Dennison Grant, A Novel of To−day

Robert Stead

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CHAPTER I

"Chuck at the Y.D. to−night, and a bed under the shingles," shouted Transley, waving to the procession to be off.

Linder, foreman and head teamster, straightened up from the half load of new hay in which he had been awaiting the final word, tightened the lines, made an unique sound in his throat, and the horses pressed their shoulders into the collars. Linder glanced back to see each wagon or implement take up the slack with a jerk like the cars of a freight train; the cushioned rumble of wagon wheels on the soft earth, and the noisy chatter of the steel teeth of the hay−rakes came up from the rear. Transley's "outfit" was under way.

Transley was a contractor; a master of men and of circumstances. Six weeks before, the suspension of a grading order had left him high and dry, with a dozen men and as many teams on his hands and hired for the season. Transley galloped all that night into the foothills; when he returned next evening he had a contract with the Y.D. to cut all the hay from the ranch buildings to The Forks. By some deft touch of those financial strings on which he was one day to become so skilled a player Transley converted his dump scrapers into mowing machines, and three days later his outfit was at work in the upper reaches of the Y.D.

The contract had been decidedly profitable. Not an hour of broken weather had interrupted the operations, and to−day, with two thousand tons of hay in stack, Transley was moving down to the headquarters of the Y.D. The trail lay along a broad valley, warded on either side by ranges of foothills; hills which in any other country would have been dignified by the name of mountains. From their summits the grey−green up−tilted limestone protruded, whipped clean of soil by the chinooks of centuries. Here and there on their northern slopes hung a beard of scrub timber; sharp gulleys cut into their fastnesses to bring down the turbulent waters of their snows.

Some miles to the left of the trail lay the bed of the Y.D., fringed with poplar and cottonwood and occasional dark green splashes of spruce. Beyond the bed of the Y.D., beyond the foothills that looked down upon it, hung the mountains themselves, their giant crests pitched like mighty tents drowsing placidly between earth and heaven. Now their four o'clock veil of blue− purple mist lay filmed about their shoulders, but later they would stand out in bold silhouette cutting into the twilight sky. Everywhere was the soft smell of new−mown hay; everywhere the silences of the eternal, broken only by the muffled noises of Transley's outfit trailing down to the Y.D.

Linder, foreman and head teamster, cushioned his shoulders against his half load of hay and contemplated the scene with amiable satisfaction. The hay fields of the foothills had been a pleasant change from the railway grades of the plains below. Men and horses had fattened and grown content, and the foreman had reason to know that Transley's bank account had profited by the sudden shift in his operations. Linder felt in his pocket for pipe and matches; then, with a frown, withdrew his fingers. He himself had laid down the law that there must be no smoking in the hay fields. A carelessly dropped match might in an hour nullify all their labor.

Linder's frown had scarce vanished when hoof−beats pounded by the side of his wagon, and a rider, throwing himself lightly from his horse, dropped beside him in the hay.

"Thought I'd ride with you a spell, Lin. That Pete−horse acts like he was goin' sore on the off front foot. Chuck at the Y.D. to−night?"

"That's what Transley says, George, and he knows."

"Ever et at the Y.D?"

"Nope."

"Know old Y.D?"

"Only to know his name is good on a cheque, and they say he still throws a good rope."

George wriggled to a more comfortable position in the hay. He had a feeling that he was approaching a delicate subject with consummate skill. After a considerable silence he continued−−

"They say that's quite a girl old Y.D.'s got."

"Oh," said Linder, slowly. The occasion of the soreness in that Pete−horse's off front foot was becoming apparent.

"You better stick to Pete," Linder continued. "Women is most uncertain critters."

"Don't I know it?" chuckled George, poking the foreman's ribs companionably with his elbow. "Don't I know it?" he repeated, as his mind apparently ran back over some reminiscence that verified Linder's remark. It was evident from the pleasant grimaces of George's face that whatever he had suffered from the uncertain sex was forgiven.

"Say, Lin," he resumed after another pause, and this time in a more confidential tone, "do you s'pose Transley's got a notion that way?"

"Shouldn't wonder. Transley always knows what he's doing, and why. Y.D. must be worth a million or so, and the girl is all he's got to leave it to. Besides all that, no doubt she's well worth having on her own account."

"Well, I'm sorry for the boss," George replied, with great soberness. "I alus hate to disappoint the boss."

"Huh!" said Linder. He knew George Drazk too well for further comment. After his unlimited pride in and devotion to his horse, George gave his heart unreservedly to womankind. He suffered from no cramping niceness in his devotions; that would have limited the play of his passion; to him all women were alike−−or nearly so. And no number of rebuffs could convince George that he was unpopular with the objects of his democratic affections. Such a conclusion was, to him, too absurd to be entertained, no matter how many experiences might support it. If opportunity offered he doubtless would propose to Y.D.'s daughter that very night−−and get a boxed ear for his pains.

The Y.D. creek had crossed its valley, shouldering close against the base of the foothills to the right. Here the current had created a precipitous cutbank, and to avoid it and the stream the trail wound over the side of the hill. As they crested a corner the silver ribbon of the Y.D. was unravelled before them, and half a dozen miles down its course the ranch buildings lay clustered in a grove of cottonwoods and evergreens. All the great valley lay warm and pulsating in a flood of yellow sunshine; the very earth seemed amorous and content in the embrace of sun and sky. The majesty of the view seized even the unpoetic souls of Linder and Drazk, and because they had no other means of expression they swore vaguely and relapsed into silence.

Hoof−beats again sounded by the wagon side. It was Transley.

"Oh, here you are, Drazk. How long do you reckon it would take you to ride down to the Y.D. on that Pete−horse?" Transley was a leader of men.

Drazk's eyes sparkled at the subtle compliment to his horse.

"I tell you, Boss," he said, "if there's any jackrabbits in the road they'll get tramped on."

"I bet they will," said Transley, genially. "Well, you just slide down and tell Y.D. we're coming in. She's going to be later than I figured, but I can't hurry the work horses. You know that, Drazk."

"Sure I do, Boss," said Drazk, springing into his saddle. "Just watch me lose myself in the dust." Then, to himself, "Here's where I beat the boss to it."

The sun had fallen behind the mountains, the valley was filled with shadow, the afterglow, mauve and purple and copper, was playing far up the sky when Transley's outfit reached the Y.D. corrals. George Drazk had opened the gate and waited beside it.

"Y.D. wants you an' Linder to eat with him at the house," he said as Transley halted beside him. "The rest of us eat in the bunk− house." There was something strangely modest in Drazk's manner.

"Had yours handed to you already?" Linder managed to banter in a low voice as they swung through the gate.

"Hell!" protested Mr. Drazk. "A fellow that ain't a boss or a foreman don't get a look−in. Never even seen her. . . . Come, you Pete−horse!" It was evident George had gone back to his first love.

The wagons drew up in the yard, and there was a fine jingle of harness as the teamsters quickly unhitched. Y.D. himself approached through the dusk; his large frame and confident bearing were unmistakable even in that group of confident, vigorous men.

"Glad to see you, Transley," he said cordially. "You done well out there. 'So, Linder! You made a good job of it. Come up to the house−−I reckon the Missus has supper waitin'. We'll find a room for you up there, too; it's different from bein' under canvas."

So saying, and turning the welfare of the men and the horses over to his foreman, the rancher led Transley and Linder along a path through a grove of cottonwoods, across a footbridge where from underneath came the babble of water, to "the house," marked by a yellow light which poured through the windows and lost itself in the shadow of the trees.

The nucleus of the house was the log cabin where Y.D. and his wife had lived in their first married years. With the passage of time additions had been built to every side which offered a point of contact, but the log cabin still remained the family centre, and into it Transley and Linder were immediately admitted. The poplar floor had long since worn thin, save at the knots, and had been covered with edge−grained fir, but otherwise the cabin stood as it had for twenty years, the white−washed logs glowing in the light of two bracket lamps and the reflections from a wood fire which burned merrily in the stove. The skins of a grizzly bear and a timber wolf lay on the floor, and two moose heads looked down from opposite ends of the room. On the walls hung other trophies won by Y.D.'s rifle, along with hand−made bits of harness, lariats, and other insignia of the ranchman's trade.

The rancher took his guests' hats, and motioned each to a seat. "Mother," he said, directing his voice into an adjoining room, "here's the boys."

In a moment "Mother" appeared drying her hands. In her appearance were courage, resourcefulness, energy,−−fit mate for the man who had made the Y.D. known in every big cattle market of the country. As Linder's eye caught her and her husband in the same glance his mind involuntarily leapt to the suggestion of what the offspring of such a pair must be. The men of the cattle country have a proper appreciation of heredity. . . .

"My wife−−Mr. Transley, Mr. Linder," said the rancher, with a courtliness which sat strangely on his otherwise rough−and−ready speech. "I been tellin' her the fine job you boys has made in the hay fields, an' I reckon she's got a bite of supper waitin' you."

"Y.D. has been full of your praises," said the woman. There was a touch of culture in her manner as she received them, which Y.D.'s hospitality did not disclose.

She led them into another room, where a table was set for five. Linder experienced a tang of happy excitement as he noted the number. Linder allowed himself no foolishness about women, but, as he sometimes sagely remarked to George Drazk, you never can tell what might happen. He shot a quick glance at Transley, but the contractor's face gave no sign. Even as he looked Linder thought what an able face it was. Transley was not more than twenty−six, but forcefulness, assertion, ability, stood in every line of his clean−cut features. He was such a man as to capture at a blow the heart of old Y.D., perhaps of Y.D.'s daughter.

"Where's Zen?" demanded the rancher.

"She'll be here presently," his wife replied. "We don't have Mr. Transley and Mr. Linder every night, you know," she added, with a smile.

"Dolling up," thought Linder. "Trust a woman never to miss a bet."

But at that moment a door opened, and the girl appeared. She did not burst upon them, as Linder had half expected; she slipped quietly and gracefully into their presence. She was dressed in black, in a costume which did not too much conceal the charm of her figure, and the nut−brown lustre of her face and hair played against the sober background of her dress with an effect that was almost dazzling.

"My daughter, Zen," said Y.D. "Mr. Transley, Mr. Linder."

She shook hands frankly, first with Transley, then with Linder, as had been the order of the introduction. In her manner was neither the shyness which sometimes marks the women of remote settlements, nor the boldness so readily bred of outdoor life. She gave the impression of one who has herself, and the situation, in hand.

"We're always glad to have guests at the Y.D." she was saying. "We live so far from everywhere."

Linder thought that a strange peg on which to hang their welcome. But she was continuing−−

"And you have been so successful, haven't you? You have made quite a hit with Dad."

"How about Dad's daughter?" asked Transley. Transley had a manner of direct and forceful action. These were his first words to her. Linder would not have dared be so precipitate.

"Perhaps," thought Linder to himself, as he turned the incident over in his mind, "perhaps that is why Transley is boss, and I'm just foreman." The young woman's behavior seemed to support that conclusion. She did not answer Transley's question, but she gave no evidence of displeasure.

"You boys must be hungry," Y.D. was saying. "Pile in."

The rancher and his wife sat at the ends of the table; Transley on the side at Y.D.'s right; Linder at Transley's right. In the better light Linder noted Y.D.'s face. It was the face of a man of fifty, possibly sixty. Life in the open plays strange tricks with the appearance. Some men it ages before their time; others seem to tap a spring of perpetual youth. Save for the grey moustache and the puckerings about the eyes Y.D.'s was still a young man's face. Then, as the rancher turned his head, Linder noted a long scar, as of a burn, almost grown over in the right cheek. . . . Across the table from them sat the girl, impartially dividing her position between the two.

A Chinese boy served soup, and the rancher set the example by "piling in" without formality. Eight hours in the open air between meals is a powerful deterrent of table small−talk. Then followed a huge joint of beef, from which Y.D. cut generous slices with swift and dexterous strokes of a great knife, and the Chinese boy added the vegetables from a side table. As the meat disappeared the call of appetite became less insistent.

"She's been a great summer, ain't she?" said the rancher, laying down his knife and fork and lifting the carver. "Transley, some more meat? Pshaw, you ain't et enough for a chicken. Linder? That's right, pass up your plate. Powerful dry, though. That's only a small bit; here's a better slice here. Dry summers gen'rally mean open winters, but you can't never tell. Zen, how 'bout you? Old Y.D.'s been too long on the job to take chances. Mother? How much did you say, Transley? About two thousand tons? Not enough. Don't care if I do,"−−helping himself to another piece of beef.

"I think you'll find two thousand tons, good hay and good measurement," said Transley.

"I'm sure of it," rejoined his host, generously. "I'm carryin' more steers than usual, and'll maybe run in a bunch of doggies from Manitoba to boot. I got to have more hay."

So the meal progressed, the rancher furnishing both the hospitality and the conversation. Transley occasionally broke in to give assent to some remark, but his interruption was quite unnecessary. It was Y.D.'s practice to take assent for granted. Once or twice the women interjected a lead to a different subject of conversation in which their words would have carried greater authority, but Y.D. instantly swung it back to the all−absorbing topic of hay.

The Chinese boy served a pudding of some sort, and presently the meal was ended.

"She's been a dry summer−−powerful dry," said the rancher, with a wink at his guests. "Zen, I think there's a bit of gopher poison in there yet, ain't there?"

The girl left the room without remark, returning shortly with a jug and glasses, which she placed before her father.

"I suppose you wear a man's size, Transley," he said, pouring out a big drink of brown liquor, despite Transley's deprecating hand. "Linder, how many fingers? Two? Well, we'll throw in the thumb. Y.D? If you please, just a little snifter. All set?"

The rancher rose to his feet, and the company followed his example.

"Here's ho!−−and more hay," he said, genially.

"Ho!" said Linder.

"The daughter of the Y.D!" said Transley, looking across the table at the girl. She met his eyes full; then, with a gleam of white teeth, she raised an empty glass and clinked it against his.

The men drained their glasses and re−seated themselves, but the women remained standing.

"Perhaps you will excuse us now," said the rancher's wife. "You will wish to talk over business. Y.D. will show you upstairs, and we will expect you to be with us for breakfast."

