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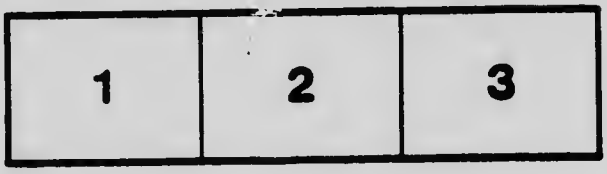

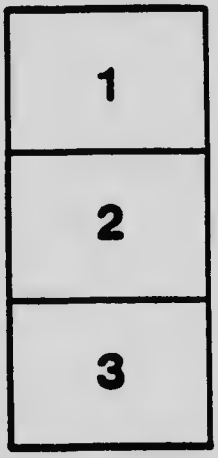

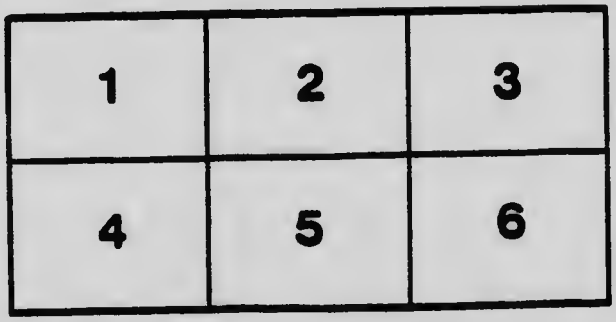

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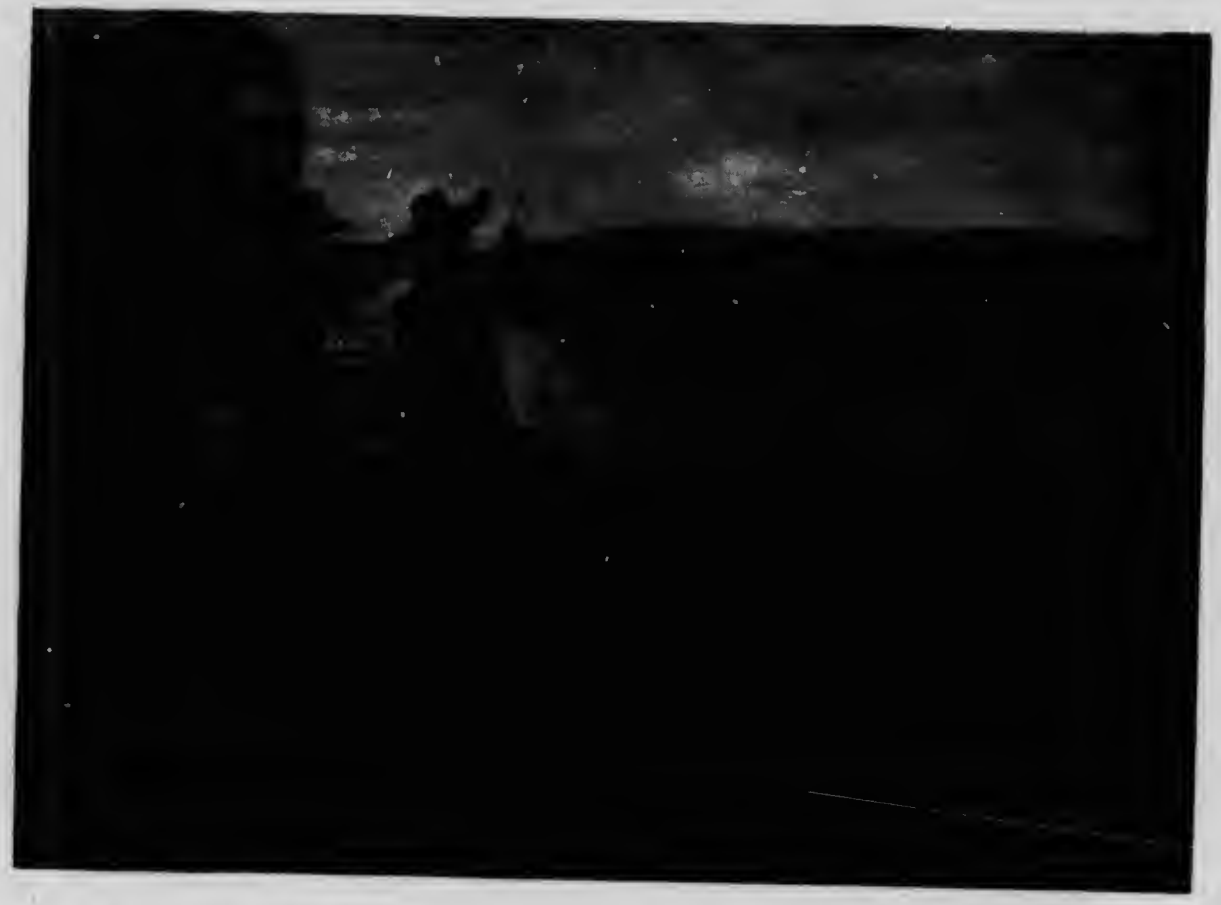

"A wounded pony was plunging upon its knees, struggling to rise, and three bodies were tumbled shapeless on the sand of the trail." See page 153.

The Shadow of a Great Rock

By

William R. Lighton

Henry Frowde
Toronto
1907

A wounded pony was plunging upon its knees, struggling to rise, and three bodies were tumbled shapeless on the sand of the trail." See page 153.

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THE SHADOW OF A GREAT ROCK

I

WHAT MANNER OF MEN

MID-JULY, Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-four. On her rude bed in the formless western wilderness the great mother, Destiny, had been delivered of an infant commonwealth, which was lifting its voice in the first shrill wail of surprise over the strangeness of life. Already its name was chosen: Nebraska. And its lot? Mother-like, this mother had seen her visions in the bitter-sweet days wherein she had felt the new life quickening. Full share of good and

evil would befall the child, no doubt; but deep in her heart of hearts she had known that the evil must pass and the good endure. Knowing this she had borne her agony steadfastly.

Of all the rough frontier towns that stretched in a ragged line along the eastern bank of the Missouri, Council Bluffs seemed most alive with the robust spirit of the time. There the crowd was most motley; there the leaping pulse could best be felt; there was the very vortex of the mad maelstrom of passionate hope, desire, and purpose.

Night was falling, and in the deepening gloom, with the shadows thick over the dim streets, there was something half eerie in the town's aspect. The roadways were filled with huge freight-waggons, drawn together in close order to leave the middle of the thoroughfares clear. All around were oxen, mules, and horses, released from harness after the day's labour, some tethered to the waggon-

wheels and others picketed near by, grazing. At intervals loomed the black bulk of rude log buildings, their windows and doors gleaming faintly with the weak rays of candle-light—so faintly that it seemed no more than the phosphorescent shining of ghostly eyes staring unwinking into the darkness. Between the buildings and all around, filling every space, tents were pitched for temporary shelter, and in the open places beyond were a hundred white-covered emigrant waggons, holding crowded loads of men, women, and children. The flickering flames of myriad tiny campfires pricked the dusk with sharp stabs of light; the warm air was heavy with the pungent odor of wood-smoke.

Now and again belated waggons came creaking in, by twos and threes, over the eastern trail, and found camping grounds; then the rich scents of boiling coffee and frying bacon would be thickly mingled with the drifting smoke. There was everywhere a lusty clamour of hoarse shouts and hoarser laughter, from the

throats of men who passed restlessly back and forth, here and there, the light of the low fires making them appear as mere vast, burly Shapes. Over all, dominating every separate sound, swelled a deep-toned, resonant murmur—the voice of the spirit of the multitude. Now and then a child cried fretfully; sometimes a girl or a woman sang a fragment of a tune; there were unnumbered sounds in the crowded human camp, and countless others that were borne in from the enfolding night. Yet deeper, stronger than these was the one great voice; inarticulate yet vibrant with meaning, crying the unfathomable passion of a new exodus to a new Promised Land.

The Boltwood store, standing near the centre of the town, was a favourite gathering-place for the crowd. It was a long, one-roomed building, its walls made of hewn logs chinked with mud, its low roof of poles sagging under the weight of sod and earth piled atop. Against the side walls, on rough shelves resting upon

wooden pegs driven into the chinking, was ranged a great supply of the wares suited to the primitive needs of the emigrants; at the rear, from floor to ceiling, bales, crates, and barrels were piled in close ranks. A space was left clear at the forward end of the room, where rough wooden benches were ranged about rough tables made of planks, and grouped about the tables were many men, packed close, talking, laughing, eating, and drinking. The day's activity was at an end, its tension relaxed, and the actors were at ease, surrendering themselves to a jocund comradeship. There was no bar in the room, but on one of the tables in the middle of the floor stood a wooden tub half filled with whiskey, with tin cups hanging from the handles by long chains. This was a gala time, and the liquor was free; whosoever thirsted might come and drink his fill. The tub had been full to the brim at sunset, two hours gone. Not many were drunk, but most had been drinking freely. The air

was thick with the reek of laden breaths, with pipe-smoke, and with the smell of hot men's bodies. Two Omaha Indians, smoke-stained and frowsy, squatted together upon the floor in a corner, speaking sometimes in deep gutturals and regarding the strange scene with furtive eyes; three or four half-breeds, mongrel offspring of the early French traders, had a table to themselves, where they chattered noisily in the *patois* of the border; now and again a weather-tanned woman passed through the throng to barter with the busy clerks at the long counters. But the great majority of those present were men of the master-race; one type was strongly dominant—the type of the American pioneer.

One entered presently from the night and stood in the doorway, looking about him, as though he was a stranger to the place. The marks of hardship were plain upon him; his heavy boots were white with road-dust, and the dust lay thick upon his black hat, upon his shoul-

ders, and upon his tanned cheeks, where it was streaked with sweat. But it needed only a glance to show that whatever had befallen him weighed lightly upon his spirit. He was not past five or six and twenty, with the buoyant health and strength which make physical endurance a joy. He stood s[illegible]ht and tall, his features showing fi[illegible]nd resolute; his every muscle was lit[illegible]free-moving, full of sturdy agility. A pistol was in a holster at his belt—his only weapon and burden.

After a quick glance over the crowd he walked to one of the counters and bought food; then, finding a seat, he ate with ravenous appetite. No one gave heed to him; he was but one of many; a hungry wayfarer more or less counted for little in that throng.

When his wolfish hunger was somewhat satisfied he looked about him again, at greater leisure and with keener interest, scanning the faces one by one, as though he hoped yet hardly expected to find one

that was known. And suddenly a light of pleasure shone in his eyes, as they rested upon three men at the opposite side of the room, grouped about a small table, on which was a single flickering candle, a litter of papers, and a torn outspread map. Two of the men bent over the map, deeply intent, following its lines with their fingers and talking earnestly, but the third leaned idly back with his shoulders against the wall, giving only light heed to what his companions were about.

His was a handsome, boyish face, its youthful flush heightened and its eyes feverishly brightened by drink. His full lips were relaxed in an amused smile at the fervid spectacle before him; his eyelids drooped heavily; the pipe he held between his teeth was tipped sidewise and its ashes spilled thickly over his woollen shirt. Seen thus, his was the face of a devil-may-care; his features were well-lined, good-tempered, betraying a generous warmth of impulse; but they were

wanting in those tokens of self-mastery which make the best of manhood.

"See here, Jack; look at this," one of his companions said, with a show of impatience, urging the boy's attention. "Here 's where we strike the Leavenworth trail; and then we follow the Platte clear to the mouth of the Sweetwater. *Look,* man!"

The boy turned his sleepy glance upon them with a short, meaningless laugh. "It 's all right, Joe," he said, lightly. "If you say so, it 's good enough for me. I don't care. That whiskey has made me too comfortable; I don't want to worry about anything. Wait a minute, till I get another drink; maybe it 'll wake me up some."

He arose and walked unsteadily to the tub, dipping up a cupful of the liquor. As he raised it to his lips, his eyes met those of the new-comer, fixed upon him, and the cup fell from his hand with a clatter, the untasted whiskey splashing upon the floor.

"Mark Bailey! Why, Mark!" he cried, surprise stiffening his drooping figure, his vacant smile giving place to an expression of lively pleasure. Their hands met in a firm pressure, and the boy's arm was laid affectionately across the man's broad shoulders. The style of the welcome brought a vagrant flush into Bailey's tanned cheeks, making it plain that he shared in the other's feeling. He did not speak at once; his eyes were busy with taking account of his friend's appearance, as though they had met after a long separation.

"It 's the same old Jack Forrester, without a hair changed," he said presently, a note of fondness in his deep voice, "Lord, but I 'm glad to see you!"

"In heaven's name, Mark," the younger man returned, "tell me about it. How did you happen to get here?"

Bailey laughed lightly. "The bars were all down," he said, "and nobody seemed to want to stop me."

"Well, but the last I heard of you, a year ago, they said you were getting rich, back there in your little old Ohio."

"Rich!" Bailey echoed, his laugh persisting. "The man that told you that must have got it out of his dream-book. I 've just been scraping out a bare living. Ohio has nearly busted me. That 's why I came out here; maybe a new pack and a new deal will change my luck. But I 've had the devil's own time getting here. I 've walked half-way across the State."

"Walked?" Forrester said. "Two hundred miles?"

"There 's certainly a whole lot of distance between the Des Moines and the Bluffs," Bailey returned. "But I had time to match, and I needed the training. It took me ten days, wading through dust knee-deep, most of the way. It did me good. I 've learned a lot I did n't know before. I 've been cooking my own victuals over a brush fire, and sleeping on the ground with nothing over me.

I 'd never done that before. I killed most of my own grub, too, with my six-shooter—rabbits and birds. It helped to work a lot of the fat off me—body and mind too. I 've had the time of my life. I reckon I need n't ask any questions about you; yours was always the standing Forrester luck."

For answer Forrester thrust his hand into his trousers pocket and brought forth a crumpled, disorderly mass of bills. "I 'm bloated out of shape with this stuff," he said; "deformed with it. I don't believe I could shake loose from it if I tried. You 'll have to take some of it, if you 're broke. This is no country to be broke in; and the Lord knows I 've got more than is good for me."

Bailey's strong hand rested with a light pressure upon the boy's shoulder.

"I don't want your money," he said. "It is n't so bad as that. I 've got a thousand dollars tucked away inside my shirt, to begin with. That 's enough. The only thing I 'll let you give me right

now is a drink. My throat feels like the inside of a fur boot."

"My luck again!" Forrester retorted whimsically. "Nobody can pay for a drink here; it 's free. Here, help yourself." He turned to the whiskey-tub, dipping up a cupful and passing it to his friend's hand. Bailey sipped lightly at the raw spirits, gasping as the fiery fumes caught his parched throat; then he drank two or three deep gulps, and the cup was half emptied.

"Now, show me some water," he said.

In the littered yard at the rear of the building was a well. They groped their way to it in the darkness, and Bailey drew a fresh bucketful from the cool depths. Tipping it upon the curb, he drank long and greedily; then filled his doubled hands again and again, bathing his dusty face and neck, wiping the water away with his handkerchief.

"That 's the stuff!" he said gratefully. "Now I don't need anything more but some sleep; and I need that bad. I 'm

dead tired. I 'd made up my mind that I 'd finish my trip to-night and sleep in Nebraska. How do you get across the river?"

"You can't," Forrester returned. "You 'll have to stay here till morning. There 's a ferry, but it does n't run after night. You 're going to stay with me to-night, and then I 'll go across with you to-morrow, and we 'll take a look around. You 'll want to find something to do, won't you? I can tell you a lot about the place. I 've been here six weeks—I 'm one of the old settlers."

Bailey considered, with a show of disappointment. "I won't sleep easy on this side," he said. "I 'd set my heart on being over yonder."

"Well, it 's no use," Forrester insisted. "I tell you there 's no way to get across. Even if there was I would n't let you go. I want you to meet those fellows I 'm with—two of the best men out here. I did n't tell you; but we 're organising a big freighting outfit—a waggon-train,

you know, to take stuff across the plains to Salt Lake, and maybe to the coast. There 's a mint of money in it. Why, say, Mark, why can't you come in with us? I can fix it for you. We 're going to need good men. Come in and let 's talk it over."

He led the way back to his table. His companions were still intent upon their map; but their interest was suspended for a time, while they welcomed Bailey, making a place for him and inviting him to join them.

One of the two, Joe Cannon, was a burly, hairy giant, whose bushy head and beard of fiery red, massive shoulders, and huge hands showed the robust animal. The other, James Frick, was of slighter make, thin-lipped, lean of feature, with a bony forehead of marked breadth that shadowed steady, cool eyes. Repression and restraint distinguished him. Though he listened carefully to all that was said, alert and watchful, it was hard to judge of the impression the talk made upon him,

so little did his manner betray him. Yet there was in this no suggestion of mere craft or cunning. He was not the sort of man to whom men are easily attracted. He could be generous enough, upon occasion, but his generosities would be all well-planned, judicial, never blindly impulsive.

Cannon was one of those who give with open hands, recklessly and to the uttermost. He would have a score of friends to Frick's one. Yet Frick was plainly much his superior in many of the ways of manhood—far above the average. He looked the part of the born leader, while Cannon showed only sheer, gross animal force, of the sort that does its best work under wise leadership. Forrester said as much when he presented Mark to the two.

"Here we are, Mark: Brains, and nerve, and money. Frick thinks; and Joe Cannon can do anything Frick can think. I 'm the rich man of the bunch. They can't beat our combination. If the

country turns out as well as it ought to, we 'll make millions."

"What?" Cannon cried, his big voice carrying a vibrant, thunderous roll. "*If* it turns out well! Why, good-goddle-mighty!" He threw his bulky figure forward upon the table, thrusting his bearded face toward Forrester aggressively, spreading out his great hands upon the strewn papers. "There never was no country yet like what there 'll be, yon side the river," he roared. "I 'm tellin' you! Why, the pick of all the men on earth are comin' out here, right now. That 's what makes a country. That 's what makes me know it 'll be a world-beater—because the lazy cowards are goin' to stay away from it for a while—them sneaks that are huntin' an easy time. If a man——"

Forrester interrupted with his habitual easy laugh. "Oh, shut up, Joe. I 'm tired to death of that talk. It 's going to be nothing but a big, raw wilderness for years, without a damned thing in it to

make a man's life worth while, unless he 's half a beast to begin with. There 'll be chances to fight, and chances to get rich, and nothing else—a place to waste the best of your life in. But I reckon there 'll be lots of fun in the wasting; and I 've always been a pretty good waster."

"It 's hard to say what will come of it," Frick said, in slow, unimpassioned quiet. "We 're going to help win the country for the men that come after us. What we 'll get out of it for ourselves is n't written on the wall. What are you thinking of doing, Bailey?"

Forrester cut in before Mark could reply. "Say, let me tell you. I 've told Mark about our scheme. He 's looking for a chance, and I 'd like it mighty well if he could go with us. He 's the sort of man we want. I 'll stand good for that. I 'd like to sell him a part of my share in the outfit, if he 's satisfied after he 's looked into it. You fellows won't be sorry."

His suggestion met with ready favour. For an hour they sat, discussing plans and conditions; and at the hour's end it was agreed that Bailey would be admitted as a partner in the enterprise if within a few days he found nothing more to his liking. The talk, filled with the spirit of the time and place, gave to him a sense of buoyant elation. Then Frick engaged himself again with his papers, calm, intent, absorbed.

But Cannon dropped his personal concerns, that he might indulge his passion for speech with a sympathetic listener concerning the immeasurable possibilities of the virgin land beyond the river. He had gathered from here and there a chaotic medley of facts, theories, and fancies, which he poured out upon Bailey in a bewildering flood. He was not logical; it would have been easy to find numberless weaknesses in what he said; yet his vagaries, his sheerest inconsistencies, his very contradictions, were somehow held together and almost harmonised

by his virile enthusiasm. Mark listened eagerly. His mind was in many ways closely akin to Cannon's. He had come to the new country to make his fortune; and what he heard, delivered in the giant's ringing voice, fitted in admirably with his own bold, far-reaching desires, satisfying him. He was not too particular about details. The whiskey he had taken had eased the ache in his muscles and given a fine exhilaration to his thoughts, so that the very bigness and wildness of the life ahead enticed him. He could feel the warm blood flushing his cheeks; the clamour of confused noises in the room, growing a little maudlin under the effects of the liquor, somehow aroused in him a grateful sense of fellowship; he would have liked to shout with the rest, in the pure joy of life and strength. He drank again presently, when Cannon and Forrester invited him. After that his blood leaped with the lustiness of his youth, and every rude element in the picture before his eyes was invested with a golden

glamour. In every man's soul throbbed pulses of power and passions of fire, fit for the struggle that was to come against the titanic forces of the wilderness. It was like the night before a battle, when the fighters are drunk with visions of victory.

Toward the last, Cannon had another listener; a young man who sat at one of the nearer tables, looking on at the stirring scene but taking no part. He seemed to be without companions, for he spoke to none of those at his table. While Cannon thundered on in his tireless glorification, the stranger turned in his seat, giving close attention. Presently he arose and came nearer.

"My name's Braidlaw," he said. "I've heard what you've been talking about. You're going to run a freighting outfit west. I'm going to California, with my sister. I didn't know but maybe you could give me a job with your train and let me work my way out, so far as you go."

The speech seemed frank and honest enough: yet Bailey's first impulse was one of dislike. He could hardly have told why. The man was of about his own age, strong and sinewy in figure, with a bold-featured face that would have been handsome but that the clean-shaven lips were too full and pouting and the thick, straight, black brows too closely meeting. His black eyes showed a dull, smoky lustre, giving an expression much too sombre, almost sinister. Cannon too seemed instinctively distrustful, for the habitual genial warmth died out of his voice as he answered.

"I don't know. We 'll need men, but it 's too soon yet. Who knows you, hereabouts?"

"No one," Braidlaw answered. "We only got in to-day, from Illinois. I have n't any friends here, that I know of. But I 've got to get some kind of work, going west."

"Well," Cannon returned, a little uneasy under the steady stare of the

stranger's eyes, "we ain't ready yet. It 'll be a month or so. You better not count on it, if you can find anything else. Are you ox-broke—can you drive an ox-team?"

"I never have," the other returned, a shade of disappointment showing in his voice and bearing. "But I 'm used to horses, and I could learn with oxen, I suppose. I 'll need the work."

"Well," Cannon repeated, still visibly on his guard, "we 'll talk about it after a while, if you 're still around. We 're the Forrester outfit; you can't lose [illegible] we 're goin' to leave an awful lot of a [illegible] wide trail, when we get things to move. You might keep askin'."

And with that Braidlaw had to be satisfied for the time. As he returned to his seat, Cannon's glance followed him gravely.

"Him!" he muttered. "Not for me, Bailey. He don't seem to belong to me, somehow; struck me a good deal like drawin' a black two-spot when you 're

tryin' to fill a red flush. No, sir; that boy goes in the discard unless we happen to need him terrible bad."

Forrester had fallen asleep, his head resting upon his arms on the table; Frick was heedless of everything but the maze of figures before him; but Cannon seemed to have taken leave of business for the day, preferring to keep on with his sturdy rhapsody, though Mark's attention was beginning to waver as his need for rest made itself felt again. After another half-hour the crowd was thinning out somewhat; but the noise swelled stronger than ever from the throats of the hardier ones who remained. With some the earlier jollity was passing into frenzy. In their separate corner the little group of half-breeds began to quarrel bitterly. A knife was drawn, and one of the brawlers got a long cut across his cheek, from which the blood spurted freely. They were thrown with rude force into the road, to finish their fight if they would in the darkness. The incident seemed to

be fuel for the half-mad spirit of the roisterers; the many voices swelled to a discordant clamour, mingled with boisterous singing and ribald cries.

A woman came to the open doorway and stood looking over the crowd within. She was clad as a widow; middle-aged, round of face and figure, thoroughly self-possessed, as though she found herself quite comfortable and at ease in that rude setting. At sight of her Bailey spoke a thought which had been in his mind again and again during the evening.

"It 'll be hard on the women, won't it, in the new country? Even if they 've got folks, they 'll have to stand a lot; but if they 're alone I 'm sorry for 'em. There 's that widow over there ——"

Cannon turned quickly to look; then he arose, his ruddy face wrinkling with an overspreading grin.

"She 's no widder," he cried. "She used to be, but she 's reformed. She 's my wife, ever since a month ago, only she ain't got her new clothes made yet.

But me an' her knows she 's no widder. She 's lookin' for me, I reckon. I better go."

When he was gone, Mark too arose and went out. The roadway had fallen into deeper darkness, so that he had trouble in picking his way along. Once he stumbled and fell over the bulky body of an ox that lay upon the ground, still yoked to its mate, in readiness for the morrow. Men too were sleeping here and there, beside the waggons, covered with blankets, their heads pillowed upon boots or saddles. Silence was over all; silence and slumber.

A half-formed purpose guided Mark's ste[illegible] He had set his heart upon reaching [illegible]braska before he slept; if that was not to be, he would at least have a look at the river-barrier. He hurried onward toward the water front until he came presently upon a picture which made him halt and stand for a time, wondering.

A small fire had been kindled at the

side of the open roadway, as the centre of a camp; but it had fallen low and made but a narrow circle of soft light in the enveloping gloom. The bulk of recumbent men's figures showed dimly against the black earth, and close to the fire was a mother with her child, both in deep sleep, the baby's bare, round legs kicked free of the covering and lying outstretched in the warmth. Near to these lay another figure, whether of girl or woman Mark could not at first be sure, so slight it appeared on its great, rude bed. The face was turned full to the fire-glow; a sweet, fair face, almost childish in its delicacy, yet mature in the firm strength of the lines of lips and chin and in the breadth of the full forehead, that was half hidden by a thick mass of tumbled brown hair. One arm was beneath her head as a pillow; her hand, pressing the bare earth, was small, almost fragile. She was resting in perfect tranquillity, as though knowing neither fear nor discomfort; yet as he looked, Mark's thoughts were flooded

with a sudden warmth of pity and tenderness.

"God!" he breathed. "What's she doing here?" For a long time he stood, looking down upon her with a sort of awe. The blanket that covered her had slipped low upon her shoulders, exposing her to the dewy night air, and she stirred slightly, as with a shiver. Very quietly Mark drew nearer, bending over, drawing the blanket closer about her; hardly breathing, fearful lest the very beating of his heart might waken and frighten her. But she slept on, all unconscious, and he drew back into the shadow of the big waggon, turning there for another look.

