out as he tramped the muddy road, guided by the incessant lightning which still played in the heavens, although the force of the storm had passed to the eastward. The revival of a purpose was as a rudder to his life; again he threw back his shoulders and drank in the night air, purified and vitalized by the hundred million volts of electricity shot through it in the last few hours. He was tired and wet, but his mind had been revived from its stupor, and he tasted the strange delight of the hunted man—the joy of matching his wit against the united wit of society and the machinery of government. As the fox who eludes the hounds may well be conceived to glory among his fellows over his accomplishment, so hunted man glories in his ability to outwit his pursuers, and in addition can take the heroic attitude of the one against the million.

As he approached the town he left the main road and swung down toward the river, where was a water-tank beside the railway bridge. It was the custom of the west-bound freights to take water at this tank, and he trusted to a happy chance that such a train might come along before daylight.

As though to encourage him in his new resolve he had scarcely reached the tank when he heard the whistle of an approaching train. He walked back along the track, keeping well into the shadow of the cut-bank. The engines on that division did not use electric lights, and he had little fear of being seen by the crew as they

swept past.

The train pulled up slowly, the engineer having allowed for a wet rail and shut off steam well down the line. He slid a little past the tank on his first stop and was obliged to back up a rail-length; meanwhile Burton had located a car with a threshing separator and engine on it, and had little difficulty in getting on board while the tender was receiving water. Feeling cautiously about the separator, he soon found an open trap-door with a space inside large enough to accommodate him, and here he concealed himself. It was dry in there, and the night was still warm with lightning; he huddled himself up and almost before the train was in motion had fallen asleep.

When he awoke he was sore in every joint, and at first he stared in bewilderment at the slats and pulleys about him. But he soon recalled that he was a fugitive, a hunted man, a man who dared not travel under the name his mother gave him, and the thought brought less enthusiasm than he had felt the night before. He was conscious, also, of hunger, and feeling in his pockets found some broken biscuits and a few crumbs of cheese. These he ate eagerly and settled back again to wait for the train to resume its journey.

As time wore on and the train did not start the boy became impatient, and at last ventured to look out. The car on which he had concealed himself stood alone, on a side track at a flag station where it had been set off in the early morning. He was not more than forty miles from Plainville, and in a country where he might easily be identified. He saw a farm house about half-a-mile away, and as the sun was approaching the zenith he doubted not that inside were a pot of boiling potatoes and a roast of beef, with the best the good wife’s garden could produce. He had only a few cents in his pocket, but a good muscle in his arm, and was not afraid to work for a meal, but he feared to reveal himself lest it might later lead to his identification. After thinking it over he decided to remain in his hiding place until dark, when he would steal to the farmer’s garden and ward off starvation with his vegetables.

He had settled back to put in the time as best he could when another thought occurred to him. This threshing outfit had evidently been consigned to some farmer of the district, and was likely to be unloaded that very day. True, it was a little early in the season for threshing mills, but the companies were anxious to get as many as possible placed before the real rush of harvest was upon them, and there was no reason to suppose that this car would be taken any further until

unloaded. And, if he should be found concealed in the separator, then explanations *would* be required.

Having turned this matter over in his mind for a short time he let himself out by the trap-door as stealthily as possible, although quite sure that there could be no one within half-a-mile; sprang to the ground on the side of the car furthest from the farmer's house, and presently commenced to walk unconcernedly across the prairie to the north-west. The country was not closely settled, and he soon ventured to follow a trail leading away from the railroad. The walking was not bad here, as the district seemed to have been out of the direct path of the storm, and he soon found himself swinging along the road at a good rate. He knew that ten or twelve miles to the northward was another line of railway, and it occurred to him that it would be good policy to walk across and divert his patronage to the other company. It would at least make him less easily followed.

The sun was high and the day was warm, and white, blocky clouds floated in the sky like icebergs in a sea of blue. The gophers played along the trail, and, far above, a hawk, pinioned on motionless wings, spied the plain for the more unwary. The memory of the night before, of the experience of the past thirty-six hours, hid itself behind a mist of unreality; but there was a vacant soreness, a sensation of pain as from some deep wound now healing, a pain so keen that it was part pleasure. A frost-bite and a burn are similar in their nature and their effect, and there is a point at which joy can scarce be distinguished from pain. A sense of loss may in itself become an asset; adversity and rejection, instead of crushing some men down, force them forward and upward. Such a spirit was Burton's; as he walked along the prairie trail a resolution took shape in his heart that he yet would show "them"—meaning his little world—the stuff of which he was made.

His reverie was broken by a blast of a horn which caused him to jump clear of the roadway. Looking hurriedly around, he saw behind him an automobile with only the driver on board, and the broad smile on the latter's face indicated his amusement at the young man's nervousness. Burton's first thought was that he had been followed; that his bail had been withdrawn, and he would be taken back and thrown into jail. But there was no menace in the kindly eye of the automobilist, as he brought his car to a stop.

"Jump in," he called, "we are going the same way, let us travel together."

Burton found no excuse for refusal, and obeyed.

In a moment the car was again in motion, but the driver, a man of fifty or thereabouts, found time to catechize his guest.

“Going far?” he demanded.

“Yes, quite a distance.”

“Live hereabouts?”

“No, down the line.”

“Perhaps you know me. I am Doctor Millar.”

“Why, yes!” exclaimed Burton, looking him in the face for the first time. “I have often heard my father speak of you.”

“Yes?” said the doctor. “And what is your name?”

“Raymond Burton.” The words were out before, with a gasp of surprise, he realised that he had revealed his identity. But it was now too late to recall them, he must face it through.

“Not a son of John Burton’s, of Plainville?” asked the doctor, a new interest leaping into his eyes.

“The same—the only son.”

“Well, well. I knew John Burton when I was a shanty doctor on the Ottawa, and have known him ever since. In the earlier days here, when doctor’s drives were longer than they are now, and we didn’t ride on rubber either, I have been at his house more than once—but you won’t remember. But—let me see—I hope you won’t think me too personal—I am your father’s friend—you had some—some misunderstanding, did you not? The papers get things so wrong, but——”

There was something in the man’s manner, in his frank, open face and clear, genial eyes that commanded Burton’s confidence. He resolved to make a clean breast of it.

“Yes, I’m in trouble,” he admitted. “A package of two thousand dollars disappeared from my employer’s safe, and I was suspected. I was committed for trial although the evidence against me was very vague. But detectives were put on my trail, and the money was found in my trunk. How it got there you know as well as I, Doctor. But it swept my feet from under me, and now I am beating my way west. I hope to lose my old life entirely, and make a fresh start where this shadow will not follow me.”

The doctor drove furiously for a full mile. Then he slowed up.

“Its pretty hard to lose one’s old life,” said he. “You will find acquaintances wherever you go, just as you found me. But there must be an explanation to this thing. You must have enemies?”

“No, at least, only one, and he’s a farmer living out of town, with no means of doing me this injury.”

“You can never tell. I’d have him shadowed, if I were you. You are sure there is no one else?”

As though it had risen before him at that moment, Burton saw a black, keen eye through the crack of a door, but he answered, “No, there is no one else.”

They were now nearing a town on the other line of railway, where Dr. Millar lived.

“Come right in with me,” said the doctor. “We will go right to my house and have dinner, and then we will diagnose your case further.”

Burton gladly agreed, and when dinner was over Dr. Millar took him into his consultation room.

“The first thing I do with a patient, especially a country patient”—his eye twinkled—“is give him a bath. We will start at the beginning. Step into the bathroom here and slip your clothes out to me. They may need some attention, too.”

Burton did as he was bidden, and the refreshing delight of a good bath went far to restore his confidence in himself.

“I’ll take my clothes now, if they’re ready for me,” he called to the doctor.

A bundle of clothes was slipped in through the door. Burton opened them out and saw at a glance that they were not his. The suit, although of no better quality, was dry and pressed, and there were clean shirt, underwear and hose. Even a clean collar and tie had not been overlooked.

“These are not my clothes,” he called. “You have made a mistake.”

“They are what the doctor ordered,” came the answer, with a laugh, “and you put them right on, or stay where you are.”

There was nothing for it but to obey, and in a few minutes Burton, well and dryly clad, was back in the consultation room, expostulating with the doctor.

“Sit right down here,” said the doctor, disregarding his protestations. “Do you know what is the matter with you?”

“No,” said the young man, in surprise.

“You have eczema!”

“Eczema! Nonsense, doctor. I am quite well, physically.”

“Now look here, young man, this is my case, and if I say you have eczema you have eczema, and you have it bad. So bad I’ll have to send you to a town I know in the far West for treatment.”

“Doctor! I don’t understand you, but even if I had eczema, or any such trouble, why should I go to the far West for treatment? Are there specialists there?”

“No, but—well, you see, it’s in the new homestead country.”

“Doctor!”

“Not a word. There’s a train leaving in two hours, and you’re going on it. By the time I dress up that face for eczema your own father wouldn’t know it, and a good sousing with iodoform will keep the passengers from getting too curious.”

“But doctor, I cannot have you do this thing. You are assisting a fugitive. You

may be held responsible. You are running a risk."

"Not much. I have no evidence that there is a warrant out for you. If I make a mistake in treating you for eczema that is simply a professional misjudgment. A doctor is permitted to make mistakes—and bury them."

"But it is at least an evasion of the spirit of the law. Of course, I'm not trying to defend the law, I'm evading it myself, but I don't want you to be mixed up in it."

"I've been thinking of that, too. I studied your case while you were making your toilet. I'm a good Canadian, and I obey the law. Society is founded upon obedience. But if laws conflict, which am I to obey?"

"The higher law, I suppose," said Burton, not just clear to what the doctor referred.

"Very well. That is just the way I figured it out. The law of man says, 'Hand him over to the police.' The law of God says, 'Do unto others as ye would—.' When the law of man conflicts with the law of God, the law of man is *ultra vires*. We must obey the higher law, and if men generally would do so fewer jails would be needed. So you see how you happen to have eczema."

"I can't thank you enough," said Burton, the moisture gathering in his eyes. "I will repay—when I can."

"That's all right," the good doctor assured him, but he turned his face away a little. "I helped you into the world, and I guess it's my privilege to help you through it."

CHAPTER XII—LOVE—OR LAW?

"They say there is wealth in the doing,
That royal and rich are the gains,
But 'tisn't the wealth I am wooing,
So much as the life of the plains;
For here in the latter day morning,
Where Time to Eternity clings,
Midwife to a breed in the borning,
I behold the Beginning of things!"

The Empire Builders.

Thirty hours later, in a forward seat of a colonist car, sat a young man with his face in bandages. A strong odour of disinfectants pervaded that section of the car, and other passengers avoided it as much as possible, but a doctor's certificate that the trouble was not of a dangerous nature satisfied conductors and trainmen. For thirty hours the young man had fasted, and the interminable journey across the broad vest of the prairie country wore on in dull monotony. Villages, towns and cities had flashed by, and now they were in the great unsettled ranching country, where one may travel many townships without seeing sign of human life. Here and there, at great intervals, the eye caught a glimpse of numberless herds grazing on the rolling uplands; and at intervals greater still a horseman loomed high against the distant horizon. The two slender threads of steel seemed the only connecting link with modern civilization, and as they strung far into the endless West the very minds of the passengers underwent an evolution, a broadening, a disassociation with Established Things, and assumed an attitude of receptiveness toward That Which Shall Be. Here, at last, was the new West, the manless land, its bosom bared for a thousand miles to the hungry embrace of landless man.

Through his little window Burton watched it, and with the eye of faith and optimism saw all this boundless country checkered into farms; towns and cities rising where now were flag-stations and water-tanks, telephones and telegraphs where now were fences and buffalo runs; electric railways groaning with wheat

across the now trailless prairie. Here was a chance to be in at the beginning; to lay new foundations of business, government, and society, unchecked by tradition, unhampered by convention, undaunted by the arrogance of precedent. How well those foundations must be laid; a variation of a thousandth of a principle, projected through a thousand years, might swing the centre of gravity of society beyond its base! And who were the men to lay this foundation? To whom had Fate entrusted such responsibility? He glanced about the car, foul from its long journey, saturated in tobacco smoke, reeking with alcoholic fumes and the nameless odours of unwashed humanity. Across the aisle sat a mother from Central Europe, crowded in the seat with her three children, clad in shawls and blankets, sweltering in the July heat. Once he caught their eye; they looked at him through the eye of the hunted thing, the croucher, the oppressed; the eye where hate serves for passion, where strength means tyranny, where love has only an animal significance. Was it from this that the ideal State should rise; from this sad flotsam of the seas of oppression and vice? And yet as he looked he saw in that same eye another element, deeper, perhaps, and less pronounced, as though only rising into being. It was the element of wonder; and whoso wonders is not without hope. And there was ambition! This little frightened family had dared to cross an ocean and half of two continents—for what? Surely only to share in a possibility impossible at home. Likely enough the husband was already a homesteader in the new land; he would meet them at one of these little flag-stations with his ox-team and wagon, and they would trek away, fifty, sixty, a hundred miles into the wilderness to rear their home, to lay the foundations of their future, to bring up a family of free-born Canadians. The whole car was filled with such foreigners; rough and vicious-looking many of them; sad-eyed and wondering a few, with here and there a son of that jocund hilarity which knows no restraint and whose current runs fullest where is most to dry it up.

And yet, who should set bounds to their future? What “mute, inglorious Miltons,” what “village Hampdens” might be here, waiting only the saving grace of environment to bring them surging into the fulness of a life unknown, undreamt, and yet the lure of whose prophetic vision had fired their dark eyes in the far fields of their unhappy ancestry! How far from the civilisation of the past, how far even from the civilisation of the present, had they thrown themselves in this wild projection into the unknown and the unlimited!

The train stood, waiting, on a side-track. With his head out of the window Burton saw a black cloud of smoke far to the westward; steadily it grew until the muzzle of a locomotive could be distinguished, and in a few minutes the

eastbound express roared past them in its down hill run to evening dress and music and conventions made for the fascination of disregarding them! But even as it swept by from the open windows of the dining car came the scent of fresh-cut roses and carnations, and a moment later the “newsy” hurried through the car with a bundle of morning papers. Burton stopped him and bought a copy, somewhat to the vendor’s surprise, and settled down to read, verbatim, the speech of the Prime Minister of England delivered in London the evening before!

As the train approached the young man’s destination he quietly slipped into the washroom and removed his bandages. With soap which the doctor had supplied him he erased the salve and grease, and after a good wash, with his hair combed and his collar and tie adjusted, he felt more like a civilized being than at any time since he had left the consultation room of Dr. Millar. As the crowd swept out at the station he mingled, unnoticed, among them.

He rushed first into a lunch-room, and after satisfying his long hunger he had scarce set foot on the station platform until a friendly hand grasped him by the arm and led him to one side.

“Come this way, Jack,” said a young man, little older than himself, but with that alert, active manner which is as distinctive of the country as the chinook. “Let’s get out of this bunch before they get wised up. Lucky I saw you in time. Jimmy Reid, a chum of mine that came in here homesteadin’ last year, has just got word tuh go home tuh I-o-way, where his father’s most all in, an’ he says to me last night—no longer ago than last night—he says, ‘Frank, slip down tuh the station to-morrow an’ if yuh see a likely lookin’ fellow ’at ’ud appreciate a bit of a start in this country put him next tuh my homestead. I got tuh let her go,’ he says, ‘Dad’s all in an’ I’ll have tuh coop up under Old Glory for awhile, anyway. Put some decent fellow next it,’ says he. Talk about luck——”

“But I am afraid I don’t understand,” said Burton. “A man can’t sell a homestead unless he has the patent, can he?”

The new acquaintance looked Burton in the face for five seconds, and then burst into a sudden guffaw.

“No, of course he can’t,” he declared, slapping his leg and laughing hilariously. “Not any more than he can travel on a train without a ticket. Oh, you wise one,”

he exclaimed, giving Burton a friendly nudge in the ribs, and dropping his voice, “what are you travellin’ colonist fer? Oh, don’t tell me,” he went on, without waiting for an answer. “It’s easier ’an butter. My chum has the best homestead outa doors, an’ I can’t take it, ’count o’ havin’ exhausted my rights already, an’ that’s the only reason you get in easy. All you got tuh do is stick around until notice o’ cancellation is posted, an’ then get in your application. He’s sixty days to get back on the job, an’ unless he sees it’s goin’ your way back he’ll come, an’ spoil the game of any one that tries tuh butt in. It’s done ev’ry day in the week, an’ you’re as safe as a dollar.”

“What’s this information going to cost me?” Burton interrupted.

Jimmy Reid’s chum hesitated for a minute. “I wouldn’t hardly like to say just what Jimmy was settin’ on that place,” he said at last, slowly, as one who is deliberating every word. “It’s easy worth twenty dollars an acre, which is thirty-two hundred fer the quarter, an’ when a man is lookin’ fer a farm to achually go out an’ live on a homestead’s as good as railway land. The duties don’t cut no figure if your goin’ to live there anyway. Course, Jimmy was expectin’ whoever got it ’ud use him decent—say about two thousand.” The last word was uttered with an inflection as though the speaker asked a question.

