

The Reclaimers

Margaret Hill McCarter



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THE RECLAIMERS

BY MARGARET HILL McCARTER

Author of "VANGUARDS OF THE PLAINS"

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**TO
MAY BELLEVILLE BROWN
CRITIC, COUNSELLOR, COMFORTER**



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THE RECLAIMERS



I

JERRY



I

THE HEIR APPARENT

Only the good little snakes were permitted to enter the "Eden" that belonged to Aunt Jerry and Uncle Cornie Darby. "Eden," it should be explained, was the country estate of Mrs. Jerusha Darby—a wealthy Philadelphian—and her husband, Cornelius Darby, a relative by marriage, so to speak, whose sole business on earth was to guard his wife's wealth for six hours of the day in the city, and to practise discus-throwing out at "Eden" for two hours every evening.

Of course these two were never familiarly "Aunt" and "Uncle" to this country neighborhood, nor to any other community. Far, oh, far from that! They were Aunt and Uncle only to Jerry Swaim, the orphaned and only child of Mrs. Darby's brother Jim, whose charming girlish presence made the whole community, wherever she might chance to be. They were cousin, however, to Eugene Wellington, a young artist of more than ordinary merit, also orphaned and alone, except for a sort of cousinship with Uncle Cornelius.

"Eden" was a beautifully located and handsomely appointed estate of two hundred acres, offering large facilities to any photographer seeking magazine illustrations of country life in America. Indeed, the place was, as Aunt Jerry Darby declared, "summer and winter, all shot up by camera-toters and dabbed over with canvas-stretchers' paints," much to the owner's disgust, to whom all camera-toters and artists, except Cousin Eugene Wellington, were useless idlers. The rustic little railway station, hidden by maple-trees, was only three or four good discus-throws from the house. But the railroad itself very properly dropped from view into a wooded valley on either side of the station. There was nothing of cindery ugliness to mar the spot where the dwellers in "Eden" could take the early morning train for the city, or drop off in the cool of the afternoon into a delightful pastoral retreat. Beyond the lawns and buildings, gardens and orchards, the land billowed away into meadow and pasture and grain-field, with an insert of leafy grove where song-birds builded an Eden all their own. The entire freehold of Aunt Jerry Darby and Uncle Cornie, set down in the middle of a Western ranch, would have been a day's journey from its borders. And yet in it country life was done into poetry, combining city luxuries and conveniences

with the dehorned, dethorned comfort and freedom of idyllic nature. What more need be said for this "Eden" into which only the good little snakes were permitted to enter?

In the late afternoon Aunt Jerry sat in the rose-arbor with her Japanese work-basket beside her, and a pearl tatting-shuttle between her thumb and fingers. One could read in a thoughtful glance all there was to know of Mrs. Darby. Her alert air and busy hands bespoke the habit of everlasting industry fastened down upon her, no doubt, in a far-off childhood. She was luxurious in her tastes. The satin gown, the diamond fastening the little cap to her gray hair, the elegant lace at her throat and wrists, the flashing jewels on her thin fingers, all proclaimed a desire for display and the means wherewith to pamper it. The rest of her story was written on her wrinkled face, where the strong traits of a self-willed youth were deeply graven. Something in the narrow, restless eyes suggested the discontented lover of wealth. The lines of the mouth hinted at selfishness and prejudice. The square chin told of a stubborn will, and the stern cast of features indicated no sense of humor whereby the hardest face is softened. That Jerusha Darby was rich, intolerant, determined, unimaginative, self-centered, unforgiving, and unhappy the student of character might gather at a glance. Where these traits abide a second glance is unnecessary.

Outside, the arbor was aglow with early June roses; within, the cushioned willow seats invite to restful enjoyment. But Jerusha Darby was not there for pleasure. While her pearl shuttle darted in and out among her fingers like a tiny, iridescent bird, her mind and tongue were busy with important matters.

Opposite to her was her husband, Cornelius. It was only important matters that called him away from his business in the city at so early an hour in the afternoon. And it was only on business matters that he and his wife ever really conferred, either in the rose-arbor or elsewhere. The appealing beauty of the place indirectly meant nothing to these two owners of all this beauty.

The most to be said of Cornelius Darby was that he was born the son of a rich man and he died the husband of a rich woman. His life, like his face, was colorless. He fitted into the landscape and his presence was never detected. He had no opinions of his own. His father had given him all that he needed to think about until he was married. "Was married" is well said. He never courted nor married anybody. He was never courted, but he was married by Jerusha Swaim. But that is all dried stuff now. Let it be said, however, that not all the mummies are in Egyptian tombs and Smithsonian Institutions. Some of them sit in

banking-houses all day long, and go discus-throwing in lovely "Edens" on soft June evenings. And one of them once, just once, broke the ancient linen wrappings from his glazed jaws and spoke. For half an hour his voice was heard; and then the bandages slipped back, and the mummy was all mummy again. It was Jerry Swaim who wrought that miracle. But then there is little in the earth, or the waters under the earth, that a pretty girl cannot work upon.

"You say you have the report on the Swaim estate that the Macpherson Mortgage Company of New Eden, Kansas, is taking care of for us?" Mrs. Darby asked.

"The complete report. York Macpherson hasn't left out a detail. Shall I read you his description?" her husband replied.

"No, no; don't tell me a thing about it, not a thing. I don't want to know any more about Kansas than I know already. I hate the very name of Kansas. You can understand why, when you remember my brother. I've known York Macpherson all his life, him and his sister Laura, too. And I never could understand why he went so far West, nor why he dragged that lame sister of his out with him to that Sage Brush country."

"That's because you won't let me tell you anything about the West. But as a matter of business you ought to understand the conditions connected with this estate."

"I tell you again I won't listen to it, not one word. He is employed to look after the property, not to write about it. None of my family ever expects to see it. When we get ready to study its value we will give due notice. Now let the matter of description, location, big puffing up of its value—I know all that Kansas talk—let all that drop here." Jerusha Darby unconsciously stamped her foot on the cement floor of the arbor and struck her thin palm flat upon the broad arm of her chair.

"Very well, Jerusha. If Jerry ever wants to know anything about its extent, agricultural value, water-supply, crop returns, etc., she will find them on file in my office. The document says that the land in the Sage Brush Valley in Kansas is now, with title clear, the property of the estate of the late Jeremiah Swaim and his heirs and assigns forever; that York Macpherson will, for a very small consideration, be the Kansas representative of the Swaim heirs. That is all I have to say about it."

"Then listen to me," Mrs. Darby commanded. And her listener—listened. "Jerry

Swaim is Brother Jim and Sister Lesa's only child. She's been brought up in luxury; never wanted a thing she didn't get, and never earned a penny in her life. She couldn't do it to save her life. If I outlive you she will be my heir if I choose to make my will in her favor. She can be taken care of without that Kansas property of hers. That's enough about the matter. We will drop it right here for other things. There's your cousin Eugene Wellington coming home again. He's a real artist and hasn't any property at all."

A ghost of a smile flitted across Mr. Darby's blank face, but Mrs. Darby never saw ghosts.

"Of course Jerry and Gene, who have been playmates in the same game all their lives, will—will—" Mrs. Darby hesitated.

"Will keep on playing the same game," Cornelius suggested. "If that's all about this business, I'll go and look after the lily-ponds over yonder, and then take a little exercise before dinner. I'm sorry I missed Jerry in the city. She doesn't know I am out here."

"What difference if you did? She and Eugene will be coming out on the train pretty soon," Mrs. Darby declared.

"She doesn't know he's there, maybe. They may miss each other," her husband replied.

Then he left the arbor and effaced himself, as was his custom, from his wife's presence, and busied himself with matters concerning the lily-ponds on the far side of the grounds where pink lotuses were blooming.

Meantime Jerusha Darby's fingers fairly writhed about her tatting-work, as she waited impatiently for the sound of the afternoon train from the city.

"It's time the four-forty was whistling round the curve," she murmured. "My girl will soon be here, unless the train is delayed by that bridge down yonder. Plague on these June rains!"

Mrs. Darby said "my girl" exactly as she would have said "my bank stock," or "my farm." Hers was the tone of complete possession.

"She could have come out in the auto in half the time, the four-forty creeps so, but the roads are dreadfully skiddy after these abominable rains," Mrs. Darby continued.

The habit of speaking her thoughts aloud had grown on her, as it often does on those advanced in years who live much alone. The little vista of rain-washed meadows and growing grain that lay between tall lilac-trees was lost to her eyes in the impatience of the moment's delay. What Jerusha Darby wanted for Jerusha Darby was vastly more important to her at any moment than the abstract value of a general good or a common charm.

As she leaned forward, listening intently for the rumble of the train down in the valley, a great automobile swung through the open gateway of "Eden" and rounded the curves of the maple-guarded avenue, bearing down with a birdlike sweep upon the rose-arbor.

"Here I am, Aunt Jerry," the driver's girlish voice called. "Uncle Cornie is coming out on the train. I beat him to it. I saw the old engine huffing and puffing at the hill beyond the third crossing of the Winnowoc. It is bank-full now from the rains. I stopped on that high fill and watched the train down below me creeping out on the trestle above the creek. When it got across and went crawling into the cut on this side I came on, too. I had my hands full then making this big gun of a car climb that muddy, slippery hill that the railroad cuts through. But I'd rather climb than creep any old day."

"Jerry Swaim," Mrs. Darby cried, staring up at her niece in amazement, "do you mean to say you drove out alone over that sideling, slippery bluff road? But you wouldn't be Lesa Swaim's daughter if you weren't taking chances. You are your mother's own child, if there ever was one."

"Well, I should hope I am, since I've got to be classified somewhere. I came because I wanted to," Jerry declared, with the finality of complete excuse in her tone. All her life what Jerry Swaim had wanted was abundant reason for her having. "It was dreadfully hot and sticky in the city, and I knew it would be the bottom deep of mugginess on that crowded Winnowoc train. The last time I came out here on it I had to sit beside a dreadful big Dutchman who had an old hen and chickens in a basket under his feet. He had had Limburger cheese for his dinner and had used his whiskers for a napkin to catch the crumbs. Ugh!" Jerry gave a shiver of disgust at the recollection. "An old lady behind us had 'sky-atick rheumatiz' and wouldn't let the windows be opened. I'd rather have any kind of 'rheumatiz' than Limburger for the same length of time. The Winnowoc special ought to carry a parlor coach from the city and set it off at 'Eden' like it used to do. The agent let me play in it whenever I wanted to when I was a youngster. I'm never going to ride on any train again unless I go in a Pullman."

The girl struck her small gloved fist, like a spoiled child, against the steering-wheel of her luxuriously appointed car, but her winsome smile was all-redeeming as she looked down at her aunt standing in the doorway of the rose-arbor.

"Come in here, Geraldine Swaim. I want to talk to you." Mrs. Darby's affectionate tones carried also a note of command.

"Means business when she 'Geraldine Swaims' me," Jerry commented, mentally, as she gave the car to the "Eden" man-of-all-work and followed her aunt to a seat inside the blossom-covered retreat, where the pearl shuttle began to grow tatting again beneath the thin, busy fingers.

It always pleased Jerusha Darby to be told that there was a resemblance between these two. But, although the older woman's countenance was an open book holding the story of inherited ideas, limited and intensified, and the young face unmistakably perpetuated the family likeness, yet Jerry Swaim was a type of her own, not easy to forejudge. In the shadows of the rose-arbor her hair rippled back from her forehead in dull-gold waves. One could picture what the sunshine would do for it. Her big, dark-blue eyes were sometimes dreamy under their long lashes, and sometimes full of sparkling light. Her whole atmosphere was that of easeful, dependent, city life; yet there was something contrastingly definite in her low voice, her firm mouth and square-cut chin. And beyond appearances and manner, there was something which nobody ever quite defined, that made it her way to walk straight into the hearts of those who knew her.

"Where were you in the city to-day?" Mrs. Darby asked, abruptly, looking keenly at the fair-faced girl much as she would have looked at any other of her goodly possessions.

"Let me see," Jerry Swaim began, meditatively. "I was shopping quite a while. The stores are gorgeous this June."

"Yes, and what else?" queried the older woman.

"Oh, some more shopping. Then I lunched at *La Señorita*, that beautiful new tea-house. Every room represents some nationality in its decoration. I was in the Delft room—Holland Dutch—whiskers and Limburger"—there was a gleam of fun in the dark-blue eyes—"but it is restful and charming. And the service is perfect. Then I strolled off to the Art Gallery and lost myself in the latest exhibit. Cousin Gene would like that, I'm sure. It was so cool and quiet there that I stayed

a long time. The exhibit is mostly of landscapes, all of them as beautiful as 'Eden' except one."

There was just a shade of something different in the girl's tone when she spoke her cousin's name.

"And that one?" Mrs. Darby inquired. She did not object to shopping and more shopping, but art was getting outside of her dominion.

"It was a desert-like scene; just yellow-gray plains, with no trees at all. And in the farther distance the richest purples and reds of a sunset sky into which the land sort of diffused. No landscape on this earth was ever so yellow-gray, or any sunset ever so like the Book of Revelation, nor any horizon-line so wide and far away. It was the hyperbole of a freakish imagination. And yet, Aunt Jerry, there was a romantic lure in the thing, somehow."

Jerry Swaim's face was grave as she gazed with wide, unseeing eyes at the vista of fresh June meadows from which the odor of red clover, pulsing in on the cool west breeze of the late afternoon, mingled with the odor of white honeysuckle that twined among the climbing rose-vines above her.

"Humph! What else?" Aunt Jerry sniffed a disapproval of unpleasant landscapes in general and alluring romances in particular. Love of romance was not in her mental make-up, any more than love of art.

"I went over to Uncle Cornie's bank to tell him to take care of my shopping-bills. He wasn't in just then and I didn't wait for him. By the way"—Jerry Swaim was not dreamy now—"since all the legal litigations and things are over, oughtn't I begin to manage my own affairs and live on my own income?"

Sitting there in the shelter of blossoming vines, the girl seemed far too dainty a creature, too lacking in experience, initiative, or ability, to manage anything more trying than a big allowance of pin-money. And yet, something in her small, firm hands, something in the lines of her well-formed chin, put the doubt into any forecast of what Geraldine Swaim might do when she chose to act.

Aunt Jerry wrapped the lacy tatting stuff she had been making around the pearl shuttle and, putting both away in the Japanese work-basket, carefully snapped down the lid.

"When Jerusha Darby quits work to talk it's time for me to put on my skid-chains," Jerry said to herself as she watched the procedure.

"Jerry, do you know why I called you your mother's own child just now?" Mrs. Darby asked, gravely.

"From habit, maybe, you have said it so often." Jerry's smile took away any suggestion of pertness. "I know I am like her in some ways."

"Yes, but not altogether," the older woman continued. "Lesa Swaim was a strange combination. She was made to spend money, with no idea of how to get money. And she brought you up the same way. And now you are grown, boarding-school finished, and of age, you can't alter your bringing up any more than you can change your big eyes that are just like Lesa's, nor your chin that you inherited from Brother Jim. I might as well try to give you little black eyes and a receding chin as to try to reshape your ways now. You are as the Lord made you, and Providence molded you, and your mother spoiled you."

"Well, I don't want to be anything different. I'm happy as I am."

"You won't need to be, unless you choose. But being twenty-one doesn't make you too old to listen to me—and your uncle Cornie."

In all her life Jerry had never before heard her uncle's name brought in as co-partner of Jerusha Darby's in any opinion, authority, or advice. It was an unfortunate slip of the tongue for Uncle Cornie's wife, one of those simple phrases that, dropped at the right spot, take root and grow and bear big fruit, whether of sweet or bitter taste.

"Your mother was a dreamer, a lover of romance, and all sorts of adventures, although she never had a chance to get into any of them. That's why you went skidding on that sideling bluff road to-day; that and the fact that she brought you up to have your own way about everything. But, as I say, we can't change that now, and there's no need to if we could. Lesa was a pretty woman, but you look like the Swaims, except right across here."

Aunt Jerry drew her bony finger across the girl's brows, unwilling to concede any of the family likeness that could possibly be retained. She could not see the gleam of mischief lurking under the downcast eyelashes of Lesa Swaim's own child.

"Your father was a good business man, level-headed, shrewd, and honest"—Mrs. Darby spoke rapidly now—"but things happened in the last years of his life. Your mother took pneumonia and died, and you went away to boarding-school.

Jim's business was considerably involved. I needn't bother to tell you about that. It doesn't matter now, anyhow. And then one night he didn't come home, and the next morning your uncle found him sitting in his office, just as he had left him the evening before. He had been dead several hours. Heart failure was what the doctor said, but I reckon everybody goes of heart failure sooner or later."

A bright, hard glow came into Jerry Swaim's eyes and the red lips were grimly pressed together. In the two years since the loss of her parents the girl had never tried to pray. As time went on the light spirit of youth had come back, but something went out of her life on the day of her father's death, leaving a loss against which she stubbornly rebelled.

"To be plain, Jerry," Mrs. Darby hurried on, "you have your inheritance all cleared up at last, after two whole years of legal trouble."

"Oh, it hasn't really bothered me," Jerry declared, with seeming flippancy. "Just signing my name where somebody pointed to a blank line, and holding up my right hand to be sworn—that's all. I've written my full name and promised that the writing was mine, 's'welp me Gawd,' as the court-house man used to say, till I could do either one under the influence of ether. Nothing really bothersome about it, but I'm glad it's over. Business is so tiresome."

"It's not so large a fortune, by a good deal, as it would have been if your father had listened to me." Mrs. Darby spoke vaguely. "But you will be amply provided for, anyhow, unless you yourself choose to trifle with your best interest. You and I are the only Swaims living now. Some day, if I choose, I can will all my property to you."

The square-cut chin and the deep lines around the stern mouth told plainly that obedience to this woman's wishes alone could make a beneficiary to that will.

"You may be a dreamer, and love to go romancing around into new scrapes like your mother would have done if she could. But she was as soft-hearted as could be, with all that. That's why she never denied you anything you wanted. She couldn't do a thing with money, though, as I said, except spend it. You are a good deal like your father, too, Jerry, and you'll value property some day as the only thing on earth that can make life anything but a hard grind. If you don't want to be like that bunch of everlasting grubs that ride on the Winnowoc train every afternoon, or the poor country folks around here that never ride in anything but a rickety old farm-wagon, you'll appreciate what I—and Uncle Cornie—can do for you."

Uncle Cornie again, and he never had shared in any equal consideration before. It was a mistake.

"There's the four-forty whistling for the curve at last. It's time it was coming. I must go in and see that dinner is just right. You run down and meet it. Cousin Eugene is coming out on it. Your uncle Cornie is here on the place somewhere. He came out after lunch on some business we had to fix up. No wonder you missed him. But, Jerry"—the stern-faced woman put a hand on the girl's shoulder with more of command than caress in the gesture—"Eugene is a real artist with genius, you know."

"Yes, I know," Jerry replied, a sudden change coming into her tone. "What of that?"

"You've always known him. You like him very much?" Jerusha Darby was as awkward in sentiment as she was shrewd in a bargain.

The bloom on the girl's cheek deepened as she looked away toward the brilliantly green meadows across which the low sun was sending rays of golden light.

"Oh, I like him as much as he likes me, no doubt. I'll go down to the station and look him over, if you say so."

Beneath the words lay something deeper than speech—something new even to the girl herself.

As Jerry left the arbor Mrs. Darby said, with something half playful, half final, in her tone: "You won't forget what I've said about property, you little spendthrift. You will be sensible, like my sensible brother's child, even if you are as idealizing as your sentimental mother."

"I'll not forget. I couldn't and be Jerry Darby's niece," the last added after the girl was safely out of her aunt's hearing. "My father and mother both had lots of good traits, it seems, and a few poor ones. I seem to be really heir to all the faulty bents of theirs, and to have lost out on all the good ones. But I can't help that now. Not till after the train gets in, anyhow."

Her aunt watched her till the shrubbery hid her at a turn in the walk. Young, full of life, dainty as the June blossoms that showered her pathway with petals, a spoiled, luxury-loving child, with an adventurous spirit and a blunted and undeveloped notion of human service and divine heritage, but with a latent

capacity and an untrained power for doing things, that was Jerry Swaim—whom the winds of heaven must not visit too roughly without being accountable to Mrs. Jerusha Darby, owner and manager of the universe for her niece.



II

UNCLE CORNIE'S THROW

Jerry was waiting at the cool end of the rustic station when the train came in. How hot and stuffy it seemed to her as it puffed out of the valley, and how tired and cross all the bunch of grubs who stared out of the window at her. It made them ten times more tired and cross and hot to see that girl looking so cool and rested and exquisitely gowned and crowned and shod. The blue linen with white embroidered cuffs, the rippling, glinting masses of hair, the small shoes, immaculately white against the green sod—little wonder that, while the heir apparent to the Darby wealth felt comfortably indifferent toward this uninteresting line of nobodies in particular, the bunch of grubs should feel only envy and resentment of their own sweaty, muscle-worn lot in life.

Jerry and Eugene Wellington were far up the shrubbery walk by the time the Winnowoc train was on its way again, unconscious that the passengers were looking after them, or that the talk, as the train slowly got under way, was all of "that rich old codger of a Darby and his selfish old wife"; of "that young dude artist, old Wellington's kid, too lazy to work"; of "that pretty, frivolous girl who didn't know how to comb her own hair, Jim Swaim's girl—poor Jim!" "Old Corn Darby was looking yellow and thin, too. He would dry up and blow away some day if his money wasn't weighting him down so he couldn't."

At the bend in the walk, the two young people saw Uncle Cornie crossing the lawn.

"Going to get his discus. He'll have no appetite for dinner unless he gets in a few dozen slings," the young man declared. "Let's turn in here at the sign of the roses, Jerry. I'm too lazy to take another step."

"You should have come out with me in the car," Jerry replied as they sat down in the cool arbor made for youth and June-time. "I didn't know you were in the city."

"Well, little cousin girl, I'll confess I didn't dare," the young man declared, boldly. "I've been studying awfully hard this year, and, now I'm needed to paint The Great American Canvas, I can't end my useful career under a big touring-car

at the bottom of an embankment out on the Winnowoc bluff road. So when I saw you coming into Uncle Cornie's office in the bank I slipped away."

"And as to my own risk?" Jerry asked.

"Oh, Jerry Swaim, you would never have an accident in a hundred years. There's nobody like you, little cousin mine, nobody at all."

Eugene Wellington put one well-formed hand lightly on the small white hand lying on the wicker chair-arm, and, leaning forward, he looked down into the face of the girl beside him. A handsome, well-set up, artistic young fellow he was, fitted to adorn life's ornamental places. And if a faint line of possible indecision of character might have suggested itself to the keen-eyed reader of faces, other traits outweighed its possibility. For his was a fine face, with a sort of gracious gentleness in it that grows with the artist's growth. A hint of deeper spirituality, too, that marks nobility of character, added to a winning personality, put Eugene Wellington above the common class. He fitted the rose-arbor, in "Eden" and the comradeship of good breeding. When a man finds his element, all the rest of the world moves more smoothly therefor.

"Nobody like me," Jerry repeated. "It's a good thing I'm the only one of the kind. You'd say so if you knew what Aunt Jerry thinks of me. She has been analyzing me and filing me away in sections this afternoon."

"What's on her mind now?" Eugene Wellington asked, as he leaned easefully back in his chair.

"She says I am heir—" Jerry always wondered what made her pause there. Years afterward, when this June evening came back in memory, she could not account for it.

"Heir to what?" the young artist inquired, a faint, shadowy something sweeping his countenance fleetly.

"To all the sphere,
To the seven stars and the solar year;

also to my father's entire estate that's left after some two years of litigation. I hate litigations."

"So do I, Jerry. Let's forget them. Isn't 'Eden' beautiful? I'm so glad to be back here again." Eugene Wellington looked out at the idyllic loveliness of the place

which the rose-arbor was built especially to command. "Nobody could sin here, for there are no serpents busy-bodying around in such a dream of a landscape as this. I'm glad I'm an artist, if I never become famous. There's such a joy in being able to see, even if your brush fails miserably in trying to make others see."

Again the man's shapely hand fell gently on the girl's hand, and this time it stayed there.

"You love it all as much as I do, don't you, Jerry?" The voice was deep with emotion. "And you feel as I do, how this lifts one nearer to God. Or is it because you are here with me that 'Eden' is so fair to-night? May I tell you something, Jerry? Something I've waited for the summer and 'Eden' to give me the hour and the place to say? We've always known each other. We thought we did before, but a new knowing came to me the day your father left us. Look up, little cousin. I want to say something to you."

June-time, and youth, and roses, and soft, sweet air, and nobody there but blossoms, and whispering breezes, and these two. And they had known each other always. Oh, always! But now—something was different now, something that was grander, more beautiful in this place, in this day, in each other, than had ever been before—the old, old miracle of a man and a maid.

Suddenly something whizzed through the air and a snakelike streak of shadow cut the light of the doorway. Out in the open, Uncle Cornie came slowly stepping off the space to where his discus lay beside the rose-arbor—one of the good little snakes. Every Eden has them, and some are much better than others.

The discus-ground was out on a lovely stretch of shorn clover sod. Why the discus should wander from the thrower's hand through the air toward the rose-arbor no wind of heaven could tell. Nor could it tell why Uncle Cornie should choose to follow it and stand in the doorway of the arbor until the "Eden" dinner-hour called all three of the dwellers, Adam and Eve and this good little snake, to the cool dining-room and what goes with it.

Twilight and moonlight were melting into one, and all the sweet odors of dew-kissed blossoms, the good-night twitter of homing birds, the mists rising above the Winnowoc Valley, the shadows of shrubbery on the lawn, and the darkling outline of the tall maples made "Eden" as beautiful now as in the full sunlight.

Jerry Swaim sat in the doorway of the rose-arbor, watching Uncle Cornie throwing his discus again along the smooth white clover sod. Aunt Jerry had

trailed off with Eugene to the far side of the spacious grounds to see the lily-ponds where the pink lotuses were blooming.

"Young folks mustn't be together too much. They'll get tired of each other too quickly. I used to get bored to death having Cornelius forever around." Aunt Jerry philosophized, considering herself as wise in the affairs of the heart as she was shrewd in affairs of the pocketbook. She would make Jerry and Gene want to be together before they had the chance again.

So Jerry Swaim sat alone, watching the lights and shadows on the lawn, only half conscious of Uncle Cornie's presence out there, until he suddenly followed his discus as it rolled toward the arbor and lay flat at her feet. Instead of picking it up, he dropped down on the stone step beside his niece and sat without speaking until Jerry forgot his presence entirely. It was his custom to sit without speaking, and to be forgotten.

Jerry's mind was full of many things. Life had opened a new door to her that afternoon, and something strange and sweet had suddenly come through it. Life had always opened pleasant doors to her, save that one through which her father and mother had slipped away—a door that closed and shut her from them and God, whose Providence had robbed her so cruelly of what was her own. But no door ever showed her as fair a vista as the one now opening before her dreamy gaze.

She glanced unseeingly at the old man sitting beside her. Then across her memory Aunt Jerry's words came drifting, "Being twenty-one doesn't make you too old to listen to me—and your uncle Cornie," and, "You'll appreciate what I—and Uncle Cornie—can do for you."

Uncle Cornie was looking at her with a face as expressionless as if he were about to say, "The bank doesn't make loans on any such security," yet something in his eyes drew her comfortably to him and she mechanically put her shapely little hand on his thin yellow one.

"I want to talk to you before anything happens, Jerry," he began, and then paused, in a confused uncertainty that threatened to end his wanting here.

And Jerry, being a woman, divined in an instant that it was to talk to her before anything happened that he had thrown that discus out of its way when she and Gene had thought themselves alone in the arbor before dinner. It was to talk to her that the thing had been rolled purposely to her feet now. Queer Uncle Cornie!

"I'm not too old to listen to you. I appreciate what you can do for me." Jerry was quoting her aunt's admonitions exactly, which showed how deeply they had unconsciously impressed themselves on her mind. Her words broke the linen bands about Uncle Cornie's glazed jaws, and he spoke.

"Your estate is all settled now. What's left to you after that rascally John—I mean after two years of pulling and hauling through the courts, is a 'claim,' as they call it, in the Sage Brush Valley in Kansas. It has never been managed well, somehow. There's not been a cent of income from it since Jim Swaim got hold of it, but that's no fault of the man who is looking after it—a York Macpherson. He's a gentleman you can trust anywhere. That's all there is of your own from your father's estate."

Jerry Swaim's dark-blue eyes opened wide and her face was lily white under the shadow of dull-gold hair above it.

"You are dependent on your aunt for everything. Well, she's glad of that. So am I, in a way. Only, if you go against her will you won't be her heir any more. You mightn't be, anyhow, if she—went first. The Darby estate isn't really Jerusha Swaim's; it's mine. But she thinks it's hers and it's all right that way, because, in the end, I do control it." Uncle Cornie paused.

Jerry sat motionless, and, although it was June-time, the little white hand on the speaker's thin yellow one was very cold.

"If you are satisfied, I'm glad, but I won't let Jim Swaim's child think she's got a fortune of her own when she hasn't got a cent and must depend on the good-will of her relatives for everything she wants. Jim would haunt me to my grave if I did."

Jerry stared at her uncle's face in the darkening twilight. In all her life she had never known him to seem to have any mind before except what grooved in with Aunt Jerry's commanding mind. Yet, surprised as she was, she involuntarily drew nearer to him as to one whom she could trust.

"We agreed long ago, Jim and I did, when Jim was a rich man, that some day you must be shown that you were his child as well as Lesa's—I mean that you mustn't always be a dependent spender. You must get some Swaim notions of living, too. Not that either of us ever criticized your mother's sweet spirit and her ideal-building and love of adventure. Romance belongs to some lives and keeps them young and sweet if they live to be a million. I'm not down on it like your

Aunt Jerry is."

Romance had steered wide away from Cornelius Darby's colorless days. And possibly only this once in the sweet stillness of the June twilight at "Eden" did that hungering note ever sound in his voice, and then only for a brief space.

"Jim would have told you all this himself if he had got his affairs untangled in time. And he'd have done that, for he had a big brain and a big heart, but God went and took him. He did. Don't rebel always, Jerry. God was good to him—you'll see it some day and quit your ugly doubting."

Who ever called anything ugly about Jerry Swaim before? That a creature like Cornelius Darby should do it now was one of the strange, unbelievable things of this world.

"I just wanted to say again," Uncle Cornie continued, "if I go first you'd be Jerusha's heir. We agreed to that long ago. That is, if you don't cross her wishes and start her to make a will against you, as she'd do if you didn't obey her to the last letter in the alphabet. If I go after she does, the property all goes by law to distant relatives of mine. That was fixed before I ever got hold of it—heirs of some spendthrifts who would have wasted it long ago if they'd lived and had it themselves."

The sound of voices and Eugene Wellington's light laughter came faintly from the lily-pond.

"Eugene is a good fellow," Uncle Cornie said, meditatively. "He's got real talent and he'll make a name for himself some day that will be stronger, and do more good, and last longer than the man's name that's just rated gilt-edged security on a note, and nowhere else. Gene will make a decent living, too, independent of any aunts and uncles. But he's no stronger-willed, nor smarter, nor better than you are, Jerry, even if he is a bit more religious-minded, as you might say. You try awfully hard to think you don't believe in anything because just once in your life Providence didn't work your way. You can't fool with your own opinions against God Almighty and not lose in the deal. You'll have to learn that some time. All of us do, sooner or later."

"But to take my father—all I had—after I had given up mother, I can't see any justice nor any mercy in it," Jerry broke out.

Uncle Cornie was no comforter with words. He had had no chance to practise

giving sympathy either before or after marriage. Mummies are limited, whether they be in sealed sarcophagi or sit behind roller-top desks and cut coupons. Something in his quiet presence, however, soothed the girl's rebellious spirit more than words could have done. Cornelius Darby did not know that he could come nearer to the true measurement of Jerry's mind than any one else had ever done. People had pitied her when her mother passed away and her father died a bankrupt—which last fact she must not be told—but nobody understood her except Uncle Cornie, and he had never said a word until now. He seemed to know now just how her mind was running. The wisdom of the serpent—even the good little snakes, of this "Eden"—is not to be misjudged.

"Jerry"—the old man's voice had a strange gentleness in that hour, however flat and dry it was before and afterward—"Jerry, you understand about things here."

He waved his hand as if to take in "Eden," Aunt Jerry and Cousin Eugene strolling leisurely away from the lily-pond, himself, the Darby heritage, and the unprofitable Swaim estate in the Sage Brush Valley in far-away Kansas.

"You've never been crossed in your life except when death took Jim. You don't know a thing about business, nor what it means to earn the money you spend, and to feel the independence that comes from being so strong in yourself you don't have to submit to anybody's will." Cornelius Darby spoke as one who had dreamed of these things, but had never known the strength of their reality. "And last of all," he concluded, "you think you are in love with Eugene Wellington."

Jerry gave a start. Uncle Cornie and love! Anybody and love! Only in her day-dreams, her wild flights of adventure, up to castles builded high in air, had she really thought of love for herself—until to-day. And now—Aunt Jerry had hinted awkwardly enough here in the late afternoon of what was on her mind. Cousin Gene had held her hand and said, "I want to say something to you." How full of light his eyes had been as he looked at her then! Jerry felt them on her still, and a tingle of joy went pulsing through her whole being. Then the discus had hurtled across the doorway and Uncle Cornie had come, not knowing that these two would rather be alone. At least he didn't look as if he knew. And now it was Uncle Cornie himself who was talking of love.

"You think you are in love with Eugene Wellington," Uncle Cornie repeated, "but you're not, Jerry. You're only in love with Love. Some day it may be with Gene, but it's not now. He just comes nearer to what you've been dreaming about, and so you think you are in love with him. Jerry, I don't want you to make

any mistakes. I've lived a sort of colorless life"—the man's face was ashy gray as he spoke—"but once in a while I've thought of what might be in a man's days if things went right with him and if he went right with himself."

How often the last words came back to Jerry Swaim when she recalled the events of this evening—"if he went right himself."

"And I don't want any mistakes made that I can help."

Uncle Cornie's other hand closed gently about the little hand that lay on one of his. How firm and white and shapely it was, and how determined and fearless the grip it could put on the steering-wheel when the big Darby car skidded dangerously! And how flat and flabby and yellow and characterless was the hand that held it close!

"Come on, folks, we are going to the house to have some music," Aunt Jerry called, as she and Eugene Wellington came across the lawn from the lily-pond.

Mrs. Darby, sure of the fruition of her plans now, was really becoming pettishly jealous to-night. A little longer she wanted to hold these two young people under her absolute dominion. Of course she would always control them, but when they were promised to each other there would arise a kingdom within a kingdom which she could never enter. The angry voice of a warped, misused, and withered youth was in her soul, and the jealousy of loveless old age was no little fox among her vines to-night. Let them wait on her a little while. One evening more wouldn't matter.

As the two approached the rose-arbor Jerry's hand touched Uncle Cornie's cheek in a loving caress—the first she had ever given him.

"I won't forget what you have said, Uncle Cornie," she murmured, softly, as she rose to join her aunt and Eugene.

The moonlight flooding the lawn touched Jerry's golden hair, and the bloom of love and youth beautified her cheeks, as she walked away beside the handsome young artist into the beauty of the June night.

"Come on, Cornelius." Mrs. Darby's voice put the one harsh note into the harmony of the moment.

"As soon as I put away my discus. That last throw was an awkward one, and a lot out of line for me," he answered, in his dry, flat voice, stooping to pick up the

implement of his daily pastime.

Up in the big parlor, Eugene and Jerry played the old duets they had learned together in their childhood, and sang the old songs that Jerusha Darby had heard when she was a girl, before the lust for wealth had hardened her arteries and dimmed her eyes to visions that come only to bless. But the two young people forgot her presence and seemed to live the hours of the beautiful June night only for each other.

It was nearly midnight when a peal of thunder boomed up the Winnowoc Valley and the end of a perfect day was brilliant in the grandeur of a June shower, with skies of midnight blackness cloven through with long shafts of lightning or swept across by billows of flame, while the storm wind's strong arms beat the earth with flails of crystal rain.

"Where is Uncle Cornie? I hadn't missed him before," Jerry asked as the three in the parlor watched the storm pouring out all its wrath upon the Winnowoc Valley.

"Oh, he went to put up his old discus, and then he went off to bed I suppose," Aunt Jerry replied, indifferently.

Nothing was ever farther from his wife's thought than the presence of Cornelius Darby. The two had never lived for each other; they had lived for the accumulation of property that together they might gather in.

It was long after midnight before the family retired. The moon came out of hiding as the storm-cloud swept eastward. The night breezes were cool and sweet, scattering the flower petals, that the shower had beaten off, in little perfumy cloudlets about the rose-arbor and upon its stone door-step.

It was long after Jerry Swaim had gone to her room before she slept. Over and over the events of the day passed in review before her mind: the city shopping; the dainty lunch in the Delft room at *La Señorita*; the art exhibit and that one level gray landscape with the flaming, gorgeous sunset so unlike the green-and-gold sunset landscape of "Eden"; the homeward ride with all its dangerous thrills; the talk with Aunt Jerry; Eugene, Eugene, Eugene; Uncle Cornie with his discus, at the door of the rose-arbor, and all that he had said to her; the old, old songs, and the thunder-storm's tremendous beauty, and Uncle Cornie again—and dreams at last, and Jim Swaim, big, strong, shrewd; and Lesa, sweet-faced, visionary; and then sound slumber bringing complete oblivion.

Last to sleep and first to waken in the early morning was Jerry. Happy Jerry! Nobody as happy as she was could sleep—and yet—Uncle Cornie's last discussion had brought new thoughts that would not slip away as the storm had slipped up the Winnowoc into nowhere. A rift in the lute, a cloud speck in a blue June sky, was the memory of what Uncle Cornie had told her when he let his discus roll up to her very feet by the door of the rose-arbor. Jerry Swaim must not be troubled with lute rifts and cloud specks. The call of the early morning was in the air, the dewy, misty, rose-hued dawning of a beautiful day in a beautiful "Eden" where only beautiful things belong. And loveliest among them all was Jerry Swaim in her pink morning dress, her glorious crown of hair a gleam in the sun's early rays, her blue eye full of light.

The sweetest spot to her in all "Eden" on this morning was the rose-arbor. It belonged to her now by right of Eugene and—Uncle Cornie. The snatches of an old love-ballad, one of the songs she had sung with Eugene the night before, were on her lips as she left the veranda and passed with light step down the lilac walk toward the arbor. The very grass blades seemed to sing with her, and all the rain-washed world glowed with green and gold and creamy white, pink and heliotrope and rose.

At the turn of the walk toward the arbor Jerry paused to drink in the richness of all this colorful scene. And then, for no reason at all, she remembered what Uncle Cornie had said about his colorless life. Strange that she had never, in her own frivolous existence, thought of him in that way before. But with the alchemy of love in her veins she began to see things in a new light. His had been a dull existence. If Aunt Jerry ever really loved him she must have forgotten it long ago. And he made so little noise in the world, anyhow, it was easy to forget that he was in it. She had forgotten him last night even after all that he had said. He had had no part in their music, nor the beauty of the storm.

But here he was up early and sitting at the doorway of the rose-arbor just as she had left him last night. He was leaning back in the angle of the slightly splintered trellis, his colorless face gray, save where a blue line ran down his cheek from a blue-black burn on his temple, his colorless eyes looking straight before him; the discus he had stooped to pick up in the twilight last night clasped in his colorless hands; his colorless life race run. His clothing, soaked by the midnight storm, clung wet and sagging about his shrunken form. But the rain-beaten rose-vines had showered his gray head with a halo of pink petals, and about his feet were drifts of fallen blossoms flowing out upon the rich green sod. Nature in loving pity had gently decked him with her daintiest hues, as if a world of lavish color

would wipe away in a sweep of June-time beauty the memory of the lost drab years.



III

HITCHING THE WAGON TO A STAR

Behind the most expensive mourner's crape to be had in Philadelphia Jerusha Darby hid the least mournful of faces. Not that she had not been shocked that one bolt out of all that summer storm-cloud, barely splintering the rose-arbor, should strike the head leaning against it with a blow so faint and yet so fatal; nor that she would not miss Cornelius and find it very inconvenient to fill his place in her business management. Every business needs some one to fetch and carry and play the watch-dog. And in these days of expensive labor watch-dogs come high and are not always well trained. But everybody must go sometime. That is, everybody else. To Mrs. Darby's cast of mind the scheme of death and final reckoning as belonging to a general experience was never intended for her individually. After all, things work out all right under Providential guidance. Eugene Wellington was a fortunate provision of an all-wise Providence. Eugene had some of his late cousin's ability. He would come in time to fill the vacant chair by the roll-top desk in the city banking and business house. Moreover, to the eyes of age he was a thousandfold more interesting and resourceful than the colorless quiet one whose loss would be felt of course, of course.

The reddest roses of "Eden" bloomed the next June on Cornelius Darby's grave, the brightest leaves of autumn covered him warmly from the winter's snows, and the places that had never felt his living presence missed him no more forever.

There was a steady downpour of summer rain on the day following the funeral at "Eden." Mrs. Darby was very busy with post-mortem details and Eugene Wellington's services were in constant demand by her, while Jerry Swaim wandered aimlessly about the house with a sense of the uselessness of her existence forcing itself upon her for the first time. Late in the afternoon, when the big rooms with all their luxurious appointments seemed unbearable, she slipped down the sodden way to the rose-arbor. There was a shower of new buds showing now under the beneficence of the warm rain, and all the withered petals of fallen blossoms were swept from sight.

As Jerry dropped into an easy willow rocker her eye fell on the splintered angle of the trellis by the doorway where Uncle Cornie had sat when the last summons

came to him. A folded paper lay under the seat, inside the door, as if it had been blown from his pocket by a whirl of wind in that midnight thunder-storm.

Jerry stared at the paper a long time before it occurred to her to pick it up. At last, in a mechanical way, she took it from under the seat and spread it out on the broad arm of her chair. As she read its contents her listlessness fell away, the dreamy blue eyes glowed with a new light, the firm mouth took on a bit more of firmness, and the strong little hands holding the paper did not tremble.

"A claim in the Sage Brush Valley in Kansas." Jerry spoke slowly. "It lies in Range—Township—Oh, that's all Greek to me! They must number land out there like lots in the potter's-field corner of the cemetery that we drove by yesterday. Maybe they may all be dead ones, paupers at that, in Kansas. It is controlled, or something, by York Macpherson of the Macpherson Mortgage Company of New Eden—*New Eden*—Kansas. Uncle Cornie told me it hadn't brought any income, but that wasn't York Macpherson's fault. Strange that I remember all that Uncle Cornie said here the other night."

The girl read the document spread out before her a second time. When she lifted her face again it was another Jerry Swaim who looked out through the dark-blue eyes. The rain had ceased falling. A cool breeze was playing up the Winnowoc Valley, and low in the west shafts of sunlight were piercing the thinning gray clouds.

"Twelve hundred acres! A prince's holdings! Why 'Eden' has only two hundred! And that is at *New Eden*. It 'hasn't been well managed.' I know who's going to manage it now. I'm the daughter of Jim Swaim. He was a good business man. And Aunt Darby—" A smile broke the set line about the red lips. "I'd never dare to say she didn't understand how to manage things, Chief of Staff to the General who runs the Universe, she is."

Then the serious mood came back as the girl stared out at the meadows and growing grain of the "Eden" farmland. A sudden resolve had formed in her mind—Jerry Swaim the type all her own, not possible to forecast.

"Father wanted me to know what it means to be independent. I'll find out. If this 'Eden' can be so beautiful and profitable, what can I not make out of twelve hundred acres, in a *New Eden*? And it will be such a splendid lark, just the kind of thing I have always dreamed of doing. Aunt Jerry will say that I'm crazy, or that I'm Lesa Swaim's own child. Well, I am, but there's a big purpose back of it all, too, the purpose my father would have approved. He was all business—all

money-making—in his purposes, it seemed to some folks, but I think mother knew how to keep him sweet. Maybe her adventurous spirit, and all that, kept her interesting to him, and her romancing kept him her lover, instead of their growing to be like Uncle Cornie and Aunt Jerry. There's something else in the world besides just getting property—'if a man went right with himself,' Uncle Cornie said. There was a good sermon in those seven words. Uncle Cornie preached more to me than the man who officiated at the funeral yesterday could ever do. 'If a man went right with himself.' And Eugene." A quick change swept Jerry Swaim's countenance. "He said he wanted to say something to me. I think I know what he wanted to say. Maybe he will say it some day, but not yet, not yet. Here he comes now."

There was a something new, unguessable, and very sweet in Jerry Swaim's face as Eugene Wellington came striding down the walk to the rose-arbor.

"I'm through at last, little cousin," he declared, dropping into a seat beside her. "Really, Aunt Jerry is a wonderful woman. She seems to know most of the details of Uncle Cornie's business since he began in business. But now and then she runs against something that takes her breath away. Evidently Uncle Cornie knew a lot of things he didn't tell her or anybody else. She doesn't like to meet these things. It makes her cross. She sent me away just now in a huff because she was opening up a new line that I think she didn't want me to know anything about. Something that took her breath away at first glance. But she didn't have to coax me off the place. I ran out here when the chance came."

How handsome and well-groomed he was sitting there in the easy willow seat! And how good he had been to Mrs. Darby in these trying days! A dozen little services that her niece had overlooked had come naturally to his hand and mind.

The words of Uncle Cornie came into Jerry Swaim's mind as she looked at him: "He's a good fellow, with real talent, and he'll make a name for himself some day. He'll make a decent living, too, independent of anybody's aunts and uncles, but he's no stronger-willed nor smarter nor better than you are." A thrill of pleasure quickened her pulse at the recollection, making this new decision of hers the more firm.

"It has seemed like a month since we sat here the evening before Uncle Cornie passed away," Eugene began. "He made a bad discus-throw and came over here just as I began to tell you something, Jerry. Do you remember what we were saying when he appeared on the scene?"

"Yes, I remember." Jerry's voice was low, but there was no quaver in it.

Her face, as she lifted it, seemed to his eyes the one face he could never paint. For him it was the fulfilment of a man's best dream.

"There's only one grief in my heart at this minute—that I can never put your face as it is now on any canvas. But let me tell you some things that Aunt Jerry has been telling me. She seems so fond of you, and she says that after all the claims against your father's estate are settled there is really no income left for you. But she assures me that it makes no difference, because you can go on living with her exactly as you have always done. She told me she had never failed in the fruition of a single plan of hers, and she is too old to fail now. She has some plan for you—" The young artist hesitated.

Jerry had never thought much about his good looks until in these June days in "Eden" when Love had come noiselessly down the way to her. And yet—a little faint, irresolute line in the man's face—a mere shadow, a ghost of nothing at all, fixed itself in her image of his countenance. A quick intuition flashed into her mind with the last words.

"Aunt Jerry is too old for lots of things besides the failure of her plans. I know what she said, Gene, because I know what she thinks. She isn't exactly fond of me; she wants to control me. I believe there are only two planes of existence with her—one of absolute rule, and the other of absolute submission. She couldn't conceive of me in the first plane, of course, so I must be in the second."

"Why, Geraldine Swaim, I never heard you speak so of your aunt before!" Eugene Wellington exclaimed. He had caught a new and very real line in the girl's face as she spoke.

"Maybe not. But don't go Geraldine-ing me. It's too Aunt Jerry-ish. I'm coming to understand her better because I'm doing my own thinking now," Jerry replied.