"I wonder where she's going," he mused; then, quick upon the heels of that thought: "I wonder if I'll ever see her again. It's an awful big country, out yonder. I wish—" But the wish was too vague to find form, even in his musing, and he turned away, going slowly on toward the river.

When he stood at last upon the bank,

he felt that his purpose must be abandoned. Along the river front was only darkness. The clumsy ferry-barge was securely moored, and no living creature was in sight. It needed but a moment to show the danger of trying to swim the stream, however expert and fearless he might be. The mighty waters, eddying against the crumbling, sandy bank, tearing it away little by little almost from beneath his feet, stretching black and formidable to the Nebraska hills. The rushing current seemed terrible in its power. But while he stood hesitating there flashed upon him a sudden reckless desire to match himself against the water. He had an unshaken confidence in the strength of his healthy young body, which had never yet failed him; in his present mood the threat of danger was in itself an invitation. Throwing off his boots and hat, he fastened them securely across his shoulders; then, with a laugh that was half sheer defiance and half pure abandon, he plunged into the stream.

Close against the bank the water was no more than waist-deep; yet he was thrown from his feet helplessly and swept along in the grasp of a force which he felt instinctively would tax his endurance to the uttermost. He wasted no strength in fighting against the current, but was content to drift with it, keeping his face upstream, and with the cunning art of a practised swimmer making it aid him on his way. Where the current ran straight and smooth, however swift, he was its master; that he knew at once, so soon as he had settled to his work and gained control of his stroke. But he knew too, within a few moments, that this was the least part of what he must face. Again and again he was borne, without warning, into the heart of a wide expanse where the waters halted in their onward course to indulge in demonic sport—dancing, swirling, boiling, as in an infernal cauldron, choked thick with sand upborne from the deep bed. Now he would be lifted with his shoulders and breast

clear of the surface, his arms beating the air; then in the next moment the eddy would clutch him like a living monster, dragging him down, down, into nether blackness, and he would fight with wild fury, struggling to rise, until his deep lungs seemed rending with the pain of suffocation. Then another stretch of smooth, gliding current, where he suffered himself to drift, keeping barely afloat, regaining his spent breath and strength against the next encounter with one of those mad whirlpools. Though it was so sore a strain upon his body, the contest was tonic to his will. Had he been wanting in that exultant, lordly courage which marks the born fighter, he must have sunk to his death within the first hundred yards; but in the moments of his greatest peril his will would assert itself, masterful, supreme.

Only once did he feel anything like despair. He had fought his way through a whirlpool and was floating again, his every muscle shaking with exhaustion,

when he was carried against a sunken tree that was anchored fast in the sand, and found his legs entangled in the ragged network of its dead branches; and again the choking water covered him. A wave of passion swept his soul—in part a formless prayer, and in part sheer savage joy that if this was to be the end he would die fighting. Then with a supreme effort he cast himself free. In the next moment he was carried against a low sandbar that lay dry above the river's surface; and with his last remaining strength he crawled out upon it, falling at his length, gasping and utterly spent.

For a full half-hour he lay, hardly moving, until his death-like weariness passed. When he stood up, he saw that he had crossed the greater part of the river's width. The wooded hills of Nebraska loomed close before him, and the channel running between bar and bank appeared of an even blackness, unbroken by the deadly eddies. After a little time he plunged in again, swimming freely.

Soon his hand caught at a pendent vine, and he clambered out upon the shore.

Across the river, far in the distance, glimmered a cluster of feeble specks of light, hardly distinguishable, that marked the town he had left—the very outmost western border of civilisation. Westward stretched a vast new empire, unknown, untried, as yet untainted by the tragedy of weakness and failure—a splendid wilderness, calling a bold challenge to those who were destined to become its conquerors. And as he stood at the river's brink, with the sense of victory fresh upon him, there was that within his heart which cried a dauntless answer to the challenge. He would be a sharer in the glory of the conquest.

He found a sheltered spot in a narrow ravine between wooded hills, where the ground was strewn with deep, wild-smelling mould; and there he stretched himself at his length, burrowing into the soft warmth. But despite his profound exhaustion, sleep did not come at once. For

many minutes he lay staring with wide eyes at the vague shapes about him, while through his thoughts there swept, in swift procession, the events of the crowded day. But that passed presently, as through a cleft in the wind-blown tree-tops he caught a glimpse of the tranquil stars, and the deeps of his mind were stirred by another thought—not of strife, not of conquest, but of a sleeping face lit by the red glow of firelight. In the last moment before he slept the face floated before him, outlined against the deep background of infinity—stars for the lips and chin, stars for the soft curve of the cheek, two glorious stars for the eyes, and a long and shining strand of star-cloud for a mass of gold-brown hair.

II

THE WOMAN

ONLY once in the night did Mark awaken, startled for a moment by the shrill, wailing cry of a pack of hungry coyotes, that were pursuing their hunt along the crest of the bluff above his retreat. When they had gone on their way, leaving behind a faint trail of ghostly sound, he lay for a little time, turning in his bed, burrowing deeper into the mould. It was near the hour of three. The silence was profound, save for the palpitant chirring of myriad nocturnal insects and the whisper of the slow midsummer night wind in the leafage overhead. The sounds lulled him like friendly voices; his senses were c oyed with a delicious weariness, and without effort or care he sank back into dreamless sleep.

When he awoke again the world about him was brilliant with the glory of dawn. The great river had lost its midnight aspect of terror and appeared as a wide expanse of shimmering gold, mirroring the beauty of the morning. Throwing off his clothes he leaped into the water, swimming to the sand-bar and back again, coming out upon the bank refreshed and vigorous and desperately hungry. From his pocket he brought a small roll of oil-skin, securely wrapped and tied, holding a bundle of matches, and kindled a fire of leaves and dried twigs against the body of a fallen log. The next thing was breakfast.

Scores of birds were in a riot of song in the trees and undergrowth near at hand—jays, thrushes, and many others whose names he did not know. A full-breasted lark perched upon a swaying branch at the stream's edge close by, tempting him. He raised his pistol against it, but then, obeying a formless impulse, he let the weapon fall. From

the same deep pocket he drew a coil of stout fishing-line, furnished with a dozen hooks. With his clasp-knife he dug into the crumbling heart of a rotting stump until he had found a handful of fat white grubs; and with these he baited his hooks, then cast the line into a deep, still pool close against the bank, fastening the shoreward end to a bush and leaving it to the care of good fortune while he prepared a bed of embers. He laughed as he realised his odd situation.

"I need a square meal, bad," he said aloud, "and all the money I've got could n't buy one over here, I reckon. I hope to heaven luck don't fool me."

Luck played him no tricks. When his fire was ready and he went down to look at his line, he found it drawn taut, cutting the water in wide, sweeping plunges, back and forth. He hauled in upon it, hand over hand, and drew to the bank a huge catfish. In a few minutes he had thick steaks cut from the firm, sweet flesh, impaled on twigs of

green hickory and set to broil over the coals.

Never was better breakfast than that, eaten at the edge of the woodland in the first sunlight of the summer day, savoured only by spicy wood-smoke and by the sauce of a lusty young appetite. He ate as though he would never get enough, slice after slice, stepping down to the river bank sometimes to dip up the cool water in the hollow of his doubled hands, drinking deeply and washing his eyes free of the smart of the smoke.

His meal was still far from ended when he heard a movement in the underwood on the hillside above, drawing nearer; and a stalwart young Indian appeared, naked to the waist, wearing only rawhide moccasins and breeches of deerskin. His face, brown, aquiline, seamed even in its youth by exposure, was grave, sombre, yet wearing that fine dignity which marks the race born in untrammelled freedom and suckled at the breast of the good earth, but which passes

quickly into bestial grossness once the race has so much as touched the hem of the garment of civilisation. This man was still a wildling; a beautiful figure, lithe, erect, calm, but with an air upon him of deep melancholy; for he was of the Omahas, the tribe that had just been led into reluctant surrender of its lands to the white invaders. A little longer and the Omahas would be driven to find a new home.

The man's sudden appearance gave Mark a momentary uneasiness; but that feeling passed directly; for, seeing what Mark was about, the Indian came closer, sitting down cross-legged beside the fire and showing by a sign that he would join in the meal. Mark laughed again, lightly, over the humour of it.

"Say, whose treat is this, anyway?" he said. "Am I your company or are you mine? But it don't matter much, so long as there 's enough to go 'round." Willingly he gave a generous portion of the broiled fish to the Omaha, who ate

hungrily, while Mark went on with his own breakfast, keeping an unfailing supply over the coals.

No further word was spoken while they ate; there seemed to be no need, for without speech they held perfect communion of understanding. When the Indian had finished, he sat for a time motionless, regarding Mark with steadfast eyes; then in unbroken silence he arose abruptly and disappeared amongst the trees.

Mark waited only to roll up his fishing-line before he set off for the scene of the new day's action, at the ferry-crossing above. His night's swim had carried him for a long distance down-stream, and the walk back was hard, leading over steep, rough hills, and through pathless tangles of bush and vine. But he came at last to the summit of a bolder crest and looked down upon the broad, shining ribbon of the river, with Council Bluffs showing faint in the distance through the morning haze that was over the water, and below, seeming almost at his feet on the western

shore, the rude beginning of the new Omaha City.

A bare half-dozen log huts stood at wide intervals and without order on the level bench of land above the river-bottom; these made the town. The axe had not yet touched the thick growths of timber that began with the first uplift of the hill-slopes; far as the eye could see there was no least mark of husbandry. Yet the scene held a mighty meaning; it was the first budding of that conquest which was destined to sweep, in fire and blood and passion, over the full, vast breadth of the wilderness. Across the narrow bench-land, and winding sinuously, away amongst the hills to the westward, ran the line of the Great Salt Lake Trail, a mere thread of dusty grey against the vivid green of the plain, fainter and fainter, and melting from sight into the heart of the unmeasured distances.

Although it was hardly more than an hour past sunrise, already many people had crossed from the Iowa shore; the clear

spaces in the village were dotted with their white-covered waggons, strewn with their belongings, quick with their eager movements as they went about, reconnoitring. The clumsy ferry-barge was in mid-stream, its deck sunk nearly to the water's edge beneath its load of waggons, beasts, and men coming to join those on the Nebraska side. On the trail, near the river, a score of waggons were drawn up in line, headed westward, making ready to begin the long journey across the plains; and as Mark looked, other waggons were crawling slowly in toward this centre from many directions, to take their places in the line.

As Mark walked down and moved about from camp to camp, looking on, his first elation of the morning was oddly tempered by dismay. His own part in the great drama that was acting itself out before his eyes was not yet fixed; strength or weakness, victory or failure—these were as yet no more than words in the unread lines. The enthusiasm of the

home-makers was alien to his present temper. There was no reason why he should think of a home; he must do other things first—make a place for himself in affairs and get on speaking terms with his fate. For two long hours he loitered, seeing no familiar face, the sense of his isolation growing.

Then suddenly he came upon Cannon —big, healthful, red of beard and blood, radiant with the glow of bodily action. He had made camp at the edge of the woods behind the town, by the side of a tiny stream, and had at once given himself a task. Even at this early hour a dozen trees had been felled, the trimmed trunks dragged together, the branches and undergrowth piled high for burning. A canvas-covered prairie waggon, heavily laden, stood near by, and mules were grazing in the thick pasturage beside the rivulet. Cannon, hatless and coatless, his flannel shirt wet with sweat from neck to waist, was swinging his axe with all his vigour against a stalwart elm, scattering

a wide shower of chips; and his wife moved contentedly about the camp, cheery, housewifely, seeming perfectly at home with only the open sky for a roof and the hills for walls.

When the tree fell, Cannon paused for a time, seating himself upon the prostrate trunk, wiping the sweat from his hot face upon the sleeve of his shirt. Then he caught sight of Mark, who stood apart at a little distance.

"Hello, there, Bailey!" he called in hearty, thunderous greeting. "I 've been wondering about you. Where you been? Come over here an' sit down. You ain't hardly made camp anywhere, have you? Well, this one 's yours, till you find something better. Dinner 'll be comin' along, after a while; a young turkey—shot it first thing after I got up here. Say, Molly, this is young Bailey, that I was tellin' you about; him that 's goin' to be with the outfit. Throw in some dinner for him, will you?"

She gave Mark a frank welcome, offer-

ing her hand—a large, firm, strong hand, whose pressure was warm, satisfying. There was a comfortable sort of grace about her, and the promise of an unusual capability—the power to meet serenely and to triumph over the hard facts of practical living. Those were the qualities of the best of the pioneer women of the West. Meeting the kindly glance of her eyes, feeling the kindly touch of her hand, Mark warmed to her instinctively, knowing that he had found a friend.

She spoke a word or two of quiet, hospitable commonplace, then went on with her work, while Mark seated himself at Cannon's side upon the trunk of the fallen tree.

"You 've begun to do things in a hurry," he hinted, as his glance wandered about the little clearing, that had already subtly gathered something of the atmosphere of home.

"This?" Cannon returned, with an inclusive gesture. "Oh, I 'm just killin'

time with this, till we get ready to pull out west. I never was one that could set an' wiggle my thumbs while I 'm waitin'; I 've got to be doin' somethin' busy. There 's a month yet, anyway; an' this 'll pay first-rate. Land 's sure to be worth a heap around here, when things get to goin'. Lemme tell you this, Bailey: the way to stack up a winner out here is to miss no chances. You want to keep your eyes peeled an' busy every minute, an' whenever you see a chance stick its head up, hop onto it, all spraddled out, an' grab hold of it with both hands an' all the teeth you got, an' *hold on.* See? Say, why don't you do like I 'm doin,' an' pick you out a claim? Get a piece o' land, and put up a shack on it, like I 'm doin', an' you 'll feel like you 'd kind o' struck root, this side the river. Here 's this piece right west o' mine, that nobody 's took yet. You could n't do better," he added, with his big, wholesome laugh. "Fine climate, right on the creek, an' good neighbours. What more do you want?

Come on; I 'll show you how to stake it out."

Mark echoed his laugh, but a little doubtfully. "I don't know anything about making a claim," he demurred.

"Well, learn!" Cannon retorted. "That 's what we 're here for. There 's no land-office open yet; but get your stakes drove, an' start to doin' things, like you belonged there, an' nobody 'll bother you. We 've got to respect each other's rights, or the thing won't hang together. Get you an axe out o' my waggon an' come ahead; we 'll cut your stakes up the creek a ways."

Mark followed the giant's impetuous lead, because he could not help it; Cannon's brusque enthusiasm dominated him, making it seem that his own will was turned blunt at the edge and of only minor service. When at noontime he sat down to share the outdoor dinner at Cannon's camp, the stakes were already set that made him a landholder, and the day had gained a new zest. The meal, served

upon the ground in primitive, homely fashion, was prolonged far beyond the time needful, while they talked. Cannon knew no more of the future than did Mark, but there was a quality in his robust will which had almost the force and virtue of prescience.

"There 's everything to do yet," he declared. "There 's towns to build, like this one 'll be, clear from here to the coast, an' freightin' to do, like the scheme we 've started, an' army contracts, for them soldiers out on the plains yonder—everything like that. There 'll be thousands an' thousands of people in the country by next year, soon as they hear what it 's like, an' somebody 's got to feed 'em an' do for 'em. That 's where we win by bein' here first. I should n't wonder if sometime there 'd be a railroad, an' somebody 's got to build it. Somebody 's got to do everything that 's done. Do you see? All you need is to stay awake an' keep your nerve healthy."

While they lingered, Forrester came

sauntering leisurely up to the camp. If the morning had held its doubts or puzzles for him, they had left no mark upon him; his manner was that of an unruffled, amused composure. A change had come to him since the night before; the effects of his whiskey were gone, and the change for the better was very marked.

"Hello, Mark!" he said. "What became of you? When did you come over?"

"Last night," Mark laughed. "I swam."

"Swam!" Forrester echoed, incredulous. "Swam the Missouri—at midnight, and midsummer high water? But I believe you!" He threw himself at his length upon the grass in the grateful shadow of the elms, his arms and legs outstretched, his fine face alight. "My soul! what 's got into all the people?" he cried. "Are you all moonstruck? When I got awake this morning, there sat Frick with his maps—busy. I tried to find Cannon, to loaf with him awhile,

and he 'd been over here for an hour. There was n't a man at the Bluffs that could spare the time to sit down and smoke with me. It 's even worse on this side; everybody 's in a tearing, mad hurry. And now you tell me you swam the river in the middle of the night. For what? What is it you 're all trying to do?"

It was Mrs. Cannon's smooth, comfortable voice that answered.

"Are n't you asking too much, when you ask them to explain? I don't suppose they could. Not many people know what they 're really trying to do."

Forrester turned to her with his frank, engaging smile. "You mean that it 's destiny?" he returned. "Maybe it is; but if it is, destiny 's no friend of mine. I can't understand why destiny must always make folks excited and noisy, instead of letting them be decent and quiet and restful. That 's so much nicer, Mrs. Cannon."

Cannon snorted with impatience.

"Anybody 'd know from that," he growled, "that you ain't struck a lick all morning."

"I have n't struck a lick all morning," Forrester agreed imperturbably. "I 'm not going to strike a lick all afternoon, nor to-morrow, nor the next day. Why should I strike licks? I 'm opposed to striking licks. It overheats the blood, for one thing; and then I might make a miss-lick and knock down something that somebody else would rather not have knocked down. Don't you see?"

Cannon was pulling at his beard and regarding the boy with a puzzled frown. "I wish somebody 'd tell me what made you come to this country," he said.

"And I wish they 'd tell *me*," Forrester retorted. "I don't know. I thought at first it was the chance of getting some more money that brought me, but I know better. I don't want any more money. I did n't come for amusement; I don't like my amusements quite so raw. I guess

I just blew out because the wind was setting this way."

But this inconsequent lightness of mood was put aside a little later, when he and Bailey had separated from Cannon and were walking toward the scene of Mark's afternoon labour. Then Forrester said, in perfect seriousness:

"I wonder if I 'm as much of a fool as I think I am. If that 's so, it 's a desperate case. Mark, I 'd give half of what I 've got if I could find out what 's the matter with me. There 's something wrong. To save my poor soul, I can't get up any enthusiasm about anything. I can't lose myself in anything I do or think. I have n't worn out my emotions; I don't believe I ever had any. I thought it would be different out here, maybe; but it is n't. This thing seems so wonderfully real and worth while to you and Cannon and Frick and all the rest. It does n't to me. I don't care a damn for it, and I wish I had n't come."

Mark regarded his friend curiously,

only half understanding, and wholly unable to sympathise. His own healthy soul knew no such disorder.

"I reckon you 'll find something real enough to think about when we get out on the trail," he hinted.

"Trail!" Forrester echoed with a mild disgust. "I 'm not going west with the outfit. There 's nothing that would hire me to spend months in the middle of that big waste. I 'd lose what little mind I 've got. I 'm going to stay down here, where I can make a pretence of looking after the company's interests along the river, and where I can keep comfortably drunk." He broke off with a short laugh that was quite without mirth. "Drunk!" he repeated. "God bless the man who found out whiskey! Don't look so scared. I tell you, whiskey has floated me through some bad days. It 's given me the only understanding I 've ever had of how I think a man ought to feel. If I can manage to keep just about so much whiskey circulating in me, without letting it die

out, I can almost forget what a farce my life is."

They had reached the spot which Cannon had suggested for the site of the cabin, and while he listened Mark was preparing to begin his work. Forrester took the axe from his hand and swung it awkwardly, until with laborious effort he had felled one of the smaller saplings. Then, hot and short of breath, he let the axe drop.

"I suppose that 's what Cannon calls 'striking a lick,'" he said, with evident distaste. "No, thank you; that 's enough for me."

He lay down again upon the grass, made himself lazily comfortable, and fell easily asleep, while Mark set to his task with vigour. He was almost a stranger to the ways of woodcraft, and inexpert with his tools; but his bodily strength was great, and he found an unsuspected satisfaction in the new use of that strength toward a definite end. His future might be uncertain, but this day amply sufficed

unto itself. When Forrester awoke, at the end of the afternoon, he saw a goodly pile of logs, trimmed and hewn for building.

"Have you done all that, while I 've been asleep?" Forrester queried. "And you 've enjoyed it too, I suppose? Oh, it 's no use, Mark, I 've got in clear beyond my depth. I don't belong here."

They ate their supper at Cannon's camp, and afterward, though bodily weariness weighed heavily upon Mark, he walked with Forrester down to the teeming centre of the new town, where the people were relaxing a little after the tension of the day. Fires were shining here and there, and folk were gathered about them, talking, laughing, singing, meeting with one another on terms of a fine, free intimacy. There was a dauntless optimism upon them; the atmosphere was that of a holiday, rather than a day of grave portent. They knew well enough that their ways were to be hard, yet they faced the knowledge with an

exultant courage. Watching their faces, catching stray scraps of their talk, touching elbows, as it were, with their indomitable spirit, he felt for them a strong and abiding kinship.

He and Forrester did not offer to join any of the groups, though a welcome awaited them everywhere, but were content with the part of onlookers, passing slowly onward toward the river front, where the newer arrivals were gathered, making such shift as they could to meet the oncoming night. There Mark halted suddenly, and his heart quickened its beat; for his eyes were resting upon the face of the woman he had seen asleep, the night before, on the Iowa shore—the face which had hovered over him, a new constellation, as he lay in his own bed under the trees.

She was walking slowly back and forth beside the camp-fire, carrying in her arms a fretful child, crooning a soft lullaby, trying to hush the babe to sleep. About her was the disorder of a new-made camp;

cooking utensils were scattered near the fire, with the remains of the recent supper. Save for the little creature held against her breast, the girl was alone.

Each time she passed the fire there was a brief moment when her fair face was touched and illumined by the ruddy glow, thrown into relief like an exquisite cameo against the background of darkness. Mark stood for a little time, his hand upon Forrester's arm to detain him, his eyes intent upon her, waiting eagerly, impatiently, for each next succeeding instant's revelation of her gentle sweetness; and as he watched, again his thoughts were suffused with tenderness.

"Wait a minute, Jack," he said, after a time, and stepped quietly to her side. "You have more than your share," he said softly. "Let me take the baby; I can quiet him."

She turned to face him, a little startled, raising her beautiful, calm eyes to his. "It 's the way, out here, to help each other," he went on, trying to be very mat-

ter-of-fact; but in the very next breath his feeling was not so well restrained. "You don't know me; but I feel almost as though we were acquainted. I saw you, last night, over at the Bluffs, and I wondered if I should ever see you again."

Her glance fell at that, and a sudden warm flush of embarrassment came to her cheeks. But she did not resist when he put out his strong arms for the child. The downy little head fell at once against his broad shoulder, and the fretful cry ceased with a long sigh. The girl's momentary air of confusion passed, and she smiled with frank relief as she put up her small hands to brush back from her forehead the curling masses of her gold-brown hair.

"I was n't afraid of you," she said, her smile persisting, her voice soft and rich and tranquil. "I 'm not yet used to your goodness, here in the new country; that 's all. There *is* such a lot to do!" she added, with a half-hopeless glance around the confusion of the camp. "The

baby's mother went with her husband, after supper, to look about a little and get ready for to-morrow, and my brother has n't come over the river yet."

"Your brother?" Mark echoed; and there came to his memory the image of the dark-browed, sinister face of the man who had applied to Cannon for work the night before, at the Boltwood store. He had said something about his sister. "Tell me, is your name Braidlaw?" Mark asked abruptly.

"Yes," the girl answered, a note of surprise in her voice.

"And you 're going to California?"

"Yes," she said again, her eyes searching his face, a little mystified; then, with a manner that was an unabashed challenge to friendliness: "Why, you know ever so much more about me than I do about you."

He was not skilful at fence. "My name is Mark Bailey," he told her directly. "I 'm one of the new ones—I only got here yesterday. I saw your bro-

ther last night, over yonder. That 's how I knew your name and where you 're going. It 's a long way."

"Yes," she answered, and stood looking pensively toward the line of the low-lying hills, vaguely defined against the western sky. "A long way," she said, after a moment. "It makes me almost afraid, it 's so big and so lonely—' a weary land ': do you remember? I wonder if we shall find ' the shadow of a great rock ' there."

Her emotion was strong upon her. She turned abruptly away toward the fire and began to busy herself with the scattered supper things. Mark had forgotten Forrester for the time; but now the boy strolled up to the fire, his hands deep in his pockets, his face alight with its amused, half-cynical smile.

"You 've found a use for yourself, Mark, as usual," he said. "And I 'm the bystander—as usual, too. I 'm worn out with being merely decorative all day. I think I 'll go over the river and go to bed. Good-night."

He had spoken as though to Mark alone, yet there was something indefinable in the manner of the speech which made it include the girl. At the last he withdrew his hands from his pockets and bared his head, then turned to face her directly for an instant, with a slow inclination of his lithe young body, his fine eyes meeting hers and holding them as he passed. In another man the action would have been formal, constrained; in him it seemed no more than a natural and gentle deference, which her very presence compelled. She acknowledged it with a grave, calm grace, and Mark saw that her glance followed him with an inquiring interest as he loitered lazily away toward the river.

The babe was sleeping soundly in Mark's arms. "You can put him down now," the girl said; and Mark laid the little body in its nest of blankets within the shelter of the waggon. She bent and touched the flushed cheek gently with her lips.

"His mother has been good to me," she said. "We came with these people from Illinois; but they will stay here, and we must find some other way to go on. We have n't found it yet; but we shall."

A hundred questions were crowding to Mark's lips, but before one of them was spoken Braidlaw came to the camp. As on the preceding night, when Mark had first seen him, there was that in the man's heavy, sensual face which forbade liking —not traces of past evil, but signs of capacity for evil. The feeling did not wholly pass when Braidlaw met his sister with a smile which curiously softened the gross lines. Before he took account of Mark's presence, he answered her unspoken but evident anxiety.

"Not yet, Dorothy; but don't let it worry you. I 'm sure to find something with all this travel."

There was a brief interval of silence, while the girl seemed to be waiting for some sign of that acquaintance between the two men of which Mark had spoken.

After a moment Mark offered Braidlaw his hand.

"My name 's Bailey," he said. "I belong to the Forrester outfit. You were talking to us last night at Council Bluffs about going west."

Braidlaw's smile was gone, and his black eyes were fixed upon Mark with their habitual hard, disconcerting stare.

"I remember," he said dully. "You would n't give me what I wanted."

"It was n't so bad as that, was it?" Mark laughed. "We 're not ready yet, that 's all. I 'm only one of the smaller partners; but if you 're still here when we take the trail I think we may fix it. We 'll need a lot of men."

