The Biography of a Prairie Girl

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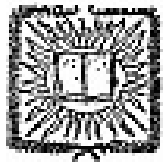
THE BIOGRAPHY OF A PRAIRIE GIRL

BY ELEANOR GATES



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TO
MRS. PHŒBE A. HEARST

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I

THE COMING OF THE STORK

IT was always a puzzle to the little girl how the stork that brought her ever reached the lonely Dakota farm-house on a December afternoon without her being frozen; and it was another mystery, just as deep, how the strange bird, which her mother said was no larger than a blue crane, was able, on leaving, to carry her father away with him to some family, a long, long distance off, that needed a grown-up man as badly as her three big brothers needed a little sister.

She often tried to remember the stork, his broad nest of pussy-willows on the chin of the new moon, and the long trip down through the wind and snow to the open window of the farm-house. But though she never forgot her christening, and could even remember things that happened before that, her wonderful journey, she found, had slipped entirely from her mind. But her mother and the three big brothers, ever reminded by the stone-piled mound on the carnelian bluff, never forgot that day:

An icy blizzard, carrying in its teeth the blinding sleet that neither man nor animal could breast, was driving fiercely across the wide plains; and the red, frame dwelling and its near-lying buildings of sod, which only the previous morning had stood out bravely against the dreary, white waste, were wrapped and almost hidden in great banks that had been caught up from the river heights and hurled with piercing roars against them.

The storm had begun the day before, blowing first in fitful gusts that

whistled under the eaves, sent the hay from the stacks flying through the yard, and lifted the ends of the roof shingles threateningly. It had gradually strengthened to a gale toward midday, and the steady downfall of flakes had been turned into a biting scourge that whipped up the soft cloak from the face of the open, treeless prairie and sent it lashing through the frigid air. Long before night had begun to settle down, no eye could penetrate the scudding snow a foot beyond the window ledges, except when a sudden stilling of the tempest disclosed the writhing cottonwood break to the north, and the double row of ash saplings leading south to the blotted, printless highway.

With darkness, the fury of the blizzard had redoubled, and the house had rocked fearfully as each fresh blast struck it, so that the nails in the sheathing had snapped from time to time, and rung in the tense atmosphere like pistol shots. Momentary lulls—ominous breathing-spells—had interrupted the blizzard; but they had served only to intensify it when it broke again. As it rose from threatening silence to rending shrieks, the bellowing of the frightened cattle, tied in their narrow stalls, had mingled with it, and added to its terrors.

But, when another wild, sunless day had come in, the drift-piled home had ceased to shiver and creak or admit any sounds from without. Hour by hour it had settled deeper and deeper into the snow that weighted its roof and shuttered its windows, until, shrouded and almost effaced, it lay, at last, secure from the tempest that swept over it and deaf to the calls from the buried stables.

Down-stairs in the big, dim sitting-room, the neighbor woman was keeping the lonely vigil of the stork. Early the previous day, before the storm began, and when the plains still stretched away on all sides, a foam-covered sea, the huge swells of which had been gripped and frozen into quiet, the anxious husband had mounted and started westward across the prairie. The horse had not carried him far, however, for the drifts would not bear its weight; so, when the three

big brothers, hearing his halloo, had taken him a pair of rude skees made of barrel staves, he had helped them free the floundering animal, and had then gone on afoot.

His destination was the army post at the reservation, and he had made swift progress toward it. The ice-bound Vermilion did not check him, and the sealed sloughs shortened his path. Onward he had sped, tirelessly. In half an hour his scarlet nubia had blended into the black of his fur-lined coat; in an hour he was only a speck, now in sight upon the top of a swell, now lost in its trough. And then he had disappeared altogether over the long, unbroken line of the horizon.

That day had passed, and the night; and, when a second day was half gone, he had not yet returned. The farm-house, as hopeful as a sailor's home, felt little worry, believing that he was too good a plainsman to brave such a blizzard foolishly, and pictured him fretting his time away at the post, or in some hospitable shanty nearer by.

But the neighbor woman was full of fear for his safety. And, as she waited alone, she walked to and fro, watching first the canopied bed in the corner, and then the shaking sash that, if Providence were merciful, might at any moment frame an eager face. Every little while she paused at the stove, where, the hay twists having long since given out, she fed the fire from a heaping basket of yellow, husked corn.

The three big brothers were in the attic overhead, huddled close about the warm stovepipe that came up through the floor, with the dogs at their backs. It was dusk there, too, for the western gable window, broken the evening before by the force of the storm, was nailed tight from within and piled high from without; while the window in the opposite end of the house was intact, but veiled with frost and hung with icicles. The week's washing, swinging under the peaked roof on a long, sagging clothes-line, added further to the gloom. Stiff and specter-like, it moved gently in the currents of air that blew down from the bare, slanting rafters, each garment taking on a fantastic

shape of its own. Near the pipe hung the stockings of the family, limp and steaming in the twilight.

The biggest brother had been reading aloud to the other two; but, as the light grew less, he threw the paper-bound book aside, and they began to talk in subdued tones. Below them, they could hear the neighbor woman walking back and forth, and the popping of the kernels in the stove; behind them, the dogs slept; and from above came faint sounds of the storm.

Outside, night was coming on fast—the early night of a stormy day. The neighbor woman, noting the increasing darkness in the sitting-room, lighted a tall kerosene lamp and set it on the clock-shelf near a south window. The lower windows to the west were closed and sightless, so no beacon could shine from them; but she hoped that the lamp's feeble rays, piercing the unscreened top panes of the south window, might by chance catch the eye of the husband were he striving to return.

With increasing darkness, the blizzard grew in strength and fury. It loosened a clapboard below the east gable, and shrieked through the partial opening. It rattled the window, and tore at the heavy planks on the roof that supported the stovepipe. It blew the snow from the cracks and whistled through them shrilly. It caught the house in its drifts and shook it.

The dogs, awakened by the screeching and clash of things, crouched in fright against their masters. Shepherd, pointer, and Indian dogs trembled when the wind moaned, and answered every whine from without with another. The St. Bernard, separating himself from the pack, sprang at a bound to the boarded-up window and, raising his head, uttered long, dismal howls. The big brothers hastened to quiet him, and spared neither foot nor fist; but the dog, eluding them, returned again and again to the window, and mourned with his muzzle to the west.

It was while the hurricane was thus raging over the farm-house, and when nothing but a bit of south roof and the tops of the cottonwoods showed that a habitation was there, that the stork alighted.

The big brothers were drowsing in the dark about the pipe, with the pack whimpering beside them, and did not know of his coming until, in a sudden lull, there came up through the open trap-door that led to the sitting-room stairs a small, clear, hailing cry.

It sounded but for an instant. Then the storm broke again, the windows rattled, the dogs whined, the sleet-charged air boomed and thundered and sucked at the quivering house, and darkness, ever blacker and more terrible, settled down.

When the neighbor woman came softly up and put her head above the trap-door, she had to call again and again into the gloom, through which the lines of frozen clothes waved faint and ghost-like, before the big brothers awoke and, rising from their cramped positions, groped their way sleepily to the stairs and followed her down. As they reached the sitting-room and stood in a silent, waiting row by the stove, the dogs about them, the neighbor woman tiptoed to the canopied bed in the corner and took up a tiny bundle, which she brought back and laid in the arms of the biggest brother.

Then she leaned back, all fat and smiling, as the big brothers bent over the bundle and looked into a wee, puckered, pink face. It was the little girl.

II

A FRONTIER CHRISTENING

THE christening of the little girl began the very morning after the stork flew down through the blizzard and left her. For the three big brothers, rejoicing that they were still only three, got out the almanac, the world's atlas, and the dictionary, went carefully through the first two, read a long list in the back of the last, and wrote down all the names they liked. Then they set about trying to decide upon one.

It was difficult, for their selections were numerous. The world's atlas had yielded Morena, Lansing, and Virginia; the back of the dictionary, a generous line beginning with Abigail and ending with Zoraida; and the almanac, May and June from the months, Maria and Geraldine from the scattered jokes, and Louisa, Fanny, and Rose from the testimonials of ladies who had been cured of influenza, hay-fever, and chilblains. So not only that day, but a whole week passed away in lively discussion, and they were no nearer a choice than ever.

Their mother gave no thought to the subject Instead, from morning till night, through the lower western windows, now tunneled free, she scanned the snow-sheeted, glistening prairie. It stretched away silent, pathless, and treacherous, smiling up so brightly that it blinded those who crossed it; and hiding, as smilingly, those who lay beneath the drifts that covered it.

But discussion over the naming never flagged among the big brothers, for they did not yet share her anxiety. The chores were their only interruption; still, while they made twists for the stove, melted

snow for the thirsty stock, or pitched hay out of the shaft that had been sunk to the half-used stack and piled it into the covered barn through a hole in the roof, they kept up the debate. But with all the time and talk given the matter, no agreement seemed possible, until one day when the biggest brother made a suggestion.

He proposed that each write a name upon a piece of paper and place it in a hat, and that the little girl's hand be put in among the pieces, so that she could take hold of one. The name on the slip she seized should be hers. So the ballots were prepared, the neighbor woman brought the little girl, and one tiny clinging fist was guided into the crown. But though the pink palm would close on a finger, it refused to grasp a ballot; and, to show her disapproval of the scheme, the little girl held her breath until she was purple, screwed up her face, and began to cry lustily.

The big brothers, when they found that she would not choose for herself, repaired in disgust to the attic. But as they gathered gloomily about the stovepipe, a second plan offered itself to them in the shape of the dominoes, and they began to play, with the understanding that whoever came out winner in the end might name the little girl.

The contests were exciting and raged from dinner-time till dusk, the dogs looking on from an outer circle and joining their barks to the shouts of the boys. When the last game came to a close under the swinging, smoky lantern that lighted the room from its nail on a rafter, the eldest brother, victorious, arose and led the way to the sitting-room, the other two following with the pack, and proudly proclaimed the little girl Edith Maud.

But he had not counted on his mother's wishes. For when she heard the result of the dominoes, she overturned the whole project, much to the delight of the vanquished, by declaring that she did not like Edith Maud at all; and added that the selection would be made from the Bible when their father returned. So the big brothers carefully

hunted out every feminine name between Genesis and Revelations.

But at the end of a fortnight they too grew anxious, and the christening was forgotten. No news had come from the army post, and so, one morning, they set forth toward it with the St. Bernard, when the warm sun was melting the white caps of the ridges. They did not have to go far. The dog led them unerringly to a near-by bluff, from which they returned a sad procession. And next day a mound rose on the southern slope of the carnelian bluff and was covered high with stones, to keep away the hungry prowlers of the plains. The storm that had ushered in the new life had robbed the farm-house of the old.

Spring had opened, and the thawing prairie lay in splotches of black and white like the hide of a calico pony, before the family again thought of the naming of the little girl. Then her mother despatched the youngest brother to the post-office, a day's ride to the east, to mail an order to a store in a far-away city. Though there seemed no possibility that it would soon be decided what to call the little girl, preparations had begun for the baptism at the sod church on the reservation, and the order asked for five yards of fine linen and a pair of white kid shoes.

During the busy days of plowing and planting that followed, interest in the christening was almost lost. And when the arrival of the linen and the shoes revived it one afternoon in early summer, it was lost sight of again in a rush of hoeing and herding. So it was not until late fall, when all the crops were harvested and the threshers had come and gone, that the family began once more to consider it.

It was time that the little girl had a name of her own, for she could trot the length of the sitting-room, if she held on to the biggest brother's finger, and walk, all by herself, from the lounge to the table.

Besides, she was learning to eat with a spoon, which she pounded crossly on the oil-cloth when she could not find her mouth, and was teething, without any worry to her mother, on an old soft cartridge-belt.

The subject reopened the night the little girl's mother cut out the baptismal robe. And while she tucked it in one succession of narrow rows and began to embroider it in lacy patterns that she had learned to do when she was a little girl in England, the big brothers hunted up the lists from the dictionary, atlas, almanac, and Bible, and reviewed them. But when the autumn days had been stitched and discussed away and winter had come in, the family was still undecided. What pleased one big brother did not please another; and if two agreed, the third opposed them. The little girl's mother was even harder to suit than they.

The afternoon of the first birthday anniversary two important things happened: the baptismal robe was finished and the christening controversy took a new turn. The big brothers, arguing hotly, urged that if a name could be found for every new calf and colt on the place, the only baby in the house ought to have one. Now, the little girl's mother always named the animals, so, when she heard their reproof, she promptly declared that she would christen the little girl at once—and after an English queen.

The big brothers were astounded, recalling how their American father had objected to their having been named after English kings. But their mother, unheeding their exclamations, wrote down a new list, which started at Mary Beatrice and included all the consorts she could remember. But when the queens had been considered from first to last, and the little girl's mother had made up her mind fully and finally, the house was again torn with dissension. The eldest brother favored Elizabeth; the biggest, Mary; and the youngest, Anne. The little girl, happy over a big, blue glass ball with a white sheep in the center, alone was indifferent to the dispute, and crooned to herself

contentedly from the top of the pile of hay twists.

But, in spite of the wishes of the big brothers, the christening would have been decided that day and forever if it had not been for one circumstance. The eldest brother, protesting vigorously against every name but Elizabeth, demanded of the little girl's mother what she had selected.

"Caroline Matilda," she said firmly.

The eldest brother sprang to his feet like a flash, knocking over a bench in his excitement.

"Caroline Matilda!" he roared, waving his arms—"Caroline Matilda!"

And the little girl, frightened at his shouting, dropped the blue glass ball, and scurried under the bed.

It was plain, therefore, that she did not like the name her mother had chosen. So the christening continued to disturb the farm-house. By spring the eldest and the youngest brothers were calling the little girl Anne, while the mother and the biggest brother were saluting her as Victoria.

Matters were still in this unsettled condition when the army chaplain rode in from the reservation one night late in the summer. He was on his way to a big Sioux tepee camp, and carried in the saddle-bags flung across his pommel a well-worn Bible and a brace of pistols. As he entered the sitting-room, the little girl eyed him tremblingly, for his spurs jingled loudly as he strode, and the leather fringe on his riding-breeches snapped against his high boot-legs.

He was grieved to find the farm-house in such a state, and counseled the little girl's mother to delay the christening no longer, suggesting a private baptism, such as the big brothers had had. But

to no effect. She declared that a private baptism might do very well for boys, but that the only daughter in the family should be named with more ceremony. The chaplain, finding that he could not settle the question, made it the subject of his evening prayer in the home circle.

The fame of the baptismal robe and the white kid shoes had gone far and wide over the prairie, and they were talked of from the valley of the Missouri to Devil's Lake, and from the pipestone country to the reservations. So every week of that summer the family welcomed squatters' wives from the scattered claims round about, and women from the northern forts, whose eyes, strange to dainty things or long starved of them, fed greedily on the smooth skin of the ivory boots and the soft folds of the dress. Shortly after the chaplain's stay, a swarthy Polish woman, shod in buckskin, came on a pilgrimage to the farm-house, and the little girl's mother, eager to show her handiwork, lifted the dress tenderly, but with a flourish, from the pasteboard box where it lay upon wild-rose leaves and a fragrant red apple, and held it against the little girl with one hand, while with the other she displayed the pretty boots. The big brothers, hurrying from the barn-yard, crowded one another to share in the triumph.

But suddenly their delight was changed to dismay. For the little girl's mother, eager to win more praise from the Polish woman, had started to deck the little girl in the dress and shoes, and had discovered that the beautiful robe was too short and too narrow for its plump wearer, while its sleeves left her fat wrists bare to the elbow. And the white kid shoes would not even go on!

The youngest brother started for the post-office that afternoon to mail the shoes back to the store in the far-away city, together with a drawing on paper of the little girl's left foot, showing just how large the new pair should be. The very same day the little girl's mother began to rip out tucks.

When the chaplain stopped on his return trip, he found that the

christening was still agitating the farm-house, the big brothers having formed a triple alliance in favor of Elizabeth, while the little girl's mother was adhering more warmly than ever to Victoria. So he spent the evening in renewed argument and prayer, and offered Catherine as a compromise. But the little girl's mother attached no importance to his suggestion, knowing that Catherine was the name of his wife.

Before starting for the reservation in the morning, as he sat upon his pony with the family in a circle about him, he communicated a notable piece of news. Some time during June of the coming year the good bishop, who was greatly beloved by the Indians, would visit the post to marry the general's daughter to the major. The wedding would take place in the sod church, and would be followed by a sermon.

"And then," added the chaplain, "could come the baptism."

The little girl's mother was delighted with the idea, and decided on the spot to delay the baptism until June. The administering of the rite by the good bishop would give it a certain pomp, while his presence would insure the attendance of every woman on the plains, and the robe and the shoes would receive due parade and admiration.

The chaplain, satisfied at having accomplished even so little for peace, cantered off, the family looking after him. But when he reached the reservation road he came to a sudden halt, wheeled sharply, and raised his hands to his face to make a funnel of them. All fell into silence and listened for his parting admonition.

"Make it Catherine!" he shouted, and cantered on.

When the little girl's mother thought of the months that must pass before the baptism, she felt sorry that she had been so hasty about sending for the second pair of kid shoes; for by June of the coming year the little girl's feet would be too big for them. So the youngest brother was again sent to the post-office, this time with a letter that

asked the store in a far-away city to send two sizes larger than the drawing.

While summer was fading into autumn, and autumn was merging into winter again, the naming of the little girl was not forgotten. The subject came up every time her mother brought out the new pair of sleeves which she was embroidering. But it was talked over amicably, the big brothers having relinquished all right to a share in the selection because their mother had at last taken an irrevocable stand in favor of her own choice, and had intrenched her position by a promise that they could have that year's muskrat money. So when Christmas morning dawned and the little girl temporarily received her long, dignified name, together with a beaver pelt for a cap, the big brothers, whittling shingles into shape for the stretching of their winter's catch, silently accepted the decision.

The long, dignified name suited the little girl. She had grown so tall that she could look over the St. Bernard's back, and so agile that she had walked out six pairs of moccasins in as many months. And when the new shoes arrived and the sleeves were finished, she grew so proud that she wanted to wear her gobelin blue apron every day.

As spring opened, and the last tuck was taken out of the robe, the big brothers put their guns and traps away in the attic, and once more turned to the plowing and planting of the fields. But, in spite of the farm work, they found time to make preparations for the approaching baptism. They painted the light wagon, giving the box a glossy black surface and the wheels a coat of green, while the little girl's mother began three suits for them, and a brand-new dress for herself out of one she had brought with her when the family came to the plains. The evenings were no less busy. The mother sewed steadily, the big brothers fixed up the light harness, and the little girl, scorning sleep, alternately hindered and helped them, and held on to the ends of tugs and reins with her pudgy hands while the big brothers greased and

rubbed and polished.

When the trip to the reservation was less than a week off, the preparations for it were redoubled, and the farm was for a time neglected. The little girl's mother put the last stitches on the new clothes; the big brothers, each having firmly refused to let either of the others try a hand at clipping him, made a journey to the post-office to get their hair cut by the hardware man; and the little girl wore a despised sunbonnet, had her yellow locks put up on rags, and went to bed every night with clabbered milk on her face.

At last the great day arrived. Early in the morning, before the rising sun flamed against the eastern windows, an ambitious young rooster, perched on the cultivator outside, gave such a loud, croupy call to the farm-yard that he awakened the little girl. She, in turn, awakened her mother. So it was in good time that the family, after eating a quick breakfast and hitching the gray colts to the newly painted wagon, climbed in and started off.

The little girl, sitting on the front seat between her mother and the eldest brother, her christening robe and the kid shoes wrapped up carefully and clasped in her arms, swelled with importance as the colts, resplendent in their new harness, trotted briskly down the rows of ash saplings in front of the house and turned the corner into the main road. Speechless and happy, she sat with her lips pressed tightly together beneath the big sunbonnet that hid the rag-wound corkscrews on her sore little head; and when the team crossed the Vermilion and passed the sod shanty on the bluffs, she did not even turn her eyes from the long, straight road that stretched westward to glance at the Swede boy who had come out to see her go by.

But before the ride was half over she grew very tired. So, after she had sleepily dropped the shoes and the robe into the hay in the wagon-box several times, she munched a cooky, drank some buttermilk, and was lifted to the hind seat, where the biggest brother

held her in his arms. When she next opened her eyes, the team was standing in front of Officers' Row, and the colonel and his wife were beside the wagon helping her mother down.

As soon as dinner was over, the little girl was carried off to be dressed, though she wanted to stay in the parlor and play with the colonel's son; and when she was ready for the baptism, the big brothers came in to see her as she stood proudly upon the snowy counterpane of the wide feather-bed, the embroidered robe sticking out saucily over her stiff petticoats and upheld by two sturdy, white-stockinged legs. On her shining curls perched a big white satin bow, while incasing each foot, and completing the whole, was a dainty, soft kid shoe.

"My, you're a blossom!" gasped the biggest brother, walking around and around her; "an' not any of your skimpy flowers, neither; just a whacking big white rose with a yellow center!"

The white rose made no reply, for she had upset on the fat feathers in trying to walk, had broken the string that held the pillow-shams, and had mussed her stiff petals. So the colonel's wife put her on a paper spread over a leather trunk.

When the two families started for the sod church, she was carried by the admiring biggest brother, and on each side of her walked her mother and the colonel's wife, the others following. She kept turning around to look at the colonel's son as they went along, and so did not see the church until she was close to it.

It made a quaint picture in the warm June sunlight as the little procession neared it. The rude cross surmounting the gable above its entrance was twined with morning-glory vines that had found their way to it after hiding the low, thick, black walls beneath; and surrounding the building was a fence of scantlings—built every spring by the chaplain to keep the troop horses and the commissary's cows from

grazing off its sides, and stolen every fall by the half-breeds when the first frosts came—that served as a hitching-post for raw-boned army mounts and scraggy Indian ponies. Beyond this circle were wagons and big, clumsy, box-topped carts from far-lying farms, with oxen tied to their wheels and swaying their weary necks under heavy yokes.

The church still wore its wedding decorations of cat-tails and willow-boughs when the door swung open to admit the christening party, and over the step that led up to the altar hung a golden bell of heart-leaved buttercups. As the little girl crossed the threshold, she looked on the crowded, waiting congregation with eager, half-frightened eyes. On each side of the aisle, filling the rear benches, were Indians and half-breeds, the gay government blankets of the men and the bright calico dresses, striped shawls, and gayer blankets of the women setting off their wide, stolid faces; here and there among them, in greasy breeches and flannel shirts, were rough cattlemen and trappers; and the troop's famous scout, the half-breed Eagle Eye, sat in the midst of them, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of her. Instead of the red handkerchief that he wore about his forehead to keep his black hair out of his eyes, he had tied, in honor of the occasion, a strip of bleached muslin, and under it his eyes sparkled and his teeth gleamed as he smiled at the white papoose.

When the biggest brother started toward the altar, the little girl hurriedly smoothed the christening robe and put out the white kid shoes so that everybody might see them. And when they passed the frontier families and came in line with the aristocratic army benches, her cheeks were flushed a vivid pink, and she was sitting proudly erect.

Then she beheld the chaplain standing at the step in a long, white dress. Scarcely had she gotten over her surprise at his strange appearance, when she saw a man join him who was garbed even more wonderfully. His dark hair was combed back and rested, like

Eagle Eye's, on his shoulders, and the sleeves of his robe were wide and ruffled at the wrist. It was the good bishop.

The next moment they were standing before him, the little girl and the biggest brother at the middle of the line and the others on each side.

The chaplain raised his hand, and the white people stood up. And after he had waved both arms commandingly and scowled, the Indians and the half-breeds got up, too, and slouched against the benches while the good bishop said a long prayer and followed it with a longer reading. The biggest brother waited very quietly through it all, but he shifted the little girl from one arm to the other two or three times.

When the reading was over, the little girl's mother answered a few questions in a low voice. As the good bishop began to pray again, the chaplain lifted a silver vessel in his hands and held it up solemnly. The little girl saw that it was the colonel's fruit-dish, and that it was full of water.

She looked about inquiringly, but all who were near her had their heads bent; and at the close of the prayer, before she had time to question, the good bishop took her into his arms.

She was frightened and wriggled to get down, not seeing the warning in her mother's eyes. The good bishop paid no attention to her, however, but leaned forward and spoke to the colonel and his wife.

"Name this child," he said.

The little girl did not hear their answer, for she was watching his hand. It was poised just above the fruit-dish, as if he meant to plunge it into the water.

She caught her breath and raised herself suddenly in his arms. The whole church was bending and stretching to see her, but she forgot the staring people, and was thinking only of her beautiful robe, the kid shoes, and the threatening water.

A brief, solemn silence pervaded the waiting church. It was broken by the good bishop's voice; and, at the same time, his ruffled hand sank into the fruit-dish, held lightly between the chaplain's finger-tips, and came to the surface wet and brimming. As she saw this, the little girl's face turned from pink to white, and she caught her breath again.

Then, just as he bent his eyes upon her and lifted his slender fingers toward her head, the little girl, giving a sudden scared, angry squirm, struck the silver dish a resentful, upward blow with one vigorous, white kid shoe.

The vessel bounded out of the hands of the horrified army chaplain, overturned upon his immaculate robe, and, empty, fell clattering to the step at his feet. And while it spun there, top-like, for one terrible moment, the baptismal party, standing in front of the good bishop, gazed in agonized, reproachful silence at the little girl, who was looking back at them defiantly from the shelter of the pulpit.

Later when the good bishop laid damp fingers upon her hair, she was christened. But the family at the farm-house always declared that she did not deserve the long, dignified name chosen for her; and the biggest brother as often added that, because the amount of water has everything to do with a baptism, the honor rightfully belonged to the dripping army chaplain.

III

"LITTLE BOY BLUE"

UP and down the oxen toiled before the plow, licking out their tongues, as they went along, for wisps of the sweet, new grass which the mold-board was turning under. After them came the biggest brother, striving with all his might to keep the beam level and the handles from dancing as the steel share cut the sod into wide, thick ribbons, damp and black on one side, on the other green and decked with flowers. And, following the biggest brother, trotted the little girl, who from time to time left the cool furrow to run ahead and give the steers a lash of the gad she carried, or hopped to one side to keep from stepping with her bare feet upon the fat earthworms that were rolled out into the sunlight, where they were pounced upon by rivaling blackbirds circling in the rear.

It was a cloudy morning near the end of May. The spring work on the farm was long past, and already the fields rippled with corn and wheat, barley and oats, and blue-flowered flax. But it was not yet time to begin the yearly onslaught against intruding weeds, so the big brothers were busying themselves with the erection of a sod smoke-house, which, at hog-killing time, would receive fresh hams and sides for the winter's curing.

A strip of prairie land bordering the northern edge of the grain had been chosen to furnish the building material because its fertile top layer was tenaciously root-bound and free from boulders. And while the biggest brother plowed it up, the other two came slowly along with the Studebaker, chopped the sods into pieces twice as long as they

were wide, and laid them carefully on the bed of the wagon.

The little girl let the biggest brother hang the gad about his neck and helped for a while with the sod-carrying. But every time she put her chubby arms around a slab, it broke in two; so her brothers told her to stop. Then she climbed to the wagon-seat and drove the horses beside the furrows, and, later, went to the farm-yard with a load.

The smoke-house was being built beside the corn-cribs. Before any sod had been laid, the eldest brother had marked out on the ground with a stick a nine-foot square, and in one side of it had left a narrow door-space where two scantlings were driven in upright to serve as sides of the casing. Then, with the dirt lines as a guide, he had begun the walls, giving them the thickness of two sods. When the little girl rode up they were already above her head. But she did not wait to see the load she had accompanied bring them up to the eldest brother's waist, for it was close upon noon and it occurred to her that there would soon be a table to set in the kitchen, so she hurried out of call up the weedy path between the wheat and the corn, to where the oxen were still lazily drawing the plow.

She picked up the gad again and sent it whisking about the black flanks of the steers. But when she had gone up and down till three long sods lay lapping each other like heavy ruffles, she grew tired of following the biggest brother and went up the carnelian bluff to the stone pile and sat down.

Her mother, standing at the kitchen door, shading her eyes with her hand, saw the fluttering blue calico on the hillside and smiled at it through tears. Nearly four years and a half had passed since the rock-covered mound had risen among the snow-drifts, yet during all this time the little girl had never been told its sad secret, for the family wished her to go about the farm without fear.

She had often wondered, however, why, when her mother wanted to have a good cry, she always sat at the kitchen window that looked out across the row of stunted apple-trees, the sorghum patch, and finally the corn, to where the carnelian bluff lifted its pebbly head; and why, whenever the big brothers saw their mother weeping there, if it were winter, they always coaxed her into the sitting-room, where a pile of magazines and books, bought to divert her, lay beside the lounge; or, if it were summer, out into the front garden, where a low bench stood against the house, under the lilac-bush, facing the round and diamond-shaped beds of scarlet verbenas, yellow marguerites, bachelor's-buttons and pansies.

But, though the little girl was ignorant of what the stone pile hid, she was, nevertheless, thinking of mournful things as she sat there. The Christmas before, Santa Claus had stingily dropped but one present down the long stovepipe that carried up the smoke from the sitting-room stove—one present to serve as both a holiday and a birthday remembrance; and that had been a big, ugly crockery doll's head with bumpy brown hair, staring blue eyes, fat, pink cheeks, and flinty shoulders. The gift, aided by the confidences of the Swede boy, had almost shaken her belief in Santa Claus, whom she had asked in a letter to give her a bought riding-whip and a book that told more about Robinson Crusoe. Instead, the homely head had been left, and she felt sure (and the Swede boy assured her) that it could only have been picked out for her by the eldest brother. And when, after gazing down upon her stupidly for two or three months from the clock-shelf, it was finally fastened, by thread run through the holes in its shoulders, to a clumsy, jointless, sawdust body, it had only served to remind her more bitterly than ever of the ill fortune that could make two great events in one small life fall upon the selfsame day.

The little girl had often complained of the stork's bringing her at Christmas-time, and had been promised by the biggest brother that, when they should all agree that she was very good and deserving—

because she had cheerfully done everything she had been told—*she should have her birthday changed to June*! But so far the promise had never been fulfilled, for the little girl did not hold, as they did, that the compact included the washing of potatoes or the scraping of the mush-kettle. Now, June was almost at hand again, and, as she waited on the bluff for the cow-horn to sound the call for dinner, she wondered if the treasured change in dates would ever be made.

While she was still perched upon the topmost rock, she heard a faint shout from the farm-yard, and looking that way, saw the eldest brother standing on the seat of the Studebaker, frantically waving his arms. She got down, ran around to the western side of the hill, and called to the biggest brother on the level prairie below her. He stopped the ox-team and tried to understand what the eldest was saying. But it was not made clear until the youngest unhitched a horse from the wagon and mounting it, still harnessed, started across the wheat-field with the dogs in full cry before him.

The herd, which before breakfast had been driven north to the river meadows, was returning to feed upon the young crops, and was dangerously near the river edge of the wheat. The cattle were grazing as they advanced, the cows leading and the beef cattle bringing up the rear. And when the foremost animals saw the youngest brother cantering toward them with the pack, they only hurried forward the faster so as to get a taste of the forbidden grain before they were compelled to turn tail.

Snapping and yelping, the dogs came down upon them, and the herd, two hundred strong, fled before them, with futile reaches after mouthfuls of the wheat as they ran. But, scarcely an hour later, when the little girl was sauntering home behind the biggest brother and the oxen, the cattle faced about and started slowly back again; and, when the family was just gathering about the dinner-table, they swarmed across the prairie and into the fields. This time the youngest brother

not only rode out and drove them back to the meadows, but remained between them and the farm till the biggest finished his meal and relieved him.

It was plain that some one would have to stay with the cattle throughout the rest of the day; for, having gotten a taste of the grain, they would return as often as they were driven away and trample down what they did not steal. But not one of the big brothers felt that he could be spared from the work on the smoke-house.

"Say, ma," said the eldest brother, looking at the little girl as he got up from the dinner-table and took his hat from the elk antlers in the hall, "I've thought the whole thing out, and I don't see why this youngster can't herd. She learned to ride; now she can keep them cattle in the meadows as well as not."

"Oh, you know she's too little," answered her mother; "she'd fall off her pony if the cattle crowded, and get stepped on."

"Ah, too little," he said superciliously. "All she'd have to do is stay behind the cattle and sick the dogs every little while."

The little girl's mother shook her head.

"Well, we could put her on the pinto and fasten her feet so's she couldn't fall off," he persisted.

The mother looked down at the little girl, still busy over her plate of bacon and eggs.

"Well, maybe she could do that," she said thoughtfully.

"Oh, I'm too little," expostulated the little girl, between two bites.

"Little! You great big thing!" scolded the eldest brother as he went out. "What are you good for, anyway? Not worth your salt."

When he was gone around the corner of the kitchen, the little girl left her high bench and sat down crossly upon the door-step. "He's always 'busing me," she complained. "When *I* want to do anyfing, he says I'm too little; but when *he* wants me to do anyfing he finks I'm big enough."

"Now, pet lamb," said her mother, "you don't have to herd if you don't want to. But I think you'd be safe on the pinto, and, perhaps, if you went the boys would all remember their promise about your birthday."

The little girl, understanding what was meant, looked up at her mother for a moment. Then she whipped through the sitting-room to her bed, pulled on a pair of beaded moccasins, took her sailor hat off a nail, and started for the smoke-house.

The eldest brother went across the reservation road to where the pinto was picketed in the grassy swale, and brought her in, with her blind black colt trotting at her heels. And when he had bridled her and girthed on the soft, woolly pelt of a sheep, he lifted the little girl to her back and fastened both bare ankles to the cinch with hame-straps. Then he put the short reins into the little girl's hands, gave the mare a good slap on the flanks, and watched horse, rider, and colt depart northward toward the cattle. For it had been settled, when the biggest brother came in, that if she would try her best to keep the cattle in the meadows so that the smoke-house could be finished, that very day her birthday would be changed from December to June.

As soon as the little girl reached the open prairie, the big brothers returned to their work on the smoke-house. And by the time that the herd, with the pinto and the dogs behind it, was but a collection of white and brown specks against the green of the plains, they were so

busy that they had forgotten her. The youngest brother lifted the sods from the wagon and handed them to the biggest, who helped the eldest lay them, one layer lengthwise, the next crosswise, and always in such a way that the middle of a slab came directly above the ends of the ones beneath.

In the early afternoon, as they worked steadily, the clouds began to mass darker across the gray sky; and the air, warm throughout the morning, became chill. A rain-storm seemed on the way, and the big brothers hurried so as to get the house covered before a shower came to wash the walls. Two were left to lay the sods, and the other set about sawing scantlings into lengths for the framework of the hip-roof, while their mother came out and bound straw into flat bunches for the thatch.

Up in the river meadows, the little girl, secure in her seat on the pinto, rode to and fro along the southern edge of the herd, in front of the lowered foreheads and tossing horns of the cattle. Behind her came the blind black colt, switching his tail and whinnying fretfully; but, despite his pleading, the little girl, eager to win the reward she had been promised, never paused in her sentry duty. The pinto fretted, too, for she also was hungry. But the little girl held the short bridle-reins tight and did not let the mare get her nose to the ground lest they slip over her head and out of reach.

The dogs were stretched lazily on some soft badger mounds not far away. The St. Bernard was not with them, for the big brothers were afraid that Napoleon, the white bull, would gore him, and had chained him up at home; and the collie was watching the sheep around the sloughs to the south. So only the wolf-dogs, with Luffree at their head, helped the little girl turn an animal back when it broke from the rest and started toward the grain.

The little girl rode faithfully before the herd, not even stopping to join the dogs in their chase after a kit-fox that was boldly passing

among the cattle. And when the hunt was over and the cows went down the runway to the river, she followed in their train, with the pinto still tugging hard at the reins. But at the bank she forgot how tired her arms were, for the pack had returned and were amusing themselves by barking and biting at the snakes that were lying along the strip of sand, and by pursuing them as they scattered to the water or to the shelter of the willows at its edge. When the herd had drunk their fill, she slowly rode eastward, watching them carefully as they spread out across the meadow.

It was then that the clouds came up and the air turned cool. And it was then that, accidentally, and in one unhappy moment, the little girl brought all her faithful work to naught, imperiled her birthday hopes, and cast herself adrift upon the prairie like a voyager in a rudderless boat. For, in stooping to pull the sheepskin saddle-blanket over her bare legs, she unthinkingly let go of the bridle, and, the pinto putting her head down to graze, the short reins slipped along her mane until they rested just behind her ears—far out of reach.

The little girl slapped her as hard as she could with her hands; but, even when the mare raised her head and walked about, the little girl could not get at the reins because she was tightly fastened to the girth. So the pinto went where she pleased, paying no attention to angry commands, or to the pounding inflicted upon her flanks by the fists of the irate little girl.

All this time the herd, too, fed where it chose and had moved out of the meadows toward the farm. The little girl was powerless to turn it, and when she set the pack at the cattle they only ran faster than ever toward the fields. So she called the dogs off. Slowly, but surely, the cows led the forbidden way, and as the little girl moved about on the pinto, powerless to go where she wished or to turn them back, she watched them, swelling with very rage in her helplessness, and wept bitterly.

When the herd was out of sight over the rise south of the meadow, the pinto, with her reluctant rider, again went riverward. This time the mare took a good drink, wading in so far that the little girl's anger turned to fear and she cried harder than ever. As the horse came out of the stream, the loud *yur*, *yur*, of a frightened crow, whose nest was in the willow fringe, startled the blind black colt, and he started on a run up the river. His mother, whinnying loudly, followed him and broke into such a hard gallop that the little girl was bounced rudely about and would have fallen to the ground had not the hame-straps firmly held her.

Away they went, the colt in the lead and the pinto after, until they reached the bunch of cottonwoods far up the stream where the yanging wild geese had their nests. Then the colt came to a halt and waited tremblingly for his anxious mother.

The black colt had a wild fear of crows, for it was due to them that he had been blind ever since, a few days after his birth, he had accompanied his mother across the reservation road to the sloughs beyond. He had trotted happily at her side as they went, but late in the evening had run one knobby leg into a hole in the prairie-dog village and taken a bad tumble. He had not been able to rise again, and, in struggling had got wedged upon his back between two mounds, so that he had to lie, feet up, all night. His mother had fed near him till dark came on, and had stood over him through the night; and not till the sun was well up did she leave him to go for water. It was then that he had been blinded, for some crows, flying by to the stubble-fields around the farm-house, had thought him dead and had alighted beside him with inquiring cries.

Now, as he stood in the cottonwoods beside his mother, he shook his head uneasily as if unpleasant memories were stirring in his baby brain, and stamped crossly as the dogs came up, their tongues out with their hot pursuit.