"As if you hadn't always done that, you little tyrant! I bear the scars of your teeth on my arms now—or I would bear them if I hadn't given up to you a thousand times years ago," Eugene declared, laughingly.

"That's just it," Jerry replied. "I've been let to have my own way until Aunt Jerry thinks I must go on having just what she thinks I want, and to do that I must be dependent on her. And—Wait a minute, Gene—you will be dependent on her, too. You have only your gift. So both of us are to be pensioners of hers. That's

her plan."

"I won't be," Eugene Wellington declared, stoutly. And then, in loving thought of Jerry, he added: "I don't want to, Jerry. I want to do great things, the best that God has given me to do, not merely for myself, but for your sake—and for all the world. That seems to me to be what artists are for."

"And I won't be, either," Jerry insisted. "I won't. You needn't look so incredulous. Let me tell you something. The evening before Uncle Cornie died—" Jerry broke off suddenly.

It seemed unfair to betray the one burst of confidence that the colorless old man had given up to on the last evening of his earthly life. Jerry knew that it was to her, and for her alone, that he had spoken.

"This is what I want to tell you. I have no income now. Aunt Jerry is right, although she never told me that herself. But I have a plan to make a living for myself."

Eugene Wellington leaned back and laughed aloud. "You, Miss Geraldine Swaim, who never earned a dollar in your precious life! I always knew you were a dreamer, but you are going wrong now, Jerry. You must look out for belfry bats under that golden thatch of yours. Only artists dare those wild flights so far—and they do it only on canvas and then get rejected by the hanging committee."

Jerry paid no heed to his bantering words as she went on with serious earnestness: "My estate—from my father—is a claim out at New Eden, Kansas. Twelve hundred acres. It has never been managed well, consequently it has never paid well. Look at 'Eden' here"—Jerry lifted a hand for silence as Eugene was about to speak—"it has only two hundred acres. Now multiply it by six and you'll have New Eden out in Kansas. And I own it. And I am going to manage it. And I am not going to be dependent on anybody. Won't it be one big lark for me to go clear to the Sage Brush Valley? If it is as beautiful as the Winnowoc, just think of its possibilities. It will be perfectly grand to feel oneself so free and self-reliant. And when we have won out, you by your brush and I by my Kansas farm, then, oh, Gene, how splendid life will be!"

The big, dreamy eyes were full of light. The level beams of the sun stretched far across green meadows and shaven lawns, between tall lilac-trees, to the rose-arbor, just to glorify that rippling mass of brown-shadowed golden hair.

"Jerry"—Eugene Wellington's voice trembled—"you are the most wonderful girl in the world. I am so proud of you. But, dear girl, it is an old, threadbare fancy, this going to Kansas to get rich. My father tried it years ago. He had a vision of great things, too. He failed. Not only that, he ruined everybody connected with him. That's why I'm poor to-day. Truly, little cousin mine, I don't believe the good Lord, who makes Edens like this in the Winnowoc Valley, ever intended for well-bred people to leave them and go New-Eden-hunting in the Sage Brush Valley. We belong here where all the beauty of nature is about us and the care of a loving God is over us. Why do you want to go to Kansas? I wouldn't know how to pray out there where my father made such a botch of living. I really wouldn't."

"I don't know how to pray here, Gene," Jerry said, softly, with no trace of flippant irreverence in her tone. "I forgot how to do that when God took my father away. But listen to me." The imperious power of the uncontrolled will was Jerry's always. "You don't *live* here; you *stay* here. And you take a piece of canvas and go to the ends of the earth on it, or down to the deeps, or into the heavens. You make what never did and never will be, with your free brush. And folks call it good and you earn a living by it. You are an artist. I am a foolish dreamer, but I am going out to Kansas and work my dreams into reality and beauty—and money—in a New Eden. If the Lord isn't there, I shall not mind any more than I do here. I am going to Kansas, though, because I *want* to."

"Look, Jerry, at the sunset yonder," Eugene said, gently, knowing of old what "I want" meant. "They couldn't have such pictures of green and gold out West as we see framed in here by the lilacs. You always have been a determined little girl, so you will have your own way now, I suppose. We can try it, anyhow, for a while. And if you find your way a rocky road you must come back to 'Eden.' When your new playthings fail, you can play with the old ones. But I really love your spirit of self-reliance. I don't want you ever to be dependent. I don't want any other Jerry than I have always known. And I want to work hard and make my little talent pay me big, and make you proud of me."

"We are living a real romance, Gene. And we'll be true to our word to make the best of ourselves and not let Aunt Jerry frighten us into changing our plans, will we, Gene? My father's wish for me was that I should not always be a spender of other folks's incomes, but that I would find out what it means to live my own life. I never knew that until last week. Everything seems changed for me since Uncle Cornie died. Isn't it strange how suddenly we drop off one life and take up another?" Jerry's eyes were on the deepening gold of the sunset sky.

"Yes, we have been two idlers. I'm glad to quit the job. But, somehow, for you I could wish that you would stay here, if you were only satisfied to do it," Eugene replied.

"I don't wish it." Jerry spoke decisively. "I couldn't be happy, now I've this splendid Kansas thing to think about. Let's go and tell Aunt Jerry and have it out with her."

"And if she says no?" the young man queried.

Jerry Swaim paused in the doorway and looked straight into Eugene Wellington's face, without saying a word.

"Geraldine Swaim, there was a big mistake made in your baptismal ceremony. You should have been christened 'The Sphinx.' Some day I'll make a canvas of the Egyptian product and put your face on it. After all, *are* you really in earnest about this Sage Brush Valley New Eden? It is so lovely here, I want you to stay here."

Again Jerry looked at him without speaking, and that faint line of indecision that scarcely hinted at its own existence fixed itself in the substratum of her memory.

Mrs. Darby met the young people in the parlor, where only a few nights ago the three had watched the summer storm, not knowing that it was beating down on the unconscious form of Cornelius Darby. Mrs. Darby felt sure that the young people would be coming to her to-night. Well—the end of her plan was in sight now. Really, it may have been better for Cornelius to have gone when he did, since we must all go sometime. Indeed, it would have been better—only Jerusha Darby never knew that—if Cornelius had gone before that discus-throw. Everything might have been different if he had gone earlier. But he lost the opportunity of his life to serve his wife by staying over and making one awkward fling too many.

The June evening was cool after the long rains. Aunt Jerry had a tiny wood fire burning in the parlor grate, and the tall lamps with the rose-colored shades lighted to add a touch of twilight charm to the place, when the young lovers came in.

"Aunt Jerry, we want to tell you what we have been talking about," Eugene began, when the three were seated together. "Jerry and I have decided that we must look on life differently now since—" Eugene hesitated.

"Yes, I know." Mrs. Darby spoke briskly. "We must face the truth now and speak of Cornelius freely. He was fond of both of you. Poor Cornelius!"

"Poor Cornelius," Jerry Swaim repeated, under her breath.

"Of course I know it is difficult for a girl reared as Jerry has been—" Eugene began again.

"She can go on living just as she has been. This will be her home always," Mrs. Darby broke in, abruptly.

"And I know that I have nothing but the prospect of earning a living and winning to a successful career in my line—" the young man went on.

"Hasn't Jerry the prospect of enough for herself? I'll need you to help me for several months. You know, Eugene, that I must have some one who understands Cornelius's way of doing things." There was more of command than request in the older woman's voice.

"I'll be glad to help you as long as I am needed, but I am speaking now of my life-work. When I cannot serve you any longer I must begin on my own career. I have some hopes and plans for the future."

"Humph! What's the use of talking about it? I tell you Jerry will have enough for all her needs, and I want you here. I shall not consider any more such notions, Eugene. You are both going to stay right here as you have done. Let's talk of something else."

"We can't yet, Aunt Jerry, because I have not enough for myself, even if Gene would accept a living from you," Jerry Swaim declared.

Jerusha Darby opened her narrow eyes and stared at her niece. If the older woman had made one plea of loneliness, if she had even hinted at sorrow for the loss of the companion of her business transactions, Jerry Swaim would have felt uncomfortable, even though she knew her aunt too well to be deceived by any such demonstration.

"Geraldine Swaim, what are you saying?" Mrs. Darby demanded, in a hard, even voice. Something in her manner and face could always hold even the brave-spirited in frightened awe of her.

Eugene Wellington lost courage to go on, and the same thing came again that Jerry Swaim had twice seen on his face in the rose-arbor this evening. The two were looking straight at the girl now. The firelight played with the golden glory of her hair and deepened the rose hue of her round cheeks. The dark-blue eyes seemed almost black, with a gleam in their depths that meant trouble, and there was a strength in the low voice as Jerry went on:

"I'm talking about what I know, Aunt Jerry. All there is of my heritage from my father is a 'claim,' they call it, at New Eden, in the Sage Brush Valley in Kansas; twelve hundred acres. I'm going out there to manage it myself and support myself on an income of my own."

For a long minute Jerusha Darby looked steadily at her niece, her own face as hard and impenetrable as if it were carven out of flint. Then she said, sharply:

"Where did you find out all this?"

"It is all in a document here that I found in the rose-arbor this afternoon," the girl replied. "Aunt Jerry, I must use what is mine. I wouldn't be a Swaim if I didn't."

"You won't stay there two weeks." Mrs. Darby fairly clicked out the words. Her face was very pale and something like real fright looked through her eyes as she took the paper from her niece's hand.

"And then?" Jerry inquired, demurely.

"And then you will come back here where you belong and live as you always have lived, in comfort."

"And if I do not come?"

Jerusha Darby's face was not pleasant to see just then. The firelight that made the girl more winsomely pretty seemed to throw into relief all the hard lines of a countenance which selfishness and stubbornness and a dictatorial will had graven there.

"Jerry Swaim, you are building up a wild, adventurous dream. You are Lesa Swaim over and over. You want a lark, that's what you want. And it's you who have put Eugene up to his notions of a career and all that. Listen to me. Nothing talks in this world like money. That you have to have for your way of living, and that he's got to have if he wants to be what he should be. Well, go on out to Kansas. You know more of that prosperous property out there than I do. I'll let you find it out to the last limit. But when you come back you must promise me never to take another such notion. I won't stand this foolishness forever. I'll give you plenty of money to get there. You can write me when you need funds to come back. It won't take long to get that letter here."

"And if I shouldn't come?" Jerry asked, calmly.

"Look what you are giving up. All this beautiful home, to say nothing of the town house—and Eugene—and other property."

"No, no; you don't count him as your property, do you?" Jerry cried, turning to the young artist, whose face was very pale.

"Jerry, must you make this sacrifice?" he asked, in a voice of tenderness.

"It isn't a sacrifice; it's just what I want to do," Jerry declared, lightly.

Jerusha Darby's face darkened. The effect of a long and absolute exercise of will, coupled with ample means, can make the same kind of a tyrant out of a Kaiser and a rich aunt. The determination to have her own way in this matter, as she had had in all other matters, became at once an unbreakable purpose in her. She wanted to keep fast hold of these young people for her own sake, not for theirs. For a little while she sat measuring the two with her narrow, searching eyes.

"I can manage him best," she concluded to herself. At last she asked, plaintively, "With all you have here, Jerry, why do you go hunting opportunities in Kansas?"

"Because I want to," Jerry replied, and her aunt knew that, so far as Jerry was concerned, everything was settled.

"Then we'll drop the matter here. I can wait for you to come to your senses. Eugene, if you can give her up, when you've always been chums, I certainly can."

With these words Mrs. Darby rose and passed out, leaving the two alone under the rose-colored lights of the richly furnished parlor.

It was not like Jerusha Darby to make such a concession, and Jerry Swaim knew it, but Eugene Wellington, who was of alien blood, did not know it.

The room was much more beautiful without her presence; and her sordid hinting at the Darby wealth which Jerry must count on, and Eugene must meekly help to guard for future gain, rasped harshly against their souls, for they were young and more sentimental than practical. Left alone to their youth, and strength, and nobler ideals, they vowed that night to hold to better things. Together they builded a dream of a rainbow-tinted world which they were going bravely forth to create. Of what should follow that they did not speak, yet each one guessed what was in the other's mind, as men and maidens have always guessed since love began. And on this night there were no serpents at all in their Eden.



IV

BETWEEN EDENS

The sun of a mid-June day glared down pitilessly on the little station at the junction of the Sage Brush branch with the main line. There was not a tree in sight. The south wind was raving across the prairie, swirling showers of fine sand before it. Its breath came hot against Jerry Swaim's cheek as she stood in the doorway of the station or wandered grimly down between the shining rails that stretched toward a boundless nowhere whither the "through" train had vanished nearly two hours ago. As Jerry watched it leaving, a sudden heaviness weighed down upon her. And when the Pullman porter's white coat on the rear platform of the last coach melted into the dull, diminishing splotch on the western distance, she felt as if she were shipwrecked in a pathless land, with the little red station house, reefed about by cinders, as the only resting-place for the soles of her feet. When her eyes grew weary of the monotonous landscape, Jerry rested them with what she called "A Kansas Interior." The rustic station under the maples at "Eden" was always clean and comfortably appointed. Big flower-beds outside, Uncle Cornie's gift, belonged to the station and its guests, with the spacious grounds of "Eden," at which the travelers might gaze without cost, lying just beyond it.

This "Kansas Interior" seemed only a degree less inviting than the whole monotonous universe outside. The dust of ages dimmed the windows that were propped and nailed and otherwise secured against the entrance of cool summer breezes, or the outlet of bad, overheated air in winter. Iron-partitioned seats, invention of the Evil One himself, stalled off three sides of the room, intending to prove the principle that no one body can occupy two spaces at the same time. In the center of the room a "plain, unvarnished" stove, bare and bald, stood on a low pedestal yellowed with time and tobacco juice. A dingy, fly-specked map of the entire railway system hung askew on the wall—very fat and foreshortened as to its own extent, very attenuated and ill-proportioned as to other insignificant systems cutting spidery lines across it.

Behind a sealed tomb of a ticket-window Jerry could hear the "tick-tick, tick-a-tick-tick, tick-tick" of a telegraph-wire. Somebody must be in there who at set

times, like a Saint Serapion from his hermit cell, might open this blank wall and speak in almost human tones. Just now the solitude of the grave prevailed, save for that everlasting "tick-a-tick" behind the wall.

When Jerry Swaim gripped her hands on the plow handles, there would be no looking back. She persuaded herself that she wasn't going to die of the jiggermaroos in the empty nothingness here. It would be very different at New Eden, she was sure of that. And this York Macpherson must be a nice old man, honest and easy-going, because he had never realized any income from her big Kansas estate. She pictured York easily—a short, bald-headed old gentleman with gray burnsidies and benevolent pale-blue eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses, driving a fat sorrel nag to an easy-going old Rockaway buggy, carrying a gold-headed cane given him by the Sunday-school. Jerry had seen his type all her life in the business circles of Philadelphia and among the better-to-do country-dwellers around "Eden."

At last it was only fifteen minutes till the Sage Brush train would be due; then she could find comfort in her Pullman berth. She wondered what Aunt Jerry and Eugene were doing now. She had slipped away from "Eden" on her wild adventure in the early dawn. She had taken leave of Aunt Jerry the night before. Old women need their beauty sleep in the morning, even if foolish young things are breaking all the laws by launching out to hunt their fortunes. Eugene had been hurriedly sent away on Darby estate matters without the opportunity of a leave-taking, two days before Jerry was ready to start for Kansas. Everything was prearranged, evidently, to make this going a difficult one. So, without a single good-by to speed her on her quest, the young girl had gone out from a sheltering Eden of beauty and idleness. But the tears that had dimmed her eyes came only when she left the lilac walk to the station to slip around by Uncle Cornie's grave beside the green-coverleted resting-places of Jim and Lesa Swaim.

"Maybe mother would glory in what I am doing, and father might say I had the right stuff in me. And Uncle Cornie—'If a man went right with himself'—Uncle Cornie might have said 'if a woman went right with herself,' too. I'm going to put that meaning into his words, even if he never seemed to think much of women. Oh, father! Oh, mother! You *lived* before you died, anyhow, and I'm going to do the same. Uncle Cornie died before he ever really lived."

Jerry stretched out her hands to the one good-by in "Eden" coming to her from these silent ripples of dewy green sod. Then youth and the June morning and the

lure of adventure into new lands came with their triple strength to buoy her up to do and dare. Behind her were her lover to be—for Eugene must love her—her home ties, luxury, dependent inactivity. Before her lay the very ends of the earth, the Kansas end especially. The spirit of Sir Galahad, of Robinson Crusoe, of Don Quixote, combined with the spirit of a self-willed, inexperienced girl, but dimly conscious yet of what lay back of her determination to go forth—*because she wanted to go*.

Chicago and Kansas City offered easy ports for clearing. And the Kaw Valley, unrolling its broad acres along the way, gave larger promise than Jerry had yet dared to dream of for the New Eden farther west. The train service, after the manner of a Pacific Coast limited, had been perfect in every appointment. And then—this junction episode.

Two eternity-long hours before the Sage Brush branch could take her to New Eden were almost ended.

"It's not so terrifying, after all." Jerry was beginning to "see things again." "It's all in the game—and I am going to be as 'game' as the thing I am playing. Things always come round all right for me. *They must.*"

The square white chin was very much a family feature just now. And the shapely hands had no hint of weakness in their grip on the iron arms of the station seat.

The door which the wind had slammed shut was slammed open again as three prospective passengers for the Sage Brush train slammed through it laden with luggage. At the same time the sealed-up ticket-window flew open, showing the red, grinning face of the tick-tick man behind its iron bars. If Jerry had never paid the slightest heed to the bunch of grubs on the Winnowoc branch, except as they kept down the ventilation, or crowded their odors of Limburger on her offended senses, the Sage Brush grubs were a thousandfold less worthy of her consideration. As the three crowded to the ticket-window, laughing among themselves, she stared through the doorway, unconsciously reading the names on the cars of a freight-train slowly heaving down alongside the station. Who invented freight-cars, anyhow? The most uninteresting and inartistic thing ever put on wheels by the master mechanic of the unbeautiful, created mainly to shut off the view of mankind from what is really worth looking at. Jerry read the dulled lettering mechanically: "Santa Fé" with its symbol of a fat cross in a circle, "Iron Mountain," "Great Northern," "Rock Island," "Frisco," "Union Pacific," "Grand Trunk," came creeping by. "New York Central," "Lehigh

Valley," "Pennsylvania Line." These took her back to "Eden" and the Winnowoc country. The station building shook; the ugly old cars slam-banged a bit faster back and forth; the engine, with the breath almost knocked out of it, was puffing down by the switch, and the whole body behind it quivered to a standstill. But Jerry Swaim's tear-blurred eyes were seeing only the green fields of the Darby country-place and the rose-arbor and Eugene Wellington. A voice loud, but not unpleasant, and a laugh, a merry, catching, giggling guffaw, drove the picture of "Eden" and all that belonged to it into "viewless air" that went flapping and flaring across the Kansas landscape.

"You don't mean it! He, he! Haw!" Everybody must smile now. "The old Sage Brush local is locoed 'way up toward S'liny. Engine shortage, car shortage, common sense shortage. He, he! And we must ride in that sunflower de luxe limited standing out there. Come on, Thelmy. You can take lower nothin', car one-half. We'll soar in now while the soarin's good."

Jerry looked at the bunch of grubs for the first time. One had to see where that big gloom-chasing giggle came from. Thelma was a spotlessly clean, well-made country product, wherein the girl had easily given place to the woman, erect, full-bosomed, strong of frame. The hazel eyes were arched over by heavy brown brows. There was no rosebud curve to the rather wide mouth that showed a set of magnificent white teeth. The brown hair wound braid on braid about the head was proof of the glory of Saint Paul's scriptural decree. Not that Jerry Swaim really noted any of these features. She merely saw a country girl—a not offensive native. The native's comrade, he with the big-laugh fixtures, was short and stout, with a round face on the front side of a round head, set on top of a tight-built body. Grub though he was, Jerry involuntarily smiled with him. That far the fat little man controlled everybody. But the funny little strut in his gait as he walked was irresistible. The third passenger, the grubbiest of the three grubs, was a nondescript of whose presence Jerry was not even aware until she heard his voice. It was a thin, high, unused voice, and its pitch wobbled up and down.

"Be you goin' on the Sage Bresh train, lady?"

The questioner had turned back after the country girl and the fat man had passed out.

Jerry looked at him without taking his question to herself. His shoes, draped with wrinkled-down hose, were very much worn. His overalls flapping around his legs, his shirt and neck and face and hair and hat, were all of one complexion, a

fuzzy, yellow brown.

"Be you goin' on this train, too?"

It was a humble, kindly voice, and the scaly old hand holding the door open against the high prairie wind was only a fisherman's hand. The deep-set eyes in the yellow-brown old face were trained to read the river; the patient mouth set to wait for the catch of lines and nets.

Jerry had never in her life spoken to such a creature. So far as she was concerned, he did not exist.

"This is the only train on the Sage Bresh to-day, lady. The reg'lar train's busted through a culbert out yander," the high, quavering voice persisted.

A sharp tooting from the engine down the line emphasized the statement, and Jerry saw the grinning red-faced tick-tick man hastily wheeling mail-sacks and sundry other parcels by the door. In a bewildered way she rose and passed out, giving no recognition to the shabby old man who had been thoughtful of her ignorance.

"We gotta go to the last car down yander, lady," the old man squeaked out, as he started down the cinder-paved way with a bearlike, shuffling, sidewise sort of gait.

Jerry followed him slowly to "the last car down yander."

A plain day coach, the sixtieth and last vertebra in this long mechanical spine, was already crowded with a bunch of grubs, none of whom could belong to Jerry Swaim's sphere. Moreover, they were all tightly packed in and wedged down so that it was impossible to detect the leaving off of the full-fare passenger and the beginning of suit-cases, old-style telescopes, baskets, bundles, boxes, half-fare children, bags of fruit, lunch-crates, pieces of farming tools, babes in arms, groceries—everything to cabbages and kings. Jerry wondered where all these *things* came from. Every object in that car, human being or salt pork, crying baby or kingbolt, was a *thing* to Jerry Swaim. And all of them were very warm and nervously tense, as if the hot June wind had blown them all inside, that the hot June sun, through the closed windows, might stew them stinkily; or, through the open windows, grime their sweaty faces with hot dust off the hot prairie. There was only one vacant seat left. It was on the shady side, facing the rear of the car, and was half occupied already by the humble grub of the squeaky voice.

The girl, Thelma, and the fat little man had taken the seat opposite him. As Jerry entered the car the little man was on his feet, bowing and strutting and insisting that a woman with a babe in arms should exchange seats with him, putting her on the cool side, while he took her place in the sun across the aisle from Thelma. In the transfer he did not see Jerry, who was looking in vain for an opening in that mass of "human various." It was the humble grub who saw her standing there. Evidently his little yellow-green eyes took her measure at a glance, but he did not spread out his effects and stare out of the window as some other men were doing, nor gather himself and his into his own half of the seat to make room for her beside him. He rose, and in a shrill little quaver he bade her take his place. It did not occur to Jerry to tell him that there was room for two, as she saw him shuffle down the aisle with a queer, limping hitch. In the same impersonal way she watched him through the open door, sitting on the rear platform during the long afternoon, humpbacked against the cinders and dust that beat upon him, swaying with the rocking car, jerked along over a sun-baked, treeless prairie at the tail of a long jerky freight-train. He meant nothing to this dainty city product; his kind had never entered her world; no more had the red-faced, tow-headed young mother, with white eyebrows and hat knocked rakishly aslant, with her big, restless, bald-headed baby rolling over her in waves, sprawling about Thelma, and threatening to bump its head off as it overflowed all the narrow space, aimlessly and persistently.

But if Jerry Swaim felt out of her element in this company, her fellow-passengers felt much more embarrassed by her presence. Thelma's neat gingham dress became limp and mussed and common. The tired mother's yellow lawn was rumpled into a dish-rag. And with every jerk of the train she lost a hair-pin from her tow hair that was already stringing down in long wisps on her neck. The baby, really a happy, white, blue-veined infant, became a fussy flushed impossibility.

All this, it seemed, just because of the presence of a faultlessly dressed, fair-faced stranger who awed everybody by not seeing them, but whose very daintiness and beauty drew them hungrily to her. Nobody could be in Jerry Swaim's presence and not feel the spell of her inherent magnetism.

The laughter and complaints of the passengers dulled down to endurance. Only the face of the short man wore a smile. But his mouth was made with that kind of a curve, and he couldn't help it. Breathing deeply and perspiring healthfully, he sat against the heat streaming into his side of the car, and forgot his troubles in his unbreakable good nature. For a long time he and Thelma had talked across

the aisle above and through the train's noises. Their talk was all of Paul and Joe's place, and the crops; of how glad Thelma was to be at home again on Paul's account; and how long it would take her yet if the alfalfa and wheat turned out well.

Jerry heard it all without knowing it, as she looked at the monotonous landscape without knowing it. And then the dry prairies began to deepen to a richer hue. Yellow wheat-fields and low-growing corn and stretches of alfalfa broke into the high plains where cattle grazed. And then came the gleam of a river, sometimes shallow along sandy levels, sometimes deep, with low overhanging brush on either side. And there were cottonwood-trees and low twisted elms and scrubby locust and oak saplings, and the faint, fresh scent of moisture livening the air.

The train jerked itself to a standstill, thought better of it, and hunched along again for a rod or two, then jostled itself quiet again.

Jerry was very drowsy now, but she was conscious of hearing the fat man calling out, cheerfully:

"Home at last, Thelmy. There's Paul waiting for you. Well, good-by."

And of Thelma's "Good-by" in a louder tone than was necessary. Of more strutting and bowing and no end of luggage clearing itself away.

Through the window Jerry caught sight of a tall, fair-haired boy, who looked like Thelma, except that in his white face was the pathos of the life-cripple. She saw Thelma kiss him, and then the two started down the sunny, cindery side-track together. In the distance, close to the river, there was a small plain house under a big cottonwood-tree. The glimpse of red about a little porch meant that the crimson ramblers were in bloom there. Oh, the roses of "Eden," and the cool rose-arbor! Jerry must have dreamed then, for "Eden" was about her again. Through it the limping grub came humbly to claim his sundry own from behind and under the seat. Even in "Eden" she thought how much like a clumsy bear his gait was. And when the little man called him "Teddy" she knew he was not a fisherman sort of creature, but a real bear in yellow-brown overalls, and that the general fuzziness of his make-up was fur, and that his stubby, scaly hands were claws. He dropped off somewhere when the freight took a siding very near the river. It was the Sage Brush, but it ran through the "Eden" grounds and Uncle Cornie was throwing his discus beside it. The rose-arbor was just across the aisle. The little fat man was sitting in its doorway, with a new moon of a smile on the smooth side of his round head where his face was, a half-quizzical, half-

sympathetic smile with no guile in it. Jerry really liked him for that kind of a smile. It belonged to him. The rose-arbor was very warm, for the man was sweating more copiously than ever.... Uncle Cornie was gone. The limping Teddy Bear was gone.... It was very, very hot and sunny in "Eden." The big maples and cool lilacs were gone.... "Eden" was gone. In its stead came the art exhibit in the cool gallery in the city. And that yellow-gray desert landscape with the flaming afterglow and purple mists. The flames seemed almost real, and the yellow gray almost real, and the art-gallery was getting warmer as "Eden" had done. It was positively hot.... And then the Sage Brush freight was laboring slowly and painfully through a desert with clack and roar and cloud of cindery dust.... Jerry sat up, wide awake, and looked up at the fat stranger who was looking at her, the smile on the inside of his face, as it were, showing only in the eyes.

Outside, the river was gone, taking with it all the cool-breathing alfalfa, and elm and cottonwood shade, and leaving in their stead only bare earth-ridges and low dunes. As far as Jerry could see, there was nothing but a hot yellow plain, wrinkled here and there in great barren folds, with wave and crest and hollow of wind-shifted sand crawling endlessly back and forth along the face of the landscape. A few spiny green shrubs struggled through at intervals, but their presence only intensified the barrenness about them.

The train was entering a deep wrinkle not unlike that cut beyond the third crossing of the Winnowoc. Jerry remembered the day she had watched that other train from the bluff road, and her exultation in pounding her big car up the steep way instead of crawling through, as Eugene was doing. Later she had found out that Eugene really preferred that to the more daring climb. Jerry involuntarily gripped the car seat with a subconscious longing to get out and drive over the whole thing. Across the aisle, the smile on the fat man's face was coming outside as he watched the stranger passenger.

They were deep in now—a valley-like thing that was hotter than any other inch of the whole way they had come. On either side tall slabs of timber, planted upright, closed in the right of way. They were barely moving through this narrow lane. The engine was gasping for breath, and the cars dragged themselves after it by inches. Then all came to a dead stop.

"Everybody turn out and help," somebody in uniformed authority called through the car door, and all the men passengers stirred to action.

"*The dickens!*" the short fat man exclaimed to everybody. "Stuck in a sand-drift in that danged blowout. That's what comes of letting this wind go all day. I told 'em up at the junction to stop it, but they wouldn't listen to me. Now we've got to soar out of here and shovel for our lives."

When he laughed everybody else had to laugh, too, and it was a really good-natured company of men that piled down from the train to help the cause of railway transportation.

The fat man had been last to leave the car.

"Let me close all these windows," he urged, strutting from seat to seat. "It'll be hot with 'em shut, but you'll be buried in sand in here if we leave 'em open, and we men don't want to dig you and the engine all out in one day. We mightn't find all the children, you know, and leave some of 'em in here covered up. He, he! Haw!" He struggled with the last windows until they were sealed down, then turned away to lend his aid in a good cause.

The tow-headed woman and her little perpetual-motion baby, who had been sleeping wearily for a few miles, roused at the jolly man's loud laugh.

"It's the blowout," the mother said, as Jerry looked at her for the first time. "Them timbers is driv in to keep out all that sand. See how it's heaped up ag'in' 'em on the outside. On awfully windy days it blows over and fills the tracks and stops the train, and then the men all get out and help to shovel it off. Gee whiz! but it's hot in here! We'd be just smothered in sand if we left the windows open, though. There! There!"

The last to the big baby, stirring uneasily, whom the mother patted off to slumber again.

Jerry walked to the rear door and looked out at the narrow space walled in by palisades, and at glimpses of sand waves on either side of the road beyond them; at the little hot-looking green shrubs clinging for life to their shifting depths, and the heat-quivering air visible above them. In all her life she had never felt so uncomfortable as now; never realized what it means to *endure* physical misery. She had seen the habitable globe features—lake-shore, and seaside, and mountain resorts; big navigable rivers; big forests; narrow little valleys; sheer cliffs and wonderful waterfalls. She didn't know that the world held such a place as this that anybody but a Hottentot was supposed to inhabit. Through a long hour and a half the train was held back by the sand of what Jerry heard was a

"blowout." She did not know nor care what the term meant. *She wanted to get out of it and go on*, and what Jerry Swaim *wanted* she had always had the right to have.

The sun was getting low in the west when the local freight labored up the Sage Brush Valley to its terminal in the yards at New Eden. All of the passengers except Jerry tumbled out, much as tired boys rush from the church door after a long doctrinal sermon. The car was stopped at the freight-station, some distance down the line from the passenger-station, which was itself a long way out from New Eden, after the manner of Western small towns. The middle '80's, when railroad branch lines were building, found road directors and town councils falling out over technicalities, with the result that the railroad seldom secured the ground it wanted and the town was seldom given a convenient station site.

The buses filled rapidly, and the mail and express wagons were rattling off ahead of buses and foot passengers, and still the young stranger sat in the car. A sudden sense of loneliness had enveloped her like a cloud. She was not a novice abroad. She had gone to strange towns alone before. She knew all the regulations of hotel service. She knew why she had come here and what she had to do, and she had abundant means for all her needs. But with all these points in her favor a helplessness swept over her, and the "what next" for the moment perplexed her. The engine was getting restless again. However long it may require a local freight to get from one given point to another, the engine, like an ill-broken colt, will keep stepping up or pulling back through every halt of the train. Jerry sat inside, watching the last bus, loaded and hung-on-to, swinging off down the dusty road toward the town, a full half-mile across the prairie from the station. Life was getting a trifle too interesting in this foreign clime, and when the short man appeared in the doorway, even the full-moon face and half-moon smile, the profound bow and comical strut, could not out-weigh the genuine comfort his presence seemed to bring.

"Pardon me, Miss—Miss—"

"Miss Swaim," Jerry informed him, sure of herself and unafraid again.

"Oh, Miss Swaim! My name is Ponk—Junius Brutus Ponk. Pardon again if I seem to intrude. This is the Sage Brush terminal. Excuse me if I say thank the Lord for the end of *this* day's journey! The buses are all gone. May I take you to your destination here in my little gadabout? You want to stop somewhere in New Eden overnight, anyhow."

"Thank you very much."

Jerry looked at him gratefully, even if he was only one of the bunch of grubs she had been forced to ride with all this long afternoon, she who had once repudiated the Winnowoc train and all trains without Pullman accommodations. "The smile on her face was mightily winsome," Ponk declared afterward, "and just took all my ramparts and citadels and moats and drawbridges at one fell swoop."

He gathered up her bags and helped her off the car pompously, saying:

"Here she is, Miss Swaim. Step right in." And then with a flourish of arms he had Jerry and her belongings stored inside a shiny gray runabout and was off down the grassy road with a dash.

"Where shall I take you to, Miss Swaim?" he inquired, when the little car had glided gracefully around the lumbering buses and rattling wagons.

"To the best hotel, please," Jerry replied. "Do you know which one that is?"

"Yes'm. There isn't but one. The Commercial Hotel and Gurrage. I'm the proprietor, so I know." The smile that broke around the face of the speaker was too good-natured to make his words seem presumptuous.

Jerry smiled, too, finding herself in the grasp of a strange and complete confidence in the pompous little unknown chauffeur.

"Do you know an old gentleman here named York Macpherson, a Mortgage Company man?" she asked, looking at him directly for the first time.

Ponk seemed to gulp down a smile before he replied: "Ye-es, I do know York very well. He's prob'bly older than he looks. His office is right across the street from the Commercial Hotel and Gurrage."

Afterward he declared: "From the minute that girl turned her eyes full on me and I saw how blue them orbs were, I begun to wish I had a gold button instead of a bone one in the back of my collar. I knew she could see that cheap bone thing right through my neck and I was willing right then to lay down and play dead if she wanted me to, and I'm never going to recover, never."

"Would you do—me a favor?" Jerry asked, hesitatingly.

Asking favors was a new line for her and she followed it prettily.

"Wouldn't I!" Mr. Ponk exclaimed. "Try me."

"Even his voice has a strut in it," Jerry thought. Aloud she said: "I have business with this old gentleman and I would be much obliged if you would tell him that Miss Geraldine Swaim is in the city and would like to meet him."

"Why, I'll soar right over there as soon as we get to the hotel and gurrage."

Junius Brutus Ponk looked slyly at the face of his companion as he spoke. What he was thinking just then it would have been hard to guess. With a flourish and curve that were wholly Ponkish the fat little man swung the gray car up to the brick-paved porch of the "Commercial Hotel and Gurrage."

"Why, there's York now, reading his mail! I'll go right over and tell him," Mr. Ponk declared. "Here, George, tell Georgette to give Miss Swaim number seven."

George assisted Miss Swaim to the hotel register and Georgette led her to room No. 7. Georgette wanted to linger a minute, for this guest was so unlike the usual commercial-traveler kind of ladies who sold books, or canvassed for extracts, or took orders for crayon portraits enlarged from little photographs; but Miss Swaim's manner gave no excuse for lingering. Alone, Jerry closed her door and turned, with a smile on her lips, to face her surroundings. The room was clean and cool, with a big window overhanging the street. Jerry sat down before it, realizing how weary the long journey had made her. Across the street, the sign of the Macpherson Mortgage Company in big gold letters hung above a plate-glass window. Mr.

Ponk, who had just "soared" across, was sitting in his car before it. Jerry saw a man inside at a desk very much like Uncle Cornie's in the Philadelphia banking-house where Eugene Wellington was busy now helping Aunt Jerry to settle things. This man was reading letters when the Ponk car tooted before the big window. He waved a hand to the tooter, then put his letters away and came leisurely outside. Jerry saw a tall, finely proportioned man, the set of whose clothes had a city air, and there was something in his whole manner that would have distinguished him from every other man in New Eden.

The fat little man talked earnestly, with a flourish of the hand now and then toward the room where Jerry sat watching the two. York Macpherson rested one foot on the running-board, and leaned his arms on the side of the car, listening intently to what Mr. Ponk was saying.

"So that is this York Macpherson who was never responsible for my estate not making any returns. And I called him an old man. The hotel proprietor must be telling him that now." Jerry laughed as she saw the two men chuckling together. "Well, I hope the pompous little fellow tells him I'm an old woman. It would even things up wonderfully."

Ten minutes later Jerry was shaking hands with York Macpherson and promising him to go to his home and meet his sister as soon as she had cleared her eyes of dust sufficiently to see anybody.

It must have been the dust in her eyes, Jerry thought, that made York Macpherson appear so unlike the benevolent, inefficient old gentleman she had pictured to herself. The hotel parlor was in twilight shadows, which helped a little to conceal the surprise of these two when they met there. Jerry knew what she had been anticipating. Whether York Macpherson knew or not, he was clearly not expecting what he found in the hotel parlor.

"I'll soar down to your shack with the lady as soon as she has had her supper and got herself rightly in hand," Ponk declared to York when he came into the hotel office. "You see, we got stuck in that danged, infernal blowout, and it was as hard on the womenkind who had to sit inside and swelter as on us men who nobly dug. 'Specially this Miss Swaim. She must have 'wept to see such quantities of sand,' same as them oysters and walruses and carpenters. We'll be along by and by, though. Have a cigar. What do you make of her, anyhow, York?"

"I don't make anything. I leave that job to you," York replied, with a smile, as he turned abruptly and left the hotel.

"Unless you see eight per cent. interest coming your way, I see. There might be a bigger interest in this investment than any you ever made in your life," Ponk called after him.

But York only waved off the words without looking back. Outside, the sunset's splendor was filling the western sky—the same old prairie sunset that he had seen many a time in his years in Kansas. And yet, on this evening it did not seem quite the same; nor were the sunsets, New Eden, and the Sage Brush Valley from this evening ever quite as they had been before, to York Macpherson.

V

NEW EDEN'S PROBLEM

Because of a broken "culbert" out toward "S'liny" the afternoon train on the Sage Brush branch was annulled for the day. Because of this annulment the mail for the Sage Brush Valley was brought up on the local freight, which is always behind time when it reaches its terminal, which accounted for the late delivery of the mail at the New Eden post-office, which made York Macpherson's dinner late because of a big batch of letters to be read, and an important business call at the Commercial Hotel following the reading and the delivery of Mr. Ponk's message.

Purple shadows were beginning to fold down upon the landscape, while overhead the sky was still heliotrope and gold, but York Macpherson, walking slowly homeward, saw neither the shadows nor the glory that overhung them. It was evident to his sister Laura, who was waiting for him in the honeysuckle corner of the big front porch, that his mind was burdened with something unusual to-night.

York Macpherson was a "leading citizen" type of the Middle West. Wholesome, ruggedly handsome, prosperous, shrewd to read men's minds, quick to meet their needs, full of faith in the promise of the Western prairies, with the sort of culture no hardship of the plains could ever overcome—that was York. Although he was on the front edge of middle life in years, with a few gray streaks in his wavy brown hair, he had the young-looking face, the alert action, and vigorous atmosphere of a young-hearted man just entered into his full heritage of manhood.

"The train was delayed down the river on account of sand drifted over the track by the south wind, and that made the mail late," York explained, when he reached the porch. "I'll bet you have had the house shut up tight as wax and have gone about all day with a dust-cloth in your hand. Given a south wind and Laura Macpherson, and you have a home industry in no time. Let's hurry up the dinner" (it was always dinner to the Macphersons and supper to the remainder of New Eden) "and get outside again as soon as possible. I can't think in shut-up rooms."

"When there is a south wind it makes little difference whether or not one does any thinking. I postpone that job to the cool of the evening," Laura Macpherson declared, as she led the way to the dining-room.

When the two came outside again the air off the prairie was delicious, and there was promise of restfulness later in the black silence of the June night that made them forget the nervous strain of the windy day. The Macphersons had no problems that they could not talk over in the shadowy stillness of that roomy porch on summer evenings.

York had been a bachelor boarder at the "Commercial Hotel and Garage" for some years before the coming of his sister Laura, who was at once his housekeeper, companion, and counselor. When he first went to the hotel New Eden was in its infancy, and the raw beginnings of things were especially underdone in this two-dollars-a-day, one-towel-a-week establishment. It was through York that Junius Brutus Ponk had given up an unprofitable real-estate business to become proprietor of the Commercial Hotel—"and Gurrage" was added later with the advent of automobiles, the "Gurrage" part being a really creditably equipped livery for public service. By this change of occupation for Ponk, the Macpherson Mortgage Company accomplished several things. It got rid of an inefficient competitor whose very inefficiency would have made him a more disagreeable enemy than a successful man would have been. Further, it placed the ambitious little man where his talents could flourish (flourish is the right word for J. B. Ponk), and it put into the growing little town of New Eden a hotel with city comforts that brought business to the town and added mightily to its reputation and respectability.

York Macpherson's business had grown with the town he had helped to build. Long before other towns in this part of Kansas had dreamed it possible for them, New Eden was lighted with electricity. Water-works and a sewer system fore-ran cement sidewalks and a mile of paving, not including the square around the court-house. And before any of these had come the big stone school-house on the high ridge overlooking the Sage Brush Valley for miles. That also was York Macpherson's task, which he had carried out almost single-handed, and had the satisfaction of bringing desirable taxpaying residents to live in New Eden who would never have come but for the school advantages. Then Junius Brutus Ponk, who had learned to couple with York, got himself elected to the board of education and began to pay higher salaries to teachers than was paid by any other town in the whole Sage Brush Valley; to the end that better schools were housed in that fine school-building, and a finer class of young citizens began to

put the good name of New Eden above everything else. The hoodlum element was there, of course, but it was not the leading element. Boys stuck to the high-school faithfully and followed it up with a college course, even though a large per cent. of them worked for every dollar that the course cost them. Girls went to college, too, until it became a rare thing to find a teacher in the whole valley who had not a diploma from some institution of higher learning.

It was only recently that Laura Macpherson had come to New Eden to make her home with her brother. An accident a few years before had shortened one limb, making her limp as she walked. She was some years older than York, with a face as young and very much like her brother's; a comely, companionable sort of woman, popular alike with men and women, young folks and children.

Some time before her coming York had bought the best building-site in New Eden, a wooded knoll inside the corporation limits, the only natural woodland in the vicinity, that stood directly across the far end of Broad Avenue, the main business street, whose mile of paving ended in York's driveway. In one direction, this site commanded a view far down Sage Brush Valley; in the other, it overlooked the best residence and business portion of New Eden. Here York had, as he put it, "built a porch, at the rear of which a few rooms were attached." The main glory of the place, however, was the big porch.

York had named their home "Castle Cluny," and his big farm joining it just outside the town limits "Kingussie," after some old Macpherson-clan memories. There were no millionaires in the Sage Brush Valley, and this home was far and away the finest, as well as the most popular, home in a community where thrift and neatness abounded in the homes, and elegance was very much lacking, as was to be expected in a young town on the far edge of the Middle West.

"Joe Thomson came in to-day to see me about putting a mortgage on his claim this side of the big blowout. Looks like a losing game for Joe. His land is about one-third sand now," York commented, thoughtfully, as he settled himself comfortably in his big porch chair.

"Well, why not let the sand have its own third, while he uses the other two-thirds himself? They ought to keep him busy," Laura suggested.

The country around New Eden was still new to her. Although she overflowed the town with her sunny presence, her lameness had kept her nearer to "Castle Cluny" than her brother had comprehended. She did not understand the laws, nor lawlessness, of what her brother called the "blowout," nor had she ever seen the

desolation that marked its broadening path.

"A blowout is never satisfied until it has swallowed all the land in the landscape," York explained. "I remember a few years ago there was just a sandy outcrop along a little draw below Joe's claim, the line of some prehistoric riverbed, I suppose. That was the beginning of the thing Joe is fighting to-day. Something started the sand to drifting. It increased as the wind blew away the soil; the more wind, the more sand; the more sand, the more wind. They worked together until what had been a narrow belt spread enormously, gradually overlapping Joe's claim, making acres of waste ground. I hate to see Joe shoulder a mortgage to try to drive back that monstrous thing. But Joe is one of those big, self-contained fellows who takes the bit in his teeth and goes his own gait in spite of all the danger signals you wigwag at him."

"Why do you loan him money if you know he can't succeed?" Laura inquired.

"Making farm loans is the business of the Macpherson Mortgage Company. That's how we maintain our meager existence," York replied, teasingly. "Joe wants to fight back the blowout creeping over his south border farther and farther each year. Our company gets its commission while he fights. See?"

"Oh, you grasping loan shark! If I didn't know how easy it is for you to lie I'd disown you," Laura declared, flinging a chair pillow at her brother, who was chuckling at her earnestness.

But York was serious himself in the next minute.

"Our company doesn't want the prairie; it wants prosperity. A foreclosed mortgage is bad business. It brings us responsibility and ill-will. What we want is good-will and interest money. I have put the thing up to Joe just as it is. Man is a free agent to choose or let alone. I have a bigger problem than Joe to handle now. I had a letter this evening from Miss Geraldine Swaim, of Philadelphia. Do you remember her, Laura? She used to come up to Winnowoc when she was a little girl."

"I remember little Jerry Swaim, Jim and Lesa's only child," York's sister declared. "She was considerably younger than I. I pushed her in her baby-cab when I wasn't very big myself. When I went away to college she was a little roly-poly beauty of ten or eleven, maybe. Wasn't she named for her father's rich sister, Mrs. Darby? I never knew that Mrs. Darby's name was Geraldine."

"It wasn't; it was Jerusha; and Jim's name was Jeremiah; and Lesa's was plain Melissa," York explained. "But Lesa changed all of their names to make them sound more romantic. Romance was Lesa's strong suit. She called her daughter 'Jerry,' to please Mrs. Darby, but the child was christened Geraldine—never Jerusha. Lesa wouldn't stand for that."

"And now what does this Geraldine want from my respected brother?" Laura inquired, leaning back on the cushions of her chair to listen.

York's face was hidden by the darker shadows of the porch, but his sister knew by his grave tone, when he spoke again, that something deeper than a business transaction lay back of this message from Philadelphia.

"It's an old story, Laura. The story of parents rearing a child in luxury and then dying poor and leaving this child unprovided for and unfitted to provide for herself. Jim Swaim was as clear-headed as his wife was soft-hearted and idealizing. Every angle of his was a right angle, even if he did grow a bit tight-fisted sometimes for his family's sake. But a leech of a fellow, a sort of relative by marriage, got his claws into Jim some way, and in the end got him, root and branch. Then Lesa contracted pneumonia and died after a short illness. And just when Jim was most needed to hold up his business interests and tide things over, as well as look after his daughter, they found him dead in his office one morning. Heart failure, the doctors said, the kind that gets a brain-fagged business man. The estate has been in litigation for two years. Now it is settled, and all that is left for Geraldine is a claim her father held out here in the Sage Brush Valley. She thinks she is going to live on that. She came in on the afternoon train and is stopping at the Commercial Hotel. I called to see her a minute on my way home. That was why I ate a cold dinner this evening. I asked her to come here at once, but she refused. Some one from the hotel will bring her over later. That means Ponk, of course. He's the whole Commercial Hotel 'and Gurrage.' We must have her here to stay with us awhile, of course."