"I hope so," Braidlaw answered, quite without feeling, and Mark turned to the girl with a grateful sense of relief.

"I must go now," he said; then, with sudden daring: "I 'm not going to wonder about it this time; I know we 'll meet again."

They were big, hardy, brave days that followed; days tense with purpose, quick with activity. Much was to be done, and at first thought the means seemed poor. Government by rule and statute in the new land was still far ahead—an end to be attained some time, when bigger things were out of the way. For the present, better than any code of laws was the stanch spirit of a people firmly bound together by the cords of common interest, common dependence, and common honour. Had there been time to doubt, the doubters might well have been alarmed for the safety of a society whose only tie was the native integrity of the race; but all were busy with other things than fear, and so the fabric held, strong, effectual. Rude honesty was practised; rude justice was done; and that was enough. If any hungered, he was fed; if any mourned, he was comforted; no man was permitted to feel himself a stranger. Those were the best days the West has ever known.

Mark threw himself heart and soul into

his new life. Day by day his confidence grew, as it was fed by definite accomplishment. Log by log the walls of his cabin were rising, and his tiny clearing was becoming an orderly nook in the wide chaos. Often he would forsake this labour of his own to give aid to Frick, upon whom, as by common consent, the details of the freighting enterprise rested. All was going well, Frick declared, and the waggons would be westward bound by the beginning of September.

Through these golden days Forrester was Mark's constant companion. In no degree was his own indolent indifference stirred by what he saw going forward; it was his need for friendship, more than any interest in their concerns, which attached him to Mark.

"I 'm watching the show, that 's all," he said once. "I 've watched lots of others, and I know this one 's no more real than those; but the acting 's pretty good, and I guess I 'm getting my money's worth."

So while Mark worked he loitered somewhere near, sleeping on the grass or filling the intervals of labour with his inconsequent talk.

Desire first, and then desire strengthened by habit, took Mark for a little time each evening to the camp where Dorothy Braidlaw was; and those brief meetings seemed to round the days to completeness. Beyond that, he could not have told his feeling for her if he would. He did not try, even to himself; with such as he, self-scrutiny is rare. All he knew was that each night when he went to her he was given some new token of her sweetness and strength and courage, over which he might brood tenderly, happily, through the robust hours of the succeeding day, while he laboured with axe and maul, growing impatient for the day to end and bring their next meeting. To a man of his make, love does not come by taking thought; it was to come to him in the fulness of time, as an awakening—as a sudden, sweet surprise of the soul, when it

had woven itself into every fibre of his life and youth. And while the mystery of love was working itself out, by those rules which no man knows, every new disclosure she gave him was a new delight, every thought of her a profound joy.

Quite as a matter of course Forrester was Mark's companion when these meetings began, but his own part in them seemed slight. He was not often a sharer in the intimate evening talk of the camp; he was for the most part content to sit lazily at his ease by the fire, smoking in silence—listening, perhaps, though he gave no sign.

Then one night toward mid-August the two sat before the door of Mark's cabin. The glory of summer moonlight was about them, the warm air astir with murmurous life. A long silence had fallen between the friends, while Forrester pulled fitfully at his pipe and Mark's eyes were fixed upon a tiny spot of light amongst the camp-fires in the valley below, marking the place where his thoughts

were. Often during the days, when he rested from his work, he had searched out that camp from his hillside; often he had watched its fire shine out in the first dusk of evening, until he knew its place amongst the others by heart. By and by he spoke suddenly and without warning:

"Jack, she's wonderful!"

Forrester stirred ever so slightly on his bench and his pipe glowed with his quickened breathing, but his silence was unbroken. It was as though his pipe and not himself had heard. While he waited for an answer, Mark speedily lost himself again in the mazes of his musings, and forgot that he had spoken. Soon Forrester arose and went in to bed without a word. Mark forgot the incident too, completely; but thereafter Forrester was less of an attendant shadow at his evening meetings with Dorothy. It would have been hard to tell that the change was deliberate. He was helping Frick, he said. Only now and then did he appear at the camp.

The relation between Mark and Braidlaw in those days was of a nameless sort, wearing the outward look of friendliness, fair-spoken and smooth-going, yet, as both knew, a sham—an intimate aversion. They had nothing in common. Mark was willing enough to like the fellow; he was even persistently watchful for signs that would justify liking; but the signs were wanting. After a time, with a show of reluctance, Braidlaw had told something of his circumstances. He was almost penniless. Still with seeming reluctance he had accepted a small amount of money which Mark offered to lend him; and after that beginning he came twice of his own accord to borrow more.

On the last of these days he appeared at Mark's cabin, late at night, frenzied with whiskey.

"You 've got to let me sleep here," he told Mark, shaken with drunken fear. "Dorothy must n't see me like this, or there 'd be hell to pay. She 's taking me out there to California to reform me.

Wants me to be good! Me! Understand? Wants to get me away from all my friends. She don't know I 'm drunk. I told her I would n't. Understand? If you tell her, I 'll kill you."

He threw himself upon the earthen floor and fell into a sodden sleep. When Mark went to his own bed, an hour afterward, he still lay in a heavy stupour, his gross face purple and bloated. Mark's masked dislike became profound loathing, and he touched the insensate body with his booted foot.

"You damned brute," he muttered.

When he awoke, in the early dawn, Braidlaw's place in the corner was vacant, nor was he anywhere about. Mark began to dress hurriedly, to go in search of him; then stopped suddenly as he turned back the corner of his blanket, where, according to habit, he had concealed his pistol and knife and the oilskin bag that held his money. They were not there.

Certainty of the truth flashed upon him, chilling heart and mind. Slowly, me-

thodically, he liftcd and shook out his blankets, one by one, folding them up and laying them in their accustomed pile. The search was unavailing; his money was gone with Braidlaw.

III

ON THE GREAT TRAIL

MARK hurried down the hill toward the town, dull anger possessing him, excluding every other feeling. He had no thought but that the theft was merely a drunken act, and that Braidlaw would be somewhere about, squandering the money in further debauchery.

But this belief was quickly dispelled. A little way below his cabin he came upon Cannon, carrying a lariat and moving aimlessly through the trees and thick undergrowths.

"Hello," Cannon growled in gruff greeting. "You 're out early. Say, you ain't seen a loose horse up your way —that big black I bought to ride west? He 's gone, and I can't find him. Looks bad to me. The rope was plumb new,

and it looks like it had been cut. Besides, I found this in the grass by the creek." And he showed Mark's missing knife.

Full conviction of what had happened came to Mark then, and hot words rose to his lips; but he choked them back with an effort. There would be plenty of time later for talking to Cannon.

"No," he said simply, "I have n't seen any horse. I 'll come back, after a while, and help you look." With a muttered oath Cannon turned to continue his search, and Mark went on his way toward the town.

His mind was blank of all plan as to what he should do, beyond an unreasoning impulse to go first of all to Dorothy. After the first sharp shock of realisation, the thought of his own loss had given place to thought of her. If it was true that Braidlaw had fled, while the madness of drink was upon him, Mark had no doubt that he had gone alone.

At the camp only Dorothy was astir, beginning the preparation of breakfast.

She saw Mark while he was still at a little distance, and she dropped her work, waiting until he stood before her. A deep pallor was upon her cheeks, and her eyes were heavy with anxiety, which grew into fear as her glance searched his face. Before a word was spoken she was trembling. Mark knew that he would have a bad time of it, though he tried to be merely matter-of-fact.

"I 've been looking for your brother," he said. "Is he here?"

She shook her head, her clear eyes intent upon him. In spite of himself, his own eyes avoided the meeting.

"What is it?" she asked, very quietly.

"Nothing," he returned. "I 'd been talking to him—about work. I wanted to see him."

"No," she said gently; "it is n't that. You must tell me."

He knew then that he had failed utterly, wretchedly. He would have given much just then for a little skill at lying; but he

had none, and he hesitated awkwardly, his wits groping.

"You need n't be afraid to tell me," she said, still with calm control. "I must know. The kindest thing you can do is to tell me the truth. He has been drinking—is that it? Ah, it 's more than that! Tell me."

She faced him resolutely, laying her hand upon his arm, compelling him. From the bottom of his soul he pitied her and wanted to be gentle, but his answer was brutally blunt.

"I 'm afraid he 's gone."

"Gone?" she breathed. "Do you mean that he 's dead?"

"No: I mean that he 's run away." Though he knew that his every word was cruel as a blow, he told her the bare, hard facts, concealing nothing—feeling that, once he had begun, concealment was useless, impossible.

From first to last she listened in perfect silence, her hands clasped before her, her eyes holding his steadfastly, only the

deathlike whiteness of her face betraying her agony. When there was no more to be told, she bowed her head abjectly, and her slight body was shaken by the stress of a long, sobbing sigh.

"How could he!" she whispered, "oh, how could he!"

Tears were shining upon her cheeks. Mark took her small, cold hands, holding them fast in his strong clasp; then, with profound compassion, heedless of everything but her need to be comforted, he drew her to him, and she hid her face upon his shoulder.

"I was so sure of him, this time," she sobbed. After a moment she drew away from him, commanding herself bravely.

"Oh, I hoped it would be different," she said, with infinite sorrow. "No one here knows; but I must tell you now. He has been like this all his life. Right and wrong have never meant anything to him, except when he had to face punishment. He did a dreadful thing—as bad as this—back there where our home was. We

had to give up everything we had to make it right. We could n't stay there, after that, and I begged him to go with me to some new place, as far as we could get from everybody and everything, where life itself would be new, and where he could begin again. He was willing to come, too; I thought he was honestly ashamed, and I hoped——"

He felt himself powerless before her great grief, and he did not try to console her.

"What can we do?" he asked simply.

She did not hesitate. "Oh, I must find him!" she cried. "There is nothing else to do. I can't let him go. I must find him, and you must be my friend and help me." Sudden recollection came to her then, and a wave of vivid colour swept her face. "But he took all you had," she said sadly. "You are as poor as I now."

"Don't" he begged. "You must n't think of that. Do you think that matters, beside the other? If you really want me for your friend, you must n't talk of

that part any more. You 've got to promise."

She looked at him long and earnestly, the soft colour mounting again; then gave him her hand with an impulsive gesture.

"You are very good to me," she breathed.

He would not let her hand go, but kept it in his own, sheltering it.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "We 'll find him. You must make yourself believe that. There 'll be some way. I must go now, but I 'll be back again, by and by. I 'll have to tell some of the men what's happened—the men I 'm with, you know."

"Yes, of course," she agreed quietly, and with that he left her, returning up the hill to Cannon.

The giant was still bent upon his search for the missing horse, floundering through the tangled thickets, wet with sweat, talking sturdily to himself.

"You can quit your hunting," Mark

said. "You won't find the horse here. Braidlaw stole him."

Cannon stood erect, towering, red and hot with sudden rage.

"Braidlaw!" he thundered. "So Braidlaw stole him, did he? How do you know?"

Mark told how he knew, going straight to the point, without waste of words, while Cannon listened with grim attention, his hair and beard seeming to bristle with feeling as his understanding laid hold of the facts. Mark expected a passionate outburst of wrath; but at the last Cannon sat down wearily upon a fallen log, nursing his huge knees between his great arms, meditating heavily upon the news.

"Here to-day, an' gone to-morrow!" he said finally, with childlike mildness; then, with the threat of gathering laughter in his deep voice: "My Lord, Bailey, but it seems good to have things turn out the way you expect 'em to, don't it?" With that his laughter burst in a vibrant bellow that shook the woods.

"I wish you 'd tell me whom the joke 's on," Mark said, when the eruption was dying away in the hairy throat. "I can't see it, and I need a good laugh right now."

"Why, you 're busted!" Cannon shouted, pounding his knee with his massive fist. "You 're busted! You ain 't got a cent. If you want even one little drink o' whiskey, you got to wait till somebody asks you. That 's what tickles me." He was quickly sobered as another phase of the matter struck him: "How about the girl? I reckon she 's busted too. What 's she goin' to do?"

"She says she 's going to find her brother," Mark told him.

"Yes, I expect," Cannon drawled. "Of course! That 's the everlastin' woman of it. Don't it make you sick? Now, what the devil does she want to find *him* for? Why don't she keep away from him an' let him alone till he turns up nice an' dead an' ready to be took back to the family graveyard? That 's what I 'd do

with him, by God! But that ain't what I meant. What 's she goin' to do right now? She can't be let be this way. You better go get her an' fetch her up here where my widder is. Or wait: we 'll go an' send the widder down to her. It takes a woman, these times. Come on; let 's see what she says."

Mrs. Cannon was growing fretful over the delayed breakfast, which was keeping hot about the open fire, awaiting Cannon's return from his horse-hunt. He hailed her gleefully:

"Look here, Molly, what I 've brought you to feed. Nothin' in the house to eat, an' nothin' to buy it with. Half-starved, an' too proud to beg. Don't be scared of him; he 's one o' these here poor but honest kind." Another attack of mirth was threatening, but the sight and scent of the waiting breakfast cut it off, and he threw himself down cross-legged upon the ground. "Here 's your place, Mark. Don't hang back. Talkin' an' eatin' always go mighty well together, if you

want to talk when you 're hungry. Help yourself."

Between times, while he attended to his lusty appetite, he gave the sorry story to his wife. She listened placidly, seemingly unperturbed, though Mark was sure of her generous sympathy.

"Poor child!" she said. "Of course I 'll go. Why, Joe, she must go west with us."

"West?" Cannon echoed. "What for? To hunt for him, you mean? He did n't go west—if he had any sense, he did n't. He 'd know he can't lose himself out on the big trail. What he 's done, if he had any sense left, was most likely to cut for some o' them towns down the river, in Kansas or Missouri, where he can stay hid." He brooded upon the matter for a moment, over his pint of coffee. "West," he repeated with a grin. "I don't know but that 's a pretty good notion, after all. We don't want her to find him, do we? The best we can do for her is to keep her lookin' in all the

unlikely places, till he 's had time to sink himself in deep water somewheres. It won't take him long. The trip west 'll be interestin' an' good for her health, too. You go talk to her, Molly."

She went at once. On the way she encountered Forrester, sauntering leisurely up the hill to his day's loafing in Mark's company. To him she told what had befallen, and their plan for Dorothy. He heard her through gravely and in silence.

"Of course," he said then, with unruffled composure. "It 's the only thing to do. It was like you to think of it." He hesitated, awkward, abashed, flushing with boyish embarrassment. "But you must let me come in on this too," he said lightly, and his lazy hand was outstretched with a crumpled roll of bills. "I know it 's no real help, of the kind she needs; but it may come handy. I can't go to her with it; she would n't let me, would she? Folks are so unreasonable over a little wad of money. But you can take it for her. You need n't give it to her

now, but you can keep it tucked away somewhere, for emergency, and not let her know."

Her placid eyes were moist, and she took his hand between her comfortable palms with a sympathetic pressure.

"You are a good man," she said warmly.

His flush deepened to scarlet, but he would not let voice or manner betray him. "Wait, wait!" he cried gaily. "That line is n't in the play. If you begin to talk like that, I 'll make you give it back. What you must say is, 'I 'll keep your secret with my life'—something like that, you know. Seriously, though, Mrs. Cannon, my eyesight 's poor and my [illegible]ent 's bad when it comes to helping [illegible]dy in distress. If you see that I [illegible]oe of any use, pass me the word on the quiet, will you?"

With that he went on his way, his hat tipped far to the back of his head, his hands deep in his pockets, the smoke of his pipe rising in a tranquil cloud.

For once he found Mark idle, sitting disconsolate on the bench beside his cabin door.

"I hoped you 'd come," Mark said. "I 've got to talk to you."

"Listen a minute, first," Forrester interposed. "You can skip the harrowing part. I know it already. I ran against Mrs. Cannon down below, and she told me." He let himself easily down to his favourite seat upon the grass, carefully refilled his pipe and got it well aglow, making himself quite comfortable.

"Well, here I am," Mark said grimly. "I 'm mighty glad I came. This is a lot better than Ohio."

Forrester made an inarticulate sound over his pipestem; his eyes were shi ing with amusement.

"What 's my part?" he asked. "I suppose I 'm expected to tell you how sorry I am that you 've got to pull out of this freighting proposition."

Mark refused to join in his levity. "What else can I do," he demanded,

"unless they 'll give me work with the waggons?"

Forrester spat with a grimace of distaste. "Don't feel obliged to be an ass, just because it becomes natural and easy to you," he said shortly. "This is no time for any of your mock-heroics. Let me tell you right now that you 're going to stay in the combination, and you 're going to let me lend you the money for it. You can't afford to pass it up. The chance won't come again."

Mark answered with a short, harsh laugh. This was just what he had expected and half feared. "I 'm not taking charity," he said bluntly.

"Damn charity!" Forrester retorted in hot impatience. "You fool! You poor, peevish fool!" But he seemed unequal to the strain of sustained feeling, and his voice quickly fell to its wonted level. "It 's not charity; it 's plain business. I 've got the money free, and you can pay me whatever interest they get in this ravenous country, if you 're

bound that friendship sha'n't bear so much of the debt. Why, look here!" Listlessly, almost aimlessly, he began feeling through his pockets and beneath his wide belt, laying upon the grass before him a little mound of bills and gold coin. He drew back from it, touching it impatiently with his boot. "I 'm rank with it. I can't use it all. Whatever virtue there is in it is going to waste. Damn it all, Mark, that stuff has always kept between my friends and me. They shy off from it as if it were carrion. I wish you 'd tell me why it is that you 'll take everything else I can give you—things that cost me a lot more—but won't take a few scraps of dirty paper that happens to have a little cheap job-printing on it. Besides, Mark they 're going to need you. Frick 's been counting on you for a sort of second waggon-boss, under Cannon. The ll be ready to start by the middle of week, and it 's too late now to pick up another man, even to take the place of such an idiot as

you are. But you have n't got a patent on idiocy."

He struck a match upon his boot-heel and sat watching the tiny flame kindle.

"You 'll take this stuff," he said with grave calm, "or you 'll watch it burn." He set the match-flame against the end of one of the tattered bills, then drew back, looking on unmoved while the edge of the paper blackened and curled.

Mark set his foot upon the blaze and crushed it out.

"No, I 've got no patent on idiocy," he said. "I reckon you 've got me where I can't help myself. But I hate to begin so—in debt, and under obligation, ever to you."

"Pshaw!" Forrester scoffed. "You can pay it back twice over, after this trip. We can't keep from making money. That man Frick 's a wonder. Our boat got in from St. Louis last night, and he 'll set the men to work on the loading to-day, likely. He wants you at the Bluffs

in the morning to help. We 'll fix up this deal of ours then."

Late in the afternoon a freighters' train drew into town over the westward trail, and eagerly Mark sought news of Braidlaw. He had stopped for breakfast in the early morning at the freighters' camp, twenty-five miles out, hurrying on again, so soon as breakfast was eaten, telling nothing of his destination or purpose.

"All right," Cannon said, when he had heard. "He 's turned the trump. Now let 's see how much he knows about the game."

With the dawn of the next day began Mark's work with the men of the new train; and it was work for men, that made his labour of the preceding days seem no more than a play-spell. The twenty-six waggons of the train, huge of body, broad of tire, seeming wholly fit for what was ahead, were drawn up in order along the river front, ready to receive their cargo as it was discharged

from the boat's hold; and through the hours of the long days the labourers—two score strong, a mighty crew—toiled straining and sweating and swearing at their tasks, piling and lashing upon the waggons the great boxes, bales, and crates of wares destined for the farther places on the trail beyond the plains, a two-or-three months' journey away.

It seemed such toil as the gods knew when the world was making; toil of a primal vigour and full of a primal pain and a primal joy. By mid-morning of the first day Mark's long, firm muscles seemed ready to tear away from the bones, quivering with utter exhaustion, his deep lungs gasping, and his strong heart near to bursting with the rush of his blood.

Now and then, when the chance came, at rare moments, when the work halted, he would fall at his length within the shadow of a pile of freight or in the full glow of the ardent sunlight, lying with arms and legs outstretched, motionless,

feeling that his strength had been spent to the very uttermost; yet rising to his task again, when the word came, with mind and body flooded with the unabatable vigour of his splendid youth and health.

Once Cannon came to him, reeking wet, the back of his scarlet shirt torn away to the waist, the flesh of his great shoulder crushed and bleeding.

"Here, Bailey," he said, with a sort of lusty savagery in his deep voice, "fix this up for me, will you? One o' them boxes slipped." Then, when Mark touched the edges of the ragged wound gently: "No, no; not my shoulder—my shirt! My shoulder 'll grow up, but my shirt won't. Makes me feel plumb naked. Take a piece o' string, or a splinter, or somethin', an' kind o' hitch it up somehow, till I can get home to the widder."

While Mark did as he was bidden, the giant breathed a deep sigh of profound weariness. "Lord, but this is work! Just look at them boys go at it. Makes

me grunt to watch 'em. But Frick says we 've got to be ready to start by sun-up next Wednesday. He talks as if he knows. But six days! I don't believe it. It can't be did. Have you seen Frick? Not a drop o' sweat on him. I don't believe he 's human enough to sweat. He must be some kind of a devil."

As the sturdy days passed, Frick's word seemed more and more likely to be made good. Toward the last, when daylight was not enough, torches were brought and set up, and by their yellow flare the crew laboured on, a piece of living mechanism.

At midnight on Tuesday Frick walked up and down the line of waggons with a torch-bearer, critically scanning the loads and the skilful knotting of the thick ropes that bound them in place while the men stood back triumphant.

"A good job, boys," Frick said coolly. "There 's whiskey and supper at the Boltwood place, waiting for you. But

don't overdo it. I want every waggon-man in his place at sunrise."

And at sunrise the train got under way, the laden waggons crossing in detachments by the ferry to the Nebraska side, to be marshalled there for a last inspection. The draught animals were oxen—superb, sturdy beasts, made for hardship; and with the train was a little band of horses for such need as might befall. Frick, who was to captain the train, rode quietly from waggon to waggon, with a final word here and there to the men; then the giant Cannon, standing by the lead team, gave a mighty shout, half an order to his beasts and half a defiant challenge to Fate; the long lash of his braided whip leaped forward over the backs of his oxen, and the great creatures settled their massive shoulders straining against the yokes. What was to come thenceforward would come.

As the line crept westward through the town, other waggons fell into the rear—emigrant parties that had been awaiting

this chance to join with some large train for common safety against the unknown perils of the long journey. There were a score of these, variously laden and variously bound, making in all a strong company—strong in numbers and strong in those undefined qualities that were to give form and character to the new land.

When the train came to the foot of the first hill-slope and began the slow ascent, Mark glanced back from his place, taking in the long perspective of the line. At the head of the emigrant division was Cannon's own waggon; upon the seat, under the arch of the canvas, sat Cannon's wife, and by her side was Dorothy Braidlaw.

At the summit of the chain of bluffs Mark paused, standing for a time with head bared to the warm wind, possessed by a sort of awe that had no tinge of fear. He was taking leave of the past, welcoming the future, that held—God knew what of good and evil, of gain or loss.

Omaha lay below, close to the water's

edge, a cluster of dusky specks in a wide expanse of living green. Beyond, stretching its sinuous length for miles through the heart of the valley, lay the mighty Missouri, beautiful and shining in the sunlight; and farther still, ten miles away, swelled the low line of the Iowa hills—full breasts of the great, good Mother Earth. The valley forest ended where he stood, and to the westward opened illimitable miles of billowy prairie; treeless save where here and there a threadlike line of cottonwoods marked the course of a tiny streamlet; trackless save for the gray zigzag of the trail; empty of all that had made the life he had known. From rim to rim of the horizon the deep dome of the sky was immaculate. The wide, unconquered wildness of the prospect entered his very soul, making him one with it. Before him lay his portion. He laughed aloud, exultingly, as he urged his oxen again into motion.

For Dorothy, too, the moment was like a crisis. As their waggons topped the bluff

and her eyes swept the broad, waste miles, she drew nearer to Mrs. Cannon's side, shrinking.

"It frightens me!" she whispered.

The older woman's motherly arm was about her, the motherly cheek pressed against her fair hair. "You dear child!" the motherly lips murmured.

"You are n't afraid?" Dorothy questioned.

The rich answering laugh was very comforting. "Afraid? No! I wanted to come with Joe. The women will help make the new country, and I wanted to see what it 's like. You must n't let yourself be afraid, deary."

"'The shadow of a great rock in a a weary land,'" Dorothy said softly. "That 's been haunting me ever since we came here. I never knew what it meant before."

Forrester rode up beside the waggon, his broad hat swinging at his side, the wind lifting the thick brown hair from about his smooth forehead. He had whimsi-

cally refused to bid farewell to the party in the town; good-byes were too discomposing; he would ride out upon the trail for a little way, until he saw the train fairly started, and then slip away without harrowing emotion. He sat his horse with the easy indolence that seemed inseparable from him, and his eyes were merry.

"Do you know what this crowd makes me think of?" he cried gaily: "The children of Israel going up out of Egypt. Only I don't seem to see old Mister Moses. Your husband's beard is n't the right colour, Mrs. Cannon; and Frick could n't pass for a patriarch in a blind asylum."

Dorothy spoke with a kindred caprice: "But we have plenty of Aarons."

His glance sought her face and lingered there for a little time; only for a moment, yet in that moment a hand's-breath of shadow fell upon his levity, then passed—so quickly that only Mrs. Cannon knew that it had come and gone.

"A right good bunch of Aarons," he returned. "And they 're a lot safer to travel with—steady, and sober, and sure-going, and willing to bear the curse of things."

"Oh, I think Moses was splendid!" the girl challenged.

"Splendid!" he echoed. "Yes, that was his chief trouble. It must have made him a mighty uncomfortable chap to live with. No; when it comes right down to hard living, give me an Aaron for a bunk-mate,—one of the healthy sort, that see things right side up. Poor, splendid Moses would have got his picnic party all balled up if he had n't had Aaron along to keep him straightened out."

He tightened his rein and straightened his posture in the saddle. "I must talk to that boy Mark a minute," he said, and rode forward along the line, carrying himself with the grace of a born horseman; the eyes of the women following him.

"There 's a true man, my deary," Mrs. Cannon said softly.

The girl did not answer at once. "Yes," she said thoughtfully, by and by. "Yes, I think he is. He's the kind of man I would want to have for my friend."

Mrs. Cannon's placid brows were lifted, ever so slightly, and a faint smile hovered about the corners of her lips; but she was content with silence.

Forrester drew rein again at Mark's side, where the man walked by his ox-team, patiently drilling himself in the use of the braided whip.