With a bow she left the room, followed by her daughter. Linder had a sense of being unsatisfied; it was as though a ravishing meal has been placed before a hungry man, and only its aroma had reached his senses when it had been taken away. Well, it provoked the appetite−−

The rancher re−filled the glasses, but Transley left his untouched, and Linder did the same. There were business matters to discuss, and it was no fair contest to discuss business in the course of a drinking bout with an old stager like Y.D.

"I got to have another thousand tons," the rancher was saying. "Can't take chances on any less, and I want you boys to put it up for me."

"Suits me," said Transley, "if you'll show me where to get the hay."

"You know the South Y.D?"

"Never been on it."

"Well, it's a branch of the Y.D. which runs south−east from The Forks. Guess it got its name from me, because I built my first cabin at The Forks. That was about the time you was on a milk diet, Transley, and us old−timers had all outdoors to play with. You see, the Y.D. is a cantank'rous stream, like its godfather. At The Forks you'd nat'rally suppose is where two branches joined, an' jogged on henceforth in double harness. Well, that ain't it at

all. This crick has modern ideas, an' at The Forks it divides itself into two, an' she hikes for the Gulf o' Mexico an' him for Hudson's Bay. As I was sayin', I built my first cabin at The Forks−−a sort o' peek−a−boo cabin it was, where the wolves usta come an' look in at nights. Well, I usta look out through the same holes. I had the advantage o' usin' language, an' I reckon we was about equal scared. There was no wife or kid in those days."

The rancher paused, took a long draw on his pipe, and his eyes glowed with the light of old recollections.

"Well, as I was sayin'," he continued presently, "folks got to callin' the stream the Y.D., after me. That's what you get for bein' first on the ground−−a monument for ever an ever. This bein' the main stream got the name proper, an' the other branch bein' smallest an' running kind o' south nat'rally got called the South Y.D. I run stock in both valleys when I was at The Forks, but not much since I came down here. Well, there's maybe a thousand tons o' hay over in the South Y.D., an' you boys better trail over there to−morrow an' pitch into it−−that is, if you're satisfied with the price I'm payin' you."

"The price is all right," said Transley, "and we'll hit the trail at sun−up. There'll be no trouble−−no confliction of interests, I mean?"

"Whose interests?" demanded the rancher, beligerently. "Ain't I the father of the Y.D? Ain't the whole valley named for me? When it comes to interests−−"

"Of course," Transley agreed, "but I just wanted to know how things stood in case we ran up against something. It's not like the old days, when a rancher would rather lose twenty−five per cent. of his stock over winter than bother putting up hay. Hay land is getting to be worth money, and I just want to know where we stand."

"Quite proper," said Y.D., "quite proper. An' now the matter's under discussion, I'll jus' show you my hand. There's a fellow named Landson down the valley of the South Y.D. that's been flirtin' with that hay meadow for years, but he ain't got no claim to it. I was first on the ground an' I cut it whenever I feel like it an' I'm goin' to go on cuttin' it. If anybody comes out raisin' trouble, you just shoo 'em off, an' go on cuttin' that hay, spite o' hell an' high water. Y.D.'ll stand behind you."

"Thanks," said Transley. "That's what I wanted to know."

CHAPTER II

The rancher had ridden into the Canadian plains country from below "the line" long before barbed wire had become a menace in cattle− land. From Pincher Creek to Maple Creek, and far beyond, the plains lay unbroken save by the deep canyons where, through the process of ages, mountain streams had worn their beds down to gravel bottoms, and by the occasional trail which wandered through the wilderness like some thousand−mile lariat carelessly dropped from the hand of the Master Plainsman. Here and there, where the cutbanks of the river Canyons widened out into sloping valleys, affording possible access to the deep−lying streams, some ranchman had established his headquarters, and his red−roofed, whitewashed buildings flashed back the hot rays which fell from an opalescent heaven. At some of the more important fords trading posts had come into being, whither the ranchmen journeyed twice a year for groceries, clothing, kerosene, and other liquids handled as surreptitiously as the vigilance of the Mounted Police might suggest. The virgin prairie, with her strange, subtle facility for entangling the hearts of men, lay undefiled by the mercenary plowshare; unprostituted by the commercialism of the days that were to be.

Into such a country Y.D. had ridden from the South, trailing his little bunch of scrub heifers, in search of grass and water and, it may be, of a new environment. Up through the Milk River country; across the Belly and the Old Man; up and down the valley of the Little Bow, and across the plains as far as the Big Bow he rode in search of

the essentials of a ranch headquarters. The first of these is water, the second grass, the third fuel, the fourth shelter. Grass there was everywhere; a fine, short, hairy crop which has the peculiar quality of self−curing in the autumn sunshine and so furnishing a natural, uncut hay for the herds in the winter months. Water there was only where the mountain streams plowed their canyons through the deep subsoil, or at little lakes of surface drainage, or, at rare intervals, at points where pure springs broke forth from the hillsides. Along the river banks dark, crumbling seams exposed coal resources which solved all questions of fuel, and fringes of cottonwood and poplar afforded rough but satisfactory building material. As the rancher sat on his horse on a little knoll which overlooked a landscape leading down on one side to a sheltering bluff by the river, and on the other losing itself on the rim of the heavens, no fairer prospect surely could have met his eye.

And yet he was not entirely satisfied. He was looking for no temporary location, but for a spot where he might drive his claim− stakes deep. That prairie, which stretched under the hot sunshine unbroken to the rim of heaven; that brown grass glowing with an almost phosphorescent light as it curled close to the mother sod;−− a careless match, a cigar stub, a bit of gun−wadding, and in an afternoon a million acres of pasture land would carry not enough foliage to feed a gopher.

Y.D. turned in his saddle. Along the far western sky hung the purple draperies of the Rockies. For fifty miles eastward from the mighty range lay the country of the foothills, its great valleys lost to the vision which leapt only from summit to summit. In the clear air the peaks themselves seemed not a dozen miles away, but Y.D. had not ridden cactus, sagebrush and prairie from the Rio Grande to the St. Mary's for twenty years to be deceived by a so transparent illusion. Far over the plains his eye could trace the dark outline of a trail leading mountainward.

The heifers drowsed lazily in the brown grass. Y.D., shading his eyes the better with his hand, gazed long and thoughtfully at the purple range. Then he spat decisively over his horse's shoulder and made a strange "cluck" in his throat. The knowing animal at once set out on a trot to stir the lazy heifers into movement, and presently they were trailing slowly up into the foothill country.

Far up, where the trail ahead apparently dropped over the end of the world, a horse and rider hove in view. They came on leisurely, and half an hour elapsed before they met the rancher trailing west.

The stranger was a rancher of fifty, wind−whipped and weather− beaten of countenance. The iron grey of his hair and moustache suggested the iron of the man himself; iron of figure, of muscle, of will.

"'Day," he said, affably, coming to a halt a few feet from Y.D. "Trailing into the foothills?"

Y.D. lolled in his saddle. His attitude did not invite conversation, and, on the other hand, intimated no desire to avoid it.

"Maybe," he said, noncommittally. Then, relaxing somewhat,−−"Any water farther up?"

"About eight miles. Sundown should see you there, and there's a decent spot to camp. You're a stranger here?" The older man was evidently puzzling over the big "Y.D." branded on the ribs of the little herd.

"It's a big country," Y.D. answered. "It's a plumb big country, for sure, an' I guess a man can be a stranger in some corners of it, can't he?"

Y.D. began to resent the other man's close scrutiny of his brand.

"Well, what's wrong with it?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing. No offense. I just wondered what 'Y.D.' might stand for."

"Might stand for Yankee devil," said Y.D., with a none−of−your− business curl of his lip. But he had carried his curtness too far, and was not prepared for the quick retort.

"Might also stand for yellow dog, and be damned to you!" The stranger's strong figure sat up stern and knit in his saddle.

Y.D.'s hand went to his hip, but the other man was unarmed. You can't draw on a man who isn't armed.

"Listen!" the older man continued, in sharp, clear−cut notes. "You are a stranger not only to our trails, but our customs. You are a young man. Let me give you some advice. First−−get rid of that artillery. It will do you more harm than good. And second, when a stranger speaks to you civilly, answer him the same. My name is Wilson−−Frank Wilson, and if you settle in the foothills you'll find me a decent neighbor, as soon as you are able to appreciate decency."

To his own great surprise, Y.D. took his dressing down in silence. There was a poise in Wilson's manner that enforced respect. He recognized in him the English rancher of good family; usually a man of fine courtesy within reasonable bounds; always a hard hitter when those bounds are exceeded. Y.D. knew that he had made at least a tactical blunder; his sensitiveness about his brand would arouse, rather than allay, suspicion. His cheeks burned with a heat not of the afternoon sun as he submitted to this unaccustomed discipline, but he could not bring himself to express regret for his rudeness.

"Well, now that the shower is over, we'll move on," he said, turning his back on Wilson and "clucking" to his horse.

Y.D. followed the stream which afterwards bore his name as far as the Upper Forks. As he entered the foothills he found all the advantages of the plains below, with others peculiar to the foothill country. The richer herbage, induced by a heavier precipitation; the occasional belts of woodland; the rugged ravines and limestone ridges affording good natural protection against fire; abundant fuel and water everywhere−−these seemed to constitute the ideal ranch conditions. At the Upper Forks, through some freak of formation, the stream divided into two. From this point was easy access into the valleys of the Y.D. and the South Y.D., as they were subsequently called. The stream rippled over beds of grey gravel, and mountain trout darted from the rancher's shadow as it fell across the water. Up the valley, now ruddy gold with the changing colors of autumn, white−capped mountains looked down from amid the infinite silences; and below, broad vistas of brown prairie and silver ribbons of running water. Y.D. turned his swarthy face to the sunlight and took in the scene slowly, deliberately, but with a commercialized eye; blue and white and ruddy gold were nothing to him; his heart was set on grass and water and shelter. He had roved enough, and he had a reason for seeking some secluded spot like this, where he could settle down while his herds grew up, and, perhaps, forget some things that were better forgotten.

With sudden decision the cattle man threw himself from his horse, unstrapped the little kit of supplies which he carried by the saddle; drew off saddle and bridle and turned the animal free. The die was cast; this was the spot. Within ten minutes his ax was ringing in the grove of spruce trees close by, and the following night he fried mountain trout under the shelter of his own temporary roof.

It was the next summer when Y.D. had another encounter with Wilson. The Upper Forks turned out to be less secluded than he had supposed; it was on the trail of trappers and prospectors working into the mountains. Traders, too, in mysterious commodities, moved mysteriously back and forth, and the log cabin at The Forks became something of a centre of interest. Strange companies forgathered within its rude walls.

It was at such a gathering, in which Y.D. and three companions sat about the little square table, that one of the visitors facetiously inquired of the rancher how his herd was progressing.

"Not so bad, not so bad," said Y.D., casually. "Some winter losses, of course; snow's too deep this far up. Why?"

"Oh, some of your neighbors down the valley say your cows are uncommon prolific."

"They do?" said Y.D., laying down his cards. "Who says that?"

"Well, Wilson, for instance−−"

Y.D. sprang to his feet. "I've had one run−in with that −−−−," he shouted, "an' I let him talk to me like a Sunday School super'ntendent. Here's where I talk to him!"

"Well, finish the game first," the others protested. "The night's young."

Y.D. was sufficiently drunk to be supersensitive about his honor, and the inference from Wilson's remark was that he was too handy with his branding−iron.

"No, boys, no!" he protested. "I'll make that Englishman eat his words or choke on them."

"That's right," the company agreed. "The only thing to do. We'll all go down with you."

"An' you won't do that, neither," Y.D. answered. "Think I need a body−guard for a little chore like that? Huh!" There was immeasurable contempt in that monosyllable.

But a fresh bottle was produced, and Y.D. was persuaded that his honor would suffer no serious damage until the morning. Before that time his company, with many demonstrations of affection and admonitions to "make a good job of it," left for the mountains.

Y.D. saddled his horse early, buckled his gun on his hip, hung a lariat from his saddle, and took the trail for the Wilson ranch. During the drinking and gambling of the night he had been able to keep the insult in the background, but, alone under the morning sun, it swept over him and stung him to fury. There was just enough truth in the report to demand its instant suppression.

Wilson was branding calves in his corral as Y.D. came up. He was alone save for a girl of eighteen who tended the fire.

Wilson looked up with a hot iron in his hand, nodded, then turned to apply the iron before it cooled. As he leaned over the calf Y.D. swung his lariat. It fell true over the Englishman, catching him about the arms and the middle of the body. Y.D. took a half− hitch of the lariat about his saddle horn, and the well−trained horse dragged his victim in the most matter−of−fact manner out of the gate of the corral and into the open.

Y.D. shortened the line. After the first moment of confused surprise Wilson tried to climb to his feet, but a quick jerk of the lariat sent him prostrate again. In a moment Y.D. had taken up all the line, and sat in his saddle looking down contemptuously upon him.

"Well," he said, "who's too handy with his branding−iron now?"

"You are!" cried Wilson. "Give me a man's chance and I'll thrash you here and now to prove it."

For answer Y.D. clucked to his horse and dragged his enemy a few yards farther. "How's the goin', Frank?" he said, in mock cordiality. "Think you can stand it as far as the crick?"

But at that instant an unexpected scene flashed before Y.D. He caught just a glimpse of it−−just enough to indicate what might happen. The girl who had been tending the fire was rushing upon him with a red−hot iron extended before her. Quicker than he could throw himself from the saddle she had struck him in the face with it.

"You brand our calves!" she cried in a fury of recklessness. "I'll brand YOU−−damn you!"

Y.D. threw himself from the saddle, but in the suddenness of her onslaught he failed to clear it properly, and stumbled to the ground. In a moment she was on him and had whipped his gun from his belt.

"Get up!" she said. And he got up.

"Walk to that post, put your arms around it with your back to me, and stand there." He did so.

The girl kept him covered with the revolver while she released the lariat that bound her father.

"Are you hurt, Dad?" she inquired solicitously.

"No, just shaken up," he answered, scrambling to his feet.

"All right. Now we'll fix him!"

The girl walked to the next post from Y.D.'s, climbed it leisurely and seated herself on the top.

"Now, Mr. Y.D.," she said, "you are going to fight like a white man, with your fists. I'll sit up here and see that there's no dirty work. First, advance and shake hands."

"I'm damned if I will," said Y.D.

The revolver spoke, and the bullet cut dangerously close to him.

"Don't talk back to me again," she cried, "or you won't be able to fight. Now shake hands."