Time dragged slowly. Late in the afternoon a dash of rain found its way down through the cottonwood leaves, splashed against the little girl's face, and mingled with the tear-drops. The pinto moved farther into the shelter of the grove and the light sprinkle did not wet her. As the light slowly faded the peepers along the river began to send up their lonesome chant, and a crow went whirring past to his home down the river, with no cry to the blind black colt underneath, for his bill was thrust through a redhead's egg. Near by, from the open prairie, the brown pippets flew skyward against the rain-drops, greeting the coming night with a last song, and then dropped silently to their nests in the lush grass.

The framework of the smoke-house roof was in its place, and the laying of the straw bundles, in long, overlapping rows, well started before the shower began; and so rapidly did the big brothers work, that when the collie came in with the sheep, the thatching was nearly finished, and the squatty, straw-crowned building, with grass and flower tops sticking, still fresh, from between its sods, looked like one of the chocolate layer-cakes that the little girl's mother made for Thanksgiving, only the filling was green instead of brown, and the top coating was gold.

They were on top of the house, laying the last two rows of straw along the ridge-pole, when their mother, who was in the kitchen getting supper, noticed that it was sprinkling, looked northward through the gloom to try to catch a glimpse of the little girl returning with the herd, and then called to the big brothers to ask if they could not see cattle moving about in the corn. They looked and, from their vantage-point, made out a big herd. Their shout brought their mother hurrying into the yard.

"They're not ours, are they?" she asked. But the big brothers were bringing the wagon team and a cultivator horse out of the barn, unsaddled and unbridled, and did not hear. Before she could reach

them, they had dashed off.

She stood looking after them, her apron over her head. She knew that if the cattle in the field belonged to the farm, something had gone wrong with the little girl; and she strained her eyes anxiously to where loud bellows, shouts, and the cracking of cattle-gads told that the herd was being routed.

Suddenly, from across the intervening corn and sorghum and into the cottonwood break, crashed a great white bull, whose curly head was swaying angrily and whose eyes shone with the lust of fight, while behind, laying about him with a whip at every jump, came the biggest brother. It was Napoleon.

"Oh, my poor pet lamb!" cried the little girl's mother, and retreated into the smoke-house for safety as the bull and his pursuer came by.

It took hard riding to rid the grain of the cattle, for, under cover of the dusk, they slipped back into the wheat again and again after having been driven out. So it was long after supper-time before the herd was bunched and driven around the farm to the reservation road and into the wire pen by way of the ash lane in front of the house. Then the big brothers came tramping into the kitchen, tired and hungry.

But what was their surprise to find it empty. And, on looking about, they discovered a note from their mother. It had been put in plain sight against the syrup-jug and read:

"*The dogs, all except Luffree, came home. If she has returned when you read this, fire a musket.*"

They stood in a circle and looked blankly at one another. For it had not crossed their minds that the little girl was not home, but somewhere out on the prairie, tied to a pinto, and all alone in the dark.

Without waiting to snatch a bite from the table, they started off to

search, leaving their jaded horses in the barn. The eldest brother went straight for the river, which he meant to follow, and took a musket with him; the youngest ran off up the path between the corn and the wheat, and carried the cow-horn; while the biggest made for the carnelian bluff, taking neither gun nor horn, but relying on his lungs to carry any good news to the others. And behind them, as they hurried, sounded the baying of the St. Bernard, ignominiously chained to a stake by the kitchen door.

The evening wore on. Overhead the low-hanging clouds covered the moonless sky like a hood, and not a star shone through the fleecy thickness to aid in the search for the little girl. At a late hour it began to sprinkle again, and, though no sound of shot or blast had broken the silence of the prairie, one by one the anxious hunters came straggling home, dumbly ate, and waited for the morning.

The little girl's mother, sitting behind the stove, cried heartbrokenly. "If my poor baby ever comes back alive," she sobbed, "she shall have her birthday in June and the best present I can get her." And all the big brothers silently assented.

But while they were gathered thus, drying their damp clothes, the biggest brother suddenly sprang up with a joyful cry.

"Why didn't we think of it before?" he said—"the St. Bernard!"

A moment later he was freeing the big dog, and his mother, lantern in hand, was holding a little gingham dress against his muzzle.

"Find her! Find her!" she commanded. "Go, go! Find her!"

The St. Bernard shook himself free of the chain that had bound him, looked into the faces that peered at him through the dim lantern-light, and then, giving a long sniff, proud, human, and contemptuous, walked slowly and majestically toward the sod barn. The family followed wonderingly.

When the corn-cribs were reached, the dog quickened his pace to a trot and began to wave his big, bushy tail in friendly greeting to something that, farther on in the dark, could not be seen by the little girl's mother and the big brothers. And when he came near the wide, closed door of the barn, in front of which showed indistinctly the forms of a large and a small animal, he leaped forward with a welcoming bark that was answered by another from a dog lying in the deep shadow against the door.

For there stood the blind black colt and the pinto with the bridle-reins still swinging across her neck. And on her back lay the little girl, her arms hanging down on either side of the sheepskin saddle-blanket, her head pillowed in sleep against her horse's mane.

IV

A PARIAH OF THE PRAIRIES

THE young cowbird, perched tail to windward on a stone beside the road, raised his head, and uttered a hoarse cry of hunger and lonesomeness as a great black flock of his own kind, sweeping by on its way to the grazing herd in the gully, shadowed the ground about him for an instant.

"Look-see! look-see!" he called plaintively, rolling his eyes and ruffling his throat; "look-see! look-see!"

But the flock, dipping and rising in swift flight, sped on unheeding. The long summer day was drawing to a close over the prairie, and with early evening myriads of gnats and mosquitos swarmed up from the sloughs to drink their fill on the flanks of the stamping cows. The insects offered a fat supper to the birds as they clung to the twitching hides of the cattle. So the flock was hastening to reach the gully before milking-time.

The young cowbird called disconsolately again and again after the shadow of the flock was far away, making a moving blot across the darkening plains. Then, discouraged, he tucked his head under his wing, clutched the stone more tightly with his claws, and rocked gently back and forth as the soft south breeze spread his tail, lifted his growing pinions, and blew his new feathers on end.

He was a tramp and the descendant of a long line of tramps, all as black and hoarse and homeless as himself. A vagabond of the blackbird world, he had, like many an unfeathered exile, only sleep to

make him forget his empty craw, and only a wayside rock for his resting-place.

He had been an outcast from the beginning. One day in the spring his tramp mother, too shiftless to build a home for herself, had come peeping and spying about the fuzzy nest of some yellow warblers that had built in an elder-bush by the river; and finding the birds away, had laid a big white egg speckled with brown in the midst of four dainty pale-blue ones that were wreathed with tiny dots. Then she had slipped away as quickly as possible, abandoning her own to the more tender mercies of the little canary pair.

It was the warblers' first nesting, or they would have known, the moment they saw the large egg among their small ones, that they had been imposed upon, and would either have pushed the interloper out or built a second story to their home and left the cowbird's egg in the basement. But they were young and inexperienced, so they had only wondered a little at the size and color of their last lay, and let it remain.

The weeks had passed. Then, one day, there had been a great chattering about the warm cup of milkweed fiber and thistle-down in the elder-bush, husky cheeping from the nest mingling with the joyous chirps of the mother-bird as she tilted and danced on its edge or fluttered ecstatically above it; and from the end of a swaying twig close by had swelled the proud song of the male.

The big egg had hatched.

When the first nestling had freed himself from his shell and tried his long, wabbly legs, he opened a wide-gaping, clamorous red mouth above his naked little body; and this set the yellowbirds on such persistent and successful searches after worms, that by the time the young cowbird's foster brothers and sisters were out, he had grown big and strong. So the newer babies had been squeezed from the

cozy center of their warm home to a place on its chilly rim.

Affairs in the nest had soon come to a sad pass. The little warblers' weak voices and short necks were not able to win the reward of tidbits claimed by the young cowbird, who ruthlessly stood upon them as he snatched his food from the bills of the yellowbirds. One by one they sickened and died, and were then pushed out into the wet grass below. After that the young cowbird had been fed faster and more fondly than ever.

One afternoon, when the warblers were away foraging for the nest, the cowbird, now well feathered, had tried his wings a little, and had flown to a clump of tall weeds not far off. Alighting safely, and emboldened by success, he had eluded a hungry snake that hunted him across the gopher knolls, and finally gone on to the top of the hill. When twilight came he had found a perch in a pile of tumbleweed, far from the sheltering bushes by the river. So the warblers, coming home late with two long wrigglers for him, had found the nest empty. They had darted anxiously about it for a while, then the male had settled upon a swinging elder-branch to sing a mournful song to his mute, grief-stricken mate.

Their last baby was gone.

When the little girl came trudging along the road that evening on her way to the farm-house, she sat down for a moment opposite the stone on which the cowbird was perched. And after examining a sand cut that was giving her some trouble under her little toe, she suddenly caught sight of the dumpy black ball that was moving back and forth with every gust. She leaned forward on her knees to see what it was, and crept slowly toward him until she was within reach. Then, before he had time to take his head from under his wing, she put out one

hand and seized him.

He was terribly frightened and struggled to get free, pushing vigorously against her fingers with wings and claws. But she only tightened her grasp as he fought, and he was soon so closely held that he could not move. She forgot her sore toe in her happiness over catching him, and started homeward on the run. As she bounded along, he watched her with his small, scared eyes.

On reaching the farm-house the little girl put him into a rough slat cage that hung in her room; and while he stretched his cramped legs, and opened his crumpled wings, she hurried to the window, where she captured a handful of house-flies. She placed them in front of him, and he retreated to the farthest corner of the cage, to beat the bars in terror. But after she had hidden herself behind the headboard of the bed, he came forward and ate up the flies without stopping to take a breath between gulps. Then he snuggled down on a piece of her worn-out woolen dress, and went to sleep again.

Though the little girl was yet only five and a half years old, she had tried many times in her life, without success, to make the slat cage the home of some feathery pet. Snipes and plover, orioles and ovenbirds, bobolinks and meadow-larks, all had lived in it by turns for a few days. But the snipes and plover had gone into a decline, the orioles and ovenbirds had grown thin and unkempt, and the bobolinks and meadow-larks had eaten themselves to death. Sorrowful over so much misfortune, she had longed to secure a hardy bird that would not only live in captivity, but would repay her loving care with songs.

The young cowbird proved to be just what she had wanted. Every day he grew larger, plumper, and hungrier; and though he was not a song-bird, his attempts at melody, made with much choking and wheezing and many wry faces,—as if the countless flies he had swallowed were sticking in his throat,—pleased her more than carols. Within a week after his capture he was so tame that he would sit on

her shoulder as she walked about her room and peck at her teeth. She was certain that he was giving her so many loving kisses; but her big brothers unsympathetically explained that he thought she had some kernels of corn between her lips.

It was not long before he was allowed the freedom of the sitting-room a little while every afternoon, and the little girl always sat and watched him as he walked solemnly about it, taking long steps, calling happily in his husky voice, and pecking curiously at the bright rags in the crocheted rug.

This freedom worked wonders with his plumage. His dark brown head fairly shone, his sable breast and back grew glossy, and his wings took on faint, changing tints of purple and blue. His jet rudder, daily dressed to its iridescent tip by his ebony beak, was flicked jauntily as he strode around on his long black legs. And all this alert, engaging beauty won the friendship of the farm-house, including even that of the little girl's big brothers, who advised her to clip his wings if she wanted to keep him; for when he had once reached full size, they said, he would fly away to join the cowbird colonies up the river. But the little girl would never consent to any use of the scissors.

Throughout the remainder of the summer he went everywhere with her, perching on her shoulder when she drove the cattle to the meadows, riding with her on the pinto if she were sent on an errand, or walking beside her in the farm-yard. He never flew far from her, and could always be coaxed back if she whistled and showed her teeth. They spent many an afternoon together on the prairie while the little girl herded. And when the cows were headed away from the wheat and were grazing quietly, he would leave her and fly to the back of Liney, the muley, where he would walk up and down the broad, white mark that ran from her horns to her tail, and catch insects. Liney, who liked the sharp thrust of his bill where a mosquito had been stinging, was careful not to wiggle her hide and scare him away. At dinner-time

he joined the little girl and shared her gingerbread.

One night, just before the cows started for the milking-pen, a big flock of cowbirds flew down and alighted in the midst of them, some of the birds perching upon the backs of the cattle to catch their supper. When the little girl saw the black company, she looked around for her bird, but could not tell him from the others. There were three perched upon Liney's back, and, hoping that one of them was he, she ran toward the cow, calling softly and showing her teeth. But as she came close, the three flew away to the roan heifer. Half weeping, she ran after them, calling still, and smiling to entice him. The birds rose into the air again, this time alighting around the farthest cow in the herd.

Overwhelmed with sorrow, the little girl turned back to where the cattle-gad lay, holding her apron up to her wet eyes as she stumbled miserably along. But just as she flung herself down beside the whip, there came a harsh call from behind her, where the lunch-pail stood. It was the cowbird.

"Look-see! look-see!" he cried, pecking at the brown paper that held the gingerbread. Jumping up, the little girl ran to him and caught him tenderly to her breast.

He was so inquisitive that he soon became unpopular at the farm-house, and on several occasions all but had his neck wrung for wrongdoing. One day he picked the eldest brother's fiddle-strings in two; another time he was discovered digging holes in the newly baked loaves of bread that had been set in a window to cool; and, again, he stole hot potatoes out of a kettle on the kitchen stove. But whenever danger threatened, the little girl championed him valiantly. So time after time he escaped merited punishment, which was to have been not less than death or exile; for he was too small to whip.

But one morning in the early fall he was confronted with a very

grave charge—one that was, if proved true, to cost him his life or his home: the little girl's mother, on going into the kitchen at sunrise to prepare breakfast, discovered all her crocks of milk disturbed and the shelf behind the stove, on which they stood in a long, yellow row, spattered with milk from end to end. As she turned, very puzzled, from the shelf to the table, she saw the cowbird gravely walking about on the white oil-cloth.

"Look-see! look-see!" he cried to her, flirting his tail and blinking his eyes. "Look-see! look-see!"

She ran to the table and seized him angrily in her hands, certain that he had forsaken his own little pan of water to bathe in the milk. But when she had looked him over carefully, and found him dry and tidy from top to toe, she let him go again, forgetting to feel of the white oil-cloth upon which he had been promenading, and which was spattered with milk like the shelf.

Before the contents of the crocks were thrown out that morning, the little girl's mother called all of the big brothers in to view the mess; and by the time breakfast was over, the cowbird had been passed around, for every one wanted to see if any milk could be found on him. None was discovered, however, so the little girl was allowed to carry him away in triumph on her shoulder.

For two or three mornings after that the milk was not visited by the marauder. Then for several days in succession it was splashed about on shelf, stove, and floor, and the little girl's mother was more puzzled than ever. The cowbird was no longer under suspicion, for the big brothers had not been able to fasten the guilt upon him, since his feathers were always as sleek and shining as the coat of a curried horse.

It was decided to poison a part of the milk for several nights and put the rest carefully in the cupboard. This was done; but though

morning after morning the shelf was sprinkled as badly as ever, no dead body of cat, bird, or wild animal was ever found in the kitchen to solve the mystery. So a new plan was adopted, and tin pans were put upside down over the crocks to keep the nightly visitor out.

This arrangement worked well for a week or more; then one morning there was a terrific rattling and banging in the kitchen, followed by deathly stillness. Certain that the disturber of the milk was at hand, the entire family rushed pell-mell through the sitting-room and down the entry to the kitchen door, which they flung wide open, and excitedly peered in. On the floor lay a tin pan that had been knocked from its place, and in one side of it was a large dent where it had struck the stove in falling. The milk in the uncovered vessel was not disturbed, and there was no sign of any living thing in the room.

Baffled and wondering, they returned to their beds. But the little girl, before going back to hers, remained behind a moment to look for the cowbird. At last she spied him, perched high up on the elbow of the stovepipe. He was trembling violently, and his glossy, black feathers were standing out—straight on end.

The neighbor woman, who dropped in that noon, made a suggestion that the big brothers decided to act upon. She declared that the kitchen visitor was a milk-snake, and that one night spent on the watch without a light would prove her correct. So that very evening, the eldest brother, wrapped in a buffalo robe and a pair of blankets, sat on a bench behind the kitchen door, resolved to keep awake till morning in wait for the mysterious disturber. The rest of the family prepared for bed, after providing him with the musket, powder and buck-shot, and the clothes-stick; and on looking in upon him before retiring, found him sitting grimly in his corner, the musket leaning against one shoulder, while upon the other perched the cowbird.

The sun was just rising next day when the little girl's mother awoke. She was surprised at not having been aroused earlier by the noise of

an encounter, and, accompanied by the little girl and the other big brothers, tiptoed quickly but softly down the entry to listen. All was quiet. She pushed the kitchen door open a little to look at the crocks. They had not been molested. Then she put her head in. As she did so, the husky cry of the cowbird came from the bench behind the door.

"Look-see! look-see!" he called, as he walked up and down the eldest brother from head to foot; "look-see! look-see!"

And the family, entering, beheld the eldest brother stretched upon the bench—fast asleep.

He was so provoked at having been found napping that, when he heard their laughter and awoke, he grabbed the cowbird and threw him across the kitchen. The cowbird lighted upon his feet unhurt, and started boldly back again. But the little girl was frightened over his bad treatment, and running to him, took him up tenderly, and carried him to her room. He was put into the slat cage for the rest of the day, and for several weeks after that slept in it every night.

It was now autumn. The husked corn filled the cribs to bursting, the wheat lay in yellow heaps on the granary floor, and the hay, stacked high, stood along the north side of the low, sod barn in a sheltering crescent. There was little left to do on the farm before the winter set in, and the cold mornings found the family astir very late. So one raw day, when the fields and prairie without lay white in a covering of thick frost, it was after sun-up before the little girl's mother entered the kitchen.

It had been so long since the milk had been disturbed that she had neglected for a week or more to cover the crocks, and did not even give the shelf a glance as she hurriedly lighted a twist of hay; but as she stooped to poke it into the stove, a quavering, plaintive, raspy voice above her made her start back and stare upward.

There on the edge stood the cowbird, his head drooping and his wings half spread. But he was no longer black. From his crown to his legs he was covered with a coating of frozen milk that, hiding his glossy plumage, turned him into a woefully bedraggled white bird; while from the ends of his once glistening tail feathers hung little icicles that formed an icy fringe.

"Look-see! look-see!" he mourned, closing his eyes and lifting one stiff leg from his perch. "Look-see! look-see!"

A moment later, hearing the sound of loud laughter in the kitchen, the little girl got out of bed and ran to find out what was the matter. But when she caught sight of the cowbird on the shelf before the row of big brothers, she did not join in the merriment. Instead, she turned very white and crept back to bed again without a word, taking the cowbird with her, cuddled under her arm.

When the sun stood over the farm-house and the frost was gone from the plains, the little girl climbed upon her pony's back and, with the cowbird perched on her shoulder, started northward up the river. Her face was whiter than it had been that morning, and she had no happy chatter with which to answer him as he chirruped to her gaily and leaned forward from time to time to peck at her teeth. Her ears were still ringing with her big brothers' laughter, and with the pitiless command that had driven the cowbird forth to the prairies again—a wing-clipped tramp and an outcast! Straight on she rode to the river meadows where the cowbird colonies lived.

Once there, she got down carefully from her horse and, after placing her pet gently upon a stone, took from her pockets a crust, part of a shriveled apple, a chunk of gingerbread, and a cold boiled potato. These she placed in front of him on the ground. Then she took

him up, parted her lips to let him peck her teeth once more, held him against her breast for a long, bitterly sad moment, and mounting, rode away.

When she was only a rod or so from him, the cowbird tried to follow. But his maimed wings would not obey, and he fell back to the ground again and again. Then he walked a few steps after the retreating pony, and, finding that the little girl was getting farther and farther away every moment, hopped upon a big rock beside the road, and called after her pleadingly.

"Look-see! look-see!" he cried, rolling his eyes and swelling his shining throat; "look-see! look-see!"

But the little girl rode straight on, and never looked back to see.

V

THE MISFIT SCHOLAR

IT was only a little way to the school-house in the winter-time because the big brothers could cross the chain of sloughs to it on their skates; but, in the autumn, before the ice was thick, the path led snake-like beside the eastern border of the water, just skirting the frill of green bulrushes and tall marsh-grass, and it was a long distance.

The school-house stood in a wide glade that was the favorite grazing-spot of a band of antelope. It was narrow and unpainted, with two windows on each side and a door in one end. And from its roof, which was not too high for a game of "anti-I-over," protruded a joint of rusty stovepipe. During spring and summer the building stood empty, with the whole sloping green place to itself and the pronghorns, and in every high wind it toppled over, with its pipe pointing to the east, until it was pried into place again. But, after school "took up" in the fall, the glade rang with the laughter and shouts of the scholars, and the antelope crossed the Vermillion and traveled to the rugged country farther west, where, when the snow fell and hid the dried grass, they could browse off the bushes; and the school-house did not topple any more, for its deep coal-bins, which were built against the wall by the door, were full to the brim.

Often on warm summer afternoons, the little girl rode down to the glade beyond the sloughs and, sitting her horse quietly, induced a tawny doe and her twin kids to approach by exciting their curiosity with her bright red flannel petticoat. But if she took the herd along, she did not dare display her skirt, for Napoleon did not like it and had, on

one occasion, viciously gored the Indian pony in the ribs when the little girl was busy coaxing the deer. After a wind-storm she liked to climb from her pony to the overturned school-house and walk about on it. Once, she slipped on a window-pane, when she was peering in, and fell through; and would have had to remain there a long time (for the door was locked), if she had not thought to pull the joint of stovepipe out of the roof and crawl through the hole to freedom.

But she had never been near the building when the teacher was in charge. She did not want to go to school, because she meant to learn her lessons at home the way her mother had,—and her mother had been taught by *her* mother, and, after that, by a governess. The little girl had never talked the matter over at the farm-house, however, for she never doubted that the governess, whatever that was, would come all in good time.

So her surprise and grief were great when she heard one day that she was to learn her lessons from the lanky Yankton man who presided over the school, and along with the other little girls who lived near enough to attend. She held one tearful argument after another with the eldest brother, declaring that she could read and study at home. But he said that a young one nearly six years old ought to know something more than stories—something about the world and arithmetic.

Secretly the little girl did not think it was of any use going to school, for she believed the teacher did not know much. She had even heard the biggest brother say so. And she knew that *she* knew a great deal. As soon as she could eat with a spoon, she had begun to hold the almanac up in front of her; and she had spoken her first word at fourteen months. It was "Man," and her mother often related how it happened.

She was rocking the little girl to sleep, she said, and singing,

"There was a little man,
And he had a little gun,"

when there sounded a small voice from the cradle. "Man," it said, and the little girl's mother, peeking over the side, saw two wide-open blue eyes. After that, when she was being rocked to sleep, the little girl always said, "Man." Three months later, she had begun to talk in whole sentences. At three years she had been able to make all her letters and read several words, having been taught secretly by the biggest brother. At four, she knew the youngest brother's reading lessons by heart, and could spell every word in the First Reader. At this stage of her education, she put aside such baby things as the "Mother Goose Rhymes," and was deeply interested in the doings of the "Swiss Family Robinson." Winter nights, she had listened to an ever increasing number of stories that were read aloud by her mother. And now she was occupied with "Gulliver." But she did not know one of her multiplication tables, and the neighbor woman, for one, was greatly disgusted with her, and declared that she did not know whatever would become of the child.

The morning the little girl started to school, with her Second Reader under one arm, it was so cold that her breath looked like puffs of white steam. Her mother thought she had better walk instead of ride, and bundled her up warmly in a big plaid shawl, her beaver cap, and her thick mittens. When she set off, she was accompanied by the youngest brother, who was going to be a visitor during the morning session. The dogs, with the exception of Luffree (who could not be found), had been chained up along the sunny side of the house to keep them from following her. And as they saw her disappearing across the reservation road, they jumped back and forth, pulling at their collars and howling dismally.

The little girl did not look around at them. Her heart was heavy. All the unhappiness that had been visited upon her that autumn weighed

it down. Every day, before sunrise, she had had to get up and eat a raw carrot, because the neighbor woman had prescribed it as a cure for a certain livid spot that had made its appearance on the little girl's cheek, and was thought to be a cancer. The little girl knew that the carrot-eating was useless, since the spot was only the mark of an unsuccessful attempt at tattooing; but she did not care to explain. Then, the cowbird had been sent away; and, as a last blow, she had been told to go to school.

There was no doubt in her mind that her misfortunes were due wholly to the fact that she had precisely thirteen freckles on her pink nose. She had never been able to count them because, when she had covered ten of the tiny brown spots with as many fingers, so much of her nose was hidden that she could count no further. But the biggest brother had assured her that she had them, and that was enough.

She was very tired when they came in sight of the school-house, and the youngest brother had to tug her along by the hand. Luffree, who had come in sight over a hillock ahead of them when they were part way, trotted at her heels and looked up wistfully at her as she half walked, half ran, complaining at every step. Now and then he jumped up and tried to lick her face sympathetically. But she would not let him, for she knew he had warts on his muzzle that he had caught the summer before while teasing a toad.

The school-room was full of smoke and noise when they entered. The scholars were laughing and talking as they crowded about the tall, round stove; and it was sending black, sooty breath into their faces from every crevice of its loosely hung doors. But shortly afterward the noise was silenced by the teacher, who brought his hands together with a resounding clap.

All the pupils in the room, except the little girl, had been to school to him the year before and knew what the signal meant. So she suddenly found herself the only one left standing in the middle of the

floor, the girls having preempted the row of benches on the right, and the boys that on the left. But she was not abashed, and her corkscrew curls danced on her shoulders as she looked about.

"Sit down, sit down!" came in whispers from both sides. She took no notice of them, and the teacher, busily preparing the roll-call at his table, did not hear. But soon a ripple of laughter from the school, and a voice from the stove, interrupted his work, and brought him scowling to his feet.

The little girl was standing with one arm extended and one small forefinger pointing past him at the globe, which, for want of a better, was but a fat pumpkin ingeniously impaled on a stick, and peeled over part of its surface in such a manner that the five oceans were represented, while the portion yet unpeeled showed the rude outlines of the six continents.

"We've got lots of pumpkins bigger 'n that at our house," she was saying, her face turned toward "Frenchy," an up-river trapper who studied geography and English spelling between his rounds of the sloughs. "Why, the cellar's *full* of 'em."

The teacher rapped briskly on the table with his pencil, to call her to order. "Look here," he said, a little crossly, "you mustn't talk out like that. Sit down."

"No seat," she faltered, lowering her voice.

He looked up and down the girls' row; there were only four seats in it, and they were full. The boys' benches were not; but, loath to lessen the terrors of a favorite punishment, he hesitated to put her there. "Come up to the rostrum, then," he said.

The little girl walked slowly forward, and a flush stole up her throat and mounted to her temples. But when she was once seated, her sailor-hat on one side and her Second Reader on the other, she felt

less demeaned; for the rostrum commanded a view of the whole room, and from it she could see Luffree, fast asleep under the youngest brother's bench.

The teacher went back to the roll-call, and the pupils droned the time away till recess. Then the boys rummaged through their willow baskets for something to eat and went out to play "prisoner's base." But the girls—the neighbor woman's daughter, and the seven belonging to the Dutchman who lived at the Vermillion's forks—stayed in, gathered in a silent circle about the rostrum, fingered the big gold brooch that the little girl's mother had let her wear as a reward for attending, and looked her up and down, from the scarlet bow on her hair to her fringed leggings. And she, never having seen the Dutchman's children before, forgot to be polite, and stared back at their denim dresses, pigtails, and wooden shoes.

When school took up again, the Swede boy was told to put his sums on a bit of tar-papered wall near him, and a mixed class in reading lined up in front of the teacher's table. Soon, however, the room was again quiet. The Swede boy and the class sat down, and the whole school, made sleepy by the warmth from the stove, lounged on their benches and drowsed on their books, and even the little girl, sitting idly on the rostrum, nodded wearily. But right in the midst of the silence, and just before the pupils were dismissed for noon, something so startling happened that the little girl's curls fairly stiffened in alarm.

The teacher clapped his hands, the children followed with a hurried banging of their books and slates, and, instantly, before the little girl had time to think what it all meant, the scholars, with one accord, began to roar at the top of their lungs.

"Scotland's burning! Scotland's burning!"

they cried, rapping their knuckles upon their desks in the rhythm of

galloping horses,—

"More water! More water!
Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!
More water! More water!"

The little girl straightened herself and a gray light crept up to where the flush had been, so that every freckle of the hateful thirteen stood out clearly. Near her, the teacher was standing, with his feet planted wide apart and his eyes raised to the ceiling. And before him, shouting and pounding and staring with crimson faces into his, were the pupils.

"Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!"

they yelled. It brought back to the little girl that terrible moment when the farm-house, with a dripping-pan full of hog-fat flaming in the oven, was threatened with destruction.

"Scotland's burning! Scotland's burning!"

sounded the warning again. No one moved. But, not knowing just how near Scotland might be, and fearful for her safety with danger so imminent, she did not wait longer. Clutching her hat and book, with a bound she cleared the distance to the youngest brother, and, with a stifled cry, leaped into his arms.

But in her excitement she had forgotten Luffree, lying asleep under the bench, and had jumped squarely upon one soft, outstretched paw. The dog sprang up with a howl of pain, the school stopped its singing, and the angry teacher left the rostrum and advanced toward the little girl. The next moment he dragged the dog from under the bench by the scruff of the neck and hurled him out of the door; the next, he shook an admonishing finger in the very face of the thirteen unlucky freckles.

Late that afternoon, the eldest brother paddled across the sloughs in the bull-boat, and had a talk with the teacher. The teacher lived in the Irishman's shack, which was made of cottonwood logs laid one upon another and covered with a roof of sticks and dirt, and "bached" by himself through the term, because the little girl's mother had refused to board him. So, when the eldest brother had finished his visit and rowed back, he recited such an ill-natured version of that day's happenings at the school-house, that the family, until then divided by the contradictory stories of the youngest brother and the little girl, united in heaping reproaches upon her.

Next morning she again traveled the winding path that skirted the marsh-grass and bulrushes, this time on the pinto. Luffree, who had been tied up at breakfast, but had mysteriously slipped his collar, followed, as before. When she arrived within a short distance of the school-house, she climbed down and, without taking any notice of the giggling, waiting crowd by the door, carefully picketed the mare out of reach of the other ponies. Then she pulled off the bridle, put it beside the picket-pin, and, after bidding Luffree watch beside it, went in quietly to take her seat. She had not unblanketed her horse because, underneath the soft sheepskin saddle and well out of sight, was tucked one of her mother's latest magazines that had pictures scattered through it.

When school was called, she was not allowed to keep the seat on the rostrum. One of the Dutchman's seven being absent, she was told to share the rear bench with the neighbor woman's daughter, and spent a happy hour in the seclusion of the high seat, watching "Frenchy," who had no slate, write his spelling on the smooth, round stove, and smiling at the Swede boy when he looked slyly across at her.

Then she heard some one call her name. It was the teacher. "Come forward to the chart," he said, and his voice seemed to shake the very floor.

She took up her Second Reader, edged herself off her seat, and stood beside it, her eyes fixed questioningly upon him.

"Come forward to the chart, I say," he said again. "Can't you hear!"

"Yes," answered the little girl, starting up the room. But she walked so slowly that, when she came near his table, he put out one lean hand, grabbed her by the arm, and hurried her. She resented his touch by twisting about until she was free. Then she took her place in front of the chart, feeling as if every eye in the room were looking up and down the row of blue crockery buttons on the back of her apron.

The teacher began to turn forward sheet after sheet of the chart, until the first page was before him. It depicted a figure in silk hat, long coat, and light trousers, promenading with a cane in his hand and a dog at his heels. Underneath were two lines of simple words, and two inquiring sentences. The teacher picked up a long cottonwood stick and pointed it first at the man and then at the dog.

"What is that?" he said.

"A man," answered the little girl.

"And that?"

"A dog."

"Now read after me," he went on, indicating a word, "'M-a-n, man.'"

She paused a moment, her lips pressed tightly together.

"Read, read, read!" commanded the teacher, whacking the chart with a pointer.

"'M-a-n, man,'" repeated the little girl, her eyes on his face.

"Don't look at me," he scolded; "look at the chart."

"I don't haf' to," said the little girl, earnestly; "I—I—"

Something unpleasant would certainly have happened at that moment, had not "Frenchy," deep in his geography lesson, piped up at the teacher from the rear of the room.

"T-a-n-g-a-n-y-i-k-a," he spelled, snapping his fingers and waving his arm. "Wot eez dat?"

For a moment the teacher was silent, scowling down at the little girl. Then he came back to the chart with another whack of the pointer. "Call it Moses," he growled.

"Mozez," repeated "Frenchy," resignedly, but with a shake of his head over the intricacies of the English language.

The little girl had twisted half around to look at a Dutch child, and the teacher, angry because he had neglected to look over the geography lesson, jerked her into place again by her sleeve. "Now, you read," he said; "look at the end of my pointer and read."

"I can read them words 'thout looking at 'em," she protested, pointing at an inquiring line, "'cause I can read everyfing in this." And she held up the Second Reader.

"Huh!" grunted the teacher, taking the book from her and tossing it upon his table. "Have you ever been to school before?"

"No," answered the little girl.

"Then you'll start right in where everybody else does," he said. "Read this line. 'Do you see a man?'"

"'Doyouseeaman?'" she repeated, still watching him.

"Look at the chart and read it," he commanded furiously.

An unfriendly light suddenly shone in the little girl's eyes. She stepped back and summoned all her pride to resent the indignity that he was putting upon her before the whole school.

"Oh, I don't want to read that baby talk," she cried, "and—and—I *won't*, and I 'm going home to my mother."

The teacher swayed in his wrath like a tall cottonwood. "You don't, eh? You won't, eh?" he bellowed, and, stooping down, plucked the little girl by the ear.

This time it was the Swede boy who interrupted the course of events in front. He leaned forward and whispered something into the ear of the boy ahead, and then, with an inarticulate shout, threw himself upon the boy and began to maul him. Instantly the teacher, yearning to use his hands upon some one, descended upon them and wrested them apart. But they clinched again and, continuing to fight, managed so to misdirect their kicks that they reached, not each other, but his lanky, interfering person.

And, while the battle raged, the little girl fled out of the school-house toward the pinto and pulled up the picket-pin. The teacher did not see her go, but, in retreating from an unusually vicious blow of the Swede boy's fist, caught sight of her just as she was leading her horse to an ant-hill to mount. With a hoarse call for her to return, he started after her, bearing in his train the two boys, who, still struggling, impeded his progress.

He shook them off at the door-step and broke into a run. The little girl was vainly striving to climb to the pinto's back; but she was so frightened that each time she made a jump for the saddle she came short of it and fell back. And, seeing the teacher coming, her efforts were more ineffectual than ever. But when he was scarcely a rod

away, and when escape seemed impossible, a new figure joined in the affair.

Luffree had been lying quietly beside the picket-pin until the little girl ran out, when he got up, ready to follow her, and joyfully leaped about the mare. Then he saw the teacher advancing, and remembered the rough handling of the day before. So, as the Yankton man came close, swinging his arms about like the fans of the Dutchman's windmill, the dog went forward to meet him, his hair on end, his eyes shifting treacherously, his teeth showing in an ugly white seam, all the wolf blood in him roused.

The teacher halted when he saw him and called back to the scholars, now crowding about the door. "Bring my pointer," he cried.

Not a pupil moved. The teacher, noting that no one was obeying his order, and not daring to go forward unarmed, ran back at the top of his speed for the stick. But he was too late; for, by the time he had gained the school-room and grabbed both the pointer and the stove poker, the little girl had scrambled upon her pinto and galloped off toward the farm-house.

The teacher did not give chase, but, sputtering revenge under his breath, called the school to order. Then, not forgetting what severity is due insubordination where the sons of salary-supplying fathers are concerned, he gave the boys who had fought, but who were now docile and smiling, a mighty tongue-lashing.

When the little girl was beyond hailing distance or possibility of capture, she brought the pinto to a standstill and looked back. Once she opened her lips as if to say something, but closed them again, and, after waiting until the scholars had all gone in, rode on. She did not go home; instead, when she came in sight of the reservation road, she turned east and cantered across the prairie until only the top of the farm-house was visible to her as she sat upon her horse. Then

she dismounted, tethered the pinto, made Luffree lie down, and, having taken the magazine from under the saddle-blankets, cuddled against the dog. She was still trembling, her throat ached with unspoken anger, and, underneath her apron, her heart bounded so that the checks moved in regular time.

But soon she wiped her blurred eyes and turned to the pictures in the magazine. They began with a red-brown one of a storm-tossed ship on a rocky coast; and, following, were drawings of queer boxes and chairs and, yet more strange, of a herd of grazing cattle *with a board fence around it*! There was also a funny picture of a ragged boy and a stylish little girl who wore a round hat and a polonaise. And, lastly, there was shown a beautiful young woman standing by a table in a long, loose robe, very much like the army chaplain's.

It was over this picture that the little girl bent longest, and she read, not without some tedious spelling, the words that were printed beneath it:

"Mary, in cap and gown, was so bright and dainty a vision that the professor wished that more young ladies of gentle birth might attend the college."

College! It was not a new word to the little girl, for she had heard the colonel tell her mother that he was going to send his son to college. But now she knew that girls as well as boys could go. And she saw by the picture that they wore beautiful flowing robes and square caps.

It was the cap that specially attracted her, for it rested becomingly upon a mass of wavy hair. She wished that her curls, which had to be coaxed into shape every morning with a warm stove-lifter and a wet brush, would hang in ripples like the young woman's, so that she could wear one.

"Oh, *ain't* it sweet!" she said aloud, getting up on her knees beside Luffree and holding out the book at arm's length. And then, with the mortar-board as her inspiration, there flashed into her brain a wonderful thought that was to grow through the coming years; and her lips framed a splendid purpose—heard by no mortal ears, save those of the shivering hound and the cropping pony—that time was gloriously to fulfil.

"And maybe," she added happily, "I'll have 'monia, and my hair'll come in just as curly."

She sprang to her feet, fired with her new ambition, and undid the pony. And remembering that it would be as well to reach the farm-house before the family could hear the second tale of trouble at the school, she hastily coiled the picket-rope, mounted, hid the magazine under the saddle-blankets, and, with the dog running stiffly in her wake, rode homeward.

When she reached the barn, she did not even wait to fasten the pinto in her stall; but, taking the magazine, raced toward the kitchen. As she halted breathless in its open door, however, she was sorry that she had not come in quietly by way of her bedroom window and waited until she was sure that her mother was alone. For she found herself in the presence not only of the big brothers, but of him whose authority she had so lately flouted!