"All the big and little gods are smiling on us, Mark," the boy cried happily. "Lord! but it looks fine, doesn't it? Seeing the procession start gave me the first real thrill I've had since I put on long breeches. I wish—my poor soul! I wish I had nerve enough to go on with you. More than a thousand miles afoot!"

A new assurance sounded in Mark's voice. "This is where I seem to belong, Jack. I've been waiting for this."

"I believe you!" He sat drooping

forward in his saddle, looking away to the far line of the level horizon. "No!" he said presently. "I reckon I 'd better toddle back. The thrill would most likely die down in me, out there in the middle of the desert somewhere, and then where would I be? I 'm afraid the kind of feeling that carries a man through deserts does n't come in thrills. I 'll stay with you till dinner time, and then I 'll go back."

Their talk was of an aimless, haphazard sort, while the boy rode by his friend's side, keeping his horse checked to a slow walk, timed to the pace of the train. Sometimes it touched upon intimate things in the deeper places of their lives; and again it would drift lightly in the shallows. The mellow warmth of the sunlit summer day lulled them into the serenity of mere living and breathing.

The laden train seemed only to crawl along the trail, like a huge, overfed reptile made drowsy by the increasing heat of the oncoming noon; the heavy, plodding

feet of the oxen lifting and falling, lifting and falling in slow, stolid, changeless rhythm, their great heads bent low, their great bodies swaying with a cumbrous motion as they dragged at their yokes. Now and again Mark felt it a real hardship to match their steps with h[illegible] while his desire leaped far ahead; yet [illegible] week after week, month after month, must keep that pace, across desert wastes and through mountain fastnesses—brave discipline for impatience.

But the plodding steps fell surely, inevitably; slow minute followed slow minute, and the morning passed. Toward noontime the train crept down into the little valley of the Papillion, and there a halt was made for dinner. Forrester still kept at Mark's side, and together they would have taken their places in the general mess provided for the men; but Cannon willed otherwise.

"You youngsters come along with me," he ordered brusquely, and led them to a nook in the grass-grown elm grove,

where Mrs. Cannon and Dorothy were setting out their meal at the water's edge; and there they took their nooning.

Their talk had no deep meaning; it was all of happy, light-tempered nothings. The morning had wrought powerfully upon Mark and Cannon, giving them a sort of foretaste of triumph that was yet free of the weariness and disillusion of triumph. Upon Forrester too it had wrought curiously, though so differently. The mood of a man was hardly his; there was upon him rather the buoyant quality of that first time in untroubled youth when the heart's outlook is wide and cloudless, and when the mind has no doubting questions to ask of life, finding it wholly good. His habitual indifference was put aside; his happiness was sincere to the hour's end.

His place was across from Dorothy, where she sat resting against the shaggy gray trunk of an elm. She took but small part in the wordy trifling over the dinner, and the boy seemed subtly glad

to have it so. His badinage was with the others, yet his eyes were upon her, watching the delicate play of the lights and shades of feeling as she listened.

The camp was astir again, and Forrester rose from his place with something of the air of waking to consciousness.

"Here's where I quit you," he said. "I'm sorry. I think I'll go hunt a hole somewhere and crawl into it till you get back. I'm going to miss you a lot. Tell me good-bye now, quick, and let me go."

He gave his hand with a sort of eager haste to the men and to Mrs. Cannon and at last to Dorothy.

"Good luck!" he said quietly, simply, and kept her hand in his with a firm, detaining pressure, his eyes, their gay light dying away, lingering upon hers until her cheeks were suffused with the flush of a shy confusion. "Good luck!" he said again, and let her go, turning away to where his horse was tethered, grazing.

As the train got under way, he sat in his saddle at the side of the trail, looking

on, calling a laughing farewell to each in turn as they passed him. When the last waggon had gone by, still he sat, looking after them. Where the descent of the next hill-slope began, Mark looked back and saw that he had not stirred.

A half-hour passed. Then, from off to one side of the trail, a shout came faintly; and when Mark looked, there was Forrester, riding at a mad gallop down from one of the bolder crests. When he drew rein again at Mark's side, his face was beaming.

"You thought you were rid of me, did n't you?" he laughed. "Well, you 're not. I 'm going along."

IV

THE WAY OF A MAN

THE first night's camp-ground was found at sunset in a wide, grassy vale between sheltering hills, where a rain-made pool gave water for the beasts. The waggons were drawn compactly together, and the oxen were freed and turned adrift to graze, under the care of herders, still bearing the heavy yokes that bound them to their mates. Bright fires leaped out amongst the gathering shadows, and the warm air was laden with the odours of supper. The rigour of the day was abated.

Against Cannon's urgent insistence, Mark ate his supper with the waggon-men eager to get upon terms with those who were to be his companions through the long months. They were a fine lot,

abounding in fresh animal vitality, that found free expression in this hour of relaxation. The air rang with their vibrant laughter and wholesome, broad-tempered banter. Strangers but a little while before, they were now linked in a strong comradeship, to which none was an alien. They lingered long over the meal, making the most of the golden hour. A little company of Indians came into the camp —Omahas or Winnebagoes, returning to their village from the hunt—standing stoically by, silent but hopeful of largess. The spirit of the hour would suffer none to be shut out, and they squatted upon the ground and ate their fill.

Dusk had deepened into night ere the meal was done. Then Mark walked idly about the camp, from group to group, looking on at the jollity. Soon he encountered Frick, loitering like himself, his day's cares ended. Frick fell into step with him, speaking with a new joviality:

"We 've started first-rate, Bailey. Not an accident, and every wheel's turn

has counted. How do you like bull-whacking? You seemed to do a lot better than the average green hand."

"Oh, I reckon a man can manage anything he sets out to," Mark returned soberly—a sincere expression of his dominant mood.

"Yes, I guess that's so. It's done me a lot of good to watch the boys to-day. I'm not going to be afraid on their account. They've got the will. That's one thing this new country's going to teach. The man who wins will have to learn to make up his mind in a hurry about new things, and then stick to his purpose. Adaptability's well enough in the old places; but it'll be a drug in the market here for a while, compared with sheer brute tenacity. Your easy, adaptable fellow always needs some luck to help him out; but the man with an unalterable will has a better resource than luck."

He meditated upon the matter for a time before he went on.

"I don't know what we 'll do with Jack," he said, as though this thought grew naturally out of the other. "It 's a queer notion of his—wanting to go with the train, at the last minute. He won't stick it out, of course; he 'll be dead tired in a week, and wish he had n't come. If it comes to that, he can go back with some east-bound train. He 's a strange chap. I don't understand him at all. There 's no more generous-hearted fellow in the world; yet I 'm not sure but that this lazy indifference of his is the supremest kind of selfishness, after all. He needs some kind of a thorough waking up."

Suddenly a new note sounded above the medley of talk and laughter. One of the emigrants had brought a violin from his waggon and was playing a simple dance melody, the tones rising faint but sweet and clear in the wide outdoor space. They were as a summons to the loungers, who gathered quickly about the musician, standing in expectant silence until one

of the men clasped his arms about his wife and swung with a laugh into the familiar step. Then a clamorous shout went up; a near fire was piled high with wood and a broad space was cleared around it, brilliantly lighted by the ruddy glow. The fiddler struck into another tune, rollicking, irresistible, standing by the fire, keeping time to the measure with the swaying of his long body and the stamping of his booted foot.

"Choose your pardners!" he called above the merry din; and on the instant the spirit of the dance caught them—slender maids and buxom matrons, graybeards and agile boys, in a whirling eddy.

"Look!" Frick cried. "That 's what makes us strong, Bailey! God only knows what 's ahead of us—life or death. But it 's all one of them now. Lord, Lord, but I love such men! They 're like the old northland heroes."

The blood of the old heroes was in them, dilute but ineradicable. They were barbarians no longer, like their forefathers;

time had quelled somewhat the primal fierceness, the red blaze of lust, the fury of unbridled passion, giving them instead a finer strength, a firmer grasp upon virtue; but their blood still leaped from their hearts, hot and throbbing, at the sound of the old, wild call—call that had first lured the hordes of the North into action, dim centuries gone; call now masterful and strong as ever—the call of the new trail to restless feet, the call of battle to the soul that loves a fight. The majesty of a rude might was upon them, and the stamp of the race's master-passion—steadfast integrity. They would go wrong sometimes, these conquerors of the wilderness; but their errancies would come not from weakness but from uncontrollable excess of strength.

Cannon came up with his wife and stood for a moment looking on with quickening interest; then his big laugh rang out above the gay tumult.

"I could dance, once," he cried heartily. "I can do it yet, if they 'll give me

room. Come on, old lady, let 's try it a whirl."

He caught her in his huge arms and bore her in amongst the revellers, struggling hardily to fall into the rhythm of their step, labouring heavily, towering above the others, his bushy hair and beard showing like a beacon to light them on to fresh enjoyment. Then Mark saw Forrester move by with Dorothy Braidlaw in his arms, upon his face a light of calm content; and the sight brought him a vague uneasiness.

"Trust Jack!" Frick commented. "That boy always lights on his feet. It 's no cunning contrivance of his; he was just born to it. Look well together, don't they? Well, I 'm going to bed. Good-night."

Forrester and Dorothy left the circle of the dancers, joining Mark where he stood apart. The girl was flushed, breathless, her fair hair in disorder, hanging in loose, lustrous masses about her shoulders. She put up her hands, catch-

ing the thick coils into place, laughing, her eyes brilliant.

"It 's been just the right ending for the day," she said happily. "Look! Was there ever another picture like that?"

But Mark could not look at the merry-makers; he must look at her instead, as she stood by his side—instinct with life, her sweet face irradiated and glorified by the tender light, wholly responsive to the subtle influence of the scene, seeming like an elfin sprite there in the wide vale, with the wild, wonderful night about her.

Cannon too made his escape from the whirl, his deep lungs gasping, his face beaded with moisture.

"Whee-e!" he cried. "For heaven's sake, let me get my front feet on the ground again! Here, Jack, you take my wife. She ain't had enough. But I have! I 'm going back to the waggon, where I can sit down and smoke."

Then, for the first time since that morning when he had told her of Braidlaw's

misdoing, Mark was alone with Dorothy. He could hardly have told why, but he had chosen to avoid a meeting which he feared must lead them in speech over difficult places. It was only the man's way of letting Time heal those hurts against which his own poor skill is unavailing. Now that the meeting had come, it brought to him an awkward constraint, and he waited for her to speak.

"I had never dreamed that such things as this could really be," she said softly, after a little time. "It seems as though nobody has ever been here before—as though the place has been waiting for us since the very beginning."

His embarrassment clung to him, and he would not trust himself to say what was in his thoughts. When he spoke, it was in merest commonplace:

"You are n't tired, after the day's ride?"

"No, no! I enjoyed every minute of it. It was all so new to me. I did n't want it to end; and now I wish this could

last for a long time." She fell into pensive quiet, standing with her hands clasped before her, her eyes raised, looking not at him, not at the dancers, not at anything near, but far away into the great starlit hollow of the night. "It must be all right," she said, "but the best things are so soon over with. I wonder if the good times will last as long as we want them to, in the next life, or if we 'll have to keep going on and on, from one thing to another."

Strong man that he was, with his robust joy in the present so intense, he smiled at the saying as at a pretty whim.

"I don't know," he returned. "I don't believe I care. This life 's plenty good enough for me."

She turned to him then, her eyes meeting his calmly, yet with a question in their depths. "Good enough?" she echoed. "Do you find it so?"

"I have never wanted anything that I thought this life could n't give me," he answered honestly. "Yes, this life suits

me, through and through, every bit of it."

"You don't mean that," she said with gentle gravity. "The bad too, and all that goes wrong?"

"I 'm human," he returned lightly. "We humans need some bad mixed with the good. I like to have things go wrong, once in a while, because that gives me a chance to try and put them right again. I don't want to think too much about another life, while I 'm living this one. It would weaken me. I should n't care enough about my failures here, if I kept on thinking about having another life to straighten them out. I 'd rather do that now."

"Ah!" she persisted. "Do you find that so easy to do? I don't."

"Easy? No. But I don't want to put it off on that account, hoping it will be easier by and by. Oh, things get taken care of pretty well. Why, what if I 'd spent yesterday worrying about the hard time we might have to-day, getting the train started and the rest: I 'd have

been fooled clear through, would n't I?" He smiled down upon her with easy assurance. "I took it for granted that Frick knew what he was doing; and I 'm taking it for granted the Almighty knows what He 's about too. This life is to get things done in; and don't you suppose He 'll let us do what He wants us to, and the way He wants?"

It was she who smiled now at his confident sophistry. "Are you always so willing, then, to take His way? Don't you sometimes prefer just your own man's way?"

"I guess maybe that 's so," he laughed in frank confession. "But I like to think that if it could be averaged up I 've done more good than bad. I don't know whose way that is—mine or His; but it suits me."

She waited for a little time; then her speech took the intimate turn he had feared.

"There is my brother," she said gently. "Will you tell me something?

I 've been wondering about it. If I were not here, and you had only yourself and him to think about, what would you do?"

The question had been no more than a deep undercurrent in his thoughts before; but now he put it to himself frankly, and was sure of his answer.

"You asked me that because you want to know," he said steadily, "so I won't lie to you. I reckon I 'd have followed him up till I found him, and then we 'd have had it out between us, somehow. But you are here, don't you see, and so—Oh, what 's the use!" and he flung out his strong arms with a gesture of dismissal. "Don't let 's talk about that any more. We can't make it any different by talking. Let 's just think it 's going to come out all right."

The fire had fallen low; the music had ceased, and the dancers were separating. He walked at her side through the camp until they came to Cannon's waggon. She had not spoken again after his last brusque word; and now she said no more

than a murmured "Good-night" before she left him.

A shadow was over his thoughts, as he walked slowly on to his own waggon, dwelling upon what had passed between them. He was quite sure that he had not said the right things. He rolled himself in his blankets and lay down upon the ground to catch a little sleep before midnight, when he was to take his turn for two hours with a camp watch. But, though quiet settled all around, sleep would not come. Now and again an ox lowed on its pasture-ground near by; once, from afar, came the thin, shrill wail of a solitary wolf; and once a child in one of the emigrant waggons awoke and cried.

Save for these fitful sounds there was only the silence of the prairie night—not a dead but a living silence. Here and there through the camp a bed of embers glowed faintly through its covering of ash; otherwise there was no light save that of the tranquil stars.

He lay tossing restlessly, listening with straining ears, staring with straining eyes, his every sense over-wrought, until the time came when he must go on watch. Then, as he paced his arc of the wide circle that enclosed the camp, with his rifle upon his shoulder, his agitation went with him. He could not make it out. Once he paused in his walk, leaning with crossed arms upon his rifle, looking away across the dark prairie; and again from the darkness there arose before him the semblance of a sweet, gentle face, the lips smiling, the eyes shining with a dusky glory from beneath a thick confusion of fair hair, as he had seen her come from the dance with Forrester. But as he dwelt upon the image, suddenly its happy radiance was dimmed, overcast by sadness, as he had seen her at the last. He took up his walk again with a sigh.

"God!" he brooded. "It looks as though things are going to be different—somehow—after this."

At the end of another day, camp was

made on the western bank of the Elkhorn amongst thick masses of box-elder and cottonwood. Some of the emigrants had pushed on ahead of the train, earlier in the day, hunting, and were waiting on the camp-ground with abundant venison and wild fowl; and again the supper hour was one of riotous good fellowship.

But Mark felt himself apart from it. Throughout the day, while keeping his slow walk over the dust of the trail, he had been thinking deeply; yet his thoughts had led him nowhere—only around and around, like one lost and returning over and again upon his course. Now he wished to be alone, and taking his fishing-line he left the camp in the early evening, walking up-stream along the bank until he had found a spot whose seclusion seemed complete. There, when his line was out, he sat down in the quiet solitude.

Though he tried then to take up the thread of his thought, the peaceful beauty of the place and the hour continually checked him, luring his attention away

from himself. On either bank the feathery tops of the elms rose high against the glowing evening sky, swaying in the light wind, almost meeting in a wide arch above the dark, swift water. Whippoorwills were calling in multitudinous chorus; a little brown owl hooted in he branches overhead; the valley swam with translucent shadows; his nook was heavy with wild odours. The fish bit hungrily, often his line occupied him, and in the intervals he could do no more than look on at the gay processional of life about him, listening to its myriad voices, his senses bathing in its quieting influences. The effort of fixing his attention was too great, and after a little time he gave it up, suffering himself to drift, borne by pure fancies.

A light step sounded upon the bank above him, drawing slowly nearer, and as though summoned by his desire Dorothy Braidlaw appeared. Her mood seemed like his own, preoccupied, serious; she did not see him until she was close upon him; then she paused with a startled word.

"Oh! I didn't know—" She would have withdrawn then, but he called to her:

"Please don't go. Wait until I can take in my line, and let me go back with you. I want to."

She stood in silent assent while he coiled the line and drew in his string of fish. When he stood at her side upon the bank his haste was quickly abated; he did not offer to return to the camp, but stood looking about.

"Do you remember what you said last night, about wanting things to last?" he asked. "But now aren't you glad that that didn't last? Don't you think this is a lot more beautiful?"

"It is very beautiful," she answered gently; then: "Have you been thinking of that too? I have, all day. There was something that was left unsaid. I should like to say it now. It's—about my brother."

He would have stopped her. "If we talk of him, I'll say the wrong thing. I did last night. Can't you just wait?"

She shook her head. "No. You must understand. You spoke of its being easy to set wrong right: but he ran away from the wrong he had done. I mean to find him, if I can. If I do find him, he won't be glad to see me. That will make it very hard."

She hesitated then, making a visible effort for composure.

"It 's not work for a woman," he said, almost harshly.

"Why not?" she flashed. "I think it 's because I 'm a woman that I 'm doing it. If I were a mar I suppose I should let him go, without trying to find him or caring what became of him. But I shall find him, and if we live, the wrong he did you will be made right. He shall pay it all back to you. That 's what I want you to know. You have n't let me say it before."

His eyes were narrowed and his lips were parted as with a grimace of sudden pain, showing his strong, white teeth.

"I wish you had n't said it at all!" he

cried. "You have put that money between us—between you and me. Don't you want me for your friend any more?"

She regarded him earnestly. "I do," she said simply. "I am sorry; but I had to tell you, whatever it cost. Things could n't go on any longer without an understanding. We must go back now; it is getting dark."

The darkness seemed to have fallen all at once. It was not the clear darkness of early night, but thick, blue-black, almost palpable, casting everything about them into dense obscurity. The slow, languid breeze had ceased, and there was an oppressive calm. Then a broad, vivid, quivering sheet of light overspread woodland and water, revealing with startling distinctness every leaf and ripple, and quick upon the flash followed the hoarse, reverberant roar of thunder and the oncoming rush of the storm-wind, drawing nearer and nearer until it swept mightily through the close masses of the trees above, beating upon them, making them

shrink and cower. The change had come with the violence of summer storms upon the prairie, catching them wholly unawares.

"We 'll be soaked through!" Mark shouted above the tumult of the wind. "Can you run? You 'll have to, if we miss the rain. Come; keep close to me!" He started toward the camp with his long, strong stride, crushing a way through the thickets that bordered the river, trying to hold them aside for her. Another white flash of lightning revealed her running blindly, her arms crossed before her face, her head bent as if in terror.

"Give me your hand!" he cried, and tried to lead her forward at a quicker pace; but the thick brushwood caught at her skirts and whipped her face, and her every staggering step was slow.

"I 'm going to carry you," he shouted, and lifted her in his arms, holding her against him, running with her as though her weight were no more than a child's. Her hands were clasped about his neck;

her supple body yielded to his strength; the wind lifted a strand of her soft hair and laid it across his cheek, and the terror of the storm became as nothing. A rapturous courage seized him, and his every fibre thrilled with a passionate exultation, a riotous, wild joy.

Another jagged bolt fell very near them, with an instantaneous, deafening thunder-clap, making earth and air rock and tremble, and the fury of the wind was demonic. She clung to him, half fainting, hiding her face against him. The splendid flash had shown him that the bank below was high and shelving inward from the river's wash, and, close by, the overhanging roots of a great tree, matted with earth, made a place of shelter. Holding her close in his powerful clasp he leaped with her to the sandy beach below and set her down within the protection of the rude roof, where she was safe from wind and rain.

The shelter was too small to cover both; but he wanted none of it. He stood

erect upon the sand, baring his head, turning his face upward. The wind tore at him, buffeting him savagely; the rain broke in a deluge, beating upon him, drenching him; the lightning was one incessant, blinding glare; the thunder was one unbroken, deep-throated roar; heaven and earth seemed crashing together. The mad frenzy did no more than exalt his soul; he shouted to the wind, as though it must understand. He was not afraid; a very ecstasy possessed him. The river was torn and lashed into seething white froth; a clump of lithe young willows, growing at the water's edge, bent flat to the foam; a giant tree upon the bank above was split from branches to root and the riven half fell outward. He saw it coming and sprang aside to avoid its crushing weight, falling at his length upon the wet sand. But he got up again, laughing.

The storm abated as quickly as it had arisen, and there was left only the soft, steady fall of the summer rain, growing

less and less until it ceased altogether. Mark knelt upon the sand before the shelter where Dorothy sat white and shaken. He took her hand and helped her to rise. Fear had not yet left her; her hand was cold and trembling. He kept it in his firm, warm clasp, comforting it, and would not let it go.

"Listen!" he cried. "Girl, you must listen to me. Nothing can come between us—nothing!" Overmastered, he put one strong arm about her slight shoulders and drew her to him, compelling her to rest against his breast, stooping above her until his lips touched her hair.

"Listen!" he cried again. "I love you! Dorothy! I love you, I love you, I love you!"

For the space of three hurried heartbeats she lay quite still in his arms; then with a cry vibrant with terror she shrank from him.

"Oh, no, no!" she breathed. "Don't, don't! You must let me go."

He freed her from his embrace, but her

hands were helpless in his. His deep voice rang with passion.

"I love you!" he exulted, the wonder and the joy of it triumphant over him. "And you must tell me that you love me."

"You hurt me!" she gasped. "You must not. Oh, be generous!"

Her face was ashen-pale in the dim light, and she cowered from him in abject fright. A sudden chill touched his heart, and he let her hands fall from his grasp.

"What is it?" he asked. "Why are you afraid of me, when I love you? Don't you believe it? It's true! It's the truest thing in the world."

"Hush!" she pleaded. "How cruel you are."

"Cruel?" he echoed. "Cruel, when I love you so? Why do you say that? Is it because you don't love me?"

She turned away from him, sobbing, shaken by a tumult of feeling. He let her be until she grew quieter, while his wits were groping.

"Is it because you don't love me?" he repeated. "You must tell me that."

"Oh, don't make me say it!" she begged. "You have been so good to me; and now—it is all so different."

He waited for a little time, trying to understand. Then he spoke the man's word:

"Dorothy, is there somebody else?"

"Please, please!" she cried miserably, and put out her hand to him impulsively. He took it again in his and lifted it gently to his lips.

"I love you," he said again. "Nothing can make that any different now—you can't, nor I can't. I 'm going to keep on loving you, because I can't help it. And I 'm going to try to make you love me. You can't deny me that."

She stopped him with a pleading gesture.

"I won't say any more now," he said. "But you must n't think I 'm giving you up, just when I 've found out what love is. You 'll remember what I 've told

you; and I 'm going to tell you again—I 'm going to keep on telling you, till I know for sure it can't do any good. This is what I want you to remember: All the man there is in me loves you. The man in me knows you 're mine, and I 'm going to try to make you belong to me. Now we 'll go back to camp."

V

THE BATTLE

MILE by mile, day's journey upon day's journey, the train moved on its way, passing from the lower levels of the humid valley, over the billowy roll of the prairie, onward toward the heart of the great Plains. By and by, as they settled to their work, the men's first excited eagerness was curiously softened. One day was hardly to be distinguished from another by varied events or shifting interests; all went forward in smooth, silent, tranquil order, steady as the rhythmic swing of a great pendulum; dawn succeeding night, noon following dawn, dusk flowing softly over the day, and then night again, unwaiting, unhastening, in Divine method. Yet there was in the minds of the men no sense of tedium, no effect of

monotonous endurance. Their task lay plain before them, and each day marked a definite measure of accomplishment. Change would come soon enough; for the present, it seemed as though passionate desire drowsed under a spell of profound content.

The men of the train were from many and various places in life. Some had come from the farms of the East; some had been townsmen; but here they met on common ground of understanding and purpose. Only a few knew the Plains life; far the greater number were mere novices in plainscraft, novices in frontiering. Hitherto they had measured their conduct by rule and precept, by statute and grave decision—by the scheme of civilisation's law; but now, within the brief span of a few miles and a few days, they felt themselves sharply separated from all that, thrown back at once upon the first ancient resources of the race—common honour and common dependence, each upon every other. Law and order, the

proud boast of the older communities, were here no more than words. Out on the open earth, under the open sky, they had sloughed the straitening limitations of habit and use, and only the primal man remained, eager for the things that made up the sum of man's life before rules were born.

More and more, as the days passed, Mark was made to feel that his life was broadening, deepening. He did not look too closely at the roots of his content, that he could not do, and would not if he could. The days sufficed. More and more the robust companionship with the men was strengthening him, satisfying him. And better still, infinitely sweet and tender, was the presence of his great love.

What had passed between him and Dorothy had given him no dismay; the power to feel dismay was not a part of him. Since love had come to him, it had dominated him, its might supreme. Life lay gloriously opening before him, an uncurtained vista. He was content

to wait, being sure of himself and his love, every passing day bringing some new revelation of his love's loveliness. At his work he thought of her, and when night came, bringing him freedom, the waking hours were passed where his eyes could dwell upon her, seeking new tokens of her grace that would fill the hours of labour with a sense of comfort and completeness.

Nor was he distressed at seeing that she timorously avoided him, so that he lost the delight of their old, frank intimacy. That he could well endure, for the sake of the greater delight, in which all others were swallowed up. Once, watching his chance, he came upon her alone and would not let her escape.

"You need n't be afraid of me," he said, when he saw in her eyes the look of a hunted creature. "I 'm not going to try to hurry you. It 's coming out all right, some time. I know it; and that 's all I want to know now. This is what I 've been thinking: You need me, as

much as I need you. The very first time I talked to you, you wondered if you could find the shadow of a rock out here in this desert. I 'm going to be that rock for you, by and by, when you need me most, and my love will be the cool shadow. You think about that. Don't be frightened; that 's all I 'm going to say now. The rest can wait."