He extended his hand and Wilson took it for a moment.

"Now when I count three," said the girl, "pile in. There's no time limit. Fight 'til somebody's satisfied. One−−two−−three−−"

At the sound of the last word Wilson caught his opponent a punch on the chin which stretched him. He got up slowly, gathering his wits about him. He was twenty years younger than Wilson, but a rancher of fifty is occasionally a better man than he was at thirty. Any disadvantages Wilson suffered from being shaken up in the lariat were counterbalanced by Y.D.'s branding. His face was burning painfully, and his vision was not the best. But he had not followed the herds since childhood without learning to use his fists. He steadied himself on his knee to bring his mind into tune with this unusual warfare. Then he rushed upon Wilson.

He received another straight knock−out on the chin. It jarred the joints of his neck and left him dazed. It was half a minute before he could steady himself. He realized now that he had a fight on his hands. He was too cool a head to get into a panic, but he found he must take his time and do some brain work. Another chin smash would put him out for good.

He advanced carefully. Wilson stood awaiting him, a picture of poise and self−confidence. Y.D. led a quick left to Wilson's ribs, but failed to land. Wilson parried skilfully and immediately answered with a left swing to the chin.

But Y.D. was learning, and this time he was on guard. He dodged the blow, broke in and seized Wilson about the body. The two men stood for a moment like bulls with locked horns. Y.D. brought his weight to bear on his antagonist to force him to the ground, but in some way the Englishman got elbow room and began raining short jabs on his face, already raw from the branding−iron. Y.D. jerked back from this assault. Then came the third smash on the chin.

Y.D. gathered himself up very slowly. The world was swimming around in circles. On a post sat a girl, covering him with a revolver and laughing at him. Somewhere on the horizon Wilson's figure whipped forward and back. Then his horse came into the circle. Y.D. rose to his feet, strode with quick, uncertain steps to his horse, threw himself into the saddle and without a word started up the trail to The Forks.

"Seems to have gone with as little ceremony as he came," Wilson remarked to his daughter. "Now, let us get along with the calves." . . .

Y.D. rode the trail to The Forks in bitterness of spirit. He had sallied forth that morning strong and daring to administer summary punishment; he was retracing his steps thrashed, humiliated, branded for life by a red iron thrust in his face by a slip of a girl. He exhausted his by no means limited vocabulary of epithets, but even his torrents of abuse brought no solace to him. The hot sun beat down on his wounded face and hurt terribly, but he almost forgot that pain in the agony of his humiliation. He had been thrashed by an old man, with a wisp of a girl sitting on a post and acting as referee. He turned in his saddle and through the empty valley shouted an insulting name at her.

Then Y.D. slowly began to feel his face burn with a fire not of the branding−iron nor of the afternoon sun. He knew that his word was a lie. He knew that he would not have dared use it in her father's hearing. He knew that he was a coward. No man had ever called Y.D. a coward; no man had ever known him for a coward; he had never known himself as such−−until to−day. With all his roughness Y.D. had a sense of honor as keen as any razor blade. If he allowed himself wide latitude in some matters it was because he had lived his life in an atmosphere where the wide latitude was the thing. The prairie had been his bed, the sky his roof, himself his own policeman, judge, and executioner since boyhood. When responsibility is so centralized wide latitudes must be allowed. But the uttermost borders of that latitude were fixed with iron rigidity, and when he had thrown a vile epithet at a decent woman he knew he had broken the law of honor. He was a cur−−a cur who should be shot in his tracks for the cur he was.

Y.D. did hard thinking all the way to The Forks. Again and again the figure of the girl flashed before him; he would close his eyes and jerk his head back to avoid the burning iron. Then he saw her on the post, sitting, with apparent impartiality, on guard over the fight. Yes, she had been impartial, in a way. Y.D. was willing to admit that much, although he surmised that she knew more about her father's prowess with his fists than he had known. She had had no doubt about the outcome.

"Well, she's good backing for her old man, anyway," he admitted, with returning generosity. He had reached his cabin, and was dressing his face with salve and soda. "She sure played the game into the old man's hand."

Y.D. could not sleep that night. He was busy sorting up his ideas of life and revising them in the light of the day's experience. The more he thought of his behavior the less defensible it appeared. By midnight he was admitting that he had got just what was coming to him.

Presently he began to feel lonely. It was a strange sensation to Y.D., whose life had been loneliness from the first, so that he had never known it. Of course, there was the hunger for companionship; he had often known that. A drinking bout, a night at cards, a whirl into excess, and that would pass away. But this loneliness was different. The moan of the wind in the spruce trees communicated itself to him with an eerie oppressiveness. He sat up and lit a lamp. The light fell on the bare logs of his hut; he had never known before how bare they were. He got up and

shuffled about; took a lid off the stove and put it back on again; moved aimlessly about the room, and at last sat down on the bed.

"Y.D.," he said with a laugh, "I believe you've got nerves. You're behavin' like a woman."

But he could not laugh it off. The mention of a woman brought Wilson's daughter back vividly before him. "She's a man's girl," he found himself, saying.

He sat up with a shock at his own words. Then he rested his chin on his hands and gazed long at the blank wall before him. That was life−−his life. That blank wall was his life. . . . If only it had a window in it; a bright space through which the vision could catch a glimpse of something broader and better. . . . Well, he could put a window in it. He could put a window in his life.

The next noon Frank Wilson looked up with surprise to see Y.D. riding into his yard. Wilson stiffened instantly, as though setting himself against the shock of an attack, but there was nothing belligerent in Y.D.'s greeting.

"Wilson," he said, "I pulled a dirty trick on you yesterday, an' I got more than I reckoned on. The old Y.D. would have come back with a gun for vengeance. Well, I ain't after vengeance. I reckon you an' me has got to live in this valley, an' we might as well live peaceful. Does that go with you?"

"Full weight and no shrinkage," said Wilson, heartily, extending his hand. "Come up to the house for dinner."

Y.D. was nothing loth to accept the invitation, even though he had his misgivings as to how he should meet the women folks. It turned out that Mrs. Wilson had been at a neighboring ranch for some days, and the girl was in charge of the home. The flash in her eyes did not conceal a glint of triumph−−or was it humor?

"Jessie," her father said, with conspicuous matter−of−factness, "Y.D. has just dropped in for dinner."

Y.D. stood with his hat in his hand. This was harder than meeting Wilson. He felt that he could manage better if Wilson would get out.

"Miss Wilson," he managed to say at length, "I just thought I'd run in an' thank you for what you did yesterday."

"You're very welcome," she answered, and he could not tell whether the note in her voice was of fun or sarcasm. "Any time I can be of service−−"

"That's what I wanted to talk about," he broke in. There was something bewitching about the girl. She more than realized his fantastic visions of the night. She had mastered him. Perhaps it was a subtle masculine desire to turn her mastery into ultimate surrender that led him on.

"That's just what I want to talk about. You started breakin' in an outlaw yesterday, so to speak. How'd you like to finish the job?"

Y.D. was very red when this speech was finished. He had not known that a wisp of a girl could so discomfit a man.

"Is that a proposal?" she asked, and this time he was sure the note in her voice was one of banter. "I never had one, so I don't know."

"Well, yes, we'll call it that," he said, with returning courage.

"Well we won't, either," she flared back. "Just because I sat on a post and superintended the−−the ceremonies, is no reason that you should want to marry me,−−or I, you. You'll find water and a basin on the bench at the end of the house, and dinner will be ready in twenty minutes."

Y.D. had a feeling of a little boy being sent to wash himself.

But the next spring he built a larger cabin down the valley from The Forks, and to that cabin one day in June came Jessie Wilson to "finish the job."

CHAPTER III

Transley and Linder were so early about on the morning after their conversation with Y.D. that there was no opportunity of another meeting with the rancher's wife or daughter. They were slipping quietly out of the house to take breakfast with the men when Y.D. intercepted them.

"Breakfast is waitin', boys," he said, and led them back into the room where they had had supper the previous evening. Y.D. ate with them, but the meal was served by the Chinese boy.

In the yard all was jingling excitement. The men of the Y.D. were fraternally assisting Transley's gang in hitching up and getting away, and there was much bustling activity to an accompaniment of friendly profanity. It was not yet six o'clock, but the sun was well up over the eastern ridges that fringed the valley, and to the west the snow−capped summits of the mountains shone like polished ivory. The exhilaration in the air was almost intoxicating.

Linder quickly converted the apparent chaos of horses, wagons and implements into order; Transley had a last word with Y.D., and the rancher, shouting "Good luck, boys! Make it a thousand tons or more," waved them away.

Linder glanced back at the house. The bright sunshine had not awakened it; it lay dreaming in its grove of cool, green trees.

The trail lay, not up the valley, but across the wedge of foothills which divided the South Y.D. from the parent stream. The assent was therefore much more rapid than the trails which followed the general course of the stream. Huge hills, shouldering together, left at times only wagon−track room between; at other places they skirted dangerous cutbanks worn by spring freshets, and again trekked for long distances over gently curving uplands. In an hour the horses were showing the strain of it, and Linder halted them for a momentary rest.

It was at that moment that Drazk rode up, his face a study in obvious annoyance.

"Danged if I ain't left that Pete−horse's blanket down at the Y.D.," he exclaimed.

"Oh, well, you can easily ride back for it and catch up on us this afternoon," said Linder, who was not in the least deceived.

"Thanks, Lin," said Drazk. "I'll beat it down an' catch up on you this afternoon, sure," and he was off down the trail as fast as "that Pete−horse" could carry him.

At the Y.D. George conducted the search for his horse blanket in the strangest places. It took him mainly about the yard of the house, and even to the kitchen door, where he interviewed the Chinese boy.

"You catchee horse blanket around here?" he inquired, with appropriate gesticulations.

"You losee hoss blanket?"

"Yep."

"What kind hoss blanket?"

"Jus' a brown blanket for that Pete−horse."

"Whose hoss?"

"Mine," proudly.

"Where you catchee?"

"Raised him."

"Good hoss?"

"You betcha."

"Huh!"

Pause.

"You no catchee horse blanket, hey?"

"No!" said the Chinaman, whose manner instantly changed. In this brief conversation he had classified Drazk, and classified him correctly. "You catchee him, though−−some hell, too−−you stickee lound here. Beat it," and Drazk found the kitchen door closed in his face.

Drazk wandered slowly around the side of the house, and was not above a surreptitious glance through the windows. They revealed nothing. He followed a path out by a little gate. His ruse had proven a blind trail, and there was nothing to do but go down to the stables, take the horse blanket from the peg where he had hung it, and set out again for the South Y.D.

As he turned a corner of the fence the sight of a young woman burst upon him. She was hatless and facing the sun. Drazk, for all his admiration of the sex, had little eye for detail. "A sort of chestnut, about sixteen hands high, and with the look of a thoroughbred," he afterwards described her to Linder.

She turned at the sound of his footsteps, and Drazk instantly summoned a smirk which set his homely face beaming with good humor.

"Pardon me, ma'am," he said, with an elaborate bow. "I am Mr. Drazk−−Mr. George Drazk−−Mr. Transley's assistant. No doubt he spoke of me."

She was inside the enclosure formed by the fence, and he outside. She turned on him eyes which set Drazk's pulses strangely a−tingle, and subjected him to a deliberate but not unfriendly inspection.

"No, I don't believe he did," she said at length. Drazk cautiously approached, as though wondering how near he could come without frightening her away. He reached the fence and leaned his elbows on it. She showed no disposition to move. He cautiously raised one foot and rested it on the lower rail.

"It's a fine morning, ma'am," he ventured.

"Rather," she replied. "Why aren't you with Mr. Transley's gang?"

The question gave George an opening. "Well, you see," he said, "it's all on account of that Pete−horse. That's him down there. I rode away this morning and plumb forgot his blanket. So when Mr. Transley seen it he says, 'Drazk, take the day off an' go back for your blanket,' he says. 'There's no hurry,' he says. 'Linder an' me'll manage,' he says."

"Oh!"

"So here I am." He glanced at her again. She was showing no disposition to run away. She was about two yards from him, along the fence. Drazk wondered how long it would take him to bridge that distance. Even as he looked she leaned her elbows on the fence and rested one of her feet on the lower rail. Drazk fancied he saw the muscles about her mouth pulling her face into little, laughing curves, but she was gazing soberly into the distance.

"He's some horse, that Pete−horse," he said, taking up the subject which lay most ready to his tongue. "He's sure some horse."

"I have no doubt."

"Yep," Drazk continued. "Him an' me has seen some times. Whew! Things I couldn't tell you about, at all."

"Well, aren't you going to?"

Drazk glanced at her curiously. This girl showed signs of leading him out of his depth. But it was a very delightful sensation to feel one's self being led out of his depth by such a girl. Her face was motionless; her eyes fixed dreamily upon the brown prairies that swept up the flanks of the foothills to the south. Far and away on their curving crests the dark snake−line of Transley's outfit could be seen apparently motionless on the rim of the horizon.

Drazk changed his foot on the rail and the motion brought him six inches nearer her.

"Well, f'r instance," he said, spurring his imagination into action, "there was the fellow I run down an' shot in the Cypress Hills."

"Shot!" she exclaimed, and the note of admiration in her voice stirred him to further flights.

"Yep," he continued, proudly. "Shot an' buried him there, right by the road where he fell. Only me an' that Pete−horse knows the spot."

George sighed sentimentally. "It's awful sad, havin' to kill a man," he went on, "an' it makes you feel strange an' creepy, 'specially at nights. That is, the first one affects you that way, but you soon get used to it. You see, he insulted−−"

"The first one? Have you killed more than one?"

"Oh yes, lots of them. A man like me, what knocks around all over with all sorts of people, has to do it.

"Then there's the police. After you kill a few men nat'rally the police begins to worry you. I always hate to kill a policeman."

"It must be an interesting life."

"It is, but it's a hard one," he said, after a pause during which he had changed feet again and taken up another six inches of the distance which separated them. He was almost afraid to continue the conversation. He was finding progress so much easier than he had expected. It was evident that he had made a tremendous hit with Y.D.'s daughter. What a story to tell Linder! What would Transley say? He was shaking with excitement.

"It's an awful hard life," he went on, "an' there comes a time, Miss, when a man wants to quit it. There comes a time when every decent man wants to settle down. I been thinkin' about that a lot lately. . . . What do YOU think about it?" Drazk had gone white. He felt that he actually had proposed to her.

