

were partly due to the notion that had got into the heads of one or two of our party that the idyllic life of a shepherd in the Platte Valley must be a very fine thing. The lieutenant combated this notion fiercely, and begged Lady Sylvia to wait until she had seen the harshness of life even amid the comparative luxury of a well-appointed ranch. Lady Sylvia retorted gently that we had no further knowledge of life at a ranch than herself; that she had attentively listened to all that had been said about the subject by our friends in Omaha; that harshness of living was a relative thing; and that she had no doubt Bell and her husband would soon get used to it, and would not complain.

"Oh no, she will not complain," said he, lightly. "She is very reasonable—she is very sensible. She will never be reconciled to the place while her children are away, and she will have a great deal of crying by herself; but she will not complain."

"Nor would any woman," said Lady Sylvia, boldly. "She is acting rightly; she is doing her duty. I think that women are far more capable of giving up luxuries they have been accustomed to than men are."

This set the lieutenant thinking. On the morning on which we left Omaha, he came aside, and said,

"I, too, have written a letter to Mr. Bal-four. Shall I post it?"

"What is in it?"

"The proposal I told you of the other night, but very—very—what do you call it? roundabout. I have said perhaps he is only coming out to take his wife home sooner than you go: that is well. I have said perhaps he is waiting until the firm starts again; if that is any use, when they must have been losing for years. Again, that is well. But I have said perhaps he is coming to look how to start a business—an occupation; if that is so, will he stay with us a year?—see if he understands—then he will take the management, and have a yearly per centage. I have said it is only a passing thought; but we will ask Lady Sylvia to stay with us at Idaho until we hear from him. He can telegraph from New York. He will tell her to remain until he comes, or to meet him somewhere; I will get some one to accompany her. What do you say?"

"Post the letter."

"It will be very pleasant for us," said he,

in a second or so, as he rubbed his hands in an excited fashion, "to have them out for our neighbours for a year at the least—it will be pleasant for Bell—how can she get any one in Denver or Idaho to know all about her children and Surrey? My dear friend, if you have any sense, you will stay with us too. I will show you bears."

He spoke as if he were already owner of the Rocky Mountains.

"And we will go down to Kansas—a great party, with covered waggons, and picnics, and much amusement—for a buffalo hunt. And then we will go up to the Parks in the middle of the mountains—what it is, is this, I tell you: If our stay here is compulsive, we will make it as amusing as possible, you will see, if only you will stay the year too."

A sigh was the answer.

And now, as we again set out on our journey westward, the beautiful prairie country seemed more beautiful than ever; and we caught glimpses of the fertile valley of the Platte, in which our imaginary freehold estates lay awaiting us. On and on we went, with the never-ending undulations of grass and flowers glowing all around us in the sunlight; the world below a plain of gold, the world above a vault of the palest blue. The space and light and colour were altogether most cheerful; and as the train went at a very gentle trot along the single line, we sat outside, for the most part, in the cool breeze. Occasionally we passed a small hamlet, and that had invariably an oddly extemporized look. The wooden houses were stuck down anyhow on the grassy plain; without any trace of the old-fashioned orchards and walled gardens and hedges that bind, as it were, an English village together. Here there was but the satisfaction of the most immediate needs. One wooden building labelled "Drug Store," another wooden building labelled "Grocery Store," and a blacksmith's shop, were ordinarily the chief features of the community. All day we passed in this quiet gliding onward; and when the sun began to sink towards the horizon we found ourselves in the midst of a grassy plain, apparently quite uninhabited, and of boundless extent. As the western sky deepened in its gold and green, and as the sun actually touched the horizon, the level light hit across this vast plain in long shafts of dull fire, just catching the tops of the taller rushes near us,