“I’m afraid it’s out of my class,” said Burton. “I’ve only a few dollars with me, and I intend to work out for a while to get enough to start me on a claim of my own.”

“I’m awful sorry,” said the other, “I am, fer a fact. ’Taint ev’ry day such a chance goes strolling by. But—oh, by the way, I was forgettin’. Here’s somethin’ right in your line. Put that few dollars of yours into some A number one top-notch town property an’ it’ll earn more fer you before the snow flies than your muscles will. Here’s somethin’ extra good,” as he drew a map from his pocket. “See this block—high class industrial property. Prices from one hundred to three hundred dollars a lot, tenth down an’ ten dollars a month until paid fer; no taxes, interest, or charges of any kind. Here’s a fine corner here, facin’ south an’ west, overlookin’ the town, five hundred dollars fer two lots, that’s only fifty dollars you’d need to put up an’ we’ll sell those lots again for a cool thousand before December. Come along, you’re dry after your trip; let’s wet this thing a little an’ then we’ll take an auto out an’ show you the stuff.”

“Sorry,” confessed Burton, rather ashamed to have to refuse, “but I really

couldn’t handle any of it. I’ve just four dollars and forty cents in my pocket at this minute, and no more coming until I earn it.”

“Sorry too,” said the land man, with no abatement of his good humour. “Sorry both fer you and me. But that really is a great buy. Come an’ see me when yer in town. You don’t look like a fellow that ’ud stay sod-bustin’ long when you can make more money in town in six months than most of these moss-backs ever saw. Here’s my card—look me up when yuh get settled an’ perhaps I can turn something your way yet. Here’s a man I’ve got to see. So long. Good luck!” and the real estate dealer drilled away through the crowd.

Down the platform a little way a group of men were gathered about an old farmer—a tall, thin, one-time Yankee, typical from top boots to chin whiskers. He was dickering with a bunch of new arrivals for labour for his farm. A few foreigners, curious-eyed, gazed at him for a minute or two, their packs on their backs and their chins drooping; then swung away to gravitate to railway construction offices or the town labour department. Half a dozen Anglo-Saxons remained; two Englishmen, in riding breeches, and three or four Eastern Canadians and Americans. Burton joined the group.

“I came out to learn to fawm, sir,” one of the Englishmen was saying. “I should jolly well like to have a gow at it. Is there any gime—er—any—er antelope or—gophahs?”

The farmer chewed a generous ration of tobacco reflectively for some seconds, then expectorated with much accuracy at a fish-plate on the railway. “Ah,” he said at length, “there be some game, all right, young man, and there also be some gun experts. Ah got a neighbour out there who’s been stuffin’ birds an’ beasts fer twenty year, an’ he’s so durn handy with a gun he can wing a grass-hopper without breakin’ a bone. I reckon he’s got most every crittur indig’ous to this country in that collection o’ his’n. Ah,” repeated the farmer, meditatively, “I reckon he has.”

“Ah, bah jove, I should like to meet him. A jolly good sort, I should say.”

“Yep, not so bad. An’ awful accerate with a gun. He’d be glad tuh see yuh, too. But if he caught you walkin’ round in them seeder-drills yer wearin’ he’d sure enough bag another zoological specimen. An’ yu’d loose yerself in a pair o’ jeans.”

There was a laugh in which all but the Englishmen joined, and they, with a remark about a “lot of bally rough-necks” withdrew themselves from the group.

“I tell you what, Mr. Whiskers,” said a young fellow wearing a Stetson and cigarette, “I think I’m just the man you need. Was born on a farm and know the whole deck. Can drive anything from a dog-team to a traction engine. Nothin’ in the State had anythin’ on me when it came to drivin’.”

The farmer focused his eyes on the cigarette with supreme contempt. “If Ah had ye ah’d use ye fer driving all right,” he said, speaking with great deliberateness. “Yep. Ah’d use ye fer drivin’ posts—if I could fit a handle!”

There was another laugh, but the crowd was thinning down.

“Well, Ah suppose you was brung up on a farm, too?” continued the farmer, addressing a husky looking chap in a cottanade suit and flannel shirt. “Can ye shock?”

“Well I guess I can,” said the man addressed. “I was the long-distance shocker of our settlement.”

“Use tuh take in shockin’, Ah suppose,” answered the farmer. “Waal, how many sheaves did they put in the shock, your way about?”

The candidate for the position hesitated a moment. “Well,” he ventured at length, “I don’t know that I ever counted, but I should say about fifty.”

“That’ll do fer you,” said the farmer. “You’re not a shocker. You’re a stacker.” Then turning to Burton, “Ah suppose you was raised on a farm too?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ever drive a binder?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How’s binders built—right or left-hand cut?”

“Most of them are left-hand, except McCormicks.”

“By hang,” said the farmer, addressing an invisible audience, “here’s a fellow that knows somethin’, anyhow. Say! Now, supposin’ you was drivin’ a binder, an’ she was kickin’ out loose sheaves right along, with the knot all on one end o’ the string, what’ud yuh do fer it?”

“I’d sharpen the knotter-knife first,” said Burton, “and if that didn’t fix it I’d ____”

“Thet’ll do,” interrupted the farmer. “This is my wagon here. Throw in yer bundle an’ stretch yerself around town fer an hour, an’ then we’ll hit the trail. But Ah forgot to tell you, it’s fifty miles tuh my farm, an’ the comp’ny out there ain’t much writ up in the sassiety papers.”

“The farther the better,” said Burton. There was a touch of bitterness in his voice, and the old man looked at him keenly.

“Love—or law?” he asked, at length.

Burton flushed but did not reply, and the farmer continued, with a sudden kindness in his speech, “Never mind, lad. This country’s full of fellows who’re tryin’ to git away from one or t’other of them two irresistibles—love an’ law. But God help the fellow thet gits hit by both. When a chinook crosses the path of a nor’wester there’s trouble fer everybody.”

Burton accompanied his new employer about the town for a couple of hours. The farmer was making purchases at the stores and implement houses, and as he did not expect to be in the town again until after the threshing it was some time before his business was completed. The young man stood beside him in the store, and his practical knowledge of quality and values astonished the old farmer. At length the purchasing was finished, and with the double wagon-box piled high with groceries, canned goods, dry-goods, hardware, harness, binder twine, machine oil and all the other sundries demanded by the activities of the harvest season, the two men started on their journey farmwards.

The sun was well into the western sky before they left the town, and in the hot July afternoon the horses had to be allowed their pace. The roads were alive with traffic, farmers driving in as much as a hundred miles for their fall supplies. Scores of other wagons, loaded as was this one, were to be seen; great stacks of lumber were dragged slowly along by four- and six-horse teams; a veritable procession of mowers, rakes and binders, some loaded on wagons and some

running on their own wheels, stretched along the country road, the procession here and there blocked into divisions by giant steam or gas tractor outfits with their long, slow-crawling caravan of paraphernalia.

Sundown found our travellers approaching a diminutive farm house, where the team of their own accord turned in at the open gate.

“This is whar Zeb Ensley lives,” said the farmer. “His shack is small, but his hospitality would fill a hemisphere, an’ Ah gen’rally allow to put up with him goin’ an’ comin’. Zeb’s English, but he’s past the moultin’ stage, an’ he’s awful white. After an Englishman moults—gits rid of his unnecessary feathers—they ain’t no better neighbour.”

By this time the team had stopped in front of an enclosure made by standing mill slabs on end, which was all the shelter provided for Mr. Ensley’s horses. The host himself was beside the wheel, and placed a brown hand in the farmer’s as the latter clambered down from the high spring seat.

“How are you, Mr. McKay? Back this far, safe, I see, with a big load and a likely looking farm hand. Won’t you introduce me?”

“Waal, now, by hang, thet’s one thing Ah can’t do,” said Mr. McKay. “They ain’t been no formalities yet. When Ah find a man ’at knows gee frum haw Ah don’t worry much about what he was christened.”

“Call me Ray,” said Burton, as he threw the inside tugs over the horses’ backs and slipped the tongue from the neck-yoke. “Go into the house and rest, Mr. McKay, and I will put the team away, if Mr. Ensley will show me where.”

“Waal, what d’ye think of thet?” said Mr. McKay, slapping his thigh. “The young fellow’s givin’ orders already. An’ what’s more—what’s more,” he repeated, pointing a huge fore-finger at Burton—“what’s more, the old man’s goin’ tuh do as he’s told.”

Burton unhitched the team and watered them; drew the harness off and rubbed them down with a wisp of hay as Ensley filled the mangers. Then the two men walked to the shack, where they found Mr. McKay with his great boots off and his stockinged feet resting comfortably on the ash-pan of the stove, in which a slab fire burned cheerily. The tea-kettle was singing lustily; a saucepan of dried apples simmered on the back of the stove, and presently the appetising smell of

frying potatoes and eggs filled the little room. The light from Ensley's single lamp fell on the walls, papered with pictures and cartoons from English publications, with a dry-goods box nailed up for a cupboard, and over the door the miniature arsenal which always marks the Britisher's home. Outside the darkness was settling down; the long, persistent twilight of the Canadian summer lingered in the western sky, but the east loomed black and colourless, and a strange night wind sighed mournfully over the endless, sweeping fields of grass.

CHAPTER XIII—GROPING

"Then I gave him hopes he could not define and fears
that he could not flee;
And he heard my cry in the long, still night,
In my spirit-thrall I held him tight,
And his blind soul-eyes craved for the light;
But the light he could not see."

Prairie Born.

Hiram Riles' temper was not improved by driving home through a soaking rain from the Dominion Day sports at Plainville. Hiram's interest in sports at best was purely negative. He enjoyed the discomfiture of the defeated team; he gloated over the player whose costly error brought upon him the wrath of the spectators. At a game Hiram always stood a little to one side, watching, not for brilliant plays, but for errors, and passing contemptuous remarks about such of the players as were unfortunate enough to localise his displeasure. There had been only one bright spot in the whole day's experiences. That was the news of the stolen money being found in Burton's trunk. Riles had never forgiven the affair at Grant's, and his nature was such that his hatred grew rather than abated with the passage of time. He now felt that his young enemy would be properly covered with shame; he could honourably dismiss the matter from his mind, or at least lay it aside to be revived when Burton regained his liberty. But the storm had interfered with his intended carousal; Riles' appetite rarely got the better of his prudence, and even the reflection that Burton was by this time probably safe in the cells failed to give the pleasure such a happy situation warranted.

But Riles' displeasure during his drive home was a small thing compared with his rage on discovering that the hailstorm had swept out forty acres of his best crop. The destruction had caught only a corner of his farm, and although his poor neighbour to the south had every stalk of his crop destroyed Riles wasted no sympathy on neighbours, but walked his floor all night nursing his anger and vexation. At an earlier hour than usual he wakened London, and cuffed the boy soundly before he made his escape to the stables. The cows in the corral yawned

and rose lazily, stretching their hind quarters to throw off the night's cramp, as a soft mist rose from the warm spots where they had lain. London glanced at the house, but there was no sign of Riles; then he softly set the dog on the astonished cattle. For a minute or two they circled the corral; then one old cow, more venturesome than the rest, sprang over the fence, breaking the upper wire in the effort, and all followed her to liberty.

"That'll give 'im somethink helse to worry habout," reflected the boy. "'E'll think they broke away when the 'ail struck 'em."

Riles' temper showed no improvement during the day, nor for many days thereafter. The loss of forty acres of grain was a matter calling for at least as many days' mourning. The poor neighbour, whose crop was all he had, had taken heart again, and whistled as he ploughed the ruin of the storm underfoot, but Riles could not forget that Providence had been most unfair to him, and was even more brutal than ever with his help, both beast and human.

But London was not the child he had been when first he entered the farmer's employ. He was now eighteen years old, and although small and ungainly of stature, and erratic in many of his mental exploits, he had imbibed something of the ambition and independence of the young men of the district, and he chafed more than ever under Riles' authority. He found opportunity frequently to visit the Grant farmhouse; in fact, whenever the cattle were lost he first inquired at Grant's, and it was noticed that on such occasions the stray animals were never discovered until long after dark. This meant a booting from Riles, but London held a couple of hours' respite with the Grant boys well worth the price. Sometimes, too, he would chat with Susy Grant or Miss Vane, and neither girl guessed the strange workings of his dwarfed little intellect.

"Everybody calls you London," said Miss Vane, one evening. "But that must be a nickname. Tell me, what is your real name? What did your mother call you, or do you remember your mother?" she added, softly.

"My real name is Wilfred Vickery," answered the boy, "but nobody calls me that. Guess Hi'm not worth a real name," he continued, with a bitter little laugh. "My mother gave me that name, but Hi never 'eard 'er speak it, leastways, not as Hi remembers hof."

"That is a nice name," said Myrtle. "I am going to call you Wilfred. You must

not think you are not worthy of a good name. You must feel worthy—and then be worthy."

"That's not wot they say hin the churches," the boy replied. "Once Hi went to church hin the school'ouse, to see w'at hit was loike, an' the preacher said as 'ow we was all sinners, an' 'ow we was hall to think wot big sinners we was, an' 'ow we was all to think we was a bigger sinner than anybody helse. Hi guess Hi am, too, bigger'n anybody—'cept old Riles."

"Have you tried not to be a sinner?" the girl asked.

"Wot? Not to be a sinner? Hi tried to do wot the preacher said, an' be the biggest sinner ever was. An' Hi guess Hi am—all but Riles."

"But that is not what the minister meant, Wilfred. He meant that you must be humble, and that you must be sorry for your own wrongdoing."

"Wot is 'umble?"

"Why, to be humble is to feel that you are in the world to help, and to be of service to other people, no matter who they may be."

"Are you 'umble, Miss Vane?"

The question was quite unexpected, and the girl hesitated for a moment as she descended from the abstract to the concrete.

"I hope I am," she said at length.

"But people say as 'ow you are proud an' stuck hup."

"Do they Wilfred? Who say that?"

"Riles an' Mrs. Riles. She says as 'ow you're a 'ot-'ouse plant, fer hornament more than use."

"Dear me, that is too bad," laughed the girl, and the ripple of her voice was good to hear. Even London knew that it was—he couldn't describe it—but *different* from any other voice. "But, supposing Mrs. Riles is right, don't you think that to be an ornament is to be useful? Look at that tiger lily; is it not beautiful? But of

what use is it?”

“Hi guess hit haint no use,” said the boy. “But when Hi go over the prairie after the cattle hoften Hi pull a lily, hand Hi loike to walk w’ere they grow.”

“And if God took all the beautiful flowers, and the wonderful clouds, and the glorious sunsets and dawns, and the singing birds, and the weep of the wind as it blows up out of the dark, and—and the beautiful people out of the world, it wouldn’t be such a nice place to live in, would it?”

“No, because ’Ee would ’ave to take you, Miss Vane.”

The girl coloured, pleased with the genuine and unexpected compliment. But she turned it to account.

“Then it is possible for the ornamental to be useful, isn’t it?”

The setting sun was crimsoning the fleecy clouds far overhead, and throwing long shadows in the warm August evening. Everywhere was the smell of ripening wheat. The tinkle of a cowbell came up from the distance; a meadowlark sang its short liquid tune from a neighbouring fence post.

“Hi guess you’re right,” said the boy, after a long pause: “Hi guess hit’s worth while bein’ beautiful. Per’aps hit’s jist has himportant to be beautiful has to raise w’eat hand milk cows, but nobody hever talked that wy to me before.”

“It’s worth thinking about, Wilfred. So many people in this country have not learned that ‘the life is more than food, and the body more than raiment.’ They can see the use of potatoes, but not of poetry. And they are in such a hurry! Such a hurry to live, one would think they wanted to get their lives over with. Poise and repose are lost arts.”

She was looking at the gathering dusk in the east, and spoke as though soliloquizing with herself. London brought her back to earth.

“Hi don’t know hall you sy, but hi know wothever you sy his roight,” he declared, with sincere gallantry. “Hand Miss Vane, can Hi come at noights w’enhever Hi can sneak away, an’—talk with you, loike we did to-noight?”

“Yes, Wilfred, you may come whenever you can, and we will talk about things

that are beautiful, and things that are useful. And we will try to remember that there is nothing so beautiful as a useful life, and nothing so useful as a beautiful life. And there is nothing so precious as—a friend."

She took the hand of the boy, so long friendless, in her own, and in that moment the soul of the little Barnardo orphan burst the bonds of eighteen years' environment and lit up the face of a *man*.