The suddenness of the discovery drove the words she had meant to say in her own behalf from her brain. But five pairs of eyes were upon her and retreat was impossible; so she strove mutely to win any possible sympathy by covering, with one unsteady hand, the ear that had been pulled.

No one spoke for a moment. And in that brief space the little girl divined, as she sought each face, that but one of the group before her was eager to see her punished, and that one was the teacher. In the

eyes of the eldest brother there was no disapproval, only a lurking smile; the biggest was openly beaming with satisfaction; the youngest had taken his attitude, as usual, from the eldest; and her mother's look was sadly kind. But the teacher was hostile from brow to boot.

It was the eldest brother who first broke the silence. He took his pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ashes against his bench, and addressed the little girl. "So you went on the war-path to-day?" he said.

She made no answer, but moved toward her mother.

"This youngster," he went on, wheeling around on the teacher, "is well up in them chart pages and can read pretty good in most books. So I guess"—he drawled it out sneeringly—"as long as you ain't got any classes that exactly fit her, she'd better lie fallow for a while."

The little girl shot a proud glance at the Yankton man as she heard the eldest brother's praise, and, emboldened, spoke up for herself. "I *can* read all the chart," she declared, "and I can read everyfing in the First Reader. And I could spell 'man'"—she put the hand that she had been holding over her ear on a level with her knee—"when I was so high."

The teacher snorted. "You know your own business," he said to the eldest brother.

"Guess we do," chimed in the biggest, grinning. "No use bothering her with a-b, ab, when she can read the things she does." The teacher stood up, ready to go. "And I was about to remark," continued the biggest, banteringly, "that she's got a lot of mighty nice stories that she's read and done with; and if you'd like to borrow one, once in a while, to pass an evenin' with, you'd find 'em mighty educatin'."

"Thank you," answered the teacher; "but like as not you'll need 'em all to finish up *her* eddication on. I guess maybe you'll be sending her

to Sioux Falls in a year or so to kind o' polish her off."

The sarcasm in the voice stung the biggest brother. "Well," he said, "she could polish off right here on these plains and have a lot more in her noddle in a year or two than *some* people I know."

This boast of her favorite again brought the little girl's courage up. "I don't want to go to a city school," she declared, "'cause they don't wear caps there."

The teacher was tramping out, with no backward look or good-by word, and he did not wait to hear more. So it was the eldest brother who answered her. "If you don't go here and you don't go to Sioux Falls," he said, "I'd like to know where you'll learn anything. Ma ain't got no time to be your governess."

"I don't want no governess, either," she replied. "I know what I'm going to do." She brought forward the magazine, which she had been holding behind her back with one hand, and, opening it at the drawing of the young woman in cap and gown, laid it on the biggest brother's knee. Then she went up to her mother, her face fairly shining through the dust and tear-marks on it. Her mother put out her arms and gently drew the little girl to her. Into her mind had come the picture of herself, in spotless pinafore, bending with her governess over her English books. And beside that picture, the little girl, sunburned, soiled, and poorly shod, made a sharp contrast.

"What are you going to do, pet lamb?" she asked.

"I'm going to cut 'nough carpet-rags this winter to last you a whole year," said the little girl, "'cause next summer you won't have me any more. I'm—I'm—going to college."

The teacher, jogging out of the barn-yard to the ash-lane, heard a hearty roll of bassos from the kitchen, and did not doubt but that he was its target. He reined in his horse at the bare flower-beds and glowered back at the door. Then, with a mutter, ungrammatical but eloquent, he spurred on toward the lonely, supperless shack by the slough.

VI

THE STORY OF A PLANTING

THE little girl was making believe, as she planted the corn, that the field was a great city; the long rows, reaching up from the timothy meadow to the carnelian bluff, were the beautiful streets; and the hills, two steps apart, were the houses. She had a seed-bag slung under her arm, and when she came to a hill she put her hand into it and took out four plump, yellow kernels. And as she went along, dropping her gifts at each door, she played that she was visiting and said, "How do you do?" as politely as she could to the lady of the house, at the same time taking off her battered blue sailor-hat and bowing,—just as she had seen the lightning-rod agent do to her mother.

She had begun the game by naming every family she called upon. But it was not long before she had used up all the names she could think of—those of the neighbors, the Indians, the story-book people, the horses, the cows, the oxen, the dogs, and even the vegetables in the garden. So, after having planted a row or two, she contented herself with making believe she was among strangers and just offering a friendly greeting to every household.

She had come out to the field when the prairie-chickens were still playing their bagpipes on the river bank, their booming sounding through the morning air so clearly that the little girl had been sure they were not farther than the edge of the wheat-field, and had walked out of her way to try to see them, tramping along in her best shoes, which had shiny copper toes and store-made laces. But when she had reached the wheat, the booming, like a will-o'-the-wisp, had been

temptingly farther on; and she had turned back to the newly marked corn-land.

Her big brothers had sent her out to drop and cover eighty rows, the last corn-planting to be done that year on the big Dakota farm. They had finished the rest of the field themselves and, intent on getting in the rutabaga crop, had turned over the remaining strip to the little girl, declaring that she could drop and cover forty rows in the morning and forty in the afternoon, and not half try. To make sure that she would have time to finish the work, they had started her off immediately after a five-o'clock breakfast; and in order that she should not lose any time at noon, they had made her take her dinner with her in a tall tin pail.

Her first glimpse of the unplanted piece had greatly discouraged her, for it seemed dreadfully wide and long. So, after deciding to plant the whole of it before doing any covering with the hoe, because the dropping of the corn was much easier and quicker to do than the hoeing, she went to work half-heartedly. Now, to make her task seem short, she had further determined to play "city."

It was such fun to pretend that, as she went bobbing and bowing up and down the rows, she forgot to stop her game and throw clods at the gray gophers. They lived in the timothy meadow, and were so bold that, if they were not watched, they would come out of their burrows and follow the rows, stealing every kernel out of the hills as they went along and putting the booty in their cheek-pouches.

After she had dropped corn as much as a whole hour, the little girl's back ached, and when she went to refill her seed-bag at the corn-barrel that stood on the border of the meadow near the row-marker, she sat down to rest a moment. The marker resembled a sleigh, only it had five runners instead of two, and there were rocks piled on top of it to make it heavy. So the minute the little girl's eyes fell upon it and she saw the runners, she thought of winter. Winter

instantly reminded her of the muskrats in the slough below the bluff. And with that thought she could not resist starting down to see if they were busy after the thaw.

She gathered many flowers on the way, and stopped to pull off her shoes and stockings. At last she reached the slough and waded in to a muskrat house, where she used her hoe-handle as a poker to scare out some of the muskrats. Failing in this, she picked up her shoes and stockings and went around the slough to find out if any green leaves were unfolding yet in the wild-plum thicket. A little later she climbed the bluff to the corn-field, making a diligent search for Indian arrowheads all the way.

When she reached the seed-bag again, she threw the string over her head and started up a row determinedly. For a rod or more she did not pause either to be polite or to scare away gophers, but hurried along very fast, with her eyes to the ground. Suddenly she chanced to look just ahead of her, and stopped abruptly, standing erect. Her shadow pointed straight for the bluff: it was noon and high time to eat dinner.

She sat down on the marker and munched her sandwiches of salted lard and corn-meal bread with great appetite. She was just finishing them when the call of a goose far overhead attracted her attention. She got down and lay flat on her back, with her head on the seed-bag, to watch the flock, high above her, speeding northward to the lakes, their leader crying commands to the gray company that flew in V-shaped order behind him. When the geese were but a dark thread across the north sky, she felt drowsy and, turning on her side with her hat over her face and her back to the gentle spring breeze, went fast asleep.

She lay there for hours, entirely unaware of the saucy stares of several gophers who paused in their hunt for kernels and stood straight as picket-pins to watch and wonder at the little heap of pink

calico under the battered sailor-hat, or whisked about her, their short legs flashing, their tails wide and bushy, their cheek-pouches so full of kernels that they smiled fatly when they looked at her, and showed four long front teeth. But the little girl was wrapped in a happy dream of a certain beautiful red wagon with a real seat that she had seen in a thick catalogue sent her mother by a store in a distant city. So she never moved till late in the afternoon, when the gentle breeze strengthened to a sharp wind that, with a petulant gust, whirled her sailor across the rows and far away.

The flying hat caused a stampede among some curious gophers who were just then investigating a near-by unplanted row in the hope of finding more corn. Clattering shrilly, they scudded back to the meadow, and the little girl rose. After a long chase for the hat, she went stiffly to work again, not stopping to put on her shoes and stockings, though the wind was cold.

After that she planted faithfully, leaving off only to throw clods at the gophers, or to ease her back now and then. And it was when she was resting a moment that she noticed something that made her begin working harder than ever. Her shadow stretched out so far to the eastward that she could not touch its head with the end of her long hoe. When she first came out that morning, it had fallen just as far the other way. She looked anxiously up at the sun, which was shining slantingly upon the freshly harrowed land through a gray haze that hung about it. Then she looked again at her shadow, distorted and grotesque, that moved when she moved and mimicked her when she bent to drop the corn. Its length showed her that it was getting late, and that she would soon hear the summoning blast of the cow-horn that hung behind the kitchen door.

She dropped the seed-bag, walked across the strip still unplanted, and counted the rows. She returned on the run. The dropping was little more than half finished, and no covering had been done at all. She

knew she could not finish that day; yet if they asked her at the farm-house if she had completed the planting, she would not dare to tell them how little of it was done. She sat down to pull on her shoes and stockings, thinking hard all the while. But, just as she had one leg dressed, she sprang up with a happy thought, and stood on the shod foot like a heron while she dressed the other. Then, without stopping to lace her shoes, she tossed her sailor aside, swung the seed-bag to the front, and began dropping corn as fast as she could.

The kernels were counted no longer, nor were they placed in the hills precisely. Without a glance to right or left, she raced along the rows, her cheeks flaming and her hair flying out in the wind. She had decided that she would *plant* all of the strip—but not *cover* the corn until next day.

The sun sank slowly toward the horizon as she worked. But the unplanted rows were rapidly growing fewer and fewer now, and the descending disk gave her little worry. Up and down she hurried, scattering rather than dropping the seed, until she was on her final trip. When she reached the end of the last row, she joyfully put all the corn she had left into one hill, turned the seed-bag inside out, slipped her lunch-bucket into it, and, after hiding her hoe in the stone pile on the carnelian bluff, turned her face toward the house. And at that very moment, with the winding of the cow-horn for its farewell salute, the last yellow rind of the sun went out of sight below the level line of the prairie.

Early the next day, while the little girl's big brothers were busy with the chores, she mounted her pony and rode away southward from the farm-house. At the reservation road, she faced toward the sun and struck her horse to a canter. A mile out on the prairie to the east, she

turned due north up a low ravine; and finally completed almost a perfect square by coming west, when on a line with the carnelian bluff, to the edge of the corn-field. There she tied her pony to a large stone on the slope of the bluff and well out of sight of the house, and, after hunting up the hoe, started energetically to cover up the planting of the day before.

She began at the bluff on the first uncovered row, and swung down it rapidly, her hoe flashing brightly in the sun as she pulled the dirt over the kernels. But when she had gone less than half the distance to the meadow she stopped at a hill and anxiously examined it a moment. She went on to the next without using her hoe, then on to the next and the next; and, finally, putting it across her shoulder, walked slowly to the end.

Arrived at the edge of the meadow, she turned about and followed up another row. Her hoe was still across her shoulder, and she did not stop to use it until she was near the bluff. When she reached the meadow the second time, she sat down on the row-marker and looked out across the timothy.

"Goodness!" she said, addressing the half-dozen animated stakes that were eying her from a proper distance, "you've done it!"

The gophers stood straighter than ever when they heard her voice, and new ones came from their burrows and sat up to watch her, with their fore paws held primly in front of them, their tails lying out motionless behind, and their slender heads poised pertly—with no movement except the twinkle of sharp, black eyes and the quiver of long whiskers.

"And there ain't 'nough seed left in that barrel," went on the little girl, "to plant a single row over again."

She sat on the marker a long time, a sorrowful little figure, in deep

study. And when she finally rose and resumed work at the upper end of the strip, she thought with dread of the disclosure that sprouting-time would bring.

An hour later, she untied her pony and climbed wearily upon his back. As she rode across the meadow toward home, she shook her head solemnly at the mounds in the timothy.

"I s'pose," she said, "you've *got* to have something to lay up for winter; but I think you might 'a' gone down to mother's veg'table patch, 'cause, when the corn comes up, I'll catch it!"

The corn-stalks were nodding in their first untasseled sturdiness before the little girl's big brothers paid the field a visit to see when the crowding suckers should be pulled and the first loosening given to the dirt about the hills. They went down one morning, their muskets over their shoulders, and the little girl went with them, hoping that so much time had passed since the planting that they would not punish her even if they found fault with her work on the last eighty rows.

Summer had come in on a carpet of spring green strewn with wild clover, asters, and blazing-star. And as they went along, the verdant prairie rolled away before them for miles in the warm sunlight, unbroken save where their eyes passed to the richer emerald of wheat sprinkled with gay mustard, new flax on freshly turned sod, or a sea of waving maize. Overhead, the geese no longer streaked the sky in changing lines, but swarms of blackbirds filled the air with crisp calls at their approach, and rose from the ground in black clouds. Down along the slough where the wild-plum boughs waved their blossoms they could see the calves frolicking together; and up on the carnelian bluff, the young prairie-chickens scurried through the grass before a watchful mother.

The little girl trailed, barefooted, behind her big brothers, and was in no humor to enjoy any of the beauties of earth or sky. With anxious

face she followed them as they penetrated the lusty stand of corn, going from south to north on the western side of the field. Then she tagged less willingly as they turned east toward the strip she had planted. As they neared it they remarked a scarcity of stalks ahead; and when they at last stood on the first of the eighty rows, they gazed with astonishment at the narrow belt that showed bravely green at the upper end by the carnelian bluff, but dark and bare over the three fourths of its length that sloped down to the timothy meadow.

"I guess *this* won't need no thinning," said the biggest brother, ironically.

They set to work to examine the hills, that only here and there sent up a lonely shoot, the little girl standing by and silently watching them. But they found few signs of the gopher burrowing they felt sure had devastated the ground. All at once the eldest brother had a brilliant thought, and, with a glance at the little girl, who was nervously twisting her fingers, paced eastward and counted the rows that made up the barren strip. There were just eighty!

He came back and joined his brothers; and the little girl, standing before him, dared not lift her eyes to his face.

"Did you plant that corn?" he demanded, ramming the butt of his musket into the ground.

"Yes," answered the little girl, her voice husky with apprehension. There was a pause.

"Did a lot of gophers come in while you's a-planting?" asked the biggest brother, more kindly.

"Oh, a *lot*," answered the little girl.

"Did you sling clods at 'em?" demanded the eldest brother, again pounding the musket into the dirt.

"Nearly slung my arm off," answered the little girl.

The eldest brother grunted incredulously.

"It's mighty funny," he said, "that the gophers liked *your* planting better 'n anybody else's."

The little girl did not answer. Her forehead was puckered painfully as, gripping her hat, she stood busily curling and uncurling her toes in the dirt. Her lashes were fluttering as if she awaited a blow.

"I'll just ask you one thing," went on the eldest brother; "what's to-morrow?"

The little girl started as if the blow had fallen, and stammered her answer.

"My—my—birfday," she said.

"A—*ha*," he replied suggestively. Then he tramped to the timothy meadow, the others following. And the little girl, walking very slowly, came on behind.

When the big brothers had gone on to the farm-house, the little girl still tarried in the corn-field. Her eldest brother's hint concerning her birthday had suggested the cruel punishment she felt certain was to be hers, and she could not bear to face the family at the dinner-table.

For months she had longed for a little red wagon—a wagon with a long tongue, and "Express" on the side in black letters; and had planned how she would harness Bruno and Luffree to it and drive along the level prairie roads. Evening after evening she had taken out the thick catalogue and pored over the prices, and had shown the

kind she wanted again and again to all the big brothers in turn.

Then one day she had surprised her biggest brother while he was taking a bulky brown-paper package off the farm wagon on his return from Yankton. He had sent her into the house; but she had found out later that the package was in the corn-crib, and had crept in there one afternoon, when the farm-house was deserted, and taken a good look at it as it hung from a rafter and well out of reach. It was still unwrapped, but the brown paper was torn in one place, and through the hole the little girl had seen a smooth, round red stick. It was a wheel-spoke.

Her sixth-and-a-half birthday was not far off, and she had waited for its coming as patiently as she could, in the meantime working secretly on harnesses for the dogs, who had resigned themselves good-naturedly to much measuring. Now, on the very eve of her happiness, she was to be deprived of the yearned-for wagon.

Crouching in the corn-field, she grieved away the long day. Dinner-time came, and all the corn-stalk shadows pointed significantly toward the carnelian bluff; then they slowly shifted around to the eastward and grew very long; and at last commingled and were blotted out by the descending gloom that infolded the little girl.

Lying upon her back, she looked up at the sky, that with the gathering darkness of the warm summer night disclosed its twinkling stars, and wished that she could suddenly die out there in the field in some mysterious way, so that there might be much self-condemning woe at the farm-house when they found her, cold and still. And she could not refrain from weeping with sheer pity for herself. After pondering for a while on the sad picture of her untimely death, she changed to one of great deeds and happiness, wealth and renown, in some far-off land toward which she was half determined to set out. But this delightful dream was rudely broken into.

A long blast from the cow-horn sounded through the quiet night and echoed itself against the bluff. The little girl sat up and looked toward the house through the dark aisles of the corn.

"I'm not coming," she said, speaking out loud in a voice that broke as she ended, "I'm going to stay here and *starve* to death!"

Once more the cow-horn blew, and this time the call was more prolonged and commanding in tone. It brought the little girl to her feet, and she hunted up her hat and put it on. Then, as two short, peremptory blasts rang out, she started toward home.

Next morning she dressed hurriedly and got to the sitting-room as quickly as she could. But there was no bright red wagon standing bravely in wait for her as she entered; there was nothing under her breakfast plate, even, when she turned it over. She ate her grits and milk in silence, choking a little when she swallowed, and, as soon as she could, rushed away to the corn-crib to see if the brown-paper package were still there.

It was gone!

Then she knew that her big brothers had sent it away.

She crept back to the house and climbed the ladder to the attic, where she meant to hide and mourn alone. But no sooner had she gained her feet beneath the peaked roof, than she saw what she had been seeking.

It hung by its scarlet tongue from a beam, flanked on one side by the paper of sage that was being saved to season the holiday turkeys, and on the other by the bag that held the trimmings of the Yule-tree. And the little girl, sitting tearfully beneath it, tried to count on

her fingers the days that must pass before Christmas.

VII

TWICE IN JEOPARDY

COOL and sparkling after its morning rain-bath, and showing along its green ridges those first, faint signs of yellow that foretell a coming ripeness, the grass-mantled prairie lay beneath the warm noon sun. The little girl, cantering over it toward the sod shanty on the farther river bluffs, frightened the trilling meadow-larks, as she passed, from their perch on the dripping sunflowers, and scattered the drops on the wild wheat-blades with the hoofs of her blind black pony.

The storm had wept so copiously upon the fading plains that the furrows, turned along the edge of the broad wheat-field to check fires, ran full and swift down the gentle slope that the little girl was crossing and almost kept pace with her pony. Every hollow in her path was filled to the brim, and the chain of sloughs to the south, now resounding with the joyous quacks of bluewings and mallards, were swelling their waters with the feeding of countless streams. And the drenched ground, where the flowers bent their clean faces as if worn with the heavy downpour, sent up that grateful essence that follows in the wake of a shower.

The blind, black pony felt the new life in the springy turf and the fresh air and flirted his unshod heels dangerously near to a tracking wolf-dog as he splashed through runlet and pool. *Pluff-et-y-pluff, pluff-et-y-pluff, pluff-et-y-pluff*, he drummed softly, and the panting hound, muzzle down, followed with a soft *swish, swish*. But to the little girl, thinking of the bounty for gopher brushes that her big brothers had offered her the day before, the galloping echoed a different song: *A-cent-for-a-tail, a-cent-for-a-tail, a-cent-for-a-tail*, it sang in her ears, till she struck the pony a welt on the flanks with the ends of her long rope reins, and jerked his head impatiently toward the shallow ford that led to the home of the Swede boy.

The morning before, the little girl's mother and the three big brothers had held an indignation meeting in the timothy meadow, which, once the choicest bit of hay land on the farm, was now so thickly strewn with wide, brown gopher-mounds, that the little girl, with a good running start down the barren corn strip, could cross it without touching a spear of grass, by bopping from one hillock to another. But while this amused her very much, for she pretended that the knolls were muskrat houses in a deep, deep slough, it only enraged her mother and the big brothers. For the gray gophers had intrenched themselves so well in the timothy, and had thrown up such damaging earthworks, that only a scythe could save what little hay remained; and they had not only taken into their burrows—as had been discovered the week before—all the freshly dropped seed from the barren corn strip, but had dug up kernels all over the field when they were sprouting into stalks.

The meadow had lain fallow the summer before, and had served no further use than the grazing of some picketed cows. Then, one parching July day it had been cut, to kill the thistles and pigweed that overran it, and in the following May had been plowed, dragged, and sown to wild timothy. The few mounds dotting it had been turned under with the belief that, between the fallow and the new plowing, the gophers would be driven out. Instead, they had kept to their burrows and, all in good time, had tripled their number.

So, as the little girl's mother and the big brothers stood on the edge of the timothy and viewed the concave stretch that should have showed green and waving from its rim to the boggy center, they planned the destruction of the rodents, and declared that if any escaped death by poison, the little girl should snare them and receive a cent for each tail.

When her mother's calico slat-sunbonnet and the big hats of her big brothers had bobbed out of sight across the corn, the little girl sat

down upon a hillock and counted gophers. But there were so many and they ran about so much that she could not keep track of them; so she gave it up soon and began to think over all the things she would buy from the thick catalogue with the money she would get when she had snared a great number.

And she was still sitting there, watching the gophers covetously, when she saw the eldest brother returning. He had a salmon-can full of poisoned wheat in one hand, and when he reached the meadow he made a circuit and left a pinch of grain at the mouths of a score of burrows, where the greedy animals could find it and cram it into their cheek-pouches, and then crawl into their holes to die. When he had distributed all the grain, he threw the salmon-can away, wiped his fingers on his overalls, and started for the watermelon patch.

The little girl had silently withdrawn into the corn-field at his approach, but now she came out and, after satisfying herself that he was out of sight, picked up the can and also made a circuit of the meadow. Strangely enough, she stopped at the very burrows he had visited. When she was done, she went to the boggy center, found a deep cow track that was half full of water, and carefully emptied the can into it. Then she took it back to where the eldest brother had thrown it, and, with a look toward the watermelon patch, went home.

On his way back to the farm-house, the eldest brother paused in the timothy to see if the gophers had eaten of the poisoned grain. He was delighted to find, on going from hill to hill, that not a single kernel was visible! He imparted the good news to the family at the dinner-table, and it was received with rejoicing. The little girl alone was silent. But, doubtless, she had not heard what he said, for she was intent upon a huge piece of dried-prune cobbler.

That afternoon she went out to the barn to get some hair for a slipping-noose. Kate, the raw-boned cultivator horse, standing idle in her stall, turned her head and nickered when she heard the door

creak open, expecting a nibble of sugar-bread. But the little girl had nothing for her. Instead, she rolled a dry-goods box into an adjoining stall, climbed upon it, and, reaching over the rough board side, got hold of Kate's long black tail.

The mare flattened her ears back, stamped crossly, and swayed her hind quarters against the opposite partition. But the little girl only clung the tighter and, unmindful in her security, chose and pulled out a dozen of the longest hairs she could find. Then, jumping down, she arranged them, ends together, hooked them over a nail at their center, and plaited them. And when she had tied a piece of stout, dark string to the end of the braid, she slipped it through the hair loop. The next moment, with a stick in one hand and the snare in the other, she started happily for the meadow.

When she reached it, saucy *chur-r-rs* from all over the timothy announced her. And as she paused on its edge to decide which burrow she would attack first, a dozen gophers sat up on their haunches to look at her, or frisked gaily from mound to mound.

She caught sight of a gray back at a near-by hole, and, running forward, chased the animal out of sight, stooped and carefully arranged the noose around the opening, and, after covering it with dirt, straightened the string to its full length. Then she crept back noiselessly to the hole to take a last peep before she threw herself down flat upon her stomach, grasped the end of the string, and lay very still.

For a moment there was no movement at the burrow. But soon the tip end of a gopher's nose appeared, the whiskers moving inquiringly, and disappeared. When it came again, the little girl whistled a note softly, and the nose came out so far that two sharp black eyes showed. The eyes saw her, too, and the gopher, growing bolder and more inquisitive, raised himself higher on his fore paws to take a better look. Presently all of his white throat was visible, and the little

girl knew that it was time to act. With one quick, vigorous jerk of her extended right arm, she tightened the loop around him. And, amid a whirl of dirt, gray tail, and tawny back, the gopher was pulled out into the timothy.

The little girl sat upon her knees and looked at him. Her heart was beating wildly, and she was almost as scared as the panting creature at the end of her string. He held the snare taut as he crouched in a bunch of grass and watched her. Finally, she pulled at it a little. It brought him toward her, reluctantly sliding along on his feet, which he braced stiffly. Then, as she pulled again, he began to tug madly, and clattered in alarm.

"*Seek—seek!*" he cried, twisting and turning his lithe body; "*seek—seek—seek!*" The next instant he took the string into his mouth and bit it ferociously.

The little girl paled at the sight, and arose trembling to her feet. This shortened the snare, and the gopher came nearer, tumbling over and over through the grass. Remembering her stick, the little girl backed slowly toward it, not taking her eyes off him for an instant. But, as she retreated, the string tightened again, and the gopher advanced as before. The little girl, still too far from the stick, trembled more than ever at his wild cries, and her hand shook so that she could hardly hold the snare. He was attacking it with all his might, bounding into the air and, blindly fearless in his danger, coming toward her faster than she could step backward.

A moment she paused, shaking her apron to try to scare him. But as, hissing and fighting, he rolled against her bare feet, she dropped the string, turned her face from the meadow—and fled!

Every Sunday afternoon the Swede boy came to the farm-house and, squatting opposite the little girl as she sat enthroned upon the lounge in all the glory of a stiff Turkey-red dress, eyed her furtively while her mother read aloud the story of Mazeppa. His pale eyes, under their heavy white brows, never wavered from her face, even during the most stirring danger to the Cossack chief. Upon these occasions the little girl's mind wandered, too; for the tale of bravery recalled the colonel's son at the army post, the pride of the troop, who, in campaign hat, yellow-striped trousers, and snug, bright-buttoned coat, was a sturdy military figure. And had the Swede boy known it, he was less to her than a cockle-bur in her blind black pony's tail.

But youth is fickle and the reservation was far. So, when the rain was over next morning, she ran to the barn, bridled her horse, climbed from the manger to his back, and, lying flat to escape the top casing of the door, went out of the stable toward the Swede shanty at a run. Down deep in the long, narrow, jack-knife pocket of her apron lay a new gopher snare, culled, as before, from the tail of the cultivator mare.

As she scoured across the prairie, her hair whipping her shoulders and her skirts fluttering gaily, the last few clouds in the sky, white and almost empty, dispersed tearfully above the distant forks of the Vermillion. And when the river was reached and forded, and the steep bank climbed on the other side, a drying wind that had sprung up promised, with the sun, to prepare the timothy for that afternoon's snaring.

The Swede boy listened silently while the little girl unfolded her plan, and, after she had finished, waited a long time before speaking. His pale eyes looked thoughtfully at the ground, and the little girl, still mounted on her pony, could not see whether or not they approved of the scheme.

"Who gates th' mownay?" he asked at last. The little girl hesitated

before answering, struggling with greed.

"Bofe of us?" she faltered.

The Swede boy grunted.

"You catch 'em and kill 'em," said the little girl, "and I'll snip off their tails. 'Cause my biggest brother says gray gophers don't worry no more 'bout losin' their tails than tadpoles do."

He grunted again, and the little girl, eager and impatient, turned the blind black pony about in circles.

"Ay catch 'em, ay kill 'em," the Swede boy said finally. There was a significant tone in his voice, and a gleam in the pale eyes under the tow hair. "An' yo' gate th' mownay," he added.

They were on the edge of the timothy meadow as soon as the pony, with his double load, could cover the distance. And while the little girl tied the horse to a big stone on the slope of the carnelian bluff, the Swede boy hastened to a gopher-hole and fixed the noose about it. A moment later, when she came stealthily running up behind him, he was already flat upon the ground and waiting.

It was not long before the gopher poked his nose out to see if his pursuer was near, and, catching sight of a ragged felt hat just above a clump of pigweed, stood up to investigate. The next instant the Swede boy had him and, springing to his feet, cast a triumphant look behind. But what was his amazement to see the little girl, bareheaded, fast disappearing through the corn!

When she came slowly back, the Swede boy was again stretched upon his stomach, and watching a hole nearer the center of the meadow. The little girl did not follow him, but stayed on the rim and pityingly viewed the limp gopher that lay, with eyes half closed, breast still, and tail thin and lifeless.

"Poor fing!" she said sympathetically, "it's 'cause you stealed the corn."

Then she opened his mouth with the butt end of her willow riding-switch, to find out what he had in his cheek-pouches. An onion and a few marrowfat peas rolled out, and the little girl, kneeling beside him, eyed him sternly.

"And so," she said, waving her hand toward the barren strip, "after pickin' up all that corn, you gophers have to go a-snoopin' round the veg'table patch!"

She left him and went on to the corn-marker, his tail, taken in righteous wrath, bearing her jack-knife company in the long, narrow pocket of her apron. But when she had sat down musingly, her chin in her hands, a strange thing happened to the dead gopher on the meadow rim. He moved a little, slowly unclosed his eyes, raised his head, and looked about; and, unseen by the Swede boy and the little girl, crawled away, through the clods that had only stunned him, to the corn-field, where, with many a cross *seek*, he nursed the hairy stump that henceforth was to serve him for a tail.

Dinnerless, but forgetful of hunger in the sport of capture, the little girl and the Swede boy stayed on. Once, during the afternoon, a gopher stopped their work by getting away with the snare and leaving them only half of the string. But the blind black pony good-naturedly furnished enough wiry strands for another slipping-noose, and the hunt went on.

On their way to the farm-house at sundown, they passed the spot where the Swede boy had left his first capture, but failed to find him anywhere.

"Why, he's runned away!" exclaimed the little girl.

The Swede boy shook his head. "Noa; ay keel hame weeth a

clode," he said, "an' a bole-snake gote hame."

They had many a stout noose stolen during the days that followed. But the Swede boy snared plenty of gray gophers, and they all shared the fate of the first one,—lost their tails and were left to lie on the edge of the ruined meadow. When the spot was visited afterward, it was generally found that they had disappeared. But this did not trouble the little girl, for she wisely concluded that the bull-snakes were having a fat time of it.

The night before the three big brothers left with the thrashers, the string of gopher-tails was so long that she brought it into the kitchen and gave it proudly to the eldest brother to count. Then it was put into a twist of hay and shoved into the cook-stove.

"Goin' to give some of them pennies to th' Swede?" asked the youngest brother as the little girl sat down at the table and began to add up her earnings.

She flushed, but did not answer.

"Naw," said the eldest brother. "Why, th' Swede's not catchin' gophers for money; he's doin' it for love."

The little girl gathered up her pennies angrily and went to her room. But, next morning, when the Swede boy's whistle sounded from the meadow, she mounted her pony and went down. For the biggest brother had whispered to her this word of philosophy: "Might jus' as well get th' game with th' name."

For several nights after the departure of the big brothers, the little girl came home radiant, brushes dangling from her apron ruffle like scalps. Then, one evening, when four catches should have made her happy, she ate her supper with a sad and puzzled face, and afterward added only *two* tails to her string. Her mother, seeing that something was troubling her, inquired what it was; but, on hearing the story, went

into such a hearty fit of laughter that the little girl's feelings were hurt very much, and she went to bed on the instant. She did not broach the subject again. But while the two weeks of her big brothers' absence were passing, she was often dejected.

After supper, the first night of their return, when the benches were still drawn up around the table, and the big brothers, tired with their long ride, were pulling at their corn-cob pipes, the little girl went up to the eldest and touched him timidly on the arm.

"Well, youngster," he said, "how many gophers have you snared since we've been gone?"

The little girl got red suddenly, and hesitated before she spoke. "Sixty," she answered, half under her breath.

The biggest brother took his pipe out of his mouth in mock astonishment. "Sixty!" he exclaimed. "Why, geewhitaker! you'll break the bank if you don't look out!"

The eldest brother put his hand into his pocket and took out some change. "Get the string," he said, "and here's your money."

The little girl looked at the coins mournfully, and then around the circle, and stepped back a few paces. "You won't b'lieve me when you see it," she said. She went out and came back presently, holding up the tails.

The eldest brother took them out of her hand, and she stood silently by while he counted them. When he had finished, he looked at her crossly. "Sixty!" he sneered. "You haven't caught no such thing! Here's only twenty." He waved the brushes in the air, and the little girl trembled visibly. "Did you think I'd pay you for sixty," he continued, "when you ain't got the tails to show for 'em?"

The little girl trembled more than ever. "Honest," she said; "honest!

We caught sixty—we did, truly—"

"Where are their tails, then? where are their tails?" asked the eldest brother, impatiently, shaking the string so violently that some of the brushes fell off. "You *say* you did—*but what have you got to show for 'em*?"

The little girl came closer, her eyes wide and earnest. She was breathing hard and she lowered her voice as she answered.

"True as cross my heart to die," she said, "we caught sixty; but this was all the string I could get. 'Cause—'cause—there's a new kind of gophers in the timothy meadow,—*and they ain't got tails!*"

VIII

A HARVEST WEDDING

THE wedding of one of the Dutchman's seven stout daughters to a young farmer who lived in a dugout on the West Fork was an event in the little girl's life only second in importance to the christening. Two trips to Yankton on the wheat-wagon with the biggest brother shrank into insignificance before it, and she looked forward to its celebration so anxiously that time dragged as slowly as a week before Christmas.

The morning of the notable day she was unable to eat anything through sheer excitement. She passed the hours after breakfast in restless riding over the barley stubble, where the sheep, led by a black bell-wether who sought the fields because they were forbidden ground, were mincing and picking their way. At eleven she happily welcomed a gallop to the farthest end of the farm to carry doughnuts and ginger-beer to the big brothers. At dinner-time her appetite was again poor, but later, after making enough hay-twists for her mother's baking, she scraped the cake-batter dish clean and partook freely of several yards of red apple peelings.

The big brothers came in early from the fields to rest and get ready, and, one by one, spent half an hour in the kitchen, where the big wooden wash-tub held the center of the room. When it came time for the little girl to take a bath, the kitchen floor looked like a duck pond, for the tub was almost floating, and the well outside was noticeably low. At sunset the family sat down to a supper suggestive of the wedding feast to come. But though there were toothsome

sandwiches on the table and cream popovers, not to speak of a heaping dish of watermelon sweet-pickles, the little girl again did not feel like eating, and only nibbled at a piece of raisin-pie when her mother, not realizing how satisfying the batter and peelings had been, threatened her with staying at home. After supper the big brothers hitched the gray team to the light wagon, fastened up the chicken-coops, latched the barn door and chained the dogs; and, having finished the chores, blacked each other's boots, brushed their hair slick with water, changed their clothes and resigned themselves to their mother, who put the last touches to their collars and ties. Then, just as a faint bugle-call, sounding the advance, was heard from across the prairie to the west, the family climbed into the wagon.

On the trip down, the eldest and youngest brothers sat in front and drove. Their mother and the biggest brother occupied the hind seat and looked after the piccalilli and pies, which they held on their laps. So the little girl had to content herself with staying in the back of the wagon on an armful of hay and letting her feet dangle out behind. As the team trotted south over the rough path that, at the school-house, joined another leading to the Dutchman's, she clung to the side boards in impatient silence, her eyes turned across the sloughs toward the Vermilion, where, through the starlight, were coming the chaplain, some troopers, and the colonel's son.

It was a still night, and the family could hear other wagons approaching from various directions, the distant whinnying of ponies traveling singly, the barking of the Dutchman's dogs, and the thudding gallop of the nearing cavalry mounts; and when they arrived the same shouts that greeted them welcomed a score of their neighbors and the dusty army men.

The moments that followed were memorable ones to the little girl. Standing by on tiptoe, with only the neighbor woman between her and the colonel's son, she saw the chaplain unite the Dutchman's daughter

and the young farmer. The ceremony took place in the yard, so that all might witness it, and the biggest brother held the lantern by which the chaplain read from his prayer-book. The guests gathered about quietly, and listened reverently to the service and to the prayer for health and happiness in the dugout home on the Fork. And when the kissing, handshaking, and congratulations were over, they moved across the yard to the kitchen door, where they drank hearty toasts to the bride, in coffee-cups foaming high with beer. Then the married men took their wives, and the unmarried, their sweethearts, and went into the house to open the party.

The Dutchman's habitation was different from his neighbors' homes. One roof sheltered his family, his oxen and his cows, his harvested crops, his poultry and his pigs. It was a shanty roof, and it covered a long, sod building that began, at the river end, with the sitting-room, continued through the bedroom, the kitchen, the granary, the stable, and the chicken-coop, and was completed by the pig-house. The Dutchman, his wife, and their daughters could go back and forth from the best room to the beasts without leaving its cover. So, no matter how deep the snow was, the cattle never lacked for fodder, the hens for feed, or the hogs for their mash, a boiler of which, sour and fumy, cooked winter and summer upon the kitchen stove; and, when the fiercest of blizzards was blowing, the family were in no danger of getting lost between the house and the barn.

The three rooms of the building that were nearest the Vermilion, though given different names, were really all bedrooms. A high four-poster of unplaned boards stood against the low back wall of the sitting-room, beneath the rack that held the Dutchman's pipes; the sleeping-room, which the four eldest children occupied, held two smaller beds; and in the kitchen—where the family ate their breakfasts of coffee-cake and barley-coffee, their dinners of souse and vegetables and hard bread broken into a pan of clabbered milk, and supped, without plates, around a deep bowl of stew—was a wide

couch that belonged to the youngest three.

But on the night of the wedding the first two rooms were empty, except for benches, the beds having been taken down early in the day and piled up beside the hay-stacks back of the stable. The couch in the kitchen was left in its place, however, and was covered from head to foot with babies.