"Might be a good idea," she replied, demurely. He changed feet again. He had gone too far to stop. He must strike the iron when it was hot. Of course he had no desire to stop, but it was all so wonderful. He could speak to her now in a whisper.

"How about you, Miss? How about you an' me jus' settlin' down?"

She did not answer for a moment. Then, in a low voice,

"It wouldn't be fair to accept you like this, Mr. Drazk. You don't know anything about me."

"An' I don't want to−−I mean, I don't care what about you."

"But it wouldn't be fair until you know," she continued. "There are things I'd have to tell you, and I don't like to."

She was looking downwards now, and he fancied he could see the color rising about her cheeks and her frame trembling. He turned toward her and extended his arms. "Tell me−−tell your own George," he cooed.

"No," she said, with sudden rigidity. "I can't confess."

"Come on," he pleaded. "Tell me. I've been a bad man, too."

She seemed to be weighing the matter. "If I tell you, you will never, never mention it to anyone?"

"Never. I swear it to you," dramatically raising his hand.

"Well," she said, looking down bashfully and making little marks with her finger−nail in the pole on which they were leaning, "I never told anyone before, and nobody in the world knows it except he and I, and he doesn't know it now either, because I killed him. . . . I had to do it."

"Of course you did, dear," he murmured. It was wonderful to receive a woman's confidence like this.

"Yes, I had to kill him," she repeated. "You see, he−−he proposed to me without being introduced!"

It was some seconds before Drazk felt the blow. It came to him gradually, like returning consciousness to a man who has been stunned. Then anger swept him.

"You're playin' with me," he cried. "You're makin' a fool of me!"

"Oh, George dear, how could I?" she protested. "Now perhaps you better run along to that Pete−horse. He looks lonely."

"All right," he said, striding away angrily. As he walked his rage deepened, and he turned and shook his fist at her, shouting, "All right, but I'll get you yet, see? You think you're smart, and Transley thinks he's smart, but George Drazk is smarter than both of you, and he'll get you yet."

She waved her hand complacently, but her composure had already maddened him. He jerked his horse up roughly, threw himself into the saddle, and set out at a hard gallop along the trail to the South Y.D.

It was mid−afternoon when he overtook Transley's outfit, now winding down the southern slope of the tongue of foothills which divided the two valleys of the Y.D. Pete, wet over the flanks, pulled up of his own accord beside Linder's wagon.

"'Lo, George," said Linder. "What's your hurry?" Then, glancing at his saddle, "Where's your blanket?"

Drazk's jaw dropped, but he had a quick wit, although an unbalanced one.

"Well, Lin, I clean forgot all about it," he admitted, with a laugh, "but when a fellow spends the morning chatting with old Y.D.'s daughter I guess he's allowed to forget a few things."

"Oh!"

"Reckon you don't believe it, eh, Lin? Reckon you don't believe I stood an' talked with her over the fence for so long I just had to pull myself away?"

"You reckon right."

George was thinking fast. Here was an opportunity to present the incident in a light which had not before occurred to him.

"Guess you wouldn't believe she told me her secret−−told me somethin' she had never told anybody else, an' made me swear not to mention. Guess you don't believe that, neither?"

"You guess right again." Linder was quite unperturbed. He knew something of Drazk's gift for romancing.

Drazk leaned over in the saddle until he could reach Linder's ear with a loud whisper. "And she called me 'dear'; 'George dear,' she said, when I came away."

"The hell she did!" said Linder, at last prodded into interest. He considered the "George dear" idea a daring flight, even for Drazk. "Better not let old Y.D. hear you spinning anything like that, George, or he'll be likely to spoil your youthful beauty."

"Oh, Y.D.'s all right," said George, knowingly. "Y.D.'s all right. Well, I guess I'll let Pete feed a bit here, and then we'll go back for his blanket. You'll have to excuse me a bit these days, Lin; you know how it is when a fellow's in love."

"Huh!" said Linder.

George dropped behind, and an amused smile played on the foreman's face. He had known Drazk too long to be much surprised at anything he might do. It was Drazk's idea of gallantry to make love to every girl on sight. Possibly Drazk had managed to exchange a word with Zen, and his imagination would readily expand that into a love scene. Zen! Even the placid, balanced Linder felt a slight leap in the blood at the unusual name, which to him suggested the bright girl who had come into his life the night before. Not exactly into his life; it would be fairer to say she had touched the rim of his life. Perhaps she would never penetrate it further; Linder rather expected that would be the case. As for Drazk−−she was in no danger from him. Drazk's methods were so precipitous that they could be counted upon to defeat themselves.

Below stretched the valley of the South Y.D., almost a duplicate of its northern neighbor. The stream hugged the feet of the hills on the north side of the valley; its ribbon of green and gold was like a fringe gathered about the hem of their skirts. Beyond the stream lay the level plains of the valley, and miles to the south rose the next ridge of foothills. It was from these interlying plains that Y.D. expected his thousand tons of hay. There is no sleugh hay in the foothill country; the hay is cut on the uplands, a short, fine grass of great nutritive value. This grass, if uncut, cures in its natural state, and affords sustenance to the herds which graze over it all winter long. But it occasionally happens that after a snow− fall the Chinook wind will partially melt the snow, and then a sudden drop in the temperature leaves the prairies and foothills covered with a thin coating of ice. It is this ice covering, rather than heavy snow−fall or severe weather, which is the principal menace to winter grazing, and the foresighted rancher aims to protect himself and his stock from such a contingency by having a good reserve of hay in stack.

Here, then, was the valley in which Y.D. hoped to supplement the crop of his own hay lands. Linder's appreciative eye took in the scene: a scene of stupendous sizes and magnificent distances. As he slowly turned his vision down the valley a speck in the distance caught his sight and brought him to his feet. Shading his eyes from the bright afternoon sun he surveyed it long and carefully. There was no doubt about it: a haying outfit was already at work down the valley.

Leaving his team to manage themselves Linder dropped from his wagon and joined Transley. "Some one has beat us to it," he remarked.

"So I observed," said Transley. "Well, it's a big valley, and if they're satisfied to stay where they are there should be enough for both. If they're not−−"

"If they're not, what?" demanded Linder.

"You heard what Y.D. said. He said, 'Cut it, spite o' hell an' high water,' and I always obey orders."

They wound down the hillside until they came to the stream, the horses quickening their pace with the smell of water in their eager nostrils. It was a good ford, broad and shallow, with the typical boulder bottom of the mountain stream. The horses crowded into it, drinking greedily with a sort of droning noise caused by the bits in their mouths. When they had satisfied their thirst they raised their heads, stretched their noses far out and champed wide−mouthed upon their bits.

After a pause in the stream they drew out on the farther bank, where were open spaces among cottonwood trees, and Transley indicated that this would be their camping ground. Already smoke was issuing from the chuck wagon, and in a few minutes the men's sleeping tent and the two stable tents were flashing back the afternoon sun. They carried no eating tent; instead of that an eating wagon was backed up against the chuck wagon, and the men were served in it. They had not paused for a midday meal; the cook had provided sandwiches of bread and roast beef to dull the edge of their appetite, and now all were keen to fall to as soon as the welcome clanging of the plow−colter which hung from the end of the chuck wagon should give the signal.

Presently this clanging filled the evening air with sweet music, and the men filed with long, slouchy tread into the eating wagon. The table ran down the centre, with bench seats at either side. The cook, properly gauging the men's appetites, had not taken time to prepare meat and potatoes, but on the table were ample basins of graniteware filled with beans and bread and stewed prunes and canned tomatoes, pitchers of syrup and condensed milk, tins with marmalade and jam, and plates with butter sadly suffering from the summer heat. The cook filled their granite cups with hot tea from a granite pitcher, and when the cups were empty filled them again and again. And when the tables were partly cleared he brought out deep pies filled with raisins and with evaporated apples and a thick cake from which the men cut hunks as generous as their appetite suggested. Transley had learned, what women are said to have learned long ago, that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and the cook had carte blanche. Not a man who ate at Transley's table but would have spilt his blood for the boss or for the honor of the gang.

The meal was nearing its end when through a window Linder's eye caught sight of a man on horseback rapidly approaching. "Visitors, Transley," he was able to say before the rider pulled up at the open door of the covered wagon.

He was such a rider as may still be seen in those last depths of the ranching country where wheels have not entirely crowded Romance off of horseback. Spare and well−knit, his figure had a suggestion of slightness which the scales would have belied. His face, keen and clean−shaven, was brown as the August hills, and above it his broad hat sat in the careless dignity affected by the gentlemen of the plains. His leather coat afforded protection from the heat of day and from the cold of night.

"Good evening, men," he said, courteously. "Don't let me disturb your meal. Afterwards perhaps I can have a word with the boss."

"That's me," said Transley, rising.

"No, don't get up," the stranger protested, but Transley insisted that he had finished, and, getting down from the wagon, led the way a little distance from the eager ears of its occupants.

"My name is Grant," said the stranger; "Dennison Grant. I am employed by Mr. Landson, who has a ranch down the valley. If I am not mistaken you are Mr. Transley."

"You are not mistaken," Transley replied.

"And I am perhaps further correct," continued Grant, "in surmising that you are here on behalf of the Y.D., and propose cutting hay in this valley?"

"Your grasp of the situation does you credit." Transley's manner was that of a man prepared to meet trouble somewhat more than half way.

"And I may further surmise," continued Grant, quite unruffled, "that Y.D. neglected to give you one or two points of information bearing upon the ownership of this land, which would doubtless have been of interest to you?"

"Suppose you dismount," said Transley. "I like to look a man in the face when I talk business to him."

"That's fair," returned Grant, swinging lightly from his horse. "I have a preference that way myself." He advanced to within arm's length of Transley and for a few moments the two men stood measuring each other. It was steel boring steel; there was not a flicker of an eyelid.

"We may as well get to business, Grant," said Transley at length. "I also can do some surmising. I surmise that you were sent here by Landson to forbid me to cut hay in this valley. On what authority he acts I neither know nor care. I take my orders from Y.D. Y.D. said cut the hay. I am going to cut it."

"YOU ARE NOT!"

Transley's muscles could be seen to go tense beneath his shirt.

"Who will stop me?" he demanded.

"You will be stopped."

"The Mounted Police?" There was contempt in his voice, but the contempt was not for the Force. It was for the rancher who would appeal to the police to settle a "friendly" dispute.

"No, I don't think it will be necessary to call in the police," returned Grant, dropping back to his pleasant, casual manner. "You know Y.D., and doubtless you feel quite safe under his wing. But you don't know Landson. Neither do you know the facts of the case−− the right and wrong of it. Under these handicaps you cannot reach a decision which is fair to yourself and to your men."

"Further argument is simply waste of time," Transley interrupted. "I have told you my instructions, and I have told you that I am going to carry them out. Have you had your supper?"

"Yes, thanks. All right, we won't argue any more. I'm not arguing now−−I'm telling you, Y.D. has cut hay in this valley so long he thinks he owns it, and the other ranchers began to think he owned it. But Landson has been making a few inquiries. He finds that these are not Crown lands, but are privately owned by speculators in New York. He has contracted with the owners for the hay rights of these lands for five years, beginning with the present season. He is already cutting farther down the valley, and will be cutting here within a day or two."

"The trout ought to bite on a fine evening like this," said Transley. "I have an extra rod and some flies. Will you try a throw or two with me?"

"I would be glad to, but I must get back to camp. I hope you land a good string," and so saying Grant remounted, nodded to Transley and again to the men now scattered about the camp, and started his horse on an easy lope down the valley.

"Well, what is it to be?" said Linder, coming up with the rest of the boys. "War?"

"War if they fight," Transley replied, unconcernedly. "Y.D. said cut the hay; 'spite o' hell an' high water,' he said. That goes."

Slowly the great orb of the sun sank until the crest of the mountains pierced its molten glory and sent it burnishing their rugged heights. In the east the plains were already wrapped in shadow. Up the valley crept the veil of night, hushing even the limitless quiet of the day. The stream babbled louder in the lowering gloom; the stamp and champing of horses grew less insistent; the cloudlets overhead faded from crimson to mauve to blue to grey.

Transley tapped the ashes from his pipe and went to bed.

CHAPTER IV

"How about a ride over to the South Fork this afternoon, Zen?" said Y.D. to his daughter the following morning. "I just want to make sure them boys is hittin' the high spots. The grass is gettin' powerful dry an' you can never tell what may happen."

"You're on," the girl replied across the breakfast table. Her mother looked up sharply. She wondered if the prospect of another meeting with Transley had anything to do with Zen's alacrity.

"I had hoped you would outgrow your slang, Zen," she remonstrated gently. "Men like Mr. Transley are likely to judge your training by your speech."

"I should worry. Slang is to language what feathers are to a hat−− they give it distinction, class. They lift it out of the drab commonplace."

"Still, I would not care to be dressed entirely in feathers," her mother thrust quietly.

"Good for you, Mother!" the girl exclaimed, throwing an arm about her neck and planking a firm kiss on her forehead. "That was a solar plexus. Now I'll try to be good and wear a feather only here and there. But Mr. Transley has nothing to do with it."

"Of course not," said Y.D. "Still, Transley is a man with snap in him. That's why he's boss. So many of these ornery good−for− nothin's is always wishin' they was boss, but they ain't willin' to pay the price. It costs somethin' to get to the head of the herd−− an' stay there."

"He seems firm on all fours," the girl agreed. "How do we travel, and when?"

"Better take a democrat, I guess," her father said. "We can throw in a tent and some bedding for you, as we'll maybe stay over a couple of nights."

"The blue sky is tent enough for me," Zen protested, "and I can surely rustle a blanket or two around the camp. Besides, I'll want a riding horse to get around with there."

"You can run him beside the democrat," said her father. "You're gettin' too big to go campin' promisc'us like when you was a kid."

"That's the penalty for growing up," Zen sighed. "All right, Dad. Say two o'clock?"