"York Macpherson!" his sister fairly gasped. "Coming to call this evening! Will stay with us awhile, of course. All right. I'm willing she should stay with us awhile, but how can *she* live on a Sage Brush claim? Why doesn't her rich aunt Darby provide for her? What does she look like?"

"I don't know," York drawled, provokingly. Then he added: "Mrs. Darby also writes, saying that she hopes we will look after Jerry while she is here, but that she herself can do nothing for her niece, because a relative of her dear deceased

husband, an artist of merit but no means, is dependent on her, and she owes it to her dear deceased's memory to look after this young man. I've a notion that there is something back of both letters, but I haven't had time to read behind the lines yet."

"Turns out her own flesh and blood, a girl, too, to shift for herself, and coddles this man, this artist thing, for her dear deceased's sake. What *do* you think of that?" Laura burst out.

"I don't think of that," York replied. "Not really knowing any woman but my sister, I can't judge them by the sample. Besides, this 'girl thing' may have elected to come to the Sage Brush herself; that would be like Jim Swaim. Or she may be making a lark of the trip; that's her mother's child. And, anyhow, she has property in her own name, you see."

"Property, bosh! Where is this precious claim that is to sustain this luxuriously reared child?" Laura Macpherson insisted.

"It is an undeveloped claim down the Sage Brush, in a part of the country you haven't seen yet. That is what this child of luxury has come out for to live upon," York said, with a minor chord of anxiety in his voice.

Then a silence fell, for Laura Macpherson felt that something tragical must be bound up in the course of coming events.

It was the poet's hour of "nearly dark." The "high lights" were beginning to gleam from the cupola of the court-house and high-school, and station tower out across the open stretch that lay between it and the town. New Eden was unusually well lighted for its size. York Macpherson had forced that provision into the electric company's franchise. But New-Edenites were still rural in their ways, and never burned up the long summer twilight with bug-alluring street lights. Homes, too, were mostly shadowy places, with the dwellers resting in porch swings or lawn chairs. Moreover, although there was a little leakage somewhere through which things disappeared occasionally, nobody in town except bankers, postmasters, and mortgage companies locked their doors. The jail was usually empty on the Saturday night, and the churches were full on Sunday, as is the normal condition of Middle West towns in a prohibition state.

"The wind is in the east. It will rain to-morrow," York said, after a pause. "I had planned to go to the upper Sage Brush country for a couple of days. I'll wait till after Sunday now."

Laura Macpherson did not know whether the last meant relief or anxiety. York was not readable to-night.

"What are you staring at?" York asked, presently, from his vine-sheltered angle, as he saw his sister looking intently down into the street.

"Humans," Laura replied, composedly.

"Not the Big Dipper, I hope. Isn't the town big enough without her ranging all over 'Kingussie'?"

"Oh, York, you will call Mrs. Bahrr 'the Big Dipper' to her face some day, if you don't quit your private practice," Laura declared.

"Well, her name is Stella Bahrr. 'Stellar,' she calls it, and she pronounces her surname just plain 'Bear.' If that isn't starry enough I don't know my astronomy. And she is always dipping into other folks's business and stirring up trouble with a high hand. Laura, once and for all, never tie up with that little old hat-trimmer. She'll trim you if you do."

"Don't be uneasy about our getting chummy. I'm positively rude to her most of the time. She isn't coming here. She has veered off toward the Lenwells'. But look who is coming, York."

York shifted his chair into line with the street.

"It's the fair Philadelphian and her pompous gentleman in waiting," York declared.

"Look at little Brother Ponk strut, would you? 'A charge to keep I have.' But, York, Miss Swaim appears a bit too Philadelphian for our New Eden scenery!" Laura exclaimed.

"She is a type all her own, I would say. Jim Swaim's determined chin and Lesa's dreamy eyes. She will be an interesting study, at least. I wonder which parent will win in her final development," York replied, as the two approached the house.

"I have brought the young lady to call on you," Mr. Ponk said, presenting his companion with a flourish, as if she were a trophy cup or a statue just unveiled. "Sorry I can't stay to visit with you, but my clerk is out to-night. They'll take care of you beautiful, Miss Swaim. No, thank you, no. I'll just soar back to the hotel."

He waved off the seat York had proffered him, and bowed himself away as gracefully as a short, round man can bow.

Laura Macpherson had an inborn gift of hospitality, but she realized at once that this guest brought an unusual and compelling interest. She was conscious, too, in a vague way, of the portent of some permanent change pending. What she saw clearly was a very pretty girl with a soft voice and a definite, forceful personality.

"Miss Swaim, you must be tired after your long journey," Laura began, courteously.

"Please don't call me that. I am so far from home I'll be 'Miss Swaimed' enough, anyhow."

The appeal in the blue eyes broke down all reserve.

"Then I'll call you 'Jerry,' as I did when you were a little girl and I was beginning to think about getting grown up," Laura exclaimed.

"And since you are far from home, we hope you may find a home welcome in our house, and that you will come at once and be our guest indefinitely," York added, with his winning smile that ought to have sent him to Congress years ago.

Something about Jerry Swaim had caught Laura Macpherson in a moment. She hoped that York had the same feeling. But York was one of the impenetrable kind when he chose. And he certainly chose that evening to prove his impenetrability.

"You are very kind," Jerry said, looking at York with earnest eyes, void of all coquettishness. Then, turning to York's sister, she went on:

"I am not tired now. But the last part of my journey was frightful. The afternoon was hot, and the wind blew terrifically. They had to close the windows to keep out the dust. Then we were delayed in what they told me was called a 'blowout.'" Her eyes were sparkling now, but her emphasis on the term seemed to cut against York Macpherson's senses like burning sand-filled wind as he sat studying her face.

"All the 'blowouts' I ever heard of were in the tires of our limousine car," she continued, musingly. "And my cousin, Gene Wellington, of Philadelphia, didn't know what to do about them at all. He is an artist, and artists never do take to

practical things. Gene was more helpless when anything went wrong with the car than ever I was, and awfully afraid of taking a risk or anything."

And that, it seemed to the Macphersons, must have been helpless indeed. For as she sat there at ease in the shadowy dimness of the summer evening, York Macpherson thought of Carlyle's phrasing, "Her feet to fall on softness; her eyes to light on splendor," a creature fitted only to adorn the upholstered places of life.

"Did you ever see that dreadful 'blowout' thing?" Jerry asked, coming back from the recollection of limousine cars and Cousin Gene of Philadelphia.

"No, I have only been here a short time myself, and the country is almost as new to me as it is to you," Laura Macpherson replied.

"Oh, it is *such* an awful place!" Jerry continued. "Everywhere and everywhere one can see nothing but great sand-waves all over the land. They have almost buried the palisades that protect the railroad. It just seemed like the Red Sea dividing to let the Israelites go through, only this was red-hot sand held back to let the train pass through a deep rift. And to-day the wind had filled up the tracks so it couldn't go through until the sand was cleaned out. There is only one kind of shrub, a spiny looking thing, growing anywhere on all those useless acres. It is a perfectly horrid country! Why was such land ever made?" Jerry turned to York with the question.

"I can't tell you," York said, "but there are some good things here."

"Yes, there is my claim," Jerry broke in. "It's all I have left, you know. Cousin Gene tried to persuade me it would be better off without me, but I'm sure it must need the owner's oversight to make it really profitable. There was no record, in settling up the estate, of its having produced any income at all. I certainly need the income now. Taking care of myself is a new experience for me."

All the vivacity and hopefulness of youth was in her words. But the dreamy expression on her face that came and went with her moods soon returned.

"Cousin Gene Wellington is not my real cousin, you know. He is Uncle Darby's relative, not Aunt Jerry's. He is an artist, but without any income right now, like myself. Both of us have to learn how to go alone, you see, but I'm not going back to Philadelphia now, no matter what Aunt Jerry Darby may say."

This was no appeal for sympathy. Taking care of oneself seemed easy enough to

Les a Swaim's child, to whom the West promised only one grand romantic adventure. There was something, too, in the tone in which she pronounced the name of Gene Wellington that seemed to set it off from every other name. And she pronounced it often enough to trouble York Macpherson. No other name came so easily and so frequently and frankly to her lips.

"We hope you will like the West. The Sage Brush isn't so bad when you get acclimated to its moods," York assured her. "But don't expect too much at first, nor too definite a way of securing an income."

Only Laura Macpherson caught the same minor chord of anxiety in her brother's voice that she recalled had been in it when he told her of Jerry's claim. It seemed impossible, however, that anything could refuse to be profitable for this charming, blossomy kind of a girl who must thrive on easy success or perish, like a flower.

"Oh, land always means an income, my father used to say. Aunt Jerry has only two hundred acres, but it is a fortune to her," the girl declared. "I'm not uneasy. As soon as I get a real hold on my property here I'll be all right. It is getting late. I must go now. No, I am going by myself," she declared, prettily, as York prepared to accompany her back to the hotel. "It is straight up this light street and I am going to try it alone from the very beginning. That's why I didn't go to your office as soon as I got here to-day. I told Cousin Gene I could take care of myself and make my own way out here, just as he is making his own way in the East, working in his studio. No, you shall not go with me. Thank you so much. No. Good-by." This to York Macpherson, who was wise enough to catch the finality of her words.

The twilight was almost gone, but a young moon in the west made the street still light as the two on the porch watched the girl going firm-footed and unafraid, unconscious of their anxiety for what lay in the days before her.

"Is it courage, or contempt for the West, that makes her fearless where one would expect her to be timid? She seems a combination of ignorance and assertiveness and a plea for sympathy all in one," Laura Macpherson declared.

"She is the child of two different temperaments—Jim one, and Les a another; a type all her own, but taking on something of each parent," York asserted, as he watched until the girl had disappeared at the door of the Commercial Hotel, far up the street.

The next day was an unusual one for four people in New Eden. The wind came from the east, driving an all-day rain before it, and York Macpherson did not go to the upper Sage Brush country. Instead, he worked steadily in his office all day. Some files he had not opened for months were carefully gone over, and township maps were much in evidence. Every now and then he glanced toward the upper windows of the Commercial Hotel. Mr. Ponk had said that Jerry had No. 7, the room he had occupied for several years. He wondered if this rain was making her homesick for the Winnowoc Valley and "Eden" and that wonderful Cousin Gene, blast him! There was a smile in York's eyes whenever he looked across the street. When he turned to his work again his face was stern. What he thought was a determination not to be bothered by rainy-day loafers coming into his office, what made him set his teeth and grip to his work, was really the fight with a temptation to go over to the hotel and look after a homesick girl.

Meantime Jerry Swaim, snug in a filmy gray kimona with pink facings and soft gray slippers, was enjoying the day to the full limit. Secure from strangers, relaxed from the weariness of travel, she slept dreamlessly, and wakened, pink and rested, to watch the cool, life-giving rains and dream her wonderful day-dreams wherein new adventure, victory over obstacles, and Eugene each played a part. Jerry was in love with life. Sunshine and rain, wind and calm, every season, were made to serve her, all things in nature to bring her interest and pleasure—all except *sand*. That hot hour and a half between sand-leaguered palisades seared her memory. But that was all down-stream now, with the junction station, and the country Thelma, and the tow-headed woman and flabby flopping baby, and the little old Teddy Bear humping his yellow-brown fuzziness against the swirl of cinders and prairie dust. The recollection of it all was like the touch of a live coal on the cool surface of her tranquil soul, a thing abhorred that yet would not be uncreated nor forgotten.

"To-morrow will be Sunday." The little pagan would have one more idle day. "I'll get a letter from Eugene on Monday. On Monday," dreamily, "I'll beg into live here, not stay here. What charming folks the Macphersons are! and—so different."

There was a difference. Jerry did not know, nor care to analyze it, nor explain to herself, why these two people had in themselves alone begun to make New Eden worth while for her. She for whom things, human and otherwise, had heretofore been created—all except *sand*.

The third New-Edenite who had some special interests on this rainy day was

Junius Brutus Ponk. Often an idler in the Macpherson Company's office, he was always interesting to York. There were never created two of his kind. That in itself made him worth while to the big, strong man of many affairs. And, much as York wanted to be alone to-day, he welcomed the coming of Ponk. In the long, serious conversation that followed, their usual bantering had no place. And when the little man went slowly out, and slowly crossed the street to the hotel, indifferent to the steady fall of rain, York Macpherson's eyes followed him earnestly.

"He'll almost forget to strut if that girl stays here—but she won't stay. And he will strut. He's made that way. But down under it all he's a man, God bless him—a man any woman could trust."

Up at "Castle Cluny" the rainy day brought one caller whom "chilling winds nor poisonous breath" could never halt—Mrs. Stellar Bahrr, otherwise—"the Big Dipper"—the town gossip.

Mrs. Stellar Bahrr was a married, widowed-by-divorce, old-maid type, built like a sky-scraper, of the lean, uncertain age just around sixty, with the roundness of youth all gone, and the plump beauty of matronliness all lacking, wrinkled with envy and small malice, living on repeating what New Eden wanted kept untold. Hiding what New Eden should have known of her, she maintained herself on a pension from some one, known only to York Macpherson, and the small income derived just now from trimming over last year's hats "to make them look like four-year-olds," York declared.

The real milliner of the town was a brisk, bright business woman who had Stellar Bahrr on her trail in season and out of season. Mrs. Bahrr herself could not have kept up a business of any kind for a week, for she changed callings almost with the moon's phases.

No more unwelcome caller could have intruded on the homey, delicious, rainy-day seclusion of "Castle Cluny."

"I jis' run in to see the hat again you're goin' to wear to-morrow, Miss Laury. I 'ain't got more 'n a minute. Ye ain't alone this dreary day, are ye? The Lenwells was sayin' last night your brother was goin' to the upper Sage Brush on some business with the Posers. But they're in town, rainy as it is, an' all. Did he go?"

"No, he put it off till Monday," Laura replied, wondering what interest York's going or coming could be to Stellar Bahrr.

"As I was sayin', the Posers is in town. Come to meet Nell and her baby. They come in on the freight yesterday. The biggest, bald-headest young un you ever see. Nell wants her hat fixed over, and nothin' on the livin' earth to fix it with, ner money to pay for it. I'll make ol' Poser do that, though. Lemme see your hat, so's I can get an idy or two. You've got some 'commodation, if that blamed millinery-store hain't. Thank ye for the favor."

Stellar had a way of pinning her eyes through one until her victim could not squirm. She also had a way of talking so much she gave the impression of running down and the promise of a speedy leave-taking, which she never took until she had gained all the information she wanted. Her talent in a good cause would have been invaluable, for she was shrewd, patient, and everlastingly persistent.

Laura Macpherson reluctantly left the room to get her hat, wondering, since it had not been out of the box before, how in the world Stellar Bahrr knew anything about it. Mrs. Bahrr was standing by the dining-room window when she returned.

"I jis' come out here to see if the Sage Brush is raisin' down yonder. Who is that strange girl Ponk's running around with last night?" The gossip turned the question suddenly. "I seen 'em comin' up here myself. Folks down-town don't know yet." The sharp, steel-pointed eyes caught into Laura like hooks.

"I don't—believe you'll like this hat." Laura had meant to say, "I don't intend to tell you," but she was hooked too quickly.

"Who'd you say she is?"

There was no courteous way out now.

"She is a Miss Swaim."

"Say, this hat's a jew'l. Looks younger 'n the girls' hats does on 'em. Where's she from?"

"East. This color is a bit trying for me, I think."

"Oh, no 'tain't! What's she here for?"

"I—You'll have to ask York." Laura rolled her burdens on her brother's shoulders, as did likewise the remainder of New Eden, when crowded to the

wall.

"York! She ain't after him, I hope. Don't blush so. That's a good one on York. An' he never met her at the station, even. Ponk—little fiend" (Ponk always turned game-cock when Stellar approached him), "little devil he is—he telephoned in from down at the sidin', by the deep fishin'-hole."

Mrs. Bahrr caught her breath and bit her lips as she eyed her hostess slyly. Laura Macpherson was white with disgust and anger. Of all the long-tongues, here was the queen.

"Where's the deep fishing-hole?" she asked, innocently, to get her unpleasant caller on another tack.

For a moment Mrs. Bahrr did not reply, busying herself with examining the new hat's lining and brim-curves. If Laura had known what York Macpherson knew she would have realized that here was the place to score by dwelling on the deep fishing-hole. But Laura was new to Sage Brush traditions.

"Ponk calls in to have his spanky new runabout all ready at the station. George nearly busted hisself gettin' there. Then Ponk, the miserable brute, he hangs around and keeps Miss Swine—"

"Swaim, Geraldine Swaim," Laura cried, in disgust.

"Yes, Geraldine Swim—keeps her inside, so's nobody gets a good look at her. I was there myself, a-watchin' him. I'd gone to see if my fish 'd been sent up, an' when they'd all cleared out he trots her out, big as Cuffey, and races to the hotel with her. Maybe, though, York didn't know she was comin', or had Ponk put up to lookin' after her for him. You never can tell about these men. I noticed York never walked home with her last night, neither. 'Course it was light as day. Well, well, it's interestin' as can be. An' she come here purpose to see your brother, too."

"If you are through with my hat"—Laura was fairly gray with anger and her eyes flashed as she tried to control herself.

Nobody was wiser than Stellar Bahrr in situations like this.

"In jest a minute. Them's the daintiest roses yet. Thank you, Miss Laury. You ain't above helping a person like me. There's them that is here in New Eden. But I know 'em—I know 'em. They talk to your back and never say a word to your

face, not a blamed word. But you're not like 'em. Everybody says you're just like your brother, an' that's enough for anybody to know in the Sage Brush country. He's been the best friend I ever had, I know that. I hope that pink-'n'-white city girl 'll find out that much pretty quick. Somebody ought to tell her, too. Well, good day, Miss Laury. My umberel's right outside in the umberel-stand."

Poor Laura! She was no fighter from choice, no imputer of evil motives, but her love for her brother amounted almost to idolatry.

"I'm her one weakness," York often said. "Her strength is in her sense of humor, her kind heart, her love of beautiful things, and the power of the old scrapping blood of the Macphersons that will stand so much—and then Joan of Arc is a tennis-player alongside of my blessed sister in her righteous wrath."

That rainy day ended with a problem in the minds of at least three New Eden dwellers: York Macpherson, who carried a bigger load now than Joe Thomson's unwise but determined mortgage matter; Junius Brutus Ponk, who was sharing York's problem to a degree, and Laura Macpherson, who realized that a malicious under-current was already started whose undermining influence might sooner or later grow into a menacing power.

And Jerry Swaim, unconscious cause of all this problem element, ate and slept and laughed and dreamed her pretty day-dreams in utter content. It was well that the next day was Sunday. The rain-washed prairie and the June sunshine did so much to lift the tension in this New Eden where even the good little snakes are not always so very good.



VI

PARADISE LOST

Laura Macpherson came through the dining-room on Monday morning with her hands full of wild flowers.

"Wherefore?" York asked, seeing the breakfast-table already decorated with a vase of sweet-peas.

"Just a minute, York. I got these with the dew on them—all prairie flowers. I thought Jerry might be up to see me to-day. I went out after them for her," Laura explained, as she arranged the showy blossoms in vases about the rooms.

York dropped behind his day-old paper, calling after her, indifferently: "I doubt if they are worth it. You must have gone to the far side of 'Kingussie' for them. I doubt, too, if she comes here to-day, but I haven't any doubt that I am hungry and likely to get hungrier before you get ready for breakfast."

"Coming, coming." Laura came hastily to the table. "I forgot you in my interest in Jerry."

"A prevalent disease in New Eden right now," York said, behind his paper. "Ponk nearly fell down on getting me a chauffeur for to-day; the superintendent didn't get the quarterlies to our Sunday-school class on time yesterday morning; the Big Dipper took the wrong pew and kept it, and now my breakfast must wait—all on account of this Jerry girl."

"Mournful, mournful!" Laura declared. "Such a little girl, too! I'd like to tell you what your Big Dipper said about Jerry Saturday, but I mustn't."

"Saturday was a rainy day," York commented, knowing Laura would answer no questions if he should ask them now.

"All the more reason why the Big Dipper should come over to copy my new hat for one of the Poser girls up the Sage Brush, and then fall to questions and conclusions," Laura insisted.

"I thought yesterday was the grand opening for that lid of yours. Where did the

B. D. see it?" York would not ask for what he wanted most to know.

"It had positively never been out of the box since it came here," Laura declared. "But pshaw, York, it is the gossip you want to know, and I'm really concerned about that."

"I'm not. I am really concerned about where Stellar Bahrr saw your hat." York was very serious and his sister was puzzled for the minute. He never looked that way when he joked—never.

"I don't know anything about Mrs. Bahrr's gift of second sight, York; I'm simply telling what I do know. That hat-box was not opened. Let's talk of better things. Mr. Ponk told me at church yesterday that when Jerry first came she asked for 'an old gentleman named York Macpherson.'" Laura's eyes were twinkling with mischief. "From what she said to me yesterday she is going to depend on you for direction, just like everybody else who comes to New Eden. I'm dead in love with her already. Aren't you?"

"Desperately," York returned. "But seriously, Laura, she is 'most too big a responsibility to joke about. There are a lot of things tied up for her in this coming West. I have to go to the upper Sage Brush this morning to be gone for a couple of days. I wish she would come here and stay with you, so that she might be with the best woman in the world." York beamed affectionately upon the sweet-faced woman opposite him. "I wish I didn't have to leave this morning, but I'll be back by to-morrow night or early Wednesday morning. It is going to be our job to map out her immediate future. After that, things will take their course without us, and New Eden, I imagine, will have to get along without her. When I get back I'll take her down to see her claim. Ponk is the only man besides myself who knows where it is, and I've fixed him. He can't run a hotel and garage and play escort all at once. I want to prepare her in a way, anyhow, for she won't find exactly what she is expecting—another 'Eden' six times enlarged. Meantime turn her gently, if you can, toward our woolly Western life. I won't say lead. Geraldine Swaim, late of Philadelphia, will never be led."

"York she's a lamb. Look at her big, pleading eyes," his sister insisted.

"Laura, she's a rock. Look at her square chin. I'm going now, and I will and bequeath her to your care. Good-by."

As he left the house his sister heard him whistling the air to the old song, "I'll paddle my own canoe."

Evidently the fair Philadelphian was still on his mind.

"I wish," he said to himself, as he cleared the north limits of the New Eden settlement and struck out toward the upper Sage Brush country—"I wish to goodness I had pressed Laura to tell me more about what that infernal Big Dipper said to her Saturday. I'll get that creature yet. I believe she knows that as well as I do. I wish, too, I was sure things would just stay put until I get back."

Half an hour after York had left town Jerry Swaim, dressed for a drive, appeared at the door of Ponk's garage.

"Have you a good little runabout that I could hire this morning? I want to go out into the country," she said to the proprietor.

"Why, yes, Miss Swaim, but I 'ain't got no shofer this morning. York Macpherson, he took my last man and soared up the country, and they won't be back for a couple of days. I'm sorry, but could you wait till, say, about a-Thursday, or mebbly a-Friday?"

Ponk's cheerful grin always threatened to eclipse his eyes, but this morning there was something anxious back of his cheerfulness. Nature had made him in a joking mood, round eyed, round headed, round bodied, talkative, and pompous in an inverse ratio to his size. But there was something always good and reliable about Ponk, and with all his superficiality, too, there was a real depth to the man, and a keener insight than anybody in New Eden, except York Macpherson, ever gave him credit for having.

"I'm sorry I've got no shofer. There was a run on the livery business this morning for some reason. That's why I'm office-boy here now, 'stead of runnin' the office next door," Ponk explained, as blandly and conclusively as possible.

"I don't want a chauffeur at all. I drive myself," Jerry declared.

"You say you do?" Ponk stared at her little hands in their close-fitting white gauntlets.

"Now I'd never thought that. Yes," weakly, "I've got a dandy car for them that can use it, which is mostly me. It's the little gray gadabout we come up from the station in the other evening. There ain't another one like it this side of the Mississippi River—S'liny, Kansas, anyhow. You see, I have to be awful particular. I don't want it smashed against a stone wall or run off of some bridge."

"I've never done that with a car yet. And I used to drive our big eight-cylinder machine over all kinds of Pennsylvania roads."

The blue eyes were full of pathos as the memory of her home and all its luxuries swept over Jerry. And Ponk understood.

"We don't have no stone walls out here, and there ain't no bridges, either, except across the Sage Brush in a few places, because there ain't never water enough out here to bridge over. Yes, you may take the gadabout. I just know you'll be careful. That little car's just like a colt, and nowadays bridle-wise under a woman's hand."

"Thank you. I'll take no risks."

When Jerry was seated in the shining gray car, with her hand on the wheel, she turned to Mr. Ponk.

"By the way, do you know who owns any of the claims, as you call them, in this valley?" she asked. "I was going to speak to Mr. Macpherson, but you say he has gone out of town."

"Yes'm." Ponk fairly swelled with importance. "I know every claim, and who owns it, from the hills up yonder clear to the mouth of that stream. My hotel an' livery business together keeps me as well posted as the Macpherson Mortgage Company that holds a mortgage on most of them."

"Can you tell me where to find the one belonging to the estate of the late Jeremiah Swaim, of Philadelphia?" Jerry asked, in a low voice.

The short little man beside the car looked away in pity and surprise as he said:

"Yes'm, I can. You follow this street south and keep on till you come to where the Sage Brush makes a sharp bend to the east, right at a ranch-house. From there you leave the trail (we still call that down-stream road 'the trail') and strike across to three big cottonwood-trees on a kind of a knoll, considerable distance away. You can't miss 'em, for you can see 'em for miles. And then"—Ponk hesitated as if trying to remember—"seems to me you turn, bias'n' like, southeast a bit, and head for a little bunch of low oaks. From there you run your eye around and figger how many acres you can see. An', it's all Jeremiah Swaim's, or his heirs an' assignees. But, say, *you* ain't any kin to the late Mr. Swaim, who never seen that land of hisn, I reckon? I hadn't thought about your names being the same. Odd I didn't."

There was something wistful in the query which Jerry set down merely as plebeian curiosity, but she answered, courteously:

"Yes, he was my father. The land belongs to me."

"Say, hadn't you better wait and let York Macpherson soar down with you?" Ponk suggested. "It might be better, after all, mebby, not to go alone to spy out the land, even if you can drive yourself. Seems to me York said he'd be goin' down that way the last of the week. I do wish you'd wait for York to go with you first."

"I want to go alone," Jerry replied, and with a deft hand she made the difficult curve to the street, leaving the proprietor of the garage staring after her.

"Well, by heck! she can run a car anyhow!" he exclaimed, as he watched her speeding away. "Smart as her dad, I reckon. Mebby a little smarter."

All of Lesa Swaim's love of romantic adventure was shining on Jerry Swaim's bright face as she came upon Laura Macpherson on the cool side porch a few minutes later.

"I'm going out to inspect my royal demesne," she cried, gaily.

"Not to-day. I want you to spend the day with me, and you don't know the road. You haven't any way to go. York will be home soon. He wants to take you there himself. He understands land values, and, anyhow, you oughtn't go alone," Laura Macpherson said, emphatically.

"That is just what Mr. Ponk said at the garage, but I want to go alone."

That "I want" settled everything with Jerry Swaim in the Kansas New Eden as in the old "Eden" in the green valley of the Winnowoc.

"I have hired a runabout of Mr. Ponk. He gave me directions so I can't miss the way. Good-by."

The trail down the Sage Brush was full of delight this morning for the young Eastern girl who sent her car swiftly along the level road, almost forgetting the landmarks of the way in the exhilaration of youth and June-time. And, however out of place she might seem on the Western prairie, no one could doubt her ability to handle a car.

"Where the stream bends sharp to the east away from a ranch-house," Jerry was

quoting Ponk. "I'm sure I can't miss it if I follow his directions and the stream and bend and house and cottonwood-trees and oak-grove are really there. I love oaks and I hope my woodland is full of them. There must be a woodland on my farm, even if the trees are few and small and scattered here, so far as I have seen. But there was really something pitiful in the little man's eyes when he was talking to me. Maybe he is a wee bit envious of my possessions. Some men are jealous of women who have property. No doubt my workmen will need managing, and some adjusting to a new head of affairs. I'll be very considerate with them, but they must respect my authority. I wish Gene was with me this morning."

Then she fell to musing.

"I wonder what message Gene will send me, and whether he will write it himself, or, as he suggested, will send it through Aunt Jerry's letters to York. It was his original way of doing to say I'd find things out through Aunt Jerry, when she probably won't write me a line for a long time. I know Gene will choose nobly, and I know everything will turn out all right at last.... I wonder if my place is as beautiful as this. How I wish Gene could see it with his artist eyes."

Jerry brought her engine down to slow speed as she passed a thrifty ranch-house where barns and clustering silos, and fields of grain and cattle-dotted prairies outlying all, betokened the possibilities of the Sage Brush Valley. The blue eyes of Lesa Swaim's daughter were full of dreamy light as she paused to picture here the possibilities of her own possessions.

At the crest of a low ridge the road forked, one branch wandering in and out among the small willow-trees along the river, and the other cutting clean and broad across the rougher open land swelling away from the narrowed valley.

"Here's something Mr. Junius Brutus Ponk left out of his map. I'll take the rim road; it looks the more inviting," Jerry decided, because the way of least resistance had been her life-road always.

This one grew narrow and clung close to the water's side. Its sandy bed was damp and firm, and the slender trees on either side here and there almost touched branches overhead. Mile after mile it seemed to stretch without another given landmark to show Jerry her destination. Beyond where the road curved sharply around a thicket of small trees and underbrush Jerry halted her car. Before her the waters of the river rippled into foam against a rocky ledge that helped to form a deep hole above it. Below, the stream was shallow, and in dry

midsummer here offered rough stepping-stones across it. It was a lonely spot, with the river on one side and a tangle of bushes and tall weeds on the other, and the curves along the roadway, filled with underbrush and low timber shutting off the view up-stream and down-stream.

At the coming of Jerry's car a man who had been kneeling over some fishing-lines at the river's edge rose up beside the road, brushing the wet sand from his clothes, and staring at her. He was small and old and stooped and fuzzy, and thoroughly unpretty to see.

"It's the Teddy Bear who 'sat in the sand and the sun' coming up from that horrid railroad junction. Who's afraid of bears? I'll ask him how to find my lost empire."

Jerry did not reflect that it was the unconscious effect of this humble creature's thoughtfulness for her that made her unafraid of him in this lonely spot. Reflection was not yet one of her active psychological processes.

"I want to find a ranch-house by a big bend in the river where it turns east," Jerry said, looking at the man much as she would look at the bend in the river—merely for the information to be furnished. He pushed his brown cap back from his forehead and rubbed his fingers thoughtfully through his thin sunburnt hair.

"It's Joe's place, eh?" the high, quavering voice squeaking like an unused machine afraid of itself. "You'd ought to took the t'other fork of the road back yander. It's a goodish mile on down this way now to where you das to turn your cyar round. When you get where you kin turn, then go back and take the t'other fork. It'll take you right to Joe's door about."

The words came hesitatingly, as if the speaker had little use for sounding them in his solitary, silent life. Fishermen don't catch fish by talking to them.

"A mile! I think I'll turn right here," Jerry declared.

Then, as the meek unknown watched her in open-mouthed wonder, she swung her car deftly about, the outer wheels barely keeping a toe-hold on the edge of the river-bank, with hardly more than an inch of space between them and the crumbling sand above the water. As she faced the way over which she had come she reached out to drop a piece of silver into the man's hand. He let it fall to the ground, then picked it up and laid it on the top of the car door.

"I ain't workin' for the gov'mint," he quavered. "I thankee, but I don't have no

knowin's to sell. Ye're welcome to my ketch of information any day ye're on the river."

He made an odd half-military salute toward his old yellow-brown cap and shuffled across the road toward a narrow path running back through the bushes.

At the bend in the river Jerry found herself.

"That must be the ranch-house that Mr. Ponk gave me for a landmark, for there goes the river bending east, all right. What a quaint, picturesque thing that is, and built of stone, too, with ivy all over it! It must have been here a long time. And how well kept everything is! The old Teddy Bear said it was 'Joe's place.' Well, Joe keeps it looking as different from some of the places I've passed as 'Eden' differs from other country-places back in Pennsylvania."

The long, low, stone ranch-house, nestling under its sheltering vines, had an old and familiarly homey look to Jerry.

"That wide porch is a dream. I'll have one just like it on my place. I wonder if this farm has any name. I suppose not. What shall I call mine? 'New Eden' wouldn't do, of course. I might call it 'Paradise Prairie.' That's pretty and smooth. Gene would like that, and talk a lot about going 'from Nature up to Nature's God.' I don't care a whiff about all his religious talk, somehow. That's just one thing wherein we will never agree. If I can go from nature to the finished produce I'll be satisfied. Oh, yonder are my three trees."

At the bend of the Sage Brush Jerry left the stream road and sped across a long level swell toward three cottonwood-trees standing sentinel on a small rise of the prairie. From there she was to see the oak-grove, the center of her own rich holdings. Oh, Jerry!



Down under the spreading oaks a young man in rough ranchman's dress stood leaning against a low bough, absorbed in thought. He was tall, symmetrically built, and strong of muscle, without a pound of superfluous fat to suggest anything of ease and idleness in his day's run. Some of the lines that mark the stubborn will were graven in his brown face, but the eyes were all-redeeming. Even as he stared out with unseeing gaze, lost in his own thoughts, the smile that lighted them hovered ready to illuminate what might otherwise have been a

severe countenance.

In all the wide reach of level land there was no other living creature in sight. The breeze pulsing gently through the oak boughs poured the sunlight noiselessly down on the shadow-cooled grass about the tree-trunks. The freshness of the morning lingered in the air of the grove.

Suddenly the young man caught the sound of an automobile coasting down the long slide from the three cottonwoods, and turned to see a young girl in a shining gray car gliding down into the edge of the shade. A soft hat of Delft-blue, ornamented, valkyrie-wise, with two white wings; golden-gleaming hair overshadowing a face full of charm; blue eyes; cheeks of peach-blossom pink; firm, red lips; a well-defined chin and white throat; a soft gown, Delft-blue in color; and white gauntlet gloves—all these were in the blurred picture of that confused moment.

As for Jerry Swaim, all farmer folk looked alike to her. It was not the sudden appearance of a stranger, but the landscape beyond him, that held her speechless, until the shrill whistle of a train broke the silence.

"Is that the Sage Brush Railroad so near?" she asked, at last, with no effort at formal greeting.

"Yes, ma'am. It is just behind the palisades over there. You can't see it from here because the sand-drifts are so high. That's the morning freight now."

The light died out of Jerry Swaim's eyes, the pink bloom faded to ivory in her cheeks, even the red lips grew pale, as she stared at the scene before her. For the oak-grove stood a lone outpost of greenness defending a more or less fertile countryside from a formless, senseless monster beyond it. Jerry had pictured herself standing in the very center of her heritage, where she might "run her eyes around," as Ponk had said, "and figure how many acres she could see, and they were all hers." And now she was here.

Wide away before her eyes rippled acre on acre, all hers, and all of billowing sand, pointed only by a few straggling green shrubs. The glare of the sunlight on it was intolerable, and the north wind, sweeping cool and sweet under the oak-trees, brought no comfort to this glaring desert.

Suddenly she recalled the pitying look in Ponk's eyes when he had begged her to wait for York Macpherson to come with her to this place, and she had thought he

might be envious of her good fortune. And then she remembered that Laura Macpherson had put up the same plea for York. He was the shield and buckler for all New Eden, it would seem. And the three, Laura and York and Ponk, all knew and were pitying her, Jerry Swaim, who had been envied many a time, but never, never pitied. Even in the loss of the Swaim estate in Philadelphia, Mrs. Jerusha Darby had made it clear to every one that her pretty niece was still to be envied as a child of good fortune.

Flinging aside her hat and gloves, unconscious of the stray sunbeams sifting down through the oak boughs on her golden hair, Jerry Swaim gazed toward the railroad with wide-open, burning eyes, and her white face was pitiful to see. At length she turned to the young man who still stood leaning against the oak bough beyond her car, waiting for her to speak.

"Can I be of any service to you?" he asked, courteously.

"Who are you?" Jerry questioned, with unconscious bluntness.

"My name is Joe Thomson." The smile in his eyes lighted his face as he spoke.

"Tell me all about this place, won't you?" Jerry demanded, pointing toward the gleaming sands. "Was it always like this, here? I thought when the Lord finished the earth He looked on His work and found it good. Did He overlook this spot?"

Surprise and sarcasm and bitter disappointment were all in her tone as she asked these questions.

Joe Thomson frowned as he replied:

"It wasn't an oversight at all. There was a fine piece of prairie here until a few years ago, with only one little sandy strip zigzagging across it. Ages back, there may have been a stream along that low place yonder that dried up and blew away some time, when the forest fires changed the prehistoric woodlands into prairies. I can't be accurate about geology and such things if history and the Scriptures are silent on these fine points."

Joe Thomson still stood leaning against the oak limb. The confusion of meeting this handsome stranger had passed. He was in his own territory now, talking of things of which he knew. He knew, too, how to put his thoughts into good, expressive English.

"There are beautiful farms up the river—ranches, I mean. What has changed this

prairie to such an awful place?" Jerry questioned, eagerly.

"Eastern capital and lack of brains and energy," Joe answered her. "It is just a blowout, that's all. It began in that sandy strip in that low place along over there by the railroad, where, as I say, some old river-bed, maybe the Sage Brush, might have been long ago before it made that big bend in its course up by my buildings. A crazy, money-mad fool from back East came out here and plowed up all this ground one dry season, a visionary fellow who dreamed of getting a fortune from the land without any labor. And when the thing began to look like real work he cut the whole game, just like a lot of other fools have done, and went back East, leaving all these torn, unsodded acres a plaything for the winds. There were three or four dry seasons right after that, and the soil all went to dust and blew away. But the sand grew, and multiplied, and surged over the face of this particular spot of the Lord's earth until it has come to be a tyrant of power, covering all this space and spreading slowly northward up over the next claim. That's mine."

"What is it doing to your land?" Jerry asked.

"Ruining it," Joe replied, calmly.

"And you don't go mad?" the girl cried, impulsively.

"We don't go mad on the Sage Brush till the last resort, and we don't often come to that. When we can't do one thing, out West, we do another. That's all there is to it." The smile was in his eyes again as Joe said this.

"Do you know who owns this ground now?" Jerry tried to ask as carelessly as possible.

"An estate back in Pennsylvania, I believe," Joe replied.

"What is it worth?" Jerry's voice was hardly audible.

"Look at it. What do *you* think it is worth, as a whole, or cut up into town lots for a summer resort?" Joe demanded.

In spite of his calmness there was a harshness in his voice, and his eyes were stern.

Jerry twisted her white hands helplessly. "I don't know—anything worth knowing," she said, faintly, looking full into the young man's face for the first

time.

Afterward she remembered that he was powerfully built, that his eyes were dark, and that his teeth showed white and even, as he repeated, with a smile:

"You don't know anything worth knowing. You don't quite look the part."

"Why don't you answer my question?"

Back of the light in Jerry's eyes Joe saw that the tears were waiting, and something in her face hurt him strangely.

"I think this claim is not worth—an effort," he declared, frankly, looking out at the wind-heaved ridges of sand.

"What brought you here to look at it, then?" Jerry demanded.

"Partly to despise the fool who owned it and let it become a curse."

"Do you know him?" the girl inquired.

"No. But if I did I should despise him just the same," Joe Thomson declared.

"What if he were dead?" Jerry asked.

"Pardon me, but may I ask what brought you down here to look at such a place?" Joe interrupted her.

"I came down here to find out its value. It belongs to me. My only inheritance. I have always lived in a big city until now, and I know little of country life except its beauty and comfort, and nothing at all of the West. But I can understand you when you say that this claim is not worth an effort. I hope I shall never, never see it again. Good-by."

The firm, red lips quivered and the blue eyes looked up through real tears as Jerry Swaim drew on her gloves and fitted the soft blue hat down on the golden glory of her hair. Then without another word she turned her car about and sped away.



II

JERRY AND JOE

VII

UNHITCHING THE WAGON FROM A STAR

How long is a mid-June day? Ticked off by the almanac, it is so much time as lies between the day-dawn and the dark of evening. But Jerry Swaim lived a lifetime in that June day in which she went out to enter upon her heritage. From the moment she had turned away from the young farmer under the oak-trees until she reached the forks of the road again she did not take cognizance of a single object. The three big cottonwood sentinels, the vine-covered ranch-home, the deep bend of the Sage Brush to the eastward, were passed unnoted. Ponk's gray gadabout seemed to know the way home like a faithful horse.

There was no apparent reason why the junction of the two highways should have momentarily called the bewildered disappointed girl to her calmer self. No more was there anything logical in her choosing to turn again down the narrow river road. The lone old fisherman was the farthest down in the scale from Geraldine Swaim of any human being who had ever shown her a favor. He could not have had any interest for her.... But York Macpherson was correct in his estimate of Jerry. She was a type in herself alone. She drove far beyond the narrow place by the deep hole where, with accurate eye and clear skill, she had played a game of chance with the river and fate and guardian angels. Her tires had cut a wide, curving gash across the sand of the road.

"My gracious alive! that was a close turn!" she exclaimed, as she caught sight of her wheel-marks. "No wonder the old Teddy Bear looked scared. One inch or less! Well, there was that inch. But what for? To enter on my vast landed—vast sanded—estate in the kingdom of Kansas!"

Jerry smiled grimly in ridicule of her foolish, defrauded self. Then in a desperate effort to blot out of mind what she had seen she hurled the gray car madly forward. With the bewildered gropings of a shipwrecked landsman she was struggling to get her bearings, she for whom the earth had been especially designed. As the hours passed the road became dry and sunny, with the north breeze tempering the air to the coolness of a rare Kansas June day, entirely unlike the hot and windy one on which Jerry had first come up this valley. She did not, in reality, cover many miles now, because she made long stops in

sheltered places and at times let the gray machine merely creep on the sunny stretches, but in her mind she had girdled the universe.

In the late afternoon she turned about wearily, as one who has yet many leagues of ground to cover before nightfall. The sunlight glistened along the surface of the river and a richer green gleamed in what had been the shadowy places earlier in the day; but the driver in the car paid little heed to the lights and shadows of the way.

"If a man went right with himself." Cornelius Darby's words came drifting across the girl's mind. "Poor Uncle Cornie! He didn't begin to live, to me, until he was gone. Maybe he knew what it meant for a man *not* to go right with himself. And if a woman went right with herself!"

Jerry halted her car again by the deep hole and looked at nothing where the Sage Brush waters were rippling over the rough ledge in its bed. For the first time since she had sat under the oak-trees and looked at the acres that were hers, Jerry Swaim really found herself on solid ground again. The bloom came slowly back to the ashy cheeks, and the light into the dark-blue eyes.

"If I can only go right with myself, I shall not fail. I need time, that's all. There will be a letter from Eugene waiting when I get back to town, and that will make up for a lot. There must be some way out of all the mistakes, too. It wasn't my land that I saw. Mr. Ponk must have directed me wrongly. That country fellow may not know the facts. I'll go back and ask York Macpherson right away. Only, he's gone out of town for two days. Oh dear!"

She wrung her hands as the picture of that oak-grove and all that lay beyond it came vividly before her. She tried to forget it and for a moment she smiled to herself deceptively, and then—the smile was gone and by the determined set of her lips Jerry was her father's own resolute child again.

"I don't exactly know what next, except that I'm hungry. Why, it is five o'clock! Where has this day gone, and where am I, anyhow?"

Her eyes fell on the broad ruts across the road. Then back in the bushes she caught a glimpse of a low roof.

"I smell fish frying. I'll starve to death if I wait to get back to the Commercial Hotel!" Jerry exclaimed. "Here's the wayside inn where I find comfort for man and beast."

She called sharply with her horn. In a minute the fuzzy brown fisherman came shuffling along the narrow path through the bushes.

"I'm dreadfully hungry," Jerry said, bluntly.

It did not occur to her to explain to this creature why she happened to be here and hungry at this time. She wanted something; that was sufficient.

"Can't you let me have some of your fish? I am desperate," she went on, smiling at the surprised face of the man who stared up at her in silence.

"Yes'm, I can give you what I eat. Just a minute," he squeaked out, at last. Then he shuffled back to where the bit of roof showed through the leaves.

While the girl waited a tall, slender woman came around the brushy bend ahead. She halted in the middle of the road and stared a moment at Jerry; then she came forward rapidly and passed the car without looking up. She wore a plain, grayish-green dress, with a sunbonnet of the same hue covering her face—all very much like the bushes out of which she seemed to have come and into which she seemed to melt again. In her hand she carried a big parcel lightly, as if its weight was slight. As Jerry turned and looked after her with a passing curiosity, she saw that the woman was looking back also. The young city-bred girl had felt no fear of the strange country fellow in the far-away oak-grove; she had no fear of this uncouth fisherman in this lonely hidden place; but when she caught a mere glimpse of this woman's eyes staring at her from under the shadows of the deep sunbonnet a tremor of real fright shook her hands grasping the steering-wheel. It passed quickly, however, with the reappearance of the host of the wayside inn.

"This is delicious," Jerry exclaimed, as the hard scaly hands lifted a smooth board bearing her meal up to her.

Fried fish, hot corn-bread, baked in husks in the ashes, wild strawberries with coarse brown sugar sprinkled on them, and a cup of fresh buttermilk.

The girl ate with the healthy appetite that youth, a long fast, a day in the open, and a well-cooked meal can create. When she had finished she laid a silver half-dollar on the board beside the cracked plate.

"'Tain't nuthin'; no, 'tain't nuthin'. I jis' divided with ye," the fisherman insisted, shrilly.

"Oh, it is worth a dollar to drink this good buttermilk!"

Jerry lifted the cup, a shining silver mug, and turned it in the light. It was of an old pattern, with a quaint monogram on one side.

"This looks like an heirloom," she thought. "Why should a bear with cracked plates and iron knives and forks offer me a drink in a silver cup? There must be a story back of it. Maybe he's a nobleman in disguise. Well, the disguise is perfect. After all, it's as good as a novel to live in Kansas."

Jerry slowly sipped the drink as these thoughts ran through her mind. The meal was helping wonderfully to take the edge off of the tragedy of the morning. It would overwhelm her again later, but in this shady, restful solitude it slipped away.

She smiled down at the old man at the thought of him in a story. *Him!* But the smile went straight to his heart; that was Jerry's gift, making him drop his board tray and break the cracked plate in his confusion.

"Here's another quarter. That was my fault," Jerry insisted.

"Oh no'm, no'm! 'Tain't nobody's fault." The voice quavered as the scaly brown hand thrust back the proffered coin.

Jerry could not understand why this creature should refuse her money. Tipping, to her mind, covered all the obligations her class owed to the lower strata of the earth's formation.



At sunset York Macpherson drove into Ponk's garage.

"Hello, fellow-townsman! You look like a sick man!" he exclaimed, as the owner met him in the doorway.

"I'd 'a' been a dead man if you hadn't come this minute," Ponk growled back.

"Congratulations! The good die young," York returned. "I failed to get through to the place I wanted to see. That Saturday rain filled the dry upper channels where a bridge would rot in the tall weeds, but an all-day rain puts a dangerous flood in every ford, so I came back in time to save your life. What's your grievance?"