The house was lighted by barn lanterns, hung out of the way under the shingles at the upper ends of the bare, sloping roof-joists, and their dull flames, that leaped and dipped with the moving feet beneath them, shone upon walls clean and bright in a fresh layer of newspapers, and revealed, to whomever cast a look upward, the parcels of herbs, seeds, and sewing thrust here and there in handy crevices of the brown, cobwebbed ceiling.

The Dutchman's neighbors crowded the rooms to the doors. In the kitchen were the older women, keeping watch over the couch and, at the same time, with busy clatter in a half-dozen tongues, unwrapping the edibles brought for the wedding supper. In the doorway between the other rooms sat the eldest brother playing his fiddle, the Irishman twanging a jews'-harp, and "Frenchy" with the bones; and on each side of them danced the guests.

The newly made bride and her husband led the quadrille in the sitting-room, opposite a trooper and the neighbor woman; the Swede had as his partner the new teacher, a young lady from St. Paul; and the biggest brother had his mother. Above them, as they promenaded, balanced, and swung, waved the black felt hat that the Dutchman had worn when he took his long trip over the prairie to invite them. Each family he visited had pinned a ribbon to its rim; and now it swayed back and forth, a gay and varicolored challenge to the hands reached out to grasp it.

The army chaplain was in the next room; and, as the quadrille

closed in a roistering polka and a waltz struck up, he clapped in time to the couples that were circling before him, their hands on each other's shoulders, and their voices joining merrily with the music:

"In Lauterbach hab' ich mein Strumf
verlor'n,
Und ohne Strumf geh' ich nicht heim;
Ich gehe doch wieder zu Lauterbach hin
Und kauf' mir ein Strumf für mein Bein."

Now and then a couple drew aside and sat down a moment to rest. But soon they were back on the floor again, whirling and laughing and stamping their feet, and raising clouds of dust from the rough plank floors to their scarlet faces.

Out of doors there was less noise, but no lack of fun. Smudge fires burned in a wide circle about the house to repel the hungry mosquitos that, with high, monotonous battle-songs, stormed the smoky barrier between them and the inner circle of horses and oxen feeding from wagon-boxes. Nearer the building, and set about the carefully raked yard on barrels and boxes, were Jack-o'-lanterns made of pumpkins, that gave out the uncertain, flickering light of tallow dips through their goggle-eyes and grinning mouths.

In and out among the wagons, fires, and lanterns the children were playing hide-and-go-seek, screaming with excitement as they scampered in every direction to secrete themselves, or lying still and breathless as the boy who was "it" hunted them cautiously, with one eye searching for moving shadows and the other fixed upon the wagon-wheel that was the goal. On being sent out of the house to give the dancers room, the boys had raised a joyous clamor over their banishment, and begun a game of crack-the-whip; while the girls, not wishing to soil their clothes, had walked to and fro in front of the house, with their arms around each other, and watched the dancing. But when the Swede boy, who was chosen for the snapper, was so

worn and breathless with being popped from the end of the rushing line that he could run no longer, boys and girls had joined in playing tag and blindman's-buff and, afterward, hide-and-go-seek.

The little girl was with them. But, so far, in spite of her white dress, which made her an easy prey, she had not been caught. The boys who had taken their turns at the wheel had caught other boys whom she did not know; and had always managed to find and, with much struggling, kiss the particular girls they favored. No matter how conspicuously she had hidden, they had always passed her by. As a result, after two or three disappointments, she had not taken the trouble of running to cover, but had either lingered just within the sitting-room to watch the dancing, or hung wistfully about the yard, somewhere near the colonel's son.

"Frenchy's" brother was now guarding the goal, and the little girl was ambushed behind the very straw-pile that concealed the colonel's son. It was an occasion that she had looked forward to and secretly brought to pass, yet, as she knelt close beside him, she could not think of one of the polite things she had planned to say to him that night. Their proximity struck her dumb, while he was silent through fear of being discovered. So they cowered together, speechless and restive, until the Swede boy tore by in an unsuccessful race for the wagon-wheel. Then the colonel's son darted out from behind the straw, and she remained regretfully looking after his blue-clad form.

All at once her meditations were rudely interrupted. "Frenchy's" brother, skulking here and there on the lookout for a bright, telltale apron, came round the pile and pounced upon her. "Forfeet! forfeet!" he cried, dragging her out into the middle of the yard.

She tried to pull away from him, and twisted her head so that her face was out of reach. "You stop," she cried hotly; "you jus' stop!"

The struggle was sweet to him, however, and he only laughed at

her angry commands and fought harder than ever for his due, striving at every turn to pin her arms down so that she could not resist. The boys ran up to urge him on, and the girls hopped up and down in their enjoyment of the scuffle.

But he was not able to win in the contest. The little girl was a match for him. What she lacked in strength she made up in nimbleness, and she stood her ground fiercely, wrestling on until, with a quick, furious wrench, she freed herself from his hold and bolted toward the kitchen.

"Frenchy's" brother pursued her. But, once inside, she was safe, for he dared not enter and scramble across the couch to where she had sought refuge by a window. So he turned back toward the goal. "I get you yet," he shouted, wiping his damp face on his shirt sleeve.

The other children gathered about him and taunted him with his failure. To right himself in their eyes he set after one of the Dutchman's girls, who shook off her wooden shoes and fled frantically in circles to evade him. But he succeeded in catching her and taking a forfeit from one of her sun-bleached braids, after which he went to the wagon and sat down on the tongue to rest.

The game went on. It was the Swede boy's turn at the goal, and he put his hands over his face and began to count as the children scattered. "Tane, twanety, thirty, forty, feefty," he chanted, "seexty, saventy, eighty." As he told the numbers he stealthily watched the kitchen window where the little girl stood.

The neighbor woman's boy, who was in hiding under the wagon and almost at his feet, saw him peeking through his fingers and jumped out to denounce him. "King's ex, king's ex!" he cried, holding up one hand. "It's no fair; he's looking."

"Ay bane note," declared the Swede boy, stoutly, wheeling about; "yo late may alone."

"You are, too," persisted the other, springing away to hide again.

The Swede boy once more resumed his chanting, and the little girl, as she leaned from her vantage-point to listen, wished that she might return to the yard and take part in the game. But "Frenchy's" brother, though tired with his struggles, was still sitting menacingly on the wagon tongue, and she dared not leave her cover.

Suddenly the sight of a slat sunbonnet, hanging on a nail beside her, suggested a means of circumventing him. She took it down and put it on, tying the strings under her chin in a hard double knot. The long, stiff pasteboard slats buried her face completely, and nobody but Luffree, with his sharp muzzle, could have reached her cheeks to kiss them. So she sallied bravely into the yard.

The Swede boy had been counting slowly in the hope that she would hide, and when he saw her approaching he paused a moment, expecting "Frenchy's" brother to renew the attack. But the figure on the tongue never moved, even when the little girl, with a saucy swish of her skirts, paused daringly near it. So he sang out his last call:

"Boshel of wheat, boshel of raye,
Who ain't radey, holer 'Ay.'"

"I," shouted the little girl, whisking triumphantly away, and the Swede boy began to count again.

She entered the house, going in at the sitting-room. He followed her movements as she threaded her way through the dancers toward the empty granary, and saw her sunbonnet pass the bedroom window and the open kitchen door. Then once more he sent out the last call. This time there was no response. So, after a hasty examination of the wagon, he began to creep about with an impressive show of hunting.

Often he came upon a new calico dress trailing in a dusty place, but passed its wearer by as if he had not seen her. He surprised the

colonel's son curled up in a box beneath a Jack-o'-lantern, and distanced him to the wagon. Then he went on searching for a girl, and the boys, clustered about the wheel, watched him as he sneaked through the yard. Finally, when he judged that enough time had passed to warrant it, he made a wider search that brought him close to the granary door.

His courage almost failed him as he passed in front of it, and he was glad when the delighted squeals of two girls, who were running toward the goal, gave him an excuse to delay his entrance. But when the girls had tapped the wheel, he bounded back and, spurring himself on, stepped within the dark room, where, in a far corner, he caught a faint glint of white.

He walked toward it timidly. It moved, and he stood still. "Yo there?" he asked, at last, his throat so dry that he could scarcely find the words. A subdued giggle answered him. He recalled how kind and comrade-like she had been to him three months before when they had caught gophers together, and his spirits rose. "Yo there?" he asked again.

Suddenly she came from her corner and attempted to pass him. Emboldened by the darkness, he put out his arms and stopped her, and she laughed gaily up at him. He laughed shyly back and dropped her arms. She made no effort to get away. He stood still, awkwardly cracking his knuckles.

"Why don't you fight!" she demanded. He did not reply, but shuffled his feet and cracked his knuckles harder than ever. The music of a waltz floated in to them over the babble of the kitchen, and he turned his head that way as if to listen. As he did so she crept past him, her eyes sparkling with fun from the depths of the bonnet. When he turned back to look at her, she was gone.

He followed her out and paid no attention to the jeering inquiries of

the other children. And as the colonel's son began to count from the wagon-wheel he walked slowly past the teams and smudges, and across a strip of backfire beyond, to the high, dry grass, where he lay on his back for the rest of the evening, looking sadly up at the stars.

The little girl sought a hiding-place, too, behind a hay-stack on the other side of the house. The colonel's son had seen her run that way, and as he sounded the final challenge his voice had a victorious ring. He began a second mock hunt. But it was a short one, for, fearful that he might stumble upon one of the Dutchman's younger brood, he first penetrated the outer darkness to find a boy, and then ran round the house in the direction taken by the little girl.

He came upon her unexpectedly as he circled a stack. She was crouching in plain sight against the hay, her face still hidden in the recesses of the bonnet. He rushed up to her and took her by the shoulders. "I've got you!" he said, but so low that the neighbor woman's daughter, who was just a few steps away behind a fanning-mill, could scarcely hear him.

"Y-e-e-s," stammered the little girl. She drew back and looked down, all her assurance supplanted by a wild desire to get away.

"Going to let me have my forfeit?" he whispered, shaking her a little.

The sunbonnet drooped until its wide cape stood up stiffly above her curls. "I hate that old French boy," she said.

The colonel's son moved closer, and a wisp of brittle grass in her hands crackled in a double grasp. She glanced up at him swiftly, as she felt his touch, and this time there was a nearing of the white frock to the suit of blue. "Well,—if—if—you've got t'," she added.

But the colonel's son, as he bent over her with all the gallantry of his nine years, had to learn by experience what "Frenchy's" brother had

divined at a glance: the sunbonnet was in the way.

He was equal to the emergency, however, and hesitated only for a moment. Then he put his hand into his trousers pocket and took out his clasp-knife. He could hear some one at the goal calling him, and there was a rattle of dishes in the house, where the music had ceased for a moment, that told him the plates were being passed for supper. He knew that in a moment either the chaplain or the boys would be searching for him.

She heard the calls and clatter, too; yet she did not move except to raise her head until the bonnet strings were in plain sight under her dimpled chin. When he saw them, he straightened his knife out with a click and leaned once more toward her.

The fiddle was playing the opening strains of the supper dance now, and a hundred voices were singing with it; so the neighbor woman's daughter, who had been peering from behind the fanning-mill, hurried away to the house. And thus it came about that no one but a vagrant night-hawk, perched high on the top of the stack, remained near enough to hear the sawing sound of a dull knife-blade, making its way through cloth.

In the early morning hours, as the gray team jogged homeward past the deserted school-house, the big brothers and their mother discussed the wedding, the dancing, and the supper. But the little girl, snugly wrapped in a quilt on the hay behind, lay still and silent, and only smiled when the night breeze from the west bore to her ear the clear notes of the departing bugle blowing a sweet retreat.

IX

THE PRICE OF CONVALESCENCE

EVERY morning a cloud appeared in the east, rushed westward across the northern sky, and vanished beyond the "Jim." Every afternoon it came up in the west again, swept back toward the east, and went out of sight in the Big Sioux. If a herd chanced to be grazing too near its path as it approached, they were scattered right and left in wild confusion by a shrill *toot*! *toot*! that could be heard at the farm-house. But when the way was clear the cloud traveled swiftly and silently, stringing itself, on sunny days, to a low white ribbon, or, if the air was damp and the heavens were gray, separating itself, from river to river, into many dark coughs of dense, high-sailing smoke.

For three months it had been crossing the plains as regularly as the sun itself. Before that it had loitered, attended, so the biggest brother said, by a great company of rough men carrying shovels and picks. It was this company, stray members of which, worn and grimy, had visited the farm-house now and then and talked in broad brogue, that had kept the little girl and the herd south of the reservation road throughout the early spring; and it was not until the men had dispersed and the cloud had begun its daily trips from horizon to horizon that she was permitted to ride northward on the pinto to see it go by.

The youngest brother went with her, mounted upon a skittish, bald-faced pony, and they halted together, near the low embankment that divided the prairie, to wait for the engine. But when it hurtled past, a screaming thing of iron and flying sparks, both the pinto and the pony, despite their riders' curbing, retreated so precipitately from the track

that neither she nor the youngest brother caught more than a glimpse of the flying train, for their mounts ceased running only when the barn-yard was reached. Then the old mare came to a stop, blowing and trembling so wildly that she could scarcely keep her legs, while the bald-face kicked and snorted about among the granaries and pens in a perfect paroxysm of terror.

It was not long, however, before the pinto completely lost her fear of the engine, and would eat quietly near the embankment while the little girl lay flat on the ties to listen for a first faint rumble, or waved at the people in the cars. The flock, too, became so familiar with the track that they soon had a contempt for it, a feeling that they retained even after a dozen of their number had been mangled on its rails; but the cattle always kept it at a respectful distance, and only Napoleon ever showed the train enough hostility to shake his stubby horns angrily at it or charge toward it as it shot away over the plains. The herd was allowed, therefore, to feed along the railroad in the custody of the little girl.

But now, for nearly three weeks, the Swede boy had kept guard over the grazing stock, and the little girl had not even seen the cloud above the distant train. For she was ill: so ill that the neighbor woman, who shared the long night watches beside the canopied bed with the biggest brother and his mother, shook her head in the seclusion of the kitchen, and told herself that the little girl would never be well again.

The family were beginning to have the same awful thought, and had sent a telegraphic summons from the new station, ten miles away, to a physician in Sioux Falls. To them a cloud far heavier and darker than the engine's breath was hanging, day and night, over the farm-house, shutting out all sunshine, hope, and happiness.

One warm afternoon, while the little girl was riding the cultivator mare up and down in the Indian corn, she had suddenly been seized with a chill. That night a fever followed, and for a week she grew

steadily worse. Her mother gave her every home remedy known to be good for malaria, and at the end of the second week moved her to the canopied bed, where an ever waving fan cooled her hot cheeks. It was here, almost at the end of the third week of her illness, that the Sioux Falls doctor found her.

She was tossing from side to side, murmuring in a delirium that had possessed her for days. Her face showed a scarlet flush against the white pillow-slip. The biggest brother, who scarcely left her bedside to rest or eat, was placing cold cloths upon her forehead and wetting her lips. White through his tan, he hung over her in an agony of fear, only lifting his eyes, now and then, to turn them sorrowfully upon his mother, seated opposite.

The little girl did not know of the doctor's arrival. As he hurried into the sitting-room, she was thinking of the floating cloud. Now it was pursuing her as she fled from it on a fleet pony; now it was stooping groundward, a huge, airy monster, to offer her a cake of ice; again it was sweeping over her, quenching the deadly fire that consumed her, and leaving her on the damp, green bank above the mooring-place of the bull-boat. She lay very still with her cool thoughts, her eyes, wide and lustrous, fixed upon the blue canopy overhead. But when, a moment later, the fever burned more hotly again, and the cloud changed to a blinding, blistering steam that enveloped her, she sat up and fought with her hands, and cried aloud for the biggest brother.

The doctor caught her wrists and gently put her back. One glance at her parched lips and brown tongue had told him what was the matter, and as he opened a valise and took out some medicines he answered the inquiring looks of the family. "Typhoid," he said. "She's a very sick child. But I think we may be able to pull her through."

With her mother and the big brothers looking on mournfully, the first step was taken toward aiding her. One by one her curls, so long her mother's pride and care, were snipped off close to her head; and

when at last they lay on the bed in a newspaper, a little heap of soft, yellow tangles, there was sobbing all about in the sitting-room, and even the doctor, accustomed to sad sights, could not keep the tears from chasing down his cheeks and into his brown beard.

She looked pitifully thin and altered, shorn of her bright halo; yet at once she grew quieter, and when she was gently lowered into the brimming wash-tub and then laid between sheets wrung from cold water, she closed her eyes gratefully and ceased her outcries.

The doctor, collarless and with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, worked over her all day. The little girl's mother and the neighbor woman assisted him, and the big brothers sat on the bench in front of the house, so as to be within easy call. But when twilight came, and everything possible had been done for his patient's comfort, the doctor, who was tired with his long ride and the day's strain, went into the little girl's room and took a much-needed sleep.

"Keep up your courage," he said cheerily to the biggest brother, as he left him at his post by the little girl; "her years of outdoor life will help her rally. I have hope; but wake me at once if you note any decided change."

The evening hours passed slowly. In the sick-room the little girl's mother was resting on the lounge, which had been pulled close to the canopied bed. The neighbor woman dozed in the kitchen, beside the table where was spread the untasted supper. The eldest and the youngest brothers were stretched, still dressed, on their beds in the attic. The house was noiseless, and dark everywhere except in the sitting-room. There, on the high clock-shelf, the same tall lamp that, nearly seven and a half years before, had burned like a beacon and lighted the coming of the stork, now, turned low, shone upon the faithful biggest brother and the suffering little girl.

Shortly after ten o'clock an interruption came to the silence. A

gentle knocking was heard at the hall door, and, on going out, the neighbor woman found a cattleman who had recently moved into the Territory from northern Texas standing on the stone step. Having heard that morning from the Swede boy that the little girl was dangerously ill, he had ridden down to proffer the services of himself and his swift horse Sultan. And when the neighbor woman told him that there was small hope of the little girl's recovery, he stabled his animal, and prepared to remain all night.

As he came out of the barn, after having tied Sultan in a vacant stall, he found that, unknown to the family, another anxious watcher was lingering about. A tow head was suddenly thrust from behind the partly open door, and a hand halted him by catching appealingly at his sleeve. "She bane bater?" asked a low, timid voice.

The cattleman turned, half startled, and shook his head as he replied, "I reckon she's a lot worse," he said. He walked on, but paused again at the smoke-house. The tow-head was just behind, and the cattleman could hear the sound of chattering teeth; so he whipped off his overcoat and tossed it back. When he entered the hall the chattering had stopped, and the coat had disappeared into the shadow of a granary.

After the cattleman settled himself upon the bench in the kitchen, the house fell into quiet once more; and it was not until midnight that the hush was broken. Then the biggest brother, having moved the curtains of the canopied bed and turned up the lamp, discovered what he felt to be the dreaded change in the little girl, and uttered a frightened exclamation.

Her face, so long flushed with fever, was blanched and wan. Her eyes were entirely closed, and their long lashes lay on her cheeks. Her arms were outspread and relaxed, her palms open. Her breathing was so faint that he had to bend his ear to her lips to hear it. He was certain that the end was near, and hastened to call his mother and

summon his brothers and the doctor. They were joined in the sitting-room by the neighbor woman and the cattleman.

It was apparent to all that a change for the worse had taken place in the little girl. Yet the doctor, who hurried to her side, watch in hand, betrayed neither satisfaction nor alarm as he bent above her; and the group about him could only wait in suspense.

Suddenly there came a sigh from the pillow, and the little girl opened her eyes. For a week she had recognized no one. Now she looked about at the faces turned upon her, and a faint smile curved her lips. It brought a cry of joy from her mother. "Oh, pet lamb," she said, "the doctor's here, and he's going to make my baby well."

A shade passed over the little girl's face, and she glanced from her mother to the doctor. "I'm really not a baby," she said in a weak voice, but with something of the old spirit; "my mother jus' says that. I'll be seven in June."

The doctor nodded, and smiled back at her. His fingers were still at her wrist, and his face wore a worried expression. The cattleman leaned and whispered a question in his ear, and he replied out loud. "I can't tell," he said. "She may and she may not."

The little girl's eyes closed. The doctor poured out a stimulant, and put the glass to her mouth. When he lifted her head, she drank it, and her breath came in longer and heavier respirations. No one spoke.

All at once a sound of scratching at the front door, followed by whining, startled her so that she looked up once more, and her lips moved. "That's Luffree," she said. Her mother began to smooth her head tenderly, and it brought a new thought to the little girl. "'Monia'll give me curly hair," she added, and closed her eyes again.

The family watched her hopelessly, for to them the doctor's silence had only one meaning; but the cattleman, standing behind the eldest

brother, could not bear the wordless waiting. He felt that if she would rouse and continue to speak, death would be delayed. So he called to her pleadingly.

"Little gal!" he said huskily; "little gal!" She stirred wearily, and her lids fluttered as if she were striving to lift them. "Little gal," he went on; "I want ye t' fight this out. Don't ye let no ol' typhoid git *you*. An' when ye git well, ye jus' come to see me, an' ye kin hev anything on th' whole ranch." She turned her face toward him. "Anything on th' whole ranch," he repeated, his voice breaking. She moved one hand till it found one of her mother's, then she lay very still.

The biggest brother dropped to his knees beside the bed and crouched there. The youngest brother began to weep, leaning against the eldest. The neighbor woman crept away toward the kitchen, her face buried in her apron. The cattleman turned his back. The mother clung prayerfully to the transparent hand. And so passed a long and despairing five minutes.

But at its end the doctor uttered an ejaculation of surprise and pleasure, and sprang to his feet. At the same time he raised a warning finger and motioned all toward the kitchen. They obeyed him and retreated, remaining together in troubled impatience until he came among them.

"I can't be absolutely certain," he said, his face alight with happiness, "but I believe you can all go to bed with safety. Things seem to have turned our way: her skin is soft and moist, her temperature is down, and, better than anything else, she's asleep."

As a full realization of the good news broke upon them, all save the biggest brother sat down to talk it gratefully over. But he dashed out of doors to voice his joy, and, as he bounded up and down the yard, half laughing and half crying, he caught up a muffled figure that was lurking in the rear of the kitchen and swung it high into the air.

During the weeks that followed, while the little girl was slowly fighting her way back to a sure hold on life, there often came into her mind, vaguely at first and then more clearly, the promise that the cattleman had made her the night they thought she was dying. "Ye kin hev anything on th' whole ranch," had been his exact words; and in the intervals when, having gratified an appetite that was alarming in its heartiness, she sat in the sun with the dogs about her, or drove with her mother in the new buckboard, she pondered them exultantly and with a confidence that was absolute.

However, it was not until she was so well that she was again saying pert things to the eldest brother, and so strong that she was once more tending the herd, that she determined to pay the cattleman a visit and remind him of his agreement. Aware that the family would oppose her acceptance of a gift from a neighbor, she made her preparations for the trip in secret, and quietly left the farm-house one Sunday afternoon, taking with her a bridle and a gunny feed-bag half filled with oats.

She had chosen a Sunday for several reasons: she was always relieved on that day of the task of herding, the youngest brother taking her place; her mother invariably spent it in writing long letters that traveled across land and sea to far-away England; and the eldest and biggest brothers puttered it away in the blacksmith-shop, where there were farm implements to mend, hoes to sharpen, and picket-ropes and tugs to splice. Usually it was the lonesomest day of the week to the little girl; but this Sunday proved to be an exception.

She was careful not to disturb the household as she set off, and when she passed the cattle, which were feeding in the river meadows, she crept round them as slyly as an Indian, so that the

youngest brother, who was fashioning willow whistles, should not see her. Once having gained the straight road that led across the railroad track toward the cattleman's, she took off her hat and made faster progress.

But the way was long, and, still weak from her recent sickness, she was easily tired. When only two thirds of the distance was traveled it was so late that the night-blooming flowers were unfolding their chalices, as white and glimmering as the little girl's Sunday apron, to let the crape-winged moths drink their sweetness. Migrant birds were already speeding above her, to fly till dawn, and they veered from their course as they saw her hurrying along beneath them. Wild creatures that had been sleeping during the day came from their holes to seek food and timidly watched her hasten past. And all along, out of the tall, brittle grass, the busy lightning-bugs sprang up with their lanterns to help the dim stars light the way.

It was dusk on the plains before she looked in, through a tangle of corn and young cottonwoods, upon the low shanty, in front of which sat the cattleman in his shirt-sleeves, thoughtfully chewing a quid. The growl of a dog at his feet discovered her to him at the same moment, and, as he squinted in the half-light at her thin little form and cropped head, she seemed like some strange prairie fay coming, light-footed, out of the gloom to meet him.

"Hi thar!" he called, rising up as the little girl threaded the corn and cottonwoods. She was breathless with walking, and did not answer as she crossed the yard, shielding herself with the bridle and the feed-bag from the dog, bounding boisterously against her. "Wal, what on airth!" exclaimed the cattleman when she halted before him.

As she glanced up, he took on the forbidding height and glowering aspect of her first school-teacher. But she summoned heart. "How d' ye do?" she said, nodding at him cordially.

"What're ye doin' up here?" he demanded. "Ye lost? Come in! come in!"

"Oh, no," answered the little girl, following him into the shanty.

He lighted a lantern, and, turning it upon her, eyed her anxiously. She looked even thinner, paler, and more eerie than she had in the yard. "Sit down," he said, motioning her to a bench. But he remained standing, his hands shoved far into the top of his wide, yellow, goatskin "chaps," his quid rolling from side to side. "W'y, I thought you 's a spook," he laughed, "er a will-o'-th'-wisp—one. Want a drink er somethin' to eat? Got lots o' nice coffee. Guess y' 're petered."

"No, I'm not," she declared. And as he turned from the stove, where he had put the coffee on to boil, she got up and stepped toward him. "I—I—called to get somefing," she faltered, resuming, in her trepidation, a babyish pronunciation long since discarded for one more dignified.

"Ye did?" queried the cattleman.

"Yes," she continued. "You 'member the night I 'most died?" He acquiesced silently. "Well, you told me then that if I'd get well you'd give me anyfing on your ranch."

The cattleman started as if he had been stung, and, wheeling about, took out his quid and threw it on the flames, so that he might be better able to cope with the matter before him.

"And so," the little girl went on, "I fought I'd come to-day."

The cattleman rubbed his chin. "I see; I see," he said.

"I couldn't get here sooner," she explained, "'cause I didn't ride."

"Oh, ye didn't?" he said. Then, noting the bridle and bag, "What ye got them fer?" he asked.

"I didn't want to use yours," she replied.

"Mine?" The cattleman was puzzled.

"Yes: I brought this," she went on, holding up the bag, "to catch him wiv; and this," holding up the bridle, "to take him home wiv."

"Him?" questioned the cattleman, more puzzled than ever.

The little girl saw that she would have to make herself more clear. "Why, yes," she said. "You promised me anyfing I wanted if I'd get well; now I'm well, so I've come to—to—get Sultan."

The cattleman sat down, amazement and consternation succeeding each other on his face. Until now he had forgotten the compact made with her, and which he was in honor bound to keep. Recalling it, he realized that it meant the loss of his best horse.

He was silent for a while, thinking hard for a means of escape from his dilemma. When he spoke at last he was smiling good-naturedly. "Ye're right," he said, rubbing his hands briskly over the long hair of the breeches; "I did say that very thing. An' I'm a man o' my word. But it seems to me," and he leaned forward confidently, "thet ye ain't made exac'ly the best pick thet ye could." The little girl sat up with a new interest. "Now I've got sunthin' here," continued the cattleman, "thet'll jes make yer eyes pop." He got up, went to a box that, nailed against the wall above the stove, served him for a cupboard, and took out a long, slender package. "Ye've got more horses than ye can shake a stick at," he began again; "ponies an' plow teams an' buggy nags, but ye ain't got nuthin' like what I'm 'bout to show ye."

Slowly and impressively he began to undo the package, keeping one eye covertly on the little girl all the while. She was beside him, rigid with expectancy. When many thicknesses of thin brown paper had been unrolled, he stepped back, unwrapped a last cover, and,

with a proud wave of his hand, revealed to her delighted gaze a big, thick, red-and-white candy cane.

"Now, what do ye think o' that?" he demanded.

An exclamation of wonder came from her parted lips. She moved nearer without answering.

"As I said," he went on, "y' 've got all kinds of horses; but when in yer life hev ye hed anything like this?" He laid it gently on the table, and folded his arms solemnly. "Thet came all the way from Yankton," he said, as if recounting the history of some famous work of art. "I bought it down thar of a feller, an' paid some little money fer it." He did not add that she was in his thoughts when he bought it. "Now I'm going out to hitch up an' take ye home," he continued. "While I'm gone, ye make up yer mind which ye want—" He started for the door, but paused half-way. "—which ye want," he repeated, lowering his voice, "Sultan—er thet *beautiful* cane?"

When he was gone the little girl stole closer to the table and gazed rapturously down. Never in her life, as the cattleman truly said, had she seen anything like it. No horse, on a prairie overrunning with horses, could compare with it. She put out her hand and touched its crooked head, almost reverently, with one small finger.

The cattleman harnessed a span of fat mules at the barn, and led them into their places on each side of a wagon tongue. All the while he talked out loud to himself, with occasional guffaws of hearty laughter and sharp commands to the team. Despite his merriment, however, he peered back at the shanty uneasily from time to time; so that it was a full quarter of an hour before the mules were hitched to the whiffletrees and ready for their journey. Then he climbed to the seat and circled toward the door.

She was not in sight when he brought up with a loud whoa, and

getting down, the lines in one hand and a black-snake in the other, he advanced to the sill and looked in. "Any passengers goin' south?" he cried cheerily, cracking the whip.

"Me," answered a voice from behind the table, and the little girl, fagged but blissful, came forward smilingly, a long, brown-paper package clasped tightly to her breast.

X

"BADGY"

IT was the little girl who discovered that the badgers were encroaching upon the big wheat-field that stretched westward, across the prairie, from the farm-house to the sandy bank of the Vermillion. In bringing the cattle home from the meadows one night, along the cow-path that bordered the northern end of the grain, she allowed several to stray aside into the field, which was now faintly green with its new sprouting. And as she headed them out, riding her pony at full gallop, she saw a fine shorthorn suddenly pitch forward with a bellow and fall. She checked her horse and waited for the animal to rise again. But it could not—it had snapped a fore ankle in a freshly dug badger hole.

The shorthorn was a favorite and, as befitted her good blood, carried across her dewlap the string of silver sleigh-bells that in wintertime tinkled before the pung. So the news of her injury was received with sorrow at the farm-house; and when, later in the evening, the little girl's big brothers went down to the field to put the heifer out of her misery, they vowed that the last feeble jingle of her bells should be the death-knell of the badgers.

They found that the burrowing host, driven out of their former homes either by an unlooked-for seepage or the advent of a stronger animal, had been attracted to the field because the harrow had so recently broken and softened the fallow, and had dug so rapidly since the planting of a few weeks before, that the north end, perforated every three or four feet, would be utterly useless, that year at least, for

either the harvester or the plow. Each family had dug two tunnels that slanted toward each other and met at the nest. And since the tunnels of one family often crossed those of another, the ground was treacherously unstable. The outlying, unplowed land also bore, mile upon mile, marks of the ravages of an army of badgers; but the north end of the wheat-field was the concentration camp.

The badgers had thrived in their new home, for on one side was a grassy rise where the eggs and young of the plover and prairie-chicken could be found; and, on the other, a gully led down to the sloughs that yielded succulent roots and crawling things. The little girl's big brothers saw that the animals were so abundant that shot, traps, or poison would not avail—only a thorough drowning-out would rid the grain-land of the pest.

The attack was planned for the following day. It would be timely, since four feet beneath the surface were the newly born, half-blind litters that could be wiped out by a flood. Some of the old badgers would, undoubtedly, escape the deluge and get past the dogs, but they would be driven away to hunt other ground for their tunneling.

The next afternoon, when the farm wagon, creaking under its load of water-barrels and attended by the dogs, was driven down to the badger holes in the field, the little girl went along. Drownings-out were exciting affairs, for the badgers always gave the pack a fine tussle before they were despatched; and she was allowed to attend them if she would promise to remain on the high seat of the wagon, out of harm's way.

When the team had been brought to a standstill on the cow-path, she watched the preparations for the drowning from her perch.

Two holes were found that slanted toward each other. One big brother, armed with two or three buckets of water, stationed himself at the hole nearer the wagon; and another, similarly armed, guarded the

farther hole. The pack divided itself, half remaining at each outlet, and barked itself hoarse with anticipation.

At last all was in readiness, and, at a word, the water was poured —bucketful after bucketful—down the tunnels. Then a big brother sprang to the horses' heads to prevent their running when the fight began, another jumped into the wagon to refill the pails and hand them down, and the dogs, leaping excitedly, closed about the holes. The little girl watched breathlessly and clung fast to the seat.

For a moment there was no sign of anything. Suddenly from the nearer hole bounded a female, the refuse of her nest clinging to her dripping hair. Whirling and biting furiously on all sides, she growled in fear and rage as she defied the pack. There was a quick, fierce fight that was carried a rod before it ended; then, amid a din of yelping, the badger met a speedy death.

The little girl climbed down from the wagon, and ran to the hole out of which the badger had come. From her seat she had spied a small, gray bit of fur in the debris lying about it, and guessed what it was. She reached the hole none too soon; for the dogs, having been drawn off their prey, were coming back, whining and limping and licking their chops. She caught up the little, half-drowned thing and climbed hastily into the wagon again, as the pack, scenting it, pursued her and leaped against the wheels.

The baby badger came very near to going the way of superfluous kittens when the little girl's big brothers saw what she had, and was saved only through her pleading. She begged to keep and tame him, and promised to thwart any desire of his to burrow indiscriminately about the house and garden. So she was finally permitted to take him home, snugly wound up in her apron, and revive him with warm milk.

The first time that he saw the world he viewed it from a subterranean standpoint, his birthplace being a round, soft, warm pocket far below the level of the growing wheat. True, his horizon was somewhat limited, since the pocket was of small dimensions. Nevertheless, it was wide to him; and he spent several days in surveying the top and sides of his home with his weak, little, blinking eyes before he ventured to crawl about. Then it was necessary for his mother to lift him from his cozy bed in the midst of his brothers and sisters and give him a sharp pinch on the neck with her teeth to make him start.

The pocket was reached by a tunnel that had been well begun and then abandoned by an industrious but timid pocket-gopher. This timidity and industry had been taken advantage of when the badgers began their colonization of the wheat-field, and the pocket and a second tunnel completed; so that the result was a comfortable residence and, finally, an ideal nursery. But in all probability he and his brothers and sisters did not realize how cozily Providence had placed them until that dreadful day.

It was when they were having their regular romp with their mother that the first indication of trouble came. His father, who had been sitting at the mouth of the tunnel gossiping with a neighboring fox, rushed down wildly to the little family, and fairly fell over them in an effort to escape by the second tunnel beyond. The fierce barking of the dogs was heard. Then the great flood of water swept down upon them from both tunnels, lifting them all in a struggling, suffocating mass to the top of the pocket.

His mother, the instinct of self-preservation overcoming her parental love, started madly for a tunnel, and, in swimming against the floating ruins of her nest, pushed him before her up the opening and into the full light of day. There, blinded by the sunlight and exhausted, he lost consciousness, and lay unnoticed, partly hidden beneath the

feathers and grass that had made his bed, until the little girl saw him.

He rewarded her for his first meal by turning on his back with his legs in the air and grunting contentedly. He was of a grizzled gray color, soft, fat, clumsy, short of limb and thick of tail, and displayed, in spite of his few weeks, a remarkably fine set of claws on his fore feet. These he alternately thrust out and drew in, as she petted him, and curled up his long, black-and-white nose. The little girl thought him the nicest pet she had ever had, and soon fell a willing slave to his wheedling grunts.

He was christened "Badgy," and spent the first month of his new life in a warmly padded soap-box in the farm-house kitchen. But by the end of that time he had outgrown the box, and, the weather being warmer, was given the empty potato-bin in the cellar. When he was big enough to run about, he spent his days out of doors. Early in the morning he was called from the bin by the little girl, who opened the cellar doors and watched him come awkwardly up the steps, ambitiously advancing two at a time and generally falling back one. After his breakfast of meat and bread and milk he enjoyed a frolic, which consisted of a long run in a circle about the little girl, while he grunted for joy and lack of breath. When he was completely worn out with play, he rolled over on his back and had a sleep in the sun.

Badgy learned to love the little girl; and it was found, after he had lived in the potato-bin for a while, that she was the only person he would follow or meet amicably; all others were saluted with a snarl and a lifting of the grizzled hair. So the household came to look upon him in the light of a worthy supplanter of the Indian dogs as a protector for her. He accompanied her everywhere over the prairie, keeping close to her bare feet and grunting good-naturedly at every swaying

step. If they met a stranger, he sprang before her, his hair on end, his teeth showing, his claws working back and forth angrily. When a Sioux came near, he went into a perfect fit of rage; and not an Indian ever dared lay hands upon him.

It was this hatred for redskins that one night saved the herd from a stampede. Badgy had been playing about the sitting-room with the little girl, and trying his sharp claws on the new rag carpet, when he suddenly began to rush madly here and there, snapping his teeth furiously. A big brother grasped the musket that stood behind the door, thinking that he had gone mad. But the little girl knew the signs, and, shielding him, begged them to go out and look for the Indians she felt certain were near. Sure enough, beyond the tall cottonwoods that formed the wind-break to the north of the house were the figures of a dozen mounted men, silhouetted against the sky. They were moving cautiously in the direction of the wire cattle-pen; but as a big brother challenged them with a halloo and followed it with a musket shot, they wheeled and dashed away. The last glimpse of their ponies showed them apparently riderless; which proved to the little girl's big brothers that the marauders were from the reservation to the west.

The summer was at its full and the wheat-fields of the Vermillion River Valley were all but ready for the harvester before Badgy began to feel a yearning for his own kind and the freedom of the open prairie. Then he often deserted his little mistress when they were walking about in the afternoon, or sneaked away after his morning nap in the sun. The first time he disappeared she mourned disconsolately for him all day. But late in the afternoon, as she sat looking across the grain, waiting for him hopelessly, she forgot her loss in watching a most curious thing happening in the wheat. Away out in the broad, quiet field there was a small, agitated spot, as if a tiny whirlwind were tossing the heads about. The commotion was coming nearer and nearer every moment. Now it was a quarter of a mile away—now it was only a few rods—now it was almost on the

edge. The little girl scrambled to her feet, half inclined to run, when out of the tall stalks rolled Badgy, growling at every step and wagging his tired head from side to side!