This evening's conversation was the first of many. Wilfred was an artist at devising reasons and excuses for visiting Grants'. And soon an unlooked-for opportunity presented itself. Miss Vane had taken a deep interest in the boy, and did not hesitate to enlist her cousins in a little plan for setting Wilfred at liberty in the evenings. Accordingly, George Grant called on Riles, and, after the customary commonplaces about the weather and the crops, mentioned his desire to get a boy to sit up for an hour or two at night to watch the smudge fires, and put them out after the cattle had settled down. Could Mr. Riles spare London from nine to eleven for a job like that? They would either pay him in money for the boy's services, or allow it when they exchanged labour in threshing time. But perhaps London had enough to do as it was, and would be better in bed after his day's——.

Not a bit of it. He was rusting for want of exercise. Of course, he could go. Grants had always been good neighbours, and they would always find Hiram Riles ready to do a favour. The boy would go over every night as long as he was needed. For, be it said, it was one of the whims of Riles' nature that he entertained no aversion to the Grants.

So it came about that Wilfred spent many of his evenings at the Grant farm. The companionship of the Grant boys, the parental kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Grant, the ready wit of Susy, which spared neither herself nor her acquaintances, were a relevation to the boy, who had always associated farm life with grim labour, hard words and sour dispositions. At nine at night the farm company gathered about the kitchen table, where were onions from the garden and buttermilk from the dairy; and as they ate, the exploits of the day were re-enacted, and the best of cheer and fellowship prevailed. And when the simple meal was over, and the "old folks" had gone upstairs, the young people engaged in harmless pastimes and amusements for another hour. Miss Vane was the soul of kindness and courtesy to the orphan boy, and although she joined in all the pleasantries of the evening she had through all a deeper purpose than mere pastime, and she seldom

failed to have a few serious words with Wilfred before he started on his walk through the dew-laden grass to the Riles' farm. And the lad was responding to her interest and her confidence. A new spirit seemed to have been born in him, his slouchy habits gave way to an air of brisk alertness, and his speech, although not yet refined, had a tone of seriousness and responsibility unknown in the past.

In conversation Myrtle seized every opportunity to quote to the boy from the masters of literature such selections as his awakening intellect could appreciate, and she had the satisfaction at length of finding his interest excited, not only in the selections themselves, but in the authors of them. She now knew that she had attained her first purpose; she had made his world wider than the boundaries of a little farming community; she had raised him to the point where his mental eye fastened on something beyond his horizon of the past. She had wakened the desire for knowledge; all other things were now possible.

Walking up the path from the pasture field one evening—the self-same path she had walked with Burton in that spring that seemed so many years ago—the light night wind stirred in the tops of the willows growing by the little stream. Against the background of the faintly coloured west distances took on an enchanted perspective, and the little limbs a few feet above their heads could easily be seen as forest monsters stretching into the lowering sky. They paused and sat on a grassy bank, watching the dusk gather through the lattice-work of leaves, and as they sat the girl repeated softly—

"I remember, I remember
The fir-trees dark and high;
I used to think their slender tops
Were close against the sky.

"It was a childish ignorance,
But now 'tis little joy
To know I'm farther off from heaven
Than when I was a boy."

"I have heard old men choke on that last line, Wilfred," she added, but was hardly prepared for his answer,—

"Yes, but they started 'igh up and grew down. Hi started low down and ham—am, Hi mean—growing up. For me, Hi'm closer to 'even to-night than w'en Hi

was a boy—a little boy—for Hi'm a boy yet. Hi'm close to 'even w'en Hi'm close to you," declared the lad, his face flushed with a light she could not see in the darkness.

She laughed lightly, all unguessing the streams of passion of which his sincerity should have made her aware. From an equal she could not have accepted the remark without misgiving, but from Wilfred—the idea was so unique that it did not even occur to her.

"Oo wrote that?" the boy demanded, after a silence.

"Thomas Hood," was the answer. "But the night is growing chilly. Let us go to the house. I have a little volume of Hood's I will lend you—if you will read it."

"Hindeed Hi will," he answered, as they walked up the path.

At the house they found that all had retired. Myrtle slipped a little book into Wilfred's hand. "Read 'The Song of the Shirt,' and 'The Bridge of Sighs' and—perhaps—'Eugene Aram.' Good night."

"Good night," he said, and disappeared in the darkness.

Myrtle sat down in the little parlour of the farmhouse. All was stillness. The hard labour of agricultural life had driven the boys and Susy early to their rooms. But their beautiful cousin had no thought of sleep. As she walked up the pasture path a gust of memory swept over her; the memory of a night, dark, with slight stirring breezes that whispered eerily among the willows; the memory of a strong hand that had helped her to her place on the pony, and had lain on his mane as they walked slowly homeward. Burton's disappearance had been complete; since the First of July celebration he appeared to have dropped out of existence as absolutely as if the earth had swallowed him. Her strong confidence in his innocence had battled bravely against overwhelming evidence, but in the unequal conflict she knew it to be breaking down. Since the night of their terrible experiences in the thunderstorm Gardiner had not attempted to force his acquaintance with her, but while she suffered from the injured ankle he telephoned a courteous inquiry daily, and since had found occasion to make a couple of casual calls. Miss Vane had received him kindly; he had been Burton's friend; he was, indeed, her friend. Burton's disappearance placed Gardiner in the *rôle* of a benefactor; he would forfeit the bail given for the young man's liberty, and the fact that he seemed prepared to do so without a murmur of protest gave

him a strong claim upon Myrtle's regard. But she could not lose sight of the fact that there was a purpose in all Gardiner's conduct; that he sought her for his wife, and that he was only waiting until there seemed no possibility of Burton's return before he pleaded his suit once more with her.

And if Burton did not return—what? A hundred times she had thrown this thought from her mind, but it intruded again more arrogantly than ever. A hundred times she had said, "He will return." But time was wearing on, and Burton's complete disappearance left little question as to his purpose. Even while she told herself he would return the cold sweat of doubt and uncertainty gathered on her brow. Early in the history of his trouble she had written to her brother in the East, and had received an answer of sound advice and practical encouragement; but Harry had soon after sailed for Europe, and neither advice nor consolation was to be had from him at present.

With a gesture as if warding off something unpleasant—something real and unseen—she walked across the room and drew a little volume from a book-case. It opened in her hand, and as she sat down her eyes fell upon the lines—

"Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last.
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast.
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by Life's unchanging sea."

With a sharp breath she closed the book. The whole scene stood before her again; the house crowded with merry-makers, their curious faces turned toward the reciter in courteous attention, but with an expression as though to ask what it all was about; the young man, with slightly flushed features but clear, deep, even voice; and then that wonderful instant of telepathy when their eyes met, and she heard the voice deepen and broaden as though a great storage of reserve energy had been connected to the human dynamo.

She rose with the book still in her fingers, drew a shawl about her slight figure, and stepped out into the night. It was absolutely dark. A soft wind moved quietly, toying with the light folds of her dress; a few heavy drops of rain spattered in the dust. God's heaven had descended in a mantle of darkness and

lay brooding over all the face of the prairies. And somewhere under that mantle of darkness, somewhere under the heaven of that same God, was a young man, sturdy and physically strong, but bearing in his quiet eyes and melancholy mouth a load beyond his years. How had his “stately mansions” narrowed in!

As high-strung natures will, she sought relief from her mental torment in physical exercise. Regardless of the darkness and the threatening rain she walked down the path and out at the gate; her feet found the hard earth of the country road and she walked rapidly along, caring little where she went. But the blood, demanded by her exercise, drew away from the brain; the cool, moist wind salved the fever of her brow, and presently she turned her footsteps homeward. As she passed the summer-house a sudden impulse seized her; she entered, laid herself down on a bench of woven willows, and in a few minutes was lost in sleep.

CHAPTER XIV—THE SACRIFICE OF SILENCE

> "Greater than the measure of the heroes of renown,
> He is building for the future, and no hand can hold him down;
> Though they count him but a common man, he holds the Outer Gate,
> And posterity will own him as the father of the State."
>
> *The Empire Builders.*

As Wilfred walked home through the wet grass his spirits were high with a new-born enthusiasm of youth. The drudgery, the hardship, the toil unlightened by a gleam of humour or a thought except of selfishness, with which the past years of his life had been surrounded, seemed now as an unreal dream. There were greater things in life than cows, and gardens, and fields of wheat; and in a dim way these things of which he had not so much as guessed were opening to his astonished vision. In his hand he carried the little book of poems, but in his heart was the joy of a grassy slope, where they watched the night deepening through the willows, and the sound of her voice, liquid as the little stream before them. He had thought of girls, always, with a shyness strongly seasoned with an element of contempt; but toward her he felt only a reverence so deep it almost hurt. He was young, and buoyant with the first great emotion of his life, and in the crude colourings of his fancy he traced wonderful dreams that drew out of the future and became very real to his intoxicated senses.

But at the door of the Riles' house his visions fled, and the spirit of cunning that had so long been his best protector brought him back to earth. He slipped quietly in, found the lantern on its nail, and silently climbed the ladder to his room. Here he lit the lantern, and without removing his clothing lay down to read by the smoky light.

Wilfred's education was very elemental, and he stumbled through many passages with difficulty, but in it all he was able to catch something of the spirit of the verses. At length he settled into "Eugene Aram," and as the excitement of the dramatic lines tightened about him he read aloud, wholly unconscious of the flight of time.

On his bed below Hiram Riles fancied he heard a mumbling sound come from his garret, and opening his eyes saw a dim light shining through the opening in the ceiling. It was deep in the dead of night, but there was no question that London was talking, in a nervous, agitated voice. Riles could not distinguish the words; he stole to the foot of the ladder and noiselessly ascended it until his head came to the level of the garret floor. Here he saw the boy lying on his mattress, a few rags of blankets about him, his knees drawn up, his head supported by a bundle of clothing, the lantern sitting on the broken chair and throwing an uncertain light upon the little volume in his hands. Riles paused in wonder, and in a moment was rivetted by the words—

"Two sudden blows with a ragged stick,
And one with a 'eavy stone,
One 'urried gash with a 'asty knife,—
And then the deed was done:
There was nothing lying at my feet
But lifeless flesh and bone!

"Nothing but lifeless flesh and bone,
That could not do me hill;
And yet Hi feared 'im hall the more
For lying there so still.
There was a manhood in 'is look
That murder could not kill!

"And, lo! the universal hair
Seemed lit with ghastly flame,—
Ten thousand thousand dreadful eyes
Were looking down in blame;
Hi took the dead man by 'is 'and——"

Riles' face was writhing in an effort to find expression, but the vocal organs refused to fill their office. Like most men of low moral nature, while scoffing at religion he was an easy victim to the terrors of the supernatural. The fact that this orphan boy, the victim of his brutality for so many years, should lie awake at the dead of night stammering through these ghastly lines must carry some horrible significance. He tried to speak, but a muffled gurgle in his throat was all the sound that responded.

It was enough. Wilfred’s ears, sharpened by the terror of the thing he read, caught and magnified the guttural noise. With a shriek he sprang from the bed and, standing in the centre of the floor, his body bent forward, his fingers clutching in nervous excitement, he peered about the musty little room. Presently his eyes fell upon the livid face of Riles, just above the floor line. They fixed each other in a stare of terror, but, to his own great surprise, the boy found a strong sense of self-control beginning to bear him up.

He was first to break the silence. “So hit was you, ’Iram Riles. You couldn’t sty awy. These words drew you loike a magnet draws a needle. Listen, w’ile Hi read ye more——"

“Don’t, boy; don’t!” Riles managed to exclaim. “It isn’t true. I never harmed him.”

Wilfred’s mind seemed to be acting by telepathy rather than from his own initiative. Afterwards he could not guess what put the words in his mouth.

“Yuh never ’armed ’im, didn’t yuh? Well, w’ere is ’e? W’ere is ’e, ’Iram Riles? That’s wot people are haskin’, an’ they’re thinkin’ o’ you w’en they hask it. W’ere is ’e?”

“I don’t know, Wilfred”—he had never called him Wilfred before—“I don’t know where he is. I didn’t touch him. I tell yuh it never struck him, do yuh hear?”

“Ho, oh, then you missed ’im! By ’ow much? Tell me, ’Iram Riles. ’Ow much? A foot?”

The man had drawn himself into a half sitting posture, his back against the wall, his body half through the trap door, his arms outstretched upon the floor. His fingers trembled, and his lips twitched as he tried to speak. He was a poor ghost of the strong man Wilfred had always known.

“Listen, boy,” he said at length. “I figured on fixin’ him, but I didn’t. I waited for him to come out of the store, and I threw it at him, but in the darkness I missed.”

“Han’ then yuh went in hand robbed the syfe,” completed Wilfred.

“You lie!” shouted Riles, suddenly regaining his self-possession. “It’s all lies!

What I told you was a lie! You hear me?”

He had risen on to his feet, and, with arms outstretched, was slowly approaching the boy. Wilfred read the change, and saw that the man who had narrowly escaped committing murder was still capable of it. But the lad had long been accustomed to protect himself, and his cunning did not desert him at the critical moment. Quick as a flash he seized the burning lantern and hurled it in the face of his assailant. For an instant all was darkness; then a tongue of flame shot across the floor and leapt up the oil-saturated night garments of Riles. With a scream the man, now a blazing torch, plunged down the opening to the floor below and rushed into the outer air. His wife, awakened by Wilfred’s shriek a few moments before, showed her presence of mind by wrapping Riles in a blanket, which extinguished the blaze before he was seriously injured. Wilfred took the opportunity to steal silently out of the building. Riles was swearing terribly as the boy slipped by the corner and disappeared in the darkness.

Wilfred’s plans were soon laid. Bundling up such clothing as he had been able to snatch up in the moment allowed, he waited a short time to see if the house would take fire. It did not, somewhat to his disappointment. To return to Riles would, he knew, be to court disaster. He had a very different purpose now in view. Of late he had been reading the papers at Grants’ in the evenings, and had learned that the Government of Canada was prepared to give a quarter section to any man who would live on it and establish a farm. It was a great day when his poor, narrow imagination first made the leap that supposed him—Wilfred Vickery, Barnardo boy—the owner of a farm in his own right. But when the supposition had once been made it grew upon him with a resistless fascination. He was now eighteen. The problem of getting West was a small thing to him. The harvest season was approaching, and he could work. He had been nursing this great thought for weeks, and now, at this moment, it became evident that he must strike out and boldly grapple with destiny. And he had another purpose, of which he scarcely dared think, but which was in reality the foundation of his whole desire.

Perhaps it was this deeper purpose that directed his footsteps again to the Grant farmhouse. He hardly knew the road he had taken until the building loomed up before him, solemn but friendly in the first gray suggestion of dawn. He walked quietly around and looked at all the windows, but there was no gleam of light. If only *she* would appear! If only he might tell her of his plans, his hopes—if only he dared! But she was sleeping, dreaming, perhaps, of “the fir trees, grim and

high," and he dared not take the chance of discovery by remaining until the family were astir. He must leave, silently and without good-bye; he must pass out of her life, for the present at least, as a leaf that falls in a stream and is borne away in the darkness. With a sigh he turned to go, down the little path that lead out by way of the garden. A few steps brought him to the door of the summer-house. Here he paused again; the place was sanctified with the memory of one or two holy evenings; he stepped inside, if only to prolong the sweet sorrow of his leave-taking.

As he stood, framed in the doorway, his vision was drowned in the blank darkness of the little building. But as one sense becomes inoperative another grows more alert, and in a moment his quick ears caught the sound of easy, regular breathing. Someone was sleeping in the summer-house; probably one of the boys. His first impulse was to steal silently away, but a strange fascination led him toward the little rustic couch across the farther wall. Hands outstretched, he crept toward it in the darkness, until his fingers touched a mass so uncertain their nerve-tips scarce detected it. He rubbed finger and thumb together, and knew that silken tresses lay between.

With a great bound his heart almost seemed to drive the air from the lungs; the veins of his neck bulged as though they would burst. He sank upon his knees, leaning forward. A flood of warm air flushed across his tense face; it beat and rebeat like the waves of a sea, and in that moment the boy understood that Time is but a segment calendared out of the circle of Eternity. He could not be mistaken. The elective affinities are never deceived. With a great breath he drew his shoulders back. Within his reach, within the very touch of his finger-tips, was the prize of life compared to which heaven and earth resolved into vague, uncertain promises!

She stirred slightly, as though some wandering thought from the material world had blown in airy ruffles across the smooth lying haven of her spirit land. Some consciousness of human presence—strange element of the divine, which, like a sudden light on sleeping eyes can pass the gates of slumber without unbarring them—was calling the mind back to its vacated chambers. Wilfred remained kneeling, thrilled with the strange exaltation of triumph and humility. His presence was operating upon her, like the magnet upon steel. In a moment she would speak. She would call him by name.

His eyes, straining through the darkness, caught the outline of her face. One

hand lay across the forehead, palm upward. It fell listlessly to her side. She turned her head gently toward him, and a low sound escaped her lips.

His ear had not been quick enough. He leaned close to her, alert for the moment when she would call his name.

“Ray,” she murmured. “Oh, Ray, they said you would not come back.”