Forrester had taken no fixed place in the work of the train; there seemed to be no place for him. For most of the time he was in the saddle, occasionally riding ahead with Frick to discover the difficulties of the trail, or joining sometimes with the hunters—occupying himself as he would. Now and then, obedient to impulse, he would saddle one of the led horses and take Dorothy for a gallop over the hills along the trail. She was an excellent horsewoman. On some days they would be gone for hours, meeting the train as it advanced, or overtaking it in its slow progress; and always Dorothy returned with heightened colour and fresh-

ened beauty. So much Mark saw, but almost without heeding.

Even the signs of change in Forrester he missed, or, seeing, passed lightly by. They were not such changes as boldly proclaim themselves. Outwardly the boy bore his old unruffled air, through which no disclosure came. A quieter dignity was upon him—something subtler than word or act. Only once did an outright sign discover itself, when after a difficult day Frick passed whiskey to the men, toasting the luck of the train: Mark saw Forrester raise his cup to his lips and then quietly spill the untasted liquor on the ground.

"Jack!" he cried. "Throwing whiskey away!"

Forrester flushed. "Guilty!" he returned with his light laugh. "I don't want to hurt Frick's feelings; but it's villainous poor stuff. I'm saving my thirst for something better."

Little by little, almost imperceptibly, the land had changed from the fair, lux-

uriant aspect of the Missouri Valley, as day by day the train had moved up the low, steady incline of the prairie toward the far mountains. The river had grown less, the grasses along the way were of new kinds; the hill-slopes at the edges of the valley were filmed with the silver-grey of the first wild sage; the beds of the little tributary streams held only dry sand, and the thick growths of elm and oak, so common below, had given place to sparse clumps of cottonwood and willow, that stood yellowed and enfeebled by the dry heat. There was an indescribable new feeling in the air, a new aspect upon the distances; lungs must breathe deeper and eyes accustom themselves to clearer vision. At night the very stars seemed nearer, almost within arm's reach.

For no apparent reason, Frick had assumed a greater vigilance. Often during the day he would ride to the hilltops beside the trail, for a careful survey of the country around; and always at night

a closer watch was kept upon the grazing beasts. Every man was armed with rifle and pistols and full belts of cartridges, and by day and night the arms were ordered kept within easy reach. Some of the men affected to scoff at these warlike signs, but Frick was grave.

"We 're in the Sioux country," he said simply. "I 'm not borrowing trouble; but we must be ready."

Then one day Forrester and Dorothy were away together, following the open trail in advance of the train, riding at an easy pace in the mid-day heat. After a time Mark saw them halt, and presently Forrester dismounted, stooping over something on the sand. When the train came up to them, Dorothy's cheeks were very pale, her eyes wide with wonder and fear. At the side of the trail lay the charred and broken fragments of a waggon in a heap of ashes, with a few poor bits of household stuff scattered near. The ground all around was thickly trampled, with signs of a recent camp; and Forres-

ter held in his hand a score of empty cartridges and a broken arrow-shaft. Close by were three low mounds upon the sand, marked by rude headboards on which names were rudely cut, with a date, and the added words, "Killed by the Sioux." The date was only two weeks past. It was their first encounter with Plains tragedy.

"God Almighty!" Frick cried, with a fervour that made the words more a prayer than an oath. "One of them was a woman, too."

When the train had passed, Forrester kept at Mark's side, leading his horse, an unwonted seriousness upon him. Mark thought him brooding upon what they had seen; but presently the boy spoke abruptly.

"Mark, tell me this: Is there anything between you and Dorothy Braidlaw?"

Mark faced him with a start, regarding him fixedly, wonderingly, a strange stir at his heart. "Anything—" he echoed.

Forrester gave a short, mirthless laugh.

"Oh, I 'm not blind!" he cried. "I have seen what she is to you, from the very first. That part 's plain enough. But has she told you she loves you?"

The point-blank question had the force of a blow. Mark had to wait to command himself before he could answer.

"No," he said at last, bluntly. "What 's got into you?" He divined the reply, yet he waited breathlessly for the words, which came at once.

"I had to ask you. I could n't talk to her without knowing. And I wanted to be honest with you. I 've seen a lot of her, Mark. She 's a woman amongst millions—she 's the one woman I 've seen who meant anything to me. I want her."

The calm voice sounded to Mark's ears far-off and strange; the wide plain before his eyes appeared as a vague blur; he felt the blood surge from his heart and pound in his brain. In a flash the past days were marshalled before him, and he thought he understood. The realisation stunned him; he was like one who has received a

sudden wound, and whose shocked and disordered senses cannot take full account of the hurt. Renunciation had never been his part in life, and the contemplation was bitter. It was his rugged mental faith, not his heart, which answered.

"If you want her, what are you waiting for? Tell her!"

Forrester's eyes were fixed upon him; but the man's face was inscrutable.

"I know you love her," Forrester said gently. "That makes it hard. But so do I. She has possessed me. If she has n't given herself to you, then I must go on. I can't help myself. I shall tell her to-morrow."

He put out his hand; but Mark, staring straight ahead, did not see. He touched the man's shoulder lightly, but Mark did not heed. After a moment he turned away sadly.

"I shall tell her to-morrow!" When he was gone, his words remained. Mark kept repeating them to himself, over and over, until they beat in his brain like a

pulse, with a dull, recurrent throb full of passionate pain. The strength of his manhood, quickening like a new-conceived life, cried that desire might meet fulfilment, that love might have its way; but with grim, fierce rage at himself he beat the thought down. He followed no beaten path of reasoning; but by a blind, headlong leap of instinct he thought he understood.

"God!" he groaned, and opened his arms wide, as if to let his love go.

When the next day came, Forrester rode away with Dorothy after the noontime camp was broken. Frick called after them anxiously:

"Careful, Jack! Don't be foolish."

Forrester waved his hand in reassurance. "We sha'n't go far," he said. "We sha'n't lose sight of you."

For a time they held to the trail ahead; then they turned off to the hills. Mark watched them, a dull ache at his heart, until they passed from view between the rolling bluffs. Though he kept his lookout,

they did not reappear. The afternoon dragged away and the sun fell low, mantling the valley with the shadows of the hills. Then the forms of two riders came in sight upon a near crest, sharply silhouetted against the sky. Mark breathed a sigh of relief; but in the next moment relief gave place to a sudden qualm of fear. Those were ponies, and not the large, strong horses of the train. Straining his eyes, he made out that one of the riders wore a feathered headdress, and that both were men.

He shouted to Frick, pointing to the hill; and on the instant the two began to descend into the valley, crossing swiftly toward the train, coming alongside and bringing their ponies to a stand.

They were of another type than the tribes earlier encountered along the trail; a finer type physically, their clean-lined bodies and limbs of a perfect mould. Both were quite naked save for breechcloth and moccasins, their bodies and faces painted grotesquely in brilliant hues.

Both sat their beasts like horsemen born, lithe, erect, their movements flowing into those of the animals. But it was their faces that distinguished them most of all —hard, fierce, cruel faces, with something satanic in their wide, thin lips and restless, unrelenting eyes. They were of the Sioux, for a century the scourge of the Plains.

One of the teamsters spoke the Sioux tongue, and him Frick summoned.

"They say they're scouts of a war party that's out after a band of Pawnees," the man interpreted. "They say the Pawnees came up to steal ponies and got away with a big bunch, and the Sioux are following. The main party is off south in the hills."

"Plain, damned lies, most likely," Frick commented bluntly. "But let them alone and see what they do. Watch them; that's all."

The Sioux rode for a little way at the front of the train, but checking their ponies skilfully and so falling back little

by little, letting the train go past them, while they observed it with a hawklike scrutiny, taking silent account of its every detail of men and arms. At last, when they had dropped quite to the rear, they wheeled their ponies suddenly and sped like the wind back to the hills.

"I don't like it," Frick said uneasily. "It looks bad. We 'll make camp early to-night. Has Jack come in yet? What 's the matter with him? Ah, look there! Look!"

Far ahead, at the south of the trail, showing dark against the gold of the evening sun, rose a column of signal smoke—mounting and mounting, then hanging black and ominous in the still air. Frick sat watching it, his anxiety rising with it.

"I wish Jack were here," he said.

"Frick!" Mark called sharply. "Let me have a horse, and send somebody to look after my waggon."

"What are you going to do?" Frick asked.

"I 'm going to see where Jack is," Mark answered. He would not listen to remonstrance nor accept any offer of company. "I can take care of myself," he insisted. "One man's as good as a dozen for this, unless we find there 's something wrong."

"Go ahead," Frick said grimly. "We 'll camp right here."

Mark flung himself into the saddle, and his strong horse swung into a long, free gallop toward the hills. Already the full light of day was gone, and under the bluffs the shadows were thickening. He urged his beast to a quicker pace, eager to save every moment of daylight that remained.

From the first crest he swept the wide prospect with a hasty survey. Nothing was in sight save a foreground of bare hills, their tops catching the last of the sunlight, the hollows between lying in a gray half-dusk; and beyond lay a limitless bare plain, stretching flat and desolate. No living creature was in sight.

He turned to the eastward, keeping as well as he could upon the high places. For two miles he rode at his horse's best speed. Then from one of the higher summits he caught sight of those he sought, a half-mile away, at the bottom of the vale below, and with a shout he galloped down to them.

They had dismounted and were standing near together, suffering their horses to graze idly about, with reins trailing. Their isolation seemed complete, as though the world held them only. As Mark drew nearer, the grazing animals lifted their heads, whinnying; but the man and the woman did not heed. Forrester stood erect, with folded arms, and Dorothy's head was bent before him while she listened, intent.

Again he shouted to them, and they drew apart, startled, and stood waiting until he pulled up beside them. Then his pent feeling flashed out in hot anger.

"Jack! You fool! What kind of a man are you, to put a woman in such danger?"

"Danger?" Forrester returned. "What is it?"

"There!" He pointed to the signal smoke, that still hung faint in the west. "You ought to have seen that. It 's the Sioux. There 's a war party watching us; a couple of their scouts were at the train only half an hour ago. We 're in for some trouble before morning. Don't stand there, man! Get your horses, quick."

Forrester ran toward the beasts, a few yards away; but his impetuous haste gave them alarm and they would not be caught, shying away from him and circling about, then striking into a quicker pace and moving off toward the hills to the southward. Mark joined in the chase; but the two, riderless and with empty stirrups beating their sides, seemed thoroughly frightened. It needed but a little time to prove that the pursuit must be long. He turned his horse back to where Forrester stood with Dorothy, and threw himself from his saddle.

"There 's no time to lose," he said harshly. "This horse 'll carry you both. I 'll catch one of yours. Get up, Jack, quick!"

Forrester flashed a swift look upon him, then drew away.

"Quick, you idiot!" Mark shouted. "Get up! I 'll help Dorothy up behind you. Camp 's two miles above. Cut straight out to the trail and follow it. Damn you, Jack! what are you waiting for?" In a rage of impatience he seized Forrester in his arms and lifted him bodily toward the saddle; but Forrester pulled from his grasp.

"No," he said, "I 'll not take your horse."

With a furious oath Mark sprang again to the beast's back and bent down, holding his hand to Dorothy. "Help her, Jack," he said between his set teeth, and she was lifted to a seat behind him. "Put your arms around me," he commanded; and she obeyed at once. She had not spoken since his appearance; she

had made no outcry, given no sign of fear, but he felt her body trembling against his own.

"Here, take my rifle," he said to Forrester. "Go down to the river, and keep under the bank, in the willows. Watch for me. If nothing happens, I'll come back with another horse."

Coming out of the hills into the open valley, Mark could see the camp lying white in the distance—that only, and over the rest of the land a brooding quiet. He spoke briefly to the girl, to reassure her, and lashed his horse into a run.

He had covered the better part of the way, and was beginning to blame himself for nursing a needless fear, when there arose from off to the left a cry, shrill, many-voiced, menacing. Along the skyline of the bluffs horsemen were massed, a hundred strong, in quick, excited motion, and as Mark looked the foremost rank of the riders dropped over the bluff's edge, the others following, a dusky, living cataract, charging down upon them.

A groan escaped Mark's lips. "Hold tight!" he cried, and with pounding heels and tense, straining voice he brought his labouring horse to its utmost speed. More than half a mile lay between them and safety. He saw that he would gain at least a small lead for the last dash; for the Sioux must cut obliquely across the intervening space between the hills and the trail to overtake them. But so slight an advantage might avail them nothing. He could feel that under the double burden the horse's stride was growing less sure, its breath coming in ragged, gasping bursts. Two hundred yards was too narrow a margin for security.

A rifle cracked, there in the rear, and then others, in an irregular volley. No harm was done; but Mark heard the vicious singing of the balls as they flew about him. Dorothy was in greater danger than he. Knowing this, he turned and caught her with one arm about her waist. "Let go!" he ordered, and swung her to a seat in front of the saddle horn, keeping

his hold upon her there, clasping her against him, sitting erect to make a shield for her with his big body.

They were nearing the end now. He could see the figures of the men standing by the waggons with rifles in hand. The pursuers were keeping on with their haphazard firing. At the very last he was hit; his hat was carried away; he felt a sharp sting of pain where the ball cut along his scalp, and the warm blood flowed over his cheek. Then from the camp he heard a command shouted in Cannon's huge voice: "Fire!" and forty rifles flashed together. A cheer mingled with the echoes that rolled back from the hills. The Sioux had followed too far. Turning for one quick backward look, Mark saw that they had swerved from their course, sweeping off to the left in a wide circle. A wounded pony was plunging upon its knees, struggling to rise, and three bodies were tumbled shapeless on the sand of the trail. And here was safety.

The hasty camp had been well contrived. The waggons were drawn together at the side of the trail in a half-circle, its base opening toward the river, whence little danger was to be feared. Against the wheels and in the spaces between the waggons were piled boxes and bales taken from the loads, and within this rough barricade the oxen and horses had been gathered and secured. At the centre of the camp were the women and children, encircled by piles of freight. The place was strong for defence; the faces of the men were alight with eager excitement.

Mark's wound was slight. When he had given Dorothy, white and half-fainting, into Mrs. Cannon's arms, he went to the river and washed the blood away; then returned to where the men lay, behind the barricade, and told of what had befallen. Frick heard him in silence; but Cannon was less contained. Moisture stood in beads upon his face; the cord-like veins of his neck and forehead were swollen, and his coarse red beard bristled.

While Mark spoke, the giant was chanting a string of rugged oaths, as though he were saying over a litany.

"I 'm going back to see what 's become of Jack," Mark said at the last. "He 's afoot out there somewhere." But Frick shook his head.

"No," he said. "What good would it do, in the dark? If they have n't found him, he 'll take care of himself; and if they have found him, one man could n't do anything, nor twenty, likely. We can't spare enough. It 's hard; but here 's where we 're needed most. We 're not done with them yet. They 'll come back again before morning. All we can do is to wait."

But the waiting proved weary. A tiny fire was kindled at the river's edge, for making coffee; then the blaze was extinguished for safety, leaving the camp in total darkness. After the hasty supper, eaten where they lay upon the ground, the men fell into a watchful quiet, with a curious commingling of courage and fear.

Only two or three of the company had had experience with savage warfare; for the others, anything that might come would be a surprise. As the hours passed, here and there one drowsed lightly upon his arms, and now and then there was a fitful murmur of speech; but outside the camp the gloom and silence were profound.

Midnight came and Forrester had not appeared. Mark's anxiety for the boy was mounting high; yet when he compelled himself to think coolly of the chances, he felt that he was impotent to aid. What had befallen, these two days, had put a new and curious aspect upon the things that made his life; his hopeful contriving, his stanch desires, had come to naught; will and purpose seemed numbed. Ever and again, as he lay in his place, there arose before him the picture of Dorothy and Forrester, as he had seen them standing together in the heart of the evening solitude, and the image stung him with passionate pain. Once he crept

softly to the place where the women and children were sheltered, hopeful of a word with Dorothy; but he could not find her in the darkness and after a moment he returned to his post and lay down again to his dull waiting. His nerves were strung to the point of snapping; every least sound—the tramping of the beasts near by, or the stir of the rising night wind in the dried grasses—made him start.

Suddenly, past midnight, one of the men near him gave a startled cry:

"Look there—west! They're going to burn us out!"

Two or three hundred yards away, and to the windward, showed a flare of yellow flame in the wild grass, rising lazily, then bending lightly before the breeze. Then another appeared, and another, spreading out slowly until they were joined in a low line, gathering in volume momentarily, making a little isle of light in the enveloping darkness. The danger was apparent enough; the grass at the

riverside, where the waggons were, was thick and tall and powder-dry.

"Quick, boys!" Frick shouted. "Pull up the grass around the waggons, outside here—quick!"

They set to work with all their strength, baring a strip of earth at the western side of the camp, to make a barrier against the approach of the fire. Some of the women came from their shelter to help, and others brought sheets of canvas, soaked from the river, piling them where they could be used for beating out the flames.

There was not much time for preparation. The wind had caught the fire at once, sweeping it forward with a rush. The glow had turned the darkness into a ruddy twilight, through which the hills and plain showed spectrally, the bodies of the labouring men coming out in sudden relief against the white background of the waggons. From beyond the fire rifles began to crack, and the balls sung close, all around; yet the men kept to their work

heroically to the last, tearing, tearing at the tindery herbage, until the flames burst roaring upon them, and they were driven back against the waggons, blinded and choking. But after a moment they caught up the drenched sheets of canvas and were at work again, whipping madly at the fire in a hand-to-hand struggle.

It was soon over. The feathery grasses burned out almost in a flash, and there was left only a broad bed of embers, glowing with a sullen red. The waggons had escaped harm, save one, where a tongue of flame was licking along the edge of the canvas. One of the men sprang upon a wheel and ripped the burning strip away with his knife; then, with a choking cry, he threw his arms above his head and fell backward headlong to the sand, lying in a huddled, convulsed heap, with an iron-pointed arrow through his throat, the blood flowing from between his lips in a crimson flood.

"Look out!" Frick screamed. "Here they come! Get back!"

They leaped to their places within the barricade, seizing their rifles. Across the burned space from the hills, like an aftermath of the fire, swept a horde of the Sioux, a full hundred, flying like dusky phantoms, yelling like a chorus of demons.

"Wait, wait!" Frick shouted, his voice shrill with frenzy. "*Aim* and shoot low. *Wait!* Now—*Fire!*"

Then came the shock and terror of chaos. The effect of the close-range volley was murderous, as the men knew by the screams of mortal agony. But the Sioux were too near and the charge too impetuous to be checked. With inhuman rage the line flung itself against the barricade, ponies and men in inextricable confusion, with a hellish din of outcry and the flash and rattle of rifle shots. The cooler-headed ones amongst the defenders lay in their place of retreat beneath the waggons, crouched to the ground, loading and firing as they could,

careful that every shot should count to the utmost; but the fury of the onset drove others out of their shelter, back toward the centre of the camp, where they stood together fighting every man for himself. No order was possible; no single voice could be heard.

The barricade had withstood the shock perfectly, save in one place, where an emigrant's waggon was overturned, making a gap in the line. Through this gap a half-dozen of the savages plunged with reckless daring, falling upon the group within; and there the fighting was almost breast to breast. Lying where he was, with a conscious deliberation that even then surprised him, Mark levelled his rifle against one of the ponies and fired. The beast reared and fell heavily, crushing his rider beneath him. Again he fired, and another of the riders dropped his uplifted arms and drooped slowly forward upon his pony's neck, clinging there limply for a moment before he fell to the ground and lay inert. Those who

remained of the mad band turned and escaped as they had come.

The attack swerved off then, passing swiftly to the eastward; but there the horde wheeled and was back again, galloping furiously along the waggon-line, the Sioux lying upon their beasts' sides, firing beneath the ponies' throats. Three times they passed thus. But the men of the camp had gathered again to their places, and at each charge their rifles told.

The body of the freighter who had first fallen still lay outside the line of the waggons. At the last onset, one of the Sioux, with insane daring, rode close, flung himself from his pony, and stooped over the dead man, drawing his knife. Mark saw and scrambled to his feet; but Cannon was before him. Wholly heedless of danger he had leaped from his concealment into the open, flinging himself upon the Indian with a deep-throated bellow, casting his huge arms about the naked body and crushing it against his own. One mighty forearm was set across the dusky

throat, and the painted face bent backward, grimacing, the eyes starting—back and back until the neck snapped with a hideous sound. The giant threw the lifeless body from him and stood erect with the roar of an enraged beast.

Another volley from the rifles beneath the waggons, and the Sioux fled, yelling, firing at hap-hazard, becoming mere vague shapes in the hanging smoke-haze, and disappearing. Then fell silence, save for the stir of the wind, that fanned the lingering embers of the burned grass to a dull glow.

For a long time Mark lay, his face buried upon his arms, his heart pounding, his brain reeling. Voices began speaking about the camp, but he heard no word distinctly. By and by he arose and staggered to the women's shelter.

"Dorothy!" he called. "Dorothy!"

She came to him at once. He took her cold hand in his, holding it against his breast, bending above her across the low barrier.

"Thank God!" he breathed. She did not speak, but put her arms about his neck, clinging to him in a passion of sobs. Presently he released himself gently.

"I 'm going to see what 's become of Jack," he said. "I can't stand this any any longer. Dorothy—" He took her bowed head between his hands, turning her face to his with a tender strength, then stooped and kissed her upon the lips. "Good-bye!" he whispered, and left her.

He crept stealthily to the river bank, avoiding being seen, and followed the water's edge down-stream for a little distance, until he had passed beyond the camp. Then he threw off his boots and entered the water, wading out until he had found his depth, and there suffering himself to drift with the rapid current, listening keenly, keeping a sharp watch upon the bank.

Three hundred yards below he saw a figure moving through the willow thickets toward the camp. Swimming closer, he made sure that it was Forrester; but he

was cautious. He withdrew again toward the middle of the stream, until his feet touched bottom near a small island that was covered with scrub growths. Then he called across the water quietly:

"Jack! Jack!"

He saw the figure pause and stand in an attitude of listening.

"Jack!" he called again, with greater confidence. "Out here! This is Mark."

The answer was a shot. He felt that he was struck—somewhere—he could not be sure where. There was no agony of pain, but only a dull consciousness, as of one half awake, that some dreadful thing had come upon him. He sank once beneath the water; then with a despairing strength he waded toward the island—falling—crawling on hands and knees through the shallows, dragging himself out upon the sand and lying there at his length, closing his eyes wearily.

Once he awoke, chilled through and through, yet wanting the will to stir, and sinking back into unconsciousness. And

again, half aroused, he wondered if he dreamed or if he heard in reality the rattle of rifles and the lusty noise of battle; but ere he could be sure, again oblivion fell upon him.

VI

"YOU SHALL LOVE ME"

SLOWLY, very slowly, Mark came half awake. Thought or feeling he had none; he was no more than a broken bit of drift upon the bosom of the dark waters of mystery flowing at the outmost edge of life. Will was gone from him; he neither knew nor cared where he was or what had happened; he only waited in a spiritless lethargy while he was borne little by little toward a living consciousness. Feebly his eyes opened, and for a long time he lay staring blankly upward at the sky, pale with the first light of dawn. While he looked, uncomprehending, the faint grey was streaked with opalescence, then flushed with crimson and gold. Birds chirped near by; and still nearer was the soft lap-

ping of water. Many minutes passed, and the light strengthened, yet that deadly lassitude held him, body and mind. Once he stirred slightly, but his every muscle protested in agony; and after that he lay quite still.

A new sound came to him, seeming strangely familiar, yet unreal—the sound of voices calling. Then he saw vague forms bending above him—faces strangely familiar too; yet, though he made an effort, his thoughts would not take hold of them, and they were gone again. After a long time—time for which he had no measure—they reappeared, and he felt himself lifted and carried, and dimly he made out that he lay upon a rude raft of poles and was floating across a width of water, with those haunting faces moving along on either side. Again he was lifted and borne, and when the supporting hands were withdrawn he sank gently, quietly down, down, and darkness closed over him.

Slowly, very slowly, he rose from the

depths; and there again were the hovering faces. One he made out, stooping close above him, its eyes looking into his —eyes shining with tears and lips quivering with the sound of a joyful laugh. Surely he knew that face! Moment by moment his mind cleared, and he strove to make his eyes ask the question his lips could not form. The laughing voice spoke in answer:

"Mark! Thank God! Don't you know me, Mark—Jack? Never mind; it 's all right. Oh, thank God!"

All right! His groping mind seized upon the words and held to them. All right! His glance wandered, and there was another face, framed in a lustrous mass of fair hair. He struggled to comprehend, and tried to smile a greeting. The face came closer, closer, and he felt the touch of a light, cool hand upon his cheeck and forehead. It was very comforting.

He slept and waked, slept and waked again and again, as upon the soft, even

ebb and flow of a mighty tide; and with every awakening his sense of reality grew stronger. By and by he discovered that he was lying upon a bed beneath a canvas waggon cover; and after another interval his ears began to catch sounds that were known—the whinny of a horse, the stroke of an axe, the stir of wind in the leaves of trees. He would have liked to ask questions, but when he tried, quieting fingers were laid upon his lips and a quiet voice forbade him—a voice which he felt must be obeyed. So he lay still, contenting himself with trying to piece together the broken odds and ends of recollection. But nothing was plain to him until at last Mrs. Cannon and Forrester came to him with water and bandages, bared his breast, and set about dressing his wound. Then in a flash he remembered.

"Good!" Forrester cried happily, when the dressing was done. He took Mark's hand in his and held it fast, with a fond pressure, his fine face quick with

feeling. "It 's all right, Mark," he said softly. "We 've got you back, and we 're going to keep you; but, God! I was n't worth it. Even if I 'd needed you, I was n't worth it." He laughed with a brave assumption of gaiety; but the laugh carried a note of bitterness. "And I was safe enough all the time—hiding out yonder. I got back when the fighting was all done. My luck!"

"How long is it?" Mark asked faintly.

"This is the eighth day," Forrester said. "Eight days we 've been in camp here, and they 've let us alone. There 's another train camped with us now, waiting till we go on. The Sioux won't come again."

Questions crowded to Mark's lips, but Forrester cut them off. "Be quiet, now. If you talk, they 'll make me go away. It 's all right—everything 's all right."

After another day or two, as his weakness grew less and something of his old self was aroused in him, other faces looked

in upon him where he lay: Frick, Cannon, the healthy sun-browned freighters and the friendly emigrants, welcoming him back to life. Then, after a long, strengthening night's sleep, Forrester came again and sat by his side.