Often, after that, he did not come home until late at night, when she would hear him snarling and scratching at the cellar doors, and creep out to let him in. Her big brothers at last warned her that there would come a day when Badgy would go, never to return. So she fitted a collar to his neck and led him when she went out, and kept him tied the rest of the time. This restriction wore upon him and he grew noticeably thin.

One morning, after having been carefully locked in the cellar the night before, he did not respond to the little girl's call from the doors. She went down to the bin, half fearing to find him dead. He was not there. She ran about the cellar looking for him. He was nowhere to be found. She returned to the bin to search there again. As she looked in, she caught sight of a great heap of dirt in one corner. She jumped over the side and ran to it, divining at once what it meant. Sure enough, beyond the heap was a hole, freshly dug, that led upward—and out!

The little girl sat back on the heap of dirt and pathetically viewed the hole. It was not that he would not come back—she knew that he would. But he had made her break her promise that there was to be no burrowing. She resolved to say nothing about the hole, however; and, after closing it completely with a stone, started off on the prairie in search of him, his chain in her hand.

When she came back late, she found him in the bin and gave him a good scolding. He answered it with angry grunts, and to punish him she locked him up supperless. But it was probably no hardship, for he was an adept in foraging for frogs and water-snakes.

He was in his place next morning, and came scrambling to the

cellar doors when she opened them. But the following morning he did not answer her call, and she discovered, on going into the bin, that there was a second big heap of dirt near the first. She plugged the hole, resolving, as before, to keep his misdeeds a secret.

For six weeks this alternate digging and plugging went on. Sometimes Badgy burrowed himself out in one night, sometimes he would not succeed in reaching the top by the time the little girl called him. And since he emerged under cover of the vacant coal-shed and kitchen that were built against the house as a lean-to, his depredations were not discovered by any of the other members of the family. Once, indeed, he was nearly caught, for he came out directly in front of the kitchen door. But judicious trampling by the little girl soon reduced the soft pile of dirt he had left at the opening to hard ground again.

One day the little girl's mother found that a spool of thread dropped on the north side of the room rolled to the south side. She pointed out the phenomenon to the little girl's big brothers. They declared that the south foundation must be giving way. An investigation from the outside led them into the shed, where they found the ground perforated with countless holes. Then they went into the cellar to examine further. There the phenomenon was explained and the culprit brought to light. Badgy had undermined the house!

The little girl waited in the garden for him that night, and answered his grunt of friendly recognition by cuffing him soundly on the ear. Then, relenting, she took him in her arms and wept over him. Inside, she knew, they were plotting to kill him. They had declared that he should not live another day. And, as she sobbed, her mind was searching out a plan to save him. Where *could* she hide him?

She sat with him held close in her lap for a while, watching his enemies within. Then she started on a long detour, with the new haystack as her destination. He kept close to her heels, snarling

wearily. A few days before she had made a cave in the stack, which stood between the barn and the chicken-house. The cave was on the side nearest the coop, and she decided to conceal him in it and fasten him there by his chain. When she had found a stake-pin and a large stone, she led him in and drove the pin its full length to make sure that he should not get away. Then she went back to the house to secure his pardon from the family council gathered about the supper table.

She found it a hard task. Her big brothers urged Badgy's total uselessness as well as his growing love to burrow, forgetting how bravely he had always stood between his mistress and any real or fancied danger. The little girl cried bitterly as she begged for his life, and vainly offered the entire contents of her tin bank, now carefully hoarded for two years, to help repair the damage he had done. She was finally put to bed in an uncontrollable fit of grief.

When she was gone, the memory of her tear-stained face melted her brothers' wrath. They even laughed heartily over Badgy's disastrous industry; and at last, relenting, they decided that he should live, provided he could be kept out of further mischief. The little girl heard the good news early in the morning and was overjoyed. She declared that Badgy should be good for the rest of his days, and she spent the afternoon fixing up the new quarters in the cave.

For the first few nights Badgy was chained in order to wean him from the old to the new home, his chain being made so short that he could not dig far into the ground under the stack. This wore upon him so that he grew cross, thinner than ever before, and generally disheveled. The little girl saw that another week of such confinement would all but kill him; while if he were shut up in the cave unchained he would undermine the stack. She feared, however, to give him his entire freedom; so she set to work to puzzle out a scheme that would solve the problem.

At last she hit upon an idea that seemed practicable. She would tie up his fore feet so that he could not dig! Then he could go unchained in the cave, with only the door of it—the top of a big dry-goods box—to restrict his movements. Aided by her mother's scissors, some twine, and a piece of grain sacking, she put the idea into instant execution.

Badgy did not like the innovation at all. He squirmed about so when the little girl was tying up his feet that she made slow progress. And when she was done, he tried vainly to pull off his new stockings with his sharp teeth, grunting his disapproval at every tug. He worked himself into a perfect fury as he bit and tore, and finally rolled clumsily to the back of the cave, where he lay growling angrily.

Pleased with her success, the little girl left him. But she had failed to reckon with Badgy's nature, and her plan was doomed.

It was now early autumn,—the time when Nature tells the badgers that they must provide themselves with a winter retreat,—and Badgy could no more have kept from burrowing than he could have resisted eating a frog. So when the dark came on, he went to work, close to the door of the cave, burrowing with might and main, his long nose loosening the dirt for his fore feet to remove. He worked so fast that it was only a few minutes before his claws came though his stockings. Then he redoubled his efforts, and dug on, and on, and on.

Early in the morning, after having burrowed down for a time, then along a level, and, finally, on an upward slant, as instinct directed him to do, he came through the crust of the earth. He climbed out of his burrow and sat upon his haunches at its mouth to rest a moment. As he did so, he heard a sound above him and looked up to see what had caused it. Over his head were several perches on which sat a number of sleepy fowls. He was in the chicken-house!

He grunted in surprise, and at the sound one of the chickens

uttered a long, low, warning note that awakened the others. As they moved on their perches, Badgy eyed them, twisting his head from side to side. The loose dirt clinging to his snout and breast fell off with his heavy breathing, and his stockings hung ragged and soiled about his front legs.

Suddenly there was another and a louder cry of danger from a chicken, following a slight noise near the door of the coop. Badgy looked that way to see what was coming, and through a hole in the sod wall made out the evil face of a mink, peering in. It came closer, and there were more cries from the chickens overhead, for they had recognized the approach of their mortal enemy. In a moment his long, shining body had come through the hole, and he had paused, crouching, to reconnoiter before making a spring.

Badgy watched him, his nose curling angrily, his claws working back and forth. Then, as the mink crept stealthily forward, measuring the distance to a pullet on a lower perch, the badger ambled toward him, snarling furiously, his teeth snapping and his eyes glowing red with hatred.

The fight was a fierce one, and the cries of the two animals as they twisted and bit aroused the whole barn-yard. The chickens set up a bedlam of noise, flying about from perch to perch and knocking one another off in their fright. But Badgy and the mink fought on, writhing in each other's hold, the mink striving to get a death-grip on Badgy's throat, while he tried as hard to rend the mink's body with his teeth and claws.

Suddenly, in the midst of the struggle, the door of the coop was thrown open and a man's figure appeared. The animals ceased fighting instantly, and the mink, letting go his hold, disappeared down the hole that Badgy had dug. But Badgy, surprised at the intrusion, only stared at the newcomer, and grunted a cross greeting as the light of a lantern was flashed upon him, sitting there crumpled and bloody.

Next morning, when the little girl went out to the haystack, she could not find Badgy. Instead, as she pulled aside the door that closed the entrance to the cave, a strange animal shot out and away before she could catch a glimpse of it. This puzzled her; when she went into the cave she found a great heap of dirt that troubled her still more. She saw that in spite of his stockings, Badgy had dug himself out. She hunted for the hole that she knew would tell her where he had come through to the surface again, but she could not find it.

She began to run here and there, calling him. There was no answering grunt. She thought of the potato-bin, and flew to the cellar to see if he had not returned to his old home, but he was not there.

That night he did not return, nor the next day, nor the next. No one could tell her where he had gone. For he had disappeared as completely as if the earth in which he had loved to dig had swallowed him up.

Whenever she spoke of him in the house among the family, there was an exchange of glances between her mother and the eldest brother. But she never saw it,—and it was just as well that she did not.

XI

A TRADE AND A TRICK

A THIN column of blue smoke was ascending into the quiet April air from a spot far out upon the prairie. Against the eastern sky, now faintly glowing with the coming dawn, it stood forth, uniting the gray heavens and the duller plains, as straight and clear as a signal-fire. It gave warning of an Indian camp.

The family at the farm-house, called from their breakfast by the baying of the dogs, gathered bareheaded about the kitchen door and watched the mounting pillar, striving to make out any crouching figures at its base. But no hint of the size of the redskin company could be gained; and, when the biggest brother had climbed from the lean-to to the ridge-pole of the roof and his mother had peered from the lesser height of the attic window, they could not even catch a glimpse of the top of a tepee, of a skulking wolf-dog, or of the shaggy coat of a grazing pony.

After her mother and the three big brothers had returned to the table, the little girl, whom the barking had called from a bowl of grits and skimmed milk and a wash-pan of kerosene in which her chilblained feet were soaking, struggled to the top of the rain-barrel at the corner of the house and anxiously eyed the rising smoke. Fresh in her mind was the murder of the Englishman at Crow Creek, whose full granaries and fat coops had long tempted roving thieves from the west; and the slaying of the Du Bois family on the James, just a few miles away. Many a winter's evening, about the sitting-room stove, and often in the twilight of summer days, sheltered by her mother's

skirts, she had heard these stories, and that other, almost within her own memory, terrible and thrilling to frontier ears,—the massacre of the Little Big Horn.

The big brothers always laughed at her fright and at the idea of any possible danger; yet they taught her to know an Indian camp-fire, the trail of an Indian pony, and the print of moccasined feet, and told her, if she ever met any braves on the plains, to leave the herd to take care of itself and ride home on the run. So, remembering only their warnings and forgetting their confident boasting and how sure and awful was the punishment meted out from the forts to erring wards of the nation, her days were haunted by prowling savages that waited behind every hillock, ridge, and stack; and she cried aloud in her sleep at night when, on dream-rides, there was ever an ugly, leering face and a horrid, clutching hand at her stirrup.

But if the big brothers did not share her fear of the Indians, yet they guarded well the farm-house and barn when the Sioux passed in their pungs in winter or on fleet ponies during the summer months. And when, that morning, the fire marked the near-by camp, there was no scattering to the thawed fields where the plows stood upright in the furrows. The eldest brother busied himself in the handy sorghum patch; the youngest rounded up the cattle and sheep and drove them south just across the reservation road to the first bit of unturned prairie; and the biggest got out the muskets and loaded them, and leashed the worst-tempered dogs in the pack.

And so the morning passed. In the sorghum patch the eldest brother placidly dropped seed. Across the road the youngest lay on his back beside his herd pony. And, inside, by a window, the biggest sat and watched the smoke, now a wavering spiral in the light breeze that fanned the prairie; while their mother, knowing that the best way to receive an Indian is with corn-cakes and coffee, stood over the kitchen stove. But the little girl kept her sentinel place on the rain-

barrel until the sun veered her shadow from the side of the house to the earth bank piled against it. Then she climbed down and, running to the sod barn, saddled, bridled, and mounted the swiftest horse in the stalls and careered back and forth between house and stable like an alert scout.

When noon came and the cow-horn summoned the family to the dinner-table, not a sign of an Indian, beyond the smoke, had been seen. So, by the end of the meal, it was decided that a visit should be paid the camp to see how many braves composed it, and why they did not move on. The biggest brother volunteered to make the ride, and, when he started off, the little girl, whose horse had been fretfully gnawing the clapboarding at the corner of the kitchen, also mounted and followed on behind, riding warily.

They skirted the corner of the freshly turned potato-field and wheeled into the reservation road behind the herd. But scarcely had they gotten half-way to the stony rise that bordered the eastern end of the potatoes, when they saw, coming over its brow and also mounted, an Indian. He was riding fast toward them, and they reined and stood still till he cantered up.

"Hullo," said the biggest brother, noting the fine army saddle and the leather bridle with its national monogram in brass as the redskin brought his horse to its haunches.

"Hullo," answered the Indian. His eyes had an anxious look in them as he glanced from one to the other.

"What you want?" The biggest brother nodded toward the smoke.

The Indian waited a moment, hitching his blanket impatiently as he tried to find an English word with which to reply. Then, failing, he suddenly slipped from his horse to the ground, threw himself flat upon his face, and began, with much writhing, to breathe heavily, as if in

great pain.

"Somebody's sick," said the biggest brother, and, without waiting, he clapped his heels against his horse's sides and set off toward the camp. The little girl came after, cantering just in advance of the redskin, whom she watched stealthily from the corner of her eye.

A mile out to the east the trio halted for a moment on a low ridge and looked down a gentle slope upon the camp. It was pitched where the reservation road crossed a ravine, and at its center, beside a rivulet, was a fire of buffalo-chips from which the smoke steadily arose. About the fire, and before two tepees, sat a half-dozen braves, five in government blankets, with their black mops bound back, the sixth in flannel shirt, leather breeches tucked into high boots, and a broad felt hat over his long hair. South of the fire, in the ravine, several horses, closely hobbled, were cropping the new grass; and between them and the tepees, lying half under a light road wagon, was an animal stretched flat and covered with blankets.

"It's that horse," said the biggest brother. The Indian behind him grunted and rode ahead down the slope, and, at his approach, the circle about the camp-fire stood up.

As the face of the Indian wearing the wide hat was turned toward them, the little girl gave a joyful cry and whipped her horse with her rope reins. The army saddle and the monogrammed bridle were no longer a mystery, the camp was no longer to be feared,—for the unblanketed brave was the troop's scout from the reservation, the half-breed, Eagle Eye!

The next moment he was explaining how, returning from Sioux Falls, where for a fortnight he had been winning admiration for his military appearance, his feats on horseback, and his skill with the rifle, he had fallen in with the party of Indians, which was coming back from a trip beyond the Mississippi. After a long, hard ride together the day

before, they had been forced to go into camp in the ravine because the blue-roan mare which one of them was driving had suddenly lain down and refused to rise. And she had remained stretched out since, and was breathing deep and painfully.

When the biggest brother rode over to where she lay, he saw at once that she was sorely stricken with pneumonia, and that only prompt attention would be of any use. Her great brown eyes were wide and starting with agony, her delicate nostrils were distended and dry, and her iron-gray sides were heaving.

"You've got to get her out o' here, Eagle Eye," said the biggest brother, as he and the little girl leaned over the panting animal; "she'll go in no time on this wet ground. Suppose we make a *travee* and haul her home."

The Indians received the offer, which Eagle Eye interpreted for them, with many signs of pleasure; and in a moment had taken down the cottonwood lodge-poles cut the previous day, and brought straps and ropes. But it was mid-afternoon before the rude litter was finished. Two poles were fastened to the hind axle of the wagon, the width of the wheels apart; across them other poles were roped after having been chopped into short lengths; and on top of these were laid some buffalo robes, blankets, and straw. Then the mare, too sick to resent handling, was half lifted and half rolled into place. When the journey to the farm-house was made, the tough Indian pony between the shafts was helped in the hauling by a plow team from the barn.

The *travee* was untied from the wagon at the stable, and the three big brothers helped the Indians to drag it into a roomy stall, the little girl looking on all the while sympathetically. Then her mother, the biggest brother, and Eagle Eye poulticed the throbbing chest, put compresses on the silky neck, and poured one hot drink after another down the reluctant throat of the blue mare.

They worked until midnight. But when the next day broke, chill and drizzily, the horse seemed worse instead of better, and the Indians, who had slept with their guns on their arms at the heads of their saddled ponies, prepared to go. They seemed so anxious to set off that the big brothers were suspicious that they had stolen the animal and were expecting pursuit. The fact that she had no saddle-marks on her mottled back, and that they had cumbered themselves with a wagon, bore out the belief. The eldest brother spoke his mind to Eagle Eye, but the half-breed only said that Black Cloud, who claimed to own her, wished to sell her to the brothers.

"I shouldn't wonder," sneered the eldest brother; "she'll be ready for the pigs by noon. I wouldn't take her as a gift,—and you can tell 'em so."

Eagle Eye turned to Black Cloud and repeated the answer. It was met with the look that had named him, and a mumbled threat that was lost on the white men.

The little girl had been standing by and had heard the conversation. She suddenly started for the house, and, when she came flying back a moment later, she had her tin savings-bank grasped tightly in one fist. Stopping in front of the scout, she held it out to him.

"Eagle Eye," she panted, "tell Black Cloud I'll give him all this for the sick horse—two whole dollars."

Again the half-breed turned to the glowering Indian. But this time the evil, dusky face lighted, and, after consulting with the other Indians, he took the bank from Eagle Eye and turned out and counted its contents.

"He thanks the white papoose," said Eagle Eye, returning the empty bank to the little girl, "and the pony is yours."

Happy over her trade, the little girl rushed away to the sick horse, while the eldest brother, enraged at her interference yet not daring to stop the bargain, mentally promised to give her a lesson later.

"If the mare lives," he said aside to the biggest brother, "you bet these thieves'll even things up."

The evening of things came sooner than he expected. For at sundown, after the Indians had departed, the swift horse ridden to their camp by the little girl was nowhere to be found!

But, angry as the farm-house felt over the theft, the big brothers knew that it would be worse than foolhardy to try to recapture their animal. And the trade seemed likely to be fair in the end, after all,—for at midnight the family saw that the blue mare was getting well!

Shrieks of laughter from behind the barn, following strange, rapid thumps upon the bare ground, led the three big brothers in that direction one May morning, and, on turning the corner, they found the little girl leaning convulsively against the old straw stack for support, while in front of her, blinded by a big, red handkerchief, and with a long bolster full of hay across her dappled withers, was the blue mare, making stiff, wild plunges into the air, with arched back and head held low. For the little girl was breaking her to ride!

It was the little girl who broke the horses on the farm to ride. She played with them as colts, and, with her light weight, mounted them long before they were old enough to carry any one heavier, and yet were too old to be sway-backed. She tried them first as they stood tied in their stalls, crawling carefully upon them from the manger. Later, she rode them at a walk up and down the reservation road.

She had learned the First Reader of the saddle on the St.

Bernard's wide, slipping back. The pinto had been the Second, and she had then passed rapidly to the graduation class of frisky calves and lean, darting shoats. Now, for two years, all the horses sold at the reservation by the big brothers had been of her training, and the troopers vowed that no gentler, better mounts had ever been in the service. Her mother viewed the colt-breaking tremblingly, and the big brothers declared that the little girl would be buried some day with a broken neck. But the little girl said nothing, and continued her riding fearlessly, knowing that love, even with horses, makes all things easy, —except the breaking of the blue mare.

Thirteen hands stood the blue mare, sound, clean-limbed, and beautiful, and the markings of her sharp front teeth showed that she was but four. From velvet muzzle to sweeping tail, from mottled croup to fetlocks, she shone in the sunlight like corn-silk. Her mane was black and waved to her wide chest, and her heavy forelock hid an inwardly curving nose that proved an Arab strain. And when, after many spirited bouts with the hay bolster, the little girl finally won her over to a soft blanket and a stirruped girth, she showed the endurance and strength of a mustang, the speed of a racer, and the gait of a rocking-chair.

She was so tall that she could not be climbed upon, like a pony, from the upper side of sloping ground or from the stone pile on the carnelian bluff, and too skittish to allow a bare foot to be thrust behind her sleek elbows as a step to her back, so the little girl invented a new method of mounting. Her nose was coaxed to the ground by the offer of a choice wisp of grass, and, as her neck was lowered, the little girl carefully put one leg over her glossy crest and gave her a slap to start her,—when the blue mare raised her head and the little girl hedged along to her back, facing rearward. Then she slowly turned about!

Herding on the blue mare's back became a pleasure, not a despised duty, and long jaunts to the station, ten miles away, for mail

or groceries, were welcomed. The eldest brother, too, had ceased to scold the little girl for the trade with Black Cloud or for the loss of the horse that was stolen. For the blue mare was worth two of the other.

The subject hardly ever came up in the farm-house any more; when it did, it only served to remind the little girl of a dread prophecy of the Swede, that, in good time, the swarthy brave would pass that way again!

The little girl always grew white at the bare thought. And often the dream of the leering face and the clutching hand would follow her by day. If she entered the barn, cruel eyes watched her from out dim corners; if she rode through the corn-field, now waist high, the leaves rustled a mysterious warning to her. "Run—run!" they whispered, and the little girl obeyed and sought the safety of the open prairie.

But there were hours of proud security, when, with the Swede boy as an audience, or, better still, with the colonel's son, she put the blue mare through her wonderful trick. This trick had been discovered accidentally by the little girl. One morning, when she was breaking the horse, she put one hand back playfully and pinched her on the croup to see if she would buck,—and, instead, she promptly lay down! Afterward, the same pinch brought her again to the ground, and the little girl found that it needed barely a touch to make the mare perform. But however delighted she was over her discovery, the little girl never mounted the prostrate horse, for she was afraid that she might roll upon her.

The days had passed, and it was now haying-time. But the mowers stood idle beneath their sheds, and the work-horses grazed contentedly with their heads to the south, for a rain was passing over the prairie. Inside the farm-house, the little girl, standing against the blurred panes, rebelled against the showers, and fretted for the blue mare and a gallop; the biggest brother, buried deep in a book, thanked Providence; while the eldest, remembering the uncovered

cocks in the timothy meadow, cursed the storm.

Toward evening, the third day of the downpour, however, the clouds lifted. A new moon appeared, holding its chin up,—a promise of sunshine,—and the little girl ran happily to the barn, slipped a lariat into the blue mare's mouth, secured it with a thong under the jaw, and, bareback, started toward the sloughs beyond the reservation road to bring home the herd. When she was a mile away, the eldest brother followed her, for he wanted to see if the grass around the farthest slough would make good cutting. He rode the bald-faced pony, and across his pommel was slung his musket.

The little girl did not see him. Content with the blue mare beneath her, her mind busy, she rode on. And her voice, shrill, and broken by her cantering, floated back to the eldest brother in snatches:

"Scotland's burning! Scotland's burning!
Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!
More water! More water!"

Then she disappeared over the ridge on her descent to the herd.

The eldest brother urged his horse a little to try to catch up with her. But she was going faster now, too, and when he reached the top of the ridge she was in the tall grass between him and the cattle, and he could just see her bobbing sailor hat and the flying tail of the blue mare.

Her song ceased as she neared the herd, for twilight was coming down and the meadow blades had taken up the same soft warnings that she had heard in the corn. Above her, homing birds called to each other, and bullfrogs croaked from the sloughs at her horse's feet. There flashed into her mind the night-and-day horror of the Indian's face and hand, and she began to whistle a little to rally heart as she rode beyond the cows to turn a stray.

But suddenly the sound died on her lips. For up from the earth rose the ugly, leering face, and out of the grass came the horrid, clutching hand! With a choking cry, the little girl struck her horse, but the next instant was flung down from her seat, and Black Cloud, rifle in hand, swung himself to her place.

He dared not fire for fear of sounding an alarm, and he dared not wait an instant to club with his gun-stock the little girl, lying stunned and half-dead with fear. Without a backward look, he drove the blue mare out of the meadow to the prairie and turned her toward the river.

But the eldest brother was scarcely a half-mile behind him. And, as the strange form came into view, going like the wind through the gathering gloom, he guessed what had happened. He whipped the bald-face wildly, following the blue mare. And a race for the Vermillion began!

But it was an uneven one. In a few leaps the mare had lengthened the distance between her and the bald-face. Discouraged, and anxious to know what had become of the little girl, the eldest brother resolved to stop. But as he did so, he raised his musket and sent a load of buckshot after the fleeting brave.

The Indian, safe from pursuit, answered it with a derisive whoop, and, turning his body around, still going swiftly, waved his rifle triumphantly aloft in his right hand and, looking back, leaned for an instant with the other on the blue mare's croup!

The horse obeyed the sign like a flash. As if the eldest brother's shot had found her heart, she stopped dead still and threw herself upon the ground,—and Black Cloud, his face for once almost white, lunged forward, struck his head with crushing force against a boulder on the river's edge, and lay as motionless as the rock itself!

Early that night, when the prairie lay still and sweet, and the new moon was swimming westward from cloud-island to cloud-island, the gray buffalo-wolves came up the Vermillion on their way to the sheep-pen of the Swede, and waked the drowsing valley with their howling. But the trembling ewes and their babies were not molested; for when the pack reached the river bank near the farthest slough, they halted to quarrel at a boulder—till the sun came up in the east again and glittered on a string of glass wampum lying beside the rock.

XII

THE PROFESSOR'S "FIND"

A NIMBUS of mystery clung to the professor the first two days of his stay. His arrival, late one afternoon, in the sewing-machine man's buggy, was as unexplained as it was unexpected; and when he was shown to the little girl's room, which she hospitably relinquished, he volunteered neither his name nor his place of residence. The following morning he left the house, carrying a small paper box and a black hand-bag, and crossed the fields to the prairie, where he ran about, his spare figure stooped, as if he were picking something, while his left hand held an instrument that flashed in the sun. On his return at noon, his box and bag were closed, and only a green stain on his fingers gave any suggestion of what he had been doing. He spent the remainder of the day quietly in his room.

The big brothers made various conjectures about him. The eldest declared that he was searching for minerals; the biggest thought him a government agent on a secret mission; while the youngest, to the terror of the little girl, who had not recovered from her adventure of a month before with Black Cloud, hinted at a dark purpose and openly asserted that it was dangerous to have the professor in the house. But, since their mother would not permit any questioning, their curiosity was not satisfied nor their fears allayed until the professor, unasked, revealed his identity.

Then it was ridiculously simple. He was a professor in the botanical department of an Eastern university, and had come West to obtain floral specimens. The paper box held his fresh finds; the bag, a

telescope with which to distinguish plants not easily accessible, and a microscope to study those close at hand. In his trunk were heavy blank books filled with dried leaves, pressed blossoms, and scientific notes.

When the little girl heard that he taught in one of those colleges, remote and wonderful, of which she dreamed, her suspicions were straightway transformed into reverence. She listened eagerly to his every word, watched him, agape with interest, as he wrote at the sitting-room table, and hung at his heels, happy and fascinated, when he walked up and down, smoking a cigar, under the ash trees in the twilight.

On the other hand, the big brothers respected him less than ever. To them flower-hunting, as an occupation, seemed trivial and effeminate. Flowers, though they were well enough in their proper places,—the front garden or the grass,—were usually a nuisance that crept through the crops and choked their growth, until descended upon and tediously jerked up, one after another, by the roots. And a man who could give his entire time not only to the collection of nosegays but to the gathering of *weeds*, could not have the esteem of the big brothers. All three, whenever they spoke of him, raised their shoulders contemptuously, after the manner of "Frenchy."

It was not long, however, before their attitude changed. The professor was so gentle and courteous, yet so firm and convincing, and so full of knowledge concerning things about them of which they were entirely ignorant, that they soon came to view him seriously. The eldest and the youngest brothers even took turns at driving him on long trips in the buckboard, and the biggest loaned him a pair of rubber boots so that he could hunt in swamps and wet meadows for bristly buttercups and crowfoot.

After she found out that he was a professor, the little girl always accompanied him on his jaunts. Before that, the herd being in the

care of the Swede boy, she spent the days either in skilfully outlining on a wide board, by means of a carpenter's pencil and an overturned milk-pan, cart-wheels for the box of the little red wagon, or in playing "Pilgrim's Progress," seated on an empty grain-sack which Bruno, snarling with delight, dragged by his teeth along the reservation road from the Slough of Despond to the gates of the Celestial City. She also helped her mother prepare for the coming Fourth of July celebration at the station.

But she gave up everything to go with the professor while he scoured the prairie to the north, east, and south, and burdened herself willingly with the lunch-bucket and his umbrella. From dawn till noon, for a whole fortnight, she trotted beside him, straining her eyes to catch sight of some plant he had not yet seen, and tearing here and there to pluck posies for his bouquet. When, however, there remained to be searched only a wide strip bordering the Vermillion, she remained at home.

The professor carried forward his work along the river enthusiastically, planning to finish by the eve of the celebration, so that he could accompany the family to the station on the morning of the Fourth, and there take the afternoon local going east. He tramped up and down the bluffs, finding many a rare shrub in high, sunny spots or low, sheltered nooks, and returning to the farm-house only when he was laden with spoil. But it was on his very last excursion that he discovered something really remarkable.

He visited a point far up the valley, where the banks were precipitous and came close together. At their base lay narrow reaches of sand between which, even at its lowest, the river hurried; and when it was swelled by heavy rains or melting snow, it rushed through boisterously and spat high to right and left against the walls.

The western side, with its southern exposure, was the greener. Box-elders belted its foot, growing at a sharp angle to the side.

Above the elders an aspen thrust out its slender trunk, and, still higher, grass and weeds protruded. Where the cliff was of solid rock, trailing wild-bean drooped across and softened it. But the professor, after sweeping it carefully with his glass and finding no new specimens upon it, resolved not to waste his time and labor, and turned his attention opposite.

Though almost bare, for it faced the north, the eastern precipice still was promising. No trees interrupted its rise, and the stones that, midway, coincided with it were uncovered. Low down were scattered clumps of wild black currant and clusters of coral-berry. But above the stones, bending temptingly forward into plain view, was a cactus which the professor had long sought.

He determined to scale the wall and secure the plant. Dropping the paper box and the hand-bag, he toiled from the sand to a first narrow ledge, from there to the currant bushes, and thence higher, by relying for a foothold upon snake holes and crevices. Once having gained the flat stones, the climb was over. He had only to put out his hand and gather the cactus.

But its stalk remained unbroken. For his eye, traveling over the rock to which he was clinging, made out a figure and some letters cut deep into its red-gray surface. He looked at them with interest, then with mingled pleasure and doubt, and lastly with wonder. And he trembled as, with one hand, he finally drew a small blank-book from an inner coat pocket and began to copy. He realized at once that, though it did not relate to floral science, he had ended by making a most notable find.

Having finished, and put away his pencil and book, he studied the figure and letters carefully for a few moments, and then descended slowly to the sand. All thoughts of growing things had faded from his mind; in their stead came crowding others that pictured possible fame. He sat down to rest and think beside the box and the hand-bag,

and stayed there, bowed over, his spectacles in his hands, his eyes roving thoughtfully, until the sun was so low that the little cañon was in gloom.

At suppertime he announced his discovery to the big brothers and their mother. They received the news with amazement. The week previous he had declared that the plains were once covered by a vast ocean, and had proved his assertion by showing them sea-shells at the top of the carnelian bluff. So they expressed their intention of visiting the cliffs, never doubting his second and almost incredible statement that, long before the Indians came to inhabit the surrounding country, it had been the home of a superior race of Latin origin.

The little girl was at the table and heard the professor's story; and she showed some agitation as she listened with downcast eyes. She knew more about the red-gray rock and its scribblings than she cared to tell before the big brothers, for she had spent one whole happy afternoon in the cañon with the colonel's son, watching him as he scrambled up the south bank, with the agility and sure-footedness of a goat, and hung for an hour in mid-air by one hand. So, while she ate her bread and smear-case, she made up her mind to follow the professor after the meal was over and unburden herself.

But no chance to see him alone was afforded her. He disappeared to pack his trunk while she was doing the dishes, and did not emerge again during the evening. She squatted under his window for a while in the dark, hoping that he would look out, and gave up her watch only when she heard him snoring. Then she, too, went to bed, where she lay turning and twisting until after midnight. Dropping off, at last, she dreamed that she and the colonel's son had been court-martialed by the professor and were to be shot at the celebration.

Breakfast was eaten at three o'clock next morning, and at sun-up the light wagon and the buckboard were ready for the drive to the

station. Every one had been so busy since rising that the professor's discovery was not mentioned. In fact, the big brothers and their mother had forgotten it; the little girl thought of it many times, however, and hoped each moment that she could speak privately to the professor. And he, as he took his seat in the buckboard, remembered it and smiled contentedly, never suspecting that the youngest brother, riding beside him, had secretly planned to file at once a claim on the quarter-section that included the little cañon so that the red-gray rock should be lawfully his.

Arrived at the station, all became occupied with the celebration. While the big brothers took care of the horses, their mother and the little girl changed their dresses at the hotel. The professor hunted up the grand marshal, held a whispered conversation with him, and was assigned a place in the procession. For the scientist purposed that the day should be more than one of national commemoration to the townspeople: it should be one of local rejoicing.

This was the first public holiday ever observed at the station, for it was still very young. Two years before, when the railroad crept up to it and passed it, it consisted of a lonely box-car standing in the center of a broad, level tract flecked with anemones. The next week, thanks to a sudden boom, the box-car gave place to a board depot, with other pine structures springing up all about, and to long lines of white stakes that marked the avenues, streets, and alleys of a future city. Now it consisted of half a hundred houses and stores surrounded by as many shanties and dugouts.

The streets were gay with color. Everywhere festoons of red, white, and blue swung in the morning breeze, and flags flapped from improvised poles. Horses with ribbons braided into their manes and tails dashed about, carrying riders who were importantly arranging for the procession, and who wore broad sashes of tricolored bunting.

The crowds added further to the brightness of the scene. Soldiers

in uniform, frontiersmen in red shirts and leather breeches, farmers and men of the town, dressed in their best, and Indians in every imaginable style of raiment, filled the saloons and shooting galleries, where they kept the glasses clinking and the bells a-jangle. Women and children, in light dresses and flower-trimmed hats, lined the scanty sidewalks and the store porches, with a fringe of squaws and Indian babies seated in the weeds beside the way or on the steps at their feet.

But at ten o'clock both men and women came into the open, for the procession had formed across the track in the rear of the depot and was advancing. Excitement was high. Crackers were popping on all sides, horses were prancing wildly, frightened by the unusual clatter, and people were laughing and shouting to one another as they craned to catch a first glimpse of the oncoming cortège.

A silence fell suddenly as the grand marshal rounded the depot, leading the way north to the grove where the exercises were to be held. Behind and flanking him rode his aides, and in their rear walked the band, a few in a prescribed dress of red caps, blue coats, and white trousers, others lacking in one or more details of it, but jauntily wearing substitutes in the shape of straw hats and store clothes. About them trailed a gang of small boys, an inevitable though uninvited part of every procession, and, after, rumbled heavy floats representing events in the history of America,—General and Mrs. Washington at Mount Vernon, Pocahontas rescuing Captain John Smith, Lincoln freeing the Slaves, and Columbus greeting the Redmen. Following was a company of cavalry from the reservation, with the colonel and his son at their head, and a band of Indians, naked but for their breech-cloths, and in war-plumes and paint, that whooped and brandished their bows and arrows as they bolted from side to side.

But the crowning feature of the parade came next. It was a hay-

rack wound over every inch of its wide, open frame with the national colors, drawn by four white horses, and bearing the Goddess of Liberty, Columbia, Dakota, and a score of girls who represented the States and Territories, and who wore filmy white frocks, red garlands on their hair, blue girdles about their waists, and ribbons lettered in gilt across their breasts.

To the family, as to many, the passing of the rack was a proud moment, for the little girl rode upon it. Like her companions, she was hatless, and she shone out from among them as she stood directly behind the goddess, because her hair, a two years' growth—she was now nine and a half years old—rippled luxuriantly about her face.

Her place in the rack had been assigned her as a special honor. It was found, when the girls assembled to receive their garlands and colors, that there were not enough of them to represent fully the map of the United States. So the little girl, being the last to arrive, was given three ribbons bearing the names of California, Texas, and Minnesota.

As the hay-wagon rolled by the family, the compliment paid the little girl did not escape their eyes. The cattleman, too, observed it, and proudly expressed himself to the biggest brother. "Say!" he whispered, "don't she cover a lot o' terrytory!"

The little girl was aware of the attention she was attracting, and she kept a graceful poise, looking neither to one side nor the other. Each girl on the rack held something in her hands that suggested the wealth of the particular State she symbolized. So the little girl wore, just under her collar, the picture of a fat beef as an appropriate emblem of Texas, while in one hand she carried a gilded stone to recall California's riches, and, in the other, through the instigation of the grand marshal, who had once been jailed at St. Paul, she held aloft a wad of cotton batting to emphasize the annual snowfall of the rival State to the east.

The end of the procession consisted of decorated buggies—in which sat the orator of the day, a local poet, the school-teacher at the station, the minister, the professor, and a dozen prominent citizens—and a rabble of horribles and plug-uglies that rent the air with yells; as it went by, it bore the admiring crowd in its train. When the grand stand was reached, the people quickly filled the board benches which had been put up for them, while the principals in the festivities settled themselves picturesquely upon the platform.

It was after twelve o'clock, so the program opened at once. The professor, sitting well in the foreground, fidgeted inwardly and hoped that the train on which he was to depart would not arrive before he had had his opportunity. But he sat smiling, nevertheless, throughout the opening prayer by the minister, the address of the day and the reading of the Declaration of Independence by the orator, the verses of the poet, the teacher's song, and four band pieces. On his lap were two large squares of white pasteboard which he fingered nervously, and every two or three minutes he took note of the time.

When his turn came at last, it was with calm dignity, as becomes a scholar, that he rose and stepped forward to the edge of the stand, where the orator, in ringing tones, introduced him as "our distinguished guest." Then, amid a hush, partly of curiosity, the professor began his speech.

Up to this time the little girl had been but a mildly interested onlooker. She was seated, with the other States, just behind the row of prominent citizens, listening less to the exercises than to the buzz about her, and refraining from talking only when the band rendered a number. The colonel's son was down in front and facing her, so she divided her time, when she was silent, between him and her mother. In the excitement of the hour she had totally forgotten the professor.

But now, with him at the speaker's table, she suddenly recalled the

evening before, her sleepless night, and her worry. And she quaked as she leaned forward to hear what he was saying, and bent her looks in fear upon the colonel's son.

The professor, having bowed to all sides and cleared his throat, launched into the subject of his discovery, prefacing it with a reference to the carnelian bluff.

"It shows by the deposit on its summit," he said, "that at one time, centuries ago, a boundless sea, that roared when the winds swept by or lapped and slept in a calm, covered the bosom of this prairie. Beneath the arrowheads and hatchets that mark it as a natural watch-tower of the redmen, lies, deep-hidden, a layer of sea-shells, proof that this plain was once an ocean bed."

He paused a moment at this point to allow the full significance of his words to impress itself upon the assemblage before him. Then he continued.

"But I have discovered the proof of a far greater marvel concerning this prairie-land of yours. A sea tumbled over it, as I have said; yes, but, more wonderful still, in ages past—I cannot say how many—a race, intellectually superior to the Indian, dwelt here. As borne out by the inerasable markings I have discovered, this race was undoubtedly a branch or part of a people that we have hitherto believed never visited the continent until Columbus's time."