As a hypnotist may convert his subject into human stone by the utterance of a single word, the heart of the Barnardo boy froze as that low sound struck his ear, and his tense face moulded itself in deep, sudden furrows. Not all the years of the future should quite efface those quick-cut channels of disillusionment.

He sat back on his heels, his hands limp by his sides. For a moment—one brief moment—an unworthy warfare raged in his nature. How completely she was in his power! But the thought had not crossed his mind when, by some strange instinct, he removed his hat from his dishevelled head, as one might do in a holy presence. For a long while he sat, staring at the blank wall before him; then quietly rose and stole toward the door.

“Who’s that? Who’s that?” she demanded in a frightened tone, sitting suddenly bolt upright. “Where am I? Speak, will you?”

Wilfred turned again toward her. “Hit’s only London, Miss Vane,” he managed to say.

“You, Wilfred? What are you doing here? What am I doing here? Where are we?”

“Hin the summer’ouse, Miss Vane. You were sleepin’ ’ere, han’ I came in. Hi didn’t know you was ’ere, Miss Vane, honest, Hi didn’t, han’ Hi tried to leave without wakin’ yuh.”

She drew her fingers across her eyes. “I begin to remember,” she said. “I must have been dreaming. I thought—oh! a lot of strange things. But what are you doing here? Have you never gone home?”

“No, Miss Vane. That is, Hi ’ave no ’ome to go to, any more. Hi ’ave left Riles, left ’im for good an’ all. Hi ’ave left ’im, han’ I am goin’ away to the West to be a farmer myself. Han’ before Hi went Hi thought Hi would come along this wy

han’ maybe Hi would see—that is, maybe Hi could sy good-bye to the boys.”

Myrtle rose and walked the few steps to where the boy stood leaning against the door. She looked very close in his face before speaking.

“Wilfred, do you mean this? Have you thought it all over? Are you sure of yourself?”

“Yes, Miss Vane, Hi am. Hi am goin’ to be a man, has other boys are men, Wy shouldn’t Hi? Hi am goin’ to the new land, w’ere the Gover’ment gives farms to those as will work ’em, han’ Hi am goin’ to work hout for money to do the himprovements. Hin three years Hi will ’ave a farm of my hown, han’ be has good a man has ’Iram Riles.” He ended with a defiant snap at those last words.

“A great deal better man, I hope,” she said. “The goodness of a man is not measured by his possessions, although that seems one of the hardest lessons for people to learn. Some One has said that he who ruleth his own spirit is greater than he who taketh a city. To control one’s ambition is greater than to realise one’s ambition. In the home of Riles I am afraid you have seen but little self-control in any form. Can you measure up to it when it is required of you?”

She had no inkling of the great test from which he had just come out victorious. And he answered modestly, “Hi think Hi can.”

“But why do you leave in this way?” she asked, a new thought presenting itself. “You are not—not running away, are you?”

“Well, Hi guess you would call hit that. Hi’d a row with Riles, an’ Hi’m goin’.”

There was a silence that lengthened into minutes. The boy shifted from one foot to another, powerless to tear himself away, and yet without an excuse for remaining longer.

“Well, good-bye, Miss Vane,” he said at length.

She started as the words recalled her. “Not yet, Wilfred,” she said. “Not yet, for a little while,” and there was something akin to pleading in her voice. “Wilfred, I believe you are an honest boy. I believe I can trust you. Can I trust you, Wilfred?”

And again he answered modestly, “Hi think you can.”

“Well, I am going to trust you. I am going to tell you a secret, a secret that no one in the world must know but our two selves. And most of all, if you meet *him* he must not know I told you this. But somewhere in the great West, I believe there is one who is more to me than—than——” She stopped for a term of comparison. “You can’t understand, Wilfred, yet, but some day you will know. You will know what it is to find your life revolving around one great thought, as the earth circles the sun, and to know that that thought springs from one Source, for which you were created, which is the end and purpose of your existence. And for me that Centre has been removed—has been torn out of my plan of life. I may find another Centre, but I can never describe a true circle about it. It will always be an elliptic, an eccentric, drawn and pushed by other forces to which I know I should not respond.”

“Hi ’ardly know hall you mean, Miss Vane, but——”

“I don’t know all I mean myself, least of all what I mean by talking to you in this way, but I *must* talk to some one. The worst loneliness in the world is to have no one to talk to, no one who can understand you. Talk is putting thoughts into words and draining them out of your stormy brain, as the great thunderclouds, when they become overloaded, find relief in rain, and out of their wild bursts of passion emerges a cloudless sky. But you know who I mean, don’t you?”

“Ray Burton.”

“Yes. You may find him in that great country. If he lives I look for him back here to stand his trial. You can tell him that much, Wilfred. And if he does not live ... earth has lost another noble soul.”

They faced each other in the brightening dawn. Suddenly, as if almost overwhelmed by a great thought that had nearly escaped him, Wilfred staggered forward, clutching Miss Vane by the shoulders.

“Oh! Miss Vane,” he cried, “Hi know ’oo took the money. Hi know ’oo took it.”

It was her turn to stagger. “You know, Wilfred! Speak! Quick, tell me all!”

“Hit was Riles. ’E threw the bottle that might ’a killed Burton—’e hadmitted it—han’ ’e took the money, too. Hi haccused ’im of it, han’ the wy ’e acted Hi

know ’e did.”

“But can you prove it? Give me your proof,” she demanded.

“Hi ’ave no proof, but Hi ’ave told yuh ’oo took the money. P’raps the proof ’ull turn hup yet.”

“God grant it so,” exclaimed the girl fervently. “At least, now I *know* that Burton is innocent.”

“Yuh don’t mean tuh sy yuh ever thought hit was Burton, do yuh?” demanded the boy, and there was a reproach in his tone that cut. “Yuh never thought that, did yuh?”

“No, I never thought him guilty. But if I could prove him innocent it would make a great difference to me—and to one or two others. The fact is I find myself in a rather embarrassing position. But you don’t understand, and I can’t ex——”

“Yes Hi do, though. Hit’s about that dog Gardiner. ’E’s worse’n Riles.”

“Wilfred!”

“Hi mean it, han’ Hi can’t prove it hit, either.”

“But you must be wrong in this case. Mr. Gardiner has been a good friend, but that is all. That is the trouble. Why can’t a good friend remain a friend instead of spoiling it by wanting to be—something more?”

The boy flushed, but it was with the pride of victory. “Hit’s gettin’ light,” he said. “Hi must be goin’ now. Hif Hi see *’im*, is there hany message; hanything more than you ’ave said?”

She thought for a moment. “Only this,” she said, reaching for the little book of poems. It opened at a well-thumbed spot and she tore a leaf from the binding. She folded it twice and pressed it into his palm. “Give him that,” she said.

He took her hand. “Good-bye, Miss Vane,” he said.

She pressed a chaste kiss on his forehead. “Good-bye. God bless you.”

And he walked sturdily away, carrying unspoken the secret tragedy of his young life.

CHAPTER XV—STILL PLAYING THE GAME

"We have smelt the smoke-wraith flying in the hot October wind,
And have fought the fiery demon that came raging down behind."

Prairie Born.

The harvest was at its height. Blood-red the sun rose every morning to plough its silent way across an ocean of polished steel, while white cloud-swans, with ruffled plumage, floated on its glassy bosom; blood-red it sank to rest every night behind the dim haze of harvest dust. The smell of ripe wheat filled the air, and where the binders clattered into fields of rusty oats a red cloud marked their pilgrimage as a modern people fought its slow way out of the land of bondage. The great, white, dangerous full moon of August had left the fields unharmed, and men and women and horses and steam and gasoline were deep in their pitched battle against time and the steadily shortening day and approaching winter.

Work on the Grant homestead was in full swing. From the earliest moment that the dew would permit operations until the stooks stood eerie and indistinct in the thickening dusk the boys broadsided their two binders into the ranks of the standing grain. Four heavy horses swung on the tugs of each binder, their heads swaying to the slow time of their shaggy feet. After the first day the rattle of the machinery had no terrors for them and they plodded sullenly along with equine resignation, but their sly eyes missed no standing stalk that came within the license of their check-reins, and occasionally the off animal would desert the path made by the drive-wheel on the previous round to make a hurried grab at a stook which appeared to be within reach. Mr. Grant found his time fully occupied arranging the relays, as the practical farmer plans that during good weather his binder must never stop except to change horses and oil the machinery. Twenty thousand harvesters from the eastern provinces had poured into the country in ten days, and it was on this imported help the farmers depended for the stooking. It was work, hard work and long hours, for everybody, but it was work with a spirit for all. The fruit of the year's labour now stood within measureable distance; victory was within their grasp.

Farmers on light soil had finished cutting, and already the whistle of the steam thresher was heard in the land. The mills were working short-handed, a condition with which they would have to be content until the stooking was finished, and a run of a thousand bushels a day was considered better than no run at all. The thresher first in the field was usually able to choose his territory, and the choice might mean the difference between loss and gain at the close of the season.

On a farm adjoining the Grants' such a short-handed mill was in operation. The water haul was short, and to economise labour the same team was being used to draw water and supply straw to the engine. A small matter, as a general rule, but a very important one in this instance, as it turned out.

Having to supply both straw and water the tankman unfortunately allowed the water reserve to fall very low. The whistle was blowing incessantly for water, and the driver whipped his team with the heavy wagon across the stubble fields. Suddenly a whiff of smoke partially obscured the engine from his view, and the next moment he knew that the straw with which the engine was partially surrounded had caught fire. The water barrels were empty, and the engineer, instantly taking in the situation, drove his engine forward without so much as throwing the belt, grappled on to the separator, and backed the outfit away from the zone of danger.

All this was done in less time than is required to relate it, but already the fire was beyond control. Whisked by a hot wind from the south-west the flames leapt from the smaller pile of straw provided for the engine to the larger one behind the separator, and in a moment were away across the field, the heavy, dry stubble burning furiously. With much courage and presence of mind the tankman swung his team around and endeavoured to cross the path of the fire, at the same time drawing the plug, which allowed the water from the tank to spray out over the stubble. The ruse did temporarily check the flames, but they had already gained too much headway to be stopped by a narrow strip of half-moistened stubble, and in a moment the courageous driver found himself and team surrounded by fire. But his wit had not deserted him. The horses, scenting the danger, plunged in frenzy as they saw the fire sweeping about them, but the driver sprang on the tongue, and, removing the draw-bolt, released them from the wagon. From that moment they could be depended upon to take care of themselves, and they dashed furiously away through the smoke and across the field. The driver, throwing his smock about his head, faced the fire, and in a moment was through the danger zone and safe on burnt ground.

Harry Grant swung his binder at the northwest corner of the field and started his team on the south stretch. Looking suddenly up he saw a cloud of smoke blowing across the lower end of the field. Already he could see the red line of flame a mile away where it swept through the neighbour's stooks. There were no fire guards so early in the season, and the road allowances stood knee-deep in dry grass. The farm buildings were safe enough, as they were surrounded by a considerable area of bare land, but the fire would lick up the stooks and even burn the standing grain, which was now dead ripe. In ten minutes they would pay an awful price for their two months' dry weather, and the nearest plough was in the implement shed, half a mile away!

In a moment Harry had his team unhitched. Throwing himself on the back of one of the horses he galloped them homeward, the trace-chains flying wildly about their heels as they ran. A wedge of hot smoke blew across their course, but they plunged into it without slackening, as a locomotive enters a fog. As they drew up in front of the implement shed Harry was just in time to meet his brother George coming out with his four-horse team and gang plough. George had been at a closer part of the field when he discovered the fire.

"Start at the south-west corner, Harry," George shouted as he drove past. "You go east. I'll go north."

The brothers did as arranged. They were able to reach the south-west corner of the farm ahead of the fire, and by ploughing a guard north and east they formed a wedge to divide the fire. The stookers had reached the scene by this time, and ran ahead of the horses, throwing the stooks out of the way. Mr. Grant started a back-fire, which steadily widened the strip of bare land between the approaching enemy and the fruit of their year's labours.

The Grant farm was safe, but the fire had been spread rather than controlled. It now raced away to the east and north, destroying every unprotected thing in its path. The wind seemed to rise as the flames gained headway, but above the roaring of the fire and the crackle of the wheat could be heard the rumble of wagons galloping along the smoke-obscured roads. All the threshers and harvesters within range were hurrying to give their assistance, but indeed it was little they could do. Further away, but still in the path of the fire, farmers were ploughing guards and settling out back-fires, and it was not until these were reached that the flames finally burned themselves out.

News of the fire had soon reached the little town of Plainville, and business men of all classes did not hesitate to close their stores and shops and drive to the scene of the conflagration in wagons, buggies and automobiles. It was little assistance they could give at best, but there is a satisfaction and a suggestion of heroism in even *appearing* to assist. And the face of a merchant looming up through the smoke that enveloped a farmer's building might be the drawing card which would establish another good account on that merchant's books.

When the telephone brought the first word of the fire Gardiner hitched up his horse and buggy and drove straight to the Grant homestead, but before he arrived the fire zone had swept onward. Some one said that young Mrs. Delt was alone at the mercy of the fire, as her husband was away assisting a distant neighbour, and Gardiner at once whipped his horse in that direction. Heavy banks of smoke lay across the road, and at places it was with difficulty he could fill his lungs with air. Suddenly, in such a smoke-cloud, his horse threw itself back on the brechin, and Gardiner fancied he heard a girl's voice raised in alarm. Springing out, he went to the horse's head, and could there distinguish the form of a woman now standing by the side of the road.

"Why, Miss Vane! What are you doing here?"

"I might answer with the same question, Mr. Gardiner, if there were time to play with words. But I want to ride with you to poor Mrs. Delt's. Come, let's hurry."

"Just where I was going," said Gardiner. "I might have known I would find you wherever an errand of mercy called."

"The crack of that whip would sound better than a compliment just now, Mr. Gardiner. There may not be a moment to lose."

The young man answered by urging his horse to a run, and in a few moments they were at Mrs. Delt's door.

"Oh, Mr. Gardiner and Miss Vane!" cried the farmer's wife, as soon as she recognised her visitors. "What *shall* I do? There are no horses here and nothing to work with. Whatever *can* we do?"

But Gardiner had already taken in the situation.

"You are protected to the west by the summer-fallow," he said, "so your only

danger is from the south. There's a strip of stubble a hundred yards wide there that the fire would lick up in a moment. We must throw a break across it in some way."

"Oh, do hurry and think what is to be done," cried Miss Vane. "You know all about prairie fires and I am quite useless. I keep looking all the time for the hose reel."

Gardiner smiled, even as he turned over in his mind the expedients that might be adopted. The girl's voice was music in his ears, and the sense of danger and emergency seemed to deepen the acquaintance between them, as a moment of crisis rises superior to a century of convention.

Gardiner's eye fell on the full water trough beside the well.

"You have a rope?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, there is plenty of rope in the stable," Mrs. Delt answered, and all three at once ran in that direction. They found a coil of rope hanging on a harness pin. Gardiner seized the coil bodily, and the ladies, anxious to help, found an end apiece. As they ran the rope became entangled and dragged along the ground, and presently all three were precipitated in a knot which required some moments to untie.

"Now a bed tick. You have a bed tick, Mrs. Delt?"

"Such a question!" gasped Myrtle, as all three rushed away again, this time to the house. Following Mrs. Delt up the narrow stairway they found the good lady in the spare room, littering quilts and pillows to right and left.

"But we want an old tick—not the best you have," Gardiner remonstrated.

"The best tick I have is none too good for Mr. Gardiner," was Mrs. Delt's reply, which left the young man speechless. There was no time for explanation, so tick and trio crowded down the stairs and out into the yard. Gardiner bundled the tick into a roll and made a couple of loops around it with the rope.

"Now, into the tank with it," he shouted, and the bedding was promptly immersed. A hotter blast of smoke hastened them in their efforts, as the women soused the tick up and down in the water to get it thoroughly saturated, while

Gardiner hitched it to the rear axle of the buggy by means of the rope.

“Now, all together!” he shouted, springing into the buggy and speaking to his horse. “One of you sit on the tick.”

With the discipline of a regular Mrs. Delt instantly obeyed, but at the first tug of the rope found herself unhorsed, if the term is permissible. Miss Vane immediately took her place and was whisked in an uncertain course across the hundred yards of stubble, the water dripping from the tick all the way.

They drove across the field and back, and then, with the added protection of a couple of water pails and three wet sacks, they started a back-fire. Several times it jumped the dampened streak, but on each occasion they beat it out with the wet sacks. The back-fire worked steadily backward against the wind, gradually widening the margin of protection, and by the time the fire came speeding down upon them a strip of burnt stubble twenty yards wide baffled its designs. For a few minutes the flames stood up, snapping far into the air, and throwing detached ribbons of fire toward the Delt buildings. But their fury was soon spent, and, admitting defeat, they slunk back shamefacedly and died down among the ashes.

