

Next day there was a letter from home,—the next days, what a part they play in life's decisions,—just a little "homey" letter from her mother. She told of a tea at Mrs. Gaston's, how Archie was there, and they had had quite a chat. He had spoken of Isa, and was glad she liked her school out West so well. She had gone to the theatre with the Muctons, and the girls had spoken about Isa's coming home. And Isa in her little bare room, in her little Western boarding-house saw them all, and a quick longing came for the safe, quiet, tame life they lived; and her heart grew a dead thing that knew shame and fear, and long, sick weariness. And she thought she must have been mad.

She thought of them all, all the wives of those other men out there in the West. How little they had! How little prettiness there was in their bare, dull life! How soon they grew old, and their husbands grew tired of them.

She thought of the woman with whom she boarded. How much she loved little unusual jaunts! Yet she scarcely ever went anywhere. She remembered the night Mr. Jackson had spoken of going up to the hills to have some machinery fixed, and Mrs. Jackson had looked up quickly, wanting to go, and then he had said:

"Oh!—No we can't go. There are road scrapers in the wagon at home, and I want to fetch in some hay. So I'll have to wait until Fred comes home with the other wagon to get the hay. It will be too late to go to the hills after that."

And how Mrs. Jackson had said: "We could leave a note for Fred and tell him to bring in the hay."

"No, that wouldn't do; Fred mightn't see it." Then Mrs. Jackson said: "If we take off the road scrapers so you can use that wagon, will you take us?" He didn't say anything. So Isa herself had helped to unload them, pretending it was lots of fun; but with a little grip of pain to think how little he cared. And after all he hadn't taken them. So the little ugly thoughts came and mocked her. Her heart grew cold, and she knew dully that something must be done, and something explained, and that she would have to be strong,—but she didn't feel strong. She felt sick and uncertain, and, oh, so tired of it all.

He came. She told him—told him with his honest, strong face getting a little whiter, and his strong lips a little tighter and thinner, and his eyes—oh, she only looked at his eyes once. They held so much wrenching pain and pity,—yes, pity for her weakness. She knew she was weak and she told him—yet she told him all without shade or tone in the painting of it.

Her mother was a widow, not rich, who had planned and saved to give her daughter an education. She was the only girl, and if she married him—her mother would—be losing her altogether. For her mother wouldn't understand, couldn't get in touch with a new life,—the life he would represent. She would feel lonely at losing her daughter, and she would not be getting a son, for there would be—could be—no understanding between her mother and Jack. The mother had always wanted the little tame, conventional happinesses of life. Oh, could she say it all,—she should have written it. It was terrible to have to tell it all; and he sat there so still,—just listening. Still she went on. She wasn't sure that she would be happy herself. It was so lonely