The girl spent the morning helping her mother about the house, and casting over in her mind the probable developments of the near future. She would not have confessed outwardly to even a casual interest in Transley, but inwardly she admitted that the promise of another meeting with him gave zest to the prospect. Transley was interesting. At least he was out of the commonplace. His bold directness had rather fascinated her. He had a will. Her father had always admired men with a will, and Zen shared his admiration. Then there was Linder. The fierce light of Transley's charms did not blind her to the glow of quiet capability which she saw in Linder. If one were looking for a husband, Linder had much to recommend him. He was probably less capable than Transley, but he would be easier to manage. . . . But who was looking for a husband? Not Zen. No, no, certainly not Zen.

Then there was George Drazk, whose devotions fluctuated between "that Pete−horse" and the latest female to cross his orbit. At the thought of George Drazk Zen laughed outright. She had played with him. She had made a monkey of him, and he deserved all he had got. It was not the first occasion upon which Zen had let herself drift

with the tide, always sure of justifying herself and discomfiting someone by the swift, strong strokes with which, at the right moment, she reached the shore. Zen liked to think of herself as careering through life in the same way as she rode the half−broken horses of her father's range. How many such a horse had thought that the lithe body on his back was something to race with, toy with, and, when tired of that, fling precipitately to earth! And not one of those horses but had found that while he might race and toy with his rider within limitations, at the last that light body was master, and not he. . . . Yet Zen loved best the horse that raced wildest and was hardest to bring into subjection.

That was her philosophy of life so far as a girl of twenty may have a philosophy of life. It was to go on and see what would happen, supported always by a quiet confidence that in any pinch she could take care of herself. She had learned to ride and shoot, to sleep out and cook in the open, to ride the ranges after dark by instinct and the stars−−she had learned these things while other girls of her age learned the rudiments of fancy−work and the scales of the piano.

Her father and mother knew her disposition, loved it, and feared for it. They knew that there was never a rider so brave, so skilful, so strong, but some outlaw would throw him at last. So at fourteen they sent her east to a boarding−school. In two months she was back with a letter of expulsion, and the boast of having blacked the eyes of the principal's daughter.

"They couldn't teach me any more, Mother," she said. "They admitted it. So here I am."

Y.D. was plainly perplexed. "It's about time you was halter− broke," he commented, "but who's goin' to do it?"

"If a girl has learned to read and think, what more can the schools do for her?" she demanded.

And Y.D., never having been to school, could not answer.

The sun was capping the Rockies with molten gold when the rancher and his daughter swung down the foothill slopes to the camp on the South Y.D. Strings of men and horses returning from the upland meadows could be seen from the hillside as they descended.

Y.D.'s sharp eyes measured the scale of operations.

"They're hittin' the high spots," he said, approvingly. "That boy Transley is a hum−dinger."

Zen made no reply.

"I say he's a hum−dinger," her father repeated.

The girl looked up with a quick flush of surprise. Y.D. was no puzzle to her, and if he went out of his way to commend Transley he had a purpose.

"Mr. Transley seems to have made a hit with you, Dad," she remarked, evasively.

"Well, I do like to see a man who's got the goods in him. I like a man that can get there, just as I like a horse that can get there. I've often wondered, Zen, what kind you'd take up with, when it came to that, an' hoped he'd be a live crittur. After I'm dead an' buried I don't want no other dead one spendin' my simoleons."

"How about Mr. Linder?" said Zen, naively.

Her father looked up sharply. "Zen," he said, "you're not serious?"

Zen laughed. "I don't figure you're exactly serious, Dad, in your talk about Transley. You're just feeling out. Well−−let me do a little feeling out. How about Linder?"

"Linder's all right," Y.D. replied. "Better than the average, I admit. But he's not the man Transley is. If he was, he wouldn't be workin' for Transley. You can't keep a man down, Zen, if he's got the goods in him. Linder comes up over the average, so's you can notice it, but not like Transley does."

Zen did not pursue the subject. She understood her father's philosophy very well indeed, and, to a large degree, she accepted it as her own. It was natural that a man of Y.D.'s experience, who had begun life with no favors and had asked none since, and had made of himself a big success−−it was natural that such a man should judge all others by their material achievements. The only quality Y.D. took off his hat to was the ability to do things. And Y.D.'s idea of things was very concrete; it had to do with steers and land, with hay and money and men. It was by such things he measured success. And Zen was disposed to agree with him. Why not? It was the only success she knew.

Transley was greeting them as they drew into camp.

"Glad to see you, Y.D.; honored to have a visit from you, Ma'am," he said, as he helped them from the democrat, and gave instructions for the care of their horses. "Supper is waiting, and the men won't be ready for some time."

Y.D. shook hands with Transley cordially. "Zen an' me just thought we'd run over and see how the wind blew," he said. "You got a good spot here for a camp, Transley. But we won't go in to supper just now. Let the men eat first; I always say the work horses should be first at the barn. Well, how's she goin'?"

"Fine," said Transley, "fine," but it was evident his mind was divided. He was glancing at Zen, who stood by during the conversation.

"I must try and make your daughter at home," he continued. "I allow myself the luxury of a private tent, and as you will be staying over night I will ask you to accept it for her."

"But I have my own tent with me, in the democrat," said Zen. "If you will let the men pitch it under the trees where I can hear the water murmuring in the night−−"

"Who'd have thought it, from the daughter of the practical Y.D!" Transley bantered. "All right, Ma'am, but in the meantime take my tent. I'll get water, and there's a basin." He already was leading the way. "Make yourself at home−−Zen. May I call you Zen?" he added, in a lower voice, as they left Y.D. at a distance.

"Everybody calls me Zen."

They were standing at the door of the tent, he holding back the flap that she might enter. The valley was already in shadow, and there was no sunlight to play on her hair, but her face and figure in the mellow dusk seemed entirely winsome and adorable. There was no taint of Y.D.'s millions in the admiration that Transley bent upon her. . . . Of course, as an adjunct, the millions were not to be despised.

When the men had finished supper Transley summoned her. On the way to the chuck−wagon she passed close to George Drazk. It was evident that he had chosen a station with that result in view. She had passed by when she turned, whimsically.

"Well, George, how's that Pete−horse?" she said.

"Up an comin' all the time, Zen," he answered.

She bit her lip over his familiarity, but she had no come−back. She had given him the opening, by calling him "George."

"You see, I got quite well acquainted with Mr. Drazk when he came back to hunt for a horse blanket which had mysteriously disappeared," she explained to Transley.

They ascended the steps which led from the ground into the wagon. The table had been reset for four, and as the shadows were now heavy in the valley, candles had been lighted. Y.D. and his daughter sat on one side, Transley on the other. In a moment Linder entered. He had already had a talk with Y.D., but had not met Zen since their supper together in the rancher's house.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. Linder," said the girl, rising and extending her hand across the table. "You see we lost no time in returning your call."

Linder took her hand in a frank grasp, but could think of nothing in particular to say. "We're glad to have you," was all he could manage.

Zen was rather sorry that Linder had not made more of the situation. She wondered what quick repartee, shot, no doubt, with double meaning, Transley would have returned. It was evident that, as her father had said, Linder was second best. And yet there was something about his shyness that appealed to her even more than did Transley's superb self−confidence.

The meal was spent in small talk about horses and steers and the merits of the different makes of mowing machines. When it was finished Transley apologized for not offering his guests any liquor. "I never keep it about the camp," he said.

"Quite right," Y.D. agreed, "quite right. Booze is like fire; a valuable thing in careful hands, but mighty dangerous when everybody gets playin' with it. I reckon the grass is gettin' pretty dry, Transley?"

"Mighty dry, all right, but we're taking every precaution."

"I'm sure you are, but you can't take precautions for other people. Has anybody been puttin' you up to any trouble here?"

"Well, no, I can't exactly say trouble," said Transley, "but we've got notice it's coming. A chap named Grant, foreman, I think, for Landson, down the valley, rode over last night, and invited us not to cut any hay hereabouts. He was very courteous, and all that, but he had the manner of a man who'd go quite a distance in a pinch."

"What did you tell him?"

"Told him I was working for Y.D., and then asked him to stay for supper."

"Did he stay?" Zen asked.

"He did not. He cantered off back, courteous as he came. And this morning we went out on the job, and have cut all day, and nothing has happened."

"I guess he found you were not to be bluffed," said Zen, and Transley could not prevent a flush of pleasure at her compliment. "Of course Landson has no real claim to the hay, has he, Dad?"

"Of course not. I reckon them'll be his stacks we saw down the valley. Well, I'm not wantin' to rob him of the fruit of his labor, an' if he keeps calm perhaps we'll let him have what he has cut, but if he don't−−" Y.D.'s face hardened with the set of a man accustomed to fight, and win, his own battles. "I think we'll just stick around a day or two in case he tries to start anythin'," he continued.

"Well, five o'clock comes early," said Transley, "and you folks must be tired with your long drive. We've had your tent pitched down by the water, Zen, so that its murmurs may sing you to sleep. You see, I have some of the poetic in me, too. Mr. Linder will show you down, and I will see that your father is made comfortable. And remember−−five o'clock does not apply to visitors."

The camp now lay in complete darkness, save where a lantern threw its light from a tent by the river. Zen walked by Linder's side. Presently she reached out and took his arm.

"I beg your pardon," said Linder. "I should have offered−−"

"Of course you should. Mr. Transley would not have waited to be told. Dad thinks that anything that's worth having in this world is worth going after, and going after hard. I guess I'm Dad's daughter in more ways than one."

"I suppose he's right," Linder confessed, "but I've always been shy. I get along all right with men."

"The truth is, Mr Linder, you're not shy−−you're frightened. Now I can well believe that no man could frighten you. Consequently you get along all right with men. Do I need to tell you the rest?"

"I never thought of myself as being afraid of women," he replied. "It has always seemed that they were, well, just out of my line."

They had reached the tent but the girl made no sign of going in. In the silence the sibilant lisp of the stream rose loud about them.

"Mr. Linder," she said at length, "do you know why Mr. Transley sent you down here with me?"

"I'm sure I don't, except to show you to your tent."

"That was the least of his purposes. He wanted to show you that he wasn't afraid of you; and he wanted to show me that he wasn't afraid of you. Mr. Transley is a very self−confident individual. There is such a thing as being too self−confident, Mr. Linder, just as there is such a thing as being too shy. Do you get me? Good night!" And with a little rush she was in her tent.

Linder walked slowly down to the water's edge, and stood there, thinking, until her light went out. His brain was in a whirl with a sensation entirely strange to it. A light wind, laden with snow− smell from the mountains, pressed gently against his features, and presently Linder took deeper breaths than he had ever known before.

"By Jove!" he said. "Who'd have thought it possible?"

CHAPTER V

When Zen awoke next morning the mowing machines of Transley's outfit were already singing their symphony in the meadows; she could hear the metallic rhythm as it came borne on the early breeze. She lay awake on her camp cot for a few minutes, stretching her fingers to the canvas ceiling and feeling that it was good to be alive. And it was. The ripple of water came from almost underneath the walls of her tent; the smell of spruce trees and

balm−o'−Gilead and new−mown hay was in the air. She could feel the warmth of the sunshine already pouring upon her white roof; she could trace the gentle sway of the trees by the leafy patterns gliding forward and back. A cheeky gopher, exploring about the door of her tent, ventured in, and, sitting bolt upright, sent his shrill whistle boldly forth. She watched his fine bravery for a minute, then clapped her hands together, and laughed as he fled.

"Therein we have the figures of both Transley and Linder," she mused to herself. "Upright, Transley; horizontal, Linder. I doubt if the poor fellow slept last night after the fright I gave him." Slowly and calmly she turned the incident over in her mind. She wondered a little if she had been quite fair with Linder. Her words and conduct were capable of very broad interpretations. She was not at all in love with Linder; of that Zen was very sure. She was equally sure that she was not at all in love with Transley. She admitted that she admired Transley for his calm assumptions, but they nettled her a little nevertheless. If this should develop into a love affair−−IF it should−−she had no intention that it was to be a pleasant afternoon's canter. It was to be a race−−a race, mind you−−and may the best man win! She had a feeling, amounting almost to a conviction, that Transley underrated his foreman's possibilities in such a contest. She had seen many a dark horse, less promising than Linder, gallop home with the stakes.

Then Zen smiled her own quiet, self−confident smile, the smile which had come down to her from Y.D. and from the Wilsons−−the only family that had ever mastered him. The idea of either Transley or Linder thinking he could gallop home with HER! For the moment she forgot to do Linder the justice of remembering that nothing was further from his thoughts. She would show them. She would make a race of it−−ALMOST to the wire. In the home stretch she would make the leap, out and over the fence. She was in it for the race, not for the finish.

Zen contemplated for some minutes the possibilities of that race; then, as the imagination threatened to become involved, she sprang from her cot and thrust a cautious head through the door of her tent. The gang had long since gone to the fields, and friendly bushes sheltered her from view from the cook−car. She drew on her boots, shook out her hair, threw a towel across her shoulders, and, soap in hand, walked boldly the few steps to the stream rippling over its shiny gravel bed. She stopped and tested the water with her fingers; then brought it in fresh, cool handfuls about her face and neck.

"Mornin', Zen!" said a familiar voice. "'Scuse me for happenin' to be here. I was jus' waterin' that Pete−horse after a hard ride."

"Now look here, Mr. Drazk!" said the girl, whipping her scanty clothing about her, "if I had a gun that Pete−horse would be scheduled for his fastest travel in the next twenty seconds, and he'd end it without a rider, too. I won't have you spying about!"

"Aw, don' be cross," Drazk protested. He was sitting on his horse in the ford a dozen yards away. "I jus' happened along. I guess the outside belongs to all of us. Say, Zen, if I was to get properly interduced, what's the chances?"

"Not one in a million, and if that isn't odds enough I'll double it."

"You're not goin' to hitch up with Linder, are you?"

"Linder? Who said anything about Linder?"

"Gee, but ain't she innercent?" Drazk stepped his horse up a few feet to facilitate conversation. "I alus take an interest in innercent gals away from home, so I kinda kep' my angel eye on you las' night. An' I see Linder stalkin' aroun' here an' sighin' out over the water when he should 'ave been in bed. But, of course, he's been interduced."

"George Drazk, if you speak to me again I'll horse−whip you out of the camp at noon before all the men. Now, beat it!"

"Jus' as you say, Ma'am," he returned, with mock courtesy. "But I could tell a strange story if I would. But you don't need to be scared. That's one thing I never do−−I never squeal on a friend."

She was burning with his insults, and if she had had a gun at hand she undoubtedly would have made good her threat. But she had none. Drazk very deliberately turned his horse and rode away toward the meadows.