When Gardiner had assured himself that the danger was past he turned to his companions and found Miss Vane busily sprinkling water from the well on the face of Mrs. Delt, who when the height of the excitement was over, had availed herself of a woman’s privilege to faint away. But the fresh water soon restored her. For a moment her eyes wandered uncertainly from one of her rescuers to the other, and presently she burst out in a ringing laugh.

Gardiner looked at Miss Vane with an expression of alarm. He was more at home fighting a prairie fire than caring for a woman in hysteria.

Mrs. Delt seemed to read his question. “Oh, don’t be alarmed,” she said, as soon as she could control herself. “I was just thinking of the picture Miss Vane presented as she rode that tick across the field. You couldn’t see her to advantage, Mr. Gardiner. And my poor best tick at that!”

Then it was time for everybody to laugh, and when that was over and smoke clouds had cleared away and the sun looked out blood-red from the western sky, Mrs. Delt insisted first that Miss Vane share some dry clothing with her, and second that all remain for supper.

The uneasiness of the Grants was set at rest by telephone, which, despite many burnt poles, was fortunately still in service, and Gardiner, nothing loath, 'phoned his clerk that he would not be in until late.

The sun had set, and a moonless sky, studded with a million diamond points, arched over Gardiner and Miss Vane as they drove home through the smoke-scented night air. A hundred points of fire glowed like great coals on the horizon, with here and there a brighter pyramid of flame marking a burning stack or some unfortunate settler's buildings. After the heat and excitement of the day everything was strangely cool, and quiet, and peaceful. The milch cows lay in their corrals, complacently chewing, and occasionally heaving great sighs of satisfaction; the horses, which had sniffed the smoke in terror during the day, had by this time concluded that it was all a part of the mysterious designs of their strange master, man, and settled themselves to enjoy a night free from the bane of flies and mosquitoes. A rainbow of light arose in the northern sky and deepened in colour until every fairy of auroraland seemed dancing in draperies of white and pink and yellowish green before the footlights of the Arctic circle to the music of the silence of immeasurable space.

"It is wonderful, isn't it?" said Miss Vane, after a long silence. "These great prairies—how majestic they are, how silent, how awe-inspiring. It is the first time I have seen them in anger—at war with the puny efforts of man. And even in their anger how beautiful they are! You prairie-dwellers have, I am told, two great elements of danger—the blizzard and the prairie fire?"

"Three," said Gardiner.

"Three? And what is the third?"

"Love."

For the moment she was taken off her guard. It was the one subject she did not care to discuss with Gardiner. But she answered, in a quiet impersonal voice,

"Love is not peculiar to the prairies."

"No, but the love of the prairies is peculiar. How can a soul, hemmed in by the works of man, seeing life in all the seaminess of man's—and woman's—depravity, and knowing that it is but one drop in the ocean of humanity, rise to the sublime heights experienced by the dweller on the prairie, where all the

works of nature seem combined to elevate the individual? The greatest organisms come out of the cities, but the greatest individuals will always come out of the country. And love is individual."

"Inhale that 'prairie-fire smell in the gloaming,' Mr. Gardiner. Is it not exquisite?"

"Miss Vane—Myrtle—why do you close your eyes to that which must be obvious? You have seen to-day the ravages of material fire—do you imagine the fire of the heart burns less deeply, or that it abates with the passing of time? Rather it grows from day to day and from month to month. The fact I declared to you that night—that memorable night of your unfortunate accident—seems a thousand times more a fact now than it was then. I realise the prize I ask, and I am astonished that I dare ask it, but what will one not do when life is at stake? And for me more than life is at stake; if you deny me this prize I ask no longer anything that life can give."

"I do not wish to be unkind, Mr. Gardiner, nor to coach you in your suit, but—don't you think you are arguing your case too much from your point of view? To put it plainly, you present reasons why you should want to marry me. Would it not be more to the point to suggest reasons why I should want to marry you?"

"Perhaps you are right. I admit I was speaking from my own view point. But, if I must say it, surely I am not without recommendations. I can keep you comfortably, and gratify your tastes and ambitions anywhere within reason. I have a good business, and some investments——"

"I said I didn't wish to coach you, but I see I must. Can't you see that tastes and ambitions and business and investments are nothing—absolutely nothing—without love? Love is the only argument that can appeal to a true girl's heart, and when love argues it needs not to be supplemented by any other consideration. Without love there can be no marriage. There may be a ceremony, but it is a hollow mockery—an outraging of every principle of real virtue. That is the argument you need, Mr. Gardiner, the only argument that can ever persuade me. And that argument is lacking."

"Which is a roundabout way of saying you don't love me?"

"Love may be denied, but it needs not to be confessed. Where it exists it will proclaim itself."

“So you have not yet learned to love me?”

She did not answer.

“You are still thinking of someone else?”

She did not answer.

“I do not wish to pursue an unpleasant subject, Miss Vane, but if you are still hoping for Burton’s return let me urge you to disillusion yourself. He will not return. If you care for him you should hope that he will not return. Return can mean only one thing to him, and he must know that. And he will not be brought back. I may say that I used my influence with the Department to have no effort made to apprehend him. He will not come back.”

“I think he will come back.”

“I will wager anything—I would lay any odds, that he will not come back. Listen—I lay you a wager. If Burton voluntarily returns to trial I promise never to press this question again. If he does not your answer is to be ‘Yes.’ Have you faith enough in Burton for that?”

For a moment she hesitated.

“You are not so sure of him,” he urged.

“Yes, I am sure of him.”

“Then our wager is placed, and bound by the honour of each,” he cried, exultantly.

CHAPTER XVI—KIT MCKAY

"Ned McCann owned the Double Star 'way back in the early days;
He had come out here with a sickly wife and a kid he hoped to raise
Where the climate suited the feeble-lunged, but life was scarce at its brim,
Till a little mound by a prairie hill held half of the world for him;
And his double love would have spoiled the child had she been like me or you,
But her only thought was for her dad and the mother she scarcely knew."

Prairie Born.

The sun was setting on their second day's drive when Burton and Mr. McKay crested a ridge behind which lay the farmer's buildings and his sweeping fields of grain, already glowing yellowish in the long bars of amber sunlight that bathed their gently rustling mass. Before them stretched the prairie trail, down a gentle incline until it lost itself in a little gulley; there was the plain bald scar where it climbed out at the other side, and immediately beyond was the farmhouse. Burton's eyes drank in the magnitude and peace of the scene with a sense that here at least was a haven where his troubles might not follow him. And he mentally blessed the old farmer, for whom he already felt a strong friendship.

"Waal, thar she be, all the same as we left her," proclaimed the farmer, jerking his whip-hand forward. "Yep, thar she be, all right."

The farmer was not emotional, and the words seemed a very commonplace statement of fact, but Burton guessed that beneath his rough exterior the old man carried a heart that turned to his home with that fervent loyalty to place so often found among the rural classes. It was his home—his own home, chopped from the bush and dug from the hillside, largely by the force of his own right arm. And between the home that is built and the home that is acquired is a gulf as broad as between birth and adoption.

"So that is your home," the young man ventured. "What a beautiful place!"

"It is purty, haint it?" said the farmer, looking around, and there was a light of

gratification in his eye. “An’ yet,” he continued, “yu’ll find men ’at wonder how a man can live in a place like this. They think electric lights an’ telephones and movin’ pictures an’—an’ the left foot on the rail most uv the time—they think that’s what makes life. Well, by hang, Ah spend a little money myself when Ah go to town.” The farmer paused and chuckled meditatively for a minute or two. “Yep. Some of ’em holler ‘Ol’ Sport’ soon’s they see me comin’. But Ah take my spice as an appetiser, not as a food. Why, hang it, youngster, Ah wouldn’t live in a city if they let me sleep in the Crystal Palace and sent my breakfast up with the mayor! Ah got twelve hundred and eighty acres of land here, an’ more cattle ’an it’s worth while countin’; Ah got all outdoors to stretch myself, and Ah ain’t wantin’ tuh trade with nobody.”

The farmer shaded his eyes with his hand. The rays of the sun, now almost horizontal, blinded their vision of the valley.

“Yep,” he said at last, with a sigh of satisfaction. “There’s Kid comin’. Ah reckoned she’d be watchin’ fer us.”

A cloud of dust rose lazily from the ravine; then stretched in a thin ribbon along the hot prairie trail. Burton’s eye was not trained to horsemanship, but it needed no experienced observer to know that the rider was approaching furiously. The streak of dust lengthened out as though shot from a gun.

“That’s my daughter,” the old man said, and Burton was conscious of a deep thrill of pride in his voice. “She allus rides like thet. She’s the girl fer a rusty cayuse, an’ don’t forget it. By hang, she’d ride a rabbit if she could saddle it. Yep, she’s a-comin’ to meet us.”

“To meet *you*, I guess,” corrected Burton.

The old man looked at him quizzically. “Waal, Ah guess thet is more technically keerect,” he admitted. “Ah ain’t sayin’ she’s comin’ out particular to meet you *this trip*.”

There was an emphasis on the last words which Burton had not fathomed when a chestnut horse swung up beside the wagon, and a young girl, as brown and lithe as her beautiful mount, brought her gauntletted hand down with a resounding smack on Mr. McKay’s shoulder.

“Ho, Dad,” she cried, “you’re a sight for the angels.”

“Yep,” assented the old man, “fer my angel, Ah reckon that’s right.”

“I declare,” laughed the girl, “how you do learn those cunning speeches when you go to town! Tell me, now, who taught you that?”

“You’re gettin’ a bigger tease than ever, Kid. Tell me, how’s ever’thing goin’ on the farm?”

“Oh, that’s too big an order. I know I have been all right—fine—fit. But say, Dad, haven’t you forgotten something?”

“Waal, that might be, easy enough,” said the farmer, looking back and surveying the heavy load. “There’s the binder twine and the groceries and machine oil an’ the mail——”

“Dad, you’re a chump. Here you let me live in the wilderness, with nothing more exciting than bronchoes and mustangs, and when a real live—possibility—comes along you—you won’t even introduce me!” The sentence ended in a burst of mimic sobbing.

“Waal, by hang, one does sorta ferget his sassiety manners, usin’ ’em so little. This is my daughter Kid——”

“Not Kid!” exclaimed the girl. “Kath——”

“All right. Kath-er-een. Kate for short. Kid fer shorter. She allus gets shorter ——”

But by this time the chestnut had flashed around to the other side of the wagon, and the girl had ridden up beside Burton.

“All right, Dad,” she interrupted. “I am sufficiently designated. Now tell me *his* name.”

“Waal, thet’s just what Ah’m kinda killin’ time over. Ah did hear his name too, but hang me if Ah ain’t plumb fergot it.”

Burton looked up in the bright face now close by his side. “I find I must always assist your father in a case of this kind,” he said, smiling. “And as he does not appear to be much of a formalist—just call me Ray.”

“That sounds like starting in the middle of a book,” laughed the girl.

“The first chapters are only preliminary, anyway,” said Burton.

“All right, Ray,” she said, extending her hand. “This eliminates the first ten chapters. Now I must gallop home and have your suppers ready.” And almost before he knew he had released her hand the cloud of dust trailed again down the valley.

The McKay farmhouse was built of logs, with an upper story over the main section. The board floors were white and bare, save where a wolf skin or other trophy of the chase served as ornament and carpet. The hard, clean floors, the whitewashed, bulging logs, the bare joists and rafters, afforded a charm of rustic simplicity which no display of wealth can provide. Even as he ate his supper with a relish of his long drive Burton’s eyes stole about into the shadowy corners of the room, where the firelight from the wood stove flickered along the floor and lost itself in the darkness. There was everywhere an air of comfort; of peace; of simplicity; yet what tales might those lurking corners repeat of the pioneers who for twenty years had shared the McKay hospitality as they related exploits of the early days more wonderful than any fiction!

The meal was ended. Burton felt that at least he had not been a bright conversationalist. Several times the farmer’s daughter had addressed a remark to him a second time, and he answered almost in monosyllables. His mind was too busy with the past—with the far, vague, distant past, when he sat before the wood fire and felt his young frame thrill as he listened to tales of adventure in the shanties of the Madawaska—tales of the river drive and the faction-fight, of the cry of the wolverine by lonely moonlit shores and the weird romances of loup-garou and windigo. How he thrilled with a deep wonder of the mystery of the untrod path which lay before him, leading into the far, strange fields of manhood, where he too should do great deeds and win great victories and fear nothing. But even as he dreamed of future bravery he would snuggle nearer to the centre of the group. He could almost hear the wolverine baying out beyond the stables!... Then there was the evening prayer and the good-night kiss, and the ascent up the creaking stairs; the bed under the bare rafters, where through the broken shingles a single star watched until his eyes closed with the sweet weariness of early childhood, and he knew that the angels were guarding his sleep. God! How far had he travelled since then!

“You are tired, Ray,” said the girl. “Let me show you to your room.”

“Yep,” added the farmer. “The sleepin’ sickness has got you. We have it just as bad as in Africa. It don’t kill anybody here, but there’s no cure ’cept to sleep it off. Trouble is, the new-comer allus gets the sleepin’ sickness an’ the eatin’ sickness tugether, which makes it powerful hard on the proprietor. It’s twenty-one years since Ah struck these diggin’s, an’ Ah mind yet how Ah et an’ slep’ that first year. Your mother use to say there wa’n’t no use cookin’ agin an appetite like that. Yep, Kid, that was twenty-one years ago. You was born the next spring.”

“That’s how Dad betrays a woman’s secret,” bantered the girl. But the farmer was leaning forward in his chair, his eyes staring at the sparks as they dropped from the grate. His elbows rested on his knees, his palms stretched straight before him, the fingers touching at the tips. There was a strange tenderness in the weather-worn face; a misty light in those honest old eyes. He was thinking of a little mound, just up the hillside, on which the grass had grown for twenty years.

The girl touched Burton’s arm. He looked in her face, and she raised her eyebrows a hair’s-breadth. No word was spoken as he followed her silently up the stairs.

At the door of his room she placed the lamp in his hand. Then in a low voice she said, “Dad never forgets. Dear old Dad!”

She remained lost in thought for a few moments, and Burton surveyed her. She had removed the brown riding habit in which he first saw her, and stood revealed in a modest black dress. Her fair face, brown with the summer winds, seemed almost to fade into the masses of her brown hair, as the calm sea fades into the shore-line. The only shade of colour she wore was a string of scarlet ribbon drawing the dark garment together at her throat. She was rather under average height, and at first he thought her slim, but a second glance convinced him that the perfection of her proportions and her strong, athletic life gave an impression that the scales would quickly dissipate. The upper lip rose slightly in the centre, as though alert to smile; the nose, strong but not over large, caught the vision for a moment, but immediately it was stolen by the eyes. What eyes they were! The warmth of the chinook, the freedom of the great plains, the wonder of sunset and dawn, the mystery of the deep, starless night, the courage of the white, fearless winter—all were blended in their hazel depths; or was it brown, or amber-grey?

The lamp tricked him; he would see in daylight.

Her wits came back from their wanderings with a suddenness that caused her to start.

“You were dreaming at supper-time,” she said. “I am dreaming now.”

“God bless the world’s dreamers,” said Burton, fervently. “How often in Bible history He revealed himself to His people in a dream! And shall He not do it still? Can we suppose the Father of thought has lost the key to the midnight chambers of the brain? But practical men despise dreamers.”

Her eyes had opened wider as he spoke; she was leaning slightly toward him when he finished. Thoughts are such mighty magnets that they attract even the material bodies that encase them. There was an appreciation in her look and her partly opened lips that Burton did not fail to notice.

“Practical men are fools,” she said. “Good night.”

For some days Burton did not find himself assigned to any regular duties about the farm. Grain-growing was only a small part of Mr. McKay’s business, and was, indeed, still regarded as largely experimental; the real wealth of the farm was represented by the herds of ranch cattle which fed in the heavy grass of the valley or roamed the unsettled plains for miles around. With these herds Burton had no concern; they were under the care of two cowboys long in Mr. McKay’s employ. Decent fellows Burton found them to be, yet while they treated him with frank familiarity they could not altogether disguise their inbred conviction that the cow-puncher is of better clay than the sod-buster. He envied them their wild free life, their rides over the limitless plains, their “leave and liking to shout,” while he sharpened the binder knives and tacked new slats on the canvases, and made fly-blankets for the horses out of twine sacks. The ancient war of the herdsman and the grainman was being fought out again in his own breast, and he secretly admitted a sense of envy. To ride the plains seemed a greater thing than to till them.

But if the cattlemen excited a measure of envy in the breast of Burton, he soon discovered that he had unwittingly aroused their jealousy. Although their feeling toward him took no unkind form of expression, he became more and more conscious that he was regarded as an intruder, an unwelcome person tolerated simply for courtesy’s sake. And the boy knew, by a kind of intuition, that the

farmer’s daughter was largely responsible for this. With the cattlemen she chatted flippantly, giving them word for word and laughing at their smartest sallies; but with Burton she talked slowly in the dusk of the long, cool evenings, when the work inside and out was finished, and the farmer smoked his pipe on the kitchen porch. The cowboys, whom she had known for years, she still held saucily at a safe distance; but with Burton, on a week’s acquaintance, she spoke of things whereof her soul hungered for conversation. She had taken the boy at his word. She had started in the middle of the book.