Ponk's face was agonizing between smiles and tears. "Well, spite of all I, or *anybody* could do, Miss Swaim takes my little gadabout this morning and makes off with it."

"And broke the wind-shield? I told you to keep her at home."

York still refused to be serious.

"I don't know what's broke, except my feelin's. You tried yet to *keep* her anywhere? She would go off to that danged infernal blowout section of the country, *and she ain't back yet.*"

York Macpherson grasped the little man by the arm. "Not back yet! Where is she, then?"

"She ain't; that's all I know," Ponk responded, flatly. "Yes, yes, yonder she is just soarin' into the avenue up by 'Castle Cluny' this minute. Thank the Lord an' that Quaker-colored gadabout!"

"Tell her I'll see her at the hotel as soon as I get my mail," York said, and he hurried to his office.

A few minutes later Jerry Swaim brought the gray runabout up to the doorway of the garage.

Ponk assisted her from it and took the livery hire mechanically.

"Thank you, Miss Swaim. Hope you had a safe day. No'm, that's too much," handing back a coin of the change. "That's regular. Yes'm." Then, as an afterthought, he added, with a bow, "York Macpherson he's in town again, an' he's waitin' to see you in the hotel 'parlor.'"

"Oh!" a gasp of surprise and relief. "Thank you, Mr. Ponk. Yes, I have had a safe day." And Jerry was gone.

The little man stared after her for a full minute. Then he gave a long whistle.

"She's a Spartan, an' she's goin' to die game. I'll gamble on that with Rockefeller. This is the rummiest, bummiest world I ever lived in," he declared to himself. "Why *the dickens* does the blowouts have to fall on the just as well as the unjust 's what I respectfully rise to ask of the Speaker of all good an' perfect gifts. An' I'm goin' to keep the floor till I get the recognition of Chair."

York Macpherson was standing with his back to the window, so that his face was in the shadow, when Jerry Swaim came into the little parlor. Her eyes were shining, and the pink bloom on her cheek betokened the tenseness of feeling held in check under a calm demeanor.

"Pardon me for keeping you waiting, Mr. Macpherson. I've been away from town all day and I wanted to get my mail before I came in. I'm a long way from everybody, you know."

There may have been a hint of tears in the voice, but the blue eyes were very brave.

"And you got it?"

That was not what York meant to say. It was well that his face was in the shadow while Jerry's was in the light. There are times when a man's heart may be cut to the quick, and because he is a man he must not cry out.

"No, not to-day. I don't know why," Jerry replied, slowly, with a determined set of her red lips, while the fire in her blue-black eyes burned steadily and the small hands gripped themselves together.

"I haven't had a word since I left home, and I had hoped that I might find a letter waiting for me here."

"Letters are delayed, and letter-writers, too, sometimes. Maybe they are all busy with Mrs. Darby's affairs. I remember when I was a boy up on the Winnowoc she could keep me busier than anybody else ever did," York offered.

"It must be that. Of course it must. Aunt Jerry is as industrious as I am idle." Jerry gave a sigh of relief.

After the strain of this day, it was vastly comforting to her to stop thinking *forward*, and just remember how beautiful it must be at "Eden" now; and Eugene was there, and it was twilight. But like a hot blast the memory of the hot sand-heaps of her landed estate came back.

"Did you want to see me about something?" she asked, suddenly. "Mr. Ponk said you did."

"Yes, Jerry. I came here to see you because my sister and I want you to come out to our house at once, and I have orders from Laura not to come home without

you."

"You are very kind. You know where I have been to-day?"

York smiled. Even in her abstraction Jerry felt the genial force of that smile. How big and strong he was, and there was such a sense of protection in his presence.

"Yes. You denied me the privilege of escorting you on this journey. I had written a full description of your property to Cornelius Darby, in reply to some questions of his, but his death must have come before the letter reached Philadelphia. In the mass of business matters Mrs. Darby may have missed my report."

"She may have," Jerry echoed, faintly. "I cannot say. Then it is my estate that is all covered with sand, barren and worthless as a desert? I thought I might have been mistaken."

The hope died out of Jerry's face with the query.

"I wish I could have saved you this surprise," York said, earnestly. "Come home with me now. 'Castle Cluny' must be your castle, too, as long as you can put up with us. And you can take plenty of time to catch your breath. The earth is a big place, and, while most of it is covered with water, very little of it is covered entirely with sand."

How kind his tones were! Jerry remembered again that both his sister and Mr. Ponk had urged her to wait for his coming. But she was not accustomed to waiting for anybody. A faint but persistent self-blame gripped her.

"May I stay with you until I find where I really am? Just now I'm all smothered in bewildering sand-dunes." She smiled up at the tall man before her with a confiding, appealing earnestness.

Many women smiled upon York Macpherson. Many women confided in him. He was accustomed to it.

"Laura will consider it a boon, for you must know that she sometimes gets a trifle lonely in New Eden. We'll call the compact finished." Only a gracious intuition could have turned the favor so graciously back to the recipient. But that was York's gift.

In the dining-room at "Castle Cluny" that evening Jerry noticed a silver cup with

a quaintly designed monogram on one side.

"That's an old heirloom," Laura said, as she saw her guest's eyes fixed on it. "Like everything else in this house, it is coupled up with some old Macpherson clan tradition, as befitting an old bachelor and old maid of that ilk."

"We used to have two of them," York said.

"We have yet somewhere," Laura replied. "I hadn't missed one from the sideboard before. It must be back in the silver-closet, with other old silver and old memories."

Jerry's day had been full of changes, up and down, from hope to bitter disappointment, from reality to forgetfulness, from clear conception to bewildered confusion, her mind had run since she had left the oak-grove in the forenoon. When she had occasion to remember that silver cup again, she wondered how she could have passed it over so lightly at this time.

Although Jerry's problem was very real, and she brought to its solution neither experience nor discipline, unselfish breadth nor spiritual trust, there was something in the homey atmosphere of "Castle Cluny" that seemed to smooth away the long day's wrinkles for her. Out in the broad porch in the twilight she nestled down like a tired child among the cushions, and gazed dreamily out at the evening landscape. York had been called away by a neighbor and Laura and her guest were alone.

"How beautiful it is here!" Jerry murmured, as the afterglow of a prairie sunset flooded the sky with a splendor of rose and opal and amethyst. "I saw a sunset like that not long ago in an art exhibit in Philadelphia. I thought then there couldn't be such a real sunset. It was in a landscape all yellow-gray and desert-like. I thought that was impossible, too. I've seen both—land and sky—to-day, and both are greater than the artist painted them."

"The artist never equals the thing he is trying to copy, neither can he create anything utterly unreal. I missed the exhibits very much when I first came West, but this is some compensation," Laura said, meditatively.

"Do you ever get lonely here? I suppose not, for you didn't come to find a great disappointment when you came to New Eden," Jerry declared, watching the tranquil face of her hostess.

"No, Jerry, I brought my disappointment with me," Laura said, with a smile that

made her look very much like her brother. And Jerry realized that Laura Macpherson's maimed limb had not broken her heart. Laura was a very new type to her guest.

"Oh, I get lonely sometimes and resentful sometimes," Laura went on, "but we get over a good many little things in the day's run. And then I have York, you know, and now and then a guest who means a great deal to me. I have so many interests here, too. You'll like New Eden when you really know us. And up here this porch has become my holy of holies. There is something soothing and healing in the breezes that sweep up the Sage Brush on summer evenings. There is something restful in the stretch of silent prairie out there, and the wide starlit sky above it. Kansas sooner or later always has a message for the sons and daughters of men."

"And something always interesting in our neighbors. See who approaches." York, who had just come up the side steps, supplemented his sister's remark.

"Oh, that is Mrs. Stella Bahrr, the Daily Evening News. Jerry, York can always unhitch your wagon from its star. She really is his black beast, though; but you can't expect mere men to take an interest in milliners, make-overs, at that, however much interest they take in millinery and what is under it."

"And millinery bills, with or without interest," York interferred again.

"Mrs. Bahrr will want a full report of Jerry, with the blank spaces for remarks filled out," Laura went on. "Why, she has changed her course and is tacking away with the wind."

"Going over to the Lenwells', I suppose. They are in some way sort of distantly related to her. Just near enough, anyhow, to listen to all her stories, and then say: 'For goodness sake don't say I told it; I got it from Stellar, you know.' She will put into any port right now. I'm her lighthouse warning," York declared. "She never approaches when I'm present."

York had risen and was standing in the doorway, where the growing moon revealed him clearly. Mrs. Bahrr, coming up the walk toward the Macpherson drive, suddenly turned about and hurried away, her tall, angular form in relief against the sky-line in the open space that lay between the Macpherson home and the nearest buildings down the slope toward the heart of the town.

"Coming back to common things," York continued, dropping into his favorite

chair. "My sister scandalizes me on every occasion. Whether or not you hitch your wagon to a star, Jerry, is not so important, after all. The real test is in just what kind of a star you hitch to. That will tell whether you are going to ride to glory or cut such a figure as the cow did that jumped over the moon."

"It is not always that lawyers give counsel for nothing, Jerry," Laura began, but the line of talk was again interrupted.

The coming of callers led to many lines of discussion during the long summer evening, in which Jerry took little part. In this new hemisphere in which she was trying to find herself, where east seemed south and her right hand her left, there was so much of the old hemisphere against which she had partly burnt her bridges. The friendly familiarity of New Eden neighbors was very different from the caste exclusiveness of the Darby-Swaim set in Philadelphia. With the Winnowoc Valley people the rich landholders had no social traffic. But the broad range of conversation to-night, token of general information, called up home memories in Jerry's mind and the long evenings when Jim Swaim's friends gathered there to discuss world topics with her father, while she listened with delight to all that was said. Her mother didn't care for these things and wondered why her artistic daughter could be so interested in them. But when the Macphersons and their guests spoke of the latest magazines and the popular fiction and the recent drama it brought up Lesa Swaim in her element to the listening young stranger. It seemed so easy for the Macphersons to entertain gracefully, to make everybody at home in the shadowy comfort of that big porch, to bring in limeade and nut-cakes in cut-glass and fine china service, to forget none of the things due to real courtesy, and yet to envelop all in the genuine, open-hearted informality of the genial, open-hearted West.

Long after the remainder of the Macpherson household was asleep Jerry Swaim lay wide awake, her mind threshed upon with the situation in which she had suddenly found herself. And over and over in the aisles of her thoughts what York Macpherson had said about unhitching from a star ran side by side with Uncle Cornie's words, "If a man went right with himself."

VIII

IF A MAN WENT RIGHT WITH HIMSELF

There were two of a kind of the Swaim blood, Geraldine Swaim, who had always had her own way, and Jerusha Swaim Darby, who had always had her own way. When the wills and the ways of these two clashed—well, Jerusha had lived many years and knew a thing or two by experience that niece Geraldine had yet to learn.

On the very day that Jerry Swaim left "Eden" Mrs. Darby had gone into the city for a conference with her late husband's business associates. Sloth in action never deprived her of any opportunities; and quick action now meant everything in the accomplishment of the purpose she had before her.

"Cornelius was such a quiet man, he was never very much company. He really did not care for people, like most men," Mrs. Darby said to her business partners, who had known her husband intimately. "Eugene Wellington has already surpassed him in getting hold of some things he never quite reached to, being an older man. And now that Eugene is proving such splendid help in taking up the less important details in my affairs he ought to do fine clerical work in the House here. There is no telling how much ability he may have for being useful to all of us along the lines that Cornelius has developed. He has proved that he is equal to a lot of things besides painting. People of little brain power and financial skill ought to paint the pictures and not rob our big affairs of business ability."

Mrs. Darby held a controlling interest in the House, so the outcome of the conference was that an easy berth on more than moderate pay, with possible prospects—just possible, of course—was what Mrs. Darby had to take back to "Eden" to serve up to Eugene Wellington when he should return from his brief errand up in the Winnowoc country. And as that was what Mrs. Darby wished to accomplish, her day's journey to the city was a success.

Only, that Winnowoc local was uncomfortably hot and crowded. Her trusty chauffeur had resigned his position on the day after Cornelius was buried, and Mrs. Darby was timid about the bluff road, anyhow. If only Jerry had been here

to drive for her! With all Jerry's dash and slash, she was a fearless driver and always put the car exactly where she wanted it to be. There was some satisfaction in having a hand like Jerry's on the steering-wheel. So, pleased as to one horn of her dilemma, but tired and perspiring, Mrs. Darby came home determined more than ever to bring about her other purpose—to have Jerry Swaim in her home, because she, Jerusha Darby, wanted her there.

Jerry always filled the place with interest. And Jerry was gone, actually gone, bag and baggage. She had cleared out that morning early on a fool's errand to Kansas. What right had Jerry to go off to earn a living when a living was here ready-made merely for her subjection to a selfish old woman's wishes? Mrs. Darby did not think it in such words, because she no more understood her own mind than that pretty girl with her dark-blue eyes and wavy, gold-tinged hair understood her own mind. One thing she did understand—Jerry must come back.

A week later Eugene Wellington dropped off the morning train running down from Winnowoc. It was too early for the household to be astir, save the early feeder of stock and milker of kine, the early man-of-all-odd-jobs who looked after the fowls, and the early maid-of-all-good-things-to-eat who would have big puffy biscuit for breakfast, with tender fried chicken and gravy that would stand alone. All the homey sounds of the early summer morning flitted out from the "Eden" kitchen and barn-yard. But the misty stillness of dawn rested on the "Eden" lawns, whose owner, with the others of the household, was not yet awake.

At the rose-arbor the young artist paused to let the refreshing morning zephyrs sweep across his face. He wondered if Jerry was awake yet. Ever since he had left "Eden" the hope had been growing in him that she would change her mind. After all, Aunt Jerry might be right about it. This was too beautiful a house to throw aside for a whim—an ideal, however fine, of self-support and all that. Women were made to be cared for, not to support themselves—least of all a pretty, wilful, but winsomely magnetic creature like Jerry Swaim, with her appealing, beautiful eyes, her brown hair all glinted with gold, her strong little white hands, and her daring spirit, exhilarating as wine in its exuberant influence. No, Jerry mustn't go. She belonged to the soft and lovely settings of life.

Eugene leaned against the door of the rose-arbor as these things filled his mind, and a love of the luxuries that surrounded him here drove back for the moment the high purpose of his own life.

In the woodwork of the arbor, where the lightning had left its imprint, he saw a little white envelop wedged in a splintered rift. The rose-vine had hid it from every angle except the one he had chanced to take. He slipped it out and read this inscription:

"To Mr. Eugene Wellington, Artist."

Inside, on Jerry's visiting-card, in her own hand-writing, was the message: "Write me at New Eden, Kansas, Care of Mr. York Macpherson. Don't forget what we are going to do, and when we have done, and won, we'll meet again. Good-by. Jerry."

The young artist dropped the card and stared down the lilac-bordered avenue toward the shadowy gray-blue west whither Jerry Swaim was gone. And all the world seemed gray-blue, a great void, where there was neither top nor bottom. Then he picked up the card again and put it into his pocket, and went into the house to get ready for breakfast.

Mrs. Darby greeted his return as warmly as it was in her repressed nature to do, conveying to him, not by any word, the feeling that he meant more to her now than he had ever meant before.

"Didn't Jerry leave suddenly? I didn't know she was going so soon. I—I was hoping—to find her here," was what he was going on to say.

"That she would be willing to stay here; to give up this scheme of hers." Mrs. Darby finished the sentence for him. "Yes, I hoped so, too. That was the only right thing to do. She chose her own time for leaving, but she will be back soon if we manage right. Don't be a bit discouraged, Eugene, and don't give up to her too much. She loves a resisting force. She always did."

Eugene looked anything but encouraged just then. All "Eden" was but an echo of Jerry Swaim, and the droop of his well-formed lips suggested only a feeble resisting force against her smallest wish.

"She is my own flesh and blood. I know her best, of course," Mrs. Darby went on. "The only way to meet her is to let her meet you. But we will drop that now. After breakfast I want you to look up the men. I have told them to report to you on the crop values, and harvest plans, and fall seeding later. Look over the place well, won't you? Then meet me in the rose-arbor at ten o'clock for a cup of tea and we will counsel together."

Mrs. Darby would have told the late Cornelius to "come in for instructions later." But Eugene Wellington wasn't a sure result. He was only in the process of solution. And Eugene, being very human, was unconsciously flattered by this deference to a penniless young man. It made him pleased with himself and gave him a vague sense of proprietorship which Cornelius Darby, the real-in-law owner of this fine country estate, never dreamed of enjoying.

"I wonder what Jerry is doing this morning," he thought as he rode Cornelius Darby's high-school-gaited horse to the far side of the place.

"The more I see of this farm the finer it looks to me. Not a foot of waste ground, not a nesting-place for weeds, not a broken fence; grove and stream, and tilled fields, and gardens, and lawns, and well-kept buildings. Not an unpainted board nor broken hinge—everything in perfect repair except that splintered framework at the rose-arbor." He paused on a little ridge above the Winnowoc from which the whole farm lay in full view. His artistic eye noted the peaceful beauty of the scene, the growing crops, the yellowing wheat, the black-green corn, the fertile meadows swathed in June sunshine, the graceful shrubbery and big forest trees through which the red-tiled roofs of the buildings glowed, the pigeons circling about the cupolas of the barn. And not the least attractive feature of the picture, although he was unconscious of it, was the young artist himself, astride a graceful black horse, in relief against a background of wooded border of the bluff above the clear gurgling Winnowoc. Eugene looked well on horseback, although he was no lover of horses, and preferred the steady, sure mounts to the spirited ones.

"I wonder if Jerry's big estate can be as well appointed as this. I wish she were here with me now." The rider fell to dreaming of Jerry, trying to put her in a picture of this "Eden" six times enlarged.



At this same hour Jerry Swaim was sitting in Junius Brutus Ponk's gray runabout under the shade of the low oak-grove, gazing with burning eyes at her own kingdom built out of Kansas sand.



Mrs. Darby had hot coffee and cold chicken and cherry preserves and cake with blackberry wine all daintily served for a hungry man to enjoy after a long three hours on horseback in the sunshine. The rose-arbor was odorous with perfume from the sweet-peas, clinging to the trellis that ran between the side lawn and the grape-arbor.

What took place in that council had its results in the letter that Eugene Wellington wrote that night to Jerry Swaim. He did not mail it for several days, and when he went to his tasks on the morning after his fingers had let go of it at the lip of the iron mail-box, the artist in him said things to him that to the day of his death he would never quite forget.



Late one afternoon, a fortnight after the day of Jerry's visit to her claim, Ponk, of the Commercial Hotel and Garage, slipped into the office of the Macpherson Mortgage Company.

"York, what happens to folks that tends to other folks's affairs?" he asked, as he spread his short proportions over a chair beside York's desk.

"Sometimes they get the gratitude of posterity. More generally their portion is present contempt and future obscurity. Are you in line for promotion on that, Ponk?" York replied.

"I'm 'bout ready to take chances," Ponk said, with a good-natured grin.

"All right. Am I involved in your scheme of things?" York inquired.

"You bet you are," Ponk assured him. "And, to be brief, knowin' how valuable your time is for goug'in' mortgages out of unsuspectin' victims—"

"Well, we haven't foreclosed on the Commercial Hotel and Garage yet," York interrupted.

"No, but you're likely to the minute my back's turned. That's why I have to go facin' south all the time. But to get to real business now, York—"

"I wish you would," York declared.

His caller paid no heed to the thrust, and continued, seriously, "I can't get some

things off my mind, and I've got to unload, that's all."

"Go ahead. I'm your dumping-ground," York said, with a smile.

"That's what you are, you son of a horse-thief. I mean the tool of a grasping bunch of loan sharks known as the Macpherson Mortgage Company. Well, it's that young lady at your house."

"I see. We robbed you of a boarder," York suggested.

"Aw, shut up an' listen, now, will you? You know I'm a man of affairs here. Owner and proprietor and man-of-all-work at the Commercial Hotel an' Gurrage, bass soloist in the Baptist choir, and—by the removal of the late deceased incumbent—also treasurer of the board of education of the New Eden schools —"

"All of which has what to do with the young lady from Philadelphia?" York inquired, blandly.

"Well, listen. Here's where tendin' to other folks's business comes in. A good-lookin' but inexperienced young lady comes out here from Philadelphia to find a claim left her by her deceased father. Out she goes to see said claim, payin' me good money for my best car—to ride in state over her grand province—of sand. And there wasn't much change but a pearl-handle knife an' a button-hook in her purse when she pays for the use of the car, even when I cut down half a buck on the regular hire. Her kind don't know rightly how to save money till they 'ain't none to save. But the look in her eyes when she come steamin' in from that jaunt was more 'n I could stand. York, she ain't the first Easterner to be fooled by the promise of the West. Not the real West, you understand, but the sham face o' things put up back East. An' here she be in our midst. Every day she goes by after the mail gets in, looking like one of them blue pigeons with all the colors of a opal on their necks, and every day she goes back with her face white around the mouth. She's walkin' on red-hot plowshares and never squealin'." Ponk paused, while York sat combing his fingers through his hair in silence.

"You know I'm some force on the school board, if I don't know much. I ain't there to teach anybody anything, but to see that such ignoramuses as me ain't put up to teach children. Now we are shy one teacher in the high-school by the sudden resignation of the mathematics professor to take on underwritin' of life insurance in the city. Do you suppose she'd do it? Would it help any if we offered the place to Miss Swaim? It might help to keep her in this town."

"Ponk, your heart's all right," York said, warmly. "It would help, I'm sure, if the lady is to stay here, for she is without means. She might or might not be willing to consider this opening. I can't forecast women. But, Ponk, could she teach mathematics? You know she was probably fashionably finished—never educated—in some higher school. If it were embroidery, or something like that, it might be all right."

"Oh, you trust me to judge a few things, even if I'm not up on the gentle art of foreclosin' mortgages and such. I know that girl could teach mathematics. Anybody who can run a car like she can with as true a eye for curves an' distances, and a head for bossin' a machine that runs by engine power, couldn't help but teach algebray and geometry just true as a right angle. But mebbby," and Ponk's countenance fell—"mebbby she'd not want to, nor thank me noways, nor you, neither, for interfering in the matter. But I just thought I'd offer you the chance to mebbby help her get on her feet. I don't know, though. I'd hate to lose her good-will. I just couldn't stand it."

"Ponk, I appreciate your motive," York said, feelingly. "I will take this up as soon as I can with Miss Swaim. You see, she's our guest and I can't very gracefully suggest that she seek employment. And, to be frank with you, my sister has become very fond of her—Laura misses a good many good things on account of her lameness—and we would like to keep her our guest indefinitely; but we can't do that, of course."

"I don't wonder your sister wants her. Of course, you don't care nothin' about it yourself. An' I'll have the board hold the place awhile to see what 'll happen. I must soar back home now." And the little man left the office.

"Sound to the core, if he does strut when strangers come to town. Especially ladies. That's the only way some little men have of attracting attention to themselves. A kind-hearted man as ever came up the Sage Brush," York commented, as he watched his caller crossing the street to the hotel.

That evening Jerry Swaim sat alone on the porch of the Macpherson home, where shafts of silvery moonlight fell through the honeysuckle vines. What York Macpherson would have called a fight between Jim Swaim's chin and Lesa's eyes was going on in Jerry's soul this evening. Since her visit to her claim life had suddenly become a maze of perplexities. She had never before known a care that could not have been lifted from her by others, except the one problem of leaving Philadelphia, and the solution of that might have been the prank of a

headstrong child, prompted by self-will and love of adventure, rather than by the grave decision of well-poised judgment. Heretofore in all her ventures a safe harbor had been near to shelter her. Now she was among the breakers and the storm was on.

For the first time in her memory her purse was light and there was no visible source from which to refill it. She was too well-bred to tax the hospitality of the Macpherson home, where she was made to feel herself so welcome. To return to Philadelphia meant to write and ask for the expenses of transportation. She had burned too many bridges behind her to meet the humility of such a request just yet; for that meant the subjection of her whole future to Jerusha Darby's will, and against such subjection Jerry's spirit rebelled mightily.

Every day for two weeks the girl had gone to the post-office with an eager, expectant face. Every evening she had asked York Macpherson if he had heard anything from Philadelphia since her coming, the pretended indifference in her tone hardly concealing the longing behind the query. But not a line from the East had come to New Eden for her.

On the afternoon of this day the postmaster had hurried through the letters because he, too, had caught the meaning of the hunger in the earnest eyes watching him through the little window among the letter-boxes. The mail was heavy to-day, but the distributor paused with one letter, long enough to look at it carefully, and then, leaving his work half finished, he hurried to the window.

"Here's something for you. Aren't you Miss Swaim?" he inquired, courteously, as he pushed the letter toward Jerry's waiting hand.

He had lived in Kansas since the passage of the homestead law. He knew the mark of homesickness on the face of a late arrival. Something in the cultivation of a new land puts a gentler culture into the soul. Out of the common heartache, the common sacrifice, the common need, have grown the open-hearted, keen-sighted, fine-fibered folk of the big and generous Middle West, the very heart of which, to the Kansan, is Kansas.

The postmaster turned quickly back to his task. He did not see the girl's face; he only felt that she walked away on air.

At York Macpherson's office she hesitated a moment, then hurried inside. York was in his private room, but the door to it stood open, and Jerry caught sight of a woman within.

"I beg your pardon." She blushed confusedly. "I don't want to intrude; I only wanted to stop long enough to read a letter from home."

Jerry's genuine embarrassment was very pretty and appealing, but York was shrewd enough to know that it came from the letter in her hand, not from any connection with his office or its occupants. Mrs. Stellar Bahrr, however, who happened to be the woman in the inner room, did not see the incident with York's eyes.

"Just come in here, Miss Swaim, and make yourself at home," York insisted. "Come, Mrs. Bahrr, we can finish our talk for to-day in one place as well as another. My sister and I are going across the river to spend the evening, so it will be late to-morrow before I can get those papers ready for you."

Mrs. Bahrr rose reluctantly, hooking her sharp eyes into the girl as she passed out. What she noted was a very white face where the color of the cheeks seemed burned in, and big, shining eyes. Of course the broad-brimmed chiffon hat with beaded medallions, the beaded parasol to match, and the beaded hand-bag of the same hues did not escape her eyes, especially the pretty hand-bag.

York closed the door behind the two, leaving Jerry in quiet possession of the inner room, while he seated Mrs. Bahrr in the outer office and engaged in the business that had brought her to him. He knew that she would be torn between two desires: one to hurry through and leave the office, and so be able to start a story of leaving Jerry and himself in a questionable situation; the other to stay and see the fair caller as she came out, and to learn, if possible, why she had come, and to enjoy her confusion in finding a woman still engaging York's time. Either thing would be worth while to Mrs. Bahrr, and while she hesitated York decided for her.

"I'll keep her with me, the old Long Tongue. Yea, she shall roost here in my coop till the little girl gets clear to 'Castle Cluny.' She sha'n't run off and overtake her prey and then cackle over it later. Jerry has committed the unpardonable sin of being young and pretty and good; the Big Dipper will make her pay for the personal insult."

In the midst of their business conversation Jerry Swaim came from the inner room, and with a half-audible word of thanks left the office. Mrs. Bahrr's back was toward the door, and, although she turned with a catlike quickness, she failed to see anything worth while except to get another good look at the hand-bag. Something told York Macpherson that the message in her letter held a

tragic meaning for the fair-faced girl who had waited so eagerly for its coming.

At dinner that evening York was at his best.

"I must make our girl keep an appetite," he argued. "Nothing matters if a dinner still carries an appeal. By George! I've got to do my best, or I'll lose my own taste for what Laura can set up if I don't look out. We are all getting thin except Laura. Even Ponk is losing his strut a bit. And why? Oh, confound it! there is plenty of time to ask questions in July and August when the town has its dull season."

So York came to dinner in one of his rarest moods, a host to make one's worries flee away.

Jerry had reread her letter in the seclusion of her room at "Castle Cluny." It did not need a third reading, for every word seemed graven on the reader's brain. In carefully typewritten form, with only the signature in the writer's own hand, it ran:

MY ALWAYS DEAR JERRY,—I should have written you days ago, but I did not get back to "Eden" until you had been gone a week. We are all so eager to hear how you are, and to know about the Swaim estate which you went to find. But we are a hundred times more eager to see your face here again. I wish you were here to-night, for I have been in the depths of doubt and indecision, from which your presence would have lifted me. I hope I have done the right thing, now it is done, and I'll wait to hear from you more eagerly than I ever waited for a letter before. Yet I feel sure you will approve of my course after you get over your surprise and have taken time to think carefully.

I had a long heart-to-heart talk with Aunt Jerry to-day. Don't smile and say a purse-to-purse talk. Full purses don't talk to empty ones. They speak a different language. But this to-day was a real confidence game as you might say. I received the confidence if I didn't die as game as you would wish me to.

To be plain, little cousin mine, I want you dreadfully to come back, so much so that I have decided to give up painting for the present and take a clerkship in the bank with Uncle Cornie's partners. I can see your eyes open wide with surprise and disappointment when I tell you that Aunt Jerry has really converted me to her way of thinking. My hours are easy and the pay is good. Not so much as I had hoped to have some day from my brush and may have yet, if this work doesn't make me fat and lazy, for there is really very little responsibility about it, just a decent accuracy. This makes so many things possible, you see, and then I have the satisfaction of knowing I am doing a service for Aunt Jerry—and, to be explicit—to put myself where I shall not have to worry over things when you come home. So I'm happy now. And when you get here I shall begin to live again. I seem to be staying here now. Staying and waiting for something. Nobody really lives at "Eden" without little Jerry to keep us all alive and keyed up. Nobody to take

the big car over the bluff road, beautiful as it is—for you know I'm too big a coward to drive it and to do a hundred things I'd do if you were here to brace me up.

Write me at once, little cousin, and say you will come home just as soon as you have seen all of that God-forsaken country you care to look at. And meantime I'll write as often as you want me to. I think of you every day and remember you in my prayers every night. You remember I told you I couldn't pray out in Kansas. May the Lord be good to you and make you love Him more than you think you do now, and bring you safe and soon to our beautiful "Eden."

Yours,

EUGENE.

The sands of the blowout on Jerry's claim seared not more hotly her fresh young hopes of prosperity, through her own effort and control, than this sudden change from the artist, with his dreams of beauty and power, to the man of easy clerical duty with a good salary and small responsibility. Of course Aunt Jerry had been back of it all, but so would Aunt Jerry have been back of her—if she had given up.

Jerry sat for a long time staring at the missive where it had fallen on the floor, the typewritten neatness of the blue lettering only a blur to her eyes. For she was back at "Eden," on the steep but beautiful bluff road, with Eugene afraid to drive the big Darby car. She was in the rose-arbor looking up to see that faint line of indecision in the dear, handsome face. She was in the "Eden" parlor under the soft light of rose-tinted lamps, facing Aunt Jerry and sure of herself, but catching again that wavering line of uncertainty on Eugene Wellington's countenance, and her own vague fear—unguessed then—that he might not resist in the supreme test.

But idols die hard. Eugene was her idol. He couldn't die at once. He was so handsome, so true, so gracious, so filled with a love of beautiful things. How could she understand the temptation to the soul of an artist in such lovely settings as "Eden" offered? It was all Aunt Jerry's fault, and he would overcome it. He must.

It was so easy to blame Aunt Jerry. It made everything clear. He had yielded to her cleverness and never known he was being ruled. With all her flippant,

careless youth, inexperience, and selfishness, Jerry was a keener reader of human nature than her lack of training could account for. She knew just the lines Aunt Jerry had laid, the net spread for Eugene's feet. But—Oh, things must come out all right. He would change.

This one thought rang up and down her scale of thinking, as if repeating would make true what Jerry knew was false.

"'If a man went right with himself.' Oh, Eugene, Eugene!" she murmured, half aloud. "You hitched your wagon to a star, but to what kind of a star—to what kind of a star?"

Then came a greater query: "Shall I go back to 'Eden,' to Aunt Jerry's rule, to Eugene, to love, to easy, dependent, purposeless living? Shall I?"

A blank wall seemed suddenly to be flung across her way. Should she climb over it, hammer an opening through it, or turn back and run from it?

With these questions stalking before her she had come out to dinner and York Macpherson's genial, entertaining conversation, and to Laura Macpherson's gracious intuition and soothing sympathy.

Early in the evening, as the Macphersons with their guest sat watching the splendor of the sunset sky, Jerry said, suddenly:

"It has been two weeks to-day since I came here. Quite long enough for a stranger's first visit."

"A 'stranger,'" Laura Macpherson repeated. "A 'stranger' who asked to be called 'Jerry' the first thing. We are all so well acquainted with this 'stranger' that we wouldn't want to give her up now."

"But I must give you up pretty soon." Jerry spoke earnestly.

"Why 'must'? Has the East too strong a hold for the West to break?" York asked.

"I came out here because I believed my land would support me, and I had all sorts of foolish dreams of what I might find here that would be new and romantic." Jerry's eyes had a far-away look in them as she recalled the unrealized picture of her prairie domain.

"You haven't answered my question yet," York reminded her.

Jerry dropped her eyes, the bloom deepened on her fair cheek, and she clasped her small hands together. For a long time no word was spoken.

"I didn't answer your question. I am not going back to Philadelphia. There must be something else besides land in the West," Jerry said, at last.

"Yes, we are here. Do stay right here with us," Laura Macpherson urged, warmly.

Every day the companionship of this girl had grown upon her, for that was Jerry's gift. But to the eager invitation of her hostess the girl only shook her head.

York Macpherson sat combing his fingers through the heavy brown waves of his hair, a habit of his when he was thinking deeply. But if a vision of what might be came to him unbidden now, a vision that had come unbidden many times in the last two weeks, making sweeter the smile that won men to him, he put it resolutely away from him for the time. He must help this girl to help herself. Romance belonged to other men. He was not of the right mold for that—not now, at least.

"I heard to-day that there is need of a mathematics teacher in our high-school for next year. It pays eighty dollars a month," he said.

"Oh, York," Laura protested, earnestly. "You know Jerry never thought of such a thing as teaching. And I really must have her here. You are away so much, you know you are."

But her brother only smiled. When York Macpherson frowned he might be giving in, but his sister knew that his smile meant absolute resistance.

"Ponk was talking to me to-day. He is the treasurer of the school board now, and he mentioned the vacancy. He was casting about for some one fitted to teach mathematics. Even though his mind runs more on his garage than on education, he has a deep interest in the schools. He admires your ability to manage a car so much it occurred to him that you might consider this position. Fine course of reasoning, but he is sure of his ground."

"Let me think it over," Jerry said, slowly.

"And then forget it," Laura suggested. "York and I are invited out this evening. Won't you come with us? It is just a little informal doings across the river."

"I would rather be alone to-night," her guest replied.

So the Macphersons let her have her way.

IX

IF A WOMAN WENT RIGHT WITH HERSELF

And thus it happened that Jerry Swaim was alone this evening behind the honeysuckle-vines, with leaf shadow and moonbeams falling caressingly on her filmy white gown and golden hair. For a long time she sat still. Once she said, half aloud, unconscious that she was speaking at all:

"So Eugene Wellington has given up his art for an easy berth in the Darby bank. He hadn't the courage to resist the temptation, though it made him a tool instead of a master of tools. And we promised each other we would each make our own way, independent of Aunt Jerry's money. Maybe if I had been there things would have been different."

She gripped her hands in her quick, nervous way, as a homesick longing swept her soul. She was searching a way out for Eugene, a cause for putting all the blame on Aunt Jerry.

"I wish I had gone with the Macphersons. I could have forgotten, for a while at least."

A light step inside the house caught her ear.

"Maybe Laura has come home," she thought, too absorbed in herself to ask why Laura should have chosen the side door when she knew that Jerry was alone on the front porch.

Again she heard a movement just inside the open door; then a step on the threshold; and then a tall, thin woman walked out of the house and half-way across the wide porch before she caught sight of Jerry in an easy-chair behind the honeysuckle-vines. The intruder paused a second, staring at the corner where the girl sat motionless. From her childhood Jerry had possessed unusual physical courage. To-night it was curiosity, rather than fright, that prompted her to keep still while the strange woman's eyes were upon her. Evidently the intruder was more surprised than herself, and Jerry let her make the first move in the game. The woman was angular, with swift but ungraceful motion. For a long time, as such seconds go, she stared at the white figure hidden by the shadows of the

vines. Then with a quick stride she thrust herself before the girl and dropped into a chair.

"Well, well! This is Miss Swim, ain't it?"

"As well that as anything. I can't land anywhere," Jerry thought.

"I'm Mrs. Stellar Bahrr, a good friend of Laury Macpherson as she's got in this town, unless it's you. I seen you in York's office this afternoon. I was sorry I intruded on you two when you come purpose to see him in his private office. When girls wants to see him that way they don't want nobody, 'specially women, around."

Mrs. Bahrr paused to giggle and to give Jerry time to parry her thrust, meanwhile pinning her through with the sharp points of her eyes that fairly gleamed in the shadow-checked moonlight of the porch. Jerry was not accustomed to being accountable to anybody for what she chose to do, nor did she know that every man in New Eden, except York Macpherson and Junius Brutus Ponk—and every woman, without exception—really feared Stella Bahrr, knowing that she would hesitate at no kind of warfare to accomplish her purpose. It is generally easier to be decent than to be courageous, and peace at any price may be more desired than nasty word battles. Not knowing Stella for the woman she was, Jerry had no mind to consider her at all, so she waited for her caller to proceed or to leave her.

"You must excuse me if I seem to be interfering in your affairs. You are a stranger here except to York and that man Ponk—" Stella began, thrusting her hooks more viciously into her catch.

"Oh, you didn't interfere," Jerry interrupted her indifferently, and then paused.

Mrs. Bahrr caught her breath. The girl was sinfully pretty and attractive, her beauty and grace in themselves alone railing out at the older woman's ugly spirit of envy. And she should be tender, with feeling to be lacerated for these gifts of nature. Instead, she was firm and hard, with no vulnerable spot for a poisoned shaft.

"I'm sure you had a right to go into a man's private office. It's everybody's right, of course," she began, with that faint sneering tone of hers that carried a threat of what might follow.

"Yes, but a little discourteous in me to drive you out. That was Mr. Macpherson's fault, not mine," Jerry broke in, easily.

"Maybe that's her grievance. I'll be decent about it," the girl was thinking.

"I'm awfully bored right now." The wind shifted quickly. "I run up to see Laury a minute. Just slipped in the side-stoop way to save troublin' you an' York out here. I knowed Laury wouldn't be here, an', would you believe it? I clar forgot they was gone out, an' I seen you all leavin', too—I mean them, of course."

The threatening tone could not be reproduced. It carried, however, a most uncomfortable force like a cruel undertow beneath the seemingly safe crest of a wave.

"It's a joke on me bein' so stupid, but you won't give me away to 'em, will you?"

"I'm awfully bored, too," Jerry thought.

"You say you won't tell 'em at all that I come?" Mrs. Bahrr insisted.

"Not if you say so," Jerry replied, with a smile.

"I'm an awfully good friend of Laury's. She's a poor cripple, dependent on her brother for everything, an' if he marries, as he's bound to do, I'd hate to see her turned out of here. This house is just Laury through and through. Don't you think so? 'Course, though, if York marries again—" Stellar Bahrr stopped meditatively. "All the women in the Sage Brush Valley's just crazy about York. He's some flirt, but everybody thought he'd settled his mind once sure. But I guess he flared up again, from what they say. She's too fur away from town a'most. Them that's furtherest away don't have a chance like them that's nearest him. But it may be all just gossip. There was a lot of talk about him an' a girl down the river that's got a crippled brother—Paul Ekblad's his name; hers is Thelmy—an' some considerable about one of the Poser girls where he was up the Sage Brush to this week. The married one now, I think, an' a bouncin' big baby, but what do you care for all that?"

"Nothing," Jerry replied, innocently.

The steel hooks turned slowly to lacerate deeper.

"Well, I must be goin'. You give me your word you wouldn't cheep about my forgettin' an' runnin' in here. York's such a torment, I'd never hear the last of it. I know you are a honorable one with your promises, an' I like that kind. I'm glad I met you. An' I'll not say a word, neither, 'bout your goin' to see York in his private office. It's a bargain 'tween us two. Laury's an awfully good friend of

yours an' she'll keep you here a good long while, she's that hospitable."

The steel hooks tore their way out, and the woman rose and strode quickly away. In a minute she had literally dropped from view in the shaded slope beyond the driveway.

"I might as well punch a stick in water or stick a pin in old Granddad Poser's tombstone out in the cimeter, an' expect to find a hole left, as to do anything with that pink-an'-white-an'-gold critter!" she exclaimed, viciously, as she disappeared in the shadows. "I'm afraid of her than I would be of a real mad-cat, but she can't scare me!"

Out on the lawn the moon just then seemed to cast a weird gleam of light, and to veil rather than reveal the long street beyond it. For a minute after the passing of her uninvited caller Jerry Swaim was filled with an unaccountable fright. Then her pulse beat calmly again and she smiled at herself.

"I don't seem to fear these Kansas men—Mr. Ponk, for example, nor that Teddy-bear creature down by the deep hole in the Sage Brush. But these Kansas women, except Laura—anybody would except Laura—are so impossible. That dairy-maid type of a Thelma, and that woman-and-baby combination, for example; and some of the women really scare me. That aborigine down in the brush by the river, in her shabby clothes and sunbonnet eclipse; and now this 'Stellar' comes catfooting out of the house and lands over yonder in the shadows. She needn't have been bored because she didn't find the folks at home, and she needn't frighten me so. I never was afraid of Aunt Jerry. I ought to be proof against anybody else. And yet maybe I am in the way here, even if they drive the very idea away from me. Laura is good to me and her friendliness is genuine. Little as I know, I *know* that much. And York—oh, that was a village gossip's tale! And she gets me scared—I, whom even Jerusha Darby never cowed."

The poison was working, after all, and Stellar Bahrr's sting had not been against marble, nor into water. With the memory of Jerusha Darby, too, the burden came again to her niece's mind, only to be lifted again, however, in a few minutes. Her memory had run back to her day down the river and the oak-grove and the sand, and the young man whose name was Joe Thomson—Jerry did not remember the name—and the crushing weight of surprise and disappointment. The struggle to decide on a course for herself immediately was rising again within her, when she saw a young man turn from the street and come up the walk toward the porch.

"I can't have leisure to settle anything by myself, it seems, even with the lord and

lady of the castle leaving me in full seclusion here. One caller goes and another comes. I wonder what excuse this one has for intruding. He is another type—one I haven't met before."

In the time required for this caller to reach the porch there flashed through Jerry's mind all the types she had seen in the West. Ponk and Thelma and fuzzy Teddy, the woman-and-baby, Laura and York, and that pin-eyed gossip—and the young country fellow whose land lay next to hers. None of them concerned her, really, except these hospitable friends who were sheltering her, and, in a way, in an upright, legal, Jim Swaim kind of way, the young man down the Sage Brush, losing in the game like herself and helpless like herself.

It was no wonder that Jerry did not recognize in this caller the ranchman of the blowout. There was nothing of the clodhopper in this well-dressed young fellow, although he was not exactly a model for advertising high-grade tailoring.

"Is this Miss Swaim?" he asked, lifting his hat. "I am Joe Thomson. You may remember that we met down in the blowout two weeks ago."

"I could hardly forget meeting you. Will you sit down?" Jerry offered Joe a chair with a courtesy very unlike the blunt manner of her first words to him a fortnight before.

But in the far recesses of her consciousness all the while the haunting, ever-recurring picture of a handsome face and a faultlessly clad form, even the face and form of a Philadelphia bank clerk, *né* artist, made the reality of Joe Thomson's presence very commonplace and uninteresting at that moment, and her courtesy was of a perfunctory sort.

"I hope I don't intrude. Were you busy?" Joe asked, something of the embarrassment of the first meeting coming back with the question.

"Yes, I was very busy," Jerry replied, with a smile. "Pick-up work, though. I was just thinking. Lost in thought, maybe."

The moonlight can do so much for a pretty woman, but with Jerry Swaim one could not say whether sunlight, moonlight, starlight, or dull gray clouds did the most. For two weeks the memory of her fair face, as he recalled it in the oak shade down beside the blowout, had not been absent from the young ranchman's mind. And to-night this dainty girl out of the East seemed entrancing.

"You were lost in thought when I saw you before. I had an idea that city girls

didn't do much thinking. Is it your settled occupation?" Joe inquired, with a smile in his eyes.

"It is my only visible means of support right now; about as profitable, too, as farming a blowout," Jerry returned.

"Which reminds me of my purpose in thrusting this call upon you," Joe declared. "I didn't realize the situation the other day—and—well, to be plain, I came to beg your pardon for my rudeness in what I said about your claim. I had no idea who you were, you know, but that hardly excuses me for what I said."

"It is very rude to speak so slightingly of land that behaves as beautifully as mine does," Jerry said, with a smile that atoned for the trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"It is very rude to speak as slightingly as I did of the former owner. But you see I have watched that brainless blowout thing creep along, season after season, eating up my acres—my sole inheritance, too."

"And you said you didn't go mad," Jerry interposed.

"Yes, but I didn't say I didn't get mad. I have worn out enough profanity on that blowout to stock the whole Sage Brush Valley."

"But you aren't to the last resort, for you do go mad here then, you told me. I wonder you aren't all madmen and women when I think of this country and remember how different I had imagined it would be."

"When we come to the very last ditch, we really have two alternatives—to go mad and to go back East. Most folks prefer the former. But I say again, it's always a long way to the last ditch out on the Sage Brush, so we seldom do either."

"What should I do now? Won't you tell me? I'm really near my last ditch."

Jerry sat with clasped hands, looking earnestly into Joe's face, as she said this. Oh, fair was she, this exquisite white-blossom style of girl, facing her first life-problem, the big problem of living. Joe Thomson made no reply to her question. What could this dainty, untrained creature do with the best of claims? The frank sincerity of his silence made an appeal to her that the wisest advice could not have made just then.

York Macpherson was right when he said that Jim Swaim's child was a type of

her own. If Jerry, through her mother's nature, was impulsive and imaginative, from her father she had inherited balance and clear vision. Her young years had heretofore made no call upon her to exercise these qualities. What might have been turned to the frivolous and romantic in one parent, and the hard-headed and grasping in the other, now became saving qualities for the child of these two. In an instant Jerry read the young ranchman's character clearly and foresaw in him a friend and helper. But there was neither romance nor selfishness in that vision.

"Mr. Thomson," the girl began, seriously, "you need not apologize for what you could not help feeling about the condition of my estate and the wrong that has been done to you. I know you do not hold me responsible for it. Let's forget that you thought you had said anything unpleasant to me, for I want to ask your advice."

"Mine!" Joe Thomson exclaimed.

This sweet-faced, soft-voiced girl was walking straight into another heart in the Sage Brush Valley. Nature had given her that heritage, wherever she might go.

"Yes, your advice, please." Jerry went on. "You have watched that sand spreading northward over your claim. You have had days, months, years, maybe, to see the blowout doing its work. I awakened suddenly one morning from a beautiful day-dream. My only heritage left of all the fortune I had been brought to expect to be mine, the inheritance I had idealized with all the romantic beauty and prosperity possible to rural life, in a minute all this turned to a desert before my eyes. You belong to the West. Tell me, won't you, what is next for me?"

"What could I tell you, Miss Swaim?" Joe asked.

"Tell me what to do, I mean," Jerry exclaimed. "Tell me quickly, for I am right against the bread-line now."

