

and keep the fires going, and I took the contract.

It wasn't a dark night. There was a goodish bit of a moon behind the clouds, and it made a gray kind of light over everything. We were at the bottom of a dry canon that ran east and west, and the wind did not reach us. It screeched and screamed over our heads, and through it all there was a kind of moaning roar, as if we were at the bottom of a tide as deep as the stars are high. I got to thinking about old times away back, of one Sunday night just before we were married. I had gone East a little sooner than we expected and had to wait for her things to be finished. We went to church that night. A keen, crisp, still night it was, when the sleigh-runners squeaked on the snow and the moonlight traced the shadows of the elms on the white ground as if they had been put in black drawing. The church was warm and bright, and they hadn't taken down the Christmas greens yet, so the air was full of the smell of them—that spicy, haunting smell, that seems as if it came somehow from a world before this. It was years since I had smelled it, and I sat and listened to the music and looked at the people, with their comfortable clothing and faces that were cheerful, not worn and wrinkled with care and weather. Molly was an awfully pretty girl in those days; all pink and white like an apple blossom, somehow. And fighting to keep awake out there in the heart of a Kansas prairie I got to thinking about her as she was then and how she had changed. Skin the color of tanned leather now, and that wild, hungry look in her blue eyes, as if they were always staring into the dark for something that frightened her. And both her children dead, and not even a spray of the pine she loved so, nor a breath of music; nothing but a dirt floor and log walls that did all that was expected of them if they kept the weather out.

Somebody hailed over the top of the bluff.

"What camp's that?"

"Kenyon and mates."

"I towed it was"—scrambling down the sides of the gulch on his sure-footed mule—"You Kenyon? News for you. A kid up to your ranch 10 days old. All hands doing well yesterday morning."

The rest roused themselves, sleepily. He had got off the trail, and seeing our smoke had struck for it. We knew and he knew that the chances were that it saved his life; but he swallowed his coffee and smoked his pipe and turned in with the rest as if getting lost in a norther was one of the things that happened, of course, to every man.

Then I sat and thought a while, and finally I roused out Madison.

"You take my turn." I said to him, "I'm going home."

"Not a brute that will travel."

"You'll pass in your check before morning."

"No; the wind is at my back; no fords; I'll keep going," and I went.

Went; half running, with the wind driving me on till I was ready to drop. Once I fell and lay there, with the wind dragging and tearing at me, until I began to grow sleepy, and then I had to get up and go ahead again.

Perhaps you never tried crossing a prairie at night without a trail to follow. It's a curious thing, one I can't account for; one that makes you feel as if your body and all your senses were of no more account than a spent cartridge. It happened to me that night, space and time seemed to get all mixed up together all at once racing along; it seemed to me that I had been up to that sort of thing for hours. I felt so adrift somehow—so horribly lost—as if I had slipped out of myself, and was out in space without landmark to measure anything by, I expect you'll have to try it yourself to know what I mean. I had no watch; there was no way of knowing how much time had gone. Of all the devils that can enter into a man uncertainty is the worst. Every sort of fancy came into my head. Perhaps I did not know the route as well as I thought. Perhaps I had even passed the cabins and was going away from them with every step. I ought to have reached them in three hours at the utmost. It seemed to me that I had been hurling along for twice three hours. Once I tried madly to fight into the wind. It was hopeless—worse than useless. I should drop with exhaustion in a few minutes, and I must keep going.

And then I found burned grass under my feet. There had been a fire over the prairie. The ground was not cold yet. A new dread got hold of me.