And to himself Burton confessed that to him she was a new relevation of womanhood. At times, out of the nightmare of the past, he would conjure up that face which, in all his wanderings and through all his associations, still hedged his soul about on every side, so that he could follow no emotion far until he met it. He saw her as she rode home on her pony along the pasture path, while the gathering dusk raised the willows very tall about them; he saw her as they sat by the water’s edge that never to-be-forgotten Sunday at the Crossing; he saw her again, half-reclining against a wall, her face drawn as though with pain and yet flushed as in excitement, the flickering light of an uncertain fire falling upon her fine features. He stood her before him and he tried to compare, but he could not compare. It was as though one would compare form with colour, or sound with sight. She was, he knew, everything that was “pure womanly,” but this daughter of the prairie was something more. Although clothed in all the delicacy of her sex, she seemed to hide nothing, to conceal nothing, behind that distinction of nature which has been so grossly misused by convention. At times she spoke to him as a sister might speak; at other times it might have been the voice of his mother; again, she was a child at his feet; but most of all it seemed she spoke as a brother. It was this spirit of comradeship, this attitude of equality, this frankness so sincere that it seemed the only natural thing—the inevitable thing—it was these that drew his soul out to her with the affection of a brother. And yet he marvelled that the face still hedged him about; that every new experience, every new confidence, seemed to paint it still clearer on his mind’s horizon.

The season wore on. Presently the wheat fields were ripe, and Burton found himself so lost in work that thoughts of his past, his present, and his future seemed crowded out of the busy hours. His practical knowledge of farm work and farm machinery, and the genuine personal interest he took in everything that fell to his lot, won for him a regard by the old farmer that was almost paternal. Indeed, more than once Mr. McKay dropped remarks about his advancing years, intimating that he felt the time must soon come when he should place the active

management of his affairs in younger hands, and on such occasions Burton felt his heart bound as the thought of a possibility fired his pulses. But then the face rose, calm and thoughtful, and the possibility died away amid the mist of dreams.

And then, one Sunday afternoon, after the wheat was all in stook, came another incident to change the course of his career. The cowboys, with a number of friends, were riding to neighbouring ranches; Mr. McKay dozed over an old newspaper as he sat in the shade of the kitchen porch; and Burton and Kate lounged on the front verandah, reading little excerpts from their magazines, but most of the time staring with dreaming eyes across the hot prairies.

“Pshaw,” said Burton, after his fourth attempt to centre his interest in a story, “I can’t read to-day. Let’s go for a walk, Kate.” He called her Kate now, although he had not been able to bring himself to the more familiar name by which the other hands addressed her. And yet he knew that he was much better acquainted with her than were they.

The girl clasped her hands above her head and yawned leisurely. Then she looked long and intently at the fringe of willows along the gulley. “It’s too hot,” she said at length.

“What, you a prairie girl and afraid of the heat?” Burton bantered.

“I’m not afraid of it,” she answered, laughing, “but I respect it. And I can’t walk in the grass in this skirt. And most of all,” she confessed, bringing her elbows to her knees and resting her chin on her hands—“most of all, I’m lazy.”

“I admire lazy people,” said Burton.

“Oh, how gallant you are! I suppose if I had said I was lame you would have admired lame people?”

“But I spoke seriously,” he protested. “I don’t say I admire one who is chronically lazy, but I do respect the man or woman who can forget the rush of life now and again and lapse into a period of laziness. ‘Leisure,’ some people call it, and it is closely identified with culture, which brings us around to the poets and the painters and art generally.”

“Speaking of art, did I ever let you see my pictures? I have a few I gathered

when I was East at college. Oh, yes, and my photographs. That is where so many acquaintances start, you know, over the family album, while one expounds to someone who doesn't care the tribal history of people he doesn't know."

The sentence was ended on the stairs. In a minute she was down with a basketful of photographs.

"Now, Mr. Ray, you shall behold the friends of my girlhood—up to date. By the way, when are you going to let me into the mystery of your surname? One of these days some of the neighbours will call, and I shall have to introduce you as 'Our man Ray.' Here I have told you my history from Alpha to Omega, and all I know about you is that your first name is Ray. When, please sir, will I be sufficiently established in your confidence to be entrusted with your name?"

For a moment he hesitated. What she said was true. She had given large confidences and received little. Why should he not tell his name? Why, indeed, should he not tell her all? He was sure that it could not change her attitude toward him; he was sure that his trust would never be betrayed, and the weight of his secret was hanging heavy about his life. That strange human instinct which demands the right of confidence the privilege of confession, was becoming irresistibly strong within him.

"I have a reason for concealing my name," he said at length. "I do not wish to tell the name until I can tell the reason also."

"And when will that be, may I ask?" It was a respectful question, not a demand for information.

"Oh, perhaps the next time we chat together," he laughed, anxious to shelve the matter for the moment. "Now, let us see these photographs."

She sat on a stool beside his chair, passing up the photographs for his scrutiny. With each she had a word of comment, but Burton looked at them mechanically. They were nothing to him but strange faces, in which he felt only a reflected interest. At length she raised a photograph which she held a moment longer than usual. "This," she said, "is a picture of my particular college chum—my best girl friend. She is pure gold."

She placed the pasteboard in his fingers. His eyes wandered to the face, and then his head shot forward as though he had been magnetised. He instantly attempted

to recover his composure, but his fingers trembled and his breath came hard. It was the face of Myrtle Vane!

CHAPTER XVII—THE HOMESTEAD LINE

"Where'er Endeavour bares her arm,
And grapples with the Things To Be,
At desk or counter, forge or farm,
On veldt or prairie, land or sea,
And men press onward, undismayed,
The Empire Builder plies his trade."

The Empire Builders.

What explanation Burton made of his agitation he never quite remembered. He knew he had said something about a remarkable likeness to a friend of his, but he felt that his behaviour at best had had only a lame excuse. Kate, however, had accepted it with the frankness that had marked her attitude toward him since the day they first met, and had rattled on her tribute to Myrtle Vane, to every word of which Burton inwardly said amen. But when she mentioned that they still corresponded regularly, and that she expected a letter by the next mail, he found himself battling with conflicting emotions. It was plain that he must tell her all or nothing; either he must take her into his life or he must go out of hers. He knew that he loomed big in the world of this farmer's daughter, and that when she next wrote to Myrtle she would tell about this Ray, her discovery. The name would excite Miss Vane's interest, identification would surely come, sooner or later. And what would this girl from whom he had torn himself under the shadow of the law and who was in very reality more to him than existence itself—what would she say when she knew of his life as a fugitive from justice, a betrayer of his bondsman, whose regard for her had been so slight that he had deserted her under the fear of his own punishment—what would she say when she knew he had cast off all responsibility for the past and to-day was living in happiness, the trusted friend of her trusted friend? He saw his life crumbling about him like a house of cards. He saw only too plainly how his desertion of the girl he loved would cost him the friendship of the girl he so much admired.

Burton excused himself to Miss McKay as soon as he could. He walked to the stables, and, finding himself unobserved, plunged down into the deep gulley.

Here he strode on and on, his mind at first in a turmoil of confusion. Gradually the exercise calmed his brain and he was able to think more clearly. And the clearer he saw his position the less he liked it. Two courses were possible; to disappear and try again to lose himself, probably by taking up a homestead far back from the centres of civilization; or to make a clean breast of the whole thing to Kate. But what would she think of him when she knew the truth? Suppose she believed in his innocence, of which he had every confidence, would her attitude change when she knew him to be a fugitive from the law—an innocent man who lacked the moral courage to prove his innocence or accept the inevitable? That afternoon he had felt that he could tell her all; that night he knew that he could tell her nothing.

And yet the idea of unexplained disappearance was unbearable to him. He felt that he owed it to his friends here, whose home had been such an oasis to him in his desert of bad fortune, to relieve their minds of any doubt as to his personal safety. He now remembered that this thought had not occurred to him when he fled from Plainville, and the blood slowly mounted to his forehead. But he would not repeat that cruelty; whatever came he would have an interview with Mr. McKay.

He returned to the house. The cowboys were still absent, and Kate, after searching for him in vain, had gone riding alone. He found Mr. McKay still on the kitchen porch, and floundered into his task.

“I have come, Mr. McKay, to tell you that I must leave here, at once. I have just heard—that is, I have just had information which makes it imperative that I leave without an hour’s delay. The heavy end of the harvest is over. I hope you will get along without trouble. Good-bye.”

“But, boy, hang it, there’s somethin’ wrong about this. Bad news?”

“Yes, news that takes me away, and any news that forces me to leave your home is bad news.”

“But you will come back, Ray? You’ll be back when your troubles—when things is straightened up with you?”

“I don’t know.”

The farmer sat back in his chair and drew deeply at his pipe for a full minute, his

eyes slightly elevated and his brow knit in thought. When he spoke the words came slowly, as though each had been chosen after deliberation.

“Waal, Ray, if your affairs take yuh away from here, tain’t my affairs tah hold yuh back. But Ah thought of talkin’ kind of confidential with yuh one of these days, an’ it may as well be now. Ah’ve held down this claim fer twenty-one years, boy, an’ Ah reckon Ah’ve about attained my majority. An’ Ah notice Ah don’t climb a cayuse or handle a pitchfork quite as spry as Ah once did. Ah’ve been lookin’ fer some one to take part of the load offa me, an’ when Ah saw how you knew farm work, an’ how yuh shaped intuh the collar, Ah kind a’ figured Ah’d found my man at last. Ah reckon my plans has kinda been upset again.”

“I am sure I appreciate what you have suggested,” said Ray. “If things shape up so—but the fact is, I can promise nothing, say nothing—at present. Some day, perhaps. And now, good-bye, and say good-bye to Kate.”

“I’m thinkin’ it would sound better from your lips. But there’s a little money comin’ to yuh.”

“I had forgotten that,” said Burton, quite truthfully. “I suppose it may come in handy.”

The old man walked to his desk and took out a pocket-book, from which he drew a number of bills. These he placed in Burton’s hand, who, with a word of thanks, shoved them in his pocket without counting.

“Ah calculated yuh’d rather have bills than a cheque,” said the old man, and there was something in his voice which made Ray feel that after all he had disguised very little from his employer.

The two men’s hands met in a moment’s firm grasp, and the next Burton knew he was tramping down the road he had first seen that summer evening six weeks before.

Once fairly on the road Burton began to cast about for some definite plan of action. He determined he would walk into town and there ascertain where homestead lands were available. Then he would go to the nearest Dominion Lands Office and file on a quarter section away in some remote region, where there would be little chance of his identity being discovered. Here he would commence life anew, under a new name, as he felt it would not be safe to file as

Raymond Burton, and here he would hope in the years to come to outgrow and outlive the tragedy of his young life.

A friendly haystack loomed through the gathering dusk, and Burton slept in its shelter until morning. He awoke stiff and hungry, and half regretted his refusal to accept Mr. McKay's offer of a horse and saddle. But he remembered a farmhouse a few miles along the road, and there he was given breakfast. He pressed on vigorously through the day, and before another nightfall turned in at Zeb Ensley's shack. The Englishman was watering his horses at the well, but he looked up and recognised his visitor of a few weeks previous.

"Hello, Ray!" he called, cheerily. "On your way back to town? I suppose Mr. McKay's work is advanced sufficiently to let you go, although, upon my word, I confess I thought you'd likely become a permanent part of his organisation. Especially," he added, with a sly twinkle in his eye, "especially as I happen to have met that young daughter of his."

"Well, it didn't work out that way, Mr. Ensley, although she's as fine a girl——"

"Mr. Ensley only visits here on Sundays," interrupted the other. "The gentleman in charge is known as Zeb. But let us get these plugs in and then we'll see what the cook can do for us. Fried eggs, I expect, with warmed potatoes and dried apples, table d'hôte." He was unbuckling the horses' harness as he spoke, and presently slipped it from their backs and turned them loose for the night.

Once inside the shanty Burton discovered that "the cook" was Ensley himself. But no time was wasted in conventions, and in a few minutes a plain but appetising supper was on the table. "Come, dig in," was the host's invitation, and there was a lull in the conversation as the hungry men plied the viands.

"So you've left McKay's," said Ensley, after the first insistent demands of appetite had been satisfied. "Where are you bound for now—back East?"

"No, I think of taking up a homestead, as soon as I can get a map showing open land, and learn where I may make application."

"Good!" said the Englishman, with genuine enthusiasm. "I'm always glad to see bright fellows taking to the homesteads. Most fathers think they do their boys a favour when they coop them up in an office or a shop, but I tell you where this country wants its bright men, some of them, at any rate, is out on the sod. There

is a mob of little interests growing up, each with its little coterie of promoters and parasites, but the big industry here will always be agriculture, and it is the big industry that needs the big brains. Besides, where is the life of town or city that a free man would accept in exchange for a hundred and sixty acres to grow in? I always have an eye for the homestead openings, and perhaps you can get all the information you want right here."

After the meal was over Ensley spread a number of maps but recently issued by the Department of the Interior on the table, and enlightened Burton on the details of the regulations. "Now here," he said, "is a fine stretch of land, of which I have first hand knowledge, as I cross it every fall when I take a few days off for goose shooting. There's no better soil in the West. It's about sixty miles from here, and nearly a hundred miles from a railway, but they're building new lines through this country as fast as they can buy the labour and the steel, and you are sure to have a road near by in a few years. Now it's a little early for goose hunting, but the ducks are at their best, and there is a chance of a few chicken. Suppose we hitch up to-morrow and make a trip out there to look over the land?"

"Oh, I couldn't permit you to go to so much trouble, Mr.—Zeb."

"No permission needed," laughed the other. "It's my buckboard and my horses, and you ride with me if you will. We leave in the morning at seven. There's no time to lose," he continued, consulting the contents of a large envelope, "as these lands are to be opened for entry exactly eight days from to-morrow, and you'd better be at the land office at least a couple of days ahead. I shouldn't wonder but there's men—and women too, maybe—lined up there waiting now, but most of them are eager to file on the land closer in. They haven't been out that far, and they don't know what they're missing. Now there'll be a ten dollar fee to pay—you have a little money?" Burton nodded. "Very well. If you're short, say so. There'll be some other expenses too. You'll have to line up before the door of the land office and stay there night and day to hold your place. Caterers will bring you food if you are willing to pay for the service, and you can perhaps hire a man to stand in your place part of the time, but be sure he's honest, or he may give it up to someone else. Then, of course, you have a little land to break each year, and certain improvements to make in the way of building a house or the like, and in three years if you can show that you have lived on the property six months in each twelve and complied with the other regulations you will receive from the Government a certificate of title to the property."

They talked about many details in connection with homestead life, talked, indeed, long after they were in bed, while a coyote howled to his mate across the plain and a waxing moon slanted its soft light through the single square window of the shanty.

Five days later Burton walked down the street to the Land Office. At first he thought there must be a riot or disturbance of some sort in front of the buildings, but on arrival found that the crowd was genial and orderly, and arranged in single file in the form of a half circle before the building. Where the end of the half circle came back to the curb the line extended along the sidewalk. Burton walked slowly the length of the line, looking curiously into the faces of these patient waiters; men of all nationalities, Canadian, American, British Islanders, German, Russian, French, Austrian, Pole, Italian, Hungarian, Scandinavian, Chinamen—here they were gathered from the corners of the globe and waiting patiently through night and day, through heat and cold, through wind and rain, through any trial and any hazard for the God-sent privilege, born of a new country, of calling the land beneath their feet their own. There were tired faces there, faces where the cheek bones stood rugged under a tawny skin and the eyes glowed under deep foreheads—faces of men from the ballast gang and the sewer gang, from the tie camp and the grading camp—men who had sweat hard in the hot sun for the few dollars necessary to stake them to home and title of their own. Here and there a woman was seen in the line, seated on soap box or suit case, complacently knitting or engaged with her fancy work. But they were all good-natured. This human material, combustible as powder, seemed as innocent as dry sand. And Burton learned that their good nature and their complacence was due to one fact only—their confidence that whatever was done would be done in conformity with the law and with absolute fairness to all concerned. Once shake that confidence, and you have dropped the spark into what you thought was sand!

Presently he reached the end of the line, and it was not until then that he realised that he was a part of this organisation, a link in this chain which stretched resolute and immovable along the street. Strange soldiers of fortune they were; men and women who feared neither the wilderness nor the hardships of the pioneer; volunteers who marched out to the sunset to wrest an existence from the unknown. Fit sires and mothers these for the race that shall answer the questions of the next century!

Burton seated himself on the curb beside the last of the line. A Chinaman

advanced with a basket of sandwiches and a pot of tea. Burton satisfied his hunger and thirst and paid the modest bill. A news-vendor sold him a magazine, and he sat down to while away the time until the doors should be opened and those at the head of the column should file in to register on the land of their choice.