"Oh, won't I fix him!" she said, as she continued her toilet in a fury. She had not the faintest idea what revenge she would take, but she promised herself that it would leave nothing to be desired. Then, because she was young and healthy and an optimist, and did not know what it meant to be afraid, she dismissed the incident from her mind to consider the more urgent matter of breakfast.

Tompkins, the cook, had not needed Transley's suggestion to put his best foot forward when catering to Y.D. and his daughter. Tompkins' soul yearned for a cooking berth that could be occupied the year round. Work in the railway camps had always left him high and dry at the freeze−up−−dry, particularly, and a few nights in Calgary or Edmonton saw the end of his season's earnings. Then came a precarious existence for Tompkins until the scrapers were back on the dump the following spring. A steady job, cooking on a ranch like the Y.D.; if Tompkins had written the Apocalypse that would have been his picture of heaven. So he had left nothing undone, even to despatching a courier over night to a railway station thirty miles away for fresh fruit and other delicacies. Another of the gang had been impressed into a trip up the river to a squatter who was suspected of keeping one or two milch cows and sundry hens.

"This way, Ma'am," Tompkins was waving as Zen emerged from the grove. "Another of our usual mornings. Hope you slep' well, Ma'am." He stood deferentially aside while she ascended the three steps that led into the covered wagon.

Zen gave a little shriek of delight, and Tompkins felt that all his efforts had been well repaid. One end of the table−−it was with a sore heart Tompkins had realized that he could not cut down the big table−−one end of the table was set with a clean linen cloth and granite dishware scoured until it shone. Beside Zen's plate were grape fruit and sliced oranges and real cream.

"However did you manage it?" she gasped.

"Nothing's too good for Y.D.'s daughter," was the only explanation Tompkins would offer, but, as Zen afterwards said, the smile on his face was as good as another breakfast. After the fruit came porridge, and more cream; then fresh boiled eggs with toast; then fresh ripe strawberries with more cream.

"Mr.−−Mr.−−"

"Tompkins, Ma'am; Cyrus Tompkins," he supplied.

"Well, Mr. Tompkins, you're a wonder, and when there's a new cook to be engaged for the Y.D. I shall think of you."

"Indeed I wish you would, Ma'am," he said, earnestly. "This road work's all right, and nobody ever cooked for a better boss than Mr. Transley−−savin' it would be your father, Ma'am−−but I'm a man of family, an' it's pretty hard−−"

"Family, did you say, Mr. Tompkins? How many of a family have you?"

"Well, it's seven years since I heard from them−−I haven't corresponded very reg'lar of late, but they WAS six−−"

The story of Tompkins' family was cut short by the arrival of a team and mowing machine.

"What's up, Fred?" called Tompkins through a window of his dining car to the driver. "Breakfust is just over, an' dinner ain't begun."

For answer the man addressed as Fred slowly produced an iron stake about eighteen inches long and somewhat less than an inch in diameter.

"What kind of shrubbery do you call that, Tompkins?" he demanded.

"Well, it ain't buffalo grass, an' it ain't brome grass, an' I don't figger it's alfalfa," said Tompkins, meditatively.

"No, and it ain't a grub−stake," Fred replied, with some sarcasm. "It's a iron stake, growin' right in a nice little clump of grass, and I run on to it and bust my cuttin'−bar all to−−that is, all to pieces," he completed rather lamely, taking Zen into his glance.

"I think I follow you," she said, with a smile. "Can you fix it here?"

"Nope. Have to go to town for a new one. Two days' lost time, when every hour counts. Hello! Here comes someone else."

Another of the teamsters was drawing into camp. "Hello, Fred!" he said, upon coming up with his fellow workman, "you in too? I had a bit of bad luck. I run smash on to an iron stake right there in the ground and crumpled my knife like so much soap."

"I did worse," said Fred, with a grin. "I bust my cuttin'−bar."

The two men exchanged a steady glance for half a minute. Then the new−comer gave vent to a long, low whistle.

"So that's the way of it," he said. "That's the kind of war Mr. Landson makes. Well, we can fight back with the same weapons, but that won't cut the hay, will it?"

By this time Y.D. and Transley, with four other teamsters, were observed coming in. Each driver had had the same experience. An iron stake, carefully hidden in a clump of grass, had been driven down into the ground until it was just high enough to intercept the cutting−bar. The fine, sharp knives were crumpled against it; in some cases the heavy cutting−bar, in which the knives operate, was damaged.

Y.D.'s face was black with fury.

"That's the lowest, mangyest, cowardliest trick I ever had pulled on me," he was saying. "I'm plumb equal to ridin' down to Landson's an' drivin' one of them stakes through under his short ribs."

"But can you prove that Landson did it?" said Zen, who had an element of caution in her when her father was concerned. She had a vision of a fight, with Landson pleading entire ignorance of the whole cause of offence, and her father probably summoned by the police for unprovoked assault.

"No, I can't prove that Landson did it, an' I can't prove that the grass my steers eat turns to hair on their backs," he retorted, "but I reach my own conclusions. Is there any shootin' irons in the place?"

"Now, Dad, that's enough," said the girl, firmly. "There'll be no shooting between you and Landson. If there is to be anything of that kind I'll ride down ahead and warn him of what's coming."

"Darter," said Y.D.−−it was only on momentous occasions that he addressed her as daughter−−"I brought you over here as a guest, not as manager o' my affairs. I've taken care of those affairs for some considerable years, an' I reckon I still have the qualifications. If you're a−goin' to act up obstrep'rous I'll get Mr. Transley to lend me a man to escort you home."

"At your service, Y.D.," said George Drazk, who was in the crowd which had gathered about the rancher, his daughter, and Transley. "That Pete−horse an' me would jus' see her over the hills a− whoopin'."

"I don't think it would be wise to take any extreme measures, at least, not just yet," said Transley. "It's out of the question to suppose that Landson has picketed the whole valley with those stakes. It is now quite clear why we were left in peace yesterday. He wanted us to get started, and get a few swaths cut, so that he would know where to drive the stakes to catch us the next morning. Some of these machines can be repaired at once, and the others within a day or two. We will just move over a little and start on new fields. There's pretty good moonlight these nights and we'll leave a few men out on guard, and perhaps we can catch the enemy at his little game. Let us get one of Landson's men with the goods on him."

Y.D. was somewhat pacified by this suggestion. "You're a practical devil, Transley," he said, with considerable admiration. "Now, in a case of this kind I jus' get plumb fightin' mad. I want to bore somebody. I guess it's the only kind o' procedure that comes easy to my hand. I guess you're right, but I hate to let anybody have the laugh on me." Y.D. looked down the valley, shading his eyes with his hand. "That son−of−a−gun has got a dozen or more stacks down there. I don't wish nobody any hard luck, but if some tenderfoot was to drop a cigar−−"

"In that case I suppose you'd pray for a west wind, Dad," Zen suggested, "but the winds in these valleys, even with your prayers to direct them, are none too reliable."

"Everybody to work on fixing up these machines," Transley ordered. "Linder, make a list of what repairs are needed and Drazk will ride to town with it at once. Some of them may have to come out from the city by express. Drazk can get the orders in and a team will follow to bring out the repairs."

In a moment Transley's men were busy with wrenches and hammers, replacing knives and appraising damages. Even in his anger Y.D. took approving note of the promptness of Transley's decisions and the zest with which his men carried them into effect.

"A he−man, that fellow, Zen," he confided to his daughter, "If he'd blowed into this country thirty years ago, like I did, he'd own it by this time plumb to the sky−line."

When the list of repairs was completed Linder handed it to Drazk.

"Beat it to town on that Pete−horse of yours, George," he said. "Burn the grass on the road."

"I bet I'll be ten miles on the road back when I meet my shadow goin'," said Drazk, making a spectacular leap into his saddle. "Bye, Y.D!; bye, Zen!" he shouted while he whirled his horse's head eastward and waved his hand to where they stood. In spite of her annoyance at him she had to smile and return his salute.

"Mr. Drazk is irrepressible," she remarked to Transley.

"And irresponsible," the contractor returned. "I sometimes wonder why I keep him. In fact, I don't really keep him; he just stays. Every spring he hunts me up and fastens on. Still, I get a lot of good service out of him. Praise 'that Pete−horse,' and George would ride his head off for you. He has a weakness for wanting to marry every woman he sees, but his infatuations seem harmless enough."

"I know something of his weakness," Zen replied. "I have already been honored with a proposal."

Transley looked in her face. It was slightly flushed, whether with the summer sun or with her confession, but it was a wonderfully good face to look in.

"Zen," he said, in a low voice that Y.D. and the others might not hear, "how would you take a serious proposal, made seriously by one who loves you, and who knows that you are, and always will be, a queen among women?"

"If you had been a cow puncher instead of a contractor," she told him, "I'm sure you would long ago have ended your life in some dash over a cutbank."

Meanwhile Drazk pursued his way to town. The trail, after crossing the ford, turned abruptly to the right from that which led across country to the North Y.D. For a mile or more it skirted the stream in a park−like drive through groves of spruce and cottonwood. Sunshine and the babble of water everywhere filled the air. Sunshine, too, filled George Drazk's heart. The importance of his mission was pleasantly heavy upon him. He pictured the impression he would make in town, galloping in with his horse wet over the back, and rushing to the implement agency with all the importance of a courier from Y.D. He would let two of the boys take Pete to the stable, and then, seated on a mower seat in the shade, he would tell the story. It would lose nothing in the telling. He would even add how Zen had thrown a kiss at him in parting. Perhaps he would have Zen kiss him on the cheek before the whole camp. He turned that possibility over in his mind, weighing nicely the credulity of his imaginary audience. . . . At any rate, whether he decided to put that in the story or not, it was very pleasant to think about.

Presently the trail turned abruptly up a gully leading into the hills. A huge cutbank, jutting into the river, barred the way in front, and its precipitous side, a hundred feet or more in height, kept continually crumbling and falling into the stream. These cutbanks are a terror to inexperienced riders. The valleys are swallowed up in the tawny sameness of the ranges; the vision catches only the higher levels, and one may gallop to the verge of a precipice before becoming aware of its existence. It was to this that Zen had referred in speaking of Transley's precipitateness.

Drazk followed the gully up into the hills, letting his horse drop back to a walk in the hard going along the dry bed of a stream which flowed only in the spring freshets. Pete had to pick his way over boulders and across stretches of sand and boggy patches of black mud formed by little springs leaking out under clumps of willows. Here and there the white ribs of a steer's skeleton peered through the brush; once or twice an overpowering stench gave notice of a carcass not wholly decomposed.

It was not a pleasant environment, but in an hour Drazk was out again on the brow of the brown hills, where the sunshine flooded about and a fresh breeze beat up against his face. After all his winding about in the gully he was not more than a mile from the cutbank.

"I reckon I could get a great view from that cutbank of what Landson is doin'," he suddenly remarked to himself. He took off his hat and scratched his tousled head in reflection. "Linder said to beat it," he ruminated, "but I can't get back to−night anyway, an' it might be worth while to do a little scoutin'. Here goes!"

He struck a smart gallop to the southward, and brought his horse up, spectacularly, a yard from the edge of the precipice. The view which his position commanded was superb. Up the valley lay the white tents of Transley's outfit, almost hidden in green foliage; the ford across the river was distinctly visible, and stretching south from it lay, like a great curving snake, the trail which wound across the valley and lost itself in the foothills far to the south; across the western horizon hung the purple curtain of the mountains, soft and vague in their noonday mists, but touched with settings of ivory where the snow fields beat back the blazing sunshine; far down the valley was the gleam of Landson's whitewashed buildings, and nearer at hand the greenish−brown of the upland meadows which his haymakers had already cleared of their crop of prairie wool. This was now arising in enormous stacks;

it must have been three miles to where they lay, but Drazk's keen eyes could distinguish ten completed stacks and two others in course of building. He could even see the sweeps hauling the new hay, after only a few hours of sun−drying, and sliding it up the inclined platforms which dumped it into the form of stacks. The foothill rancher makes hay by horse power, and almost without the aid of a pitch−fork. Even as Drazk watched he saw a load skidded up; saw its apparent momentary poise in air; saw the well−trained horses stop and turn and start back to the meadow with their sweep. And up the valley Transley's outfit was at a standstill.

Drazk employed his limited but expressive vocabulary. It was against all human nature to look on such a scene unmoved. He recalled Y.D.'s half−spoken wish about a random cigar. Then suddenly George Drazk's mouth dropped open and his eyes rounded with a great idea.

Of course, it was against all the rules of the range−−it was outlaw business−−but what about driving iron stakes in a hay meadow? Drazk's philosophy was that the end justifies the means. And if the end would win the approval of Y.D.−−and of Y.D.'s daughter−− then any means was justified. Had not Linder said, "Burn the grass on the road?" Drazk knew well enough that Linder's remark was a figure of speech, but his eccentric mind found no trouble in converting it into literal instructions.

Drazk sniffed the air and looked at the sun. A soft breeze was moving slowly up the valley; the sun was just past noon. There was every reason to expect that as the lowland prairies grew hot with the afternoon sunshine a breeze would come down out of the mountains to occupy the area of great atmospheric expansion. Drazk knew nothing about the theory of the thing; all that concerned him was the fact that by mid−afternoon the wind would probably change to the west.

Two miles down the valley he found a gully which gave access to the water's edge. He descended, located a ford, and crossed. There were cattle−trails through the cottonwoods; he might have followed them, but he feared the telltale shoe−prints. He elected the more difficult route down the stream itself. The South Y.D. ran mostly on a wide gravel bottom; it was possible to pick out a course which kept Pete in water seldom higher than his knees. An hour of this, and Drazk, peering through the trees, could see the nearest of Landson's stacks not half a mile away. The Landson gang were working farther down the valley, and the stack itself covered approach from the river.

Drazk slipped from the saddle, and stole quietly into the open. The breeze was now coming down the valley.

CHAPTER VI

Transley's men had repaired such machines as they could and returned to work. The clatter of mowing machines filled the valley; the horses were speeded up to recover lost time. Transley and Y.D. rode about, carefully scrutinizing the short grass for iron stakes, and keeping a general eye on operations.

Suddenly Transley sat bolt−still on his horse. Then, in a low voice,

"Y.D!" he said.