For a moment Joe stared at the girl in amazement. Her earnestness left no room to misunderstand her. But his senses came back quickly, as one whose life habit it had been to meet and answer hard questions suddenly.

"Why not go back East?" he asked.

"One of your two last resorts; the other one is madness. I won't do it," Jerry said, stubbornly. "Shall I tell you why?"

It was a delicious surprise to the young ranchman to be taken into the confidence

of this charming, gracious girl. The honeysuckle leaves, stirred by the soft night breeze that came purring across the open plain, gave the moonbeams leave to play with the rippling gold of her hair, and to flutter ever so faintly the soft white draperies of her gown. Her big dark eyes, her fair white throat and shoulders, the faint pink hue of her cheeks, the shapely white arms below the elbow-frilled sleeves, her soft voice, her frank trust in his judgment and integrity, made that appeal that rarely comes to a young man's heart oftener than once in a lifetime.

"My father lived a rich man and died a poor man, leaving me—for mother went first—to the care of his wealthy sister. A half-forgotten claim on the Sage Brush is my only possession after two years of litigation and all that sort of thing." Jerry paused.

"Well?" Joe queried.

"I was offered one of two alternatives: I might be dependent on my aunt's bounty or I could come out West and live on my claim. I chose the West. Now what can I do?"

The pathos of the young face was touching. The question of maintenance is hard enough for the resourceful and experienced to meet; how doubly hard it must be to the young, untried, and untrained!

Joe Thomson looked out to where the open prairie, swathed in silvery mist, seemed to flow up to the indefinite bounds of the town. All the earth was beautiful in the stillness of the June night.

"I don't know how to advise you," he said, at length. "If you were one of us—a real Western girl—it would be different."

To Jerry this sincerity outweighed any suggestion he could have offered. From the point of romance this young man was impossible to Lesa Swaim's child. Yet truly nobody before, not even York Macpherson, had ever seemed like such a real friend to her, and the chance acquaintance was reaching by leaps and bounds toward a genuine comradeship.

"Why do you stay here? You weren't born here, were you? Tell me about yourself," Jerry demanded.

"There's a big difference between our cases," Joe replied, wondering how this girl could care anything for his life-story. "I was the oldest child of our family. My father came out here on account of his health, but he came too late, and died,

leaving me the claim on the Sage Brush and my pledge on his death-bed never to leave the West, for fear I, too, would become an invalid as he had been. There seems to be little danger of that, and I like the West too well to leave it now. And then, besides, I'm like a lot of other fellows who claim to love the Sage Brush. I haven't the means to get away and start life anywhere else, anyhow. You see, we are as frank out here about our conditions as you Philadelphians are."

He smiled and looked down at his strong hands and sturdy arms. It would be difficult to think of Joe Thomson as an invalid.

"I inherited, besides my claim and my promise, the provision for two younger sisters, housed with relatives in the East, but supported by contributions from this same Sage Brush claim on which I have had to wrestle with the heat and drought that sear the prairies. And now, when both my sisters, who married young, are provided for and settled in homes of their own, and I can begin to live my own life a little, comes my enemy, the blowout—"

"Oh, I never want to think of that awful thing!" Jerry cried. "I shall give the Macpherson Mortgage Company control of the entire sand-pile. I'll never play there again, never!"

In the silence that followed something in the beauty of the midsummer night seemed to fall like a benediction on this man and this woman, each facing big realities. And, however different their equipment for their struggles had been in previous years, they were not so far apart now as their differing circumstances of life would indicate.

"I must be going now. I did not mean to take so much of your time. I came only to assure you that I am not always so rude as the mood you found me in the other day would indicate." Joe rose to go with the words.

Jerry's mind had run back again, dreamily, to Gene Wellington, of Philadelphia, the Gene as she knew and remembered him. It was not until afterward that she recalled her surprise that this ranchman of the Western prairies should have such a simple and easy manner whose home life had evidently been so unlike her own.

"You haven't stayed too long," she said, frankly. "And you haven't yet suggested what an undertrained Philadelphia girl can do to keep the coyote from her dugout portal."

If only she had been a little less bewitchingly pretty, a little less sure that the distance of planet from planet lay between them, a strange sense of sorrow, and a strange new purpose would not have found a place in Joe Thomson's heart then. With a perception much keener than her own, he read Jerry's mind that night as she had never tried to read it herself.

"I'm better up on soils and farm products than on civic problems and social economy and such. Dry farming, clerking, sewing, household economics in somebody's cook-shack, teaching school, giving music lessons, canvassing for magazines—the Sage Brush girls do things like these. I wish I could name a calling more suitable for you, but this is the only line I can offer," Joe said, thinking how impossible it would be for the girl beside him to fit into the workaday world of the Sage Brush Valley. On the next ranch to his own up the river a fair-haired, sun-browned girl was working in the harvest-field this season to save the price of a hired hand, toward going to college that fall. Jolly, strong-handed, strong-hearted Thelma Ekblad, whose name was yet to adorn an alumni record of the big university proud to call her its product. Jerry Swaim would never thrive in the same soil with this stout Norwegian.

They were standing on the porch steps now, and the white moonbeams glorified Jerry's beauty, for the young ranchman, as she looked up at him with a smile on her lips and eyes full of light, a sudden decision giving new character to her countenance. The suddenness of it, that was her mother's child. The purpose, that was the reflection of Jim Swaim's mind.

"I'm on the other side of my Rubicon. I'm going to teach mathematics in the New Eden high-school. Will you help me to keep across the river? There's an inspiration for me in the things that you can do?"

"You! Teach mathematics! They always have a man to teach that!" Joe exclaimed, wondering behind his words if he only dreamed that she had asked him to help to keep her across her Rubicon, or if she had really said such a beautiful thing to him, Joe Thomson, sand-fighter and general loser, who wouldn't be downed.

"Oh, I don't wonder you are surprised! I always jump quickly when I do move. You think I couldn't teach A, B, C, the known quantities, let alone x, y, z, the unknown quantities, don't you?" Jerry said, gaily. "When I went to school I was a flunker in languages and sciences. I was weak in boarding-school embroidery, too, because I never cared for those things, nor was I ever made to study

anything unless I chose to do it. But I was sure in trigonometry and calculus, which I might have dodged and didn't. I reveled in them. My mother was scandalized, and Gene Wellington, an artist, who, by the way, has just given up his career for a good bank clerkship in Philadelphia, a sort of cousin of mine, was positively shocked. It seemed so unrefined and strong-minded. But my father said I was just his own flesh and blood in that line. Yes, I'll teach school. Mr. Ponk is going to offer me the position, and it's a whole lot better than the poor-house, or madness, or the East, maybe," she added, softly, with a luminous glow in her beautiful eyes.

The old Sage Brush world seemed to slip out from under Joe Thomson's feet just then.

"Is your friend related to John Wellington, who once lived in Philadelphia?" he asked, after a pause, his mind far away from his query.

"Why, he's John Wellington's son! John Wellington was a sort of partner of my father's once," Jerry said. Even in the soft light Joe saw the pink flush deepen on the girl's cheek. "Good night." She offered him her hand. "I hope I may see you often. Oh, I hate that blowout, and you ought to hate me on account of it."

"It is a brainless, hateful thing," Joe Thomson declared, as he took her proffered hand. "All my streams seem to be Rubicons, even to the crooked old Sage Brush. I can't be an inspiration to anybody. It is you who can give me courage. If you can teach mathematics in New Eden, *I believe I can kill that blowout.*"

The strength of a new-born purpose was in the man's voice.

"Oh, no, you can't, for it's mostly on my land yet!" Jerry replied.

"Well, what of it? You say you won't play in that old sand-pile any more. What do you care who else plays there? Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Thomson. Why, what is that?" Jerry's eyes were on a short, squat figure standing in the middle of the gateway to the Macpherson grounds.

"That's 'Fishing Teddy,' an old character who lives a hermit kind of life down the Sage Brush. He comes to town about four times a year; usually walks both ways; but I promised to take him out with me to-night. He's harmless and gentle. Everybody likes him—I mean of our sort. You wouldn't be interested in him. His real name is Hans Theodore, but, of course, nobody calls him Mr. Theodore. Everybody calls him 'Fishing Teddy.' Good night, Miss Swaim."

Joe Thomson lifted his hat and walked away.

Jerry saw the old man shuffle out and join him, and the two went down the street together, one, big and muscular, with head erect and an easy, fearless stride; the other, humped down, frowsy, shambling, a sort of half-product of humanity, whose companion was the river, whose days were solitary, who had no part in the moonlight, the perfume of honeysuckle blossoms, the pleasure of companionship, the easy comfort that wealth can bring. His to bear the heat and the cinders on the rear platforms of jerky freight-trains, his to serve his best food to imperious young city girls lost in an impetuous passion of disappointment in a new and bewildering land. And yet his mind was serene. Knowing the river would bring him his food in the morning and his commodity of commerce for his needs, he was vastly more contented with his lot to-night than was the stalwart young man who stalked beside him, grimly resolving to go out and do things.

Jerry watched the two until they turned into a side-street and disappeared. The moonlight was wondrously bright and the air was like crystal. A faint, sweet odor from hay-fields came up the valley now and then, and all the world was serenely silent under the spell of night. The net seemed torn away from about the girl's feet, the cloud lifted from her brain, the blinding, blurring mists from before her eyes.

"I have crossed my Rubicon," she murmured, standing still in the doorway of the porch trellis, breathing deeply of the pure evening air. "I'm glad he came. I am free again, and I'm really happy. I suppose I am queer. If anybody should put me in a novel, the critics would say 'such a girl never came to Kansas.' But then if Gene should paint that blowout, the critics would say 'there never was such a landscape in Kansas.' These critics know so much. Only Gene will never paint any more pictures—not masterpieces, anyhow. But I'm going to live my life my own way. I won't go back to idleness and a life of sand at 'Eden.' I'll win out here—I will, I will! 'If a woman goes right with herself.' Oh, Uncle Cornie, I am starting. Whether I hold out depends on the way—and myself."

When Laura Macpherson peeped into Jerry's room late that night she saw her guest sleeping as serenely as if her mind had never a puzzling question, her sunny day never a storm-cloud. So far Jerry had gone right with herself.

X

THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER

The big dramas of life are enacted in the big centers of human population. Great cities foster great commercial institutions; they father great constructive enterprises; they endow great educational systems; they build up great welfare centers; and they reach out and touch and shape great national and international conditions. In them the big tragedies and comedies of life—political, religious, social, domestic—have their settings. And under the power of their combined units empires appear and disappear. But, set in smaller font, all the great dramas of life are printed, without a missing part, in the humbler communities of the commonwealth. All the types appear; all conditions, aspirations, cunning seditions, and crowning successes have their scenery and *persona* so true to form that sometimes the act itself takes on the dignity of the big world drama. And the actor who produces it becomes a star, for villainy or virtue, as powerful in his sphere as the great star-courted suns of larger systems. Booth Tarkington makes one of his fiction characters say, "There are as many different kinds of folks in Kokomo as there are in Pekin."

New Eden in the Sage Brush Valley, on the far side of Kansas, might never inspire the pen of a world genius, and yet in the small-town chronicle runs the same drama of life that is enacted on the great stage with all its brilliant settings. Only these smaller actors play with the simplicity of innocence, never dreaming that what they play so well are really world-sized parts fitted down to the compass of their settings.

Something like this philosophy was in York Macpherson's mind the next morning as he listened to his sister and her guest loitering comfortably over their breakfast. A cool wind was playing through the south windows that might mean hot, sand-filled air later on. Just now life was worth all the cost to York, who was enjoying it to the limit as he sat studying the two women before him.

"For a frivolous, spoiled girl, Jerry can surely be companionable," he thought, as he noted how congenial the two women were and how easily at home Jerry was even on matters of national interest. "I never saw a type of mind like hers before—such a potentiality for doing things coupled with such dwarfed results."

York's mind was so absorbed, as he sat unconsciously staring at the fair-faced girl opposite him, that he did not heed his sister's voice until she had spoken a second time.

"York, oh York! wake up. It's daylight!"

York gave a start and he felt his face flush with embarrassment.

"As I was saying half an hour ago, brother, have you seen my little silk purse anywhere? There was too much of my scant income in it to have it disappear entirely."

"Yes, I took it. I 'specially needed the money for a purpose of my own. I meant to tell you, but I forgot it. I'll bring back the purse later," York replied.

Of course Laura understood that this was York's return for catching him at a disadvantage, but she meant to pursue the quest in spite of her brother's teasing, for she was really concerned.

Only a few days before, the New Eden leak had opened again and some really valuable things, far scattered and hardly enough to be considered separately, had disappeared. Laura by chance had heard that week of two instances on the town side of the river, and on the evening previous of one across the river.

Before she spoke again she saw that Jerry's eyes were fixed on the buffet, where two silver cups, exactly alike, sat side by side. There was a queer expression about the girl's mouth as she caught her hostess's eye.

"Is there any more silver of that pattern in this part of the country?" she asked, with seeming carelessness, wrestling the while with a little problem of her own.

"Not a pennyweight this side of old 'Castle Cluny' in Scotland, so far as I know," York replied. "There's your other cup, after all, Laura. By the way, Miss Jerry, how would you like to take a horseback ride over 'Kingussie'? I must go to the far side of the ranch this morning, and I would like a companion—even yourself."

"Do go, Jerry. I don't ride any more," Laura urged, with that cheerful smile that told how heroically she bore her affliction. "I used to ride miles with York back in the Winnowoc country."

"And York always misses you whenever he rides," her brother replied, beaming

affectionately upon his brave, sweet sister. "Maybe, though, Jerry doesn't ride on horseback," he added.

At Laura's words Jerry's mind was flooded with memories of the Winnowoc country where from childhood she had taken long, exhilarating rides with her father and her cousin Gene Wellington.

"I've always ridden on horseback," she said, dreamily, without looking up.

"She's going to ride with me, not with ghosts of Eastern lovers, if she rides today," York resolved, a sudden tenseness catching at his throat.

"What kind of mounts are you afraid of? I can have Ponk send up something easy," he said, in a quiet, fatherly way.

Jerry's eyes darkened. "I can ride anything your Sage Brush grows that you call a saddle-horse," she declared, with pretty daring. "Why, 'I was the pride of the countryside' back in a country where fine horses grew. Really and seriously, it was Cousin Gene who was afraid of spirited horses, and he looked so splendid on them, too. But he couldn't manage them any more than he could run an automobile over the bluff road above the big cut this side of the third crossing of the Winnowoc. He preferred to crawl through that cut in the slow old local train while I climbed over the bluffs in our big car. You hadn't figured on my boasting qualities, had you?" she added, with a smile at her own vaunting words.

"Oh, go on," Laura urged. "I heard your father telling us once that your cousin, on the Darby side, would ride out with you bravely enough, but that you traded horses when you got off the place and you always came back home on the one they were afraid for you to take out and your cousin was afraid to ride back."

"She *climbed* while Cousin Gene *crawled*. I believe she said something there, but she doesn't know it yet; and it's not my business to tell her till she asks me." York shut his lips grimly at the unspoken words. "We'll be back, appetite and sundries, for the best meal the scullery-maid can loot from the village," he said, as they rose from the table.

When Jerry came out of the side door, where York was waiting for her, she suggested at once a model for a cover illustration of an outing magazine, an artistic advertisement for well-tailored results, and a type of young American beauty. As they rode back toward the barns and cattle-sheds that belonged to the ranch edging the corporation limits of New Eden, neither one noticed the tall,

angular form of Mrs. Stellar Bahrr as she came striding across lots toward the driveway.

Stellar lived in a side street. Her back yard bordered a vacant lot on the next side street above her. Crossing this, she could slip over the lawn of a vacant house and down the alley half a block, and on by the United Brethren minister's parsonage. That let her sidle between a little carpenter-shop and a shoe-shop to the rear gateway into an alley that led out to the open ground at the foot of the Macpherson knoll. Stellar preferred this corkscrew route to the "Castle." It gave her several back and side views, with "listening-posts" at certain points.

"Oh, good morning, Laury! I'm so glad to find you alone. I'm in a little trouble, an' mebbe you can help me out. You are everybody's friend, just like your brother, exactly. Only his bein' that way's bound to get him into trouble sooner or before that. Eh! What's that you're lookin' at?"

Laura had gone to the buffet after the riders had started away. She had a singular feeling about that cup appearing so suddenly. She remembered now that Jerry had asked twice about those cups, and had looked at them with such a peculiar expression on each occasion. Laura had not remarked upon it to herself the first time, but the trifling incident at the table just now stayed in her mind. Yet why? The housekeeper often rearranged the dining-room features in her endeavor to keep things free from dust. That would not satisfy the query. That cup and Jerry Swaim were dodging about most singularly in Laura's consciousness, and she could not know that the reason for it lay in the projecting power of the mind of the woman coming across lots at that moment to call on her.

Yet when Mrs. Bahrr thrust herself into the dining-room unannounced, as was her habit, with her insistent greeting, and her query, "What's that you're lookin' at?" the mistress of "Castle Cluny" had a feeling of having been caught holding a guilty suspicion; and when Stellar Bahrr ran her through with steely eyes she felt herself blushing with surprise and chagrin.

"How can I help you, Mrs. Bahrr?" she asked, recovering herself in a moment.

It was, however, the loss of the moment that always gave the woman before her the clue she wanted.

"I'm needin' just a little money—only a few dollars. I'm quittin' hat-trimmin' since them smarties down-town got so busy makin' over, an' trimmin' over, an' everything. I'm goin' to makin' bread. I've got six customers already, an' I'm

needin' a gasoliner the worst way. I lack jist five—mebby I could squeeze out with four dollars if I had it right away. You never knowed what it means to be hard up, I reckon; never had no trouble at all; no husband to up an' leave you and not a soul to lean on. You've always had York to lean on. I 'ain't got nobody."

The drooping figure and wrinkled face were pitiful enough to keep Laura Macpherson from reminding her that she was older than her brother and once the leaning had been the other way. Here was a needy, lonely, friendless woman. What matter that her greatest enemy was herself? All of us are in that boat.

"Of course I'll help you, Mrs. Bahrr. I'll get the money right away."

She rose to leave the room, then sat down again hastily.

"I'm afraid I can't help you right now, either. I have mislaid my purse. But when I find it I'll let you have the money. When York comes back maybe I can get it of him. Could you come over this afternoon?"

"Mebby York won't let you have it to loan where there ain't no big interest comin'. I'd ruther he didn't know it if you wasn't sure."

Laura recalled what her brother had said about not becoming entangled with Stellar Bahrr, and she knew he would oppose the loan. She knew, too, that in the end he would consent to it, because he himself was continually befriending the poor, no matter how shiftless they might be.

"I think I can bring York round, all right," Laura assured her caller. "He's not unreasonable."

"I'd ruther he didn't know. Men are so different from women, you know. You say you lost your purse. Ain't that funny? Where?"

"The funny thing is I don't know where," Laura replied.

Mrs. Bahrr had settled down, and, having accomplished her open purpose, began to train her batteries for her hidden motive.

"Things gits lost funny ways, queer ways, and sometimes ornery ways. Ever' now an' then things is simply missin' here in this burg—just missin'. But again there's such queer folks even in what you call the best s'ciety. Now ain't that so?"

Laura agreed amiably. In truth, she wanted to get her mind away from its substratum of unpleasant and unusual thought for which she could not account.

Nothing could take her farther from it than Mrs. Bahrr's small talk about people and things. She knew better than to accept the gossip for facts, but there was no courteous way of stopping Stellar now, anyhow. One had to meet her on the threshold for that.

"'Tain't always the little, petty thievin' sneak gits the things, even if they do git the blame of it. No, 'tain't." Mrs. Bahrr rambled on, fixing her hook eyes square into her hostess at just the right moment for emphasis. "I knowed the same thing happen twice. Once back in Indiany, where I come from—jist a little town on White River. There was a girl come to that town from"—hesitatingly—"from Californy; said to be rich, an' dressed it all right; had every man there crazy about her, an' her spendin' money like water pours over a mill-wheel in March. Tell you who she looked like—jist a mite like this Miss Swim stayin' at your house now—big eyes an' innocent-lookin' like her, but this Californy girl was a lot the best-lookin' of the two—a lot. An' she was rich—or so everybody thought. This un ain't. I got that out of Ponk 'fore he knowed it. An'—well, to make a story end somewhere this side of eternity, I never could bear them ramblin' kind of folks—first thing folks knowed a rich old bachelor got animated with her, just clear *animated*, an' literally swore by her. An'—well, things got to missin' a little an' a little more, an', sir—well"—slowly and impressively—"it turned out at last that this girl who they said was so rich was a *thief*, takin' whatever she could get, 'cause she was hard up an' too proud to go back to Oregon to tell her folks. An' that rich bachelor jist defended her ever' way—'d say he took things accidental, an' then help her to git 'em back, or git away with them—it was like a real drammy jist like they acted out in the picture show t'other night down-town. There was lots of talk, an' it nearly broke his sister's—I mean his mother's—heart. But, pshaw! that all happened years ago down in Indiany on the White River. It's all forgot long 'go. Guess I'd never thought of it again if this Swim girl hadn't come here with her big eyes, remindin' me of that old forgot eppisode, an' your losin' your purse mysterious. How things happen, year in an' year out, place after place, the same kind of things; good folks everywhere, though—everywhere. I was in York's office late yistyday afternoon, an' this girl comes in. Too bad she's so poor an' so pretty."

There was a venomous twist of the hooks at that word "pretty."

"But she's in trouble some way, all right, I know, an' York 'll help her out. I wouldn't ask him. Men take more int'rist naturally in young an' pretty women. But it's different with older women. I hope York never gits caught sometime like that man I knowed back in Indiany. He's too smart for that. Miss Swim must

have told York about her money shortage yistryday. The postmaster said she'd been waitin' for a check considerable. I couldn't get nothin' out of *him*, whether it had come yet or not. But I guess not. But la! la! she's your guest; you wouldn't let her suffer; an' I ain't tellin' a soul what I know about things. I do know what they say, of course. York won't let her suffer. But I'm so much obliged to you. Four dollars will be all I need, an' I'll pay you with the first bakin's. I guess I'll set some folks thinkin' when they see I can make my own way—"

Laura Macpherson was on her feet and it was her eyes now that were holding the woman of the steel hooks.

"Miss Swaim is our guest, the daughter of an old friend of the Macphersons. Of course we—"

Oh what was the use? Laura's anger fell away. It was too ridiculous to engage in a quarrel with the town long-tongue. York was right. The only way to get along with Stellar Bahrr was not to traffic with her. Mrs. Bahrr rose also, gripping at the chance for escape uninjured.

"I'll see you this afternoon if you still feel like helpin' me, an' York is willin'. I clear forgot to put out my ice-card. Good day. Good day."

The woman shuffled away, leaving the mistress of "Cluny Castle" in the grip of many evil spirits. The demon of anger, of doubt, of contempt, of incipient distrust, of self-accusation for even listening—these and others contended with the angel of the sense of humor and the natural courtesy of a well-bred woman.

And then the lost purse came up again.

"I may have left it in Jerry's room when I went to that closet after my wrap last evening. I'll never learn to keep my clothes out of our guest-room, I suppose," Laura said to herself, going at once to Jerry's room.

As she pushed aside some dresses suspended by hoops to a pole in the closet, Jerry's beaded hand-bag fell from a shelf above the hangings, and the fastening, loosened by the fall, let the contents roll out and lay exposed on the floor.

As Laura began to gather them up and put them back in their place, she saw her own silk purse stuffed tightly into the bottom of her guest's hand-bag. And then and there the poison tips of Stellar Bahrr's shafts began a festering sore deep and difficult to reach.

It was high noon when York Macpherson and his fair companion returned from the far side of the big Macpherson ranch. Jerry's hair was blown in ringlets about her forehead and neck. Her cheeks were blooming and her eyes were like stars. With the fresh morning breeze across the prairie, the exhilarating ride on horseback, and the novel interest in a ranch whose appointments were so unlike "Eden" and the other Winnowoc Valley farms, Jerry had the ecstasy of a new freedom to quicken her pulse-beat. She had solved her problem; now she was free for her romantic nature to expand. It was such a freedom as she had never in her wilful life known before, because it had a purpose in it such as she had never known before, a purpose in which the subconscious knowledge of dependence on somebody else, the subjection to somebody else's ultimate control, played no part.

To Laura Macpherson she seemed to have burst from the bud to the full-blown flower in one short forenoon.

York's face, however, was wearing that impenetrable mask that even his sister's keen and loving eyes could never pierce. He had been impenetrable often in the last few weeks. But of the York back of that unreadable face Laura was sure. Even in their mutual teasings the deep, brotherly affection was unwavering. As far as it lay in York's power he would never fail to make up to his companionable sister for what circumstances had taken from her. And yet—the substratum of her disturbed consciousness would send an upheaval to the surface now and then. All normal minds are made alike and played upon by the same influences. The difference lies in the intensity of control to subdue or yield to the force of these influences. Things had happened in that morning ride that York had planned merely for the beneficence of the prairie breezes upon the bewildered purposes of the guest of the house.

On the far side of the "Kingussie" ranch the two riders had halted in the shade of a clump of wild plum-trees beside the trail that follows the course of the Sage Brush. Below them a little creek wound through a shelving outcrop of shale, bordered by soft, steep earth banks wherever the shale disappeared. This Kingussie Creek was sometimes a swift, dangerous stream, but oftener it was a mere runlet with deep water-holes carved here and there in the yielding shale. Just now, at the approach of July heat, there was only a tiny thread of water trickling clear over yellow rock, or deep pools lying in muddy thickness in the stagnant places.

"Not much like the Winnowoc," York suggested, as his companion sat staring down at the stream-bed below.

"Everything is different here," Jerry said, meditatively. "I've traveled quite a little before; been as far as the White Mountains and the beautiful woodsy country up in York State. There's a lot of upness and downness to the scenery, but the people—except, of course—" Jerry smiled bewitchingly.

"Except Ponk, of course," York supplied, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"How well you comprehend!" Jerry assured him. "But, seriously, the world is so different out here—the—the people and their ways and all."

"No, Jerry, it isn't that. The climate is different. The shapes of things differ. Instead of the churned-up ridged and rugged timber-decked lands of Pennsylvania and York State, the Creator of scenery chose to pour out this land mainly a smooth and level and treeless prairie—like chocolate on the top of a layer cake."

"Chocolate is good, with sand instead of sugar," Jerry interrupted.

"But as to the people—the real heart of the real folks of the Sage Brush—there's no difference. They all have 'eyes, hands, organs, senses, affections, passions.' They are all 'fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed with the same means, warmed and cooled with the same summer and winter' as the cultured and uncultured folk of the Winnowoc Valley and the city of Philadelphia. The trouble with us is we don't take time to read them—nor even first of all to read ourselves. Of course I might except old Fishing Teddy, that fellow you see away down there where the shade is deepest," York added, to relieve the preachment he didn't want to seem to be giving, yet really wanted this girl to understand. "He's a hermit-crab and seldom comes among us. Every community has its characters, you know."

"He was among us last night, and went home with Joe Thomson," Jerry replied, looking with curious interest at the motionless brown figure up-stream in the shadow of a tall earth bank.

York gave a start and stared at the girl in surprise. "How do you know? Did the Big Dipper come calling on you? That sort of information is in the Great Bear's line."

Jerry flushed hotly as she remembered her promise not to tell of Mrs. Bahrr's

call. In a dim sort of way she felt herself entangled for the moment. Then she looked full at York, with deep, honest eyes, saying, simply:

"Joe Thomson was calling on me last night, and I saw this old fellow, Hans Theodore, Joe named him, waiting on the driveway, and the two went away together, a pair of aces."

"How do you know, fair lady, that this is the same creature? And how do you happen to know Joe Thomson?" York inquired, blandly, veiling his curious interest with indifference.

"I happened to meet both of these country gentlemen on a certain day. In fact, I dined *al fresco* with one when I was riding in my chariot, incognito, alone, unattended by gallant outriders, about my blank blank rural estate in the heart of the Sage Brush country of Kansas. The 'blank blank' stands for a term not profane at all, but one I never want to hear again—that awful word '*blowout*.'"

Jerry's humor was mixed with sarcasm and confusion, both of which troubled the mind of her companion. This girl had so many sides. She was so unused to the Western ways and he was trying to teach her a deeper understanding of human needs, and the human values regardless of geography, when she suddenly revealed a self-possession telling of scraps of her experience in a matter-of-fact way; and yet a confusion for some deeper reason possessed her at certain angles. Why? That mention of Joe Thomson was annoying to York. Why? Jerry's assumed familiarity with such a hermit outcast as the old fisherman was puzzling. Why? York must get back to solid ground at once. This girl was throwing him off his feet. Clearly she was not going to chatter idly of all her experiences. She could know things and not tell them.

"Seriously, Jerry, there are no geographical limits for culture and strength of character. If you stay here long enough you will appreciate that," he began again where he had thrown himself off the trail to avoid a preachment.

"Yes," Jerry agreed, with the same degree of seriousness.

"See, coming yonder." York pointed up the trail to where a much-worn automobile came chuffing down the shaly road toward the ford of Kingussie Creek. "That is Thelma Ekblad and her crippled brother Paul. If you look right you will see the same lines of courage and sweetness in his face that are in my sister's. And yet, although their lives have been cast in widely different planes, their crosses are the same and they have lifted them in the same way."

Jerry hadn't really seen the lines in Laura Macpherson's face, because she had been too full of her own troubles. With York's words she felt a sense of remorse. Finding fault with herself was new to her and it made her very uncomfortable. Also this girl coming, this Thelma Ekblad, was the one whom Mrs. Bahrr had said York had pretended to be interested in once. Jerry had remembered every word of Stellar Bahrr's gossipy tongue, because her mind had been in that high-strung, tense condition last night to receive and hold impressions unconsciously, like a sensitized plate. The thought now made her peculiarly unhappy.

"Joe Thomson's farm is next to hers. Some day I'll tell you her story. It is a story—a real-life drama—and his."

York's words added another degree to Jerry's disturbed mental frame.

"How do you do, Thelma? Hello, Paul! Fine weather for cutting alfalfa. My machines are at it this morning." York greeted the occupants of the car cordially.

"Good morning, York. We are rushing a piece of the mower up to the shop. Had a breakdown an hour ago."

Thelma was tanned brown, but her fair braids gleamed about her uncovered head, and when she smiled a greeting her fine white teeth were worth seeing. Paul Ekblad waved a thin white hand as the car passed the two on horseback, and the delicate lines of his pale, studious face justified York's comparison of it with Laura Macpherson's. Jerry saw her hostess at that moment in a new light. Burdened for the moment as she was under the discomfort of what seemed half-consciously to rebuke the frivolous girl that she dimly knew herself to be, the sudden memory of her resolve declared to Joe Thomson in the shadow-flecked porch the night before came as a balm and a stimulant in one, to give her purpose, self-respect, and peace.

Thus it was that Jerry came in to "Castle Cluny" at high noon the picture of health and high spirits, shaming Laura Macpherson's doubt and sorrow which her morning had brought her. Laura was thoroughly well-bred, and she had, beyond that, a strong and virtuous heritage of Scotch blood that made for uprightness and sincerity. With one effort she swept out of her mind all that had harassed it since the cup episode at the breakfast-table, establishing anew within her understanding the force of her brother's admonition concerning any affiliation with the Big Dipper, the town meddler and trouble-maker.

Late that afternoon, as Laura sat sewing in the shade of the honeysuckle-vines,

Stellar Bahrr hurried across lots again and hitched cautiously up to the side door. Listening a moment, she heard the sound of Laura's scissors falling on the cement floor of the porch, and Laura's impatient exclamation, "There you go again!" as she reached to pick them up and examine the points of their blades.

Stellar hitched cautiously a little further along the wall, and stood in the shade of the house, outside the porch vines.

"Laury," she called, in a sibilant voice, "I jis' run in to say I won't need that money at all. I'm goin' to go out sewin', an' I can git all I can do, now the wheat harves' promises so well. Ever'body's spending money on clo'es an' a lot of summer an' fall sewin' goin' to rot, you might say. I'll be jis' blind busy, an' I can sew better than I can bake or trim. But I'm same obliged."

"Won't you come in?" Laura must not be rude, at any cost.

"No, I can't. I must run back. My light bread's raisin' and it'll raise the ruff if I don't work the meanness out of it."

Just then Jerry Swaim came bounding through the hall doorway. "Look here, Laura! See what I have found." She held up her beaded hand-bag and pulled the stuffed silken purse out of it. "Now how did it ever get in there? I'm a good many things, but I never knew I was a shoplifter," Jerry declared, laughingly, a bit of confused blush making her prettier than usual.

"Why—why—" Laura was embarrassed, not for Jerry's sake, but on account of those steel hooks thrusting themselves into her back through the honeysuckle-vines.

"Say, Laury, I jis' wanted to say I'm goin' to Mis' Lenwell's first. Good-by." Stellar Bahrr's voice, sharp and thin, cut through the vines.

As Laura turned to reply Jerry saw her fair face redden, and her voice was almost harsh as she spoke clearly, to be well heard.

"I remember now. I must have put it in there by mistake when you were down-town yesterday afternoon. I guess I thought it was my bag."

Mrs. Bahrr, turning to go, had caught sight of Jerry's hand-bag through the leaves, and remembered perfectly that Jerry had carried it with her down-town the day before, and how well it matched the beaded trimming of her parasol, her wide-brimmed chiffon hat, and the sequins of her sash trimmings against her silk

walking-skirt.

Jerry recalled taking the bag with her, too, and she recalled just then what Mrs. Stellar Bahrr had hinted about Laura not wanting York to admire other women. Why did that thought come to the girl's mind just now? Was the wish of the evil mind of the woman hitching away across lots and corkscrewing down alleyways projecting itself so far as this?



XI

AN INTERLUDE IN "EDEN"

An interlude should be brief. This one ran through a few midsummer days with amazing rapidity, considering that in its duration the current of a life was changed from one channel, whither it had been tending for almost a quarter of a century, to another and widely different course that ran away from the very goal-mark of all its years of inspiring ambition.

It was late afternoon of a July day. Jerusha Darby sat in the rose-arbor, fanning and rocking in rhythmic motion. The rose-vines had ceased to bloom. Their thinning foliage was augmented now by the heavier shade of thrifty moon-vines.

Midsummer found "Eden" no less restful and luxuriant in its July setting than it was in the freshness of June.

The afternoon train had crawled lazily up the Winnowoc Valley on schedule time, permitting Eugene Wellington, in white flannels, white oxfords, and pink-pin-striped white silk shirt, fresh from shave and shower-bath, to come on schedule time to the rose-arbor for a conference with Mrs. Darby.

The swift flow of events had not outwardly affected the handsome young man. The time of the early June roses had found him poor in worldly goods, but rich in a trained mind, a developed genius, a yearning after all things beautiful, a faith in divine Providence, abounding confidence in his own power to win to the mastery in his beloved art, and glorying in his freedom to do the thing he chose to do. It found him in love, and the almost accepted lover of a beautiful, wilful, magnetic girl—a girl with a sturdy courage in things wherein he was lacking; a frivolous, untrained girl, yet with surprising dependableness in any crisis. It found him the favorite nephew of a quiet, uninteresting, rich old money-grubbing uncle and his dominant, but highly approving wife, whose elegant home was always open to him the while he felt himself a pensioner on its hospitality.

Mid-July found him, in effect, the master where he had been the poor relation; the rich uncle gone forever from earthly affairs; a dominant aunt still ruling—so she fancied—as she had always ruled, but with the consciousness of her first

defeated purpose rankling bitterly within her. It found Eugene still in love with the same beautiful, wilful girl, but far from any assurance of being a really accepted lover. It found him insensibly forgetting the aspirations of a lifetime and beginning, little by little, to grasp after the Egyptian flesh-pots. Life was fast becoming a round of easy days, whose routine duties were more than compensated by its charming domestic settings. The one unsatisfied desire was for the presence of the bright, inspiring girl who had left a void when she went away, for whose return all "Eden" was waiting.

The swift course of events had created other changes. Some growths are slow, and some amazingly swift, depending upon the nature of the life-germ in the seed and the soil of the planting. In Eugene Wellington the love of beauty found its comfort in his present planting. It was easier to stay where beauty was ready-made than to go out and create it in some less lovely surroundings. Combine with this artistic temperament an inherent lack of initiative and courage, a less resistant force, and the product is sure. Moreover, this very falling away from the incentive to artistic endeavor exacted its penalty in a dulled spirituality. Whoever denies the allegiance due, in however small a measure, to the call of art within him pays always the same price—a pound of tender bleeding flesh nearest his heart. For Eugene Wellington the Shylock knife was sharpening itself.

This July afternoon there were no misgivings in his soul, however—no black shadows of failure ahead. All the serpents of "Eden" were very good little snakes indeed. After a while he would paint again, leisurely, exquisitely; especially would he paint when Jerry came home.

As he lighted a cigarette, a recent custom of his, and strolled down the shady way to the rose-arbor to meet Mrs. Darby, he drew deep draughts of satisfaction. It had been an unusually good day for him. Unusually good. Business had made it necessary to open some closed records in the late Cornelius Darby's affairs, records that Mrs. Jerusha Darby herself had not yet examined. They put a new light on the whole Darby situation. They went further and threw some side-lights on the late Jim Swaim's transactions. Altogether they were worth knowing. And Eugene, wielding a high hand with himself, had, once for all, stilled his finer sense of fitness in his right to know these things. He had also made rapid strides in this brief time toward comprehending business ethics as differing from church ethics and artistic ethics. Face to face in a conflict with Jerry Swaim, with Aunt Jerry Darby, with his conscience, his God, he was never sure of himself. But as to managing things, once he had shut his doors and barred them, he was confident. It was a truly confident Gene who stepped promptly into the rose-

arbor on the moment expected. To the old woman waiting for him there he was good to look upon.

"I'm glad you are on time, Gene," Mrs. Darby began, rocking and fanning more deliberately. "I'm ready now to settle matters once for all."

"Yes, Aunt Jerry," Eugene responded, fitting himself gracefully into the settings of this summer retreat, with a look of steady penetration coming into his eyes as he took in the face before him.

"Any news from the Argonaut to-day?" he asked, at length, as Mrs. Darby sat silently rocking.

"Not a line. I guess Jerry is waiting for me to ask her to come back. She must be through with her romantic fling by this time, and about out of money, too. So now's the time to act and settle matters, as I say, once for all. Jerry *must come home*."

"Amen, and amen," Eugene agreed, fervently.

"And if she won't come home herself, she must be brought—to see things as we do. *Must*, I say, Eugene."

"I'm glad she didn't say 'brought home' if she's going to send me after her," the young man thought. The memory of having been sent after Jerry in years gone by, and of coming back empty-handed, but full-hearted and sore-headed, were still strong within him. "How shall we make her see?" he inquired.

Mrs. Darby rocked vigorously for a few minutes. Then she brought her chair to a dead stop and laid down the law without further shifting of anchors.

"All my property, my real estate, country and city, my bank stocks, my government bonds, my business investments—everything—is mine to keep for my lifetime, and to pass by will to whomsoever I choose. Of course it's only natural I should choose the only member of my family now living to succeed to my possessions."

How the "my" sounded out as the woman talked of her god, to whose service she was bound, but of whose blessings she understood so little!

Eugene sat waiting and thinking.

"Of course, whoever marries Jerry with my approval will come into a fortune

worth having."

"He certainly will," Eugene declared, fervently.

A clear vision of Jerry and June roses swept his soul with refreshing sweetness, followed by the no less clear imagery of Uncle Cornie stepping slowly but persistently at the wrong moment after his wabbling discus. He looked away down the lilac-walk, unconsciously expecting the familiar, silent, uninteresting face and figure to come again to view. To the artist spirit in him the old man was there as real to vision as he had been on that last—lost—June day.

"You are thinking of Jerry herself. I am thinking of her inheritance, which is a deal more sensible, although Jerry is an unusually interesting and surprising girl," the old woman was saying.

"Unusually," Eugene echoed. "And in case you do not make a will?"

The young man was still looking down the lilac-walk as he asked the question, seemingly oblivious to the narrow eyes of Mrs. Darby scrutinizing his face.

"I have already made it. If things do not please me I shall change it. I may do that half a dozen times if I choose before I'm through with it. Now listen to me." The woman spoke sharply.

Eugene listened, wondering the while what sort of lightning-rod she carried, to speak with such assurance of all she meant to do before she was through with the transactions of this life. Uncle Cornie had not been so well defended.

"I want you to write to Jerry to come home. You can pay her expenses. She will take the money quicker from you than from me. She's as proud as Lucifer in some things, once she's set. But she's in love with you, and where a girl's in love she listens."

Eugene looked up quickly. "Are you sure?" he asked, eagerly.

"Of course I am! Why shouldn't I know love when I see it?" Mrs. Darby inquired.

Yes, why?

"But you mustn't give in, nor plead with her. Just tell her how well fixed you are, and how much she is missing here, and that you will wait her time, only she must come back, and promise to stay here, or I'll cut my will to bits, I certainly

shall. I'll write myself to York Macpherson. He's level-headed and honorable as truth. If he was dead in love with Jerry himself—as he no doubt is by this time—he'd just put it all away if he found out he was denying me my rights. I'll put it up to his honor. And so with him at that end of the line, and you here, and me really moving the chessmen, it can't be a losing game, Eugene. It simply can't. Jerry may not get tired of her new playthings right away, but she will after a while. It isn't natural for her to take to a life so awfully different from her bringing up. When the new wears off she'll come home, even if necessity didn't drive her, as it's bound to sooner or later. She's nearly out of money right now, and she can't sponge off the Macphersons forever and be Jim Swaim's child. Is everything clear to you now?"

Eugene threw away his cigarette and lighted a fresh one, his face the while as expressionless as ever the dry, dull face of Cornelius Darby had been. At last he answered:

"Mrs. Darby has made a will, presumably in favor of her niece, Geraldine Swaim—a will subject to replacement by any number of wills creating other beneficiaries. In any event, Mrs. Darby proposes to have a voice in the final disposition of her property."

Mrs. Darby nodded emphatically. "I certainly do."

Eugene smiled approval of such good judgment. "You are right, Mrs. Darby. What is your own you should control, always. But, frankly, Aunt Jerry, it is Geraldine Swaim herself who is my fortune—if I can ever acquire it."

"You don't object to her prospects, I hope," Mrs. Darby interrupted, with a twinkle in her eye.

"I couldn't, for her sake. And I am artistic enough to love the charm of an estate like this; and sensible enough, maybe, to appreciate the influence and opportunity that are afforded by the other financial assets of the Darby possessions. I'll do all in my power to bring Jerry back to a life of ease and absence of all anxiety and responsibility. Shall I go out to Kansas after her?"

An uncomfortable feeling about that York Macpherson had begun now to pull hard upon Eugene's complacent assurance, although he had rebelled a few minutes ago at the thought of going anywhere after Jerry.

"Never," Mrs. Darby responded. "It would just give her another chance for

adventure and seem to acknowledge that we couldn't do without her."

In truth, Mrs. Darby was shrewd enough to know that with Eugene on the ground she could not count on York Macpherson as her ally. York would naturally champion Jerry's cause, and she knew that Eugene Wellington would be no match for the diplomatic man of affairs whom she had known intimately from his childhood.

"Aunt Jerry, how much do you know of the value of this Swaim estate?" Eugene asked, suddenly.

"Very little. Cornelius told me that he had a full account of it. That was on the very day he was—he passed away. The papers, except the one Jerry found here the day after the funeral, have all been mislaid."

"Then I'd advise you to write to this Macpherson person and find out exactly what we have to fight against," the young man suggested. "Meantime I'll write to Jerry. I'm sure she should be ready to listen now. All I claim to know of that beastly region out West I learned from my father, but that is enough for me. If there were really a bit of landscape worth the cost of the canvas I might go out there and paint it. But who cares to paint in only two colors, blue one half—that's sky, unclouded, monotonous; and chrome yellow, the other half—that's land. I could paint the side of the cattle-barn over yonder half yellow, half blue, and put as much expression into it."

Mrs. Darby listened approvingly. "I'm very thankful that you see things so sensibly. The sooner you replace what isn't worth while with what is the sooner you will know you are a success in your business. We will write those letters tonight. I'm having your favorite dishes for dinner now, and we'll be served here. It is so pleasant here at this time of day. I'll go and see to things right away, and we'll have everything brought out pretty soon."

The owner of all this dainty comfort and restfulness and beauty hurried away, leaving Eugene Wellington alone in the rose-arbor—alone with memories of Jerry Swaim, and Uncle Cornie, and life, and love, and hope and high ambition, and himself—the self that a man must go right with, if he goes with him at all.

For a long half-hour he sat there in the rose-arbor, the appealing call of his divine gift filling his artist soul. Then his judgment prevailed. What he most wanted to have was here, ready to have now—and to hold later with only a little patient waiting. A few weeks, or months, or maybe even a year, a run of four swift

seasons, and the girl of his heart's heart would come back into her own, and find him ready for her coming. That impossible York was not to be considered. Jerry was no fool, if she was sometimes a bit foolish in her pranks. And he, Eugene Wellington, had only this day learned of the whole Swaim situation, what was vastly valuable to know. Meantime, his the task to keep that precious Jerusha Darby will intact; or, failing in that, came the more difficult and delicate task of controlling or holding back the pen that would write another will. And in the end Jerry would love him forever for what he would save for her—for her—

The memory of what he had learned that day in the business house in the city came with its testimony that he was shaping his life course well. Only one little foxy fear dodged about in his mind—the fear that Jerry—the Jerry he knew, lovable in spite of all her little failings, beautiful, picturesque, and surprising—that this Jerry, whom he thought he knew so well, might prove to be an unknowable, unguessable Jerry whose course would baffle all his plans, his efforts, his heart longings. It must not be. He would prevent that. But could he?

The coming of dainty viands with exquisite appointments gave nourishment to his ready appetite, and dulled for a time the thing within him that sometime must cry out to power or be sleeked down into fat and unfeeling subjection.

That night two letters were written to New Eden, Kansas, but neither writer really knew the reader to whom the letter was written, nor measured life purposes by the same gauge, so setting anew the world-old stage for a drama in human affairs whose crowning act shapes human destinies.



XII

THIS SIDE OF THE RUBICON

In the late afternoon of a July Sabbath Jerry Swaim had gone for a stroll along the quiet outskirts of New Eden. Laura was napping in the porch swing, and York had gone to his office in answer to a telephone call. Jerry was rarely lonely with herself and she was a good walker. She was learning, too, the need for being alone with herself, for there were many things crowding into her mind that demanded recognition.

Jerry attended church with the Macphersons every Sunday, but it was a mere perfunctory act on her part. To-day the minister was away. He had gone to the upper Sage Brush to officiate at the funeral of Mrs. Nell Belkap that had been Nell Poser, she of the tow hair and big-lunging baby. She had died of congestion, following over-heating in cooking for threshing-hands for her mother, her father being the kind of man that objected to hired help for "wimmin folks." All that was nothing to Jerry, who found herself wondering, in a vague sort of way, just where that baby would sprawl itself, unattached to its mother's anchorage. Babies were not in Jerry's scheme of things at all.

The substitute minister was more interesting to think about. He had a three-piece country charge over which to spread the Gospel, "Summit School-House," "Slack Crick Church," and "Locust Grove Grange." He said "have went" and he called the members of one of Saint Paul's churches "The Thessalonykins." And he really didn't know the Lord's Prayer correctly, for he said "forgive us our trespasses," instead of "our debts," as dear accurate Saint Matthew has written it.