The day waned and night settled in. Burton began to feel the need of a blanket, and hired a boy to buy him one at a store. A street lamp burned overhead and he bought an evening newspaper. Its touch seemed strange to his fingers—it was so long since he had handled a newspaper fresh from the press. He glanced over the black headlines, but found little of interest. What were the papers talking about, anyway? In the last two months he had fallen entirely out of touch with what is called the events of the world. In a company of well read men he would have seemed ignorant. And yet in his heart he felt that these last few weeks had brought him closer to life, closer to the real things of the world, than ever he had been before.

He turned over the inside pages idly until his eye, attracted by a familiar word, fell on a paragraph in an obscure corner. In a moment his attention was rivetted to the item, as he read:

> "PLAINVILLE. The first Assize Court to be held in the town of Plainville will open on Monday. The docket will be a light one, consisting only of minor cases. The principal local interest centres about a charge against Raymond Burton of stealing $2,000 from the safe of his employer, one of the leading merchants of this place. The employer himself was so satisfied of Burton's innocence that he went his bail, but the young man has completely disappeared, and the confiding employer seems likely to forfeit his bond. The stolen money, however, was recovered, having been found in Burton's trunk by a detective engaged on the case."

He read the paragraph again and again. The words seemed to burn into his brain. Here was a dispatch, evidently sent through the regular news channels, and no doubt appearing in every daily paper in the country, a despatch that branded him not only as a thief—the words suggested no question as to his guilt—but as a fugitive from justice and a bail jumper. It placed him in the light of a criminal, and Gardiner in that of a martyr. It was thrown broadcast to the world. He was beginning to learn the awful truth that publicity has more terrors than the penitentiary. If one could go to jail quietly, without any fuss, without any

crowds, without cameras or photographs or reporters or newspapers, and return in the same way, it might be bearable. But this—this was worse than any sentence within the province of the Court. What would the public think? What would his friends think? What would *she* think? What *could* she think?

Burton sat and pondered, gazing down the long street and seeing only his own checkered career. Where would not this thing follow him? He had thought himself safe at McKay's; he had fled from the farmer's home like a frightened child from a whipping. He had thought to lose himself on a homestead; on the very threshold of his hew life the tale of his shame was thrust in his face. From somewhere a sentence came into his mind. "Be sure your sin will find you out." But he had not sinned. That was the rub. He was innocent—yes, as innocent as the thoughtless correspondent who sent that despatch. But stay; does an innocent man jump his bail? Something seemed to say to Burton that at that moment an innocent man becomes a guilty one. And the load of his guilt seemed mounting up. He had left Gardiner to pay the price of his unfaithfulness. There was no evading that, although he had not thought of it in that light before. In the eyes of the world he was already a criminal. And yet to go back—what would that avail? Every evidence—every circumstance, was against him. To go back would simply be to have the Court confirm the sentence already passed by public opinion.

He gazed down the long street into the darkness. Presently a red light showed at the end, a trifle to the left, where it glowed in narrow streaks through the ranks of the telephone poles. It grew quickly in volume, and Burton at first thought it was a fire; but soon he knew it to be the rising moon. The scene stirred something in his memory; some vague recollection of the past. And then it burst upon him, and he saw again the sun setting through the stately elms at Crotton's Crossing; the blood, and the bars. And then behind it all rose that quiet, thoughtful face which guarded the end of every avenue of his thought.

He put his head between his hands and wept.

A man who had sat down beside him, but after him, having arrived late that evening, straightened up and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Wot's the matter, hold chap?" he asked in a low voice, that their sleeping neighbours might not hear. "Wot's the matter? Got a pine, or somethink, or are you 'omesick?"

In the dim light Burton could not distinguish the face, but the voice he would have known anywhere.

“London!” he cried, as he threw his arms about the astonished boy and hugged him like a child.

Then were a few moments of golden silence; then a few words of explanation.

When they spoke of home Burton’s first question was for Miss Vane.

“Hi left ’er with a ’eavy ’eart,” said Wilfred, “but still ’oping. Ho, Hi sy, ’ere is somethink she sent you.”

The boy produced his little pocket-book and Burton struck a match, for the shop lights were off and the street was in partial darkness. Presently the lad located a little torn piece of printed paper.

Burton took it curiously. “Why, that’s only a scrap of paper,” he said.

“That’s wot she sent. ‘Give ’im that,’ she said, ’an’ tell ’im hif ’e lives Hi look for ’im back to stand ’is trial.’”

“Hold a match!” cried Burton, excitedly. “Here, strike this and hold it.”

The flame sputtered for a moment, then grew into a steady little light, and Burton placed the scrap of paper where the rays fell to the best advantage. And his eyes rested on the printed words:

“Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by Life’s unchanging sea.”

CHAPTER XVIII—RIGHT ABOUT FACE

> “Oh, can I doubt the Power that leads
> You safe from zone to zone,
> Is mindful of the man He made
> In image of His own;
> That though we blindly breast the gale,
> Or skirt the shores of Time,
> Our Pilot knows the track we take,
> And guides from clime to clime?”
>
> *The Empire Builders.*

Burton sprang to his feet.

“When does the next train go east?” he demanded.

Wilfred produced a railway time-table, and after some study he found the page. “There’s one at midnight,” he said.

Burton glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve.

“Good-bye, old man,” he said, seizing the hand of the Barnardo boy.

“Wot, you ain’t goin’ to-night, are you?” said the boy. “You’ll lose your ’omestead, hafter——”

“I’ll lose more if I don’t go. And I would have lost it, lost it all, if it had not been for you. God bless you, London! Stay and file on your homestead. I’ll not be wanting one at present. I’m thinking I will be unable to perform the residence duties for a while,” he added, with a bitter little laugh.

“But stay,” he continued. “Have you selected your land?”

“No.”

“Just going it blind?”

“Yep. Just takin’ my chance with the rest o’ them. Hi’ve a list of the hopen lands ’ere, an’ Hi reckon to strike somethink——”

“Yes, you’ll strike a sand bed or an alkali mine. Here’s a list of four quarters I have looked over personally. They appear in the order of my preference. Take it, you’re welcome to it.”

There was a look of gratitude in the boy’s eyes which could find no expression in words. The two friends held each other’s hand a moment in a firm grasp, and then Burton hurried toward the station. He reached it just in time to buy a ticket and board his train.

Once in a car and seated, the lights of the city died out of view, and Burton was left to collect his thoughts. His sudden resolution to go to his trial regardless of consequences had left him bereft of any plan of campaign or any definite course of action. For months he had studied how he might evade the law, but now his only fear was that he might not reach Plainville in time to appear before the Court and receive his sentence. That he would be found guilty he took as a matter of course. He did not deceive himself with any hope of acquittal on any ground whatever. He was not going back to match himself against his fate; he was going back to accept his fate. He wondered how long his sentence would be. It might be one year, it might be five; it might be ten. That he supposed would depend in some degree upon the digestion of the judge, and whether his lordship might decide to make an example of him for the benefit of other evil-doers.

But he felt only a casual interest in these matters. To his great surprise neither judge, jury nor jail had any terror for him. He regarded them with an impersonal feeling of unconcern, except a desire to be done with all of them. He wondered if they would let him wear his own shirts in jail.

He consulted a time-table, and found that if he made all connections he should reach Plainville in the early morning of the first day of the assizes. He supposed there would be a short session of the grand jury first, but did not know whether his absence then would affect his trial. He wondered if they would call his case first and immediately require Gardiner to forfeit his bail, and if they would return the bail when he appeared and gave himself up.

For twenty-four hours the train drilled steadily eastward, running without

incident. Darkness had again settled down and the hour of midnight was approaching when suddenly the emergency brakes were applied with a force that threw the passengers forward in their seats. The train came to a stop in a moment, and the young men and a few of the older ones who had not gone to bed in the sleeping cars crowded out to see the cause of the delay. A dull glow shone down the track from ahead, and a whiff of wood smoke blew in their nostrils. Aside from that and the subdued lights in the cars all was darkness, darkness intense and illimitable, walled in only by the brooding silence of the great prairies.

A couple of trainmen with lanterns were seen walking on the track, and Burton hurried to overtake them. As he advanced the glow of light became brighter and the smell of smoke more noticeable. In a few minutes he had come up with them, and together they reached a wooden trestle which spanned a ravine where a little stream trickled at the bottom during the summer, but was now dried by the long period of rainless weather. The bridge was on fire; most of the timbers had already given way, and the hot rails hung in two shining streaks from bank to bank.

From the conversation of the trainmen Burton gathered that the fire was probably due to a falling coal from a passing engine lighting the woodwork. He ventured to ask how long it would delay the train.

“Well, that’s hard to say,” was the answer. “It’ll take at least twelve hours to throw a temporary bridge in there after the work train arrives, and they won’t likely be here before morning. The company knows nothing about it yet, so we’ll likely have to pull back to the last station to give information.”

And the assize court at Plainville sat the next morning!

Burton walked back to the train and consulted his time-table. He was about seventy-five miles from Plainville and on another line of railway. Mechanically he started to read the names of the stations which lay ahead of him, but at the second name his heart gave a bound. That was the town where Dr. Millar lived. That, he estimated, was about fourteen miles away. It was now midnight. He could be there by four o’clock, and the doctor’s automobile would place him in Plainville by eight easily. He still had a chance to save his honour by appearing in court when his name was called.

Without further delay he started out at a brisk walk along the railway track. He scrambled through the dry ravine, and regained the railway on the other side. He was unhampered by luggage of any kind, and although walking on the ties in the darkness was rather uncertain he had no doubt he would be standing in the doctor's office within five hours. The light wind was balmy and refreshing, but very soon it began to carry scattered drops of rain. These gradually grew thicker until a steady shower was falling. The moisture soon soaked through his clothing, but the exercise kept him warm and he felt little discomfort. And at ten minutes to four, warm, wet and footsore, he rang the bell at Dr. Millar's door.

The doctor answered the ring in person. At first glance he did not recognise his visitor, but a very few words of explanation sufficed. Dr. Millar was a master of the art of grasping essentials by intuition.

He looked at his watch, and then he looked out at the black, wet night. The rain was now falling heavily, and the street lay white with water where the light from the open door cut its wedge-shaped path across it.

"It'll be a hard drive, Burton," he said, "but it must be made, and the sooner we start the better. I will be dressed in a few minutes, and I always leave my car ready to pull out at a moment's notice. But you are wet. You must have some dry clothing."

Burton protested that he was quite comfortable, that he did not feel the dampness at all, but the doctor would not listen to him.

"You are warm now, because you have been walking hard, but a few minutes in the automobile will set your teeth chattering. Besides, I think I have some clothes belonging to you around here somewhere, and I want you to take them away, this very night. Now get in there and hustle them on," and suiting the action to the word the doctor shoved Burton into his private office. There was nothing to do but obey.

A little later an automobile pulled out from Dr. Millar's gate and started to plough its path through sixty miles of mud and water.

The holding of the first assize court at Plainville was an event of no small importance to the people of that obscure but ambitious town. Plainville had been fortunate enough at the last election to place its sympathies with the winning side, and the first evidence of appreciation was a handsome court-house, built on

a block of lots which had been held for a dozen years by Perkins, the lawyer, without a chance of sale, but was now turned over to the Government at a handsome profit. Mr. Perkins' allegiance to the party of purity and justice had been further rewarded by his appointment to the office of crown prosecutor at the assizes. It was a little disappointing, to be sure, that the crop of criminals had so far been distressingly small, the most serious case on the docket being the theft of two thousand dollars which were afterwards recovered, but neither Plainville nor Perkins were discouraged. The judicial district was young, and would improve with the passage of time. Who knew but that some public spirited criminal might yet commit a real murder, and so bring the name of Plainville into prominence in all the papers of the province?

The jurors and witnesses had assembled, over-taxing the hotel accommodation of the town, which the thoughtful lawyers and officials had reserved for themselves a safe period in advance. A number of minor offices were filled by Plainville citizens, and this rewarding of the faithful restored the credit of several shiftless Plainville families at the grocers' and butchers'. The hotels were full, the bars were busy, even the temperance houses had more trade than they could accommodate, and many a thrifty housewife was ekeing out the price of a new bonnet by placing the spare room at the disposal of the strangers. Mrs. Goode found the demands upon her lodgings and her table more than she could supply, but had boldly met the situation by pitching a number of tents in her back yard, where her cadaverous husband could be employed without menace to the business coming in at the front door. Plainville was prosperous, excited and happy.

After the great fact of the assize itself interest centred mainly in the case of *King* v. *Burton*, and the hot discussions in the pool-rooms and the lobby of the post office over the young man's guilt or innocence had given rise to two opposing factions. The first of these held that Burton was innocent, and would appear to stand his trial at the proper time; the second declared that he was guilty, and had "skipped the country for good." And it was interesting to note how the townspeople and country people lined up on the two sides of the controversy. It was a virtual dividing of the sheep and the goats. Those who held high views of life and embraced all humanity in a kindly sympathy were assured that Burton would be back to face his trial, and even that his innocence would be established; while that other class of people who find it easier and more to their tastes to believe evil than good were equally certain that the young man had disappeared from Plainville for ever. And among those who held the latter belief

it must be said were a few who would have preferred to believe otherwise, but whose judgment had forced them to the unpleasant conclusion. There was Mr. Sempter, of the Sempter Trading Company, who secretly held Burton in high regard; there were the Grant boys, who openly—and especially before their cousin—avowed their confidence in Burton, but who in their hearts were at a loss to understand his disappearance; and there was Gardiner, who at first had stoutly maintained the innocence of his former employee, but had at last admitted that he could no longer believe him guiltless. There, too, was a third faction which explained Burton's absence on the theory that some mishap which had not yet come to light had befallen him. This was a comfortable position for those who did not wish to antagonise either of the other parties, as it left the question of Burton's innocence or guilt out of the discussion. This was the belief espoused by the local newspaper, the church organisations, and such other institutions as felt that it would be bad business to give offence to any section of the community.

The great day of the opening of the assizes at last arrived. During the night it rained heavily, and the streets and roads were deep with mud, but the clouds scattered about nine o'clock and the sun looked through on the crowds filing down to the court house. The judge read his charge to the grand jury, and the grand jury at once proceeded to find in accordance with the thinly-veiled wishes expressed in the charge. The Court then adjourned to resume its sitting at two o'clock that afternoon.

As the hour drew near the spirits of those who had to the last hoped for Burton's reappearance in the nick of time fell under the depression of a conviction which for months they had been trying to fight off. John Burton's Scotch pride had at last given away to paternal attachment, and he engaged Bradshaw, the lawyer, to appear in defence of his son. The lawyer's office had become the gathering place of the steadily diminishing group who were still hoping against hope, but as the minutes wore by the hope changed to despondency. In Burton's absence they could read only an admission of his guilt—an admission which cut loyal hearts deeper than any sentence which might have been pronounced over his protestations of innocence.

The court house was packed long before the afternoon session commenced; and when the judge had taken his seat on the bench and the first case, *King* v. *Burton*, was called an intensity of excitement prevailed in the room which seemed even to reach the officers of the law. It was not that the crime charged was so

exceptional, but the reluctance of many good people to believe in Burton's guilt and the mystery of his sudden and complete disappearance had pitched public interest to its highest key. Many rumours had been in circulation within the last few hours; rumours that Burton had returned during the night, that he had been in the custody of the police since July and would be produced at the proper moment, that he had been drowned in the lake, that he had been seen in a far western town—all of these and more were flying about in the air and adding to the confusion of the public mind. But at last the moment had come; something definite was to be done, or said, or ascertained, and as many of the townspeople, with a sprinkling of interested ones from the country, as could crowd into the building were agog to know whatever could be known.

Down in the little box where the lawyers sat someone was speaking in a low tone which reached only to the officials of the court. Then the deep voice of the judge filled the room.

"So the accused has not appeared for trial? Let him be called three times."

The court crier cleared his throat and shouted in a raucous voice, "Raymond Burton! Raymond Burton! Raymond Burton!"

A hush that could be felt fell over the assembled people. For a full minute there was absolute silence.

It was the judge who spoke again. "Bonds were no doubt given for the appearance of this Burton at trial?"

An official answered, "Yes, my lord."

Gardiner stood up from the front seat of the audience. "I am his——" he managed to say, but was instantly silenced.

"That will do," said the judge; "an order will——"

At this moment a commotion was heard among the crowd who had not been able to gain admittance, and all eyes were turned toward the door. In another instant a young man, flushed, dishevelled and mud-bespattered, forced his way into the room, glanced about the interior for an instant to get his bearings, and walked straight to the prisoner's box where Bill Hagan, the town constable, now promoted to the position of a court official, stood with as much dignity as his

years spent in leaning over a bar made possible.

“Well, Bill, were you waiting for me?” was the question he addressed the constable.