The rancher turned and followed the line of Transley's vision. The nearest of Landson's stacks was ablaze, and a great pillar of smoke was rolling skyward. Even as they watched, the base of the fire seemed to spread; then, in a moment, tongues of flame were seen leaping from a stack farther on.

"Looks like your prayers were answered, Y.D.," said Transley. "I bet they haven't a plow nearer than the ranch."

Y.D. seemed fascinated by the sight. He could not take his eyes off it. He drew a cigar from his pocket and thrust

it far into his mouth, chewing it savagely and rolling it in his lips, but, according to the law of the hayfield, refraining from lighting it. At first there was a gleam of vengeance in his eyes, but presently that gave way to a sort of horror. Every honorable tradition of the range demanded that he enlist his force against the common enemy.

"Hell, Transley!" he ejaculated, "we can't sit and look at that! Order the men out! What have we got to fight with?"

For answer Transley swung round in his saddle and struck his palm into Y.D.'s.

"Good boy, Y.D!" he said. "I did you an injustice−−I mean, about your prayers being answered. We haven't as much as a plow, either, but we can gallop down with some barrels in a wagon and put a sack brigade to work. I'm afraid it won't save Landson's hay, but it will show where our hearts are."

Transley and Y.D. galloped off to round up the men, some of whom had already noticed the fire. Transley despatched four men and two teams to take barrels, sacks, and horse blankets to the Landson meadows. The others he sent off at once on horseback to give what help they could.

Zen rode up just as they left, and already her fine horse seemed to realize the tension in the air. His keen, hard−strung muscles quivered as she brought his gallop to a stop.

"How did it start, Dad?" she demanded.

"How do I know?" he returned, shortly. "D'ye think I fired it?"

"No, but I just asked the question that Landson will ask, so you better have your answer handy. I'm going to gallop down to their ranch; perhaps I can help Mrs. Landson."

"The ranch buildings are safe enough, I think," said Transley. "The grass there is close cropped, and there is some plowing."

For a moment the three sat, watching the spread of the flames. By this time the whole lower valley was blanketed in smoke. Clouds of blue and mauve and creamy yellow rolled from the meadows and stacks. The fire was whipping the light breeze of the afternoon to a gale, and was already running wildly over the flanks of the foothills.

"Well, I'm off," said Zen. "Good−bye!"

"Be careful, Zen!" her father shouted. "Fire is fire." But already her horse was stretching low and straight in a hard gallop down the valley.

"I'll ride in to camp and tell Tompkins to make up a double supply of sandwiches and coffee," said Transley. "I guess there'll be no cooking in Landson's outfit this afternoon. After that we can both run down and lend a hand, if that suits you."

As they rode to camp together Y.D. drew up close to the contractor. "Transley," he said, "how do you reckon that fire started?"

"I don't know," said Transley, "any more than you do."

"I didn't ask you what you KNEW. I asked you what you reckoned."

Transley rode for some minutes in silence. Then at last he spoke:

"A man isn't supposed to reckon in things of this kind. He should know, or keep his mouth shut. But I allow myself just one guess. Drazk."

"Why Drazk?" Y.D. demanded. "He has nothin' to gain, and this prank may put him in the cooler."

"Drazk would do anything to be spectacular," Transley explained. "He probably will boast openly about it. You know, he's trying to make an impression on Zen."

"Nonsense!"

"Of course it's nonsense, but Drazk doesn't see it that way."

"I'd string him to the nearest cottonwood if I thought he−−"

"Now don't do him an injustice, Y.D. Drazk doesn't realize that he is no mate for Zen. He doesn't know of any reason why Zen shouldn't look on him with favor; indeed, with pride. It's ridiculous, I know, but Drazk is built that way."

"Then I'll change his style of architecture the first time I run into him," said Y.D. savagely. "Zen is too young to think of such a thing, anyway."

"She will always be too young to think of such a thing, so far as Drazk or his type is concerned," Transley returned. "But suppose−− Y.D., to be quite frank, suppose _I_ suggested−−"

"Transley, you work quick," said Y.D. "I admit I like a quick worker. But just now we have a fire on our hands."

By this time they had reached the camp. Transley gave his instructions in a few words, and then turned to ride down to Landson's. They had gone only a few hundred yards when Y.D. pulled his horse to a stop.

"Transley!" he exclaimed, and his voice was shaking. "What do you smell?"

The contractor drew up and sniffed the air. When he turned to Y.D. his face was white.

"Smoke, Y.D!" he gasped. "The wind has changed!"

It was true. Already low clouds of smoke were drifting overhead like a broken veil. The erratic foothill wind, which a few minutes before had been coming down the valley, was now blowing back up again. Even while they took in the situation they could feel the hot breath of the distant fire borne against their faces.

"Well, it's up to us," said Transley tersely. "We'll make a fight of it. Got any speed in that nag of yours?" Without waiting for an answer he put spurs to his horse and set forward on a wild gallop into the smoke.

A mile down the line he found that Linder had already gathered his forces and laid out a plan of defence. The valley, from the South Y.D. to the hills, was about four miles wide, and up the full breadth of it was now coming the fire from Landson's fields. There was no natural fighting line; Linder had not so much as a buffalo path to work against. But he was already starting back−fires at intervals of fifty yards, allotting three men to each fire. A back−fire is a fire started for the purpose of stopping another. Usually a road, or a plowed strip, or even a cattle path, is used for a base. On the windward side of this base the back−fire is started and allowed to eat its way back against the wind until it meets the main fire which is rushing forward with the wind, and chokes it out for lack of

fuel. A few men, stationed along a furrow or a trail, can keep the small back−fire from jumping it, although they would be powerless to check the momentum of the main fire.

This was Linder's position, except that he had no furrow to work against. All he could do was tell off men with sacks and horse blankets soaked in the barrels of water to hold the back−fire in check as best they could. So far they were succeeding. As soon as the fire had burned a few feet the forward side of it was pounded out with wet sacks. It didn't matter about the other side. It could be allowed to eat back as far as it liked; the farther the better.

"Good boy, Lin!" Transley shouted, as he drew up and surveyed operations. "She played us a dirty trick, didn't she?"

Linder looked up, red−eyed and coughing. "We can hold it here," he said, "but we can never cross the valley. The fire will be on us before we have burned a mile. It will beat around our south flank and lick up everything!"

Transley jumped from his horse. He seized Linder in his arms and literally threw him into the saddle. "You're played, boy!" he shouted in his foreman's ear. "Ride down to the river and get into the water, and stay there until you know we can win!"

Then Transley threw himself into the fight. As the men said afterwards, Linder fought like a wildcat, but Transley fought like a den of lions. When the wagon galloped up from the river with barrels of water Transley seized a barrel at the end and set it bodily on the ground. He sprang into the wagon, shouting commands to horses and men. A hundred yards they galloped along the fighting front; then Transley sprang out and set another barrel on the ground. In this way, instead of having the men all coming to the wagon to wet their sacks, he distributed water along the line. Then they turned back, picked up the empty barrels, and galloped to the river for a fresh supply.

Soon they had the first mile secure. The backfires had all met; the forward line of flames had all been pounded out; the rear line had burned back until there was no danger of it jumping the burned space. Then Transley picked up his kit and rushed it on to a new front farther south. At intervals of a hundred yards he started fires, holding them in check and beating out the western edge as before.

But his difficulties were increasing. He was farther from the river. It took longer to get water. One of the barrels fell off and collapsed. Some of the men were playing out. The horses were wild with excitement and terror. The smoke was growing denser and hotter. Men were coughing and gasping through dry, seared lips.

"You can't hold it, Transley; you can't hold it!" said one of the men.

Transley hit him from the shoulder. He crumpled up and collapsed.

A mile and a half had been made safe, but the smoke was suffocatingly thick and the roar of the oncoming fire rose above the shouts of the fighters. Up galloped the water wagon; made a sharp lurch and turn, and a front wheel collapsed with the shock. The wagon went down at one corner and the barrels were dumped on the ground.

The men looked at Transley. For one moment he surveyed the situation.

"Is there a chain?" he demanded. There was.

"Hitch on to the tire of this broken wheel. Some of you men yank the hub out of it. Others pull grass. Pull, like hell was after you!"

They pulled. In a minute or two Transley had the rim of the wheel flat on the ground, with a team hitched to it and a little pile of dry grass inside. Then he set fire to the little pile of grass and started the team slowly along the

battle front. As they moved the burning grass in the rim set fire to the grass on the prairie underneath; the rim partly rubbed it out again as it came over, and the men were able to keep what remained in check, but as he lengthened his line Transley had to leave more and more men to beat out the fire, and had fewer to pull grass. The sacks were too wet to burn; he had to have grass to feed his moving fire−spreader.

At length he had only a teamster and himself, and his fire was going out. Transley whipped off his shirt, rolled it into a little heap, set fire to it, and ran along beside the rim, firing the little moving circle of grass inside.

It was the teamster, looking back, who saw Transley fall. He had to drop the lines to run to his assistance, and the horses, terrified by smoke and fire and the excitement of the fight, immediately bolted. The teamster took Transley in his arms and half carried, half dragged him into the safe area behind the backfires. And a few minutes later the main fire, checked on its front, swept by on the flank and raced on up through the valley.

In riding down to the assistance of Mrs. Landson Zen found herself suddenly caught in an eddy of smoke. She did not realize at the moment that the wind had turned; she thought she must have ridden into the fire area. To avoid the possibility of being cut off by the fire, and also for better air, she turned her horse to the river. All through the valley were billows of smoke, with here and there a reddish−yellow glare marking the more vicious sections of flame. Vaguely, at times, she thought she caught the shouting of men, but all the heavens seemed full of roaring.

When Zen reached the water the smoke was hanging low on it, and she drove her horse well in. Then she swung down the stream, believing that by making a detour in this way she could pass the wedge of fire that had interrupted her and get back on to the trail leading to Landson's. She was coughing with the smoke, but rode on in the confidence that presently it would lift.

It did. A whip of wind raised it like a strong arm throwing off a blanket. She sat up and breathed freely. The hot sun shone through rifts in the canopy of smoke; the blue sky looked down serene and unmoved by this outburst of the elements. Then as Zen brought her eyes back to the water she saw a man on horseback not forty yards ahead. Her first thought was that it must be one of the fire fighters, driven like herself to safety, but a second glance revealed George Drazk. For a moment she had an impulse to wheel and ride out, but even as she smothered that impulse a tinge of color rose in her cheeks that she should for a moment have entertained it. To let George Drazk think she was afraid of him would be utmost humiliation.

She continued straight down the stream, but he had already seen her and was headed her way. In the excitement of what he had just done Drazk was less responsible than usual.

"Hello, Zen!" he said. "Mighty decent of you to ride down an' meet me like this. Mighty decent, Zen!"

"I didn't ride down to meet you, Drazk, and you know it. Keep out of the way or I'll use a whip on you!"

"Oh, how haughty! Y.D. all over! Never mind, dear, I like you all the better for that. Who wants a tame horse? An' as for comin' down to meet me, what's the odds, so long as we've met?"

He had turned his horse and blocked the way in front of her. When Zen's horse came within reach Drazk caught him by the bridle.

"Will you let go?" the girl said, speaking as calmly as she could, but in a white passion. "Will you let go of that bridle, or shall I make you?"

He looked her full in the face. "Gad, but you're a stunner!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad we met−−here."

She brought her whip with a biting cut around the wrist that held her bridle. Drazk winced, but did not let go.

"Jus' for that, young Y.D.," he hissed, "jus' for that we drop all formalities, so to speak."

With a dexterous spurring he brought his horse alongside and threw an arm about Zen before she could beat him off. She used her whip at short range on his face, but had not arm−room in which to land a blow. They were stirrup−deep in water, and as they struggled the horses edged in deeper still. Finding that she could not beat Drazk off Zen clutched her saddle and drove the spurs into her horse. At this unaccustomed treatment he plunged wildly forward, but Drazk's grip on her was too strong to be broken. The manoeuvre had, however, the effect of unhorsing Drazk. He fell in the water, but kept his grip on Zen. With his free hand he still had the reins of his own horse, and he managed also to get hold of hers. Although her horse was plunging and jumping, Drazk's strong grip on his rein kept him from breaking away.

"You fight well, Zen, damn you−−you fight well," he cried. "So you might. You played with me−−you made a fool of me. We'll see who's the fool in the end." With a mighty wrench he tore her from her saddle and she found herself struggling with him in the water.

"If I put you under for a minute I guess you'll be good," he threatened. "I'll half drown you, Zen, if I have to."

"Go ahead," she challenged. "I'll drown myself, if I have to."

"Not just yet, Zen; not just yet. Afterwards you can do as you like."

In their struggles they had been getting gradually into deeper water. At this moment they found their feet carried free, and the horses began to swim for the shore. Drazk held to both reins with one hand, still clutching his victim with the other. More than once they went under water together and came up half choking.

Zen was not a good swimmer, but she would gladly have broken away and taken chances with the current. Once on land she would be at his mercy. She was using her head frantically, but could think of no device to foil him. It was not her practice to carry weapons; her whip had already gone down the stream. Presently she saw a long leather thong floating out from the saddle of Drazk's horse. It was no larger than a whiplash; apparently it was a spare lace which Drazk carried, and which had worked loose in the struggle. It was floating close to Drazk.

"Don't let me sink, George!" she cried frantically, in sudden fright. "Save me! I won't fight any more."

"That's better," he said, drawing her up to him. "I knew you'd come to your senses."

Her hand reached the lash. With a quick motion of the arm, such as is given in throwing a rope, she had looped it once around his neck. Then, pulling the lash violently, she fought herself out of his grip. He clutched at her wildly, but could reach only some stray locks of her brown hair which had broken loose and were floating on the water.

She saw his eyes grow round and big and horrified; saw his mouth open and refuse to close; heard strange little gurgles and chokings. But she did not let go.

"When you insulted me this morning I promised to settle with you; I did not expect to have the chance so soon."

His head had gone under water. . . . Suddenly she realized that he was drowning. She let go of the thong, clutched her horse's tail, and was pulled quickly ashore.

Sitting on the gravel, she tried to think. Drazk had disappeared; his horse had landed somewhat farther down. . . . Doubtless Drazk had drowned. Yes, that would be the explanation. Why change it?