"Now, tell me," Mark said. "What about our boys?"

Forrester's face was sobered. "We buried five, Mark," he answered simply. "Do you remember that fellow that played the fiddle for us to dance by, back there at the Elkhorn? They got him, and three of our own men; and they killed one of the little children. My soul!" he cried, his voice harsh with feeling. "We wanted a fight, for the fun of it; and now we 've had it. God forgive us! That fiddler had a wife and children, too, and nothing besides. They 'll have to shift for themselves, somehow. Oh, it 's tough!" But he put these graver things aside with a forced laugh. "It can't be helped now. What we 've got to do is to get you well again, so we can go ahead.

You're delaying the game. You think about that and rest."

One face he had missed, in these later days, save only now and then in a fleeting glimpse. While his weakness had held him, forbidding speech, forbidding everything but passive quiet, Dorothy had been his faithful minister, hovering about him with a watchful constancy, seeming loath to give the least part of her ministry into other hands. It was she who had fed him, upon the first return of appetite, with dainty foods mysteriously wrought from the coarse fare of the camp; and the sight of her had fed his hungry eyes. When in his utter weakness even the desire of life had ebbed to the very dregs, it was her presence, so instinct with life—the living warmth of her hand, the living light in her eyes,—that had subtly drawn him, as by gossamer threads too fine to be discovered, back to the warmth and light of life itself. With heart and soul he clung to her.

But as strength grew upon him, and he came out of the shadows, her care was surrendered and she came to him less and less, and then only upon the briefest errands. He knew that she avoided him, for fear of what she saw trembling upon his lips. He could not bear to have it so.

One quiet evening she brought his supper from the camp-fire, placing it before him, and standing for a moment, her fair head and slender shoulders framed in the opening of the canvas.

"Is there anything else you would like?" she asked gently.

"Yes," he said with simple earnestness. "I want you to stay where you are, just a minute. Don't run away." He did not glance at his supper; his eyes were fixed upon hers, gravely, holding them until her lids drooped and a faint blush overspread her cheeks. He could control his voice, but he could not keep revelation out of his glance.

"Wait!" he said again. "I 've got to talk to you a little. But you need n't

be afraid. I only want to say 'Thank you."

She smiled upon him timidly, with a look that he took as gratitude for his forbearance, and tried to speak gaily.

"'Thank you!'" she echoed. "What funny little words! I don't believe I know what they mean."

"They don't mean half what I want them to," he returned. "Not a hundredth part. There are n't any words for that, I reckon. You 'll have to try to understand the best you can. I know what would have become of me, if it had n't been for you—you and Mrs. Cannon. And I wanted to live, too. I don't know what I 'm going to do with my life: but whatever it is, I 'm not going to forget that I owe it to you. And I 'd rather owe it to you than to anybody else in the world."

Again her colour mounted, and she turned away in real distress. "Hush!" she cried softly. "Oh, you must n't say that."

"I've said it already," he retorted. "Once is all I need to say it. That part's done now, and neither one of us is going to forget. But there's something else." He hesitated, dwelling upon her loveliness, struggling to put down the rising rebellion of his longing. "You must listen to me a little while. I'll try to say nothing to hurt you. I've told you I love you, Dorothy. I told you because I thought I had a right. I thought my love was enough to give me the right. But it made you afraid of me, and you haven't quit being afraid. I didn't know why, at first, but I think I'm beginning to understand. I don't want it to be that way, Dorothy. It wasn't meant to be that way, and we mustn't let it." With a curious shyness he put out his hand to where hers lay, resting upon the edge of the waggon-box, and let his strong fingers pass lightly, caressingly, over the velvet-soft flesh. "I need you," he breathed. "We need each other. We'll always need each

other, whatever happens. I wish you would n't fight against it, nor be afraid of it. We must keep friends. Oh!" he cried, with sharp impatience. "I 'm not saying it right. I don't want you to think I 've quit caring, or care in any different way. I 'm not one that changes. But—I 'm not going to worry you with it any more. There!" His hand gripped hers firmly, and a firmer note came into his voice. "I 'm not going to worry you with it any more," he repeated. "But we must keep one another, as we used to be—good friends, always. Please, Dorothy!"

She gave a quick, soft laugh, full of a confusion of emotion—relief, happiness, tenderness. "You are good to me!" she cried, and caught his hand between her own, pressing it for a swift instant against her breast. "You sha'n't think that of me any more," she whispered. She left him then; but in the cool, mellow dusk, an hour later, she came again, standing in her old place at the back of

the waggon, her chin resting upon her crossed arms, smiling down upon him where he lay. It was he that spoke first, trying to fix the tone which he resolutely meant their new relation should carry.

"Oh, I 'm a lot stronger, this last day or two. I wish they 'd get ready and go ahead now; there 's no use waiting any longer." The jocund sounds of the evening occupations about the camp were borne to his ears, and he stirred impatiently. "I want to look out," he said. "Please help me to raise up, for just a minute."

She tried to dissuade him; but he would have it so, and she aided him to lift his shoulders, propping him with blankets, then kneeling at his side while he lay gazing upon the bustling life about the fires near by. "That 's good!" he sighed contentedly. "Lord, but I 'll be glad when I 'm out there with them again." But after a few moments his glance strayed to the wide, dusky stretch of plain beyond, that was invested with

the gathering mystery of night and to the fading glow of purple twilight that clung to the low horizon. It seemed so short a time since his every look toward that line of the West had filled him with eagerness, inviting him, enticing him; for out there, somewhere, somehow, he had meant that love should come to fulfilment—love, and the other strong purposes of his youth. But now, as he gazed, he felt desire wavering, fading like the day-glow. What was to come he felt to be wholly out of his keeping. Silence had fallen between them. His hand sought hers in the darkness, as though for a hold upon the realities that were eluding him. But the girl withdrew her fingers gently.

"You must n't overtax yourself," she said. "You must lie down again now."

Leave of the fateful camp was not long delayed. Once the healing of his wound had well begun, the rebound of his superb young body was quick and sure. With every hour, while he lay breathing the rare, clear air of the Plains,

he felt strength flowing back to him. He was glad when the train got in motion again.

He wondered that he was not impatient to be upon his feet and in his place beside his oxen; but he found himself quite content to lie where he was, rocked by the slow, swaying movement of the waggon, dropping asleep when he would and waking again to lie through the long, warm, tranquil hours, soothed by their every influence, wholly care-free. Mrs. Cannon and Dorothy rode as before upon the forward seat, talking sometimes, sometimes falling silent, always instantly ready to wait upon his least need or desire. Now and then Dorothy would come of her own accord to sit by his side for a golden hour. A half-dozen books were amongst her possessions, and from one or another of these she read aloud to him. He was not upon intimate terms with books; life, with its living interests, had always held the greater charm for him. What she read did not often abide

with him; but always, when the reading was done, there lingered in his memory the soft, full music of her voice, intoning itself over and over again. What he had offered she seemed to have accepted frankly; their relation bore no colour of embarrassment or constraint. By common consent, the future was in abeyance.

Day by day health and vigour rose in him in a warm, rich flood, as his buoyant will took a new grip upon life. To sit propped up in his bed and watch his strong and healthful mates at their work was tonic, and his bodily indolence became a hardship. It was like a new birth when, a week after the train resumed its march, he was able one evening to take his first weak, halting steps about the camp, supported by Forrester's friendly arm. But his robust spirit was revolted when he found how feeble his big legs and body had become.

"I couldn't crack my bull-whip to save my soul," he complained. "Look how my hand shakes! And my legs feel

like a new-dropped colt's. Let 's find some place to sit down. I feel too far off the ground."

They rested upon the warm sand on the river bank, at the side of the camp, where they could watch its bold movement in preparation for night. What they talked of in the first minutes amounted to nothing—it was only a light, aimless drift of speech in one of life's back-waters, where the current was turned aside. Forrester's confirmed, whimsical indifference seemed to possess him; and for Mark it sufficed to rest languidly at ease, with the throb of his returning vitality pulsing through his body.

"A man needs to be knocked out once in a while, to know how to set the right store by his strength," he said once. "I 'd never lost even a day before."

The careless suggestion had more effect than he meant. A silence fell upon Forrester, resisting against Mark's further offerings of speech. Mark's glance turned to the boy's face presently;

it was overcast by a moody sadness, his shoulders drooped wearily, and the lines about his lips were drawn tense. A little qualm of misgiving stirred in Mark's mind. Forrester met his look with a deep-drawn sigh.

"A man needs to be knocked out once in a while, to know how to measure his own weakness," he said dully. He sat for a moment with bent head, dipping up handfuls of the dry sand, letting it slip idly through his relaxed fingers, staring gloomily at the inconstant heaps of sliding grains. By and by he abandoned this little effort, facing Mark courageously.

"I told you what I meant to do, that day. But it was no use."

"Jack!" The word was a cry, vibrant with startled feeling; his heart bounded. Quick upon the sharp shock of surprise, exultation seized him, and he had to shut his lips hard to stifle a laugh of sheer joy. But that feeling did not hold. For a time they sat looking into one another's eyes, while neither spoke.

"I don't—understand," Mark said faintly, by and by. "*No use!* Did she tell you that?"

Forrester's lips parted with a harsh, inarticulate sound, that was like a laugh dying in birth. "I did n't go so far as that. I saved that pain for both of us. I went far enough to be perfectly sure that I need n't say what I wanted."

Mark waited a moment for full comprehension. He seized Forrester's arm and shook it roughly.

"Jack!" he cried. "You quitter! You scared boy! Is that the sort of stuff you 're made of?"

Forrester was very white and very grave. "Quitter!" he echoed bitterly. "Yes, I guess you 've got a right to call me that. I 've been a quitter, all my life. It 's in my blood. There 's nothing I 've ever really wanted that I had the courage to claim." He began again his aimless play with the sand-grains, the muscles of his fine face working convulsively. "I wish I could see life as you do," he said

presently. "I wish to God I could believe that the good things belong to me, sometimes. But I can't. What have I done—what have I been? It 's grotesque!"

It was Mark's primal faith that answered: "You coward! You poor fool! I thought you loved her."

Forrester's breath was sharply indrawn. "Love her?" he sighed. "Why, Mark, it was because I loved her that I had the strength to hold my tongue —the best strength I ever had. It showed me to myself for just what I am —only the poor half of a man. Oh!" he flung out his arms with a gesture of helplessness. "You can't understand!" he cried.

Mark set his teeth and gripped his hands hard in a grim effort at restraint, "And you 're going to let it go with that?" he demanded bluntly. "Jack, if you do, you 're less a man than I thought you."

"Ah!" Forrester returned, almost listlessly. "Mark, see here: Do you

never question yourself about your deserts? You take what you can get, don't you? You think everything belongs to you that you can wrest out of life by pure strength?"

"Yes," Mark retorted rudely. "A man deserves what his strength can win for him. That 's all I know about deserts: that 's all there is to know. What is it you 're afraid of? What have you seen that frightens you so?"

Forrester straightened his drooping posture slowly, as though the effort gave him physical pain; his eyes met Mark's fearlessly.

"I 've seen what you 've missed seeing," he said with quiet courage. "You are the man."

"Jack! What are you saying!" The calm words were like a knife-thrust, as full of surprise. Before the man's eyes the dim-lit earth and sky appeared as through a sudden haze. Forrester's quiet voice came as from a far distance.

"You are the man. I know it. If

I 've ever been sure of a thing in my life, it 's that. Oh, I 'm all you 've called me —fool, and all the rest of it. But there are two of us, and you 're the lucky one."

"You don't know what you 're saying!" Mark said, with a stifled groan. "It can't be true. Jack, I know it is n't true."

"It 's the truest thing in your life." Forrester's voice had the firmness of certainty. "If I 've ever been sure of anything in the world, it 's that. She loves you."

Again Mark walked beside his team; for only a little time each day, at first, while weakness held him, and then for longer hours, with renewed vigour. The return to labour was a godsend. Again and again in his life he had found bodily activity a sure resource; and now it did not fail him.

He was in a maze, wandering, groping, feeling it enclose him. Not of his will had it come upon him; yet with the in-

stinct of his kind he felt that by sheer force of will he must fight his way out to a clear understanding. He was a stranger to every mood but that of the fighter.

Was it true, this that Forrester had said? Hope and fear, desire and doubt, struggled together mightily within him. And while the struggle went on, he kept to himself, with the instinct of the half-savage, avoiding his mates, avoiding the girl, morose, implacable. What had come to pass in him in these days surprised him as he began to realise it, in the hours alone with himself. He was no longer a boy, with the boy's ecstatic, fervid view of love and life. He knew himself now for a man, with the man's sterner outlook. It was not love alone that possessed him, but the riot of a man's passions. One thought only gripped him, and would not be beaten down—weaving itself in with the sturdy fibre of his will, becoming a part of him: Love should have its way.

He was not impatient. He did not try to discover why, but he knew that impatience was wholly swallowed up in the greater emotion that mastered him. "She loves you," Forrester had said. Was it true? "I love her!" his soul answered. Hour by hour, day by day, as he walked upon the sand of the trail or as he lay at night in his blankets, staring at the stars, the words repeated themselves, over and over, until they became as the rhythm to which the strong stride of his feet and the strong beating of his heart kept time. "I love her! She shall love me!"—over and over again, over and over again, until it mounted to absolute conviction. The rest could wait. He was not impatient. There was time enough to go to her, by and by. He would first make conquest of himself, compel order out of the chaos that was in him. Stubbornly he shut his lips, letting no word pass them.

Desolation had come upon the land, stealthily but surely, as the trail had led

ever and ever to higher levels. Valley and plain alike were bare and unlovely. The wild grasses were sparse and yellow; the great expanse of sagebrush was thick with impalpable dust; scattered in ugly disorder were ragged, matted patches of cactus and soapweed, shrunken and deadened by the dry heat. Day after day this unvarying prospect opened ahead, far as the weary eye could see, and night after night it closed behind, as the shadows settled over it, in sickening monotony. Game had become scarce, as the wild herds had passed to the lower lands in search of fresher pasturage. The very river had shared in the seasonal blight, until it was hardly more than a broken chain of pools, shallow and tepid. The days were still summery, but the night winds were cold, ominous of the winter that drew near. Ease and plenty lay behind; ahead, in the hundreds of wide, vacant miles, lay—Heaven knew what of hardship and privation, with terror in their train.

Some amongst those of the train were growing anxious, apprehensive; even Frick, through his impassive mask, showed signs of the wear of an increasing responsibility. The rest of the way lay through regions peopled only by hostile tribes. There had been but the one actual encounter; after that the savages had kept their distance—watchful, but inspired by a wholesome fear of the train's increased size and strength. That was the least of the menaces. Many of the emigrant parties had dropped out on the lower prairies, to begin home-making; of those that remained, many were but poorly quipped for bearing the brunt of a wilderness winter, with food becoming more and more scarce, and with grim Want lurking ahead. It was enough to daunt the stoutest.

But to Mark, in his intense self-absorption, all this wore the look of a shadowy unreality; nothing was real but what was going on, strong, inevitable, within himself. Mere force of habit, more than

contriving, carried him through the days' routine; instinct, not conscious need, dictated his eating and sleeping; in the councils of the train over the difficulties to be overcome he was all but dumb—brooding heavily through the sunlit days, and in the night hours rehearsing in his dreams the drama of his passion.

Not by his planning, but quite by chance, came his next meeting with Dorothy. It was in the early evening, after camp was made, that he happened upon her, face to face, as she walked down to one of the river pools to bring water for preparing supper. Even then, had there been a way, he would have avoided her; but he could not. If she had seen anything of his distraught mood in these later days, if she had seen that he was deliberately keeping away from her, and if now she read anything to give her uneasiness in the hard-set lines of his face or in the smothered glow of his eyes, she ignored it, smiling up at him with frank unreserve.

"How strong and well you look! If I did n't know, I could n't believe what you 've been through. How do you do it?"

He did not answer. He took the pail from her hand and filled it at the pool; then set it down upon the sand and stood before her, square, erect, his eyes fixed upon her face. There was that in the look which made her shrink from him timidly.

"I must hurry back," she said. "Mrs. Cannon is waiting to get supper. Will you carry the water for me?"

Again he passed her question by. "Dorothy!" he cried. The note in his deep voice was not to be misinterpreted.

"Oh, please!" she breathed, and put out her hand with a gesture of pleading. But he caught the small hand in his and held it fast, as though he did not mean to let it go. Though she tried to escape, her strength was as nothing against his.

"You hurt me!" she said. "Don't! You must let me go."

"I will not!" he declared. "I've waited for you too long already. I'm going to keep you now until you've answered me. I love you! Dorothy, do you love me?"

She had ceased struggling, standing helpless before him, her head bent, her cheeks ashen-pale, her slight body trembling from head to foot. Bravely she tried to control herself, but the trial was a pitiful failure.

"You are cruel!" she said.

"I can't help it," he returned. "Do you love me?"

"You promised, and I've been trusting you not to speak of this to me again."

"I've broken my word," he said, "because I couldn't help that either. Do you love me?"

"You are making me hate you!" she sobbed.

He laughed at that; a triumphant laugh. "I believe you do love me!" he cried. He drew her to him, unresisting,

his arms about her. "Dorothy, why can't you tell me so?"

"No, no!" With all her slight strength she sought to free herself; but he would not yield; his big arms held her as in a vise, close against his breast. Even the sight of her tears did not move him to the least relenting.

"Be quiet, Dorothy, and listen," he commanded. "I 'm going to say what I want, before I let you go. There 's no other way. I 've done my best, but there 's no other way now. You must n't blame me. Would you blame a starving man for telling you he was hungry? I 'm starving for you. I want you. I 've got to have you. By God, you belong to me!"

She was sobbing bitterly. When she did not speak, he held her from him at arm's length, his hands gripping her shoulders. As he looked upon her thus, slowly the fire of possession died low in his eyes, and a softer light took its place.

"Dear girl!" he murmured. "What

is it? I love you. Can't you believe that? I know you do believe it. What is it that hurts you so?" He laid his hands upon her head and compelled her to face him, looking long into her troubled eyes. "Dorothy, what is it?" he asked, with a new gentleness.

Still she would not answer him. "I think I know," he said. "Is it your brother? Is it because——"

"Stop!" She freed herself, standing away from him, a sudden wave of vivid colour sweeping her face. "You must stop. You have no right to say that."

But he went on stubbornly. "I 've made you angry, but I 've guessed right. You 're letting him come between us—him, and that damned money of mine. You 're going to let love go, just for that. He 's played the scoundrel, with you and me too, and he 'll do it again. You 're letting him spoil both our lives, and it won't do any good. If you find him, he 'll still be nothing but a scoundrel, and

he 'll keep on being one. You can't help it. You——"

"Stop!" she cried again, imperiously. "Oh, how brutal you are! Is that what love means to you? Is that all the strength you get from it—the strength to say such things?"

"It gives me strength to say what 's true," he retorted. "You know it 's true—all that I 've said."

She was death-white again, her clear eyes dark with pain. But a supreme courage was upon her.

"You are not to speak of this to me again," she said. "Do you understand? Never again. My life is my brother's. Will it comfort you if I say I think you have told the truth about him—the plain, dreadful truth? He has shown himself a weak, wicked man. I know it as well as you do. What he has done has given you the right to say what you have about him to me. But I hoped—" She hesitated, striving for composure; then went on resolutely. "I hoped you were go-

ing to help me, because I needed a friend; and now you 've made it impossible—impossible."

"Dorothy!" he cried abjectly. "Don't, girl! Do you think I was trying to hurt you?"

She stopped him with a gesture. "That does n't matter. We have got past all that. All I ask of you is that you will not speak another word to me about him, nor about—that other thing. You must do what I ask."

"You 're laying up a hard reckoning between him and me, if we ever get together," he said, wretchedly.

"That must be between you and him," she answered. "I wanted it different, but I can't help it now. Now you must let me pass."

She stooped and lifted the full pail, and he stood aside, looking after her, motionless, silent, as she moved away from him across the cactus-strewn sand. A dull rage burned within him, rage at himself, at her, and at the hopeless wrong of

it all. The load she carried was too heavy and she stopped, passing it from one hand to the other. With a smothered oath he sprang after her.

"Give me that pail," he .commanded, and took it from her grasp with rude strength. "Now you listen to what I've got to say. I've been dead wrong. All I've said has been dead wrong, except just one thing. I love you. You can't make me quit that, nor I'm not going to quit it; do you hear? I'm going to keep on loving you. You were made for me to love, and nothing you can say or do will change it. I'm telling you this once more, so you won't forget. Dorothy, do you hear?"

She gave no sign, but kept steadfastly on, with lips set, looking straight before her. At the camp he set the pail down and turned away, choking with passionate anger and passionate despair.

Slowly, sluggishly, the train fared onward across the wide waste, and at the

week's end it crept, weary and dust-laden, up to the grim walls of old Fort Laramie.

Old Fort Laramie! Never was such another paradox. Outpost of law, and refuge for every shade of outlawry since Eden; stronghold of hope for wayfarers hard beset in the vast wilderness, and haunt of all the nameless evils of a new, raw land; a tower of strength, and a ribald affront flaunted in the face of Heaven. Here, since the days of the fur traders, had been a tiny oasis in the wilds; hither, year by year, had come trappers, argonauts, adventurers of every sort from everywhere, bent upon every manner of border pilgrimage; and hereabouts, in course of time, had gathered and clung the scum of this human drift. Federal soldiers were there—a mere handful of weather-beaten men, worn and dispirited by the hopeless task of policing a thousand miles of lawless frontier; but far the greater number were only wanderers—Indians of many tribes and hunters and trappers come in to

trade, or emigrants and freighters halting here by the way to relax from their labours, unbending body and soul under the spell of rare companionship. They were vagrant humours that ruled the place—humours without rule or precept save such as lightest whim might set. There was a plentiful store of whiskey levelling all ranks; all ranks held mad carnival of debauchery.

It was noon when the train went into camp on the river below the fort. Through the afternoon Mark held away from his mates, who had thrown themselves at once, with lusty abandon, into the revelry. He wanted none of it; he wanted nothing but to be alone. But at evening, as he sat almost solitary over his supper at the freighters' mess, Cannon came to him.

"Hello, Bailey!" the giant hailed him. "I 've been lookin' for you. Come along with me. There 's goin' to be the very devil to pay, before we get out o' this. The boys have started on the

drink, bad. Jack 's with 'em too—wild, with his pockets all turned inside out. You know what that means. And, say, *he 's* here, too—that big Braidlaw. I seen him, a little bit ago, with a whole barrel o' whiskey in him, an' raisin' h—l. That ain't the worst of it: Dorothy 's lookin' for him. *I* did n't tell her; but she knows, somehow. Come on: we got to kind o' keep around, you an' me."

VII

A WEARY LAND

ALL day long, as on all days there, liquor had flowed steadily from unfailing springs, and the crowd assembled about the fort, hundreds strong, was frenzied with its excesses. It was a motley company. On the wide sand-bench along the Platte, below the fort walls, the waggons of the train were scattered in disorder; near by, a band of Sioux had pitched a nomads' camp of hide tepees; and above, in the timber along the brawling Laramie, was a village of Cheyennes. Pretence of trade had drawn the savages hither; but now that was forgotten, while they bore their part in the night's drunken riot—passion that made the one firm link of kinship between themselves and the master-race. For the time blood-enmity was drowned in the post trader's whis-

key, and Cheyennes and Sioux together mingled with the whites in a brotherhood of abandon to passionate appetite. Fur hunters were there too, come from the streams and forests north, south, and west, to squander six months' hard earnings in a week of furious carousing. A company of Californians, returning eastward after hapless months or years in the gold fields, had paused to buy brief forgetfulness of their ill luck; and the emigrants and freighters of the train were surrendering themselves, reckless and care-free, to a madness of reaction after the long, dull months of isolation on the trail. A stern, primal morality had held these men while the wilderness enfolded them; but now the pendulum had swung far backward. The very air was laden with the fumes of their drink, and shook with their full-throated cries, seeming to reel with the general debauchery.

Into the thick of this tumult Mark and Cannon passed in their search. Mark looked on at the fervid spectacle curiously;

in the mood he bore there was nothing in it that revolted him; rather, the lusty human quality of it appealed to him strongly, giving him a sense of that world-old comradeship which, for the hardy ones of all time, has lain in stripping the harness from the work-worn passions and turning them free to fling up their heels without let or restraint. To his eyes, as to his understanding heart, the picture was not one of shameful weakness, but of sheer, robust, untamed and untamable strength. Indecent it was not, in his sight. Law and order, the carefully balanced proprieties, the nicely weighed and measured contrivances of book and rule, seemed infinitely remote; here was only the ancient spirit of the first manhood, with all its hard-learned lessons forgotten, thrown back upon its own rude, rugged resources. Life and death, all that was past and all that was to come, were wholly swallowed up in the riotous joy of the present moment. Gross the picture was; full of obscenities, too, to nice per-

ceptions; but aglow with the splendour of unchecked youth and health.

"Which one of them are we hunting for?" Mark questioned. "Dorothy 's alone, is n't she? We 'd better go to her first. But then what are we going to do?"

Cannon turned to him with a grin. "I dunno," he answered lightly. "This is one o' the times when I 'm just kind o' trustin' the Lord. Mebbe He knows what 's what." His levity passed quickly. "By God, it 's goin' to be hard on the girl, if she runs across that brother o' her'n before we do. He was up yonder, when I saw him, at that first shack. Let 's go up there."

The building to which he led the way was no more than a temporary shed of rough planks, set up just without the fort walls—a mere tenting-place of debauchery, one of many of its kind that stood without order upon the sand. The one room of the building was small and mean and cramped, but large enough for the

purpose it served. Across one end was a broad bench of unplaned boards, breast-high, that answered for a bar; behind the bar stood barrels of whiskey, with the tops knocked in, and from these the liquor was being served in tin cups to the crowd, whites and Indians alike. Save for the bar, the barrels and a grimy oil lamp swinging from the ceiling, the room was quite bare of furnishings; the drinkers stood packed close, jostling together, swearing in good-humoured impatience at those who tried to push their way through to buy. A goodly part of the crowd had overflowed the room, standing about the door with their cups in their hands; and here, upon the trampled sand, were the prone bodies of those who had already drunk to excess and been cast out to recover themselves. There was no room inside for any who had got beyond the power to spend. Within and without the air rang with a ribald confusion of noise.

Cannon and Mark crowded into the

throng, scanning the faces in the dim light.

"He ain't here," Cannon said. "He was with this bunch, a bit ago; but he 's gone somewhere else. We 'll just have to blow around, different places, I reckon."