The teacher, the poet, and the minister opened their eyes with interest as his statement fell upon their ears. But no thrill of surprise swept the crowd, and the professor, after a pause, coughed and went on.

"I intend to submit my discovery to the scientific world. As proof of it I have two drawings which I shall show you. They consist of copies of inscriptions found by me on the Vermillion. This is one of them."

He displayed the larger pasteboard square and a titter ran through the crowd. To her alarm, the little girl noticed that the colonel's son did not laugh. Instead, he opened his mouth and stared wildly. Another instant and the square was turned toward her. She gave a cry when she saw the figure drawn upon it.

[Illustration]

"Notice," said the professor, "how large and Cæsarean is the head. It is the crude outline of a man whose arms are outstretched as if in appeal to or in adoration of some god. The attitude is full of dignity and strength. It is unquestionably an ancient graffito."

He turned to the table and lifted the second square. "I have been working for years in scientific fields," he began once more, "accepting what small honors came my way, grateful that I have been able to name two new species of flowers. Now, I have chanced upon something in the boundless stretches of the plains that promises reward as well as fame. Heretofore, no scientific men, strictly speaking, have searched the prairies for archæological traces. Hunters, travelers, soldiers, priests, and statesmen have gone across, their eyes bent on different phases of the country. And so it was for me, an humble student, to uncover the undreamed-of."

He turned once more to those behind him, holding up the second pasteboard. The little girl shrank in her seat as the three accusing letters, written large upon it, fell beneath her apprehensive gaze:

[Illustration]

The professor looked hurriedly at his watch, seized his hat and the drawings, and made a parting bow. "I leave on the coming train," he said regretfully; "I see that it is now almost due. I promise you that I shall return in the near future. Until then, farewell."

The crowd parted respectfully to let him pass as he hastened down

the steps of the grand stand and away. The little girl looked after him undecidedly. Then, a quartet having moved between her and the colonel's son, she cast aside the gilded rock and the cotton batting and threaded the assemblage on the run.

The two had the short, dusty road to themselves, and they traveled it rapidly. The professor, with a rod's start, kept well ahead of the little girl, and came into the depot on time, his hat in his hand. She, breathless, arrived a moment later, just as the engine slowed down.

The professor had heard no one behind him, for all noise had been drowned by his own rush. So, without looking back, he sprang toward the last coach and swung himself on by the rail of the farther steps, his drawings under one arm, his hands encumbered with the box and bag which he had picked up in the waiting-room. Suddenly a voice caused him to turn.

"Professor!" cried the little girl. She was puffing so hard that she could not continue.

"Bless my heart!" said the professor, descending to the lowest step and catching her by the hand.

"Oh, professor!" she cried again.

"Yes? Yes?" he said inquiringly. The train was starting and there was no time to be lost. She ran beside it for a few steps.

"I did that!" The little girl pointed at the pasteboard under his arm. She fell back. The cars were moving rapidly now, and she was too tired to pursue them.

"You!" gasped the professor, clapping one hand to the drawings; *"you!"*

"Well—well—not me, but a boy," she added chokingly.

The professor put his hands to his head, and the squares, escaping his arm, were blown from the steps and fluttered upon the graveled embankment. The little girl saw them fall and ran forward to secure them. He did not see her. He was sitting on the top step of the fast-receding train, his face covered as if to shut out a fearful sight, his coat-sleeves pressing his ears as if to deaden a shout of ridicule.

The little girl looked after him, holding the pasteboards in her hands. "I'm sorry," she said out loud, "that nobody made these a long time ago. But they couldn't, 'cause they're my 'nitials."

Then she walked back toward the grand stand, where the band, with small boys encircling it, was rendering the final number of the program,—a resounding "America."

XIII

A RACE AND A RESCUE

"WHAT'RE you doin' under there?" asked the biggest brother, looking beneath the canopied bed, where the little girl was lying on her back, her feet braced at right angles to the loose board slats above her.

There was no answer, but the broad counterpane of bright calico squares that, by its heaving, had betrayed her presence, became suddenly still.

"Because," continued the biggest brother, "I'm goin' to the station this afternoon with the blue mare and the buckboard. And if you ain't doin' nothing and want to go along, just slide out and meet me on the corn road."

He exchanged his gingham jumper for a coat at the elk antlers in the entry, and left the house. When his whistle was swallowed up by the barn, the little girl crept stealthily from her hiding-place, washed her feet, changed her apron, and, under cover of the kitchen, hurried eastward to the oat-field. Having gained it, she turned north, crouching low as she ran.

Haytime was over and harvest was close at hand. In the brief space between, the reapers were being put into shape for the cutting of the grain. That morning, while the biggest and the youngest

brothers were repairing the broken rakes of a dropper, the eldest had sharpened the long saw-knife, aided by the little girl, whom he compelled to turn the squeaking grindstone. They had begun early, working under the tool-shed, and for hours the little girl had labored wearily at the winch-handle, with only an occasional rest. By eleven o'clock her arms were so tired that she could scarcely go on, and she became rebellious. Perhaps it was not only her fatigue, but the fact that "David Copperfield" had arrived the day before and was awaiting her temptingly in the sitting-room, that caused her, in a cross though not malicious moment, to give the circling handle such a whirl that the reaper blade was jerked violently forward; and, as it bounded and sang against the stone, it cut a gash in the eldest brother's hand.

The swallows nesting under the roof of the shed saw the little girl suddenly run toward the house, followed by the irate eldest brother, who carried a basin of water. The two disappeared into the entry, the little girl leading. When the eldest brother came out, still holding the basin, he looked angry and warm. For, with all his hunting, she had managed to escape him, and he was obliged to nurse his wrath and his hand unavenged.

The little girl had dived under the canopied bed, where she stayed, holding her breath, while the eldest brother looked for her high and low. When he went out, calling the youngest brother to take her place, she yet remained discreetly hidden. At dinner-time a plate of food and a glass of milk mysteriously made their appearance at the edge of the bed, so that she was able to stay in seclusion and wait for the storm to pass. But even "David Copperfield," which arrived with her meal, did not aid her in whiling away the hours. So the biggest brother's suggestion came as a welcome relief.

When the buckboard rolled along the corn road, the little girl stepped out of the field and climbed to the seat on the driver's side. Neither she nor the biggest brother spoke, but, as the blue mare

jogged on, she took the reins from him and chirruped gaily to the horse, with an inward wish that, instead of being in the buckboard, she were free of it and on the blue mare's back. The mare made poor progress when she was hitched between shafts, since she was not a trotter, and reached her best gait under a blanket. But this was known to the little girl alone, for the big brothers never went faster than a canter, and would have punished her if they had guessed how rapidly, on each trip to the station, the horse was ridden.

The little girl usually started for town in the early afternoon, as the biggest brother had that day. In this way the local passed her, going east, when the trip was half over. As the engine came in sight, the little girl urged the mare to a slow gallop, and, as the cow-catcher got abreast, gave her a sharp cut that sent her forward beside the train. And so swift was the high-strung horse that she was never left behind until a long stretch of road had been covered. The little girl liked best, however, to start the race at the outer edge of the broad meadow that lay west of the station, because, by acquiring speed before the engine came on a line with her, she could ride up to the depot with the rear car.

The almost daily brush with the train was seemingly as much enjoyed by the blue mare as by her rider. With the engine's roar in her ears and its smoke in her nostrils, she sped on, neck and neck with the iron horse. When the local was still far behind she would begin to curvet and take the bit between her teeth. After the first few contests, she needed no whip. The little girl had only to slacken the reins and let her go, and she would scamper into the station, covered with dust and foam from her flashing eyes to her flying feet.

While the little girl was thinking over her exciting rides, the biggest brother was mournfully looking around at the farm. The year had been a disastrous one. A chinook had swept the prairies in the late winter, thawing all the drifts except those in sheltered gullies, and giving a

false message to the sleeping ground; so that, long before their time, the grass and flowers had sprung up, only to be cut down by a heavy frost that was succeeded by snow. Again a hot wind had come, and again the grass had sprouted prematurely and been blighted. When spring opened, the winds veered to the south and drove back, and what green things had survived the cold died early in a hot, blowy May.

Lack of moisture had stunted the growing crops, the sun had baked the ground under them, and every stem and blade had been scorched. Where, in former years, the oats had nodded heavy-headed stood a straight, scanty growth. The wheat showed naked spots on its western side, the Vermillion having overflowed after the sowing and lain so long that the seed rotted in the wet. The flax stems turned up their blue faces and shriveled into a thin cover on the sod. And in the corn-field, that promised nubbins instead of the usual husking, there shone too soon a glimmer of gold.

Around the fields the brittle grass sloped down to the shrinking sloughs, where the muskrat houses stood high and dry, stranded on the cracked swamp-beds like beached boats. The river, for weeks a wide-spread, muddy stream, was now but a chain of trickling pools. Drought was abroad with its burning hand, and the landscape lay bared and brown.

But frost, sun, and winds had not been the only scourges. Potato-bugs had settled upon the long patch that was bordered by the reservation road. The youngest brother had painted the riddled vines green with poison, and the little girl had gone along the rows with a stick, knocking thousands of the pests into an oyster-can; but their labor had been in vain. Cutworms had destroyed the melons; cabbage-lice and squash-bugs had besieged the garden, attended by caterpillars; and grasshoppers by the millions had hopped across the farm, devouring as they went and leaving disaster behind them.

The hot wind that bent the stunted grass beside the road reminded the biggest brother of every catastrophe of the year, and he cried out angrily to it. "Oh, blow! blow! blow!" he scolded, and, reaching over, gave the blue mare a slap with the reins to relieve his feelings. It started her into a smart trot, and she soon topped the ridge along which the track ran. Then the little girl headed her toward the station.

"It only needs a fire to finish the whole thing up," went on the biggest brother, ruefully eying the prairie. "The country's as dry as tinder. And our place ain't plowed around half well enough. If a blaze should happen to come down on us"—he shook his head gravely.

As if in answer to his words, there came from behind them a gust of hot air that carried with it the smell of burning grass. He faced to the rear with an exclamation of alarm and, shading his face, peered back along the rails. "Catch that?" he asked excitedly. "There *is* a fire somewheres; it's behind us. And the wind's in the west!"

The little girl sprang to her feet, the buckboard still going, and also looked behind. "Why, I can see smoke," she said. She pointed to where a dark haze, like shattered thunder-clouds, was rising from the sky-line.

"It's been set by that confounded engine," declared the biggest brother. He seized the reins and brought the blue mare to a stop.

The little girl stood upon the seat, holding his hand to steady herself. "Don't you think we'd better drive home?" she questioned anxiously.

"Well, I don't know," he replied. "Seems to me like the smoke's gettin' thicker awful fast. We don't notice it much because the sun's so bright. But it ain't more 'n eight or ten miles away, and comin' like sixty. It could make the farm ahead of us. We'll just get on to the back-fire at the station and keep from gettin' singed."

They sat silent for a moment. Then the biggest brother turned about and clucked to the blue mare. But the little girl continued to squint against the sun until, in descending into a draw, the black haze behind was lost to view.

The biggest brother kept the blue mare at a good gait, and the road, with its narrow strip of weedy grass down the center, flew by under the bouncing buckboard. Soon the long, gradual incline leading up from the ravine was climbed. At its top, on a high bench, the horse halted for breath. Both the biggest brother and the little girl at once rose to their feet. As they did so, they uttered a cry.

A moving wall of animals, that stretched far to north and south, was heading swiftly toward them from beyond the river bluffs. They could hear the sound of thousands of hoofs, like the ceaseless roll of dulled drums, and across the black level of the wall they saw a bank of smoke, into which leaped tongues of flame.

Without losing a second, the biggest brother began to urge on the blue mare. The black-snake was missing from its place in the buckboard. So he used the ends of the reins. He saw that the wind, which had been brisk all day, was now redoubled in strength, increased by another that found its source in the advancing fire. He wondered if he had not better unhitch and let the horse carry them both, abandoning the buckboard to its fate on the road. Yet he feared to lose any time, and, reflecting that perhaps the spirited creature would refuse to ride double, he decided to hurry on without making the change. As the mare responded to the rein ends, something like a prayer moved his dry, firm-set lips. For he knew that they were menaced not only by a conflagration, but by a mad stampede.

"The local'll be along in about half an hour," said the little girl, speaking for the first time since their dread discovery. "Do you think the fire'll hurt it?"

The biggest brother laughed uneasily. "No," he replied, "it'll go right through the fire; but the cattle'll pitch it off the track if they get in front of it."

The little girl faced around to watch the oncoming rout, and the biggest brother renewed his thrashing of the blue mare. But he was not satisfied with the horse's speed. She was acting strangely, wavering from side to side as if she were anxious to turn, at the same time keeping her head high and whinnying nervously.

"*You* know what's comin'," the biggest brother said to her between his teeth; "and you'd go back if I'd let you."

The little girl called his attention from the mare with a shout. He turned to look in the direction of her shaking finger. What he saw blanched his dripping face. From a point on the prairie where he knew the farm-house stood were ascending several dense, black funnels!

The line of flying animals had now crossed the farm. The blaze seemed to be at the very flanks of the herd, licking up the dry weeds and grass from under their speeding feet. The biggest brother groaned as his eye swept the oncoming panic. He forgot for a moment the danger to those at home and the terrible loss that, doubtless, had been visited upon them, in the thought of the impending fate of himself and the little girl. "They'll be plump on us in no time," he muttered, and, kneeling at the dashboard, he renewed his beating.

A bare three miles ahead lay the meadow beyond which was the town and safety. The thundering host behind, at the rate it was coming, would catch them while they were crossing the wide basin, where the dropseed-grass and blue-joint were higher than the wild hay on the prairie about. There the herd would have to increase its running to escape the swifter-going fire; hence, there lay the greatest

peril to the biggest brother and the little girl.

In a few moments the animals heading the rout were out of sight in the draw crossed a little while before by the buckboard. The fire followed them, creeping slowly down the farther hillside, where the growth was poor; but when it, as well as the stock, disappeared in the bottom, where the grass stood thick and tall, the narrow ravine top vomited smoke and flame like the mouth of a crater.

In a terribly short space the stampede rushed up the bench and came on, a dense mass, horning and shouldering wildly. It was soon so close that the horses could be distinguished from the cattle. Then it gained on the buckboard to such an extent that the little girl could make out, through the smoke and dust that whirled before it, animals that she knew. But they were changed. Was that old Kate, the cultivator mare, with bulging eyes and lolling tongue? Or young Liney, the favorite daughter of a well-loved mother, whose horns cut the grass as she fled? Or Napoleon's dusky son, Dan, near the rails? Even above the sound of their feet and the roar of the fire, she could hear them bawling from weariness and fear as they charged ruthlessly on toward the buckboard.

The blue mare was failing in her stride and acting more obstinately than ever. Now to the right, now to the left, she turned, and it was with difficulty that the biggest brother kept her in the road. She answered every blow on her lathered hindquarters with an angry hump. The biggest brother, as he pounded her mercilessly, felt that escape was impossible.

Beside him, quiet and brave, sat the little girl. A spot of scarlet showed on either cheek, her eyes were alight, her figure tense. If she felt any terror, she did not show it. She knew how rapidly the blue mare could travel, and she trusted her pet to bring them to safety.

As the buckboard struck the meadow road, the biggest brother

gave a hurried glance over his shoulder to see how far behind was the herd. "Never saw so many animals all together in my life," he said. "They'll kill us sure if they catch us. And that fire's drivin' 'em at an awful clip. My God!"

The cry burst from him in dismay as a huge, burning tumbleweed, as high as a wagon-wheel and as round, rolled through a gap in the stampede and whirled past them, lighting the grass as it sped. A second and a third followed. Soon a dozen brands had shot forward, heralding the crackling fiend behind. The blue mare shied wildly when the weeds came close, and each time the buckboard almost capsized. She was lagging more than ever, as if waiting for the animals that were scarcely a half mile away.

There was fire all around now, and smoke and cinders floated over the biggest brother and the little girl, choking them and shutting out the road ahead. The wind, as it brushed by, seemed to sear their faces with its torrid breath. Suddenly, the dust and smoke clearing to the right, the little girl clutched the biggest brother's arm and pointed out a dark, bulky creature that was in the lead. It was a bison, evidently one of those lonely bachelors that, exiled from their kind, were the first hermits of the plains. His bushy head was lowered and his beard swept the ground. The biggest brother and the little girl could see his naked body gleam and quiver as he was crowded forward by a band of antelope. He galloped blindly, as if he was failing in strength. Even as they looked he tumbled to his knees and let the antelope pass over him, meeting an ignoble death beneath a hundred sharp hoofs and in the embrace of the fire.

The biggest brother's attention was given to the bison only an instant. For a long-horned steer collided with a hind wheel and a horse came dashing against the blue mare. He guided the buckboard nearer the rails to avoid the horse and reached round to hammer with his hat the steer's nose, which was thrust almost against the seat.

"They'll trample us, they'll trample us!" he cried, and he seized the little girl about the shoulders and thrust her in front of him. "Drive," he commanded. Then he climbed back over the seat and furiously kicked out at the animals lunging upon the buckboard.

But he could as easily have stopped the pursuing fire, which was in the meadow and was house high; for, with those in the rear pressing them on at every bound, the leaders could not slacken their course. He saw that there was but one thing to be done: increase the speed before the buckboard was run down. "Oh, why didn't I unhitch?" he cried miserably as he climbed back to the little girl's side.

Forgetful of danger, she was whipping the blue mare with all her strength. The mare was traveling as fast as the herd now, and the station was in sight despite the drifting dust and smoke. Before it lay the black stretch at which the fire must stop, and on which, if the blue mare could be brought to a standstill behind a building or a waiting car, there was succor from death. Yet hope—with the herd upon them and the fire closer, hotter, and deadlier—was almost gone. The biggest brother, in a very final frenzy of desperation, joined his efforts to those of the little girl, and pounded the blue mare and the crowding stock repeatedly with his naked fists.

But suddenly another phase entered into that run for life. The roar behind them became louder, swelled to deafening, surged to their ears like a long, deep boom of thunder. And then, with a shriek that seemed to divide the smoke and dust, the local plunged through the cloud across her track and came even with the blue mare's muzzle.

In that moment, worn with her five miles' gallop, it was the only thing that could have spurred her on. Her eyes were bulging from lack of breath. Her sides, streaked with blood, no longer responded to the scourge of the rein ends. But, with the engine abreast, the desire to worst it, long nurtured by the little girl, set her into a wilder pace. With a snort, she gathered herself together.

The buckboard, tossing from side to side on the uneven meadow, gained instantly on the herd and passed to the front once more. The engine had distanced it, yet the blue mare did not slacken. The biggest brother and the little girl, torn between hope and fear, yelled at her encouragingly. Breathing heavily, she strained every muscle to obey.

Another moment and the engine was on the burnt strip; another, and the last car reached it; a third, and the blue mare's feet struck it, and she scurried into the lee of the depot to let the animals behind her divide and charge by through the town.

The biggest brother, as soon as the blue mare had been tenderly cared for, hired a livery horse and started homeward. The little girl accompanied him, her face, like his, still streaked with dust and cinders. Neither spoke as the bare, smutty meadow was crossed. They only looked ahead to where smoke was rising slowly, ten miles away to the west. They were spent with excitement, but their thoughts were on their mother and brothers, the house surrounded by a straw-strewn yard, the line of stacks behind the barn, the board granaries, the fields dry and ready for the match.

As they drove rapidly along through the sunlight, over the land just scored and torn up by the stampede, they passed dead and injured animals that, weaker than the others, had fallen and been trampled and burned. Few horses and cattle had suffered, but, beginning at the draw, the sheep were pitifully plentiful. Everywhere smoke floated up in tiny threads from smoldering buffalo-chips, and clumps of weeds burned damply, only now and then bursting into flame.

At last, with a shout of joy, the biggest brother made out the farm-

house; with an unhappy cry he announced the burning of the stacks. And when the buckboard came still nearer, they could see that the granaries were gone, and that all the sod buildings were roofless and open to the blurred sky, while on every side—the corn-field alone breaking the vista—lay the blackened fields.

When they drove up, their mother tottered to meet them, and waved one hand heartbrokenly toward the kitchen door, where the eldest and the youngest brothers, exhausted with fighting fire, their faces grimy, their clothing burned to tatters, sat weeping. "It couldn't have been much worse," she sobbed, as the biggest brother took her in his arms.

The little girl tumbled from the buckboard and, forgetting their quarrel of the morning, threw her arms around the eldest brother's neck. He bowed his head against her apron, and there was a long silence, interrupted only by sounds of mourning. Then the biggest brother spoke. "Mother," he said, patting her shoulder softly, "we've got the house and the farm left, remember. We've got one another, too." He paused a moment. Before he spoke again he gave a little laugh, and all looked up at him in surprise. "What's more," he went on, "where's the caterpillars and cucumber-bugs, and the potato-bugs and cabbage lice? Burned up, slicker 'n a whistle. And mother," he persisted, holding up her tear-stained face smilingly, "have you happened to consider that there ain't a blamed grasshopper in a hundred miles?"

XIV

HARD TIMES

THE first deep snow of the winter, dropping gently from a wide, dun sky, rested in white folds on the new straw roofs of the sod buildings, crested the low stacks that had been hauled from distant meadows not swept by the fire, covered the cinder-strewn gaps in the yard where the granaries had stood, and hid under a shining, jeweled pall the stripped fields and the somber prairie. The little girl's mother, stringing pop-corn in the kitchen for the Christmas tree at the school-house, looked out toward noon to see the farm restored, as if by enchantment, to the aspect of other and happier winters; and sorrowfully welcomed the winding-sheet that gave promise of the coming resurrection, when the grass and flowers should rise again from out the naked, charred ground, bright and glorious with the fresh-born spring.

It had seemed to her, ever since the terrible holocaust of a few months before, as if the Bad Lands had moved eastward upon them. Yet, however sad was the sight of their loss and the sense of their privation, she counseled against selling out at a small figure and moving to some State where prairie fires were unknown, and bravely determined to stay and fight back to rough comfort and plenty.

"The snow will help us to forget," she said to the biggest brother, as she took a hot, crammed popper from him and emptied it into a milk-pan. He nodded in reply, and sprinkled the popper with kernels again, and she went back to her bench, carrying the pan under one arm. They sat without speaking, the click of the needle and the snapping of the corn alone breaking the quiet. When another popper was ready to be turned out, the biggest brother went into the adjoining shed with a wooden bucket and shoveled it full of coal from the ever-lessening pile that had been purchased, like the seed for the coming planting, on the promise of the next year's crop.

As he returned, bending under the weight of the bucket, the door into the entry was shoved slowly open and the little girl entered. She

walked forward to lay her mittens on the table before she brushed the snow from her shoulders and leggings and untwisted and shook out her nubia. Her woolen cap was pulled far down over her ears, and her mother, as she watched her, did not see the grave eyes and pensive face until the little girl halted beside the biggest brother's chair to warm her hands at a stove-hole.

"How's the tree?" asked the biggest brother, putting down the bucket and depositing one small lump on the dying coals.

"It's setting in a churn," replied the little girl, without looking up.

"Is it trimmed?" said her mother.

The little girl acquiesced. "It's all ready to light."

"S'pose those Dutchman's young ones brought some things over to put on," ventured the biggest brother, shaking the popper violently to hide his concern.

The little girl sighed heavily. "Everybody's sent presents but the Swedes and us," she said, and there was a telltale break in her voice.

"The Swedes and us won't have much on," declared the biggest brother, dryly. "That fire scooped up our Christmas gifts. The only people around here that can make presents this year were smart enough to backfire." He gave the popper such a shake that the lid swung up and let a shower of kernels fall over the stove.

"The Dutch girls said this morning," began the little girl, "that their new house is better 'n ours. And they said that every one of 'em is going to have two presents off the tree to-night. And—and—I know it's true, too, because I saw the teacher write their names on the packages." She paused a moment. "They're all big packages," she added mournfully.

"I am glad," said her mother, "that some one is to receive presents

to-night, even if we do not."

"And where *you're* goin' to shine," broke in the biggest brother, giving the little girl a squeeze, "is in the program. You'll play that new tune you learned on the fiddle, and you'll speak your piece; and they'll all be as jealous as kingdom come. As for presents, well, you've been gettin' 'em straight for ten years; so you c'n afford to skip the eleventh." He got up to empty the popper in the pan.

The little girl did not reply at once. When she burst forth at last, her eyes were full and her breast was heaving. "It's our first school tree," she cried; "and here I'll be the only girl that won't have her name called, except for an old orange or a bag of candy." Then she hurriedly left the kitchen.

"Poor baby!" said her mother when she was gone. She disposed of the stringing of the pop-corn to the biggest brother and began to pick over a quart of wheat that was to be their supper. Having finished and put it on to boil, she turned to the roasting of some barley for the next morning's coffee.

"I wish we'd a-got her a little trinket for to-night," said the biggest brother, "even if it'd a-been only worth ten cents." He took out his pipe and filled it from a handful of corn-silk in his jumper pocket. "*I'd* be tickled to death," he added, "if I could have a plug of tobacco."

"And I a sack of flour," said his mother. "We'll have the last in biscuits for to-day's dinner. I suppose I shouldn't have used it up for a week more, because we had white biscuits only last Sunday. But it is Christmas day; I can't resist giving you boys something a little extra. I've kept enough flour out, though, to thicken gravies with. Now, if we only had plenty of potatoes."

"When it gets nearer spring, we c'n eat the inside of the potatoes and save the peelin's for plantin'."

"Oh, I thought of that long ago," laughed his mother; "I've got half a sack of peelings here behind the stove where they won't freeze."

"The meat's gettin' low, ma. There's only a hunk or two left in the barrel, and I just noticed, when I was gettin' the coal, that that pig in there on the rafters is dwindlin' fast. I guess another cow'll have to go. Might as well, anyway. Hay won't more 'n last the horses."

They were interrupted by the eldest and the youngest brothers, who came in, stamping the snow from their boots and swinging their arms.

"Gee! it's cold!" cried the youngest, keeping in a far corner, out of way of the warmth from the stove, and thumping his toes alternately as he moved in a circle. "Sloughs are frozen to the bottom. Didn't catch a thing, and had to use the ax to chop out the traps every place we'd set."

Dinner was eaten in silence that Christmas day. The family could not help contrasting the meal with those served on former like occasions. Since nearly all the turkeys and chickens had perished in the fire, and what few remained were being kept over for the following year, no plump fowl lay, shins in air, before the eldest brother. A small piece of baked pork held the place of honor, surrounded by the never-absent dish of boiled wheat, the plate of precious white biscuits, and some sweetened corn-bread. When dinner was over, the big brothers tramped off to the chain of sloughs, taking with them the violin and the corn their mother had strung so that the latter could be put on the tree that afternoon. The little girl and her mother cleared the table and then sat down to unravel some old wristlets and from them knit new heels and toes into the big brothers' stockings.

The little girl was very quiet and thoughtful. Her mouth drooped mournfully, her eyes were wistful. She spoke to her mother only in answer, and then in monosyllables. Her mother, as she watched her, felt that the little girl's unhappiness was the last bitter touch to her own

grief, and she was glad when the child put on her dried leggings, her cap and coat, preparatory to spending an hour in her own room, where there was no fire.

The mother heard no sound from the other part of the house until the middle of the short afternoon. Then she caught the notes of a song. A moment later the little girl came running into the kitchen, her eyes dancing, and went running out again, carrying a sheet of brown wrapping-paper and a long piece of white string. No more sounds came from her room. When she came out at suppertime, dressed for the evening's entertainment, she was her usual cheerful self, much to the mystification of her compassionate mother and the big brothers.

There was a false ring of gladness in the sleigh-bells that night as they came jingling from the stable. For what right have sleigh-bells to ring when every pocket is flat and when there is no lumpy flour-sack hidden from sight under the hay in the pung bottom? So the eldest and the youngest brothers, their mother and the little girl, took their places in the low box and let the biggest brother cover them with a feather-tick, without any of the gay laughter and banter that marked the pleasure-rides of former years. Then the biggest brother, only his eyes showing from his head-wrappings, sprang to his seat behind the horses and sent the team briskly forward with the storm toward the huge bonfire of cottonwood logs that had been lighted close to the school-house on the farther edge of the farthest slough.

When the reservation road, hidden under four feet of packed snow, was crossed, the pung slid down to the carpeted ice of the first slough in the train of the capering horses, and was whisked through the crisp night toward the distant beacon. So swiftly did it scud that, before the quartet behind realized it, the horses had pressed up the hill beside the burning cottonwoods and halted before the school-house.

The little girl was the first to scramble from the snug box when the tick was lifted. Still wearing a big buffalo coat that enveloped her from

head to foot, she squirmed through the door, about which was a crowd, and threaded her way past the high desk that daily secluded her while she ate her poor lunches, past the hot stove with its circle of new-comers, to where, hidden by the chart, stood the teacher. There she held a moment's whispered conversation, produced a package from under her greatcoat, and then joined the other children, who were seated up in front on boards placed across the main aisle.

The little building, that had been saved in the prairie fire by the well-trodden oval around it, was crowded with the people of the district, assembled to enjoy their first public entertainment and tree. Among the younger ones were the Dutchman's girls and their baby nephew, the neighbor woman's children. "Frenchy's" brother, and the Swede boy. On either hand and behind were the grown people,—the Dutchman and his wife, the young couple from the West Fork, the cattleman, "Frenchy," the Swede, and the big brothers and their mother. When the family entered, the room was so full that the eldest and the youngest brothers had to content themselves with a perch on the coal-bins. The little girl, turning to survey the room, could not catch a glimpse of the biggest brother, however, and finally concluded that he was still busy with blanketing the horses and putting them away in the long shed.

The tree was ablaze from its top to the rim of the cloth-wound churn, and was hung with tinsel trimmings from the farm-house,—the selfsame trimmings that for years had twinkled and winked at the little girl each Christmas eve. Among the tinsel was festooned the pop-corn, while from every bending branch and stem hung apples and oranges supplied by the teacher, colored bags of candy and bright cornucopias given by the cattleman, sorghum taffies-on-a-stick made by the neighbor woman, while eggs, colored in gaudy and grotesque patterns by boiling them in pieces of calico, were suspended in tiny cunning willow baskets that testified to the nimble fingers of the Dutchman's wife. Around the base of the churn and heaped high

against it was the pile of gifts.

The program opened immediately after the arrival of the family. The teacher, keeping one eye upon the fast burning and unstable candles above her, came forward to the edge of the platform to say a few words of greeting. The children then gave a rousing Yule chorus, the laden boughs over them waving gently in time with their voices. The little girl and her violin followed, and the tree was as still as those who sat before it while the strains of "I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls" floated tremblingly out from under her uncertain bow. A new settler's four-year-old lisped "Six Little Rabbits," with many promptings and encouraging nods from the teacher. The Dutchman's youngest got up to recite "The Burial of Sir John Moore," and, though shaking from head to foot, attacked the doleful stanzas in a high key and with sprightly gesticulations. "Frenchy's" brother spoke in his own tongue a piece that was suitable to the occasion; much to his amazement, it elicited peals of laughter. When he sat down, the program wound on its tedious, recitative way until the tree was again supplied with candles by the neighbor woman's son, and the little girl arose to deliver a welcome to that same Santa Claus from whom she expected nothing.

If her mother, the big brothers, and the doting Swede boy hoped to see her final effort a triumphant one, they were disappointed, for she spoke falteringly and, at one juncture, forgot her lines. Her eyes wavered from her mother to the tree, from the tree to the teacher, and her closing words were inarticulate.

In the excitement of the moment, however, only the fond few noticed her confusion. The faint tinkle of bells and the swelling toots of a tin horn were announcing the approach of Santa Claus. Before the little girl had finished, and in spite of the teacher's admonition, the children were standing up and looking expectantly toward the rear; and no sooner had the little girl taken her seat, than they broke forth

into excited chatter, calling to one another eagerly. Then the door was suddenly thrust open to the sound of a shrill toot, and Santa Claus came bounding in.

Amid the din of the horn and the shouts of the children, he clambered forward to the platform, bobbing to right and left, and tweaking the ears of those he passed. Long, yellow rope hair hung down from under a round, scarlet cap, and a rope beard reached to his portly waist. Cotton snow and another kind that melted promptly in the warm room covered his shoulders and sleeves. In a gruff though merry voice that sounded above all the others, he sang out the names pinned to an armful of candy-bags.

One by one, big and little hurried up to receive their gifts of sweets. The little girl evinced none of the delight that shone on the faces of the other children. She watched the distribution silently, with no glad throbs of the heart, and took her share of the fruit and candy with downcast eyes. Her mother sorrowfully noted that, even when the bags and cornucopias had been given out and Santa turned his attention to the pile around the churn, her interest did not increase.

She watched dully as the girls skipped boldly up, with proud, knowing looks, to seize their presents, or the boys sidled forward bashfully with changing color. All unwrapped and admired their gifts as soon as they were back in their seats. The Dutchman's girls shrieked with joy as they undid their presents, the neighbor woman's daughter could scarcely hold her share in her best apron. "Frenchy's" brother had distended pockets. The young farmer's baby crowed in purple delight over the stack of parcels before him.

The little girl's lap was empty, save for the candy and fruit dropped carelessly into it. When the pile around the churn had dwindled sorely and but a dozen gifts remained, the little girl had not yet gone forward to claim one. The other children had been too occupied to notice her ill fortune until they had spent their first joy over their gifts. Then one of

the Dutchman's girls elbowed the neighbor woman's son, who sat next her, to call his attention to the little girl, and he passed the news on. Soon all the children were glancing questioningly at her and nudging one another.

The neighbor woman's daughter, who had often shared the generous fruit of the annual tree at the farm-house, took secret satisfaction in the unlooked-for fall of the little girl's pride, and leaned to all sides to whisper. She even stretched in front of the little girl to tell it to a boy beyond. Not daring to speak plainly, she resorted to pig-Latin. "Seegry," she cried, pulling at his coat, "shegry ain'tgry gotgry agry thinggry." But when the little girl, who knew pig-Latin in all its various dialects, turned angry, scornful eyes upon her, the neighbor woman's daughter sat up and her smile faded to a sickly blankness.

Santa Claus was now almost at the end of his resources. The floor was bare about the churn, and there remained only three or four parcels in his arms. The teacher was despoiling the tree of its pop-corn festoons and tossing them gaily about. Already there was a sound of crunching in the room, as the candy, nuts, and fruit met their destined fate.

But all at once, with the last package, a long, thick one, held up before his jovial face, Santa Claus started, looked a second time at the writing upon it, and then, with a jubilant laugh, called out the little girl's name!

The children about her hushed on the instant, and all eyes were turned upon her. The pitying expression on her mother's face changed to one of joy, and the eldest and the youngest brothers slid off the coal-bins as if they were possessed. The Swede boy and the cattleman, who had each been busy blaming himself for something worse than forgetfulness or negligence, fairly beamed at the back of the little girl's curly head.

Very deliberately she got up and stepped to the platform. A smile curved her mouth, and she carried her pink chin high. As she received her gift, she paused for one moment to drop a dainty curtsy and to thank Santa Claus, a proceeding which filled all the other girls with envy, since they had omitted it. Then she proudly took her seat, the long, thick package in one hand. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with white string.

The little girl did not open the package; instead, she sat quietly with it across her knee, displaying, as if unconsciously, her name printed in full across it in large letters that strayed upward, and that were headed by a "Miss" entirely of capitals. Under her name, in glowing red ink, was written "Merry Christmas," and, farther down, the words: "There are seven beautiful things in this box for you.—S. C."

When the teacher had made her closing speech, all rose to go. The little girl, as she put on her cap and the big buffalo coat, was the center of interest, for the children crowded about her and handled her package. The neighbor woman's daughter hung the closest, and even put one arm around the little girl. The latter did not seem to notice any one, but put the package under her coat and joined her mother.

When the pung drove up to the door the little girl lost no time in getting into it. The eldest and the youngest brothers followed her.

The biggest and his mother tarried a little, however, the one to speak to the Swede boy, the other to accost the cattleman.

There was a teasing look in the biggest brother's eyes as he gave the Swede boy a slap on the back. "Good for you!" he said in an undertone; "I'll never forget that, long 's I live." The Swede boy tried to answer, hung his head, and finally made off. The biggest brother took up the reins and, while he waited, continued to pick cotton from the lapels of his overcoat.

Meanwhile the cattleman, coming out of the school-house ready for his drive home, suddenly found himself face to face with a tearful little woman who gratefully seized his big hands. "Oh, how *good* of you!" she cried; "how thoughtful and good and kind! Thank you! thank you!"

"What fer?" demanded the cattleman. "I hain't done nothin', my dear lady."

"Oh, that will do to say," laughed the little girl's mother through her tears, as she got into the pung and pulled one corner of the tick over her head.

The little girl was silent during the homeward ride; and on their arrival, when the family entered the kitchen, she dropped her package beside the stove and began to take off her coat and cap. Her mother and the biggest and the youngest brothers looked at her in amazement.

"Why, pet lamb," her mother said at last, "aren't you going to look at your presents?" She picked up the package and carried it to the table.

The little girl slowly shook her head. The biggest brother saw that all the bravado and indifference shown at the school-house were gone. In their place was a look of keen pain. He lifted her and held her on his lap, guessing, all at once, the secret of the seven gifts. "My baby sister!" he said, and trusted himself to speak no further. She understood, and put her head against his breast.

The youngest brother, spurred by curiosity, was opening the package. His mother stood beside him. As the brown paper fell away at the severing of the white string, he sprang back with an exclamation of surprise. The biggest brother put the little girl to one side, got up, and stepped across to look down at the contents thus disclosed.

He was reminded of the rear half of the attic, where for years had been gathering odds and ends. There was a bit of torn and faded mosquito-netting, an old mouth-organ, a broken domino, a pair of half-worn mittens, a ten-penny nail, a dog-eared copy of "Alice in Wonderland," and a slate-pencil.

"My daughter!" said the little girl's mother, light breaking in upon the situation; "my brave little daughter!" She turned to breathe a mother's comfort.

But the little girl, her cap and coat resumed, was disappearing into the chill shadows of the sitting-room.

XV

THE FATE OF A CROWING HEN

"SASSY" was all that her name implied. From the very beginning, when, as a small white egg, innocent enough in appearance, she left the hand of the little girl's mother and joined nine companions under a fat cochin, it was with something of an impudent roll that she gained her place in the nest. Three weeks later, after having been faithfully sat upon, and as faithfully turned each day by the cochin's beak, she gave another pert stir, very slight, and tapped a hole through her cracking shell. The next morning she swaggered forth, a round, fluffy, cheeping morsel.

