

"Perhaps," called back Mary, with a strange inflection, which to Tom should have meant, "Yes."

The field was finished, the plows were loaded on the wagon, and the boys were on their way towards the home farm when the sun was yet a half-hour high. As they drove into the yard, their brothers, Jack and Harry, also entered it from working in the fields of the home place, giving as a reason for quitting work so early, that Nellie was alone and that there were cows to milk and chores to do when Farmer Scott was not at home. The cows were soon milked, the chores quickly done, and four hungry farmer's sons were ready for supper.

It was a merry group around the old table in the farm-house kitchen. Nellie at the foot of the table pouring tea was the pride and idol of her brothers. Mary Frazer, the motherless and only daughter of the Rev. Mr. Frazer, the minister of the Virgille congregation, was Nellie's bosom friend, and held a place in the hearts of the boys only second to that of their sister. The four boys, strong, broad-shouldered, sun-burned youths, open-hearted, generous and perfectly at ease, always appeared at their best in the presence of Nellie's friend.

After tea followed music, Nellie with her guitar, Jack and Tom with their violins, and Mary at the piano, were a quartette of at least local reputation. With talk, laughter, and music the time slipped merrily away, till Mary rose, saying, "Papa will be home on the eight-thirty train, and I must be at the station to meet him." Nellie led her away to the little bedroom to don hat and shawl, while the boys fled out into the kitchen. Tom was first and was putting on his hat when Will interrupted him, saying, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going home with Mary," replied Tom.

"Didn't you have that honor when she was here last," put in Harry, "you ought to give some one else a chance."

"Well, what if I did. I asked her this time," rejoined Tom.

"Oh!" said Will, "that is what you were saying over the fence. Well, I suppose we'll have to give place, Harry."

"Don't you see how things are going," said Jack. "Tom's too sharp for you fellows."

"Experience teaches fools," quoted Harry, "our eldest brother has had his."

Tom had to wait for his charge. There were girlish secrets to exchange and much subdued conversation and laughter in the little bedroom before the girls appeared. When they did, Nellie was saying:—"I am sorry papa and mamma are not home or I should have one of the boys drive you home." Turning to her brothers, she added, "Who's going to be Mary's escort?" Tom came forward and with a low bow and mock gallantry, said, "Madam, permit me."

It was long before Tom forgot the walk in that clear moonlight September evening. After it, and a half hour spent waiting for Mr. Frazer's delayed train, he walked slowly home trying to answer to his satisfaction whether or not he was willing to regard Mary Frazer as simply a sister.

As he entered the kitchen, Jack met him, saying, "Father is waiting for you. He wants to talk to us. He looks awfully cut up. I guess Smith's got him into trouble." Without answering, Tom followed Jack into the sitting-room. His father sat with a deeply troubled look, surrounded by Nellie and the boys, while Mrs. Scott sat quietly, a little removed into the darkness of the corner. Mr. Scott looked up, saying, "Well, my boy, we've been waiting for you. I want to have a talk with

all of you together. You know I backed Smith. His debt falls due to-morrow, and he has left the country. So I must pay." He paused, then went on. "If it were only myself that had to suffer, I wouldn't mind it so much, but I am sorry for you boys. If it had not been for this, I should have been able to buy the Harte place for two of you when our lease expired. Now, I can't. Harte has a chance to sell it and makes me a good offer for my claim, and he will pay for the plowing we have done. I believe I'd better take it. Well, I'll tell you what I have been thinking about. Jack, how should you like to take our place here? I'll rent it to you for as long as you wish. Harry, you are the youngest and will be better near your mother for a few years, how would you like to join with Jack? And Tom, Will, I am afraid I can't find room for you here. What do you say to going to the North-West? An excursion starts to-morrow, and if you could be ready, you might go to see what the country is like. I had a letter from Martin yesterday. He says they are in the midst of harvest now, and I don't think you could go in a better time. What do you say?" For a few minutes the boys remained silent, then Jack asked:

"But, what are you going to do?"

"If you'll allow me, I'll build on the corner of your farm," replied the father in a more cheery tone. Now that he had told the worst he felt relieved. "But, we can talk about that afterwards. Tom, Will, what do you say? I know it is rather hasty, but you don't go to stay. Your mother and I have talked it over and we think it best." The boys exchanged glances and Will said "I'll be ready," and Tom added, "So will I."