Jerry's mind was on him as an aside, on him, and that Paul Ekblad whom she caught sight of in the Ekblad car with Thelma. They had stopped a minute to speak with York Macpherson as they were on their way to that up-country Poser funeral. Why should Paul Ekblad go so far to a funeral?

Jerry strolled aimlessly along the smooth road leading out to the New Eden cemetery, her bead-trimmed parasol shading her bare head, and her pale-green organdie gown making her appear very summery. Jerry had the trick of fitting all weather except the heated, sand-filled days of mid-June on a freight-train, which

condition Junius Brutus Ponk declared "was enough to muss a angel's wings an' make them divine partial-eclipse angel draperies look dingier than dish-rags."

There were half a dozen well-grown cottonwood-trees in the cemetery, with rows of promising little elms, catalpas, and box-elders all symmetrically set. The grass was brown, but free from weeds; the walks were only smooth paths. But the shade of the cottonwood group, and the quiet of the place, seemed inviting. Every foot of the wind-swept elevation was visible to the whole town, but the distance was guarantee for undisturbed meditation. Jerry had no interest in cemeteries. She had rarely visited the corner of "Eden" where the few elect by family ties had their last resting-place. She walked down the grassy paths toward the largest cottonwoods, now, indifferent alike to the humble headstone and the expensive and sometimes grotesque granite memorial. By the tallest shaft in the place, designated by Stellar Bahrr as "Granddad Poser's monniment," she sat down in the shade of the biggest trees, and looked out at New Eden in its Sabbath-afternoon nap; at the winding Sage Brush and the green and yellow fields, and black hedgerows, and rolling prairies, with purple-shadowed draws and pale-brown swells, and groves about distant farmhouses. She sat still for a long time, and she was so lost in this view that she did not hear steps approaching until Mr. Ponk was almost beside her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Swaim. Takin' a constitutional? They ain't no Swaims laid away out here I reckon."

"Oh no," Jerry replied. "I shouldn't come here for that if there were."

Something about Ponk always made her good-natured. He was so grotesquely impossible to her—a caricature cut from some comic magazine, rounded out and animated.

"Say you wouldn't? Now that's real queer." The short man opened his little eyes wide with surprise. "Now I soar down here regular every Sunday evenin' of the world, summer and winter."

"What for?" Jerry asked, looking up at the speaker with curiosity.

New Eden was still in that stage when a funeral was a public event. And the belief was still maintained that the dead out in the cemetery must be conscious of every attention or lack of it shown to their memory by visits and flowers, and the price of tombstones. In a word, to the New Eden living, the New Eden dead were not really in the Great Hereafter, but here, demanding consideration in the social

economy of the community.

Ponk was more shocked at Jerry's query than she could begin to comprehend, and his interest in her and pity for her took a still stronger grip on life.

"Why, Miss Swaim, I come out here to see my mother. I 'ain't never failed to bring her a flower in summer, or a green leaf in winter, one single Sunday since she was laid out there on the south slope one Easter day eight Aprils ago."

"But she isn't there." Jerry spoke gently now, realizing that she had hurt him unintentionally.

"She is to me, an' I'd ruther think it thataway an' feel like I was callin' every Sunday, never forgettin'," Ponk said, sadly.

"Where's your dead to you, Miss Swaim?" he asked, after a pause.

Jerry, who was gazing down the Sage Brush Valley, turned slowly at his words, her big eyes luminous with tears.

"They are not." She waved a hand against viewless air.

"Oh yes, they are, walkin' beside you every day, lovin' you and proud of you! A good mother just lives on an' keeps doin' good, and so does a father, if you let 'em." Ponk hesitated, and his moon-round face was flushed. "I ain't tryin' to preach," he added, hastily. "They's some things, though, we all got to cling to or else get hustled off our feet into a big black void where we just sink and die. It ain't just Sage-Brushers, but it's all Christians—Baptists and Cammylites and High Church and everybody. It's safer to stand in the light than sink in the bottomless night. But, say, look who's comin' an' see what's trailin' him. I guess I'll be soarin' back to the hotel now. Pleased to meet you—always am pleased." Ponk lifted his hat and bowed uncovered, and uncovered walked away.

What he had said in the sincerity of his spiritual belief fell on fertile soil in the mind of his listener. He had preached a sermon to her that was good for her to hear.

Jerry looked out in the direction he had indicated and saw York Macpherson, walking a bit briskly for him and the place and the afternoon.

It was no wonder that Jerusha Darby should expect York to be caught by the charms of his guest. As she sat there in the shade of the cottonwoods, where, in

all the cemetery, the blue grass grew rankest, with her pale-green gown, her smooth pink cheeks, and the wavy masses of golden-brown hair coiled low at the back of her head, York wondered if the spirit of the wild rose in bloom and the spirit of some Greek nymph had not combined in the personification before him.

At the gateway he met Ponk.

"Why do you run away? I have a special-delivery letter for Miss Swaim. I thought I'd better come and find her, but that needn't interfere with you."

"Oh, you smooth-bore! But I have to go, anyhow. I'm headin' off what's trailin' you. Don't look back. It's Stellar Bahrr, comin' out to see who's been to see their folks to-day and who's neglectin' 'em, 'specially late arrivals. She's seen my game, though, now, an' she's shabbin' off to the side gate, knowin' I'd head her back to town. Say, York, she's after Miss Swaim now. You watch out. Them that's the worthlesst and has the least influence in a community can start the biggest fires burnin'. Everybody in New Eden's been buffaloed by her—just scared blue—except maybe us two. You ain't, I know, and I'm right sure I ain't."

"Ponk, you are as good as you are good-looking," York said, heartily. "The Big Dipper could start a tale of our guest meeting gentlemen friends in the cemetery. And yet for privacy it's about like meeting them on the sidewalk before the Commercial Hotel. However, she's started scandal with less material. I have business with Miss Swaim, so I'll walk home with her."

Jerry waited for her host under the flickering, murmuring leaves of the cottonwood. She had seen some woman wandering diagonally from the cemetery road toward the corner of the inclosure, but she had no interest in strangers and might never have thought of her again but for a word of York's that day.

He had seen the girl looking after Stellar as she made a wide flank movement. A sense of duty coupled with a strange interest in Jerry, for which he had as yet given no account to himself, was urging him to tell her, as he had told his sister, to have no traffic with the town's greatest liability, but with all of Ponk's warning he could not bring himself to speak now.

"May I sit here with you awhile?" he asked, lifting his hat as he spoke.

"Certainly. It is so quiet and peaceful out here, and, as I have no associations with this place, I can sit here without being unhappy or irreverent," Jerry replied.

"I came out to find you. There are callers at home now, so I'll give you my message here, unless you want to follow Mr. Ponk's example and 'soar' off home."

"That man interests me," Jerry declared. "He said some good things about his mother just now. And yet he's so—so funny."

"Oh, Ponk's outside is against him. If he could be husked out of himself and let the community get down to the kernel of him he is really fine wheat," York said, conscious the while that he had not meant, for some reason, to praise the strutting fellow. Yet he had never felt so toward the little man before.

"I have a special-delivery letter for you which came this afternoon. While you read it I'll go out to the gate and speak to the Ekblads, coming yonder."

Jerry read her letter—the one Eugene had written after his conference with Jerusha Darby in the rose-arbor. In it he had been faithful to the old woman's smallest demands, but the message itself was a masterpiece. It was gracefully written, for Eugene Wellington's penmanship was art itself; and gracefully worded, and it breathed the perfumes of that lovely "Eden" on every page.

Jerry closed her eyes for a moment in the midst of the reading, and the wind-swept cemetery and all the summer-seared valley of the Sage Brush vanished. The Macphersons; Ponk; Thelma Ekblad in the automobile by the cemetery gate, holding something in her arms, and her fair-haired brother, Paul; Joe Thomson (why Joe?)—all were nothing. Before her eyes all was Eugene—Eugene and "Eden." Then she read on to the end. One reading was enough. When York came back she was sitting with the letter neatly folded into its envelope again, lying in her lap.

York had a shrewd notion of what that letter contained, but there was nothing in Jerry's face by which to judge of its effect on her. Two things he was learning about her—one, that she didn't tell all she knew, after the manner of most frivolous-minded girls; the other, that she didn't tell anything until she was fully ready to do so. He admired both traits, even though they baffled him. In his own pocket was Jerusha Darby's letter, also specially delivered. He sat down by Jerry and waited for her to speak.

"Were those the people we saw on the south border of 'Kingussie'?" she asked.

"Yes," York replied.

"Do they interest you?" she questioned.

"Very much."

"Why?" Jerry was killing something—time, or thought.

"Because, as I told you the other day, the same life problems come to all grades. And life problems are always interesting," York declared.

"Has Thelma Ekblad a blowout farm, too?" Jerry's face was serious, but her eyes betrayed her mood.

"Better a blowout farm than a blowout soul," York thought. "No. I wonder what she would do with it if she had," he said, aloud.

"Just what I am doing, no doubt, since all of us, 'Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady,' are alike. Tell me more about her," Jerry demanded.

"She's talking against time now, I know, but I'll tell her a few things," York concluded.

"Jerry, there are not many women like this Norwegian farmer girl who is working her way through the State University down at Lawrence. A few years ago her brother Paul was in love with a girl up the Sage Brush, the daughter of a prosperous, stupid, stingy old ranchman. Paul was chewed up in a mowing-machine one day when the horses got scared and ran away, but his girl was true to him in spite of her father's objections to him. Then came a woman—a sharp-tongued gossip (she's over yonder now by the side gate)—who managed to stir up trouble purely for the infernal joy of gossip, I suppose, between this girl and Thelma. I needn't go into detail; you probably do not care much for the general outline."

"Go on," Jerry commanded.

"Well, it was the rough course of true love over again. Between the father and the sister the match was broken off, and before things could be reconciled the girl's father forced the marriage of his daughter to a worthless scamp who posed as a rich man, or an heir expectant to riches. The Ekblads are hard-working farmer folk. When it was too late the misunderstanding was cleared up. The rich fellow soon proved a fraud and a rascal and a wife-deserter. And the girl came home with her baby. Her father, as I said, was too stingy to hire help. So this girl-mother overworked in threshing-time, and—was buried this afternoon up the

Sage Brush—old man Poser's daughter, Nell Belkap. The Ekblads have just come from the funeral. Old Poser has refused to care for Nell's baby and intended to put it in an orphan asylum. Thelma Ekblad brought it home with her. It was in her arms just now, and she's going to keep it and adopt it. When she's away at school—she has a year yet before she graduates—that crippled brother, Paul, will take care of it. All of which is out of your line, Jerry, but interesting to us in the valley here."

As York paused and looked at Jerry, all that Stellar Bahrr had said of him and the Poser girl swept through her mind. Not the least meanness of a lie is in its infectious poisoning power.

"It is very interesting. I wonder how she can take care of that baby. Babies are so impossible," Jerry said, musingly.

"We were all impossibles once. Some of us are still improbables," York replied.

Jerry looked up at him quickly. "Not altogether hopeless, maybe. Thelma is doing this for her brother's sake, I can see that. And the story has a sweeter side than if she were doing it just for herself. It makes it more worth while."

It was the first time that York had caught the note of anything outside of self in Jerry's views of life.

He involuntarily pressed his hand against the specially delivered letter he himself had received that afternoon, and his lips were set grimly. The plea of the old woman, and the soul of the young woman, which called loudest now?

"Will this young Ekblad go up to his sweetheart's grave every Sunday, like Mr. Ponk comes here?" Jerry asked, after a pause.

"No, he will probably never go near it," York replied.

"Why not? I thought that was the customary way of doing here," Jerry declared.

"Because it isn't his grave. It belongs to Bill Belkap, who doesn't care for it. Paul Ekblad will find his solace in caring for Nell Poser's child and in knowing it was her wish that he is fulfilling. That is the real solace for the loss of loved ones."

Jerry remembered Uncle Cornie and his withered yellow hand under her plump white one as he told her of Jim Swaim's wish for his child.

"If I carry out that wish I will be true to my father—and—he will be happier,"

she thought, and a great load seemed lifting itself from her soul.

"Oh, father, father! You are not in the 'Eden' burial-plot. You are here with me. I shall never lose you." The girl's face was tenderly sweet with silent emotion as she turned to the man beside her.

"I'm glad you told me that story. May I come down to your office in the morning for a little conference? I can come at ten."

"Certainly. Come any time," York assured her, wishing the while that the plea of Jerusha Darby's that lay in his pocket was in the bottom of Fishing Teddy's deep hole down the Sage Brush.

The next morning Jerry Swaim came into the office of the Macpherson Mortgage Company promptly at the stroke of ten by the town clock.

"If I were only a younger man," York Macpherson thought, feeling how the presence of this girl transformed the room she entered—"if I were only younger I would fall at her shrine, without a question. Now I keep asking myself how a woman can be so charming, on the one hand, and so characterless maybe, shallow anyhow, on the other. But the test is on for sure now."

No hint of this thought, however, was in his face as he laid aside his pen and asked, in his kindly, stereotyped way:

"What can I do for you?"

"You can be my father-confessor for a minute or two, and then make out my last will and testament for me," Jerry replied, with a demure smile.

"So serious as all that?" York inquired, gravely, picking up a blank lease form as if to write.

"So, and worse," Jerry assured him. But in an instant her face was grave. "You know my present situation," she began, "and that I must decide at once what to do, and then *do* it. I'm so grateful that you understand and do not try to offer me friendship for service."

York looked at her earnest face and glowing dark-blue eyes wonderingly. This girl was forever surprising him, either by flippant indifference or by unexpected insight.

"You know a lot about my affairs, of course," Jerry went on, hurriedly. "Aunt

Darby offered both of us—me, I mean, a home with her, a life of independent dependence on her—charity—for that, at bottom, was all that it was. And when I refused her offer she simply cut me until such time as I shall repent and go back. Then the same thing would be waiting for me. I know now that it was really wilfulness and love of adventure that most influenced me to break away from Philadelphia and—and its flesh-pots. But, York, I don't want to go back—not yet awhile, anyhow."

It was the first time she had ever called him by that name, and it sent a thrill through her listener.

"Is it wilfulness and love of adventure still, or something else, that holds you here 'yet awhile'?" York asked, with kindly seriousness.

"Oh, wait and see!" Jerry returned.

"She is not going to be *led*, whichever way she goes. I told Laura so," was York's mental comment.

"Does this finish your 'confession'?" he asked.

"I may as well tell you the other side of the story." Jerry's voice trembled a little. "Cousin Gene Wellington was in the same boat with me, a dependent like myself. But now that he has given up to Aunt Jerry's wishes, I suppose he will be her heir some day, unless I go back and get forgiven."

"This artist's father was in business with your father once, wasn't he?" York asked.

"Yes, and there was something I never could understand, and Aunt Jerry never mentioned, about that; but she did say often that Cousin Gene would make up for what John Wellington lacked, if things went her way. They haven't all gone her way—only half of them, so far."

"Do you fully understand what you are giving up, Jerry?" York asked, earnestly. "That life might be a much pleasanter story back East, even if it were a bit less romantic than the story on the Sage Brush. Might not your good judgment take you back, in spite of a little pride and the newness of a different life here?"

As York spoke, Jerry Swaim sat looking earnestly into his face, but when he had finished she said, lightly:

"I thought before I saw you that you were an old man. You seem more like a brother now. I never had a brother, nor a sister—nothing but myself, which makes too big a houseful anywhere." She grew serious again as she continued: "I do understand what I'm giving up. It was tabulated in a letter to me yesterday, and I do not give up lightly nor for a girl's whim now. I have my time extended. There seems to be indefinite patience at the other end of the line, if I'll only be sure to agree at last."

"Pardon me, Jerry, if I ask you if it is a question of mere funds." York spoke carefully. "I know that Mrs. Darby may be drawn on at any time for that purpose."

"Did she tell you so?" Jerry asked, bluntly.

"She did—when you first came here," York replied, as bluntly.

Jerry did not dream of the struggle that was on in the mind of the man before her, but her own strife had made her more thoughtful.

For a little while neither spoke. Then York Macpherson's face cleared, as one who has reached the top of a difficult height and sees all the open country on the other side. Jerusha Darby's plea had won.

"Jerry, you do not understand what is before you. Whoever takes up the business of self-support, depending solely on the earnings that must be won, has a sure battle with uncertainty, failure, sacrifice, and slow-wearing labor. Of course it is a glorious old warfare—but it has that other side. In the face of the fact that I am your fortunate host, and that my sister is happier now than she has ever been before in New Eden, and hopes to keep you here, I urge you, Jerry, to consider well before you refuse to go back to your father's sister and your artist cousin."

The "father's sister" was a master-stroke. It caught Jerry at an angle she had not expected. But that "artist cousin"! If Gene had been truly the artist, Jerry Swaim had yielded then. The failure to be true to oneself has long tentacles that reach far and grip back many things that else had come in blessing to him who lies to his own soul.

"I won't go back. That is settled. Now as to my last will and testament, please," Jerry said, prettily.

"Imprimis," York began, with his pen on the lease form before him.

"Oh, drop the Latin," Jerry urged. "Say, 'I, Geraldine Darby Swaim, being of sound mind and in full possession of all my faculties, and of nothing else worth mentioning, being about to pass into the final estate and existence of an old-maid school-teacher, a high-school teacher of mathematics'—Please set that down."

"So you are going to teach. I congratulate you." York rose and took the girl's hand.

"Thank you. Yes, I just 'soared' over to the hotel and signed my contract with Mr. Ponk and the other two members in good standing, or whatever they are." Jerry would not be serious now. "And the remainder of my will: 'I hereby give and bequeath all my worldly goods, excepting my gear, to wit: one claim of twelve hundred acres, containing three cottonwood-trees, three times three acres of oak timber, and three times three times three million billion grains of golden sand, to the Macpherson Mortgage Company to have and to hold, free of all expense to me, and to lease or give away to any lunatic, or lunatics, at the company's goodwill and pleasure, for a term not to exceed three million years. All of which duly signed and sworn to.'"

As Jerry ran on, York wrote busily on the lease form before him.

"Please sign here," he said, gravely pointing to a blank space when he had finished. "It is a three years' lease to your property herein legally described. The Macpherson Mortgage Company will pay you twenty-five cents per acre, per year, with the exclusive right to all the profits accruing on the land, and to sublease the same at will."

"That is about half of what Aunt Jerry spent on my wardrobe just before I came West," Jerry exclaimed. "But I couldn't take twenty-five cents a year. I've seen the property, you know, and I don't want charity here any more than I did in Philadelphia."

"Then sign up the lease. This is business. Our company is organized on a strictly financial basis for strictly financial transactions. It is a matter of 'value received' both ways with us."

York Macpherson never trifled in business matters, even in the smallest details, and there was always something commanding about him. It pleased him now to note that Jerry read every word of the document before accepting it, and he wondered how much a girl of such inherent business qualities in the small details of affairs would waver in steadfastness of purpose in the larger interests of life.

"Will you let me give a receipt for the cash instead of taking a check?" Jerry asked, as York reached for his check-book.

"Why do you prefer that?" York asked, with business frankness.

"Because I do not care to have the transaction known to any one besides your company," Jerry replied.

"But suppose I should sublease this land?" York suggested.

"That would be different, of course, even if the lessee was a lunatic. Otherwise I don't care to have it known to any one that I draw an income from what is not worth an effort," Jerry declared, quoting Joe Thomson's words regarding her possessions.

"If I give my word to exclude every one else from knowing of this transaction it means every one—even my sister Laura." York looked at Jerry questioningly.

"Even your sister Laura," Jerry repeated, conclusively.

York was too well-bred to ask her why, and, while he voluntarily refrained from telling his sister many things, she was his counselor in so many affairs that he wondered not a little at Jerry's request, while he chafed a little under his promise. He was so accustomed to being master of himself in all affairs that it surprised him to find how easily he had put himself where he would rather not have been placed.

Half an hour later Joe Thomson came into the office.

"What can I do for you to-day, Joe?" York inquired.

"Do you control the sections south of mine?" Joe asked. "I want to lease them, but I shouldn't care to have the owner know anything about it."

"That old blowout! What's your idea, Joe?"

"I want to try an experiment," Joe replied.

York Macpherson had the faculty of reading some men like open books.

"You must have been hanging around eavesdropping this morning. I just got a three years' lease on Miss Swaim's land at twenty-five cents an acre, and here you come for it. I took it on a venture, of course, hoping to sell sand to the new cement-works up the river, sand being scarce in these parts." There was a

twinkle in York's eyes as he said this. "I can sublease it, of course, and at the same price, but you know, Joe, that the land is worthless."

"I don't know it," Joe said, stubbornly. "You seem to have been willing enough to get the lease secured this morning."

York ignored the thrust. "You know I leased that land merely to help Miss Swaim, but you don't know yet whether or not you can tame your own share of that infernal old sand-pile that you want to put a mortgage on your claim to fight," York reminded him.

"I'll take a part of that loan to pay for the lease, and the rest I'll use on the Swaim land, not on mine. I'm going to go beyond the blowout to begin, and work north the same way it goes," Joe explained.

"All of which sounds pretty crazy to me. You are shouldering a big load, young man—a regular wildcat venture. There's one of you to myriads of sand-heaps. You'll have to take the Lord Almighty into partnership to work a miracle before you win out. I've known the Sage Brush since the first settler stuck in a plow, and I've never known one single miracle yet," York admonished him.

"As to miracles," Joe replied, "they are an every-day occurrence on the Sage Brush, if you can only look far enough above money-lending to see them, you Shylock."

Calling York Macpherson a Shylock was standard humor on the Sage Brush, he was so notoriously everybody's friend and helper.

"And I've had to take the Lord in for a partner all my life," Joe added, seriously.

York looked at the stern face and stalwart form of the big, sturdy fellow before him, recalling, as he did so, the young ranchman's years of struggle through his boyhood and young manhood.

"Of course you can win," he assured Joe. "Your kind doesn't know what failure means. It isn't the *work*, it is the stake that makes me uneasy."

Joe looked up quickly and York knew that he understood.

"I read your page clearly enough, my boy," he said, earnestly. "You are taking a hand in a big game, and the other fellow keeps his cards under the table. Blowouts are not as uncertain as women, Joe. Let me tell you something. You

will find it out, anyhow. I can ease the thing up now. Back in Philadelphia a rich old widow has given two young lovers the opportunity to earn their living or depend on her bounty—a generous one, too. Being childless and selfish, she secretly wanted to hold them dependent on her, that she may demand their love and esteem. It is an old mistake that childless wealth and selfishness often make. The girl, being temperamentally romantic and inherently stubborn, voted to go alone. These things, rather than any particularly noble motive—I hate to disillusion you, Joe, but I must hold to facts—have landed her practically penniless in our midst; and she is not acquainted yet with either lack of means or the labor of earning. The young man, gifted in himself, which his sweet-heart is not, son of a visionary spendthrift, has chosen the easier way, a small clerkship and a luxurious home seeming softer to his artistic nature than the struggling up-climb with his real gift. This old lady won't last forever. Her disinherited niece won't want to work at teaching forever. The waiting clerk will come after the heir apparent just when she is most tired of the Sage Brush and the things thereof, and—they will live tamely ever after on the aunt's money. Do you see what you are up against, Joe? Don't waste energy on a dream—with nothing to show for your labor at last but debt and possible failure, and the beautiful Sage Brush Valley turned to a Sodom before your eyes."

"Whenever you are ready I'll sign up the lease," was Joe's only reply.

So the transaction was completed in silence.



III

JERRY AND EUGENE—AND JOE

XIII

HOW A GOOD MOTHER LIVES ON

New Eden never saw a more beautiful autumn, even in this land of exquisite autumn days, than the first one that Jerry Swaim passed in the Middle West. And Jerry reveled in it. For, while she missed the splendid colorings of the Eastern woodlands, she never ceased to marvel at the clear, bright days, the sweet, bracing air, the wondrous sweeps of landscapes overhung by crystal skies, the mist-wreathed horizons holding all the softer hues, from jasper red to purest amethyst, that range the foundation stones of heaven's walls as Saint John saw them in his dream exquisite.

It had never occurred to Jerry that a beauty impossible to a wooded broken country might be found on the October prairies. Her dream of a Kansas "Eden" exactly like the Pennsylvania "Eden," six times enlarged, had been shattered with one glimpse of her possession—a possession henceforth to be a thing forgotten. But life had opened new pages for her and she was learning to read them rapidly and well.

One thought of the past remained, however. The memory of a romance begun in her Eastern home would not die with the telling. And while Jerry Swaim persuaded herself that what Eugene Wellington called success to her was failure, and while every day widened the breach between the two, time and distance softened her harsher judgment, and she remembered her would-be lover with a tender sadness that made her heart cold to the thought of any other love.

This did not make her the less charming, however—this pretty girl without any trace of coquetry, who knew how to win hearts to her. Sure of the wideness that separated her life from the life of the Sage Brush Valley, she took full measure of interest in living, unconsciously postponing for herself the future's need for the solace of love. The small income from her lease to the Macpherson Mortgage Company filled her purse temporarily, and she began at once upon a course of economic estimates worthy of Jim Swaim's child, however seemingly impossible in Lesa Swaim's pretty, dueless daughter. Another trait, undeveloped heretofore, began to be emphasized—namely, that while she could chatter glibly on embroideries and styles, and prettily on art, and seriously and intelligently on

affairs of national interest, as any all-round American girl should do—she was discreet and uncommunicative regarding her business affairs. Not that she meant to be secretive; she was simply following the inherited business ability of an upright, well-balanced man, her father. Coupled with this was a pride in her determination to win—to prove to Aunt Jerry Darby and Eugene Wellington that she had made no mistake; and until victory was hers she would be silent about her endeavors.

The Macphersons had insisted that Jerry should remain their guest at least until the opening of the school in September. And if the girl imagined that she found a faint hint of fervor gone from Laura Macpherson's urging, her hostess made up for it in the abundant kindness of little acts of hospitality. Jerry was frankly troubled, and yet she could not say why, for it was all the impressions of a mind sensitized to comprehend unspoken things. Jerry's memory would call up that incident of the lost purse found in her hand-bag, and of Laura's excuse for it, which she, Jerry, knew was impossible. And yet the girl felt that it was a contemptible thing to impute a distrust to Laura that, placed in the same position, she herself would scorn to harbor.

"I see no way but the everlasting run of events. I wish they would run fast and clear it up," Jerry said to herself, dismissing the matter entirely, only to have it bobbing up for consideration again on the first occasion.

At the close of a hot summer day Jerry was in her room, finishing a letter to Jerusha Darby, to whom she wrote faithfully, but from whom she had rarely received a line. York and Laura were on the porch, as usual. The hammock that day had been swung to a shadier position, on account of the slipping southward of the late summer sun; and Laura forgot that Jerry's window opened almost against it now, so that she could hear all that was said at that corner of the porch. As Jerry finished her letter she caught a sentence outside that interested her. She was innocent of any intention of eavesdropping afterward, but what she heard held her motionless.

"The leak has opened again, York," Laura was saying. "Things are beginning to disappear, especially money."

York's face took on a sort of bulldog grimness, but he made no reply.

Inside, Jerry glanced at her beaded hand-bag lying on the top of the little desk, saying to herself:

"I'll open a bank-account to-morrow. I've been foolish to leave that roll of bills lying around; all I have, too, between me and the last resort in Kansas—to go mad or go back East.' I'm certainly a brilliant business woman—I am."

And then, unconscious at first that she was listening, her ear caught what followed outside:

"York, the queer thing is that it's just at 'Castle Cluny' that things are disappearing right now. Mrs. Bahrr was over to-day and told me the Lenwells had even gone to Kansas City and forgot to lock their back door, and not a thing was missing, although Clare Lenwell left five silver dollars stacked up on the dresser in plain view."

"If anybody would know the particulars it would be the Big Dipper," York declared.

"Oh, now don't begin on that tune, York, for I'm really uneasy," Laura began.

"For why?" York inquired.

And then Laura told him the story of her lost purse, omitting Stellar Bahrr's part in the day's events, and adding:

"Of course, I hate myself for even daring to carry a hint of suspicion for a minute, but Jerry knew as well as I did that I hadn't put my purse in her hand-bag by mistake, for she carried it with her up-town that day. But I could forget the whole thing if it had ended there. I know that the dear girl was dreadfully short of money until just recently. Now her purse is full of bills. I couldn't help seeing that when she displays it so indifferently. She says she will have no funds from Philadelphia. Where does she get money when I can't keep a bill around the house?"

"Then I would quit the stocking-toe banking system that mother and all the other women and most of the men back in Winnowoc used to employ. You might try the First National Bank of New Eden. I'm one of the directors, and a comparatively safe man for all that," York advised, gravely.

"The loss of the money is nothing to the possible loss of confidence," Laura went on, ignoring her brother's thrust. "Could such a thing be possible that this dear girl is discouraged and tempted to hide her necessities?" The woman's voice was full of kindly sorrow. "York, couldn't you tell her?"

"I see myself doing that," York fairly exploded. "Laura, there may be a big leak in this house where valuables seep through. I'm not saying otherwise. But as for Jerry Swaim, it's simply preposterous—impossible. Never let such a thing cross your mind, let alone your lips again, you dear best of sisters. You know you don't believe a word of it."

"I know I don't, too, York; of course I don't; but I must have needed you to assure me of it. It all began in circumstance and an ugly suspicion that a story of Stellar Bahrr's suggested. And when I missed my own money and saw that great roll of bills—Oh, I must be crazy or just a plain human creature full of evil—"

"Or both," York added. "We are all more or less human and more than less crazy, especially if we will listen to old wives' tales against the expressed command of our wise brothers. As for Jerry having money"—York suddenly recalled his promise to Jerry not to discuss her affairs—"it's hardly likely she would display carelessly what was acquired by extreme care. Let's call her out here and think of better things."

As Laura looked up she realized for the first time the nearness of the hammock to Jerry's open window. The grief of being overheard by one whom she would not wound for worlds, with the self-rebuke for giving ear to Stellar Bahrr's gossip, almost overcame her.

"You go after Jerry, please," she said, faintly.

York went into the hall, calling at Jerry's open door, but she was not there. He looked in the living-room, but it was empty. Through the dining-room he passed to the side porch, where a dejected, lonely little figure was half hidden by the vines that covered it. At sight of her York stopped to get a grip on himself.

At her host's explosive declaration, "I see myself doing it," Jerry had come to herself. Surprised and wounded, but realizing the justice of the ground for suspicion against her—her—Jerry Swaim, who had always had first concern in those about her—she left her room hastily and passed out of the house by the side door. In the little vine-covered entry she sat down and stared out at the lawn, where the fireflies were beginning to twinkle against the shrubbery bordering the driveway. She had thought the disposition of her estate, and the choice of occupation, and the putting away of Eugene Wellington, had settled things for her future. Here was the fulfilling of a sense of something wrong that had recently possessed her, hardly letting itself be more than a sense till now. What did life mean, anyhow? "To go mad or go back East?" Why should she do either

one, who had not offended anybody?

As Jerry gazed out at the shadowy side lawn the sound of a step caught her ear—a shuffling of feet across the grass, and the noise of a hard sole on the cement driveway. Jerry's eyes mechanically followed a short, shambling figure, suggesting a bear almost as much as a human being, as it passed forward a step or two; then, dividing the spirea-bushes on the farther edge, it disappeared into the deeper shadow of the slope toward the town below "Kingussie."

It was Fishing Teddy—old Hans Theodore; Jerry recognized him at a glance, and in the midst of her confused struggle to find herself she paused to wonder about him. Intense mental states often experience such pauses, when the mind grappling in an internal combat rests for a moment on an impression coming through the senses.

"What's the old Teddy Bear doing here?" Jerry asked herself, and then she remembered his coming once before almost to this very spot. That was the night Joe Thomson had called—the big farmer whose property her own was helping to destroy. There was something strong and unbreakable about this Joe. A million leagues from her his lot was cast, of course, and yet she hoped somehow that Joe might be near and that the Teddy Bear was waiting for him.

"Jerry! Jerry!" York called through the hall, and then he came out to where she sat on the side porch.

"I was hunting for you. You have a caller, my lady, a gentleman who wants to take you for a ride up the river. It will be gloriously cool on the ridges up-stream. He will give you a splendid hour before the curfew rings—the lucky dog!"

Jerry looked up expectantly. "It must be Joe Thomson," she thought, and she was glad to have him come again.

On the front porch little Junius Brutus Ponk was strutting back and forth, chatting with Laura.

"Good evening, Miss Swaim. I just soared down to invite you to take a little drive in my gadabout. I hope it will suit you to go."

"Nothing would please me more," Jerry said, lightly. "Let me get my wrap." As she returned to her room her eye fell on her hand-bag, lying on her desk. A sense of grief swept over her, for one moment, followed by a strange lightness of heart as if her latest problem had solved itself suddenly.

As they passed down the walk to the little gray car York Macpherson looked after them, conscious of the impossible thing in Ponk's mind, and wondering wherein lay the charm of this pink-and-white inefficient girl to grip with so strong a hold on the heart of a sensible man like Ponk.

"It is her power to be what she has never been, but what she will become," he said to himself. "She's the biggest contradiction to all rules that I ever knew, but she's a dead-sure proposition."

The coming of callers found York in his best mood, and when his sister bade him good night he put his arms around her, saying, gently:

"You are the best woman in the world, Laura, and you mustn't carry a single hidden worry."

"Neither must you, York," Laura replied, and each knew that the other understood.

Meantime, out on the upper Sage Brush road Jerry was letting the beauty of the evening lift the weight from her mind. She was just beginning to understand that, while she had imagined herself to be doing her own thinking heretofore, she had been merely willing that her thinking should be done for her. She was now at the place where her will meant little and her judgment everything in shaping her acts. The recognition brought a sense of freedom she had never known before. What she had overheard from the porch seemed far away, and her wounded spirit grew whole again as she began to find herself standing on her own feet, not commanding that somebody else should hold her up. Jerry's mind worked rapidly, and before the gray car had been turned at the northern end of the evening's ride it was not the Jerry Swaim of an hour ago, but a young warrior, clad in armor, with shining weapons in her hand, who sat beside the adoring little hotel-keeper of the faulty grammar and the kindly heart.

Ponk halted the car at the far end of the drive up-stream, to take in a moonlight view of the Sage Brush Valley.

"Them three lights down yonder's the court-house an' the school-house an' the station. The other town glims are all hid by trees an' bushes and sundry in the wrinkles of the praira." Ponk always said "praira." "But it's a beautiful country when you douse the sunshine and turn on the starlight, or a half-size moon like that young pullet in the west sky yonder. Ever see the blowout by moonlight? Sorta reclaims its cussed ugliness, you might say, an' the dimmer glow softens

down an' subdues the infernal old beast considerable."

Jerry turned quickly toward her companion. "Blowout is a word taboo in my presence," she said, gravely. "Anybody who wants to be listed as a friend of mine will never mention it to me, for to me there is no such thing. I have no real estate in Kansas, nor anywhere else, for that matter. I'm just a poor orphan child." The girl smiled brightly. "All the world is mine, even though none of it really belongs to me. If you want my good-will, even my speaking acquaintance, you'll remember the road to it is *never to mention that horrid thing* to me again."

"I never won't," Ponk declared, seriously. "If that's the only restriction, I'm in the middle of your good-will so far I'll never find the outside gate again."

"I hope you won't," Jerry said, lightly.

"I'm seriouser than you are, Miss Swaim, and I asked you to take this ride for three reasons," Ponk returned.

"Name them," Jerry demanded, in the dim light noting the flush on his round cheeks.

"Firstly, and mainly, just selfish pleasure. Secondly, because I wanted to do you a favor if I might presume, and thirdly, to tell you why I wanted to do it."

"You are very kind," Jerry said, sincerely.

"What I want to say in that favor business is the same I told York to say that Sunday we met you in the cemetery, where I'd been callin' on mother, and you come to get away from New Eden and all that in it is, for a little while. You remember York came trailing after you with some excuse or other, an' right behind him comes another trailer, a womankind?"

"I remember York, that's all," Jerry replied, trying to recall the woman, whom she had forgotten.

"Well, she didn't forget you. It's that Stellar Bahrr, and she made capital, principal, and compound interest out of the innocent event, as she does out of every move everybody in that burg makes. But don't let it disturb you a mite."

"I won't," Jerry replied, indifferently. "But tell me why she should make capital out of me?"

"Cause she hates you," Ponk said, calmly.

"Me? Why?" Jerry's eyes were black now, and the faintly gleaming ripples above her white forehead and her faintly pink cheeks in the light of the moon made a delicious picture.

"Just because you are you, young, admired. I don't dare to say no more, no matter what I feel. It's a snaky jealousy, and she'll trail you constant. It's got to be the habit of her life, and it's ruined her as it will any person."

"Well, let her trail." Jerry's voice had a clear defiance now. "I'm here to earn an honest living by my own efforts. I shall pay my bills and take care of my own business. I have not intentionally injured anybody."

She paused and remembered Laura Macpherson, her shapely hands gripped together, emphasizing her unbreakable determination.

"And you are goin' to win. Don't never be afraid of the end and finis. But, knowin' Sage Brush, an' how scared it is of Mrs. Bahrr, yet listenin' constant to every word she says, I felt it my duty to warn you of breakers ahead. I've known more 'n one, bein' innocent, to fall for her tricks. And I'm telling you out of pure kindness. There's only two ways to handle her—keep still and try to live above her, or stand straight up an' tell her to go to the devil. Excuse me, Miss Swaim, I'm not really a profane man, but I mean well by you, and I'm not just settin' here to gossip about a fellow-citizenness."

"I know you mean well, Mr. Ponk. You have been more than kind to me ever since the night I reached New Eden, and I do appreciate your friendship and good-will," Jerry said, earnestly. "Now as to Mrs. Bahrr, which course do you advise me to follow?"

Junius Brutus Ponk was hanging on every word of Jerry's, and his face was a full moon of pleasure, for he was frankly and madly in love with her, and he knew it.

"I can't advise at all; it just ain't for me to do that. You are honorin' us by stoppin' in our midst. What I want you to do is to be on the lookout, an' if things start wrong, anywhere—school or church or with your friends, the Macphersons, for instance, as they might—just run down old Stellar before you go to guessin', or misunderstandin', and if you can't do it alone"—Ponk smote his broad bosom dramatically—"I'm here to help. That leads me to the thirdly of my triplet purpose in askin' the pleasure of your company."

Jerry looked up with a smile. The little man was so thoroughly good, and yet so

impossible. York Macpherson seemed head and shoulders above any other man she had ever known in her life—except her father. In fact, he seemed like a sort of father to her—and Joe Thomson. That was just a shadow across her consciousness, for all these men belonged here and at heart were not of her world.

"Miss Swaim, will you let me, without no recompense, be a friend at court whenever you need my help? You seem to me like a sort of female Robinson Crusoe cast away on the desert island of the Sage Brush country in Kansas. Let me be your Man Friday. I'd like to be your Saturday and Sunday and Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday. York Macpherson would come lopin' in to claim Thursday, I reckon."

The sincerity of the fat little man offset the pompous ridiculousness of his speech.

"If I seem cuttin' into the Macpherson melon-patch it's because I got on to some of Stellar Bahrr's gossip that set me thinkin'. She's up to turnin' Miss Laury against you because of York's admiring you so much."

Jerry grasped the situation now. The hotel-keeper was not only wishing to befriend and shield her—he thought he was in love with her. And he thought that York Macpherson was also in love. Was he? The girl's mind worked rapidly. Little as she cared for the opinion of New-Edenites, outside of these three good friends, she realized that these same New-Edenites were interested in her and dared to discuss her affairs; and that if she stayed here, as she meant to do, she must meet them and be, in a way, of them. How much of this newly discovered admiration which her companion evidently felt, and which he felt sure York Macpherson possessed, might be really the outgrowth of pity for her in the new position in which she found herself? And there was Laura. Stellar Bahrr had hinted about her being neglected by her brother for other women. Whatever might be the real motive, Jerry and love had parted company on the day that Eugene Wellington's letter had come telling of his renunciation of his art for an easy clerkship. But Laura didn't know that, and she might have heard the town-meddler—Oh, bother Stellar and all her works! Jerry Swaim would have none of them. And Laura was such a sweet, companionable, refined friend. This thing must be overcome in some way.

"Tell me, Mr. Ponk, why do the New Eden people listen to a sharp-tongued trouble-maker, since they know her power?" Jerry asked, after a pause.

"Why? 'Cause they enjoy it when 'tain't about them—all of us do that, bein' human. Are you right sure you wouldn't believe her yourself, much as you despised any story of hers you'd be forced to listen to? Well as I know her, I have to keep pinchin' my right arm to see if it's got nerve enough to strike back if I'm hit, you might say."

On Jerry's cheeks the bloom deepened. She had let a word of Mrs. Bahrr's set her to wondering about both her host and hostess.

"They's one more thing I want to say, the third reason for askin' you out this evenin'," Ponk went on, and the pompous manner fell from him somewhat in his earnestness. "I don't want you to leave Macpherson's home for anything, right now. They want you and—well, I hope you won't. Even at the loss of a boarder for myself at the hotel and gurrage I hope you won't. But if some time—if it was ever possible you'd find a need for me more 'n what we spoke of—I ain't no show. I'm clear below your society back East, but, if you ever needed a real, devoted, honest man who tried to be a Christian—"

Jerry caught his full meaning now. "You are a Christian, Mr. Ponk. I'm not. You are kind to me in my need, and I shall rely on your sincerity and your friendship, and if there is any way in which I could return it, even in a small measure, I would be so happy. We will be the best of friends."

Jerry's smile was winsome as she frankly put out her hand to seal the bond in a clasp of good-fellowship. And Junius Brutus Ponk understood.

"It's no use," he said to himself, sadly. "I wish it might have been, but it ain't. I ain't such a fool I can't see a door when it's shut right before me. I'm blessed to be her friend, and I'll be it if the heavens drop. I'm in my Waterloo an' must just wade across an' shake myself. That's all."

His sunny nature always overcame his disappointments, but from that hour in an upper niche of his heart's shrine he placed Jerry's image, one of the beautiful things of life he might do homage to but could never possess.

"They's just one favor I want to ask of you," he said, aloud, "an' that is that you'll go with me to call on mother out to the cemetery sometimes. I'd like her to know you, too. She was good, and a good mother just lives on."

Jerry's cheek paled a shade, but she said, graciously: "I'll be glad to do that, Mr. Ponk. Maybe it will make me a little less rebellious, and you will be doing me

the favor."

Ponk's face beamed with pleasure at her words the while a real tear rolled unnoticed down his cheek. That night marked the beginning of a new spiritual life for Jerry Swaim.



XIV

JIM SWAIM'S WISH

The next morning, when Jerry Swaim was ready to go to the bank, her pretty beaded bag seemed light as she lifted it, and when she opened her purse she found it empty. Then she sat down and stared at herself in the mirror opposite her.

"Well, what next? Go mad or go back East? This must be the last ditch," she murmured. "Joe Thomson said he didn't *go* mad, but he did *get* mad. I'm mad clear to my Swaim toes, and I'm not going to take another bump. It's been nothing but bumps ever since I reached the junction of the main line with the Sage Brush branch back in June, and I'm tired of it. Gene Wellington said the West got the better of his father. The East seems to have gotten the best of his father's son."

Across her mind swept the thought of how easy Gene's way was being made for him in the East, and how the way of the West for her had to be fought over inch by inch.

"Neither East nor West shall get me." She tossed her head imperiously, for Jim Swaim's chin, York Macpherson would have said, was in command, and the dreamy eyes were flashing fire.

An hour later Ponk's gray runabout was spinning off the miles of the trail down the Sage Brush, with Jerry Swaim's hands gripping the wheel firmly, though her cheeks were pink with excitement. Where a road from the west crossed the trail, the stream cut through a ledge of shale, leaving a little bluffy bank on either side, with a bridge standing high above the water.

Joe Thomson, in a big farm wagon, had just met his neighbor, Thelma Ekblad, in her plain car, at the end of the bridge, when Jerry's horn called her approach. Before they had time to shift aside the gray car swept by with graceful curve, missing the edge of the bridge abutment by an eyelash.

"Great Scott! Thelma, I didn't notice that this big gun of mine was filling up all the road," Joe exclaimed. "That was the neatest curve I ever saw. That's Ponk's

car from New Eden, but only a civil engineer's eye could have kept out of the river right there."

"The pretty girl who is visiting the Macphersons was the driver," Thelma said.

"No! Was it, sure?" Joe queried, looking with keen eyes down the trail, whither the gray runabout was gliding like a bird on the wing.

"Why, of course it was!" Thelma assured him, feeling suddenly how shabby her own machine became in comparison. "I must go now. Come over and see Paul when you can."

"I will. How is the baby?" Joe asked.

"Oh, splendid, and so much company for Paul!" Thelma declared.

"Yes, a baby is the preacher and the whole congregation sometimes. Let me know if you need any help. Good-by."

So in neighborly good-will they separated, Joe to follow the gray car down the trail, and Thelma to wonder briefly at the easy life of the beautiful Eastern girl whose lot was so unlike her own. Only briefly, however, for Thelma was of too happy a temperament, of too calm and philosophical a mentality, to grieve vainly. It always put a song in her day, too, to meet Joe upon the way. Not only on common farm topics were she and Joe congenial companions, but in politics, the latest books, the issues of foreign affairs, the new in science, they found a common ground.

Joe's thoughts were of the Eastern girl, too, as he thundered down the trail in his noisy wagon.

"I wish I could overtake her before she gets to the forks of the road," he said to himself. "I know she's not going to go my way farther than that. But why is she here at all? There's nobody living down the river road for miles, except old Fishing Teddy. She did dine at his expense the day she came out to her sand-pile. He told me all about it the night when we rode down from town together. Funny old squeak he is. But he can't interest her. Hello! Yonder we are."

In three minutes he was beside the gray car, that was standing at the point where the river road branched from the main trail.

"Good morning, Mr. Thomson. I knew you were coming this way, so I waited for

you here. I don't go down that road. You know why."

Jerry pointed toward the way down which her own land lay.

Joe lifted his hat in greeting, his cheeks flushing through the tan, for his heart would jump furiously whenever he came into this girl's presence.

"Good morning, Miss Swaim. I am glad you waited," he managed to say. "You certainly know how to guide a car. I didn't know I was filling the whole highway up at the bridge."

"Oh, there was plenty of room," Jerry said, indifferently.

"Yes, plenty if you know how to stick to it. That's the secret of a lot of things, I guess—not finding a wider trail, but knowing how to drive straight through on the one you have found."

Joe was talking to gain time with himself, for he was inwardly angry at being upset every time he met this pretty girl.

This morning she seemed prettier than ever to his eyes. She was wearing a cool gray-green hat above her golden-gleaming hair, and her sheer gingham gown was stylishly summery. Exquisite taste in dress, as well as love of romance, was a heritage from Lesa Swaim.

"You are a real philosopher and a poet," Jerry exclaimed, looking up with wide-open eyes.

"A sort of Homer in homespun," Joe suggested.

"Probably; but I have a prose purpose in detaining you and I am in great luck to have found you," Jerry replied.

"Thank you. The luck will be mine if I can serve you."

The bronze young farmer's gallantry was as gracious as ever the well-groomed Philadelphia artist's had been.