She was not Sassy yet, however. It was later, when she lost her yellow down and grew a scant coat of white feathers, through which her skin showed in pimpled, pinkish spots, that she displayed the characteristics that christened her, and, by her precocity and brazenness, distinguished herself from among her leghorn brothers and sisters.

At this period of her life, a pullet in both months and experience, she should have conducted herself with becoming modesty. Instead, she developed a habit of taking her meals, morning, noon, and night, from the kitchen table, to which the little girl did not usually go until long after the big brothers had finished and withdrawn. Sassy made her entrance either by way of the hall or through the window nearest the stove. Once inside, she hopped to a bench, and thence to the oil-cloth. Her progress from one end of the board to the other was always attended by serious damage to the butter, of which she was

inordinately fond. When, having fared well, she at last descended, she paraded up and down, with many sharp, inquiring cries of "C-a-w-k? c-a-w-k? c-a-w-k?" and wherever her claws chanced to touch left little, buttery fleurs-de-lis on the floor. She escaped the disastrous fire, not, like a dozen other fowls, by seeking refuge in the wind-break, but because she was in the coal-shed carrying on a hand-to-hand conflict with the tortoise-shell cat, who had five new babies.

By Thanksgiving day, having developed into a juicy frier, more prone than ever to snoop, family opinion turned against her, so that when it came to the question which chickens, in view of the shortage of feed, should occupy the oven in place of the usual sizzling turkey, the big brothers and the little girl voted for the heads of Sassy and of a certain mysterious young rooster who, though disturbing, had never been definitely singled out, since, on hearing his falsetto crow and looking about for him, the family invariably came upon the insolent pullet, alone and unconcerned.

The day before Thanksgiving the little girl was directed to capture both the rooster and Sassy. For the first, she selected a young leghorn that she believed to be the guilty trumpeter and poked him into a box-coop beside the smoke-house. Then she set about jailing the culpable pullet. She was aided by Godfrey, the biggest brother's pet pointer, who scented Sassy in the vegetable patch, where she was scratching around the tomato vines. Together they pursued her at top speed, Godfrey keeping close to his bird, but, in true sportsmanlike fashion, refraining from seizing her. Through the tomatoes they ran, till the little girl sat down from sheer exhaustion, with Godfrey panting beside her and the pullet perched near by on a pile of seed onions.

After a ten minutes' rest, the little girl and the pointer renewed their chase. This time Sassy left the tomato patch (foolishly enough, for the vines tripped the little girl), and fled, with hackles spread, toward the

well, where a flock was dipping water. When they saw her coming, the chickens, among which were several young leghorns, fled in terror toward the sorghum patch and lost themselves in its woody lanes. Godfrey and the little girl charged this western jungle with zest, thrashing about until the pullet—supposedly—emerged and flitted toward the sod barn. But when for the second time, and after a lengthy hunt that brought up at the new stacks, they paused for breath, the little girl discovered, to the mystification of the pointer, who did not know one leghorn from another, and to her own disgust, that since their threading of the sorghum they had been after the wrong chicken!

The little girl sprawled on the sunny side of a stack for an hour or two after that, and chewed straws. She pulled off her shoes to rest her stockingless feet, and put her head on Godfrey's damp side. For she had resolved to postpone the catching of Sassy till evening, when the elusive pullet would be sleepily seated on a two-by-four in the empty cow-stall that now served for a coop.

When the early November twilight fell upon the farm-yard, the little girl roused Godfrey by gently pulling his tail and skipped round to the barn door. Under ordinary circumstances, the task of creeping upon an unsuspecting chicken and seizing it for the block would have been unpleasant. But, influenced by her long dislike of the pullet, and recalling her tiresome experience of the afternoon, she chuckled to think that she would soon have her hands clasped tightly about Sassy's yellow legs. "I'll not make a mistake *this* time," she said to herself.

She entered the barn slyly and stole down behind the stalls until she came opposite the perches. The chickens were settling themselves for the night, moving and murmuring drowsily. As she peeped among them, her glance fell upon Sassy, outlined against the small square window beyond and roosted comfortably with her beak toward the manger, all unconscious of her nearing doom. The little girl

was certain that it was she, for there was no mistaking the rakish lop of the serrated comb, or the once white under-feathers soiled to a bluish cast.

The little girl waited, restraining the excited pointer, until the light had faded from the square window. It was then so dark that the chickens could not see the malevolent fingers that, thrust softly up among them, grabbed a leghorn's shanks; and there was only a mildly concerned "k-r-r-r!" from an old, watchful hen as the little girl retreated, one hand doing almost fatal duty around an ill-starred neck.

By the time that the little girl, triumphantly bearing both her prey, heads down, reached the mounting-log at the front door of the house, where the eldest brother awaited her with the hatchet, it was nearly as dark outside as it had been in the barn. So the eldest brother—for the little girl had hurried away after giving him the chickens—could not tell which leghorn suffered the guillotine first. His sanguinary work being done, the little girl returned and carried the dead fowls into the coal-shed, where she tied their toes together and hung them over a nail.

Early next morning the eldest brother was awakened by a prolonged falsetto crow,—the familiar disturbing salute of the chanticleer he had beheaded the night before! Puzzled and wondering, he got up, ran to the eastern window of the attic, and looked down upon the yard. An amazing discovery repaid his promptness. For, as the chicken once more raised its voice, he saw that the mysterious rooster was still alive! So was Sassy! They were combined in one and the same bird! Two innocent chickens had been sacrificed!

So, until the next spring,—the spring following the fire, and one ever memorable for its wonderful grass and flowers, its gentle rains and windless, sunny days,—Sassy continued to exasperate the family, winning only censure. But when the depleted flock could not furnish half the eggs the family needed, she took it upon herself to lay

one daily, and was considerate ate enough to render it unnecessary for the little girl to go out and bring it in, by depositing it in the hay-twist box behind the kitchen stove, in the linen-barrel in the entry, or on the canopied bed. Then she found an appreciative friend in the little girl's mother, who, whenever she heard a proud, discordant announcement, half crow, half cackle, blessed the little white hen as she hurried to secure the offering.

One afternoon during Sassy's career of prolificacy, the little girl remembered that her best thick dress was so threadbare that she would need a brand-new one for the next winter. She found, too, that if she was to have one she must devise a way to swell the small amount in the tin savings-bank; for the big brothers declared they would be able only to pay the heavy debt upon the farm and victual the house for the stormy months to follow. So she hit upon the idea of raising chickens, and broached it to her mother. The latter, remembering the sorry Christmas just past, at once presented her with Sassy, promising that all the eggs the leghorn laid should be credited to the little girl at the general merchandise store at the station, and that all the chicks hatched out by Sassy should go the same way.

The little girl was jubilant over the plan, and each morning answered the "cut-cut-c't-a-a-ah-cut" of her hen with a gift of crumbs, and then took possession of the new-laid egg, placing it carefully in a cracker-box. When, at the end of as many days, a dozen eggs lay side by side, she took them out, wrapped each one in paper, packed them all in a lard-bucket full of shorts, and, mounting the blue mare, rode to the station, where she had the satisfaction of seeing eleven cents put opposite her name in the egg-book at the general merchandise store.

This was repeated four times, and, the price of eggs having gone up a few cents in each interval, the little girl had sixty cents to put in her bank, which raised her total to one dollar fifty-nine. On her June

birthday the family presented her with four dimes; the week after she sold a wooden squirt-gun to the neighbor woman's son for five cents. It was then plain that, if Sassy should continue to furnish eggs faithfully, the dress was assured.

But at this happy juncture, and, womanlike, without a single cluck of warning, the leghorn ceased her diurnal laying, and, after a spasmodic week, during which she scattered three or four eggs on the little girl's bed, gave no further sign of justifying her existence.

The little girl was in despair, and at once confided Sassy's delinquency to the eldest brother, who knew a great deal about chickens. He said that a leghorn was an all-year-round layer, and that when a hen of the breed failed to uphold the standard of her kind she was fit only for broiling. The youngest brother, overhearing the account of Sassy's conduct and the eldest brother's comments, volunteered the opinion that nothing ailed the chicken but the pip, and advised fat and pepper. But when three days had gone by and the leghorn, with generous doses of axle-grease and cayenne, ailed rather than recovered, the little girl ceased her administrations.

It occurred to her, in the midst of her worry, that perhaps Sassy wanted to set. Accordingly she got ten eggs together, arranged them in a nest, caught the hen, and put her upon them. But here a new and unlooked-for thing happened. Sassy would not stay on the nest. Not at all daunted, the little girl procured a broad strip of calico and tied the hen down. But in her struggles to get free, Sassy broke nearly all of the eggs under her, and finally hied herself out of the new coop and over the smoke-house to liberty.

Unhappy that her leghorn thus spurned to mother a brood, the little girl sought the biggest brother. "Oh, no wonder the mean thing crows," she said to him, as she told her story.

The biggest brother conferred long and solemnly on the question.

When it was settled, the little girl came out of the sitting-room with a look of hopeful determination upon her face and hunted up Sassy. The latter had grown so bold since the Thanksgiving before that any one could pick her up without running after her. So the little girl, in two winks, had her under one arm and was on her way to the carnelian bluff.

It was a hot, sultry day in midsummer, and not a breath of wind was blowing over the farm. The grain-fields were still. The blades of the corn drooped limply. The creamy sap of the milkweed growing in the timothy meadow was drying up in the stem. Below the bluff the herd stood, belly deep, lashing about them with wet tails, and the pigs wallowed among the wilting bulrushes in damp security.

Yet, with all its heat and quiet, the afternoon was destined to be a stormy one. The swallows were flying low across the farm-yard; the colts, pestered by busy flies, were moving restlessly about the wire pen; the Maltese cat was trying her claws on a table leg in the kitchen; and, behind the wind-break, a collie had given over a beef-bone and was industriously eating grass. But all these signs, which should have foretold to her what was coming, were unnoticed by the little girl as she hurried along.

At the southern base of the bluff she halted and put Sassy on the ground with her head pointing up the hill. Then, with apron held wide, she began to shoo the hen gently toward the summit. For the biggest brother had said very emphatically that the only way to make a chicken lay is to drive her up a hill.

Sassy did not pay any attention to the apron, but shook her wattles crossly, "k-r-r-red," and held her head so that one white ear lobe lay questioningly uppermost.

"Now you go up," commanded the little girl; "go right straight up, or I'll just *give* it to you. *I'll* make you lay, you lazy thing!"

Sassy tilted her head so that the opposite ear lobe showed, and lifted one foot against her breast. Otherwise she did not indicate that she had even heard her orders. Her disobedience angered the little girl.

"Shoo! shoo! shoo!" she cried; "do you think I'm going to carry you? No, siree! You'll walk,—every step of it, too. *I'll* teach you." She seized Sassy by the tail and rudely shoved her forward.

It availed no more than the shooing. The hen not only refused to advance, but turned and flew into the corn. When, after chasing her around a dozen hills, the little girl once more had the leghorn held tightly in her hands, she gave her a good shaking. But no matter how hard the little girl jerked her body from side to side, Sassy, by bending her neck, kept her head defiantly in one place.

The little girl was at her wits' end. The biggest brother had specified that Sassy should be driven; but the leghorn would not drive. The little girl had tried her best to carry out her instructions, and had only discovered the truth of the old adage about leading a horse to water. She could bring Sassy to the very spot where a cure could be effected—and the hen would refuse treatment. Chagrined, warm, and discouraged, she resolved to carry the chicken bodily to the stone-pile, a bare half way, and there think over her failure. So, with Sassy under her arm once more, she toiled up the grassy slope.

While she was lying beside the pile, worried and distraught, with the leghorn at close quarters throwing up dirt and pebbles, the air became so ominously and deathly still that the little girl and Sassy fairly gasped for breath. Over the grass tops the heat halted and lay in long, faintly visible waves, like a ghostly sea. And in the west there began to arise, silently and swiftly, a vast mountain of peculiar, dense arched clouds.

It bulged upward until its top seemed half way to the sun. Then, with

lightning rapidity, it closed in at its middle and assumed the shape of a monster toad-stool, and traveled forward toward the Vermillion with a mighty roar.

The little girl neither saw nor heard it as it came on. She was thinking, with the hopefulness of youth, over Sassy's future possibilities. "She'll surely start laying again some time," she mused, "and I'll borrow a hen from mother to set on the eggs. So I'll have all those chickens, and when they grow up I'll have all their eggs, and some of them will set, and—" She lost herself in an endless chain of computation.

The toad-stool, topped with angry, boiling clouds, was now but five or six miles away. It swayed like the trunk of an elephant as it darted forward, one second touching the ground, the next lifting itself into the air, shifting and lowering as if it were picking spots upon which to alight. A breeze sprang up and hurried to meet it, and all the grass and corn-stalks bowed that way.

Suddenly the rustling about her made the little girl look up. The bright sunshine had changed to threatening gloom, the sultry quiet was broken by whispers of tempest and rain. She saw the nearing cloud-column, now an hour-glass in form, and realized her awful danger. Calling to Sassy, she got up on her knees with the thought of flight.

Sassy answered with little joyous cries. She was gratefully welcoming the forerunning breeze of the cyclone by raising her wings, and was walking sidewise down the hill.

The next moment, a torrent of water struck the little girl as she attempted to get to her feet, and rolled Sassy farther away from the pile. Then, with a horrid growl, the cyclone crossed the river, skipped over the swaying wheat, and, alighting on the edge of the corn, dragged its ravaging base across the field with a terrific whirling of

stalks and a rending and grinding that bespoke the very end of things. Its center was midway between the bluff and the farm-house. And, as its farther edge braided the cottonwoods in the wind-break and uprooted the stunted apple-trees, its near edge came close to the stone-pile with a mighty sucking breath.

The little girl, seeing that escape was impossible, for the rain was beating her down, flung herself in the lee of the pile and clutched at the grass. "Sassy!" she shouted again; "Sassy!" But the cyclone drowned her cry.

With starting eyes she saw the swirling currents draw Sassy, maelstromlike, in and in. The hen lost her feet, was next tossed like a white ball hither and thither, and then sped out of sight into the vortex of the storm's wild mingling of matter, taking with her all the little girl's hopes of future revenue—the unlaid eggs and the unhatched chicks. As she disappeared, she gave a final frightened, crowing cluck. It was her swan song.

When the tornado had swept on, leaving in its wake a wide path of bare ground fringed with wreckage, the little girl hurried home to assure herself that her mother and the big brothers had gotten into the storm-cellar, and that the blue mare was unhurt, and to gaze into the sitting-room mirror to see if her hair had turned white. Satisfied upon all points, she changed her clothes and started eastward on horseback, following the streaked road of the cyclone. As she traveled, she kept steadfastly on the lookout, and jogged along until the prairie was wrapped in night. When, at last, she turned and started back, she carried, as trophies of her search, her mother's wooden chopping-bowl, dusty and unharmed, and, thrust in her hat-band, a solitary memento of the vanished crowing hen, a broken,

soiled white feather.

XVI

THE RESERVATION TRIP

A HUGE pen with V-shaped wings, patterned after those built by the Indians to imprison antelope, thrust its long, high neck over the railroad embankment and against the open doors of the cattle-cars as they were rolled along the siding. Through the pen and up the jutting neck into the stifling, wheeled boxes, lowing in fright and advancing unwillingly, were driven the Dutchman's fat steers and the beeves belonging to the cattleman. When a long train was filled with them, a wildcat engine backed down from the station, coupled on to the waiting freight, and went lumbering away with its hungry, thirsty load, bound for a packing-house in a distant city.

The little girl watched the shipping of the stock, her heart sore with the thought that only a short week stood between the home herd and the shambles. Never before had she mourned the departure of the cattle, for, spared the long ride in foul, torturing confinement, they had simply disappeared across the prairie in the direction of Sioux Falls or Yankton, contentedly feeding as they went, and with the three big brothers riding slowly behind them. It had always been the same with the sheep. But now there rang continually in her ears the piteous bleating of the little flock she had learned to love through the summer months, and that, lured by a treacherous bell-wether, had passed through the pen, some days before, and crossed the long, high Bridge of Sighs.

But what she feared for the animals yet to be sold never came to pass. The morning before the big brothers were to round-up, a

trooper rode in from the reservation with an urgent message from the new commandant, asking that as many head of beeves as possible be sent to the post. The letter stated that a stock-raiser, with whom negotiations had been all but closed, had received an offer from a Kansas City buyer that advanced the army terms by a fraction of a cent per pound on the hoof. The commissary, therefore, was compelled to look elsewhere for meat.

A reply was at once sent back, promising a drove from the farm-house within a week. And as the little girl saw the cavalry horse speeding westward with the message, she flew into the kitchen with a happy song on her lips and set about helping her mother prepare provisions for the trip.

That afternoon, while the biggest and the youngest brothers divided the cattle, putting those that were to be wintered into the wire pen, the eldest shod four ponies, three for riding and one for a pack-horse. The start was planned for the next day, and since the trip must be a leisurely one in order that the animals should arrive in as good condition as when they set out, a cow was included in the drove to furnish milk during the two days or more that the big brothers would be en route.

But the following morning all plans for the journey were upset. One of the ponies tried its newly shod heels on the youngest brother with such viciousness that he had to be carried into the house. The biggest brother decided to remain at home and take care of him. So, while the pack-horse was being loaded with blankets, food, and a coffee-pot, the eldest brother and his mother discussed the situation and at last agreed that the little girl would have to help in the drive.

It was the fall before the little girl's thirteenth birthday, and she was wearing her hair in a braid and her dresses to her shoe-tops. That summer, for the first time in her life, she had not gone barefoot. She had also taken to riding a side-saddle with a red plush seat. When

her mother, therefore, suggested that the trip would be a hard one, that the post was a rough place, and that, since the colonel's family had gone to a new fort in Wyoming, there was no house on the reservation at which she could stay overnight, the eldest brother pooh-poohed and declared that the little girl was no baby and that very good accommodations could be secured at a hotel near the barracks.

They started immediately after dinner, taking two dogs along, and crossed the Vermillion to the West Fork. There the cattle were brought to a stand and a camping-place was selected. They were still so near the farm that the eldest brother, anxious to know how matters were at home, induced the little girl to return to the farm-house for the night. She did so, and joined him before sunrise next morning.

There was a worried look on her face as she came galloping up, and the eldest brother, fearful that the youngest was worse, demanded the news.

"Everything's just as it was when we left," said the little girl, "only mother's awfully scared about my going, because the Swede told her last night, when he heard that I was gone, that the hotel at the post is an awful place, full of gamblers and thieves. Two or three men that had money have disappeared there, and never been seen since. The Swede says he thinks the proprietor isn't any better than he should be."

"Oh, that Swede's a regular croaker," replied the eldest brother. "'Fraid as death of his own shadow. I can take care of you and myself and the money to boot. Needn't to fret while I've got my pistols handy."

"Well, mother says," added the little girl, "that she hopes nothing happens to the money, because it'll finish putting us in as good shape as we were before the fire. She doesn't think anybody'd hurt us, exactly."

Nothing more was said about the hotel after that, and the little girl soon forgot her disquiet in the pleasures of the trip. She had made it but two or three times since the return from her christening, and had always gone so fast in the light wagon or the buckboard that she had no time to enjoy the changing scenery. Now they were not keeping to the main road, and she saw landmarks and farms that were new to her as they traveled from the West Fork to the "Jim," and on to the Missouri.

That night the eldest brother pitched camp on a hillock not far from the herd and well out of way of the mosquitos. To make the little girl's safety certain, he put her blankets at the center of a square that was roped in by lariats, the stakes being black willows cut from a clump on the river bank. She lay down with the dogs beside her, but, unused to the strangeness of her bed, slept little. The eldest brother stayed with the herd, so she passed the long hours before midnight looking up at the stars and thinking.

She could hear the yelping of some coyotes that were cautiously reconnoitering from a neighboring bluff. When they came near, the dogs sprang up and challenged them, and soon their cries died away as they slunk down a deep coulée. The dogs quieting again, she caught the sound of faint movements and calls in the grass. An owl hooted, and it was so like the signal-cry of some prowling Blackfeet who had visited the farm one night that she was startled and sat up. A bird chirped and a rabbit hopped by. Down among the cattle a steer coughed, or grunted as it got awkwardly to its feet. And there was an occasional click of horn against horn as an animal moved its head. At last all the sounds blended and faded, and she fell asleep, lulled by the song that the eldest brother was singing to the herd.

At three o'clock the following afternoon, though they had gone at a grazing pace since sun-up, they arrived in sight of the post and halted a mile away from the nearest dugout. The little girl and the dogs

remained with the cattle while the eldest brother cantered in to report his arrival. When he returned, a young lieutenant came with him to inspect the drove; and by six o'clock the beeves had been declared satisfactory and were in a stockade pen behind the barracks. Then the eldest brother, his belt heavy with good government coin, rode with the little girl toward the hotel, a rough, one-story building flanked on either side by a gambling-house.

They ate their supper in the small, unpapered parlor which adjoined the bar, for the eldest brother had looked into the dining-room and found it as thick with smoke and men as the saloon. When the meal, which was served by an Indian woman, was over, the little girl remained quietly in her chair while the eldest brother went out to sell the pack-pony. He returned late, delighted over making a fine bargain with a Canadian fur-trader, to find her waiting patiently but tremblingly for him.

"Oh, they've been making such a terrible noise in the saloon," she told him, as she sprang up to let him in. "I locked the door because I was scared. I could hear swearing and quarreling, and poker chips rattling around."

He did not answer until he had carefully hidden the price of the pony in his belt. Then he put his revolvers on the table and drew a chair close to hers.

"I just met Eagle Eye," he whispered, "an' he says that what the Swede told ma is true. This hotel's a tough place, and the man that runs it 's got a bad name. It's full of gamblers now, too, because the troopers have just been paid. I don't like to think of bunkin' here to-night one bit. Pretty nearly every man knows I've got a lot of money on me. But what c'n we do?"

The little girl knit her brows. "We might stay right in this room," she whispered at last. "You could bring in the blankets and I'd watch while

you slept a little while; and then you could watch till morning."

"Oh, I guess it ain't so bad as all that."

"Or we could ride toward home and camp. I'm not tired, and I'd rather ride than stay here, especially alone in a room."

"Well, now, I don't intend to let you stay alone in a room," declared the eldest brother. "But there's no use of our tryin' to start home to-night. We couldn't get off without somebody knowin' about it, and I don't want any cutthroat Indians after me. If we had fresh horses it'd be a different thing. We'd lead 'em a run for the farm. But the ponies are tired. We'll start home in the mornin', and I'll get this wad into a safe at the station before night." He tapped his belt.

A knock brought him to his feet. On opening the door, the hotel man stood before him. "I suppose you folks want a brace of rooms," he said, taking in the revolvers with a swift glance of his little, deep-set eyes. "I can give you two that have a door between. Only ones I've got left. Had to put Pinky Jackson into the barn to clear one of 'em. And he's a reg'lar boarder, too." He looked the little girl up and down so searchingly that she shrank behind the eldest brother.

The eldest brother took up his revolvers. "One room'll do us," he said. "We'll jus' camp like we did on the prairie last night. Sister's a little bit nervous; couldn't think of puttin' her off by herself. Give us a room with a shake-down, and I'll roll up in some blankets on the floor."

The hotel man slapped the eldest brother on the back. "You're the right kind of a brother," he cried heartily; "like to see it. We men kind o' forget, living out in these wilds, how scarey and tender girls are. Come along, I've got the very room for you." He picked up the lamp, crossed the crowded saloon, between card-tables full of men, and led the way down a long passage. The eldest brother and the little girl followed close at his heels, scarcely giving a glance to the gaping

crowd in the bar.

The room into which they were shown was at the very end of the passage and in the rear part of the house. It was uncarpeted, and its ceiling was so low that the eldest brother could reach up and touch it with the flat of his hand. A wide, rough bedstead occupied one side; against the opposite wall stood a cot of the kind used in military camps. A chair with a rawhide bottom completed the furniture. The door from the passage was the only one leading into the room. There were no windows at all, but at one end a casing had been boarded up. The eldest brother, after a quick survey, remarked the lack of light.

"Well, you see," explained the hotel man, "this room originally looked out on the yard. But when I built on a lean-to, the window was closed. Won't make any difference to you, will it? Heard you were going to leave early."

"Oh, no," said the eldest brother. He took the lamp and set it on the floor. When the hotel man had given a last sharp look around, he went out and closed the door.

Without losing a moment, the little girl, who was wearied with her long day's ride, put some matches within easy reach and flung herself down in her clothes on the cot. But the eldest brother, after rolling the bedstead against the door, examined the window to make sure that it was nailed fast, and gently tapped the walls to see that no spot gave back the hollow sound that would suggest a secret entrance. Satisfied that all was safe, he unbuckled his belt, put it under the blankets at the little girl's feet, and extinguished the light.

It was then past eleven, but the hotel was still awake and noisy. The eldest brother concluded that it would be well to get a short nap at once and remain awake throughout the hours when, the bar-room being deserted, any attempt to molest him would be made. The little girl was already breathing deeply. He threw himself across the bed,

his pistols beside him.

He did not know how long he had been asleep when he found himself wide awake and conscious that some one was moving softly toward him. He struggled to spring up, half convinced that he was having a nightmare, but his body refused to obey. All at once, as he lay silently looking upward, a man arose from beside the bed and leaned over him.

A dim light, which seemed to come from the rear, brought out the menacing figure plainly. One arm was half raised as if to strike. It was evident that the assassin was in doubt, since the headboard shaded the bed, as to whether the eldest brother or the little girl was stretched before him. The next instant he knew, for the eldest brother twisted in agony at sight of the arm poised above him and uttered a groan.

Quick as a flash the figure swayed toward him and the arm descended. But the eldest brother was quicker. He rolled sidewise, and at the same time struck out with his right hand. There was the sound of a dull blow not made by his fist, a scream from the little girl, and the thump of the eldest brother's body as he struck the floor on the farther side of the bed.

Intense stillness followed. The eldest brother, a revolver in either hand, got cautiously to his knees and peered across to where his assailant had stood. The dim light was gone now, however, and he could make out nothing. He waited, holding his breath, to see if any one were creeping upon him from under or around the bed. Hearing nothing but a sob from the little girl, he at last arose to his feet, his eyes and his weapons on the alert, and stepped back against the wall. Then he sidled along until, having passed the boarded-up window and two corners, his knees struck the cot.

"Don't be afraid," he said, squatting instantly to one side to dodge any bullet or knife that might be guided by his voice. After another

short wait he added, "I think he's gone. Light the lamp."

While the match flickered in the little girl's hand, the eldest brother again moved eyes and pistols in a half-circle. But as the lamp was lifted and its light dispelled the darkness, he saw that they were alone. To remove every doubt, he looked under the bed and the cot and behind the headboard. When his search was completed he sat down on the rawhide-bottomed chair, trembling, enraged, and mystified.

"Am I crazy?" he asked in a low voice. "I was sure there was a man in here. But if there was, how'd he get out?"

"I heard some one," whispered the little girl. She was very pale, and kept close beside him for protection.

The eldest brother thought a moment. Then he jumped up and strode over to the bed. "Bring the lamp," he said.

Together they examined the covers. Only the top one had been turned down. Now it lay as the eldest brother had tossed it when he rolled out upon the floor. The other blankets were undisturbed. He ran his fingers over them carefully.

Suddenly he uttered a cry and began to fold them back swiftly, finding on each the trace he sought. When the mattress was at last laid bare, he pointed to a narrow slit that did not penetrate to the under side.

"It was a knife," said the little girl, and the lamp almost fell from her grasp.

The eldest brother nodded, dragged the bed away from the door, and flung it wide. The passage was dark and still, apparently empty. "Hello!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Hello, there!"

As the sound of his voice died away, a distant door creaked and the hotel man came out in his underclothes, a candle in his hand.

"What's the matter?" he called crossly, coming toward them. "You'll wake the whole house." He looked around, a trifle dismayed, the eldest brother thought, to see other doors being opened and heads thrust out.

"That's just what I intend to do," cried the eldest brother. "I want to let every man in the hotel know that you keep a murderer handy to stab people in their sleep!"

The proprietor was now close. He brought up abruptly at the daring accusation and glared at the eldest brother. "Don't you give me any such talk as that," he said. His teeth came together with a snap, and he reached instinctively to the place where, in the daytime, was the pocket that held a ready pistol.

"Don't you dare deny it," answered the eldest brother. He brought a revolver in line with the hotel man's eyes. "Do you see that?" he queried. "Well, just be very careful, and come here. I want to show you something." He motioned the other to precede him. Together they entered the bedroom. A curious crowd followed and filled the apartment. "Now," went on the eldest brother, "look at that bed."

One by one they stepped forward, ran their fingers through the slits in the covers, smiled grimly, and backed away to whisper among themselves. The hotel man did like the rest, only his smile was pacifying, cringing.

When all had had their turn, the eldest brother faced the crowd. "I heard last night," he said, "that more 'n one man has hired a room in this hotel and never been seen again. So I shoved my bed against the door, before I went to sleep, to make sure we'd be safe. That knife cut shows how safe we was." He seized the proprietor roughly by the shoulder. "There's a remedy for holes like this. Like as not, these gentlemen know about it." There was a murmur of assent from the listening crowd. "Now I'll give you jus' a minute to show the gentlemen

where that secret entrance is that I looked for last night. Then we'll talk remedy."

He cocked a pistol, his fingers still on the hotel man's shoulder, and held the eyes of the latter steadily. They stood thus for a moment, face to face.

"I don't know anything about a secret entrance," growled the hotel man at last, with an oath. "But if you'll take your hand off me and put down that shooting-iron, I'll help you hunt it, if there is one."

The eldest brother did as he was asked, and the hotel man began to walk about, looking above him, examining the walls, scrutinizing the floor. Soon all the rest were similarly occupied, even the eldest brother taking his eyes off his host to search the boards at his feet.

The opportunity for which the hotel man was waiting came. While the attention of all was diverted, he moved around until he was opposite the door, and then slipped through it with a defiant yell. Down the dark passage he fled, and gained its farther end before the eldest brother, with the crowd behind him, took up the chase. Shots were fired at haphazard into the gloom. But when the hotel had been carefully searched, no proprietor was to be found. His pursuers, certain that he was hidden in some closet known only to himself, adjourned to the bar to discuss ways and means.

The news of the trouble at the hotel spread like thistle-down in a high wind. In half an hour the saloon was jammed with cattlemen, traders, soldiers, gamblers, half-breeds, and Indians, all more or less under the influence of the absent proprietor's liquor, which was flowing freely, and all ready to hear what the eldest brother had to say.

He stood on the slippery counter to address them, his weapons still in his hands. On one side was a solitary lamp that brought out dimly the faces upturned to him; on the other sat the little girl, facing

the mob as it waited, sinister, determined, threatening, ready to act upon any mad suggestion.

When the eldest brother had recounted his story, he stood in silence, waiting for some one to speak. After a short pause there was a movement in the rear of the room, and, with a jingle of spurs, there stepped forward Eagle Eye, the scout.

He pulled off his slouch-hat and shook back his long hair as he leaped to a place beside the eldest brother. Then he put his hands to his belt and stood, arms akimbo. "There's been bad work here before," he said, "and we've let it pass. But shall we let it pass this time?" There were cries of "No, no," and curses on the head of the hotel man. Eagle Eye went on. "It's a dark night: the moon is down, and the sun is slow a-rising. We had better have a light to show us to our beds." There was a hidden meaning in his voice that was read and answered with cheers by the drunken mob.

"What say you, Langdon?" he continued, whirling round upon a man on whose blue flannel shirt shone a star and whose belt gave back the glint of nickel.

Langdon gave a laugh and shrugged his shoulders before draining the flask in his hand.

"This is my friend," said Eagle Eye, extending one arm above the little girl and resting it on the eldest brother's shoulder. "We will help him drive the fox from the haystack."

Another cheer greeted him. He jumped to the floor, and the eldest brother followed, lifting the little girl down beside him. The crowd, eager for the vengeful finale, rushed out of the bar to the street.

Eagle Eye hung back to whisper in the eldest brother's ear. "It's a good time for you to get out," he said. "I'll help you saddle the ponies." He knelt to unfasten his spurs and put them on the other's boots.

The eldest brother felt of his belt, grasped the little girl's hand, and hurried out of a side door with the half-breed. A soldier had carried away the lamp to use it as a brand, and no one saw them leave the darkened room. Once in the stable, the work of getting the horses ready took but a few moments. Then the eldest brother and the little girl mounted and rode at a walk toward the barracks, with Eagle Eye on foot beside them and the dogs trotting after.

When they were so far that their horses' hoof-beats could not be heard by the crowd, they gave the half-breed a silent, grateful shake of the hand and galloped rapidly toward home. Not until the post was a mile behind did they halt at the top of a ridge to look back.

Volleys of shots and shouting were borne to their ears by the early morning breeze, for the crowd was celebrating the progress of a swiftly mounting blaze. Soon the eldest brother and the little girl could see the men running excitedly about, and caught the smell of kindling lumber. In a few moments the post sprang into sight as the hotel became a mass of flame.

The mob as it moved about the rim of the burning pile, looked like wooden men pulled by wires. There were fewer shots now and little shouting. The conflagration seemed to glut the horde. The eldest brother and the little girl dared pause no longer, but cantered on. When they looked around for the last time, the fire had died down, and its thin smoke was carrying up a myriad sparks, to die out in the dome of the slowly brightening sky.

XVII

ANOTHER MOUND ON THE BLUFF

COTTONWOOD leaves from the wind-break, splashed with red from the wounds of the frost, tarried at the window-panes to tap gently, or went hurrying past the farm-house with the north wind that was whining dolorously under the wet gables, to find their way through the branches of the ash-trees in front. The crows strutted across the stubbled wheat, spouting to one another over their finds. The dead pea-vines in the vegetable garden screwed about till they loosened their roots, and then scampered up the furrowed potato-field as the guardian of their gathered fruit flounced his empty sleeves and ample coat-tails at them. A family of robins that had dallied too long in the north whirred over the corn-field, where the shocks were standing in long, regular lines, and called down a last crisp good-by to the russet, plume-topped tents of autumn's invading army.

But all the bleakness without, that November morning, could not equal the bitterness within, though the iron tea-kettle was singing cheerily enough over the hot coal fire in the sitting-room stove, and the collies, to show their lazy appreciation of cozy quarters, were thumping their tails contentedly against the rag carpet. For, with the eldest and the youngest brothers elk-hunting beyond Fort Mandan, and the biggest miles away at Yankton with a load of hogs, the little girl, half dazed with anxiety, was watching, alone save for the neighbor woman, beside the canopied bed.

Her mother's illness had come with alarming suddenness. The afternoon before she had been apparently as well as usual, and when

the little girl went into her room for the night, was humming to herself as she chopped up turnips for the cows. But the neighbor woman, arriving later in quest of a start of yeast, found her lying still and speechless in the entry, where she had been stricken at her work. Brandy had revived her, and she had begun to recover her strength. Yet it was plain to the neighbor woman and the little girl, no matter how much the sufferer strove to make light of her fainting, that help was needed.

Throughout the forenoon the little girl begged hard for permission to go to the station for the new doctor. Her mother, seeing through the windows how sunless and blustery it was outside, entreated her to wait until the next day, when the biggest brother would be home. But the neighbor woman, who dreaded a second attack, at last joined her arguments to the little girl's, dwelling upon the uncertainty of the brother's return; and shortly after dinner the mother consented.

"If there were only some one else to send," she whispered as the little girl bent over her for a parting embrace. "It is cold and stormy."

"It's getting colder every minute," was the answer. "If I go at all, I must go now. I'll take the sorrel and ride fast. And I'll be back before you know it." She kissed her mother tenderly and hastened from the house.

When she led her horse out of the barn and mounted at a nail-keg near the tool-house, she saw that her start had been delayed too long and that she was threatened with a drenching. The air was rapidly growing more chill, and northward the sky was streaked in long, slanting lines with a downfall that was advancing toward the farm. She gave no thought to deferring her trip, however, but sprang into the saddle, and instead of taking the road leading through the corn-shocks, started across the fields toward the carnelian bluff.

To her dismay, her short cut resulted only in a loss of time. When

she passed through the cottonwoods to the barley-field beyond, the ground, still soaked from the recent rain, became so soft that the sorrel sank to his knees at every step. He began to plunge excitedly, and she guided him to the left, away from the timothy meadow, to a firmer foothold on the edge of the corn-field. It brought her out upon the prairie at the western base of the hill.

As she crossed the southern slope, setting her horse into a run with her whip, she chanced to glance up toward the summit, and her eyes met an unfamiliar object. The next moment, despite her solicitude for her mother, the oncoming storm and the long road ahead, she reined him in so abruptly that he sat back upon his haunches, and then urged him up the incline to where, in place of the usual pile of stones, was a low, dark mound of earth with a pipestone cross at its head.

Halted beside the mound, her curiosity changed to sudden awe; for, leaning from her horse, she read aloud a word that imparted painful knowledge carefully kept from her for almost fourteen years,—a word that was chiseled deep into the polished face of the cross:

FATHER

Looking down thus, for the first time, at the uncovered grave, no feeling of grief succeeded her surprise and wonder. But instantly the thought came that it was here, in happy ignorance of the meaning of the pile, that every spring and summer she had sat to watch the big brothers at work in the fields, the gophers, the birds, the herd in the slough below; to think over her baby problems and sorrows; or to build castles from a beloved book. She read the chiseled word again, softly and reverently, then backed the sorrel away and once more rode on rapidly, making for the railroad and sitting her horse with the tense erectness of a trooper on parade.

All at once, a little way out on the prairie, a terror seized her, and

she began to lash the sorrel with all her might. The black hillock behind, with its graven head-mark, had borne to her heart a new fear that perhaps her mother, too, would soon sleep upon the hillside. She put the thought of her father away, and centered her efforts on reaching the station and the doctor. As she galloped at breakneck speed, the damp wind swept her face, cutting it sharply, and whipped out her horse's mane and tail till they fluttered on a level with the saddle.

At the track she ceased striking the sorrel and let him fall into a slow, steady canter. The downpour was near now, sweeping south in the strong grasp of a squall to cross her path. She could see that its front was a sheet not of rain, but of driving hail that rebounded high from the dry grass. She crouched in her seat and pulled her hat far down to shield her face.

Before the sorrel made another quarter of a mile, the hailstones had passed the ties and were kicking up the soft dirt of the embankment like a volley of shrapnel. When they moved their fire forward to the wagon-road, they almost hurled the little girl from her saddle. She cried out in agony as the icy bullets cleft the air and pounded her cruelly on head and shoulders. A stone the size of a wild duck's egg split the skin of her rein-hand, and she dropped the bridle and let the sorrel go at random. Squealing shrilly whenever a missile reached his tender ears, he stayed in the road, but stopped running, and whirled in a circle to avoid his punishment. The little girl, though she flinched under the shower, remained on his back grittily and waited until the fall thinned and suddenly ended.