At eight o'clock next morning, they left the little station at Virgille, to go out into the new land. To youth all the future looks bright, and the boys left the station on that September morning, with feelings of high hope.

On a pleasant Sunday afternoon the Rev. Mr. Hewitt drove along the winding prairie trail leading to the settlement of Merlin. To a stranger the drive would have been an interesting one, but to Mr. Hewitt it was an old story. The buckskin-colored pony and old buckboard followed, as if from habit, the smooth hard-beaten track, as it wound on mile after mile, seeming to start nowhere and lead away over the boundless ocean of prairie. To a stranger, I say, the drive would have been interesting. The broad, clear sky stretching over that wide expanse of prairie broken only by the horizon, would cause an overpowering sense of the magnitude of the Great Lone Land, to be followed by a sense of loneliness, to relieve which he would turn to anything. The flowers by the wayside in their infinite variety would look up to comfort and cheer him. He might turn to the gophers gamboling beneath the very feet of his horse, but their numbers and utter disregard of his presence would make him feel more alone than before.

Upon Mr. Hewitt this had no effect. As the pony jogged along, he seemed lost in thought. Presently he took out his watch, and seeing the time began to urge on his horse. He watched with interest the settlers' little houses as they appeared, one by one, upon the horizon. As he approached he began to note the progress of harvesting operations. Wide fields of waving yellow grain side by side with acres of standing shocks, and here and there completed and uncompleted stacks told of a bountiful harvest. The tinkling of bells to the right drew his attention to the set-

tlement's herd of cattle. The boy who had charge of them was riding towards him. With a smile Mr. Hewitt greeted him, saying—

"Well, Bob, are you going to the meeting to-day?"

"Yes, sir, but I am not Bob, that's my brother's name. He generally takes care of the cattle."

"Oh! that is how I made the mistake. One of you has to watch the cattle all the time, I suppose."

"Yes, nearly all the time. I have just driven them far enough away so that they won't get into the grain during the meeting."

"You have a fine lot of cattle there. Who owns them?"

"Oh! everybody, that is, everybody that has any. Pa says everybody who knows his business has cattle. Pa has ten. Nearly half of them belong to the Scott boys. They have all the best bred ones. Pa says they know what they are about. They're going to get sheep next year. Pa is, too."

"You're having a good harvest this year. I see some have commenced stacking."

"We've got a splendid crop. Pa says it is the best we have had since we came to the country. Those are our stacks over there, and farther away you see the Scott boys' stacks. They have more stacked up than anybody else. They are always ahead with their work."

Evidently the Scott boys were his heroes. Mr. Hewitt did not answer, but looked away across the plain, where creeping along in the distance, could be seen people gathering to the meeting, some in buckboards, some on horseback, and a few on foot. The boy rode along in silence. Presently he said, "You see that grey team just over there. That is the Scott boys coming to meeting. That team behind is pa's. They're the best teams in the settlement. Pa says so." Mr. Hewitt smiled at the boy's hero worship, and for the sake of saying something, asked,

"How far do you live from the Scott boys?"

"They're our nearest neighbors. It's three miles from our house to theirs." Just then they reached the house where the service was to be held and the conversation ceased.

The meeting-place was one of the houses in the district. Gathering in by threes and fours, the people soon filled the little low room. A strange mixture of denominations and creeds, the meeting representing Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, Lutherans, and even Roman Catholics. Here they met on common ground and worshipped together. They sang together old familiar hymns, bowed their heads in reverence when Mr. Hewitt offered his simple, earnest prayers, and listened attentively to the message which he brought them. After the meeting, they lingered in the room and about the door to shake hands and exchange friendly greeting with the minister and with one another. Some brought letters to the minister with the request that he should post them when he reached home, for Merlin was thirty miles from the railroad and had mail only once in two weeks.

But Mr. Hewitt could not remain long among his people. This had been the second service held during the day, and he must hasten on to hold another meeting twelve miles beyond Merlin. He was driving away when he heard his name called, and Tom Scott came forward, holding in his hand a letter. Giving it to the minister, he said,

"Will you please post it?"

Mr. Hewitt took it, saying "Certainly." Without noting Tom's abashed manner he slipped it into the outside pocket of his overcoat. Then with a friendly "Good-bye," he drove away. A glance at the envelope, addressed "Miss Mary Frazer, Virgille, Ont.," would have explained Tom's embarrassment.

*To be concluded in our next.*