"Kansas seems determined to get rid of me, if hard knocks mean anything. I've had nothing but bumps and knotty problems since I landed on these sand-shifting prairies. It makes me mad and I'm not going to be run off by it." Jerry's eyes were darkly defiant and her lifted hand seemed strong to strike for herself.

"You have the real pioneer spirit," Joe declared. "It was that very determination

not to be gotten rid of by a sturdy bunch of forefathers and mothers that has subdued a state, sometimes boisterous and belligerent, and sometimes snarling and catty, and made it willing to eat out of their hands."

"Oh, it's not all subdued yet. It never will be." Jerry pointed down the trail toward the far distance where her twelve hundred blowout-cursed acres lay.

Joe Thomson's mouth was set with a bulldog squareness. "Are we less able than our forefathers?" he asked.

"As to sand—yes," Jerry replied, "but to myself, as a first consideration, I'm dreadfully in trouble."

"Again?"

"Oh, always—in Kansas," Jerry declared. "First my whole inheritance is smothered in plain sand—and dies—hard but quickly. Then I fight out a battle for existence and win a schoolmarm's crown of—"

"Of service," Joe suggested, seriously.

"I hope so. I really do," Jerry assured him. "Next I lease my—dukedom for a small but vital sum of money on which to exist till—till—"

"Yes, till wheat harvest, figuratively speaking," Joe declared.

"And this morning my purse is empty, robbed of every cent, and my pearl-handled knife and a button-hook."

Joe had left his wagon and was standing beside Jerry's car, with one foot on the running-board.

"Stolen! Why, why, where's York?" he asked, in amazement.

"I don't know. I don't think he took it," Jerry replied.

"Oh, but I mean what's he doing about it?" Joe questioned, anxiously.

"Nothing. He doesn't know it. I came to find you first, to get you to help me."

"Me!" Joe could think of nothing more to say.

"You won't scold, and I'm afraid York would. I don't want to be scolded," Jerry declared. "He would wonder why I hadn't put it in the bank. And, besides, there

have some queer things been happening in New Eden—I can't explain them, for you might not understand, but I do really need a friend right now. Did you ever need one?"

To the girl alone and under suspicion, however kind the friends who were puzzled over her situation, conscious that too many favors were not to be asked of the good-souled Junius Brutus Ponk, the young farmer seemed the only one to whom she could turn. And she had the more readily halted her car to wait for him because she had already begun to weave a romance in homespun about this splendid young agriculturist and the good-hearted country girl, Thelma Ekblad. He, himself, was impersonal to her.

"I'm always needing friends—and I'm more glad than you could know to have you even think of me in your needs. But everybody turns to York Macpherson. He's the lodestar for every Sage Brush compass," Joe said, looking earnestly at Jerry.

"I'm on my way to the old Teddy Bear's house, your Fishing Teddy," Jerry declared, "and I thought you would go with me. I don't want to go alone."

"Let me take this machinery to the men—they are waiting for it to start to work—and I'll be glad to go," Joe answered her.

The gray car followed the big wagon down the trail to the deep bend of the Sage Brush in the angle of which Joe's ranch-house stood; and the load of machinery was quickly given over to the workmen. As Joe seated himself in the little gray car Jerry said:

"You are wondering why, and too polite to ask why, I go to Hans Theodore's. Let me tell you." Then she told him of her dazed wanderings down the river road two months before, and of her meal near old Teddy's shack.

"He brought me fried fish on a cracked plate, and buttermilk in a silver drinking-cup—a queer pattern with a monogram on the side. The next morning I saw another cup exactly like that on the buffet in the Macpherson dining-room. They told me there should be two of them. One they found was suddenly missing. Later it suddenly was not missing. York said their like was not to be had this side of old 'Castle Cluny' on the ancient Kingussie holding of the invincible Clan Macpherson's forebears. So this must have been the same cup. It was on the morning after you called and took the old Teddy Bear home with you that the missing cup reappeared. You remember he was shambling around the grounds

the night before, waiting for you?"

"Yes, I remember," Joe responded, gravely.

"Meantime Laura Macpherson lost her purse. It was found in my hand-bag. I believe now that the one that took it became frightened or something, and tried to put it on me. Maybe somebody knew how dreadfully near the wall I was. Then York paid me lease money, as I told you—three hundred dollars. It was in my purse last evening when I went out for a ride. As I sat in the side porch alone, earlier in the evening, I saw the old Teddy Bear shamble and shuffle about the shrubbery and disappear down the slope in the shadows on the town side of the place. This morning my money is all gone. I am going down here after it."

"And you didn't ask York to help you?" Joe queried, anxiously.

"Why, no. I wanted you to help me. Will you do it?" Jerry asked, looking up into the earnest face of the big farmer beside her.

Was it selfishness, or thoughtlessness, or love of startling adventure, or insight, or fate bringing her this way? Joe Thomson asked himself the question in vain.

"I'll do whatever I can do. This is such a strange thing. I knew things were missing by spells up in town, but we never lose anything down our way, and you'd think we would come nearer having what old Fishing Teddy would want if he is really a thief," Joe declared.

"I am going down to old Teddy's shack and ask him to give me my money, anyhow," Jerry repeated.

"And if he has it and refuses, I'll pitch him into the river and hold him under till he comes across. But if he really hasn't it?" Joe asked.

"Then he can't give it, that's all," Jerry replied.

"But how will you know?" Joe insisted.

"I don't know how I'll know, but when the time comes I'll probably find a way to find out," Jerry declared. "Anyhow, I must do something, for I'm clear penniless and it's this or go mad or go back East. I'm not going to do either. I'm just going to get mad and stay mad till I get what's mine."

"I'll be your faithful sleuth, but I can't believe you'll find your bag of gold at the end of this rainbow. The old man is gentle, though, and you couldn't have any

fear, I suppose," Joe suggested.

"Not with you along I couldn't," Jerry replied.

She was watching the road, and did not see how his eyes filled with a wonderful light at her words. She was not thinking of Joe Thomson, nor of York Macpherson, nor yet of Junius Brutus Ponk. She was thinking far back in her mind of how Eugene Wellington would admire her some day for really not giving in. That faint line of indecision in his face as she recalled it in the rose-arbor—oh, so long ago—that was only emphasized by his real admiration for those who could stand fast by a determination. She had always dared. He had always adored, but never risked a danger.

Down by the deep fishing-hole the willows were beginning to droop their long yellow leaves on the diminishing stream, and the stepping-stones stood out bare and bleaching above the thin current that slipped away between them. A little blue smoke was filtering out from the stove-pipe behind the shack hidden among the bushes. Everything lay still under the sunshine of late summer.

"You keep the car. I'm going in," Jerry declared, halting in the thin shade by the deep hole.

"I think I'd better go, too," Joe insisted.

"I think not," Jerry said, with a finality in her tone there was no refuting.

York Macpherson had well said that there was no duplicate for Jerry, no forecasting just what she would do next.

As Jerry's form cast a shadow across his doorway old Fishing Teddy turned with a start from a bowl of corn-meal dough that he was stirring. The little structure was a rude domicile, fitted to the master of it in all its features. On a plain unpainted table Jerry saw a roll of bills weighted down by an old cob pipe. A few coins were neatly stacked beside them, with a pearl-handled knife and button-hook lying farther away.

"I came for my money," Jerry said, quietly. "It's all I have until I can earn some myself."

The old man's fuzzy brown cheeks seemed to grow darker, as if his blush was of a color with the rest of his make-up. He shuffled quickly to the table, gathered up all the money, and, coming nearer, silently laid it in Jerry's hands.

The girl looked at him curiously. It was as if he were handing her a handkerchief she had dropped, and she caught herself saying:

"Thank you. But what made you take it? Don't you know it is all I have, and I must earn my living, too, just like anybody else?"

Old Fishing Teddy opened his mouth twice before his voice would act. "I didn't take it. I was goin' to fetch it up to you soon as I could git up there again," he squeaked out at last.

Jerry sat down on a broken chair and stared at him, as he seated himself on the table, gripping the edge on either side with his scaly brown hands, and gazed down at the floor of the cabin.

"If you didn't take it, why did you have it here? I saw you last night on Macpherson's driveway," Jerry said, wondering, meanwhile, why she should argue with an old thieving fellow like Fishing Teddy—Jerusha Darby's niece and heir some fine day, if she only chose, to all of the Darby dollars.

"I can't never explain to you, lady. They's troubles in everybody's lots, I reckon. Mine ain't nothin' but a humble one, but it ain't so much different from big folks's in trouble ways. An' we all have to do the best we can with what comes to us to put up with. I 'ain't never harmed nobody, nor kep' a thing 'at wa'n't mine longer 'n I could git it back. You ask York Macpherson, an' he'll tell ye the truth. He never sent ye down here, York didn't."

The old man ceased squeaking and looked down at his stubby legs and old shoes. Was he lying and whining for mercy, being caught with the spoils of his thieving?

Jerry's big eyes were fixed on him as she tried to fathom the real situation. The bunch of grubs on the Winnowoc local—common country and village folk—had been far below her range of interest, to say nothing of sympathy. Yet here she sat in the miserable shack of a hermit fisherman, an all-but-acknowledged thief, with his loot discovered, studying him with a mind where pity and credulity were playing havoc with her better judgment and her aristocratic breeding. Had she fallen so low as this, or had she risen to a newer height of character than she had ever known before?

Suddenly the old grub hunched down on the table before her looked up. Jerry remembered afterward how clear and honest the gaze of those faded yellow eyes

set in a multitude of yellow wrinkles. His hands let go of the table's edge and fitted knuckle into palm as he asked, in a quavering voice:

"Be you really Jim Swaim's girl who used to live up in that there Winnowoc country back yander in Pennsylvania?"

Jerry's heart thumped violently. It was the last word she had expected from this creature. "Yes, I'm Jim's only child." The same winsome smile that made the artistic Eugene Wellington of Philadelphia adore her beamed now on this poor old outcast down by the deep hole of the Sage Brush.

"An' be you hard up, an' earnin' your own livin' by yourself, did ye say? 'Ain't ye got a rich kin back East to help ye none?" The voice quavered up and down unsteadily.

"Yes, I have a rich aunt, but I'm taking care of myself. It makes me freer, but I have to be particular not to—to—lose any money right now," Jerry said, frankly.

"Then ye air doin' mighty well, an' it's the thing that 'u'd make your daddy awful glad ef he only could know. It 'u'd be fulfillin' his own wish. I know it would. I heered him say so onct."

Jerry Swaim's eyes were full of unshed tears. Keenly she remembered when Uncle Cornie had told her the same thing at the doorway of the rose-arbor in beautiful "Eden" in the beautiful June-time. How strange that the same message should come to her again here in the shadow of New Eden inside the doorway of a fisherman's hut. And how strange a thing is life at any time!

"Please don't be unhappy about this." Jerry lifted the money which lay in her lap. "It shall never trouble you."

And then for a brief ten minutes the two talked together, Geraldine Swaim of Philadelphia, and old Fishing Teddy, the Sage Brush hermit.

Joe Thomson, sitting in the gray car, saw Jerry coming through the bushes, her hat in her hand, the summer sunshine on her glorious crown of hair, her face wearing a strange new expression, as if in Fishing Teddy's old shack a revelation of life's realities had come to her and she had found them worthy and beautiful.

Little was said between the two young people until they reached the Thomson ranch-house again and Jerry had halted her car under the shade of an elm growing before the door. Then, turning to Joe, she said:

"You are right about the old Teddy Bear. He isn't a thief. I don't know what he is, but I do know what he isn't. Since you know so much about my coming here already, may I tell you a few more things? I want to talk to somebody who will understand me."

Jerry did not ask herself why she should choose Joe Thomson for such a confidence. She went no deeper than to feel that something about Joe was satisfying, and that was sufficient. Henceforth with York and the hotel-keeper she must be on her guard. Joe was different.

In the half-hour that followed the two became fast friends. And when the little gray runabout sped up the long trail toward New Eden Joe Thomson watched it until it was only a dust-spot on the divide that tops the slopes down to Kingussie Creek. He knew now the whole story of Laura's purse and her suspicions, of Ponk's offer of help, and he shrewdly guessed that the pompous little man had met a firm check to anything more than mere friendship. For Jerry's comfort, he refuted the possibility of the Macphersons' harboring a doubt regarding her honesty.

"A mere remark of the moment. We all make them," he assured her.

Lastly, he was made acquainted with the events inside of Hans Theodore's shack.

"Something is wrong there, but it is deeper than we can reach now," Jerry said. "Maybe we can help the old fellow if he is tempted, and shield him if he is wronged."

How fair the face, and soft and clear the voice! It made Joe Thomson's own face harden to hide a feeling he would not let reveal itself.

As he watched the girl's receding car he resolved anew to conquer that formless enemy of sand and to reclaim for her her lost kingdom in Kansas. His reward? That must come in its own time. Ponk was out of the running. York was still a proposition. As for all that stuff of York's about some Eastern fellow, Joe would not believe it.

And the girl driving swiftly homeward thought only of the romance of Joe and Thelma, if she thought of them at all—for she was Lesa Swaim's child still—and mainly and absorbedly she thought of her father's wish to be fulfilled in her.

So the glorious Kansas autumn brought to Jerry Swaim all of its beauty, in its soft air, its opal skies, its gold-and-brown-and-lavender landscapes, its calm

serenity. And under its benediction this girl of luxurious, idle, purposeless days in sunny "Eden" on the Winnowoc was beginning a larger existence in New Eden by the Sage Brush, and through the warp and woof of that existence one name was all unconsciously woven large—JOE.



XV

DRAWING OUT LEVIATHAN WITH A HOOK

For three years the seasons sped by, soft-footed and swift, and the third June-time came smiling up the Sage Brush Valley. Many changes had marked the passing of these seasons. Ranches had extended their cultivated acres; trees spread a wider shade; a newly settled addition had extended the boundaries of New Eden; and a new factory and a high-school building for vocational training marked the progress of the town. Budding youth had blossomed into manhood and womanhood and the cemetery had gathered in its toll. Three years, however, had marked little outward change in the young Eastern girl who stayed by her choice of the Sage Brush country for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer. She had flung all of her young energy into the dull routine of teaching mathematics; romance had given place to reality; idleness and careless dependence to regulated effort and carefully computed expenditures; gay social interests to the companionship of lesser opportunities, but broader vision. However, these things came at a sacrifice. When the newness wore away from her work, Jerry's hours were not all easeful, happy ones. Slowly, with the passing of the days, she began to learn the hard lesson of overcoming, a lesson doubly hard for one whose life hitherto had been given no preparation for duty. Yet, as her days gathered surer purpose her dark-blue eyes were less often dreamy, her fair cheeks took on a richer bloom, while her crown of glorious hair lost no glint of its gold.

Her gift of winning friends, the old imperious power to make herself the center of the universe, was in no wise disturbed by being a citizen and a school-teacher instead of an Eastern lady of leisure sojourning temporarily in the Sage Brush country. The young men of the valley tried eagerly to win a greater place than that of mere friendship with her, but she gave no serious consideration to any of them, least of all—so she persuaded herself—to the young ranchman whom she had met so early after her arrival in Kansas. Further, she had persuaded herself that the pretty rural romance she had woven about him and his Norwegian neighbor, Thelma Ekblad, must be a reality. Thelma had finished her university course and was making a success of farming and of caring for her crippled brother Paul and that roly-poly Belkap baby, now a white-haired, blue-eyed, red-lipped chunk of innocence, responsibility, and delight. Gossip, beginning at

Stellar Bahrr's door, said that interest in her neighbor, the big ranchman down the river, was responsible for Thelma's staying on the Ekblad farm, now that she had her university degree, because she could make a career for herself as a botany specialist in any college in the West. Jerry knew that love for a crippled brother and the care of a worse than orphaned child of the woman that brother had loved were real factors in the life of this country girl, but her air castles must be built for somebody, and they seemed to cluster around the young Norwegian and the ranchman. Of course, then, the ranchman, Joe Thomson, could interest Jerry only in a general genial comradeship kind of way. Beginning in a common bond, the presence of a common enemy—the blowout—chance meetings grew into regular and helpful association. That was all that it meant to Jerry Swaim.

Three staunch friends watched her closely. Ponk, of the Commercial Hotel and Garage, believed blindly and wholly in her ability, laying all blame for her defective work in the school upon other shoulders, standing manfully by her in every crisis. Laura Macpherson, although never blinded to the truth about Jerry in her impetuous, self-willed, unsympathetic, undeveloped nature, loved her too well to doubt her ultimate triumph over all fortune. Only York, who studied her closest of all three, because he was the keenest reader of human nature, still held that the final outcome for Jerry Swaim was a matter of uncertainty.

"I tell you, Laura," York said, one evening in the early spring of the third year, when Jerry had gone with Joe Thomson for a long horseback ride up the Sage Brush—"I tell you that girl is still a type of her own, which means that sometimes she is soft-hearted, and romantic, and frivolous, and impulsive, and affectionate, like Lesa Swaim, and sometimes clear-eyed, hard-headed, close-fisted, with a keen judgment for values, practical, and clever, like old Jim."

"And which parent, Sir Oracle, would you have her be most like?" Laura inquired.

"Lord knows," York replied. "As He alone knows how much of the good of each she may reject and how much of the weak and objectionable she may appropriate."

"Being a free moral agent to just dissect her fond parents and choose and refuse at will when she makes up her life and being for herself! It's a way we all have of doing, you know," Laura said, sarcastically. "Remember, York, when you elected to look like papa, only you chose mother's wavy brown hair instead of her husband's straight black locks; and you voted you'd have her clear judgment in

business matters, which our father never had."

"And gave to you the same which he never possessed. Yes, I remember," York retorted. "But how is all this psychological analysis going to help matters here?"

"How's it going to help Joe Thomson, or keep him from being helped, you mean?" Laura suggested.

A faint flush crept into York Macpherson's brown cheek.

"It's dead sure Jerry has little enough thought of Joe now," York said, gravely. "She's living a day at a time, and underneath the three years' veneer of genuine service the real Philadelphia Geraldine Swaim is still a sojourner in the Sage Brush Valley, not a fixture here."

And York was right so far as Jerry Swaim's thought of Joe Thomson was concerned.

After signing the lease with York Macpherson she rarely spoke of her property to any one until it came to be forgotten to the few who knew of it at all.

Once she had said to Joe:

"That heritage of mine is like the grave of an enemy. I couldn't look at it forgivingly; so I would never, never want to see it again, and I never want to hear the awful word 'blowout' spoken."

"Then forget it," Joe advised.

And Jerry forgot it.

But for Joe Thomson the seasons held another story. Down the Sage Brush, fall and spring, great steam tractors furrowed the shifting sands of the blowout, until slowly broom-corn and other coarse plants were coaxing a thin soil deposit that spread northward from the south edge of the sand-line. Little attention was paid to these efforts by the few farmer folk who supposed that Joe was backing it, for they were all a busy people, and the movement was too futile to be considered, anyhow.

Late in the summer of her first season in New Eden, affairs came to a head suddenly. Three years before, Junius Brutus Ponk's well-meant warning to Jerry to be on her guard against Stellar Bahrr's mischief-making had not been without cause or results. Before the opening of the school year, beginning with the

Lenwells as a go-between, percolating up through families where fall sewing was in progress, on to the Macphersons and their closest friends, the impression grew toward fact that Jerry was a sort of adventuress who had foisted herself upon the Macphersons and had befuddled the brain of the vain little hotel-keeper, who had overruled the other members of the school board and forced her into a good place in the high school, although she was without experience or knowledge of the branch to which she was elected. And then she met young men in the cemetery and rode in Ponk's car over the country alone.

One of the easy acts of the average, and super-average, mortal is to respect a criticism made upon a fellow-mortal—doing it most generally with no conscious malevolence, prompted largely by the common human desire to be the bearer of new discoveries.

New Eden was no worse than the average little town at any point of the compass. It took Stellar Bahrr at her par value, listened, laughed, and declared it disbelieved her stories—and mainly in that spirit repeated them, but in any spirit always repeated them. When the reports of Jerry had gone to the farthest corners of town they came at last to the office of York Macpherson. And it was Ponk himself who brought them, with some unprintable language and violent denunciations of certain females who were deadlier, he declared, than any males, even blackmails. York forgave the atrocious pun because of the righteous wrath back of it. He knew that Ponk's suit with Jerry failed temporarily, and he admired the little man for his loyal devotion in spite of it.

The Macphersons had completely convinced Jerry of their faith in her, and in that congenial association she had almost forgotten the incident of the porch conversation about her. To Ponk's anxious query, "What will you do?" (nobody ever said "can" to York Macpherson; he always could), York had replied:

"I shall go straight to Jerry. She will hear it, anyhow, and she has displayed such a deal of courage so far she'll not wither under this."

"You bet she won't, York, but what will stop it? I mean Stellar Bahrr's mischief-makin'. She's subtler than the devil himself."

"We'll leave that to Jerry. She may have a way of her own. You never can tell about Jerry." As he spoke York was turning his papers over in search of something which he did not find, and he did not look up for a minute.

"I'll leave the matter to you now," Ponk said. "I have other affairs of state to

engross my attention," and he left the office, muttering as he strutted across to the garage door.

"Thinks he can pull the wool over my eyes by not lookin' at me. Well, York wouldn't be the best man on the Sage Brush if he didn't fall in love with Miss Jerry. She's not only the queen of hearts; she's got the whole deck, includin' the joker, clear buffaloed."

York was true to his word as to telling Jerry, when the three were on the porch that evening, what was in the air and on the lips of the "town tattlers," as he called them. Jerry listened gravely. She was getting used to things, now, that three months ago would have overwhelmed her—if she hadn't been Jim Swaim's child. When he had finished and Laura was about to pour out vials of indignation, Jerry looked up without a line on her smooth brow, saying:

"Will you go over to Mrs. Bahrr's with me now, York?"

York rose promptly, questioning, nevertheless, the outcome of such an interview.

Mrs. Bahrr had just followed her corkscrew way up to the side gate of the Macpherson home as the two left the porch, when she heard Jerry call back to Laura:

"If we find Mrs. Bahrr at home we won't be gone long."

"And if you don't?" Laura asked.

The answer was lost, for Mrs. Bahrr turned and fled across lots, by alley gate and side walk-way and vacant yard, to her own rear door. One of Mrs. Bahrr's strong points was that of being more ready than her antagonist and her habit of thought had made her world an antagonistic one.

York was curious to see how Jerry would meet her Waterloo, for that was what this encounter would become, and he was glad that she had asked him to go with her instead of running off alone, as she had done when she wanted to see her estate.

Seated in the little front parlor, Jerry took her time to survey the place before she came to her errand. It was a very humble home, with a rag carpet, windows without draperies, but with heavy blinds; chairs that became unsettled if one rocked in them; cheap, unframed chromos tacked up on the walls; an old parlor organ; and a stand with a crazy-quilt style of cover on which rested a dusty

Bible. York saw a look of pity in Jerry's eyes where three months before he felt sure there would have been only disdain.

Very simply and frankly the girl told the purpose of her call, ending with what might have been a command, but it was spoken in the clear, soft voice that had always won her point in any argument.

"Whether these stories came from you or not you will be sure not to repeat them."

Stella Bahrr bristled with anger. Whatever might have been said behind her back, nobody except York Macpherson and Junius Brutus Ponk had ever spoken so plainly to her face before. And they had never spoken in the presence of a third party. And here comes a pretty, silly young thing with a child's Sunday-school talk to her, right in York's presence, in her own house. Jerry Swaim would pay well for her rudeness.

"I don't know as it's up to me to keep still when everybody's talkin'. I won't promise nothin'. An' I 'ain't got nothin' to be afraid of." Mrs. Bahrr hooked her eyes viciously into her caller.

"I'm afraid of a good many things, but I'm not so very much afraid of people. I was a little afraid of you the first time I saw you. You remember where that was, of course."

Jerry looked straight at Mrs. Bahrr with wide-open eyes. Something in her face recalled Jim Swaim's face to York Macpherson, and he forgot the girl's words as he stared at her.

"When I was a child," Jerry continued, "they used to say to me, 'The goblins 'll git you ef you don't watch out.' Now I know it is the Teddy Bear that gits you ef you don't watch out."

Mrs. Bahrr's lips seemed to snap together and her eyes tore their way out of Jerry and turned to the window. Jerry stepped softly across to her chair and, laying a hand on her shoulder, said, with a smile:

"Hereafter it will be all right between us."

And it was—apparently.

As they walked slowly homeward York and Jerry said little. The girl's mind was

busy with thoughts of her new work—the only work she had ever attempted in her life; and York's thoughts were busy with—Jerry.

That night York sat alone on the porch of "Castle Cluny" until far toward morning, beginning at last to fight out with himself the great battle of his life. The big, kindly, practical man of affairs, arrow-proof, bullet-proof, bomb-proof to all the munitions of Cupid, courted and flattered and admired and looked up to by a whole community, seemed hopelessly enmeshed now in the ripples of golden-brown hair, held fast by the beautiful dark-blue eyes of a young lady whose strength to withstand what lay before her he very much doubted.

"If I speak to her now, she'll run away from us and leave Laura lonely. She can't go to the hotel, because I know Ponk has tried and failed. I'm one degree behind him in that. Where would she go? And how would the Big Dipper act? I've no faith in her keeping still if Jerry did use some magic on her to-night. Nobody will ever Rumpelstilskin her out of herself. I'll be a man, and wait and befriend my little girl whenever I can, although I'm forced every day to see how she is growing to take care of herself. When nothing else can decide events, time is sure to settle them."

All this happened at the beginning of the three years whose ending came in a June-time on the Kansas plains. Summer and winter, many a Sabbath afternoon saw the hotel-keeper and the pretty mathematics-teacher strolling out to the cemetery "to call on mother." The quaint, firm faith of the pompous little man that "mother knew" had no place in Jerry Swaim's code and creed. But she never treated his belief lightly, and its homely sincerity at length began to bear fruit.

Not without its lasting effect, too, was the silent influence of Laura Macpherson upon her guest. The bright, happy life in spite of a hopeless lameness, the cheerful giving up of what that lameness denied the having, all unconsciously wrought its beauty into the new Jerry whom the "Eden" of an earlier day had never known. Nobody remembered when the guest and friend of the Macphersons began to be a factor in the New Eden church life, but everybody knew at the close of the third year that the churches couldn't do without her. And neither the Baptist minister, holding tenaciously to salvation by immersion, nor the Presbyterian, clinging to the doctrine of infant damnation, nor the Methodist, demanding instantaneous revival-meeting conversion from sin, asked once that the fair Philadelphian should "become united with the church." That would necessitate the query, "Which church?" And that would mean a loss to two and a gain to only one. As far as the blowout sand differed from "Eden" on the

Winnowoc, so far Jerry's religious faith now differed from the disbelief that followed the death of her father. In Kansas where the artistic Eugene Wellington had declared his own faith would perish, she had learned for the first time how to pray.

Letters had long since ceased to come from Aunt Jerry Darby to her niece, although in a friendly and patiently expectant form Eugene Wellington wrote beautiful missives breathing more and more of commercialized ideals and less and less of esthetic dreams, and not at all of the faith that had marked the spiritual refinement of his young manhood.

The third spring brought busy, trying days. A sick teacher made it necessary for the well ones to do double work. The youngest Lenwell boy, leader of the Senior class, started the annual and eternally trivial and annoying Senior-class fuss that seems fated to precede most high-school commencements. For two years it had been Jerry Swaim, whose mathematical mind seemed gifted with a wonderful generalship, who had managed to bring the class to harmony with an ease never known in the New Eden High School before. This year Clare Lenwell was perfectly irreconcilable, and Jerry, overworked, as willing teachers always are, was too busy to bring the belligerents to time before the bitterness of a town-split was upon the community. When she did come to the rescue of the superintendent, his own inefficiency to cope with the case became so evident that he at once turned against the young woman who "tried to run things," as he characterized her to the school board.

That caused an explosion of heavy artillery from the "Commercial Hotel and Garage," which made one member of the board, an uncle of young Lenwell, to rise in arms, and thus and so the fires of dissension crisscrossed the town, threatening to fulmine over the whole Sage Brush Valley. To make the matter more difficult, the town trouble-maker, Stellar Bahrr, for once seemed to have been innocently drawn into the thing, and everybody knew it was better to have Stellar Bahrr's good-will than to start her tongue.

York Macpherson and Junius Brutus Ponk both felt sure that Stellar had really stirred up the Lenwells, for whom she was constantly sewing; and, besides, a distant relative of theirs had married into the Bahrr family back where Stellar came from, "which must have been the Ark," Ponk declared, "and the other one of the pair died of seasickness." Anyhow, the local school row became the local town row, and it was a very real and bitter row.

In these days of little foxes that were threatening the whole vineyard, Jerry turned more and more to Joe Thomson. All of New Eden was tied up in the fuss, took sides, and talked it, except the Macphersons and a few of their friends, and they talked it without taking sides because the thing was in the air constantly. Jerry could not find even in "Castle Cluny" a refuge from what was uninteresting to her and thoroughly distasteful in itself. Ponk, being by nature a rabid little game-cock, was full of the thing, and was no more companionable than the Macphersons. But when the quiet ranchman came up from the lower Sage Brush country, his dark eyes glowing with pleasure and his poised mind unbiased by neighborhood failings, he brought the breath of sweet clover with his coming. When Jerry came home from their long rides up-stream—they never rode toward the blowout region—she felt as if she had a new grip on life and energy and ambition for her work. Joe was becoming, moreover, the best of entertainers, and the comradeship was the one thing Jerry had learned to prize most in her new life in the Middle West.

When the spring had slipped into early May Joe's visits grew less frequent, on account of his spring work. And once or twice he came to town and hurried away without even seeing Jerry. It comforted her greatly—she did not ask herself why—that he did drop a note into the post-office for her, telling her he was in town and regretting that he must hurry out without calling.

It was during this time that Thelma Ekblad came up to New Eden to do some extensive shopping and spend a week with the Macphersons. There were other guests at "Castle Cluny," and Thelma and Jerry shared the same room.

Back in "Eden" the heir apparent would never have dreamed of sharing anything with a Winnowoc grub. How times change us! Or do we change them?

Thelma was sunny-natured, spotlessly neat in her dress, and altogether vastly more companionable to Jerry than the Lenwell girls, who would persist in pleading their little high-school Senior brother's cause; or even the associate teachers, who were troubled and tired and overworked like herself.

Jerry had met Thelma often, and thought of her oftener, in the three years since they had come upon the Sage Brush branch of the local freight together one hot, sand-blown June day, three summers before. She had woven a romance about Thelma. Romances seemed now to belong to other people. They never came to her. She was glad, however, when Thelma's shopping was done and she went back to the farm down the Sage Brush, and her brother Paul, and the growing,

joyous Belkap child who filled the plain farm-house with interest.

Stellar Bahrr, in Jerry's presence, had spoken ill of no one since the memorable call three years ago. On the evening after Thelma left town she cork-screwed over to "Castle Cluny" for a friendly chat with Laura.

"I run in to see Thelmy Ekblad. She 'ain't gone home, is she? Got her shopping all done a'ready? Some girls can buy their weddin' finery quicker 'n scat. Did she say who was to make that new white dress she was buyin' yesterday at the Palace Emporium?" This straight at Jerry, who was resting lazily in the porch swing after an unusually annoying day.

"Not to me," Jerry replied, sliding another pillow behind her shoulders and leaning back comfortably.

"Well, well! I s'posed girls always told them things to each other. 'Specially if they slep' together. She's gettin' a mighty fine man, though—Thelmy is—at least, folks says she's gettin' him. He's there a lot, 'specially 'long this spring. His farm's right near her and Paul's. And she's one prince of a girl. Don't you say so, Miss Swaim?"

Jerry smiled in spite of herself, saying: "Yes, she's a prince of a girl. I like her." And then, because she was tired that night, both of Stellar and her topic, and the whole Sage Brush Valley, she turned away that neither Laura nor Stellar might see how much she wanted to cry.

But turning was futile. Mrs. Bahrr's eyes went right through the girl and she knew her shaft had hit home.

Joe had not been to town for weeks. It didn't matter to Jerry. Yet the next day after Stellar's call lacked something—and the next and the next. Not a definite lack, for Jerry's future was settled forever.

Down on the Sage Brush ranches Joe Thomson was trying to believe that things wouldn't matter, too, if they failed to go his way. These were lonely days for the young ranchman, who saw little of Jerry Swaim because every possible minute of his time was given to wrestling with the blowout.

There were many more lonely days, also, for Jerry, who now began to miss Joe more than she thought it could be possible to miss anybody except Gene Wellington, idealized into a sad and beautiful memory that kept alive an unconscious hope. And, with all her energy and her determination, many things

combined to make her school-room duty a hard task to one whose training had been so unfitting for serious labor. The flesh-pots of the Winnowoc came temptingly to her memory, and there were weary hours when the struggle to be sure and satisfied was greater than her friends could have dreamed.

The third winter of her stay had seen an unusual snowfall for the Sage Brush, and this spring following was an unusually rainy one. Everywhere rank vegetation flourished, prairies reveled in luxurious growths, and cultivated fields were burdened with the promise of record-breaking harvests.

York Macpherson's business had begun to call him to the East for prolonged trips, and he had less knowledge than formerly of the details of the affairs of New Eden and its community.

One day not long after Thelma's shopping trip Joe Thomson dropped into the office of the Macpherson Mortgage Company.

"How's the blowout?" This had become York's customary greeting.

"Never gentler." Joe's face was triumphant and his dark eyes were shining with hope. "This rainy season and the good old steam-plows are doing their perfect work. You haven't had any sand-storms lately, maybe you have noticed. Well, wheat is growing green and strong over more than half of that land now. There's not so much sand to spare as there used to be."

"You don't mean it!" York exclaimed, incredulously.

"Go and look at it yourself, you doubting old Missourian who must be shown," Joe retorted. "There's a stretch on the northeast toward the bend in the Sage Brush that is low and baked hard after the rains, and shifty and infernally stubborn in the dry weather."

York meditated awhile, combing his heavy hair with his fingers. "The river runs by your place?" he asked, at length.

"Yes, my house is right at the bend, and there is no sand across the Sage Brush," Joe replied.

"Well, the blowout will never stop till it gets up to the south bank of the bend. As I've told you already, you'll have to take the Lord Almighty into partnership to work a miracle. Otherwise this creeping up from behind and beyond the thing will be a never-ending job of time and money and labor. You'll never catch up

with it. It's just too everlastingly big, that's all. You'll be gray-bearded, and bald-headed, and deaf, and dim-sighted before you are through."

"I will not," Joe declared, doggedly. "And I've already told you that I've always taken the Lord Almighty into partnership, or I'd have been a derelict on a sea of sand lang syne."

"Joe, your faith in the Lord and faith in the prairies might move mountains, but they haven't yet moved the desert."

"Not entirely," Joe replied, "but if I do my part, who knows what Providence may do?"

As he sat there in the hope and strength of his youth, something in Joe Thomson's expectant face brought a pang to the man beside him.

"Joe, your lease will soon expire. I said to you three years ago that women are shiftier than blowouts. You didn't believe me, but it's the truth."

"Naturally the Macpherson Mortgage Company must acquire much knowledge of such things in the development of their business," Joe responded, jokingly. "Little Thelma Ekblad on the claim above mine has helped to pay off the mortgage your company held, and sent herself to the university, working in the harvest-fields and at the hay-baler to do it. Thelma never seemed shifty to me. She's a solid little rock of a woman who never flinches."

"I'll except Thelma. You ought—" But York went no further, for he knew Joe's spirit would not respond to his thought, and he had no business to be thinking, anyhow. He had known Joe Thomson from childhood. He admired Jerry Swaim greatly for what she had been doing, but he knew much of the Philadelphia end of the game, and his heart ached for the young Westerner, who, he believed, had shouldered a stupendous, tragical burden for the sake of a heart-longing only a strong nature like Joe's could know.

"By the way, Jerry Swaim's aunt, back East, is in a bad way and may die at any time, but she will never forgive Jerry to the point of inheritance. I happen to be in the old lady's confidence that far."

"You are a social Atlas, York," Joe declared. "You hold the world on your shoulders. But what you say doesn't interest me at all. So don't prejudge any of us, maid or man."

"And don't you let your bloomin' self-confidence and ability to work half-miracles be your undoing. A house builded on the sand may fall, where one built on gold dust may stand firm," York retorted.

"Do you believe your own words?" Joe asked, rising to his feet.

"The point is for you to believe them, whether I do or not," York answered, as Joe disappeared through the doorway.

"Why, in the name of fitness, can't that fellow fall in love with that little Thelma Ekblad, a girl who knows what sacrifice on the Sage Brush means and who has a grip on the real values of life? Oh, well, just to watch the crowd run awry ought to be entertainment enough for a bachelor like myself," York thought, as he sat staring after Joe. "I've lived to see a few half-miracles myself in the last decade. Anybody whose lot is cast in western Kansas can see as many of them as the old Santa Fé Trail bull-whackers saw of mirages in the awful 'fifties. There's a lot of reclaiming being done on the Sage Brush, even if that struggle of Joe's with the blowout is a failure. Thelma Ekblad in her splendid victory over ignorance, carrying a university degree; Stellar Bahrr"—York smiled, "Ponk, who would put a flourish after his name if he were signing his own death-warrant, the little hero of a hundred knocks, living above everything but his funny little strut, and he's getting over that a bit; old Fishing Teddy, brave old soul, down in his old shack alone; Jerry, with her luxurious laziness and doubt in God and a hereafter—all winning slowly to better things, maybe; but as to sand and Joe—

"Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?' You'll never do it, Joe, never, and you'll never win the goal you've set your heart on. Poor fellow!"

That night, on the silent porch alone, York finished the battle he had begun on the evening after he and Jerry had called on Stella Bahrr.

"It's the artist bank clerk against the field, and we'll none of us bat above his average. Good night, old moon, and good night, York, to what can't be."

He waved a hand at the dying light in the west, and a dying hope, and went inside.



XVI

A POSTLUDE IN "EDEN"

Cornelius Darby had lain in his beautifully decorated grave for three years, and a graceful white shaft pointing heavenward amid the shrubbery had become a landmark for the bunch of grubs who rode the Winnowoc local.

"Must be getting close to the deppo. Yonder is old Corn Darby's gravestone over on the bluff," they would say, as the train chuffed up out of the valley on either side of the station. That was all the memory of him that remained, save as now and then a girl in a far-away Kansas town remembered a June evening when a discus shied out from its course and rolled to the door of a rose-arbor.

But "Eden," as a country estate, lost nothing by the passing of the husband of its lady and mistress, who spared none of the Darby dollars to make both the town and country home delightful in all appointments, hoping and believing that in her policy of stubbornness and force she could have her way, and bring back to the East the girl whom she would never invite to return, the girl whose future she had determined to control. The three years had found Jerusha Darby's will to have Jerry Swaim become her heir under her own terms—mistaking dependence for appreciation, and idleness for happiness—had ceased to be will and become a mania, the ruling passion of her years of old age. She never dreamed that she was being adroitly managed by her husband's relative, Eugene Wellington, but she did recognize, and, strangely enough, resent, the fact that the Darby strain in his blood was proving itself in his ability, not to earn dollars, but to make dollars earn dollars once they were put plentifully into his hands.

Since Mrs. Darby had only one life-purpose—to leave her property to Jerry Swaim under her own terms—it galled her to think of it passing to the hands of the relatives of the late Cornelius. She believed that love of Eugene would bring Jerry back, for she was Lesa's own romance-loving child—even if the luxuries that wealth can offer should fail; and she had coddled Eugene Wellington for this very purpose. But after three years he had failed to satisfy her. She was becoming slowly but everlastingly set on one thing. She would put her property elsewhere by will—when she was through with it. She could not do without Eugene as long as she lived—which would be indefinitely, of course. But she

would have her say—and (in a whisper) it would *not* be a Darby nor *kin* of a Darby who might be sitting around now, waiting for her to pass to her fathers, who would possess it.

In this intense state of mind she called Eugene out to "Eden" in the late May of the third year of Jerry Swaim's stay in Kansas. The rose-arbor was aglow with the same blossoming beauty as of old, and all the grounds were a dream of May-time verdure.

Eugene Wellington, driving out from the city in a big limousine car, found them more to his taste than ever before, and he took in the premises leisurely before going to the arbor to meet Mrs. Darby.

"If I could only persuade Jerry to come now, all would be well," he meditated. "And I have hopes. The last news of her tells me a few things. She hasn't fallen in love with York Macpherson. He'd hate me less if she had, and he detests me. I saw that, all right, when he was here last month. And she's pretty tired of the life of the wilderness. I know that. If she would come right now it would settle things forever. I'd go after her if the old lady would permit it. I'd go, anyhow, if I dared. But I must keep an eye on Uncle Cornie's widow day and night, and, hungry as I am for one glimpse of Jerry's sweet face, I couldn't meet Jerusha D. in her wrath if I disobeyed her."

Eugene had the chauffeur pause while he surveyed the lilac-walk and the big maples and the lotus-pond.

"If Jerry would come *now*," he began again, with himself, "she would be heir to all this. If she doesn't come soon, there's trouble ahead for Eugene of the soft snaps. To the rose-arbor, Henderson."

So Henderson whirled the splendid young product to the doorway of the pretty retreat.

Mrs. Darby met her nephew with a sterner face even than she was accustomed to wear.

"I want to see you at once," she said, as the young man loitered a moment outside.

"Yes, Aunt Jerry," he responded, dutifully enough—as to form.

"What have you heard from Jerry recently?" she demanded.

"What York Macpherson told us—that she has had a hard year's work in a school-room," Eugene replied.

"Humph! I knew that. What are you doing to bring her back to me?" Mrs. Darby snapped off the words.

"Nothing now!" the young man answered her.

"Nothing now! Why not?" Mrs. Darby was in her worst of humors.

"Because there is positively nothing to do but to wait," Eugene said, calmly. "She is not in love anywhere else. She is getting tired and disgusted with her plebeian surroundings, and as to her estate—"

"What of her estate? I refused to let York Macpherson say a word, although he tried to over-rule me. I told him two things: I'd never forgive Jerry if she didn't come back uninvited by me; and I'd never listen to him blow a big Kansas story of her wonderful possessions. What do you know? You'd be unprejudiced." The old woman had never seemed quite so imperious before.

"I have here a paper describing it. York Macpherson sent it to Uncle Cornelius the very week he died. I found it among some other papers shortly after his death and after Jerry left. When York was here he confirmed the report at my insistent request. Read it."

Jerusha Darby read, realizing, as she did so, that neither her husband nor York Macpherson had succeeded in doing what Eugene Wellington had done easily. Each had tried in vain to have her read that paper.

"You knew the condition of this estate for three years, and never told me. Why?" The old woman's face was very pale.

"I did not dare to do so," Eugene replied, that line of weakness in his face which Jerry had noted three years before revealing itself for the first time to her aunt.

"This is sufficient," she said, in a quiet sort of way. "To-morrow I make my will—just to be sure. I shall probably outlive many younger people than myself. Write and tell Jerry I have done it. This time to-morrow night will see my estate settled so far as the next generation is concerned. If I do not do it, Eugene, some distant and improvident relatives of Cornelius will claim it. Send the lawyer out in the morning."

"All right, Aunt Jerry. I must go now. I have a club meeting in the city and I can make it easily. The car runs like the wind with Henderson at the wheel. Good-by."

And Eugene Wellington was gone.

"Three years ago I'd have left everything to him if I had been ready to make a will then. I'm ready now, and any time in the next ten years I can change it if I want to. But this will bring things my way, after all. I told York I'd never forgive Jerry!"

Mrs. Darby paused, and a smile lighted her wrinkled face.

"To think of that girl just shouldering her burden and walking off with it. If she isn't Brother Jim over again! Never writing a word of complaint. Oh, Jerry! Jerry! I'll make it up to you to-morrow."

To Jerusha Darby money made up for everything. She sat long in the rose-arbor, thinking, maybe, of the years when Jerry's children and her children's children would dominate the Winnowoc countryside as they of the Swaim blood had always done. And then, because she was tired, and the afternoon sunshine was warm, and her willow rocking-chair was very comfortable—she fell asleep.



"Went just like her brother, the late Jeremiah Swaim," the papers said, the next evening.

Instead of the lawyer, it was the undertaker who came to officiate. And the last will and testament, and the too-late evidence of a forgiving good-will, all were impossible henceforth and forever.

The estate of the late Jerusha Darby, relict of the late Cornelius Darby, no will of hers having been found, passed, by agreement under law, to a distant relative of the late Cornelius, which relative being Eugene Wellington, whose knowledge of the said possible conditions of inheritance he had held in his possession for three years, since the day he accidentally found them among the private papers of his late uncle, knowing the while that any sudden notion of the late Jerusha might result in putting her possessions, by her own signature, where neither Jerry, as her favorite and heir apparent, nor himself, as heir-in-law without a will, could

inherit anything. Truly Gene had had a bothersome time of it for three years, and he congratulated himself on having done well—excellently well, indeed. Truly only the good little snakes ever entered that "Eden" in the Winnowoc Valley in Pennsylvania.



XVII

THE FLESH-POTS OF THE WINNOWOC

The glory of that third springtime was on the Kansas prairies and in the heart of a man and a maid, the best of good fellows each to the other, who rode together far along their blossomy trails. The eyes of the man were on the future and in his heart there was only one wish—that the good-fellowship would soon end in the realization of his heart's desire. The eyes of the maid were closed to the future. For her, too, there was only one wish—that this kind of comradeship might go on unchanged indefinitely. To Jerry no trouble seemed quite so big when Joe was with her, and little foxes sought their holes when he came near. If the spring work had not grown so heavy late in May, and Joe could have come to town oftener, and one teacher had not fallen sick, and Clare Lenwell hadn't been so stubborn, and if Stellar Bahrr had held her tongue—But why go on with ifs? All these conditions did exist. What might have been without them no man knoweth.

One of the humanest traits of human beings is to believe what is pleasant to believe, and to doubt and question what would be an undesirable fact. Jerry Swaim, clinging ever to a memory of what might have been, building a pretty love dream, it is true, to be acted out some far-away time by a young farmer and his neighbor in the Sage Brush Valley, listened to Stellar Bahrr's version of Thelma Ekblad's shopping mission, held back the tears that burned her eyeballs for a moment, and then, being human, voted the whole thing as impossible, if not as malicious as any of Stellar Bahrr's stories. Indeed, Thelma Ekblad was now, as she had always been, the very least of Jerry's troubles.

The school row, that had become the community fuss, culminated in the superintendent putting upon his teachers the responsibility of settlement.

If they were willing to concede to the foolish demands of the class, led by Clare Lenwell, and grant full credits in their branches of study, he would abide by their decision. The easiest way, after all, to quiet the thing, he said, might be to let the young folks have their way this time, and do better with the class next year. They could begin in time with them. As if Solomon himself could ever foresee what trivial demand and stubborn claim will be the author and finisher of the disturbance from year to year in the town's pride and glory—the high-school

Senior class, and its Commencement affairs. The final vote to break the tie and make the verdict was purposely put on Jerry Swaim, who had more influence in the high school than the superintendent himself. Jerry protested, and asked for a more just agreement, finally spending a whole afternoon with Clare Lenwell in an effort to induce him to be a gentleman, offering, in return, all fairness and courtesy.

Young Lenwell's head was now too large for his body. He was the hero of the hour. Rule or ruin rested on this young Napoleon of the Sage Brush, divinely ordained to free the downtrodden youths of America from the iron heel and galling chains with which the faculty of the average American high school entralls and degrades—and so forth, world without end.