It was not until they heard him speak that the crowd seemed to realise that Raymond Burton in the flesh stood in the prisoner’s box. When they grasped that fact an huzzah broke out from a few enthusiasts, which was immediately seized by others and grew in volume until it threatened to raise the roof.

Order was quickly restored, when the judge scolded the people soundly, threatening that he would have the court room cleared if there were any further demonstrations.

Then turning to Burton he asked, “Are you the Raymond Burton named in the indictment?”

“I did not hear the indictment, my lord, but I am Raymond Burton.”

“You have,” continued the judge, “by your absence delayed the operation of this Court and the machinery of justice. I may say to you frankly, that I was given to understand that you had evaded the police and would not appear for trial, and at the moment of your entry I was about to make an order distraining the bail given for your appearance. Can you give an explanation of your conduct?”

“I can, my lord. I was in the West, where I intended to enter for a homestead. I was, in fact, in line before the door of the Land Office when I discovered that if I were to reach Plainville in time for my trial I must leave at once. I would have been here early this morning if my train had come through on time, but a bridge was burned out last night, and we were delayed. I walked fourteen miles along the track, when a friend provided me with an automobile, but the roads were so bad, and we had a number of mishaps, that I have only now reached the town. I am very sorry, my lord, that you have been delayed.”

The judge listened patiently through this explanation, and it was evident that he was impressed with the sincere, straight-forward manner in which it was given. He appeared to accept Burton’s statement as the truth, without question. The effect on the audience of the boy’s appearance and the quiet words he addressed to the Court was electrical, and they were again on the point of bursting into a cheer when they were restrained by a peremptory “Silence in the court.” Burton

glanced again about the room, and to his astonishment saw tears of emotion glistening in many eyes. Old Dick Matheson's face was radiant as he confided in a whisper to a neighbour that he "knew his father on the Muddywaski"; Alice Goode, who had stolen away from the dinner dishes, was fairly dancing on her chair; the Grant boys shot at him looks electrified with enthusiasm; and to the breast of his own father the Scotch pride had returned as he turned about in his seat and looked with defiance upon the assembled crowd. There were only two black faces in the house; Hiram Riles, of whom Burton expected nothing better; and Gardiner, whom he did not understand. One would have thought that Gardiner would have been delighted at the saving of his bond, but the merchant chewed his lip in vexation. He had been playing for greater stakes.

And yet Burton knew that he stood under the shadow of certain conviction; that from that court house he would march to jail. But he had played the part of a man; he had justified the loyalty of his friends, and now nothing else seemed to matter.

"Your failure to appear here on time," said the judge, again addressing Burton, "appears to have been due to causes which you could not foresee and over which you had no control. The Court has been inconvenienced, but the Court has no grievance in such a case. I will allow you fifteen minutes to consult with your solicitor, after which your trial will proceed. If it should appear later that you are entitled to be remanded to permit of calling witnesses in your defence, reasonable opportunity will be afforded you to do so."

CHAPTER XIX—THE LIGHT AT LAST

"And though on Life's uncertain sea,
We veer and tack in stormy stress,
I doubt not in the years to be
The generations will agree,
We sailed direct to blessedness!"

Gardiner was the first witness for the prosecution. He told briefly facts with which the reader is already acquainted. He had left a package of two thousand dollars in the safe Saturday night; on Monday morning the money was gone, and Burton's keys were hanging in the lock of the cash drawer. No one but Burton and himself knew the combination of the safe; no one but Burton and himself had keys to the cash drawer. On making the discovery he had placed the matter in the hands of the police. He had always thought Burton to be honest; he believed he lived inside his salary and that he was free from any extravagant vice.

The next witness was Graves. He gave his profession as that of a detective, and said he had been detailed to cover the theft from Mr. Gardiner's safe. He had obtained employment in Gardiner's store in the capacity of clerk, and had made a point to cultivate Burton's acquaintance. He had found the prisoner to be a young man of apparent honesty and good habits. Nothing that could be learned at the store added any light to the subject, so he had decided to search Burton's rooms. At the very bottom of Burton's trunk he had found the package stolen from Gardiner's safe. The package had been broken and a ten dollar bill removed. Otherwise it was intact. The envelope and money were produced in evidence.

Burton listened to the evidence of these witnesses without emotion—almost without interest. But when the next name was called he looked up with surprised interest. Hiram Riles entered the box.

Riles testified that he was in Plainville late on the Sunday night preceding the discovery of the robbery. As he was walking down town to get his team before leaving for home he fancied he saw a glimmer of light in Gardiner's store.

Peering in through the window he could see Burton in the little office at the back, working at the combination of the safe by match-light. He knew that Burton was connected with the store and at the time did not suspect anything wrong.

Burton fidgeted in his chair. The mystery of the broken bottle was now clear to him, and he longed to charge Riles with the deed.

A hardware clerk testified to selling Burton a revolver on the morning the theft was discovered.

Polly Lester was next called. She took the usual oath, and Lawyer Perkins rose to question her.

“What is your name?”

“Doris Landin.”

“Your profession?”

“I am a private detective.”

At these words a buzz of astonishment ran about the crowded room. To many present the girl was a stranger, but others knew her as a domestic at Mrs. Goode’s boarding-house.

“And you, too, were watching Burton?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What did you learn of him.”

“I found nothing to reflect upon his character.”

“Exactly; but you made—that is, you were present at a certain discovery?”

“I watched from behind the door when the prisoner’s trunk was searched. I saw the package taken out of his trunk.”

“And you identify the package?”

“I do.”

“Thank you. That will do, Miss Landin.”

“But that is not all I saw.”

“That will do——”

“But I am under oath to tell the whole truth——”

“If the witness has anything to add relative to this charge the Court will hear it,” said the judge. “Please tell us, as concisely as you can, what you know of this matter.”

The girl turned and faced the judge, while all ears were strained to catch her next utterance. The auditors felt that at last some new light would break on this mystery. Perkins seemed little pleased with the turn events had taken; Bradshaw evidently enjoyed the situation, although apparently quite at sea himself, and Burton betrayed his eagerness by leaning forward and clasping his hands nervously. The fact that the girl was a detective was a relevation to him, and he wondered what new bolt would come from a sky so long overcast.

“May it please your lordship,” said the girl, “all I have said is true, but it is not half the truth. I watched the prisoner closely and searched his room and his effects daily for any clue that would throw light on this case, but without result. On the morning of the first of July, I searched his clothing and his trunk from top to bottom, but made no discoveries. Shortly before noon, while I was engaged in my work in one of the other rooms, I fancied I heard stealthy footsteps in the hall. I looked out, and was astonished to see Mr. Gardiner making his way silently toward Mr. Burton’s room. I followed, unobserved. I saw Mr. Gardiner open Mr. Burton’s trunk, which was always left unlocked, and thrust a package far down into the trunk. Mr. Gardiner then stole away as quietly as he had come. I immediately entered Mr. Burton’s room and took the package out of the trunk. I identify it as the package already placed in evidence. I then——”

But Perkins had sprung to his feet. “Your lordship,” he exclaimed, “I submit that this is very remarkable evidence. The Crown has built up a complete and logical case, entirely free from dime novel effects, but if this testimony is to be credited the structure so carefully built by the prosecution falls to the ground. It is easy for the witness to make these statements, absurd as they are on the face of it, but

it is impossible for the Crown to disprove them. I ask that the evidence be not admitted."

"Unless supported by confirmatory evidence," added the judge.

"Unless supported by confirmatory evidence," agreed Mr. Perkins.

Excitement was now intense. All eyes, by one accord, had turned to Gardiner. He sat in his chair as white as chalk, and apparently on the verge of nervous collapse.

"I have provided for the point raised by the Crown prosecutor," continued Miss Landin, quite unruffled by the remarks of Mr. Perkins. "I examined the package, which I have identified. I then broke the two wax seals and opened the envelope. I counted the money. There were two hundred ten dollar bills, all on the same bank, new and apparently unused. The serial numbers began with B-323001 and ran to B-323200. It will be found that the package now exhibited is one bill short, and that the missing bill is B-323005. I now produce the missing bill, which I took from the package at that time, and place it in evidence." So saying she drew from her purse a bright new ten dollar bill, which she handed to the clerk. "Number B-323005," she said.

"Correct," said the clerk, when he had examined the bill.

"I then," continued Miss Landin, "replaced the package in the trunk and awaited developments. I had not long to wait. Mr. Gardiner, Mr. Graves and Mr. Burton appeared in the hall in a few minutes. They entered Mr. Burton's room, and Mr. Graves found the package in the trunk. I watched them through the crack of the door, and did not fail to notice Mr. Gardiner's agitation when he discovered the package had been opened. I subsequently told Mr. Graves that I had been a witness to what occurred in the room, and he thought it would be a good thing to have me appear here and give evidence. This I have done."

"Your lordship," said Mr. Perkins, meanwhile glowering at Gardiner and Graves, "these developments were entirely unexpected by the Crown, and place the case in an absolutely new light. I can only ask permission to withdraw the charge."

"I think it better to proceed with it," said the judge. "Do you wish to call any witnesses for the defence, Mr. Bradshaw?"

“I had intended calling witnesses to establish the previous good character of the prisoner,” said Bradshaw; “but this has already been testified to by three Crown witnesses, and I now consider that unnecessary.”

“And very remarkable evidence it is,” said the judge. “Where testimony, even when amply supported, appears unreasonable on its face, the law naturally looks for a motive. Can you supply that in this instance?”

“*I* can,” continued Miss Landin. “Owing to—to a love affair, in which Mr. Gardiner found the prisoner here a dangerous rival, he determined to bring Mr. Burton into disgrace which would cause him to leave the country. It was a simple matter for Mr. Gardiner to remove the package from his safe and cast the suspicion upon his clerk. When this failed to have the desired effect it was another simple matter to conceal the package in Mr. Burton’s trunk and drop a hint to the detective who was employed on the case.”

“Then the case is closed. We will not reflect upon the intelligence of the jury by any remarks. Can the jury find a verdict without leaving the room?”

“We can,” said the foreman. “All who say ‘Not guilty’ stand up.”

Every juror rose to his feet.

“Discharge the prisoner,” said the judge. “It will, of course, rest with him whether an action is taken against his traducer. But I should like to sit on the case.”

Burton rose to say something, but immediately the air became alive with hands. They were thrust at him out of space—from above, from below, from every side—and he found himself seized and carried bodily out of the building.

At the door he saw Miss Landin. There was a room there used for office purposes. At the moment it was unoccupied. Breaking away from his enthusiastic friends he seized the girl by the arm, drew her into the room and locked the door.

“Now tell me all,” he demanded. “Tell me why you did it, how you did it, and why you kept your discovery a secret, even from the officers of the law. But first of all accept an apology for the one-time bad opinion of a boy who has been very much of a fool, and who has been saved by a miracle. You are the miracle, Polly

—I mean, Miss Landin."

"Hardly that," said the girl, laughing. "And I am not sure how much I should tell you. You see, it wasn't you that engaged me."

"That's the biggest part of the mystery. Don't keep me in suspense. I haven't seen my way for the last five months; let me see it clearly now."

"I should say that your way is as clear as day. It lies straight to Mrs. Goode's little private parlour, where somebody is waiting for you," she said, with a knowing smile. "But I suppose I owe you an explanation. Your friends are clamouring for you at the door, so I will make it brief. Listen.

"Myrtle Vane loves you. You couldn't see it, of course, being a man, and she, being a woman, couldn't tell you. When you got into trouble there was only one person in whom she could confide, and that person was her brother Harry. She wrote him a letter—such a letter as raises the relation of brother and sister from the human to the divine. He called me to his office, as I had given him service before in other matters. He read me his sister's letter and talked with me frankly. 'I want you to go to Plainville,' he said, 'and find out all about this case. Learn the character of this young man who has gained such a hold on the affections of my sister. If he is guilty help to convict him; if he is innocent establish his innocence beyond the shadow of doubt or question. But above all, learn whether or not he is a man. See whether he can stand up under adversity—whether he can face the inevitable with clear eye and set chin. And when your investigation is complete report to my sister.'"

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Burton. "And you have reported?"

"Yes, by messenger, an hour ago. I couldn't report until you came back, you know."

"Why?"

"Why? Stupid! With all your masculine assurance, you will hardly claim that your conduct, up to an hour ago, had a very heroic ring. But your return—in the nick of time—your explanations, and the course of to-day's events establish everything. I had to let you return thinking you were guilty, otherwise I should have been in doubt what to report. Now while many believed in you, only you and I and Gardiner in all this world knew you were innocent. You couldn't prove

it, Gardiner wouldn't prove it, so the secret rested with me. And, in spite of my sex, I have learned that there is just one way to keep a secret. I kept it."

"Even from Miss Vane?"

"Even from Miss Vane."

"Polly, you're a wonder—you're a brick." There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. "I won't forget you—I won't forget." For a moment he held her hand in his. And there were tears in her eyes, too, when she turned away.

The Grant boys almost ate him when he reappeared from the little office, but a clerk from the Sempter Trading Company forced his way to Burton. "Mr. Sempter would like to see you in his office at once, Burton," he said.

"I will be there in ten minutes," was the answer.

Burton found Mr. Sempter in his private office at the back of the store. The merchant received him cordially and placed a chair for him. "You might step down and get the mail for us, Miss Jones," he said to his stenographer, and as soon as the young woman had left the room he plunged into his business with Burton.

"I have no doubt, Mr. Burton, your time is limited to-day. Your friends, quite naturally, will demand the privilege of showing their elation at the happy outcome of the miserable affair with which your name was so unjustly associated. So I will be brief and to the point. When I established this business here I was the first general merchant in Plainville. As the town grew I realised that another store was inevitable. The farmers demand competition, and no matter how well you may use them they prefer to deal where they have a choice of stores. To meet that situation it occurred to me to start another store under another name. Gardiner was recommended to me by an Eastern business connection. I got into touch with him, and the outcome was the establishment of a store under his name, although I furnished all the capital."

Burton raised his eyebrows a trifle. "Then Gardiner was your employee?" he interrupted.

"Nothing more or less. But the secret was well kept. Gardiner was a shrewd businessman, and not even my head clerks ever suspected my connection with

the store that bore his name. Now, to arrive at the point: I paid Gardiner two thousand dollars a year and twenty per cent. of the profits. That gave him a net income from the business of between three and four thousand yearly. His resignation is now in my hands, and the position is open to you on the same terms. What do you say?"

Burton was so much surprised by the revelation made, and by Mr. Sempter's liberal offer, that he found it difficult to answer. But at last he managed to say something about his inexperience in mercantile business.

"It is not experience I am hiring," said Mr. Sempter. "I can hire twenty years' experience for twenty dollars a week. It's character I am bidding for now. I am an old hand on the market, and I seldom pay more than an article is worth. Can you assume your new duties to-morrow morning?"

"I can," said Burton, rising from his chair in his sudden resolve.

The old merchant and the young one clasped hands together, and at that moment Miss Jones entered with the mail.

"The clerk in the post office said there was a letter for Mr. Burton," she explained, "and wondered where to find him, so I brought it with me." So saying she placed an envelope in Burton's hands.

As he left the store he glanced at the post mark, and his heart jumped as he found it was that of a far western town. He nervously tore open the enclosure, and read:

> "DEAR RAY.—Of course I have found out all about you. Why couldn't you tell me and save all this investigation on my part? I am addressing this letter to reach you at Plainville on the first day of the assizes. I expect you will be there to lift it; if it comes back to me undelivered another pillar of my faith in humanity will be gone. But it won't come back. And in some way justice will prevail, even if we do not see it clearly just now. The fact that the lady with the scales may sometimes be caught napping is no fault of her customer.
>
> "I have invited myself to visit you and Myrtle when you get settled down. Meanwhile—good luck!
>
> "KATE MCKAY."

“Dear old Kid,” said Burton, as he pressed the letter fervently to his lips. “It’s wonderful how many people there are in this world who ring true, after all, isn’t it?”

As he entered the hall of the Goode boarding-house he was overwhelmed by a pair of arms about his neck and a resounding kiss on his cheek. When he could disengage himself he was looking into the laughing face of Alice Goode.

“That’s a horse to me,” she exclaimed, gleefully. “I knew it was now or never. In fifteen minutes you’ll be tagged and labelled, and I never trespass on other people’s property. But until the ‘Keep off’ sign is up I don’t mind stamping around on the lawn a little.”

“There’ll always be a corner in the lawn for you, Alice,” he said earnestly.

“More likely in the root garden,” she sallied. “But hist——”—this with her finger to her lips—“the great moment is at hand.” She led him softly to the parlour door, and as it swung open to her touch his eyes fell on that wonderful face which he had seen in every dawn and every sunset, every shadow and every sunbeam, since that glorious day, ages ago, when their mirrored images had blended in the glassy water at their feet. With a spirit flooded with humility and tenderness he stepped into the presence that to him was nothing less than sacred.

And Alice Goode gently closed the door and tip-toed down the hall.

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