But he lingered for a time, looking on at the turmoil as though with tolerant amusement.

"Don't it beat the world!" he said presently, with a deep laugh. "I 've been watchin' 'em, all afternoon. Think o' trustin' that kind of chaps with responsibility, like we 've been doin' ! Ain't it funny? You would n't trust 'em with nothin' now, except devilment. But when they 're sobered up, they 'll go right ahead and make this country a place fit to live in. They 'll build towns and railroads, an' they 'll make laws, an' all that kind o' thing; an' they 'll do it right, too. But now look at 'em!"

A newcomer elbowed his way in and approached the bar, carrying himself with

an air of authority. He was a middle-aged, bearded man wearing the uniform of the army, with a captain's shoulder-straps. Long service had faded the colour of his dress, and the skin over his cheek-bones was tanned by exposure to a deep bronze. He took no account of any in the room, but rapped with his gauntleted knuckles upon the boards.

"Simons!" he called sharply to one of those behind the bar—a black-browed, broad-chested fellow, with flannel sleeves rolled high upon hairy arms, who was busily serving the drinkers. The man glanced up with easy indifference.

"Take your turn, Cap," he growled. "There 's lots of thirsts here ahead of you."

The officer shouldered his way closer. "See here, Simons," he said sternly. "I warned you this afternoon that you must stop selling to these Indians. Why have n't you obeyed?"

The other affected not to heed. He began making change for a patron, count-

ing the coins slowly down from a pile of silver and gold that lay upon the boards, taking a needless time to it. An angry light shone in the officer's eyes, and his lips were set; but he waited, holding himself under control, until the transaction was finished. Then Simons turned to the waiting drinkers.

"Quick, boys," he urged. "There 's lots waitin'. Whiskey?"

Some of them nodded in answer, and the fellow prepared to set out their cups.

"Simons!" The word carried a metallic ring. "You attend to me. Why have n't you done as I ordered?"

"Oh, you be damned!" Simons retorted. "I 'm busy. Can't you see? Come back by and by, if you want to talk." With that he began to fill another lot of cups from the nearest barrel, and turned to place them on the bar; but the officer raised the sword-scabbard that hung from his belt and brought it down smartly across the hairy wrist, spilling the liquor in a broad spattering shower

over the floor. Roaring an oath, Simons tried to draw his pistol from its holster on his hip; but the blow had benumbed his hand, and he bungled badly. The captain leaped lightly across the bar and stood confronting him.

"None of that!" he commanded. "You dare to draw that gun and I'll have you hanged. Drop your hands!"

His voice and eyes compelled obedience. Surlily, Simons let his big hands fall at his sides.

"I ordered you to stop selling your whiskey to these Indians," the captain repeated. "You knew the reasons for the order. Now why haven't you followed it?"

"I know my business," Simons growled, "and I know my rights. I'm outside the fort. You haven't got any authority here. Why the h—l don't you keep where you belong?"

The other choked back his rising wrath. "You've got to stop," he said. "You know, as well as any man here, what we'll

have to face if you keep on. It 'll mean bloodshed, as it has a dozen times before. I mean to be obeyed. I 'll not discuss my authority with you. Will you do as I tell you?"

Simons leered around upon the faces of the crowd, and what he saw there seemed to renew his courage.

"I know my business," he said again, with an evil oath. "I 've got this whiskey here to sell, and I 'm goin' to sell it to anybody that 's got the price; I don't give a damn what colour he is."

"There are women and children in the camps. If trouble starts, they 'll be in danger. Have you thought of that?"

"*I* did n't bring 'em here," Simons retorted. "They 're none of mine. You blue-bellies are here to look after them, if they need it. It 's none of my lookout."

The officer turned to the crowd. "You 'd better clear out of here, boys," he said. "I don't want any difficulty with you, but I 'm going to bring men to close the place and keep it closed. I

can't prevent your drinking; but if you want any more whiskey, you 'll have to get it somewhere else. I 'm going to upset every barrel here."

He stooped beneath the bar and passed quietly out, the crowd parting in silence to make way for him. Simons sent after him an insolent laugh.

"Upset it, will you, you ——!" he shouted. "There 'll be some you don't get." He seized an axe and tore the planks of the bar from their supports, then stood aside with a gesture. "Help yourselves, boys!" he cried. "It 's free. Take all you can. Fill up these bottles and get 'em away. If those damned blue-bellies get any, it 's your fault. Quick, now!"

There was a shrill answering cheer and a forward crush to be amongst the favoured. Cannon spoke in Mark's ear.

"Let 's go. We don't want to be in the mix; we 've got something else to look after. They 'll be raisin' Cain here in a minute."

They could do no more than wander here and there, at hap-hazard, keeping a lookout in the shifting disorder of the mob. Suddenly Mark cried "There 's Dorothy!" and broke into a run, with Cannon labouring heavily at his heels.

She had been following her quest alone. As they caught sight of her, she was passing a group seated about a fire on the ground, drinking and shouting. She paused for a moment, glancing quickly over their faces, from a little distance. One of the men, a burly trapper, espied her and staggered to his feet, advancing toward her, laughing and holding a bottle above his head. She drew back; but he caught her arm and held her, with a drunken, coarse jest. With all her strength she struggled to free herself, and the fellow reeled unsteadily and fell at his length, lying helpless upon his back, his big hand grasping her skirt and holding it fast.

"Stay here, you beauty!" he cried.

Aflame with anger, Mark stood over him. "Let go!" he ordered.

The fellow kept his hold, blinking tipsily. "You clear out!" he returned. "She 's mine. I saw her first. You get one of your own."

With all his might Mark drove his knotted fist upon the leering face, again and again, in savage rage, crushing the thick lips, opening a deep cut upon the full-fleshed cheek, every blow bringing a spurt of blood. Blinded, stunned, the man tried to rise, thrusting out his arms in a feeble effort at defence; but Mark beat him [illegible] until he lay still. Several of his co[illegible]ons were upon their feet; but their wits were thick with drink, and they were slow in coming to his aid. Mark turned to Dorothy, who, white with terror, clung to Cannon, his huge arm about her waist.

"Quick!" he cried. "We 'll have to run for it." He caught her arm, Cannon supporting her upon the other side; and

between them they hurried her away, dodging and doubling through the throng. When they paused at last, she was near to fainting, weak with fear. Mark spoke sharply.

"You must go back to Mrs. Cannon. This is no place for you. Let Cannon take you away."

Her hand still lay upon his arm. She looked at him, wide-eyed, her manner full of helpless appeal; but rudely he shook himself free, steeling himself, his lips set inflexibly. The mood that was at once his strongest and his worst was wholly ascendant in him, his hot blood tingling to his finger-tips, making tenderness impossible. "Go, go!" he said, with harsh impatience.

She shook her head. "No," she returned, almost inaudibly. "I must stay here. I must find him."

He could not master himself. "What good can you do?" he demanded. "You 're in the way. Cannon and I can hunt for him a lot better without you

—without having to drag you around and look after you. You 'll only make trouble."

She shrank before his anger. Cannon spoke with rough gentleness. "Come, little girl. He 's right. We 'll look after him. You come with me."

But she was resolute. "I must find him," she repeated. "You need n't stay with me. But I can't go."

"What are you going to do?" Mark insisted. "Suppose you find him, what are you going to do then?"

"I don't know," she answered, fearfully. "I don't know. But I must find him."

Mark turned upon his heel with a rasping laugh. "Let her come, Joe, if she won't go. It takes a woman to be reasonable!"

"There, there!" Cannon interposed, his voice softened with kindness. "You go ahead, Bailey, by yourself, and leave her here with me. You 'd better do that. I 'll see that nothin' don't happen to her. Go on now."

Dorothy stood, looking from one to the other of the men's faces, so strongly contrasted in their different emotions. It was to Cannon that she clung in her extremity. The giant's eyes met Mark's in a man's look of understanding, and with a gesture he urged him away. Because he feared to stay, Mark turned and left them.

For what seemed an endless time he walked about, wanting any clear intent, scanning the faces, half deafened by the uproar. Once, approaching a second group upon the sand, deep in the general revel, he paused.

"Say," he said to one of those least drunk, "do you know a man around here named Braidlaw?"

The fellow regarded him briefly, his eyes alight with tipsy deviltry. "Braidlaw? Sure I do! Bill Braidlaw. He 's been around—Bill Braidlaw, blind drunk. Where 's Braid, boys? He 's got lost in the shuffle somewheres; but he 's around. What do you want him for? Sit down here, you ——, and drink with us."

Mark shook his head. "Not now, boys. After a while."

"After a while!" the other scoffed. "The time to drink whiskey is *now*. Sit down. This whiskey did n't cost nothin'. It come from Simons's, an' free whiskey don't last no time. Have some!"

But Mark turned away to continue his quest. Everywhere Simons's liquor was flowing in abundance. The roisterers seemed to have taken care that a full share should fall into the hands of the Indians; Sioux and Cheyennes had it in plenty, and were fast drinking themselves into frenzy. What the soldiers had feared seemed most likely to come to pass, for already the drunken companies were quarrelling amongst themselves, lashing themselves into an evil mood.

His aimless wandering brought him at last, seemingly by merest chance, upon those he sought. The meeting came in another drinking resort, much like the first, but roomier, with rough board tables ranged in rows near together. About

these tables men were crowded, gaming and drinking, the rattle of chips mingling sharply with the confusion of voices. A roulette wheel, dingy with years of hard service, stood in the middle of the room, the players massed closely about it; card games were going on furiously at other tables; the bar was doing a thriving trade.

Forrester and Braidlaw sat together at one of the tables, that was wet with spilled liquor, and standing around them were a dozen men, lounging and laughing over their drink. Forrester seemed the genius of the group; as Cannon had said, his pockets were "inside out"; he was buying for all, jovially urging them on. His face was flushed with his own excess, his eyes flaming, his lips loosely parted.

"Drink hearty, boys!" he cried in maudlin fellowship. "You 're all my friends, ain't you? I 'm paying for all my friends. Devilish bad whiskey, though. Never mind; it 's whiskey, so drink it—drink it!" He raised his own

cup to his lips; but his hand was unsteady, and the liquor spilled down upon him, wetting his face and shirt, and the crowd broke into hoarse, jeering laughter. He joined in the laugh, wiping the clinging drops from his face upon his sleeve. "Damned good joke!" he chuckled. "Never mind, there's lots more that ain't spilled yet. Well, spill it into you, and let's order again.

They were nothing loath, and a fresh supply was brought from the bar.

"Here's luck!" Forrester cried. "Now you boys drink *my* luck. Have n't got any luck: but drink it anyway." He stared foolishly around upon the circle of faces. "Ever been disappointed in love?" he queried with tipsy emotion. "Hard luck, ain't it? Never mind!" He beat upon the table with his cup, laughing his dare-devil laugh.

"If the girl you love don't love you, never say die, and stick to it. That's what I say. Ain't that right? Drink, then!"

Mark had pushed his way into the front rank of the crowd, and stood behind Braidlaw, who lolled upon the table, his head supported upon his hands. Suddenly Forrester caught sight of Mark, and stared at him fixedly, dazed for a moment. But he was not daunted nor sobered.

"Behold, the bridegroom cometh!" he shouted, and got unsteadily to his feet. "Drink to the bridegroom! There 's the man, damn him and God bless him! Luck to Mark Bailey!"

At the words, a swift change came upon Braidlaw. He sat erect like one startled out of heavy sleep, but with senses saturated and weighted down by lethargy. His debauch had plainly continued for many days; his brain was filled with disordered visions, confused by this sudden, rude awakening to reality.

"What?" he said dully. "What did you say?" His eyes, clouded with the fumes of his drink, yet with feverish fire smouldering in their dark depths, turned

slowly from one to another of the faces, resting upon Mark's at last. The unwholesome flush upon his swarthy cheeks faded to a sick, gray pallor; then the blood came surging back in a red flood. A thick, choking exclamation escaped him, and he arose with slow, painful effort, as though a load rested upon him. Mark stood within arm's length, grim, powerful, menacing. Involuntarily Braidlaw drew back, leaning limply with his broad shoulders against the wall. Mark's voice was tense with a note of brutal triumph.

"Well, I 've found you," he said. "You don't seem glad to see me."

Braidlaw did not answer, but stood staring, staring. Forrester came unsteadily around the table and stood between them, laying his hand upon Mark's breast.

"Come, now, be good," he laughed with drunken amiability. "It 's all right, Mark. We 'll fix it all right. Be a good fellow."

Without looking at him, Mark roughly shook himself free of the detaining hand; but Forrester persisted. "It 's all right, I tell you. Don't you raise the devil about a little thing like that. Come and sit down. What 'll you drink?"

"Be quiet, will you!" Mark flared angrily. "You 're drunk."

"That 's right!" Forrester returned easily. "I 'm drunk. So 's he. You come and get drunk too, and then when we 're all sober, we 'll fix it up. Say, Mark, he 's her brother—Dorothy's brother, you know. You don't want to be hard on *her*. You ——"

Mark turned upon the boy fiercely, catching him by the shoulders and forcing him backward upon the table. With his open hand he struck the laughing face a sharp blow, then lifted him again to his feet. "Don't you dare speak her name again, till you 're sober," he cried, and threw the limp body from him with all his strength. Forrester tried to catch his footing, but could not, and fell

with violence to the floor in a corner, where he lay quite still.

But his words had wrought a change in Mark's mood. This was not the time for his own quarrel. He took Braidlaw's arm in his strong hand. "Come," he said. "Your sister 's here. She wants you."

Braidlaw had spoken not a word, nor did he speak now. His only answer was a blow of his clenched fist, that caught Mark full upon the face. In another moment they had closed, and were struggling with the fury of wild beasts, while the crowd gathered about them, jostling, swaying, swearing with delight.

Braidlaw's prolonged carouse had enfeebled neither will nor body; it seemed instead to have brought his every power to the full. He fought savagely, passionately, giving and taking blow for blow fiercely, indomitably. Mark knew at once that he had found his match in strength, in temper, in all that makes the fighter.

Yet the struggle was very brief. After the first blind onset, Mark's brain cleared, leaving him perfect master of himself. He ceased his aggression, taking the defensive, backing off inch by inch, using all his cunning to coax his antagonist on. The onlookers misinterpreted, thinking him already bested, and broke into shrill cheers, crying encouragement to Braidlaw. He too was deceived; gathering himself, he threw all his weight and strength into a mad rush and a full-arm blow straight from the shoulder. But the blow fell upon empty air. With tiger-like litheness and agility, Mark stooped low, crouching for an instant, bracing himself, then, with his every muscle strung to its uttermost tension, casting himself forward with the power of sprung steel, driving his mighty shoulder full against Braidlaw's breast. He reeled under the shock, slipping to his knees, wrenched and shaken, but exulting; for he knew he had won. Braidlaw stood erect, motionless, the breath driven from

his body, his arms hanging at his sides, his eyes starting, his face convulsed with agony. On the instant Mark leaped upon him, and he fell heavily, with Mark lying upon him, grappling for the last effort, feeling for a hold upon his throat to strangle him.

"Look out!" a voice called, seeming to come from far off. "Look out for his knife!"

From its sheath at his belt, Braidlaw had drawn a broad hunting blade and was feebly trying to use it against Mark's side, thrusting blindly, without aim or strength. Mark caught the groping arm with both his hands, wrenching it back until the knife fell to the floor. He seized it and raised it to strike. Before his eyes there flashed a broad sheet of red flame, quivering, vivid, and his ears were deafened as by the roar of a great wind. But through that sound a voice reached him—a woman's scream, terrified, agonised, and the blow did not fall. All at once his rage and hatred died down

within him, leaving him listless, emotionless. Slowly he arose, his every movement costing an effort, and stood looking down upon Braidlaw, who lay inert at his feet. The knife was still in his hand. He regarded it blankly, then let it fall from his grasp and struck it with his foot, kicking it into the crowd.

"Get up," he said, with dull quiet. "You 're not hurt. Get up." He put his arms about Braidlaw's shoulders, and would have lifted him to his feet; but in a moment he let the body fall again, for, as through a grey mist, he saw Dorothy kneel at his side.

Without knowing what he did, Mark turned and pushed through the crowd; and when he was free he broke into a run, passing the boisterous groups about the fires; passing the shadowy clusters of the Indian tepees; hurrying on and on until the fort and the encampments were left far behind, and he was stumbling through a pathless tangle of sage-brush on the hills. Once, breathless and exhausted,

he fell, and there he lay for a long time without moving, staring up at the shining stars. His senses were awake, but volition seemed quite dead. He could take no account of time. By and by he arose, and, neither knowing nor caring where he went, walked onward, until the boundless waste enclosed him completely. There he lay down again, while the night passed over him. He did not sleep; he could not. Nor could he think, though he tried a little. His excitement had quite spent itself, leaving only utter weariness of body and mind; he looked back upon the night's events with an interest that was almost impersonal, so profound was his apathy. The night silence was deathlike, save once, when a prairie wolf drew near his resting place, creeping up stealthily, and startling him by its sudden, shrill wail. Lying where he was, he drew his pistol and fired, and the beast vanished like a flying ghost, leaving him to his solitude. Not until the sky began to show the first cold grey of dawn did

he stir again. When the light grew stronger, and he arose, he found himself upon a hilltop, looking down upon the fort and the cluster of waggons and Indian lodges, that lay in the heart of the valley, five miles away.

He did not try to think what was to come next in the drama; that must take care of itself. It was only the animal that was living in him now. His old wound pained him; his whole body was strained and sore; ravenous hunger possessed him. More than anything else he wanted food and sleep. Doggedly he set off toward the camp.

The places of the night's adventures were very quiet as he passed, though it was nearing sunrise. Some of the revellers had found shelter, but many lay stretched upon the sand, sleeping off their liquor, recruiting their jaded spirit and strength for what the new day might bring. At the Sioux village some ugly old squaws were moving shiftlessly about, kindling breakfast fires and bringing wa-

ter from the river; and where the freighters were encamped, a few of the emigrant women were astir, preparing the morning meal; yet for the most part the plain looked like a battle-field, strewn with the fallen.

At the freighters' mess of his own train Mark found the cook at work, making coffee and slicing bacon. The man looked at his haggard face and grinned.

"Give me something to eat, Jimmy," Mark said. "Quick—anything; I 'm starved." He poured for himself a pint-tinful of the thick, black coffee, drinking it in deep gulps, tearing greedily at the bread and meat that was given him.

"Lord, what a stomach you 've got!" the cook commented. "The rest of the boys won't want no breakfast. Sick! I never seen such a sick lot. They 'd give good money to know how you do it—I would myself. Out all night, and eat like that!"

"It 's easy, Jimmy," Mark answered

stolidly, his mouth full of the half-cooked bacon.

While he ate, Forrester came to him. The boy was deathly pale, a picture of shame and misery. Mark glanced at him, without a word, then returned to his breakfast. Forrester sat down upon the sand, with his head bent upon his lifted knees, waiting for the courage to speak. But Mark would not help him. When he thought of the spectacle Forrester had made, his anger returned faintly, with a sense of disgust and revulsion.

"Oh, good God!" Forrester groaned. He put out one shaking hand and touched Mark lightly upon the arm. "Help me, Mark."

But Mark kept stubborn silence, eating with wolfish zest. When he had finished, Forrester still sat as at first.

"I can't help you," Mark said then. "There 's nothing I can do. What happened last night, after—after I left? What did *she* do?"

Forrester raised his head, languidly, staring away across the grey waste of hills and plain. "It was no use," he said. "She tried to take him with her, but he would n't go. He said he 's going to stay here and drink himself to death. He was a brute—he 'd have struck her, if it had n't been for Cannon. He was drinking all the rest of the night. It 's no use."

Mark pushed aside his cup and plate and arose. He had eaten his fill, and now he craved sleep. The sight of Forrester's sorrow and contrition did not move him; even the thought of Dorothy's need brought no stir of feeling. Those things were out of his keeping; he had finished his part. He went to his waggon and crawled beneath it, stretching himself upon the bare earth, and falling at once into deep slumber.

His sleep was the stupor of exhaustion. For hours he lay without moving. Toward noon, when the sun shone dazzlingly in upon his face, he was half aroused for a moment, but only to roll over into the

shadow and sleep again. The day was full of a noisier madness than the one before; but no least sound of its turmoil reached him.

It was near sunset when he awoke and crept from his shelter, stood up and stretched and shook himself. Full consciousness did not come at once; recollection of what had passed returned scrap by scrap. His every muscle ached; but after his rest, life was again strong in him.

The freighters' camp seemed quite deserted. Above, where the saloons and gambling houses were clustered, a curious quiet prevailed. Men were gathered in groups or going about, as yesterday, but as though their frenzy was abated. From where he stood, Mark saw that a few soldiers, with rifles upon their shoulders, and accoutred with sidearms, were pacing back and forth here and there, as though on police duty. The only sign of commotion was at the Sioux camp. A strong patrol of soldiers surrounded it;

the skin tepees were being rapidly taken down; a score of ponies stood meekly by, bearing pack-saddlers and travois poles, and these were being loaded with all speed.

Mark ran toward the fort, wondering. The first man he met was one of the soldiers.

"What 's happened?" Mark asked.

The other regarded him curiously. "Where you been?" he returned.

"Asleep," Mark answered. "I 've slept all day, hard."

"Then you 've slept through a half-hour of hell," the soldier said. "Some of your fellows—the freighters and the rest—got crazy-drunk, and a mob of 'em went over to pick a fuss with them Sioux, for devilment. They sure had what they went after. The Sioux was pretty drunk too. It took every man we 've got to pull 'em apart an' get the Indians started off. There 's two of 'em they 'll have to bury, likely, before long—all shot up; an' one of your gang 's dead. He was one

that 's been around for a little spell—what 's his name, now? They say his sister just got here, yeste'day."

"Dead!" Mark echoed. "God! Where is he?"

"Up yonder, at the Simons shack—the one we closed up last night."

With halting, uncertain steps, a chill at his heart, Mark went onward until he joined the hushed group about the door of the shanty; but there he paused, holding back, peering fearfully within. A rude bed of blankets had been spread in the centre of the floor, and upon it lay Braidlaw's body, strong, stalwart, as if he slept, the disorder of his death not yet smoothed away. Dorothy lay upon the earthen floor, her head pillowed upon the dead man's broad breast; and at her side knelt Mrs. Cannon, stroking the girl's hair quietly, waiting for the time to speak.

When Braidlaw had been buried, two days later, the train prepared to go on its westward way. The men were ready;

after the catastrophe of death, they had no more heart for their debauch; they were glad to take up their work.

Mark too was glad. The dreadful hours had been like a nightmare; he wanted to forget. He had suffered keenly; not as a sharer in Dorothy's suffering, but with a pain and despair wholly his own. Not once had he talked to the girl, or offered to aid her; he had kept quite to himself, brooding, brooding. He was not afraid; it was a sense of complete powerlessness that gripped him and held him back. Nothing that his will had planned had come to pass. It was Destiny. Destiny was mightier than his will; beaten, he could no more than surrender.

His apathy was not stirred when he knew that Dorothy was to remain at the fort until an eastbound train would pass, when she would return homeward. Forrester told him this, and that he, too, meant to go.

"This is n't my country, Mark," he said. "I don't belong here. If there 's

a place for me anywhere, it is n't here." A weight of sadness was upon him. "I don't know," he sighed. "I 've got no right; but maybe I can help her, somehow. I 'm going, anyway. I 'll wait for you at Council Bluffs, till you come back. Then we 'll talk about things. I can't talk now."

In the grey of the early morning the train got under way, creeping slowly out of the valley to the ridge above the river. Not until the last moment did Mark get a good-bye glimpse of Dorothy. Then she and Mrs. Cannon came together from the fort gate. Looking back from his place beside his oxen, Mark saw Dorothy standing by while the older woman got to her seat and turned her waggon into the line; then, with slow step, she returned to the shelter of the fort walls. When she was gone, Mark breathed a long, deep sigh and set his face resolutely westward.

VIII

IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROCK

SIX months were gone, and the train was faring eastward, descending the long slope from the high plains into the rolling prairie of the valley of the Missouri. Within that brief span a lifetime had been crowded—a lifetime of hardship and peril, a lifetime of courage and endurance, a lifetime of purpose and accomplishment. Winter had shut them in at Green River, in the heart of the wilderness, while the journey's end was near in miles but impossibly remote through the snow-choked cañons of the mountains. There, worn with exposure and disheartened by the dull delay, they had grimly weathered it through, until inaction—bane of the man with the temper of the fighter—became unbearable. Long before the breaking of spring they had

fought their way out, with days of unremitting toil, to the valley of the Great Salt Lake, where lay the market for the waggons' cargoes; turning then wearily upon the homeward way.

Now, when the end was almost in sight, there rested upon the men none of the outward ecstasy of victory. They were too far spent for that. Two thousand miles afoot over plain and mountain had wrought the superb young bodies into wiry, lean thews and tough sinews, fit for endurance but not for ecstasy. Ragged they were, gaunt, dust-laden, brown as Indians. New faces were in the line, here and there, replacing the dead.

It was mid-April and over the breadth of the land was the first, faint flush and glamour of reawakening life—eternal fulfilment of the eternal promise. On the hill-breasts and in the sheltered hollows, where the mellow sunlight fell aslant, a light mist of green lay over the dead brown; the warm air was fragrant as the breath of a girl; the sky as limpid and

brilliant as a jewel. The earliest of the migrant birds were already beginning their mating-songs. All the earth was quickening with the mighty mystery and miracle of resurrection.

But this wine of new life was slow to stir the hearts of the men jaded and heavy with exhaustion. It was rest more than any rekindling, reviving magic, that they craved—rest and respite.

To Mark, as he plodded dully onward day by day beside his oxen, it seemed that his longing for rest could never again be wholly satisfied. What had passed, in the long months, lay upon his body and mind with a weight that would not be shaken off. The elastic grace of unconquered youth was gone from his step; his eyes were sunken, their eager fire abated to a feverish, dull glow; lines were furrowed deep upon his tanned face, that was shrunken and hollow, as though with hunger; his black hair hung in a thick mat, almost to his shoulders, its lustre dulled by sun and weather. His

strength was not lost or lessened, but it had become as the strength of seasoned oak and tempered steel, not that of living flesh and bone. Even the buoyant quality of his will was subdued, toned down to mere power of endurance instead of that lust for conquest he had cherished when first his feet were set upon the new soil. For he had tasted of conquest and had found it of a strange savour.