Wounded from head to foot, she continued her journey over a road deep with hail. When the station came in sight, she stopped to wipe the blood from a hurt on her cheek and to wind her handkerchief around her injured hand. Then she raced through town and left her message at the doctor's door.

The doctor hitched up his buggy and, accompanied by his wife, set off for the farm behind the little girl, who at times rode anxiously far in the lead, and, again, drew up and trotted beside the vehicle to ask him to travel faster. But when the farm-house was neared, she could not bear to lag any longer, and gave the sorrel the bit. As she passed the carnelian bluff, she skirted it well, though she could not see the mound or the cross. It had grown dark and they were shrouded in stormy shadows. But she kept her eyes continually in that direction, and talked to the horse to quiet a nervous throbbing in her breast that she did not admit to herself. At the barn she unbuckled the saddle and the bridle outside the door, let the sorrel trot in alone, and ran toward the kitchen.

When the doctor completed his diagnosis that night, he told the little girl's mother only what she had long known: that she might live to see her daughter a grown woman and her sons old men; that she might pass away before the end of another week, or another day. The little girl was not in the room to hear him, and on returning later to the canopied bed, neither her mother nor the neighbor woman repeated his words. He was gone again, leaving only a few pellets to check a possible sinking-spell. For there was nothing else that could be done at the farm-house—except wait and hope.

But, as if she divined by instinct what there was to fear, the little girl stoutly refused to leave her mother that night and seek rest. After prevailing upon the neighbor woman to lie down on the lounge close by, she sat on the carpet beside the bed, weary but unswerving, and reached up every little while to touch a hand, or rose to listen to the spasmodic beating of the tortured heart.

At midnight her mother awoke and asked for nourishment. Having eaten and drunk, she motioned the little girl to a seat on the edge of the bed and began to talk, slowly at the beginning but more hurriedly toward the last, as if she were freeing herself of something long ago

thought out and long delayed in the saying.

"I've been thinking of the fields and hedges of dear old England," she whispered. "I can see them so plainly to-night. I have just been there in my dreams, I think; and I have come back to tell you how beautiful they are. Of course the plains are beautiful, too,—beautiful but lonely. England is dotted with homes, and there are trees everywhere, and flowers so many months of the year. Oh, one never could feel lonely there."

She turned her face away and seemed to be asleep. But presently she came back to the little girl and took her hand with a smile.

"Years ago," she went on, "when I was a hearty, happy girl, only two or three years older than you are now, pet lamb, your father and I came West and took up this farm. Hardly anybody lived here in those days. They were a few squatters; but they either trapped in the winter and went away during the summer, or hunted and farmed in the summer and left in the fall. So life was very quiet, quieter even than it is now, except that there were Indians here by the hundreds. They stole from us by night and shot our stock, and would have murdered us only that they could get more out of us by letting us live. They came by in processions, put up their wigwams in our very yard, and ate up everything we had in the house. We dared not see the wrong they did. I was often alone when they came, and I always wondered if that would not be the last of me and my little boys.

"But, though here and there men and women and even little babies were tomahawked, we were never harmed, for some reason; and, as the years went by, people began to come and settle near us. Then the post was established, and we could go to church once a summer. I went with the boys, because some one always had to remain home to watch the farm. That is why I never visited a town the first ten years after we settled here. Then you came,—just a few days—before—we lost—your—father."

The little girl smoothed back her mother's hair lovingly. The time had come to tell of her discovery on the bluff. "I've seen it," she said in a low voice.

Her mother understood. "We wanted you to find it out by yourself," she answered. "The boys took away the stones and put up the cross the night before they left." She sighed and then went on:

"I have been thinking about you to-night—about your future—in recalling my years here on the plains. I am no longer young, pet lamb; I was never very strong. I may not always be with you." Her voice broke a little. She tightened her grasp of the little girl's fingers.

"I do not worry about the boys. They will marry and settle down among our good neighbors. But you, my little girl, what will you do? Not stay, I hope, hoeing and herding and working your life out in the kitchen, with nothing to brighten the days. I cannot bear to think of that. I lived on here after your father was taken because I feared the responsibility of raising my boys in a great, strange city; and I dreaded the thought of leaving your father's grave. But now I often wonder if I have acted for the best. Selfish in my grief and loss, have I not deprived the boys of the advantages they should have had? For you, it is not yet too late.

"Whether I am taken from you or not, I want you to leave the prairie and spend the rest of your life where you can enjoy the best things that life offers—music and pictures and travel, and the friendship of cultivated people. In twenty years—perhaps less, for the plains are changing swiftly—all these level, fertile miles will be covered with homes. Every quarter-section will hold a house, and there will be chimneys in sight in every direction. Churches and better schools will follow. The roads will be planted with trees. There will be fences about the fields, and no Indians to thieve and kill. And this valley, the 'Jim,' or the Missouri, will not be the edge of civilization, for the frontier will

have moved far to the west.

"And yet, though I can see it all coming, I am not willing for you to wait for it and spend your young womanhood here. One woman in a family is enough to sacrifice to the suffering and drudgery of frontier life. So I want you to go East, to go where the sweetest and best influences can reach you. The prairie has given you health. It has never given you happiness. Your life, like that of every other child on the plains, has had few joys and many little tragedies. They say the city child ages fast; but do they ever think of the wearing sameness and starving of heart that puts years on the country child? Ah! those who are born and bred on the edge of things give more than the work of their hands to the country's building."

They sat in silence a long time, their hands clasped. Then the little girl kissed her mother softly. "I want to go, mother," she said, with shining eyes. "I want to go away to school, and you must go with me."

Her mother did not answer for a moment.

"'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,'" she breathed at last. And not till long afterward, when tears had worn the first keen edge from her grief, did the little girl know the full meaning of the promise.

"Pull back the curtains from the eastern windows," said her mother; "I want to see the sky. Is the night clear?"

"The stars are out, mother."

"Ah, I love the stars!"

"Are they the same ones that I'll see when—when—I'm away from here?"

"The very same, pet lamb."

"You and I will watch them and think of that, mother."

The neighbor woman turned on the lounge, and they fell into silence again. The little girl remained standing at a window, her face pressed close to the glass.

As she waited there, the whole east began gradually to spring into flame. The sky blazed as ruddily as if a great fire were just beyond the horizon and racing to leap it and sweep across upon the farm. A broad fan of light, roseate at its pivot and radiating in shafts of yellow and red, was rising and paling the stars with its shining edge. Wider and wider it grew, until from north to south, and almost as far up as the zenith, were thrust its shining sticks. Then out of the cold mist floating over the distant Sioux showed a copper segment of the moon, which rose into sight and careened slowly heavenward, lighting up the wide plains, glimmering on the placid water of the sloughs, and shining full into the face of the dreaming little girl.

Only the neighbor woman was at the farm-house next day to comfort the little girl and help her through the sad hours. There was no sign of the pig-wagon all morning, and as the afternoon passed slowly away the little girl ceased to strain her eyes along the road leading to the school-house, and never left her mother's side. It was the neighbor woman who, not daring to leave the room even to do the chores about the barn and coops, looked south every few moments with the hope that the biggest brother would return before it was too late.

As the day drew toward its close the sun, which had been lurking sulkily behind the clouds, came out brightly and shone into the sitting-room, where its beams lay across the foot of the canopied bed like a warm coverlet. The room was robbed of its gloom, and the little girl's mother opened her eyes and looked about her, long and thoughtfully, as one gazes upon a loved scene that is drifting from sight.

The walls were hung with spatter-work that the biggest brother had done, and with photographs and magazine pictures in splint frames. Over the front door was tacked the first yarn motto that the little girl had ever worked. It was faded, but her mother, though her eyes were dimming, could read the uneven line: "God Bless Our Home." The new cane-seated chairs were set about against the walls, and a bright blue cover hid the round, oak center-table. The eldest brother's violin lay in its case on the organ that had come into the house the month before when the wheat was sold. Up on the clock-shelf was a Dresden shepherd in stately pose before his dainty shepherdess. The curtains on the windows hung white and soft to the carpet.

Presently the mother asked to be raised on her pillow, and the neighbor woman and the little girl turned the bed so that she could look out of the windows at the setting sun.

The western heavens rioted in a fuller beauty that afternoon than had the eastern half at moon-rise the night before. As the sun sank behind the clouds piled high upon the horizon, it colored them in gorgeous array and threw them out in wonderful shapes and sharp relief against a clearing sky. Castles towered on one side, vast turrets standing forth above their walls; on the other, banks of tinted vapor formed a huge cloud-seat.

The little girl, calm, though her heart was torn with pain, looked out with her mother upon the dying glories. She had often before in her life seen that changing panorama which, thrown up one moment, melted into nothingness the next. At night she had learned to kneel with her face that way,—to the great billows that always seemed to her a seat in the sky, that were always something more than mere vapor. She could pray better when, long after sundown, they hung above the horizon, robbed of their colors but still glorious. And there had grown up in her mind the comforting thought that on those very billows was God's throne, and from them, at sunset, He looked down

upon that part of the earth that was sinking into the night, and blessed it and told it farewell. She even thought she could see His face in the heavens sometimes,—His flowing white robes, and the amethyst stool upon which He rested his feet.

As the sun dropped behind the prairie, the cloud-throne loomed forth against the blue more vividly than ever. The little girl kept her eyes dumbly upon it, watching the crimson and gold slowly fade to royal purple where the King sat.

"Remember what I said, pet lamb," her mother whispered. She could not see, yet she was still holding the little girl's hands firmly. "Remember what I told you to do."

The little girl could not answer; she could only bow her head in reply. Tearless, she waited beside the bed, where, for the second time, Life was striving with Death,—and was to lose. There was no sound in the room until there came a last whisper, "Pray."

The little girl slipped down from the edge of the bed to the carpet and knelt toward the west. A collie trotted up to her and licked her cheek. She put him gently aside. She was trying to think of something to say in behalf of her mother to Him who, even now, was taking His farewell look. At last a thought came to her, and her lips moved to speak aloud the only petition she could think of:

"O God," she pleaded, raising her eyes to where the seat, marvelous in purple and burning gold, loomed high over the prairie against the sky, "please be good to my mother."

And as she knelt there, strong in her faith and brave in her grief, a messenger came down from the western cloud-throne—a messenger of peace from the God of the little girl.

XVIII

THE LITTLE TEACHER

WITH one of the biggest brother's checked jumpers pinned across her breast, and with suds spattered up her bare arms to her shoulders, the little girl was valiantly attacking the weekly wash. A clothes-basket at her feet was piled with white garments awaiting the bluing. The tub was full of colored things that were receiving a second rub. Out of doors, on a line stretched between the corner of the kitchen and the high seat of the big farm wagon, flapped the drying sheets and pillow-cases. Breakfast was cleared away, the beds were made, the sitting-room was tidied, and it was not eight o'clock, yet she was nearly done. And while she worked steadily to finish, the boiler on the stove behind her kept time with its clanking cover to the grating tune of her washboard.

The little girl no longer had to make use of a three-legged milking-stool in order to reach the tub. Instead, she stood square on the floor. For she was tall for her scant fifteen years, having grown so rapidly in the last twelve months that she now came up to the youngest brother's chin, and required fully ten yards of cloth for a dress. But she still wore her hair down her back, and, as she bobbed over the clothes to give them their added drubbing, shiny strands shook themselves loose from their curly, captive neighbors and waved damply against her flushing cheeks, till she looked like a gay yellow dandelion a-sway in a gusty wind.

When the last red shirt was wrung from the water, she began to dip bucketfuls and empty them on the sloping ground at the farther side of

the storm-cellar, singing blithely as she hurried back and forth. She was so intent on her carrying that she did not see a horseman who was turning in at the ash lane, his face eagerly lifted to the windows of the farm-house. Even when, having tied his mount at the block in front, he rapped on the sitting-room door, she did not hear him. Finally, when, receiving no answer, he walked around the corner to the entry, she stepped out with her last pail and came face to face with him.

Joy leaped into his eyes as he dropped his whip and lifted his hat; something more than surprise lighted hers as she let her suds fall and spill over the stone step. Then, stammering a welcome, she surrendered her hands to the glad grasp of the colonel's son.

"My! it's good to see you!" he cried, looking at her with the old frankness. He stepped back a little to measure her from top to toe. "And *haven't* you shot up!"

"Like a ragweed," she laughed, taking him into the kitchen, where she brought him a chair from the sitting-room.

"You're a full-fledged housekeeper, too," he declared. "How do you like the change from herding?"

"Oh, I haven't herded much for a long while," she replied proudly, as she refilled her tub from a barrel in the corner that had been drawn by the biggest brother; "I helped mother in the house all last summer." She grew sober suddenly, and the colonel's son hastened to change the subject.

"You're looking awfully well," he assured her.

"I've worn off some of my tan," she explained.

"Well, that's partly it," he said, and his glance was boyishly eloquent.

She fell to rubbing again, and he watched her admiringly, noticing

how trim was her black dress, and how spotless were the lace at her throat and the ribbon that bound back her hair.

"I don't believe you can guess where I'm started for," he said, after a moment of silence.

She straightened up to rest her back and looked out through an open window. "I thought you were just coming here."

"No." He watched her for a sign of pleased astonishment when he continued, "I'm on my way to St. Paul."

She turned swiftly, her eyes open wide. "College?" she questioned in a low, strained voice.

"Nearly that; I shall prepare for West Point. The bishop has chosen a school for me."

Her eyes went back to the window, but a mist was over them now, and she could not see the square of cottonwoods and barley framed by the sash.

"I left the Wyoming post a week ago," he went on. "Father's orderly brought my trunk to Chamberlain, and I rode down from there to the reservation—and then came here. I shall take the train at the station. It's changed to morning time, I believe, and goes by about 10:30."

She seemed not to hear him. Her face was still turned away, and she was murmuring to herself. "The bishop!" she repeated; "the bishop!" All at once she ran out of the room. When she returned, she held a tin spice-box in her hand. She took a letter from it and held it toward the colonel's son. "Read this," she said. "It's from the bishop to mother."

He spread out the written sheet, which was dated two years back, and read it aloud.

"'Whenever that spirited little maid of yours is ready to take up the studies she cannot enjoy where you are, send her to me. I will get her ready for the college she dreams about, and, if God takes you from her soon, as you fear, and as I pray not (though His will be done!), I will watch over her like a father.'"

When he finished, he looked up at her, his face fairly sparkling. "Of course you'll go," he said.

"No," she answered sadly, shaking her head; "I can't go. I haven't any money. The boys have just bought some land that joins ours. If I left, they'd have to pay my expenses and then hire some one to take my place. So they wouldn't be able to pay for the land. I shall have to wait till I can earn something myself."

"It's a shame!" declared the colonel's son. "Because if you work here, how can you earn anything?"

She shook her head again. "I don't know. Only I *shall* go some day. I'm—I'm glad *you're* going, though."

"But it's been more your hope than mine. I'm sorry it isn't different—that we aren't just changed around. I don't care to study much, anyway. I want to be a soldier, like father. I don't see why I should study so much for that. I've been everywhere with him after Indians. I wish I could go on at it without stopping to study."

"I don't know what *I* want to be. I only know that I love to read and study. If I could read and study I wouldn't mind living on the plains."

"You wouldn't?" cried the colonel's son. "Why, maybe I shall always have to live here, and—" He stopped in confusion, and got up hastily, hat in hand. "Good-by," he said. He stepped toward her, his head lowered bashfully. She wiped her hands on the jumper.

"Do you have to go?" she asked. "Can't you stay and have dinner?

My brothers would love to see you. And I'd cook you something nice."

"No," he replied, a little agitated. "I won't more than catch my train." He shook hands and started out. At the door he glanced back, and was startled at her colorless face. "What is it?" he pleaded, coming back to her side.

She sat down on a bench by the window, the jumper crushed in her fingers. "Oh, I want to go! I want to go!" she said, her voice deep with pain and longing. "I'm lonesome here. I miss mother terribly. I'm always listening for her; I'm always getting up and going into the next room as if she were there. And then I remember—" She broke down and wept, all her pride gone.

"Don't, don't," whispered the colonel's son, tenderly. "It'll all come out right. Next year, when I'm on my way back, I'll stop, and we'll talk it over again. That won't be long. Maybe something will turn up, too, between now and then."

"Maybe," she said hopelessly. But she checked her tears and rose to follow him out. At the mounting-block they shook hands again. Then he sprang into the saddle and galloped through the yard toward the north.

"A year isn't long," she whispered to herself, as she watched him disappear in the corn, and she went bravely back to her tub.

A month went by,—a month of dull routine that was enlivened only by the harvesters. Day after day she plodded through a heavy program of breakfast, dinner, supper, bed-making, sweeping, and the care of the chickens and pigs; her calendar was the added duties that each morning entailed of washing, ironing, mending, scrubbing, and baking. The promise of the colonel's son came to cheer her

sometimes; but it was a peep into the tin spice-box each evening that heartened her most. For to her the bishop's letter was the single link between the prairie and the longed-for campus.

Then one afternoon, as she sat churning, the dasher in one hand, in the other a spoon that busily returned the cream frothing from the hole of the cover, there came a second tap at the front door. This time she heard, and ran through the sitting-room, still grasping the spoon, to invite the new settler to enter.

He tramped in with a jocund greeting, sat down on the kitchen floor in a path of sunlight, and leaned against the wall, smoking. "Go right on—go right on," he urged. "Like to see you trouncing the cream. And what I've got to say won't sour it."

She went on with her butter-making, the tall, wooden vessel firmly held between her feet.

"Had a meeting of the school committee yesterday," he began, puffing at his pipe slowly. "We talked over hunting up another teacher to take the place of the one the Dutchman hired."

"She isn't coming?" asked the little girl.

"No, she isn't coming; she's going to take a school near Sioux Falls," he answered crossly. "I'm tired of these teachers that pretend to the little schools away off nowhere that they're ready to take them, when all the while they've got their eyes peeled for a school near town. So I've proposed to the committee that we get some one about here to take the school—some one that won't fail us, and that can handle my young ones, the two little chaps from the West Fork, and one or two of the Dutchman's. That's about all the scholars there'll be this term. What do you think about it?"

"I—I should think it would be all right," she faltered, churning so hard that the froth climbed up the dasher, carrying pieces of fresh

butter with it and leaving them midway on the handle.

"I should think so, too," said the new settler; "and that's about the way we fixed it up. And—well, we thought we'd offer it to you."

She got up, her color coming and going swiftly, and stood before him. "To *me*?" she asked. "Do you mean it?"

He assented by a nod.

"Oh, it's too good to be true," she went on. "I can hardly believe it." She began to laugh tearfully. "You see, I've—I've—" Then, at sight of the braid lying over her shoulder, she put up her hands and gathered her hair into a knot. "I'll take it," she said.

"Glad of that," answered the new settler, cheerily, and, with a glance at the handle of the dasher, "I think that butter's come."

It was just a week later when she rode south and took charge of the school. The day was full of joy and misgivings. She was happy when, with one of the new settler's babies before the chart, she could point out the very lines the Yankton man had shown her, and hear the little one striving to lisp and learn them. She was filled with doubts when, having dismissed a class, the pupils looked back at her from their seats, some mockingly, she thought, others with laughing eyes that challenged hers. But at four o'clock, when, at the tap of the hand-bell, they cleared their desks and sat straight with folded arms, they seemed to have gotten over the novelty of her supervision, and marched out, with good-bys as they passed the teacher's table, just as they had in former terms. She rode home, feeling that her work was well begun.

The first six weeks of the term passed without incident. There had

sprung up a complete understanding between her and the children, and her affection for them was returned with gratifying respect. Then, one Monday morning, there entered a disturbing element.

A Polish woman, whose husband had moved his family down from Pierre to occupy the Irishman's shack, came to the school, bringing her son, a gawky, hangdog lad of twelve. While she recited a long account of his past experiences with teachers, and dictated her wishes as to his treatment by the little girl, he acted as interpreter. When she finally departed, with admonitions and sidewise wags of the head, he shuffled defiantly to a desk.

He occupied his first hour in slyly flipping wet-paper wads at a picture of Shakspere pinned above him on the wall. The little girl, who was well versed in all school tricks from her years of sitting in a rear seat, knew what he was doing, but hesitated to speak to him. At last, seeing that he was attracting the attention of all the other children, she sent him to the blackboard to copy his spelling ten times.

By ingenious counting he soon completed his work, and then began to draw pipe-stem men for the Dutchman's youngest to giggle at. He was sent back to his desk, where he spent the time in wriggling his ears.

The little girl saw that trouble was before her,—saw, too, that her position would be imperiled if she failed in her discipline. That night, when the biggest brother helped her to get supper and make the beds, she shared her fears with him.

"It's one thing to get a school," she said sorrowfully, as he tried to comfort her; "it's another to keep it."

But next day she called the pupils to order cheerfully.

It was evident that the young Pole had been well discussed by the children. They watched him constantly to see what new prank he was

preparing for their entertainment. He swaggered under their astonished gaze, and insolently made requests aloud without raising his hand for permission to speak. Just before recess, upon chancing to glance his way, the little girl caught him tossing a note over to the other side of the room.

She suddenly came to a halt beside his desk, and anger, strange and almost unreasonable, possessed her. It flashed into her mind that before her, ignorant, slouchy, indifferent, was one who, by his mischief, threatened to deprive her of what her mother and the biggest brother had long desired, what she herself yearned after with all the earnestness of her soul. She could scarcely refrain from attempting to send him off then and there! She trembled with indignation. Meeting her eyes for a moment, he saw a dangerous glint in them, and for the rest of the morning was more circumspect.

But at noon, a full dinner, a lazy hour, and the ill-concealed admiration of the other children put him again into a mean mood. He got out of line in marching, and pulled the hair of one of the little fellows from the West Fork. The little girl passed the afternoon with her eyes upon him. When he went so far that the school was interrupted, she walked toward him and gave him some task, or stayed beside his desk while she was hearing a class. But though in a measure it kept him in subjection, her power over the others, she found, was being woefully lessened, and her discipline destroyed. At dismissal she took up her hat and pail with a weariness that was not physical, but of the spirit, and rode home, bowed and silent.

But, unknown to her, the Polish boy defeated his own evil ends that same evening, and solved to her satisfaction, and to that of the committee and the scholars, the question of her rule.

He was sent to the Swede's to inquire after a turkey that his mother thought had strayed up the river and nested near the reservation road; and, in asking after the hen, he departed from his errand long enough

to boast to the Swede boy of his fun at the school-house. The latter listened to him eagerly, though quietly, grinned slyly once or twice during the story, and at the close of it remarked, with his finger on his nose, that he thought he had better go back to school again himself.

The following morning, when she entered, to her surprise, the little girl found him seated in the back of the room, his lunch in a newspaper beside him, his books in a strap at his feet. "Ay kome tow lairn again," he said, and then waited until she assigned him a desk.

He was so interested in the little girl that, for the first hour after school was called, he forgot to watch the young Pole. Everywhere she moved, he kept his eyes upon her. If she caught his glance, she saw in it only pride and encouragement and was content.

But the young Pole, seeing that the Swede boy did not look at him, became piqued at last and set about gaining not only the attention of the new pupil, but of the entire school. He rummaged his pockets for a bean-shooter, and, finding one, proceeded to let the dry beans fly, snapping them loudly against the benches.

The anger, resentment, and mortification on the little girl's face at his audacity made the Swede boy squirm in his seat. But he said nothing, seemed not to watch the bean-shooting, and bided his time.

At last, interrupted in her teaching and goaded to the point of rebuke, the little girl dismissed a class and, rising in her chair, called the school to attention. "I am sorry to have to speak to any one before the rest," she said, her face white, her voice almost gone with excitement; "but I must have order." She looked straight at the young Pole.

He scraped his feet and smirked at her, at the same time flipping a bean from between his thumb and finger. It struck the stove with a sharp ring that brought the Swede boy to his feet. His hand was

raised to attract her attention. She nodded.

The Swede boy lowered his arm very slowly, looking about him with an air of deprecation. "Ay doan know," he said in a low voice, "eef yo theenk like me. Bote she"—he pointed to the little girl—"komes, takes th' skole, lairns us. We bay gote to pay hair back." He shifted till he stood over the young Pole. "So eef somebodey no bay gote," he added, with a threatening note in his voice, *"ay make hame*." Then he sank to his seat again, having for the second time in that school-room saved her from bitter humiliation.

The next morning the school-house withstood its last throe. At ten o'clock, in the midst of a reading-lesson, there entered the young Pole's father. His ox-gad was in his hand; he did not remove his hat, but strode forward to the teacher's desk, sputtering broken English. When he came near, he shook his empty fist so close to the little girl that she caught the scent of hay on it, for he had been throwing down feed to his cattle.

"No touch my flesh unt blut," he cried savagely; "no touch my flesh unt blut."

A half-recumbent figure in the rear, whose pale eyes rested upon her, gave the little girl courage. "No one has been touched," she replied. "But if the school is made noisy by a pupil, then that pupil will be punished, or will leave."

The Pole raised his gad with a grunt of rage. "Eh?" he shouted, cursing in his own tongue. He nourished his arms and stamped up and down wildly. Of a sudden he saw the Swede boy, who had come forward and halted beside the table. His gaze fell before the pale, half-shut eyes, his voice lowered, and he ceased to swing his whip and swear. Then he hedged adroitly, speaking in broken English again and giving quick looks at the Swede boy's huge, red hands, that hung, clenched and twitching, on either side of his stalwart

person.

"I hav-v no trouble wid you," he said to the little girl, his manner changing to one of apology, "bud I lick my boy mineself," and he moved down the aisle and disappeared through the door.

His son gazed after him in amazement and disgust, gave a sniff of contempt, and replied to the triumphant look on the little girl's face by extracting his geography and going to work. He played his pranks no more, and the term passed peaceably, under the mental guidance of the little girl and the physical overlordship of the Swede boy.

On the afternoon of the last day of school, when her pupils had said their good-bys and were straying homeward laden with their books and slates, the little girl stayed behind. And, sitting in the very place to which in former years she had raised reverent eyes, she looked round the building, every crack and corner of which had its memory.

On the bench by the door, close beside the leaky water-bucket, was the same battered, greasy basin in which the neighbor woman's daughter had placed a horse-hair one day, stoutly maintaining that in due time the hair would miraculously turn into a worm.

The broken pointer reminded her of a certain fierce encounter when, having confided to one of the Dutchman's seven that on the previous Sunday the farm-house had partaken of a dish of canned frogs' legs, she had been hailed in return as "Miss Chinaman," and the teacher had closed the event by routing her tormentors.

She thought of the morning the Dutch children first came in leather shoes, an occasion recalled by the pencil-marks behind the chart, where she had stood her punishment for too much smiling.

The stove-poker brought back the terrible moment she had dared to put her tongue against it in the icy school-room, and had had to sit with the iron cleaving to her until the teacher warmed some water.

The peg above the coal-bins reminded her of the winter day when she took down the well-rope and tied it to the faithful Luffree's collar, so that, with his keener, finer instinct for direction, he could lead teacher and pupils through a blizzard to the safety of the farm-house.

She was suddenly awakened from her day-dreams by the sound of galloping. A horseman was approaching from the direction of the farm-house, and she hurried to the door to see who it could be. As he came near, she ran out joyfully to meet him. It was the colonel's son.

"They told me you were here," he cried, springing from his saddle. She could scarcely answer him for sheer happiness, and when he brought out her mount and they started away through the twilight, he leading the horses, she walked beside him silently.

He told her about his trip, his months at the preparatory school, his new friends, the wonders of the big city in which he had been living, hardly taking a breath in his excitement as his narrative swept along. Suddenly he became quiet and bent toward her anxiously, penitently.

"Go on," she urged; "it's fine!"

"But I've forgotten to ask you how you've been and what you've been doing. Or whether—next year—Of course I wish awfully that you could—"

He faltered, stopped. Then, after a moment, "But you're as brave as can be to just go right on at this school and let your teacher help you all she can. It'll all count, you'll find, when you start in studying some place else."

She laughed merrily. "You haven't heard," she said. Even in the

dusk he could see that her face was beaming.

"Heard what?" he asked.

"That I've been going to school, but—not in the way you think."

He halted in the road. "What do you mean?"

"I've been teaching."

It was a long way from the school to the farm-house, yet the colonel's son and the little girl had so much to tell each other that they were not done even when the lane was reached. So they paused in its gloom, under the budding ash-boughs. A red-breasted thrush, just returned to his old haunts, twittered inquiringly at them from a twig above, and the horses nickered and champed on their bits. But they heard only each other until, having lighted the lamp in the sitting-room, the biggest brother strolled toward them, singing a gay love-song.

XIX

TOWARD THE RISING SUN

THE big brothers sat in a sullen circle about the sitting-room table, the eldest smoking, the biggest studying his fingers, the youngest whittling jackstraws. Near, silent and troubled, hovered the little girl, watching the three who, like the Fates themselves, seemed to be settling her destiny.

"So you don't want her to go," said the biggest, taking up the discussion where it had been dropped a few moments before; "though you know it was mother's last wish, an' that the youngster's always wanted it. Well, your reasons; let's hear 'em again from first to last."

"What'll she do with all this eddication she's hankerin' for?" demanded the eldest, flashing angry eyes around. "Tell me that."

"Huh!" grunted the biggest, and he threw back his head with a hearty laugh. "Well! well!" he exclaimed, when he could speak; "*that's* what's worrying you, is it! Jus' let me ask *you* something. Did you ever hear of anybody in your life that had an eddication fastened on to 'em an' didn't know what t' do with it? What'll *she* do with it? Wait till she's *got* it. Then she an' me'll sit down an' tell you a-a-all about it."

There was a note of ridicule in his voice that fired the eldest, who made no reply, but struck the wooden bowl of his pipe so savagely against his boot-heel that it split and fell from its stem. Then he turned upon the youngest with a wave of the hand that commanded an

opinion.

"Yes, what've *you* got to say?" inquired the biggest, also turning.

The youngest shrugged his shoulders. "You two run the business to suit yourselves," he said; "I wash my hands of it." He began another jackstraw without glancing up.

"That's good," said the biggest; "that counts you out." He tilted his chair around until he faced the eldest. "I'm no dog in the manger," he continued; "I didn't have a chance to learn more than the law allows, or to go to a city school. But I wanted to, bad enough. That's why I know how *she* feels." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the little girl. "I'm for her goin'; an', whatever comes of it, I'll stand by her. Books is all she wants—let her have 'em. We ain't got no right to hold her back."

"She can have 'em here," interposed the eldest.

"Yes, along with work that's too hard on her. You wouldn't think of puttin' a fine animal like the blue mare on the plow; no, of course you wouldn't. There's some horses born for teamin' an' some for high-toned carriage pullin'. It happens in this case we ain't talkin' about a draft plug." He was trembling in his earnestness. After a pause he went on. "She might stay here. That's right. But she'd never have a cent to call her own 'less she earned it teachin'. Some way or other, the boys in a family always think they own the farm; girls ain't got no share, no matter how hard they've drudged around the kitchen or the garden, or even in the fields. They can take anything that's given 'em till they marry; or they can hang around an' play nurse-girl an' kitchen-girl to their brothers' wives."

"I've always noticed," broke in the eldest, changing his ground, and ignoring what the biggest said, "that every country girl who goes to town polishes herself up like a milk-pan till she's worn off the prairie

look, an' then she marries some dude with a head like an addled egg."

The biggest threw the little girl a swift, roguish glance. "I ain't afraid of the dude part of it," he said; "I'm willin' to trust her taste, anyway. I don't have to live with him; neither do you."

"Do you mean to say," asked the eldest, giving the table a blow with his fist, "that you think a city's the place for a girl, friends or no friends? Nobody's goin' to look after her, when she leaves here, as careful as we do."

"The bishop," suggested the little girl, advancing almost imploringly.

"The bishop!" sneered the youngest.

"I thought you washed your hands of this," reminded the biggest, with a look that instantly quieted the youngest; "I guess maybe you didn't get 'em clean. At any rate, you'd better jus' make jackstraws." He faced the eldest again.

"I say the city's no place for her," the latter continued hotly. He pointed through the open door to where, above the ash-trees, a hawk was pursuing a field-sparrow that vainly, by sudden dips and rises, strove to escape its enemy. "You see that?" he cried. "Well, in every city there's a thousand hawks with their claws out waiting to swoop down on them that don't watch. She'd better not go, I say. She'll be safe and happy here. It was so long since mother'd seen a big place she forgot how it is there. It's not too late to stop gettin' ready. You'd better stay." He stood up and whirled about upon the little girl.

The biggest brother gave a dissenting shake of the head. "She'll be safe enough," he said. "It's only when a little bird gets careless that the hawk gets him. What do *you* know about a city, anyhow?"

"The hardware man says—" began the eldest.

The biggest cut him short. "There's some people in this world that can't do a lick of good," he said, "but they can do any amount of mischief. That hardware man's one of 'em."

"She ain't got enough money to last her more 'n six months," the eldest asserted, once more changing ground.

"I've got what I've just made teaching," said the little girl.

The biggest shook a warning finger at her. "I'm runnin' this parley-voo," he laughed. Then he became serious again. "She's got what she's jus' made teachin'," he agreed. "Well, that won't last her long. So—" He hesitated, arose, and began to walk the floor nervously. "Course," he faltered, "I bought that quarter-section from the Swede. But I don't need it more 'n a cat needs two tails. Jus' bought it to be a-doin'. So—I've concluded to call the bargain off, and buy some land later on. The—the—youngster can have the little pile I've got."

For a moment no one spoke. Then the little girl put out her arms, and the biggest brother drew her to him. "That's the way we've settled it," he said. His voice was husky, his eyes overflowing. "I want to help her get away. An'—an'—Heaven knows how I am going to miss her. You two'll not feel it as I will." He buried his face in her shoulder. Finally he spoke again. "Next year, when her money runs out, she'll have my share of the crop and herd; an' *every* year she'll have my share till she's through an' ready to do something for herself. Then I'll buy that quarter-section. It belongs to the Swede boy. He'll keep it to sell it to me any time in the next ten years. He says so; that's *his* part toward helpin' her."

"Oh, dear old brother," whispered the little girl, "thank you! thank you!" She was dangerously near to tears and could say no more.

"We've decided," said the biggest, "that we might as well get this

thing over. So—so—she's goin' to-day."

"To-day?" The eldest and the youngest almost shouted in their surprise.

"Yes, to-day," repeated the biggest. "She's goin' to do a little studyin' this summer; now, I'm goin' to hitch up," he added, as he kissed the little girl and went out.

The eldest and the youngest remained beside the table, the former battling with disappointment and sorrow, the latter suddenly wrathful and concerned. As they sat there, the little girl packed a few last garments into a leather satchel and put on her hat and coat. Then she climbed the stairs to the attic to tell the low, bare room good-by.

Ever afterward, when she thought of the farm-house, it was the attic that first pictured itself in her mind, for the rooms below had seen many improvements since her birth-night over fifteen years before, but the attic had remained unchanged. Above the litter of barrels and boxes that covered the western half of the floor, hung the Christmas trimmings in their little bag; seeds for the spring planting, each kind done up separately; strings of dried peppers; rows of cob-corn, suspended by the shucks; slippery-elm, sage, and boneset in paper packages; unused powder-horns; and the big brothers' steel traps. To the east of the stovepipe were their beds, covered with patchwork quilts made by the mother, and the boxes in which they kept their clothes and trinkets.

The little girl halted sadly beneath the slanting rafters to look round. When she finally turned away to descend, she had to feel her way carefully, though the morning sun, but lately risen, was pouring in its light.

The farewells in the sitting-room were soon over. With many a promise to write, with fond pats to the dogs that crowded about her

hoping she would take them on her drive, with tender kisses on the pillows of the old canopied bed, and glances behind, she went out into the frosty air and took her seat in the buckboard.

Her face was calm and her eyes were dry as they drove out of the yard. She was bravely fighting down her grief at leaving, and she looked back again and again to wave her hand to the eldest and the youngest, who were standing outside the kitchen, swinging their hats in tardily repentant and approving response.

At sight of the carnelian bluff, she suddenly sat very still, and a pang shot through her heart. Looking down at the well-worn, weed-bordered road, she remembered the November morning when, with even deeper sorrow, she walked behind her who was never to pass through the corn again.

Opposite the bluff the biggest brother stopped the buckboard and the little girl stepped down, crossed the half-thawed drifts that still lay on the western slope, and went up to the graves. A brisk wind was blowing over the plains and shaking the scent from the first wild prairie-violets that dotted the new grass.

She paused but a moment at the pipestone cross, but beside the other grave she knelt and looked long and lovingly at the white headboard. The chaplain had put it up the day after the funeral, and had lettered on it in black:

MOTHER
"Blessed are the pure in heart."

A few minutes later she joined the biggest brother, and the buckboard hurried on. She did not look around at the house or bluff until the highest point between the track and the farm was reached. Then, as if he read her wish, the biggest brother again drew rein.

She stood up to look back. She could see the herd, peacefully

trailing across the river meadows in search of green feeding. Beyond lay the awakening fields under the cold sun, the bluff, the house shining in a new coat of red, the board barn towering over the low sod one at its back. And she caught a glimpse of the two dark figures still standing against the kitchen, watching her out of sight. She did not see a third, whose pale eyes were so dim that he in turn could not see her as he loitered mournfully by the side of a stack.

"Good-by," she said softly; "good-by." A sob came from her biggest brother. She sank to the seat and, putting her arms about his neck, clung to him, weeping aloud.

As they drove on, he manfully strove to restrain his grief. When he turned east at the railroad, he drew his sleeve across his eyes and clucked to the horse.

"It'd be a lot worse if you had to stay," he said. "There's everything before you where you're goin', if you want to work for it. Here there's nothing."

The little girl lifted her head from his shoulder with fresh courage. "I know it," she said. She gave him a grateful smile, and turned to look back once more.

Suddenly a cry parted her lips. She pointed off beyond the farm-house. "See!" she exclaimed, and the biggest brother brought the horse to a stand.

Hanging against the sky was a spectral city whose buildings, inverted and magnified, loomed through the clear, crisp air in marble-like grandeur, and whose spires, keen-tipped and transparent, were thrust far down toward the earth.

Breathlessly the little girl watched the mirage, which to her seemed divine, as if He who sat at sunset upon the throne of clouds were showing her the longed-for city of her dreams in a celestial image,

high and white and beautiful. Joy shone on her face at the wonderful thought; and into her eyes there came a light of comprehension, of determination, and of enduring hope,—it was the radiant light of womanhood. And the biggest brother, looking proudly at her, knew at that moment that she was no longer a little girl.

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

Both Vermillion and Vermilion were used and retained in this text.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

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