This at least was Clare Lenwell's attitude from one o'clock P.M. to five o'clock P.M. of an unusually hot June day. At the stroke of five Jerry rose, with calm face, but a dangerously square chin, saying, in an untroubled tone:

"You may as well go. Good afternoon."

Young Lenwell walked out, the cock of the hour—until the next morning. Then all of the Seniors were recorded as having received full credits for graduation from all of the faculty—except one pupil, who lacked one teacher's signature. Clare Lenwell was held back by Miss Swaim, teacher of the mathematics department.

The earthquake followed.

In the session of the school board on the afternoon of Commencement Day Junius Brutus Ponk, who presided over the meeting, sat "as firm as Mount Olympus, or Montpelier, Vermont," he said, afterward; "the uncle Lenwell suffered eruption, Vesuviously; and the third man of us just cowed down, and shriveled up, and tried to slip out in the hole where the electric-light wire comes through the wall. But I fetched him back with a button-hook, knowin' he'd get lost in that wide passageway and his remains never be recovered to his family."

It was not, however, just a family matter now among the Lenwells. In the presence of the superintendent and Mrs. Bahrr, Miss Swaim was called to trial by her peers—the board of education. In this executive session, whose proceedings were not ever to be breathed—for York Macpherson would have the last man of them put in jail, he was that influential—*Other Things Were Made Known*—Things that, after the final settlement, became in time common

property, and so forgotten.

Herein Stellar Bahrr's three years of pent-up anger at last found vent. She had been preparing for this event. She had adroitly set the trap for the first difficulty, that had its start in the Lenwell family, while she was doing their spring sewing. Incessantly and insidiously she laid her mines and strung her wires and stored her munitions, determined to settle once for all with the pretty, stuck-up girl who had held a whip over her for three whole years.

Charges were to be brought against Miss Swaim of a *serious* character, and she was to be tried and condemned in *secret session* and allowed to *leave* the town *quietly*. *Nothing* would be said *aloud* until she was *gone*.

In despair, Ponk sought York Macpherson two hours before the trial began.

"There's two against me. And no matter what I say, they'll outvote me. It's the durned infernal ballot-box that's a curse to a free government. If it wasn't for that, republics would flourish. Bein' an uncrowned king don't keep a man from bein' a plain short-eared jackass—and they's three of us of the same breed—two against one."

York's face was gray with anger, and he clutched his fingers in his wavy hair as if to get back the hold on himself.

"You will have your trial, of course. Demand two things—that the accused and the accusers meet face to face. It will be hard on Jerry."

"Has she flinched or fell down once in three years, York Macpherson? Ain't she stronger and handsomer to-day than she was the day I had the honor to bring her up from the depot in that new gadabout of mine? If I could I'd have had it framed and hung on the wall and kept, for what it done for her."

The two men looked into each other's eyes, and what each read there made a sacred, unbreakable bond between them for all the years to come.

The trial was held in the hotel parlor, behind closed doors. The charges were vague and poorly supported by evidence, but the venom back of them was definite. Plainly stated, a pretty, incompetent girl had come West *for some reason* never made clear to New Eden. Come as an heiress in "style and stuckupitude of manner" (that was Stellar Bahrr's phrasing); had suddenly become poor and dependent on the good-will of J. B. Ponk, who had fought to the bitter end to give her "a place on the town pay-roll and keep her there" (that was the jealous

superintendent's phrasing); and on the patronage of York Macpherson, who had really taken her in, he and his honorable sister, even if they really were the worse "taken in" of the two. At this point Ponk rapped for a better expression of terms. The young person had tried to "run things" in the church and schools and society. Even the superintendent himself had to be sure of her approval before he dared to start any movement in the high school. And no one of the preachers would invite her to unite with his church.

But to the charges now:

First: She had refused to let Clare Lenwell graduate who wasn't any worse than the rest of the class.

Secondly: She had a way of riding around over the country with young men on moonlight nights on horseback. Of going, the Lord knows where, with young men, *joy-riding* in cars, or of going alone wherever she pleased in hired livery cars. And *some* thought she met strange men and was acquainted with rough characters, and the moral influence of that was awfully bad; and there was something *even worse*, if that were possible, WORSE!

Things had disappeared around town often, but in *the last three years* especially. If folks were poor, they needed money.

Then Stellar Bahrr came into the ring.

Jerry had sat and listened to the proceedings as an indifferent spectator to what could in no wise concern her. With the entrance of Mrs. Bahrr to the witness-stand, the girl's big, dreamy eyes grew brighter and her firm mouth was set, but no mark of anxiety showed itself in her face or manner.

Mrs. Bahrr whined a bit as to wishing only to do the right thing, but her steel-pointed eyes, as she fixed them in Jerry, wrote as with a stylus across the girl's understanding:

"You are hopelessly in the minority. Now I can say what I please."

What Mrs. Bahrr really knew, of course, she couldn't swear to in any court, because of Laura and York Macpherson. She wouldn't shame them, because they had befriended a fraud, all with good intentions. She only came now because she'd been promised protection by the board from what folks would say, and she was speaking what must *never* be repeated.

"Most of us need that kind of protection when you are around," Ponk declared, vehemently, knowing that, while the school board would keep her words sacred, nothing said or done in that trial would be held sacred by her as soon as the decision she wished for was reached.

Stellar, feeling herself safe, paid no heed to Ponk. What she really knew was that a certain young lady had been known to take money from her hostess and, being caught, had been forced to give it up. Stellar herself saw and heard the whole thing when it happened. Laura had told her about the matter, and then, when she was just leaving, Jerry had returned the money. She was right outside of the vines on the porch, and she knew. Stellar knew that dollars and dollars, jewelry, silverware, and other valuables had been taken, and some of them never restored; but some was sneaked back when the pressure got too strong. In a word, through much talk and little sense, Miss Geraldine Swaim was branded a high-toned thief. And worse than that. For three years strange men had slipped to the Macpherson home when the folks were away, and been let out by the side door. Real low-down-looking fellows. Stellar had seen them herself. She had a way of running 'cross lots up to Laury's evenings, and *she knew* what she was talking about. Stellar dropped her eyes now, not caring to look at Jerry. Her blow had hit home and she was exultant.

"Has the young lady anything to say?" Lenwell of the school board asked, feeling a twinge of pity, after all, because the case was even stronger than he had hoped it could be made.

Jerry looked over at Stellar Bahrr until she was forced to lift her eyes to the girl's face.

"I cannot understand the degree of hate that can be developed in a human mind," she said, calmly. "That is all I have to say."

Junius Brutus Ponk's round face seemed to blacken like a Kansas sky before the

coming of a hail-storm. Lenwell gave a snort of triumph, and the third member of the board grinned.

At that moment the door of the hotel parlor opened. Jerry, who sat opposite to it, caught sight of York Macpherson in the hall. And York saw her, calm and brave, in what he read, in the instant, was defeat for her. Before her were dismissal, failure, and homelessness. But neither he nor any one else dreamed how far the influence of those Sunday afternoons of "calling on mother," with the fat little hotel-keeper, had led this girl into a "trust in every time of trouble," and she faced her future bravely.

It was not York Macpherson, but the little, fuzzy, shabby figure of old Fishin' Teddy who shuffled inside and closed the door, demanding in a quavering squeak to be heard.

Ponk gave a start of surprise; Lenwell was annoyed; the third man was indifferent now, being safe, anyhow. Stellar Bahrr and the superintendent stared in amazement, but Jerry's face was wonderful to see.

"Ain't I got a right to say a word here, gentlemen?" old Teddy asked, looking at Ponk.

"If it's on the subject of this meeting, yes. If it's anything about fish, either in the Sage Brush or in Kingussie Creek, no. This really ain't no place for fish stories. We're overstocked with 'em right now, till this hotel and gurrage will have a 'ancient and a fishlike smell' as the Good Book says, for a generation."

"I just got wind of what was on up here. A man from your town come down to see me on business, an' he bringed me up."

"York Macpherson's the only man I ever knew had business with old Teddy. Lord be praised!" Ponk thought.

"I got a little testimony myself to offer here, for the one that's bein' blackmailed. I'll tell it fast as I can," Teddy declared.

"Take your time an' get it straight. None of us is in a hurry now," Ponk assured him.

Then the Teddy Bear, without looking at Jerry, gave testimony:

"Back in Pennsylvania, where I come from, in the Winnowoc country, I knowed

Jim Swaim, this young lady's father. I wasn't no fisherman then. I was a hard-workin', well-meanin', honest man. My name was Hans Theodore—and somethin' else I have no use for since I come to the Sage Brush in Kansas."

He hesitated and looked down at his scaly brown paws and shabby clothes.

"I ain't telling this 'cause I want to, but 'cause I want to do justice to Jim Swaim's girl. Jim was my friend an' helped me a lot of ways. He was a hard-fisted business man, but awfully human with human bein's; an' his daughter's jes' like him, seems to me."

Jerry's cheeks were swept with the bloom of "Eden" roses as she sat with her eyes fixed on the old man. To her in that moment came a vision of Uncle Cornie in the rose-arbor when the colorless old man had pleaded with her to become as her father had been.

"I got into trouble back there. This is a secret session, hain't it?" The old man hesitated again.

"Yes, dead secret," Ponk assured him. "Nothin' told outside of here before it's first told inside, which is unusual in such secret proceedings, so you are among friends. Go on."

Stellar Bahrr sat with her eyes piercing the old man like daggers, while his own faded yellow-brown eyes drooped with a sorrowful expression.

"I won't say how it happened, but I got mixed up in some stealin' scrape—that's why I changed my name or, ruther, left off the last of it. I'd gone to the Pen—though ever' scrap I ever stole, or its money value, was actually returned to them that had lost it. Jim Swaim stood by me, helpin' me through, an' I paid him as I earnt it. Then he give me money to get started here, an' befriended me every way, just 'cause it was in him. I've lived out here on the Sage Brush alone 'cause I ain't fit to live with folks. But when the old *mainy*, as you say of crazy folk, comes, why, things is missin' up in town. They land in my shack sometimes, an' sometimes I'm honest enough to bring 'em back when I can do it. I'm the one that hangs around in the shadders, an' if you ketch sight of strange men at side doors, Mrs. Bahrr, it's me. An' when this Jerry Swaim (I knowed her when she was a baby; I carried her in my arms 'cross the Winnowoc once, time of a big flood up in Pennsylvania)—when her purseful of money was stole, three years ago, an' she comes down to my shack and finds it all there, why, she done by me then jus' like her own daddy 'd 'a' done, she never told on me at all. An' she hain't told all

these years, and wa'n't goin' to tell on me now. I don't know what you mean 'bout these stories on her. She never done nothin' to be ashamed of in her life. 'Tain't in her family to be ashamed. They dunno how. If they's blame for stealin' in New Eden, though, jus' lay it on old Fishin' Teddy. You 'quit her now."

The old man's voice quavered as he squeaked out his words, and he shuffled aside, to be less in evidence in the parlor, where he had for the one time in his life been briefly the central figure.

The silence that followed his words was broken by Jerry's clear, low voice. Her face was beautiful in the soft light there. To Ponk she had never seemed so adorable before, not even on still Sabbath afternoons in the quiet corner of the cemetery where they talked as friends of mother-love and God, and Life after life.

"Friends, this old hermit fisherman is telling you a falsehood to try to shield me because of some favor my father showed him in the years gone by. If he is not willing to say more, to tell you the real truth, he will force me to say to you that I am the guilty one after all. I cannot let him make such a sacrifice for me."

She spoke as though she were explaining the necessity for changing cars in Chicago in order to reach Montreal. Old Fishin' Teddy lifted his clubby brown hands in protest.

"'Tain't so, an' 'tain't right," he managed to make the words come out—thin and trembling words, shaking like palsied things.

"No, it isn't so, and it isn't right, and he must not bear a disgrace he doesn't deserve. I'll do it for him," Jerry said, smiling upon the shabby old man—a common grub of the Sage Brush Valley.

There is nothing grander in human history, nothing which can more deeply touch the common human heart of us all, than the lesson of self-sacrifice taught on Mount Calvary. From the thief on the cross, down through all the centuries, has the blessed power of that Spirit softened the hearts of evil-doers, great or small. Jerry had not once turned toward Stellar Bahrr since the entrance of Fishin' Teddy. When she had ceased speaking, the silence of the room was broken by the town busybody's whining tone:

"They ain't neither one of 'em a thief, Mr. Ponk. It's me. They sha'n't do no such sacrificing thing."

The silence of the moment before was a shout compared to the dead silence now.

"Yes, it's me. I was born that way, an' it just seems I can't help it. I've done all the liftin', I guess, that's been done in this town a'most—'tain't so much, of course; but I ain't mean clear through, an' I jus' wouldn't ever rest in my grave if I don't speak now. I thought I'd always hide it, but I know I never will."

Old Teddy shrank back in a heap on his chair, while all of the rest except Jerry Swaim sat as if thunderstruck.

"I'm goin' clear through with it, now I've begun. Maybe I'll be a better woman if I am disgraced forever by it." Mrs. Bahrr's voice grew steadier and her eyes were fixed on the ground.

"Hans Theodore—the last part of his name is Bahrr—he's my husband. It was for my sins that he left Pennsylvania. Jim Swaim saved us from a lot of disgrace, and persuaded us to come West an' start over, an' helped us a lot. I couldn't break myself of wrong-doing just by changing climate, though. We tried Indiany first an' failed, then we come to S'liny, Kansas, next an' then we come on here. An' at last Theodore give me up an' went off alone an' changed his name. Mr. Lenwell's folks here is distant relatives, but they never would 'a' knowed Theodore. Didn't know he'd never got a divorce, and never stop supportin' me; like he'd said when we was married, he'd 'keep me unto death,' you know; and he'd come to see me once in a while, to be sure I wasn't needin' nothin'. I jus' worked along at one thing or another, an' Teddy earnt money an' paid it in to York Macpherson, like a pension, an' he paid me, York did. But Teddy wouldn't never live with me, though he never told York why. An' when I took things—"

Mrs. Bahrr paused and looked at Jerry deprecatingly.

"Like that silver cup I saw down at the deep hole?" Jerry asked, encouragingly.

"Yes, like that. I seen you down there that day. I was the woman that passed your car—"

"I know it," Jerry said, "I remember your sunbonnet and gray-green dress. I've often seen both since."

"Yes, an' you remember, too, the time I come out on the porch sudden when you first come here, an' made you promise not to tell." Mrs. Bahrr's voice quavered now.

"An' 'cause I knowed Teddy'd bring that right back to Macpherson's and you'd remember it, an' 'cause you were Jim Swaim's child that knowed my fault an' made me do what I didn't want to do, even if I was in the wrong, I hated you an' vowed to myself I'd fix you. It was me slipped into your room an' stuck Laury's purse into your beaded hand-bag, an' it was me took your roll of money from your own purse. Teddy took it away, though, that very night. Teddy he'd take whatever I picked up an' pretend he'd sell it, but he'd git it back to 'em some way if he could; an' he's saved an' sold fish an' lived a hermit life an' never told on me. He's slipped up to town to git me to put back or let him put back what I was tempted to pilfer, 'cause it seemed I just couldn't help it. York's been awful patient with me, too. But I can't set here an' be a woman and see Teddy shieldin' me, a hypocrite, an' her shieldin' him, an' not tellin' on me, like wimmen does on wimmen generally, an' not make a clean breast of it. An' if you'll not tell on me, an' all help me, I'll jus' try once more—"

"Won't anything go out of this room except what you tell yourself, Stellar Bahrr," Ponk said, gravely. "Now you go home an' begin to act better and think better, an' this'll be a heap cleaner town forever after. An' if you live right the rest of your days you 'll keep on livin' after you're dead, like mother does. The charges of this case is all settled. I congratulate you, Miss Fair Defendant. You are a Joan of Arc, an' a Hannah Dustin, an Boaz's Ruth, an' Barbara Fritchie, all in one."

While the other two members of the board were shamefacedly shaking hands and offering Jerry half of New Eden as a recompense, old Fishin' Teddy slipped out of the side door through the dining-room and on to where Ponk's best livery car waited to take him to his rude shack beside the deep hole in the Sage Brush.

As Jerry passed into the hall she found a crowd waiting for her—the three ministers from the churches, the mayor of New Eden, the friends of the Macphersons, York himself, and many more of the town's best, who had gathered to congratulate Jerry and to assure her of their pride in her ability and appreciation of her as a citizen of New Eden.

With the Commencement that night the school fuss and town split disappeared at one breath and passed into history.

When they reached the doorway of "Castle Cluny," after the Commencement exercises, York handed Jerry a letter. It was a long and affectionately worded message from Eugene Wellington, telling of the passing of Jerusha Darby, of his inheritance, and of his intention to come at once to Kansas and take her back to

the "Eden" she had neglected so long.

And Jerry, worn with the events of the last few weeks, feeling the strain suddenly lifted, welcomed the letter and shed a tear upon it, saying, softly:

"Oh, I'm so tired of everything now! If he comes for me, he'll find me ready to meet him. The flesh-pots of the Winnowoc are better to me than this weary desert."



Came an evening three days before the date for the lease on the Swaim land to expire. Jerry sat alone on the Macpherson porch. It had been an extremely hot day for June, with the dead, tasteless air that presages the coming of a storm, and to-night the moon seemed to struggle up toward the zenith against choking gray clouds that threatened to smother out its light.

Jerry was not happy to-night. She wanted Joe Thomson to come this evening. It had been such a long while since he had had time to leave the ranch for an evening with her.

And with the wishing Joe came. With firm step and the face of a victor he came. From his dark eyes hope and tenderness were looking out.

"I haven't seen you for ages, and ages are awfully long, you know," Jerry declared.

"I've been very busy," Joe replied. "You know you can't break the laws of the ranch and expect a harvest, any more than you can break the laws of geometry and depend on results. I would have been up sooner, though, but for one thing: a fellow on the ranch above mine who got hurt once with a mowing-machine had another accident and I've been helping the owner, that stout-hearted little Norwegian girl, Thelma Ekblad, to take care of their crops, too. Thelma is a courageous soul who has worked her way through the university, and she is a mighty capable girl, too. She would be a splendid success as a teacher, she is so well trained, but her family need her, and all of us down there need her."

Jerry caught her breath. It was the first time in three years that Joe had ever mentioned any girl with interest. But now this was all right and just as things should be. A neighbor, a capable Western girl—women see far, after all, and

Jerry's romance had not been a foolish one.

"That's all right, Joe, but I have been wanting to see you"—the old "I want" as imperative again to-night as in the days when all of this girl's wants had been met by the mere expression of them.

"And I'm always wanting to see you, and never so much as to-night," Joe began, earnestly.

"Let me tell you first why I have wanted to see you once more," Jerry broke in, hastily.

In the dull light her dreamy dark-blue eyes and her golden hair falling away from her white brow left an imprint that Joe Thomson's mind kept henceforth; at the same time that "once more" cut a deeper wound than Jerry could know.

"My aunt Jerry Darby is dead." The girl's voice was very low. "I can't grieve for her, for she was old and tired of life and unhappy. You remember I told you about her one night here three years ago."

Joe did remember.

"She left all her fortune to Cousin Gene Wellington."

"The artist who turned out to be a bank clerk?" Joe asked. "I really always doubted that story."

"Yes, but, you know, he did it to please Aunt Jerry. Think of a sacrifice like that! Giving up one's dearest life-work!"

"I'm thinking of it. Excuse me. Go on," Joe said.

Jerry lifted her big dreamy eyes. The sparkle was gone and only the soft light of romance illumined them now.

"Gene is coming out to see me soon. I look for him any day. Everything is all settled about the property, and everything is going to be all right, after all, I am sure. And I'm so tired of teaching." Jerry broke off suddenly.

"But, oh, Joe," she began presently, "you will never, never know how much your comradeship has helped me through these three trying years of hard work and hopelessness. We have been only friends, of course, and you are such a good, helpful kind of a friend. I never could have gotten through without you."

"Thank you, the pleasure is mine. I—I think I must go now."

Joe rose suddenly and started to leave the porch. In an instant the very earth had slid out from under his feet. The memory of York Macpherson's warning swept across his mind as the blowout sands sweep over the green prairie. And he had come to say such different words to-night. He had reached the end of a long, heart-breaking warfare with nature and he had won. And now a new warfare broke forth in his soul.

At that moment a sudden boom of thunder crashed out of the horizon and all the lightnings of the heavens were unleashed, while a swirling dust-deluge filled the darkening air. Jerry sprang forward, clutching Joe's arm with her slender fingers.

"The storm will be here in a minute," she cried, "You must not leave now. You mustn't face this wind. Look at that awful black cloud and see how fast it is coming on. I don't want you to go away. Where can you go?"

But Joe only shook off her grip, saying, hoarsely:

"I'm going down the Sage Brush. If you ever want me again, you'll find me beyond the blowout."

The word struck like a blow. For three years Jerry had not heard it spoken. It was the one term forever dropped from her vocabulary. All who loved her must forget its very existence.

There was a sudden dead calm in the hot yellow air; a moment of gathering forces before the storm would burst upon the town.

"If you ever see me beyond that blowout, you'll know that I do want you," Jerry said, slowly.

In the blue lightning glare that followed, her white face and big dark eyes recalled to Joe Thomson's mind the moment, so long ago now, it seemed, when Jerry had first looked out at the desert from under the bough of the oak-grove.

During the prolonged, terrific burst of thunder that followed, the young ranchman strode away and the darkness swallowed his stalwart form as the worst storm the Sage Brush country had ever known broke furiously upon the whole valley.

And out on the porch steps stood a girl conscious, not of the storm-wind, nor the

beating rain, nor cleaving lightning; conscious only that something had suddenly gone out of her life into the blackness whither Joe Thomson had gone; and with the heartache of the loss of the moment was a strange resentment toward a brave-hearted little Norwegian girl—a harvest-hand with a crippled brother, an adopted baby, and a university education.



XVIII

THE LORD HATH HIS WAY IN THE STORM

Laura Macpherson sat on the porch, watching her brother coming slowly up the street, seemingly as oblivious to the splendor of the sunset to-night as he had been on a June evening three summers ago.

"That was the worst cloudburst I ever heard of out here," he declared, when he reached the porch. "Every man in town who could carry a shovel has been out all day, up-stream or down-stream, helping to dig out the bottomland farms. I've been clear to the upper Sage Brush, doing a stunt or two myself. I left my muddy boots and overalls at the office so that I wouldn't be smearing up your old Castle here."

Even in the smallest things York's thoughts were for his crippled sister.

"There's a lot of wild stories out about buildings being swept away and lives being lost, here and there in the valley. You needn't believe all of them until your trustworthy brother confirms them for you, little sister. Such events have their tragedies, but the first estimate is always oversize."

"Even if your Big Dipper tells me, shall I wait for your confirmation?" Laura inquired, blandly.

"Oh, Laura, I'm going to cut out all that astronomical business now, even if I always did know that the right way to pronounce the name Bahrr is plain Bear, however much you have to stutter to spell it. Stellar has been, as the Methodists say, 'redeemed and washed in the blood of the Lamb.' I'm taking her in on probation, myself, and if she sticks it out for six months I'll take her into full membership."

"What do you mean, York?" Laura inquired.

"I mean that since they settled the school row in secret session, Mrs. Bahrr has been as different a woman as one can be who has let the habit of evil thinking become a taskmaster. I've never told you that her husband is still living, a shabby old fellow who gives me money for her support as fast as he can earn it, but he

won't live with her. She flies from hat-trimming to sewing and baking and nursing and back to sewing, and she never earns much anywhere, and works up trouble just for pure cussedness. But to-day she went to the upper Sage Brush to help old Mrs. Poser. The Posers were nearly washed away, and the old lady is sick and lonely and almost helpless. She needs somebody to stay with her. Yes, Stellar is really becoming a star—a plain, homely planet, doing a good-angel line where she's most useful. We'll let the past stay where it belongs, and count her reclaimed to better things now."

"Amen! And what about the valley down-stream? It must be worse, because the storm came up from that way," Laura declared.

"There are plenty of rumors, but I haven't heard anything definite yet, for I just got here, you know, and, as I telephoned you, found Mr. Wellington had registered at Ponk's inn. The traveling-men who were on the branch line have brought the first word to town to-day. The train is stuck somewhere down the valley, and the tracks, for the most part, are at the bottom of the Sage Brush. There are washouts all along the road-bed, and the passengers have been hauled up the stream, across fields, and every other way, except by the regular route. No automobile can travel the trail now, so our Philadelphia gentleman arrives a good bit disgusted with this bloomin' Western country, don't you know; and sore from miles of jolting; and hungry; and sort of mussy-looking for a banker; but cocksure of a welcome and of the power to bring salvation to one of us at least."

York dropped down on the porch step with a frown, flinging aside his hat and thrusting his fingers savagely into his heavy hair.

"Oh, well!" he exclaimed, dejectedly. "There's been a three years' running fight between Jim Swaim's determined chin and Lesa's tender eyes. I had hoped to the Lord that Jim would win the day, but that whirlwind campaign of pleading and luxury-tempting letters came just at the end of a hard year's work in the high school, with all that infernal fuss in the Senior class, splitting the town open for a month and being forgotten in an hour, and the jealousy toward the best teacher we've ever had here, etcetera. So the 'eyes' seem to have it. If there were no ladies present," York added, with a half-smile, "I'd feel free to express my lordly judgment of the whole damned sex."

"Don't hesitate, Yorick; a little cussing might ease your liver," Laura declared, surprised and amused at her brother's unexpected vehemence of feeling.

"There's nothing in the English language, as she is cussed, to do the subject

justice, but I might practise a few minutes at least," York began.

"Hush, York! That is Mr. Eugene Wellington coming yonder. I'll call Jerry. Poor Joe!" Laura added, pityingly. "I have a feeling he is the real sufferer here."

"Yes, poor Joe!" York echoed, sadly. "Ponk will just soar above his hurt, but men of Joe's dogged make-up die a thousand deaths when they do die."

Lesia Swaim's daughter was gloriously beautiful to Eugene Wellington's artistic eyes as he sat beside her on the porch on this beautiful evening. And Eugene himself held a charm in his very presence. All the memories of the young years of culture and ease; all the daintiness of perfect dress and perfect manners; all the assurance that a vague, sweet dream was becoming real; all the sense of a struggle for a livelihood now ended; all the breaking of the grip of stern duty, and an unbending pride in a clear conscience, although their rewards had been inspiringly sweet—all these seemed to Jerry Swaim to lift her suddenly and completely into the real life from which these three busy, strange years had taken her. Oh, she had been only waiting, after all. Nothing mattered any more. Eugene and she had looked at duty differently. That was all. He was here now, here for her sake. Henceforth his people were to be her people—his God her God. Uncle Cornie was wise when he said of Eugene: "He comes nearer to what you've been dreaming about." He seemed not so much a lover as a fulfilment of a craving for love.

The first sweet moment of meeting was over. Her future, their future, shrouded only by a rose-hued mist, beyond which lay light and ease, was waiting now for them to enter upon. In this idyllic hour Geraldine, daughter of Lesia Swaim, had come to the very zenith of life's romance.

"It has been a cruel three years, Jerry," Eugene was saying, as, their first greetings over, he lighted a cigarette and adjusted himself picturesquely and easefully in York Macpherson's big porch chair—a handsome, perfectly groomed, artistic fellow, he appeared fitted as never before to adorn life's ornamental places.

"But they are past now. You won't have to teach any more, little cousin o' mine. York Macpherson says your land lease expires to-day. So your business transactions here are over, and we'll just throw that ground in the river and forget it."

He might have taken the girl's hand in his as they sat together, but instead he

clasped his own hands gracefully and studied their fine outlines.

"I have all the Darby estate in my own name now, you know, and I didn't have to work a stroke at earning it. God! I wonder how a fellow can stand it to work for every dollar he gets until he is comfortably fixed. I simply filled in my banking-hours in a perfunctory way, and I didn't kill myself at it, either. See what I have saved by it for myself and you, and how much better my course was than yours, after all. Just three years of waiting, and dodging all the drudgery I possibly could. And you can just bet I'm a good dodger, Jerry."

Something like a chill went quivering through Jerry Swaim's whole being, but the smile in her eyes seemed fixed there, as Eugene went on:

"Now if I had stuck to art, where would I have been and where would you be right now? I've always wanted to paint the prairies. If I can stand this blasted, crude country long enough, and if I'm not too lazy, we'll play around here a little while, till I have smeared up a few canvases, and then we'll go home, never to return, dear. Art is going to be my pastime hereafter, you know, as it was once my—my—"

"Oh, never mind what it once was." Jerry helped to end the sentence.

The sunset on the Sage Brush was never more radiantly beautiful than it was on this evening, and the long midsummer twilight gave promise of its rarest grandeur of coloring. But a dull veil seemed to be slowly dropping down upon Jerry's world.

Eugene Wellington looked at her keenly.

"Why, Jerry, aren't you happy to see me—glad for us to be together again?" he asked, with just a tinge of sharpness edging his tones.

"I have looked forward to this meeting as a dream, an impossible joy. I hardly realize yet that it isn't a dream any more," Jerry answered him.

"Say, cousin girl," Eugene Wellington exclaimed, suddenly, "I have been trying all this time to find out what it is that is changed in your face. Now I know. You have grown to look so much more like your father than you did three years ago. Better looking, of course, but his face, and I never noticed it before. Only you will always have your mother's beautiful eyes."

"Thank you, Gene. They were, each in his and her way, good to me. I hope I

shall never put a stain upon their good names," Jerry murmured, wondering strangely whether the feeling that gripped her at the moment could be joy or sorrow.

"They didn't leave you much of an inheritance. That's the only thing that could be said against them. My father was partly to blame for that, I guess, but I never had the courage to tell you so till now. You know courage and Eugene Wellington never got on well together." Somehow his words seemed to rattle harshly against Jerry's ears. "You know, my dad, John Wellington, came out here to this very forsaken Sage Brush Valley somewhere and started in to be a millionaire himself on short notice, by the short-cut plan of finance. When the thing began to look like work he threw up the whole blamed concern, just as I would have done. Work never was a strong element in the Wellington blood, any more than courage, you know." Gene stopped to light another cigarette. Then he went on: "Well, after that, dad clung close to Jim Swaim and Uncle Darby till he died. I guess, if the truth were told, he helped most to tear your father down financially. He could do that kind of thing, I know. Jim Swaim spent thousands stopping the cracks after dad, to save the good name of Wellington for his daughter to wear—as your mother always hoped you would, because I was an artist then. You see, Mrs. Swaim loved art—and, as Aunt Darby always insisted (that was before you ran away from her), because it would keep her money and Uncle Darby's all in the family. That's why I'm so glad to bring all this fortune that I do to you now. I'm just making up to you what your father lost through mine, you see, and it came to me so easily, without my having to grub for it. Just pleasing Aunt Darby and taking a soft snap of clerical work, with short hours and good pay, instead of toiling at painting, even if I do love the old palette and brush. And I used to think I'd rather do that sort of thing than anything else in the world."

Jerry's eyes were fixed on the young artist's face with a gaze that troubled him.

"Don't stare at me that way, Jerry. That isn't the picture I want you to pose for when I paint your portrait, Saint Geraldine. Now listen," Eugene continued. "Your York Macpherson was East this spring, and he told me that that wild-goose chase of dad's out here had left a desert behind him. He said a poor devil of a fellow had fought for years against the sand that dad sowed (I don't know how he did the sowing), till it ate up about all this poor wretch had ever had. The unfortunate cuss! York tried to tell Aunt Darby (but I headed him off successfully) that dad started a thing that became what they call a 'blowout' here. York Macpherson wanted to put up a big spiel to her about justice to you and

some other folks—this poor critter who got sanded over, maybe. But it didn't move me one mite, and I didn't let it get by to Aunt Jerry's ears, although I half-way promised York I would, to get rid of the thing the easiest way, for that's my way, you know. Did you ever see such a precious thing as a 'blowout' here, Jerry?"

Jerry's face was white and her eyes burned blue-black now with a steady glow. "Never, till to-night," she said, slowly. "I never dreamed till now how barren a thing a lust for property can create."

Gene Wellington dropped his cigarette stub and stared a moment. He did not grasp her meaning at all, but her voice was not so pleasant, now, as her merry laugh and soft words had been three years ago.

"By the way, coming up to-day, I heard of a dramatic situation. I think I'll hunt up the local color for a canvas for it," Eugene began, by way of changing the theme. "You know you had a horribly rotten storm of thunder and lightning and wind, and a cloudburst down the river valley where our train was stuck in the mud, and the tracks were all lost in the sand-drift and other vile debris. Well, coming up here from the derailed train, some one said that the young fellow who had leased that land, or owned the land, that is just above the sand-line, the poor devil who had such a struggle, you know—well, he was lost when the river overflowed its banks. But somebody else said he might be marooned, half starved, on an island of sand out in the river, waiting for the flood to go down. The roads are just impassable around there, so they can't get in to see what has become of him. His house was washed away, it seems—I saw a part of it in the river—but nobody knows where he is. Hard luck, wasn't it? I know you'll be glad to leave this God-forsaken country, won't you, dearie? How you ever stood it for three whole years I can't comprehend. Only you always were the bravest girl I ever knew. Just as soon as I paint a few of its drearinesses we'll be leaving it forever. What's the matter?"

Jerry Swaim had sprung to her feet and was standing, white and silent, staring at her companion with wide-open, burning eyes. Against all the culture and idle ease of her trivial, purposeless years were matched these three times twelve months of industry and purpose that came at a price, with the comradeship of one who had met life's foes and vanquished them, who earned his increase, and served and sacrificed.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" Gene repeated. "Did I shock you? It is a tragical sort

of story, I know, but you used to love the romantic and adventurous. Every big storm, and every flood, has such incidents. I never remember them a minute, except the storm that took Uncle Cornie and left me a fortune. They are so unpleasant. But there is a touch of romance in this for you. They told me that a young Norwegian girl down there was moving heaven and earth to find this poor lost devil, because he had been so good to her always and had helped her when her brother was badly hurt. I guess her brother went down-stream, bottom side up, too. See the drift of it all? The time, the place, and the girl—there's your romance, Cousin Jerry, only the actors are terribly common, you know."

Who can forecast the trend of the human heart? Three days ago Jerry had thought complacently of the convenience of this stout little Thelma for Joe's future comfort. Now the thought that Thelma had seen him last, had caught the last word, the last brave look, smote her heart with anguish.

"Doesn't anybody know where Joe is?" she cried, wringing her hands.

"I don't know if his name is Joe. I don't know if anybody knows where he is. I really don't care a sou about it all, Jerry." Gene drawled his words intentionally. "The roads are awful down that way. They nearly bumped me to pieces coming up, hours and hours, it seemed, in a wagon, where a decent highway and an automobile would have brought me in such a short time. It would be hard to find this Joe creature, dead or alive. Let's talk about something more artistic."

"Gene, I can't talk now. I can't stay here a minute longer. I *must* go and find this man. I must! I must!"

In the frenzy of that moment, the strength of character in Jerry's face made it wonderful to see.

"Jerry!" Eugene Wellington exclaimed, emphatically. "You perfectly shock me! This horrid country has almost destroyed your culture. Go and find this man—"

But Jerry was already hurrying up the street toward Ponk's Commercial Hotel and Garage.



"Miss Swaim, you can't never get by in a car down there," Ponk was urging, five minutes later. "I know you can drive like—like you can work algebra,

logyruthms, and never slip a cog. But you'll never get down the Sage Brush that far to-night. If them Norwegians on beyond the ranch yon side of the big bend 'ain't done nothing, you just can't. The Ekblads and the other neighbors will do all a body can, especially Thelmy. The river's clear changed its channel an' you could run a car up to the top of Bunker Hill Monument, back in New Hampshire, easier than you could cut the gullies an' hit the levels of the lower Sage Brush trail after this flood."

"Get the car ready quick. *I want to go*," Jerry commanded, and Ponk obeyed. A minute later a gray streak whizzed by the Macpherson home, where Eugene Wellington stood on the porch staring in speechless amazement.

"Bless her heart!" he ejaculated, at length. "She is self-willed like her dad. Aunt Darby always told me I'd have to manage her with gloves on, but not to forget to manage her, anyhow."

He strolled back to the Commercial Hotel, where the best-natured man in Kansas lay in wait for him.

"You're in early. Have a real cigar—a regular Havany-de-Cuby—off of me. An' take a smoke out here where it's cool."

Eugene took the proffered cigar and the seat on the side porch of the hotel that commanded a view of the street clear to "Castle Cluny."

"Town's pretty quiet this evenin'. All the men are gone up-stream or down, to see if they can help in the storm region. Every store shut up tight as wax. Three preachers, station-agent, the three movie men—gone with the rest. We are a sympathetic bunch out here, an' rather quick to get the S O S signal and respond noble."

"So it seems," Eugene replied, wondering the while how he should be able to kill the time till Jerry's return, resolving not to tarry here to paint a single canvas. The sooner Geraldine Swaim was out of Kansas the better for her perverted sense of the esthetic, and the safer for her happiness—and his own.

"Yes," Ponk was going on to say, "everybody helps. Why, I just now let out the pride of the gurrage to a young lady. She's just heard that a man she knows well is lost or marooned on a island in the floods of the Sage Brush. And if anybody'll ever save him, she will. She's been doin' impossible things here for three years, and the town just worships her."

"I should think it would," Eugene Wellington said, with a sarcasm in his tone.

"It does," Ponk assured him. "She's the real stuff—even mother, out yonder, loves her."

The little man's face was turned momentarily toward the hill-slope cemetery beyond the town. "And when a girl like that comes to me for my fastest-powered car to go where no car can't go, for the sake of as good a man as ever lived on earth, a man she's been *comradin*g with for three years, and with that look in her fine eyes, they's no mistakin' to any sensible man on God's earth why she's doin' it."

"If my room is ready I'll go to it," Eugene broke in, curtly.

"Yes, Georgette, call George to take the gentleman to number seven, an' put him to bed."

Then the little keeper of the Commercial Hotel and Garage turned toward the street again, and his full-moon face went into a total eclipse. But what lay back of that shadow of the earth upon it no man but Junius Brutus Ponk could know.



XIX

RECLAIMED

Down the Sage Brush trail Jerry Swaim's car swept on in spite of ruts and gullies and narrow roadways and obstructing debris, flood-washed across the land. But though the machine leaped and climbed and skidded most perilously, nothing daunted the girl with a grip on the steering-wheel. The storm-center of destruction had been at the big bend of the river, and no hand less skilful, nor will less determined, would have dared to drive a car as Jerry Swaim drove hers into the heart of the Sage Brush flood-lands in the twilight of this June evening.

Where the forks of the trail should have been the girl paused and looked down the road she had followed three years before; once when she had lost her way in her drive toward the Swaim estate; again, when she herself was lost in the overwhelming surprise and disappointment of her ruined acres; and lastly when she had come with Joe Thomson to recover her stolen money from the old grub whose shack was close beside the deep fishing-hole. The road now was all a part of the mad, overwhelming Sage Brush hurrying its flood waters to the southeast with all its might. Where was the flimsy little shack now, and where was the old Teddy Bear himself? Did his shabby form lie under the swirling current of that angry river, his heroic old heart stilled forever?

A group of rescuers, muddy and tired, came around a growth of low bushes on the higher ground toward her. All day they had been locating homeless flood victims, rescuing stock, and dragging farm implements above the water-line. The sight of Ponk's best car, mud-smearred and panting, amazed them. This wasn't a place for cars. But the face of the driver amazed them more.

"Why, it's Miss Swaim, that teacher up at New Eden!" one man exclaimed.

At the word, a boy, unrecognizable for the mud caking him over, leaped forward toward Jerry's car.

"What are you doing, Miss Swaim?" he cried. "You mustn't go any farther! The river's undermined everything! Please don't go! Please don't!" he pleaded.

"Why, Clare Lenwell!" Jerry exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes. This isn't my full-dress I wore at Commencement the other night, but I've been saving lives to-day, and feeding the hungry, too," the boy declared, forgetting his besmeared clothing in the thought of his service.

"Tell me, Clare, where is Joe Thomson—I mean the young man whose ranch is just below here."

Clare's face couldn't go white under that mud, but Jerry saw his hand tremble as it caught the edge of her wind-shield.

"He's gone down-stream, I'm afraid. They say his home is clean gone. We have been across the river and came over on that high bridge. I don't know much about this side. They said Thelma Ekblad tried to save him and nearly got lost herself. Her brother, the cripple, you know, couldn't get away. Their house is gone now. He and the Belkap baby were given up for lost when old Fishin' Teddy got to them some way. He knew the high stepping-stones below the deep hole and hit them true every step. They said he went nearly neck deep holding Paul and striking solid rock every time. He'd lived by the river so long he knew the crossing, deep as the flood was over it. Paul made him take the baby first, and he got out with it, all right, and would have been safe, but he was bound to go back for Paul, too; and he got him safe to land, where the baby was; but I guess the effort was too much for the old fellow, and he loosed his hold and fell back into the river before they could catch him. He saved two lives, though, and he wasn't any use to the community, anyhow. A man that lives alone like that never is, so it isn't much loss, after all. But that big Joe Thomson's another matter. And he was so strong, he could swim like a whale; but the Sage Brush got him—I'm afraid."

Jerry's engine gave a great thump as she flung on all the power and dashed away on the upper road toward Joe Thomson's ranch.

"At the bend of the river you turn toward the three cottonwoods." Jerry recalled the directions given her on her first and only journey down this valley three years before.

"Why, why, there is no bend any more!" she cried as she halted her car and gazed in amazement and horror at the river valley where a broad, full stream poured down a new-cut channel straight to the south.

"Joe's home isn't gone at all! Yonder it stands, safe and high above the flood-line. Oh, where did the river take Joe?" She twisted her hands in her old quick,

nervous way, and stiffened every muscle as if to keep off a dead weight that was crushing down upon her.

"He said if I wanted him he would be down beyond the blowout. I'm going to look for him there. I don't know where else to go, and I want him."

The white, determined face and firm lips bespoke Jim Swaim's own child now. And if the speed of her car was increased, no one would ever know that the thought of reaching her goal ahead of any possible Thelma might be the impetus that gave the increase.

"Yonder are the three cotton woods. From there I can see the oak-grove and all of my rare old acres of sand. What beautiful wheat everywhere! The storm seems to have hit the other side of the river as it runs now, and left all this fine crop to Joe. But what for, if it took him?"

Her quick imagination pictured possibilities too dreadful for words.



Down in the oak-grove, Joe Thomson stood leaning against a low bough, staring out at the river valley, with the shimmering glow of the twilight sky above it. At the soft whirring sound of an automobile he turned, to see a gray runabout coasting down the long slope from the three cottonwoods.

"Jerry!" The glad cry broke from his lips involuntarily.

Jerry did not speak. After the first instant of assurance that Joe was alive, her eyes were not on the young ranchman, but on the landscape beyond him. There, billow on billow of waving young wheat breaking against the oak-wood outpost swept in from far away, where once she had looked out on nothing but burning, restless sand, spiked here and there by a struggling green shrub.

"What has done all this?" she cried, at last.

"I'm partly 'what,'" Joe Thomson replied. The shadows were on his face again, and his loss, after that moment of glad surprise, seemed to be doubly heavy.

"But how? I don't understand. I'm dreaming. You really are here, and not dead, are you?"

"No, you are not dreaming. I only wish you were," Joe responded, gloomily. "But no matter. Yes, I'm here. 'Part of me lived, but most of me died,'" he muttered Kipling's line half audibly. "I subleased your land from the Macpherson Mortgage Company three years ago. The lease expires to-day. You remember what it was worth when you saw it before. I shall hand it over to you now, worth thirty dollars an acre. Thirty thousand dollars, at the very least, besides the value of the crop. I got beyond the blowout and followed it up. I plowed and planted. Lord! how I plowed and planted! And as with old Paul and Apollos, it was God who gave the increase."

"Joe! Oh, Joe! You are a miracle-worker!" Jerry cried.

"A worker, all right, maybe. And all life is a miracle," Joe declared, gravely.

"But your own land, Joe. They told me that your house was gone and that maybe you had gone with it, and that these roads down here were impassable and nobody could find you."

Joe came to the side of the little gray car where Jerry sat with her white hands crossed on the steering-wheel. Her soft white gown, fitted for a summer afternoon on the Macpherson porch, seemed far more lovely in the evening light down by the oak-trees. Her golden hair was blown in little ringlets about her forehead, and her dark-blue eyes—Joe wondered if Nature ever gave such eyes to another human being!

"No, Jerry, my house isn't gone. My father built it up pretty high above the river, and I saved almost everything loose before the flood reached my place. It was the Ekblad house that went down the river. I went over there to help Thelma get her brother and the baby to safety on the high ground. She had started out to warn old Fishin' Teddy, thinking her own family was secure, and afraid he would get caught. She could not get back to them, nor anywhere else. I saved her, all right, but when I went back after Paul and the baby, the home and those in it were gone down-stream. Thelma thought we were all lost. That's how the story got started. Old Teddy is gone, but I heard later that the others are saved. Their home wasn't worth so very much. They got most of the real valuable things—photographs of their dead father and mother, and the family Bible, and deeds, and a few trinkets. Other things don't count. Money will replace them. Anyhow, York Macpherson is buying their land at a good figure. It will give Thelma the chance she's wanted—to go to a college town and teach botany. She will make her way and carry a name among educators yet, and support Paul and the baby,

all right, too. Did the folks miss me and say I had gone down the river? Well, I didn't. I'm here. And as to all this"—he waved his hand toward the wheat—"I can net a right good bank-account for myself and I can pay off the mortgage I put on my claim to pay the lease on yours, and for steam-plows and such things. It has been a bumper year for wheat down here. I have reclaimed the land from the desert. It will revert to you now—you and your artist cousin jointly, I suppose. The river helped to finish the work for me—found its old bed in that low sandy streak where years ago the blowout began. It has straightened its bend for itself and got away from that ledge below the deep hole, and left the rest of the ground, all the upper portion of the blowout, yours and mine, covered with a fine silt, splendid for cultivation. The blowout is dead. It took hard work and patience and a big risk, of course, and the Lord Almighty at last for a partner in the firm to kill it off. Your own comes back to you now. Can I be of any further service to you?"

As he stood there with folded arms beside the car, tall and rugged, with the triumph of overcoming deep written on his sad face, the width of the earth seemed suddenly to yawn between him and the lucky artist who had inherited a fortune without labor.

"You have done more than to reclaim this ground, Joe," Jerry exclaimed. "Miraculous as it all is, there is a bigger desert than this, the waste and useless desert in the human heart. You have helped to reclaim to a better life a foolish, romancing, daring girl, with no true conception of what makes life worth while. All the Sage Brush Valley has been good to me. York and Laura Macpherson in their well-bred, wholesome friendship; little Mr. Ponk in his deep love for his mother and faith in God; even old Teddy Bear, poor lost creature, in his sublime devotion to duty, protecting the woman he had vowed once at the marriage altar that he would protect; and, most of all"—Jerry's voice was soft and low—"a sturdy, brave young farmer has helped me by his respect for honest labor and his willingness to sacrifice for others.

"Joe"—Jerry spoke more softly still—"when you said good-by the other night in the storm, you told me that if I ever wanted you I'd find you down beyond the blowout. The word was like a blow in the face then. But to-night I left Cousin Gene up at New Eden and came here to find you, because *I want you.*"

With all of Jim Swaim's power to estimate values written in her firm mouth and chin, but with Lesa Swaim's love of romance shining in her dark eyes, Jerry looked up shyly at Joe. And Joe understood.

THE END

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