One night, when the men were stretched in their blankets and quiet had fallen upon the camp, he sat beside the mess fire, watching the ash gather over the embers, that seemed to be blinking drowsily and falling asleep, drawing their night's coverlet about them. He was very tired, but wanted the will to go to his bed. He was not trying to think; it was no more than the listless revery of utter weariness that held him.

The train had long since left the country of the hostile Sioux, and the tension of caution was relaxed, with only a man or two keeping sleepy watch over the

grazing oxen. Save for these, Mark thought himself the only one awake about the camp; but presently Cannon came to the fireside, half clothed, with a blanket over his broad shoulders. Despite his indomitable spirit, he had suffered with the rest; the months had been years as in their effect upon him; he was shaggy, hollow-eyed, worn. But as he sat down at Mark's side, his bearded lips were smiling with the humour that nothing had been able to daunt.

"Uneasy?" he asked. "So am I. I 've been tossin' for an hour. I 'm goin' to set here till I fall over; then mebbe I 'll sleep."

He stretched his huge limbs, trying to make himself comfortable, settling for a time into moody silence.

"Gettin' close, boy," he said after a while. "It 'll seem good, won't it?—mighty good! Say, I 've been thinkin': Are you goin' to try it again?"

"Are you?" Mark returned.

"I dunno. That 's what I 've been

thinkin' about. The widder, she says we ain't; but I dunno. It 's been a great time. We 've made it win, Mark; an' winnin' is a bait I can't help bitin' on, somehow. Frick's been figurin' some. He was tellin' me to-night that if we have any kind of luck with them furs bought at Green River an' Laramie, we 'll clear up better than four to one on what we put into it. That ain't so bad, for a first try, without no experience nor nothin'."

"Yes," Mark said, listlessly, "we 've won. But we 've paid the price."

"Ah, by God, that 's so!" Cannon cried, with profound feeling. "A terrible price. I can't bear to think about it. Them poor boys! An' life was so good —as good as it is to us. It seems like blood money, when you think about it that way. Them the Sioux got, an' one at Green River, an' the one that died at Salt Lake—By the Lord, Death has too big a rake-off!"

Another silence fell between them, which Cannon was the first to break.

"But that ain't all, Mark. There 's another thing to think about. Somebody's got to do these jobs, an' take all these chances. The country ain't goin' to be made by them that sets down an' waits till things get easier. Somebody's got to be willin' to do these first things. It 's goin' to cost lives, spite of all we can do—as many lives as a war. Somebody 's got to give 'em. O God!" He threw himself down upon the earth, flinging his mighty arms wide, as if baffled and helpless in the face of this master-tragedy whose author was Destiny. "I dunno," he said again. "I can't see through it. I 'll have to think about it, good and hard. One way, I 'd a damned sight rather not. But another way, somehow it kind o' seems to call me."

He lay for a long time without moving, his big breast heaving now and again with a ragged sigh, as his thoughts groped for an answer to the world-old riddle. "Ain't it funny?" he said, by and by. "Men are curious critters. A

man says to himself, 'I 'm goin' to do this or that, an' it 's comin' out this way or that way.' But it don't—not once in a hundred million times, if it 's anything real big an' worth while. What I don't understand is why we don't all get plum discouraged an' quit. What 's the reason? Seems like mebbe the Almighty 's pullin' strings on us, don't it, after all?"

Lying as he was, he fell asleep presently, leaving Mark to himself. The vast, deep hollow of the night gave him a sense of complete isolation and loneliness. There were no near and familiar sounds that came to his ears, but only a far, faint murmur, the throbbing of the earth's wondrous life-currents sweeping their appointed way—sound never stilled since life began. It was of a part with Cannon's cry of the heart in its fathomless mystery; as he heard, his soul was oppressed by fear and by a great melancholy. Was it never to be given to him, he wondered, to know anything, even the least part, of life's real meaning? As

never before, he felt that he stood facing a dead wall, shutting the future away from his sight completely. Was the fair faith of youth to turn out, after all, no more than an ironical illusion, a cruel jest? "A man deserves what his strength can win for him," he had said to Forrester once, believing it implicitly; but now the words came back to him like a mocking echo empty and false; and close upon this he heard again Cannon's saying: "A man says to himself, 'I 'm goin' to do this or that, an' it 's goin' to turn out this way or that way.' But it don't." In his moody dejection, and in the light of what had befallen, he saw himself as no more than a puppet, doing a foolish dance for the idle amusement of the Fates.

As always of late, when he would sit brooding thus, by and by the face of Dorothy took form before him, ethereal, exquisite, the misty eyes gazing fixedly into his with a look that was inscrutable —sad, accusing, but full of a shadowy,

vague tenderness. A spasm of pain contracted his heart. Could it be true that she had passed out of his life? Would he never again set eyes upon her loveliness? Through all the dreary months, the memory of their parting, when her need was so great and his brutal passion so implacable, had recurred to him again and again; as he thought of it now, it filled him with the consciousness of a final and irreparable loss. His victory in the wilderness—the first real victory of his life and the beginning of his fortune—had become meaningless and vacant, since love was gone. His zest was dead. Though he hardily tried to face his future and to plan a use for himself, the effort was a wretched failure.

Midnight came, bringing the brief stir of changing watch, and the fire was almost dead; but still he sat dreaming his ineffectual dreams, trying, with his utmost strength, to bring some clear shape out of the haunted shadows that shut him in. But at the last he realised nothing

but despair. He had won his victory, he had earned victory's reward; but as he dwelt upon it he saw that it was pitifully cheap and tawdry, without love to glorify it. He lay down upon the ground, burying his head upon his arms.

"I loved her!" he breathed. "Oh, I loved her so!" Then, in helpless surrender: "God help me! I want her. She belongs to me."

Another week, and one warm, radiant noonday, as the train crept at its snail's pace to the crest of one of the billowy hills, Cannon, walking by the lead waggon, flung his arms above his head, with a deep-throated cry, leaping about in a clumsy dance of joy.

"Glory, glory, glory hallelujah!" he shouted. "Here she is! Omaha, Omaha!"

The train halted, and the men ran forward from their places in the line, gathering about the capering giant, laughing, cheering, happy, their weary trials forgotten as they looked down upon the scattered cluster of cabins at the bottom

of the hill-slope. Peace lay over the wide valley, that was carpeted and festooned with the green of the bourgeoning spring, in infinite variety of hues and shadings; from rim to rim of the enclosing hills it was filled, flooded, with the liquid gold of the sunlight; the near woods resounded with a riot of bird-melodies; the thick tangles of undergrowths along the sides of the trail were jewelled with wild blossoms, peeping shyly out; the balmy air was rich with the incense of the mellow earth.

"God's country!" Cannon said, his deep voice resonant. "Oh, it 's good!"

Slowly they descended the hill and drew into the village, where the townsfolk were assembled in the streets to give them welcome and to get the news of the winter from the western trail. Frick's careworn face was beaming, as he felt the lifting of his load.

"We 'll stay on this side to-night, boys," he said. "There 's no hurry, we can go to the Bluffs in the morning.

You care for your animals, and then keep as sober as you can."

When the needful tasks were done, Mark sought Frick.

"I 'm dead tired," he said. "I 'm going to wait here, for a day or so, till I can have some sleep. One of the boys will take my waggon across. I 'll see you, over there, before the week 's out."

"All right," Frick nodded. "You 've earned it. It 's been a hard trip. Take your time. I 'll try and have the business figured out, by the time you come, so we can make our settlement and talk things over."

Released, Mark went at once to the cabin he had built, in the last summer, on his claim. There was an air of abandonment about the place. The door had blown open, letting the winter's snow drift in. The spring warmth seemed not to have found its way here, for the snow lay heaped upon the floor, and the stone fireplace was choked with it, giving to the room an oppressive chill. His tools

were in a corner, as he had left them. He shovelled the snow from the hearth and kindled a roaring fire of bark and dead-falls, then set to work to clear the drifts from the door. Evening was upon him when his labour was done and the room made tidy. A wolfish hunger possessed him. Returning to the town, he brought coffee, bread, and bacon, cooked his supper over the coals and ate his fill, taking a long time to it. When he had finished, he flung off his boots, wrapped a blanket about him and lay down upon the warm hearth-stones, where he fell at once into deep, dreamless sleep, waking only when the morning sun was high. The rivulet running near his cabin was still banked with snow in the sheltered hollow where the timber stood thick, and the water was icy-cold. Stripping to the skin, he splashed about in the stream until the shock of its bitter cold brought reaction, making his body glow. Plunging into a snow-bank, he rolled like a colt, coming out tingling to his finger-tips. He break-

fasted as he had supped. ravenously; stretching out again at once to sleep.

All through the day he lay, drowsing and waking, drowsing and waking, turning lazily in his blanket, rising only when his fire fell low or when returning hunger prompted him with imperative call—full of a placid, animal content, his mind undisturbed, basking in the warmth of life and strength that flowed into his every fibre.

After his second breakfast, he went out upon the hills and through the woods, walking without aim or purpose but to feel the renewed vigour of his body, and to tire himself out, that he might enjoy again the pleasure of rest. For hours he kept to his sturdy exercise, turning homeward only when the dusk began to fill the deep hollows, and his muscles were cloyed with a delicious weariness.

From a distance, he saw that his cabin door stood open, and that the room was bright with firelight, shining in a broad path over the threshold and across the

darkened earth. Forrester was there, awaiting his coming, sitting before the blaze crossed-legged upon the floor. In his deep preoccupation he did not hear the approaching footsteps until Mark stood in the doorway; then he started to his feet, turning with outstretched hands.

"Mark, Mark!" he cried. For a little time he stood thus, his glance eagerly searching the man's face. "For Christ's sake, Mark!" he said, as if in supplication.

All hardness toward the boy passed from Mark's heart. He put his strong arms about the young shoulders with the affection of a brother, and his deep laugh was like a caress. "It 's all right, Jack," he said gently. "It 's got to be all right. We can't afford to have it any other way. Lord, but I 'm glad to see you!"

They sat together beside the fire, taking account of what the months had wrought. They had brought change to Forrester, no less than to Mark; he was thin and worn; his happy-go-lucky boyishness was gone, and he seemed older

by five years than at the time of their parting, with a quiet, contained dignity and power of restraint that bespoke a ripened manhood. In the first moments of their meeting Mark saw the difference, wondering at its meaning.

But he asked no intimate questions; understanding would come soon enough. For an hour they sat, while he told of what had befallen on the trail and of the outcome of the enterprise. Forrester spoke but little; sometimes it was plain that he was not attending to what Mark said, while his thoughts were fixed upon something, invisible but to his brooding eyes, deep in the glowing heart of the coals.

By and by Mark arose. "Supper!" he said briskly. "I 've been forgetting. I 'm near starving. Now you 've got to do the talking, and let me work. What 's been happening here? I have n't heard a word yet."

Forrester drew back into the shadow at the side of the fireplace, leaning

against the chimney-stones. One thought had been uppermost in the mind of each, but both had avoided it in speech. Now Forrester spoke as though with a courageous effort.

"She 's here, Mark," he said quietly. "At the Bluffs, I mean. She 's been there ever since we came back."

Mark was bending over the fire, raking a bed of coals together. At the calm words he stood suddenly erect, feeling his every muscle drawing tense.

"Here!" he echoed. "She 's *here?* Why, what——"

"She 's teaching school, over yonder," Forrester said, with the same quiet. "She began it a little while after we got here. She meant to go back to her home, but she changed her mind and staid. I 've been here too, all the time. She wanted the school, and I got it for her. I 've done all I could, Mark."

"And what—what else? Tell me!"

Forrester shook his head. "That 's all. There 's nothing more than that,

that I know. You 'll have to find out the rest for yourself."

A silence fell between them, while Mark went about his work mechanically, blundering, getting nothing done. His coffee boiled over on the fire; his bacon was burned to black chips; but he did not heed. After a time Forrester came to his side, laying his hands lightly upon the strong shoulders, looking fixedly into the perplexed eyes.

"Oh, Mark, Mark, you 've got to be good to her. Do you understand? No, I don't believe you do; but you must. Whatever grace of soul you 've got you must show to her. You don't know what she is. Why, Mark, if you knew—oh, what 's the use!" He broke off with an abrupt gesture, turning away and beginning to pace back and forth across the dim-lit room, back and forth, back and forth, his head bent, his fine face working with the stress of his nervous excitement, Mark following him with intent, troubled gaze.

"But, Jack—" he began; but Forrester stopped him with uplifted hand.

"Don't!" he said. "I know what you 're thinking. I 've been her friend, as good a friend as I knew how to be; that 's all. You can put that out of your mind. If I had been fit—" He walked to the open doorway and stood for a moment looking out into the night, waiting for control. When he turned to face Mark again, his lips were smiling, his eyes alight, as though his depth of feeling had been but a passing humour. "If the child is really father to the man," he laughed, "then my young father and I have an account to settle, for the things I 'm incapable of. But friendship is n't one of them, Mark, I 've been her friend, and now I 'm trying to be yours. You 'll have that to thank me for after a while. Go ahead with your supper; I want it, bad."

When the next dawn came, a spring rain was falling, warm and soft, cleansing and vitalising, bringing a sense of

Nature's deathless calm. Toward noon the clouds passed and the sun shone with dazzling brilliance; the perfumed breath of the woods and the earth was full of a sensuous languor. Again Mark bathed in the rivulet, ate his dinner with unabated appetite, and set off for the ferry-landing. He was rested and refreshed. He must make his settlement with Frick and take a square look at his future, he told himself. Prolonged idleness was not his part.

He found Frick elated over his careful tables of figures, that spelled success.

"Thirty-seven hundred and eighty dollars, Bailey," he said with quiet satisfaction. "Here 's your statement. Check it off, and see if it 's right."

A renewed sense of mastery came to Mark, as he tucked his money securely into his belt.

"And now what 's the plan?" he asked.

"We 'll have to wait a few days," Frick said, "until some new stuff comes up the river. Supplies are short here, after the

winter. We 'll know pretty soon. It 's just as well. The boys will want to feel their freedom a bit. I 'm going back and I want to keep the old crowd together, as much as I can. Jack will keep his money in the game, he says, and I have hopes of Joe, though he 's a little doubtful on his wife's account. We 'll see. Of course you 'll go? "

" I don't see anything else. I 'm satisfied, plenty, with the way it 's turned out. Yes, I guess you can count on me too."

When they had separated, Mark returned to the ferry-landing, where the boat was waiting; but there he paused, loitering about, letting the boat go without him; then another and another. A thought accused him: " You 're a coward. You 're afraid to face her." He was not used to fear. It was this realisation, more than desire, that held him, irresolute. By and by he left the river and walked idly about the town, here and there, neither knowing nor caring where

he went. His eyes saw nothing of what went on around him; his companions of the train were mingling with the townsfolk, in light-hearted good-fellowship, and now and again one of them hailed him, challenging him to join in the sport, but he shook his head, only half heeding, and kept on his way. The afternoon was far spent when his wandering ceased and he shook himself out of his preoccupation, drawing his stooped shoulders firmly erect.

"I 've got to see her," he said. "There 's no other way. It 's a jump in the dark, but I 've got to take it."

He inquired his way to the schoolhouse —a rough log building, that stood in a waste spot at the edge of the town, amongst scrub oaks, the dooryard trampled bare by the feet of the children. School was just dismissed as he came within sight of the place, and the children were going their ways in noisy, lively groups, their sweet young voices swelling in a gay chorus, their blithe young feet

dancing with the joy of release into the spring sunshine and warmth. But Mark gave to them only a passing glance, unseeing, impatient; for beside the open door, in exquisite relief against the rude background, stood a slender, black-gowned figure, crowned with the glory of a mass of fair hair, glowing, instinct with life in the golden sunlight. He caught his breath sharply, and his strong heart leaped and pounded, while his love surged back upon him, flooding his soul. Of no avail his stubborn struggle. In that moment he knew that he was conquered, helpless.

He drew back amongst the trees, waiting until the children had gone lightly on their way homeward; then, with halting steps, he stole quietly to the open doorway, quaking with the fear that was upon him.

Dorothy sat at her desk, at the far end of the room, bending busily over the day's last tasks, and all unconscious. Now and again, as she turned the leaves of her

book, a familiar gesture of her small hand or a familiar poise of her small head thrilled him like a stab of delicious pain. She was so beautiful, so brave, with an air of such heavenly serenity! For a long time he stood, hardly breathing, his every fibre quick with yearning tenderness. Then, because he could not help himself, he stepped across the threshold, standing with bared head.

"Dorothy, Dorothy!" he cried.

With a startled, inarticulate cry she half arose from her chair, then sank back again white as death, her hands pressed to her breast, her lips parted, waiting while he came slowly up the aisle and stood before her, his passionate, hot eyes holding hers, that were full of wonder and fright.

"I have come," he said simply. She did not answer or move; she seemed hardly to live, save in the dark depths of her eyes. Slowly he drew nearer, standing at her side, towering above her.

"I have come," he said again. "I

had to come. I fought against it, but it was n't any use. I had to come."

Still she did not answer, sitting like one dazed, powerless.

"Dorothy!" His strong, warm fingers closed about her cold hand with a clinging pressure. At the touch, she seemed to start again to life, a deep flush mounting, overspreading cheeks and neck and forehead.

"Oh!" she breathed, with a long sigh. Her glance fell from his, and she released her hand from his clasp. But her agitation was not passed. She picked up her book from the desk, turning the leaves idly, with trembling fingers; then let it fall to the floor and with a helpless cry hid her face upon her arms, shaken by a storm of sobs.

He laid his hand upon her bent head, stroking her soft hair, love and tenderness welling within him. "God!" he cried, and sank to his knees at her side, putting his great arms about her, drawing her to him as though she had been a

troubled child, compelling her head to rest against his broad shoulder. "There!" he said, his voice choking. "There 's where you belong, beloved." As though she wanted the will to move, she lay quite still until the tumult of her tears was quieted.

"I thought I had lost you," he whispered then. "I thought you would be gone. I was afraid I would never find you again."

She drew away from him gently, drying her tears. "I had no place to go," she said, with a child's utter simplicity. "My brother was all I had. I could n't go back where we had lived. Besides, I had to stay here until——"

He knew what she would say. "Please, Dorothy, not that!" he said. "Listen. You are never to speak of that wretched thing again. Never again. That is dead and buried with him, and you must let it lie. It has made you suffer too much already—all these months of dreadful loneliness. Promise me that."

She bent her head in silence. "I am glad," he said. For a little time he waited, his hungry eyes intent upon her.

"You have been very lonely, have n't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she sighed, with the same simple honesty.

"Look at me, Dorothy!"

Slowly, very slowly, she raised her bent head, turning toward him, and their eyes met.

"I love you!" he cried. "You can tell it 's true. I shall love you until I die, and after that, if a man can love then. I love you. You need me, as much as I need you, because I am strong. I want my strength to be about you, because you need it, and because I love you. 'A weary land':—Do you remember when you said that to me? The first day we met? And ever since then I have been dreaming that some day I should be your rock, with my love to make a shelter for you. Is it coming true? Don't fight against it—don't! Here!" Kneeling

as he was, he opened his arms to her. "Dorothy, if you love me, come! No! Look at me! I love you! I know that you love me. Come!"

With a great cry she gave herself to him, letting his arms enfold her.

"Beloved, beloved!" he whispered in ecstasy. "Mine, mine! Oh, I thank God."

Again, with the wondrous glory of the spring about him, and with the ineffable splendour of love and life flooding his soul, Mark worked upon his claim, making over his rude cabin into a home. Home! The word beat in his mind like a pulse. Every stroke of his axe thrilled him; every breath he drew warmed and comforted him like wine. Within his heart, as in the freshening world without, a very miracle was being wrought, a miracle of transfiguration. No more for him any doubt of life or of life's utility—doubt that so short a time ago had turned his passions to discord, primal and brutal.

Love; wife; home:—the simple words became for him the whole gamut of harmony, the sweet, inviolate harmony of the creation. He laughed, with a sort of shame, at the memory of what had been his faith so short a time ago—that conquest of this wide, new land was to be made by the sheer, gross strength of will and body, through the lust of the fighter. Such a poor, blind faith! He knew better now. Blood must be shed, no doubt, to appease the savage gods of the wilderness; but the supreme and ultimate victory would descend, not upon the ghastly battlefield, but upon the dooryard of the home; its most precious trophy would fall, not to the messenger of death and destruction, but to him who would bring into life being out of the virgin soil and about the hearthstone. Life, not death, must be the magic master-word of the victor; fruitfulness, not devastation; the world-old patience of the husbandman, not the mad fury of him whose hand bore fire and sword. So much was made

known to him, with the certainty of absolute conviction, as the golden days passed over him. Love; wife; home: heaven and earth seemed crying the words with myriad voices, in eternal reiteration, and deep in his soul he understood.

Although it absorbed him so wholly, his task was not great. He was only building another room on his cabin—a wide, log-walled room, with a fireplace, like the other, and with deep-seated windows opening toward the east and south. It would be primitive enough, he knew, when it was done; yet every rough timber, every stone, every grain of sand in the chinking, was hallowed in his sight; for here Dorothy was to live—Dorothy, his wife, sweet mother of his children, dear sharer in all the joy and glory that life and love could bring. From dawn to dark he worked, knowing no weariness; and often, when night had fallen, he would kindle a great fire upon the ground, working for long hours by the light of the

flames, his every muscle and nerve strung tense, and singing with his happiness. His heart was full of joyful laughter; and the spring rains and spring winds, the birds at their spring nesting, the soft green mat of growing things upon the spring earth beneath his feet—every gay figure in life's exquisite spring processional—sang with him in a jocund abandon of delight. There was no moment of idleness. Before his southern door he built a rustic porch of slender saplings, like a bower, bringing wild vines from the woods to plant about it; and in the mellow earth of the dooryard he spread, with infinite patience, a living carpet of purple and yellow violets, patterned with the airy tracery of the first budding fern-fronds.

His work must be done by the first day of June; but he would suffer none to help him. His own hand must do everything, for pure love's sake. Nor would he suffer Dorothy to see what he was about, until the great day would come.

Cannon and his wife visited him on a golden afternoon, taking sympathetic account of what he was about. The giant lolled at his ease upon a fallen tree-trunk, tugging at his shaggy beard, speaking with a lightness that could not wholly obscure his feeling.

"Well, Bailey, I can see where we 're goin' to be shy one good man next trip," he said. "But I 'd stay too, if I was you; dummed if I would n't. I should n't wonder if this is what me an' her will be doin' one o' these days—diggin' in the dirt an' fixin' a place where we can strike root. But it won't be till after the next trip west. She 's goin' to let me go once more, ain't you, old lady?"

"Oh, yes!" she smiled placidly. "Just as I 'm going to let the wind go. It would be foolish to try to hold the wind in one place, would n't it, now?"

"Just once more!" Cannon repeated, his lively eyes grave for the moment. "I 've been thinkin' about it, a heap. Look here: I 've found a verse that kind

o' seems to fit. Lemme read you." From the bosom of his shirt he brought a small worn Bible, turning the leaves with clumsy thumb until he had found what he sought. "I read her, sometimes, when the fit 's on me," he said, "an' I run across this last night, when I was layin' by the fire. Listen! 'And they took of the fruit of the land in their hands, and brought it down unto us, and brought us word again, and said, It is a good land which the Lord our God doth give us.' There! What do you make out o' that? Was n't that like we 're goin'? Ain't we fixin' it for them that 's come after us, just the same as them old roosters done? You 're damned right we are! We 're breakin' the way for them that 's to come after us, an' lettin' 'em know what they 've got to expect. It 's got to be done. We won't get our names in no book, like them old Jews. Nobody won't remember who we be, nor yet what we done; but it 's got to be done, just the same, an' I reckon

mebbe the Lord 'll be just as tickled as He was then."

"Yes, yes!" his wife sighed softly. "If I were a man, I should feel so too. But I 'm a woman, and I want my home. This will be a wilderness for the women until they have made their homes and—and their graveyards—a place for the living and a place for the dead."

Cannon struck his great hands together with a helpless gesture. "Lord God!" he cried; "why can't we see ahead, an' know what 's best? But I 'm goin', wife—just once more. I 've got to; I 've got to!"

Forrester came too, sometimes, loitering about and looking on while Mark worked. He seemed to know no distress over the time to come, but faced it with his habitual air of amused tolerance. It was with a light, off-hand whimsicality that he spoke one day, as June drew near:

"Hurry up the wedding, Mark. I 'm waiting for it. Then I 'm going down to

Kansas and play with those Free Soilers for a while. They 're having no end of fun, and it will be something different for me. This game 's too slow for my taste. Frick's going to keep my money for me; he can take care of it a lot better than I can. But I want to play at something swifter—something gorgeous and interesting. Be quick now, and let me go, before the thing gets stale with thinking about it."

A day in June, and in the bridal freshness and splendour of the morning Mark stood at Dorothy's side upon the carpet of violets beneath the trees, listening in rapture while the simple words were spoken that made her his wife. Never was such a morning before since the world began, he was sure; heaven and earth seemed burnished to the brilliance of flame, decked with all the glories of Nature's immortal life. Never before was such a chapel as that of the spring woodland, aisled with the arched leafage

of oaks and elms and lindens, resounding with the deathless music of life and love.

All the folk of the neighbourhood were there—the freighters, the passing emigrants, the townsmen, and the pioneer husbandmen, standing about in a smiling throng, sharing in his happiness.

"I, Dorothy, take thee, Mark—" So much he heard, and then what followed became to him like a dream until the people gathered about and he felt the kindly pressure of their toil-hardened hands, read what was in their homely, sun-browned faces, and watched while they went away, in merry groups, down the hillside through the trees.

Forrester was the last to go, lingering as though held by subtle chains. But there was upon him no outward show of emotion; his lips were smiling, his eyes full of light, his lithe shoulders squared. Without a word he lifted Dorothy's hand and touched it reverently with his lips, before giving his hand to Mark, holding the strong fingers with a clinging, affection-

ate pressure. Their eyes met, and he tried to speak, but the words would not come.

"Good luck!" he cried with a laugh, and turned away.

When he was gone, Mark took Dorothy's hand in his and led her to the doorway of their home, standing there with her, looking down upon her, feasting his soul upon her radiant loveliness, hardly daring to breathe or to move lest the wondrous spell might be broken. It was long before he spoke. Laying his strong hand upon her fair head, he gently turned her face to his, looking into her glorious eyes—well-springs of love and tenderness and trust. Stooping, he kissed her upon the lips.

"Dorothy! Wife!" he whispered. Then, his strong arm about her, he drew her within the cabin.

THE END