Zen turned it over in her mind. Why make any explanations? It would be a good thing to forget. She could not have done otherwise under the circumstances; no jury would expect her to do otherwise. But why trouble a jury about it?

"He got what was coming to him," she said to herself presently. She admitted no regret. On the contrary, her inborn self−confidence, her assurance that she could take care of herself under any circumstances, seemed to be strengthened by the experience.

She got up, drew her hair into some kind of shape, and scrambled a little way up the steep bank. Clouds of smoke were rolling up the valley. She did not grasp the significance of the fact at the first glance, but in a moment it impacted home to her. The wind had changed! Her help now would be needed, not by Mrs. Landson, but probably at their own camp. She sprang on her horse, re− crossed the stream, and set out on a gallop for the camp. On the way she had to ride through one thin line of fire, which she accomplished successfully. Through the smoke she could dimly see Transley's gang fighting the back−fires. She knew that was in good hands, and hastened on to the camp. Zen had had prairie experience enough to know that in hours like this there is almost sure to be something or somebody, in vital need, overlooked.

She galloped into the camp and found only Tompkins there. He had already run a little back−fire to protect the tents and the chuck− wagon.

"How goes it, Tompkins?" she cried, bursting upon him like a courier from battle.

"All set here, Ma'am," he answered. "All set an' safe. But they'll never hold the main fire; it'll go up the valley hell− scootin',−−beggin' your pardon, Ma'am."

"Anyone live up the valley?"

"There is. There's the Lints−−squatters about six miles up−−it was from them I got the cream an' fresh eggs you was good enough to notice, Ma'am. An' there's no men folks about; jus' Mrs. Lint an' a young herd of little Lints; least, that's all was there las' night."

"I must go up," said Zen, with instant decision. "I can get there before the fire, and as the Lints are evidently farmers there will be some plowed land, or at least a plow with which to run a furrow so that we can start a back−fire. Direct me."

Tompkins directed her as to the way, and, leaving a word of explanation to be passed on to her father, she was off. A half hour's hard riding brought her to Lint's, but she found that this careful settler had made full provision against such a contingency as was now come about. The farm buildings, implements, stables, everything was surrounded, not by a fire−guard, but by a broad plowed field. Mrs. Lint, however, was little less thankful for Zen's interest than she would have been had their little steading been in danger. She pressed Zen to wait and have at least a cup of tea, and the girl, knowing that she could be of little or no service down the valley, allowed herself to be persuaded. In this little harbor of quiet her mind began to arrange the day's events. The tragic happening at the river was as yet too recent to appear real; had it not been for the touch of her wet clothing Zen could have thought that all an unhappy dream of days ago. She reflected that neither Tompkins nor Mrs. Lint had commented upon her appearance. The hot sun had soon dried her outer apparel, and her general dishevelled condition was not remarkable on such a day as this.

The wind had gone down as the afternoon waned, and the fire was working up the valley leisurely when Zen set out on her return trip. A couple of miles from the Lint homestead she met its advance guard. It was evening now; the sun shone dull red through the banked clouds of smoke resting against the mountains to the west; the flames danced and flickered, advanced and receded, sprang up and died down again, along mile after mile of front. It was

a beautiful thing to behold, and Zen drew her horse to a stop on a hill−top to take in the grandeur of the scene. Near at hand frolicking flames were working about the base of the hill, and far down the valley and over the foothills the flanks of the fire stretched like lines of impish infantry in single file.

Suddenly she heard the sound of hoofs, and a rider drew up at her side. She supposed him one of Transley's men, but could not recall having seen him in the camp. He sat his horse with an ease and grace that her eye was quick to appraise; he removed his broad felt hat before he spoke; and he did not call her "ma'am."

"Pardon me−−I believe I am speaking to Y.D.'s daughter?" he asked, and before waiting for a reply hastened to introduce himself. "My name is Dennison Grant, foreman on the Landson ranch."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I thought−−I thought you were one of Mr. Transley's men." Then, with a quick sense of the barrier between them, she added, "I hope you don't think that I−−that we−−had anything to do with this?" She indicated the ruined valley with her hand.

"No more than I had to do with those coward's stakes," he answered. "Neither of us understand just now, but can we take that much for granted?"

There was something about him that rather appealed to her. "I think we can," she said, simply.

For a moment they watched the kaleidoscopic scene below them. "It may help you to understand," she continued, "if I say that I was riding down to see if I could be of some use to Mrs. Landson when the wind changed, and I saw I would be more likely to be needed here."

"And it may help you to understand," he said, "if I say that as soon as immediate danger to the Landson ranch was over I rode up to Transley's camp. Only the cook was there, and he told me of your having set out to help Mrs. Lint, so I followed up. Fortunately the fire has lost its punch; it will probably go out through the night."

There was a short silence, in which she began to realize her peculiar position. This man was the rival of Transley and Linder in the business of hay−cutting in the valley. He was the foreman of the Landson crowd−−Landson, against whom her father had been voicing something very near to murder threats not many hours ago. Had she met him before the fire she would have spurned and despised him, but nothing unites the factions of man like a fight against a common elemental enemy. Besides, there was the question, How DID the fire start? That was a question which every Landson man would be asking. Grant had been generous about it; he had asked her to be equally generous about the episode of the stakes. . . . And there was something about the man that appealed to her. She had never felt that way about Transley or Linder. She had been interested in them; amused, perhaps; out for an adventure, perhaps; but this man−− Nonsense! It was the environment−−the romantic setting. As for Drazk−− A quick sense of horror caught her as the memory of his choking face protruded into her consciousness. . . .

"Well, suppose we ride home," he suggested. "By Jove! The fire has worked around us."

It was true. The hill on which they stood was now entirely surrounded by a ring of fire, eating slowly up the side. The warmth of its breath already pressed against their faces; the funnel effect created by the circle of fire was whipping up a stronger draught. The smoke seemed to be gathering to a centre above them.

He swung up close to her. "Will your horse face it?" he asked. "If not, we'd better blindfold him."

"I'll try him," she said. "He was all right this afternoon, but he was reckless then with a hard gallop."

Zen's horse trotted forward at her urging to within a dozen yards of the circle of fire. Then he stopped, snorting and shivering. She rode back up the hill.

"Better blindfold him," Grant advised, pulling off his leather coat. "A sleeve of my shirt should be about right. Will you cut it off?"

She protested.

"There's no time to lose," he reminded her, as he placed his knife in her hand. "My horse will go through it all right."

So urged she deftly cut off his sleeve above the elbow and drew it through the bridle of her horse across his eyes.

"Now keep your head down close to his neck. You'll go through all right. Give him the spurs, and good luck!" he shouted.

She was already careering down the hillside. A few paces from the fire the horse plunged into a badger hole and fell headlong. She went over his head, down, with a terrific shock, almost in the very teeth of the fire.

CHAPTER VII

When Zen came to herself it was with a sense of a strange swimming in her head. Gradually it resolved itself into a sound of water about her head; a splashing, fighting water; two heads in the water; two heads in the water; a lash floating in the water−−

"Oh!" She was sure she felt water on her face. . . .

"Where am I?"

"You're all right−−you'll be all right in a little while."

"But where am I? What has happened?" She tried to sit up. All was dark. "Where am I?" she demanded.

"Don't be alarmed, Zen−−I think your name is Zen," she heard a man's voice saying. "You've been hurt, but you'll be all right presently."

Then the curtain lifted. "You are Dennison Grant," she said. "I remember you now. But what has happened? Why am I here−−with you?"

"Well, so far, you've been enjoying about three hours' unconsciousness," he told her. "At a distance which seems about a mile from here−−although it may be less−−is a little pond. I've carried water in the sleeve of my coat−−fortunately it is leather−− and poured it somewhat generously upon your brow. And at last I've been rewarded by a conscious word."

She tried to sit up, but desisted when a sudden twitch of pain held her fast.

"Let me help you," he said, gently. "We have camped, as you may notice, on a big, flat rock. I found it not far from the scene of the accident, so I carried you over to it. It is drier than the earth, and, for the forepart of the night at least, will be warmer." With a strong arm about her shoulders he drew her into a sitting posture.

Her eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. "What's wrong with my foot?" she demanded. "My boot's off."

"I'm afraid you turned your ankle getting free from your stirrup," he explained. "I had to do a little surgery. I could find nothing broken. It will be painful, but I fear there is nothing to do but bear it."

She reached down and felt her foot. It was neatly bandaged with cloth very much like that which she had used to blindfold Quiver. It was easy to surmise where it came from. Evidently her protector had stopped at nothing.

"Well, are we to stay here permanently?" she asked, presently.

"Only for the night," he told her. "If we're lucky, not that long. Search parties will be hunting for you, and they will doubtless ride this way. Both of our horses bolted in the fire−−"

"Oh yes, the fire! Tell me what happened."

He hesitated.

"I remember riding into the fire," she continued, "and then next thing I was on this rock. How did it all happen?"

"Your horse fell," he explained, "just as you reached the fire, and threw you, pretty heavily, to the ground. I was behind, so I dismounted and dragged you through."

"Oh!" She felt her face. "But I am not even singed!" she exclaimed.

It was plain that he was holding something back. She turned and laid her fingers on his arm. "Tell me how you did it," she pressed.

The darkness hid his modest confusion. "It was really nothing," he stammered. "You see, I had a leather coat, and I just threw it over your head−−and mine−−and dragged you out."

She was silent for a moment while the meaning of his words came home to her. Then she placed her hand frankly in his.

"Thank you," she said, and even in the darkness she knew that their eyes had met.

"You are very resourceful," she continued presently. "Must we sit here all night?"

"I can think of no alternative," he confessed. "If we had fire− arms we could shoot a signal, or if there were grass about we could start a fire, although it probably would not be noticed with so many glows on the horizon to−night." He stopped to look about. Dull splashes of red in the sky pointed out remnants of the day's conflagration still eating their way through the foothills. The air was full of the pungent but not unpleasant smell of burnt grass.

"A pretty hard night to send a signal," he said, "but they're almost sure to ride this way."

She wondered why he did not offer to walk to the camp for help; it could not be more than four or five miles. Suddenly she thought she understood.

"I am not afraid to stay here alone," she said, with a little laugh. It was the first time Grant had heard her laugh, and he thought it very musical indeed. "I've slept out many a night, and you would be back within a couple of hours."

"I'm quite sure you're not afraid," he agreed, "but, you see, I am. You got quite a tap on the head, and for some time before you came to you were talking−−rather foolishly. Now if I should leave you it is not only possible, but quite probable, that you would lapse again into unconsciousness. . . . I really think you'll have to put up with me here."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that! . . . Did I−−did I talk−−foolishly?"

"Rather. Seemed to think you were swimming−−or fighting−−I couldn't be sure which. Sometimes you seemed to be doing both."

"Oh!" With a cold chill the events of the day came back upon her. That struggle in the water; it came to her now like a bad dream out of the long, long past. How much had she said? How much would she have given to know what she said? She felt herself recounting events. . . .

Presently she pulled herself up with a start. She must not let him think her moody.

"Well, if we MUST enjoy each other's company, we may as well do so companionably," she said, with an effort at gaiety. "Let us talk. Tell me about yourself."

"First things first," he parried.

"Oh, I've nothing to tell. My life has been very unromantic. A few years at school, and the rest of it on the range. A very every−day kind of existence."

"I think it's the 'every−day kind of existence' that IS romantic," he returned. "It is a great mistake to think of romance as belonging to other times and other places. Even the most commonplace person has experienced romance enough for a dozen books. Quite possibly he has not recognized the romance, but it was there. The trouble is that with our limited sense of humor, what we think of as romance in other people's lives becomes tragedy in our own."

How much DID he know? . . . "Yes," she said, "I suppose that is so."

"I know it is so," he went on. "If we could read the thoughts−− know the experiences−−of those nearest to us, we would never need to look out of our own circles for either romance or tragedy. But it is as well that we can't. Take the experience of to−day, for example. I admit it has not been a commonplace day, and yet it has not been altogether extraordinary. Think of the experiences we have been through just this day, and how, if they were presented in fiction they would be romantic, almost unbelievable. And here we are at the close, sitting on a rock, matter−of−fact people in a matter−of−fact world, accepting everything as commonplace and unexceptional."

"Not quite that," she said daringly. "I see that you are neither commonplace nor unexceptional." She spoke with sudden impulse out of the depth of her sincerity. She had not met a man like this before. In her mind she fixed him in contrast with Transley, the self−confident and aggressive, and Linder, the shy and unassertive. None of those adjectives seemed to fit this new acquaintance. Nevertheless, he suffered nothing by the contrast.

"If I had been bright enough I would have said that first," he apologized, "but I got rather carried away in one of my pet theories about romance. Now my life, I suppose, to many people would seem quite tame and unromantic, but to me it has been a delightful succession of somewhat placid adventures. It began in a very orthodox way, in a very orthodox family. My father, under the guidance, no doubt, of whatever star governs such lucky affairs, became possessed of a piece of land. In doing so he contributed to society no service whatever, so far as I have been able to ascertain. But it so fell about that society, in considerable numbers, wanted his land to live on, so society made of my father a wealthy man, and gave him power over many people. Could anything be more

romantic than that? Could the fairy tales of your childhood surpass it for benevolent irresponsibility?"

"My father has also become wealthy," she said, "although I never thought of it in that way."

"Yes, but in exchange for his wealth your father has given service to society; supplied many thousands of steers for hungry people to eat. That's a different story, but not less romantic.

"Well, to proceed. I was brought up to fit my station in life, whatever that means. There were just two boys of us, and I was the elder. My father had become a broker. I believe he had become quite a successful broker, using the word in its ordinary sense, which denotes the making of money. You see, he already had too much money, so it was very easy for him to make more. He wanted me to go into the office with him, but some way I didn't fit in. I've no doubt there was lots of romance there, too, but I was of the wrong nature; I simply couldn't get enthusiastic over it. As we already had more money than we could possibly spend on things that were good for us, I failed to see the point in sitting up nights to increase it. Being of a frank disposition I confided in my father that I felt I was wasting my time in a broker's office. He, being of an equally frank disposition, confided in me that he entertained the same opinion.

"Then I delivered myself of some of my pet theories about wealth. I told him that I didn't believe that any man had a right to money unless he earned it in return for service given to society, and I said that as society had to supply the money, society should determine the amount. I confessed that I was a little hazy about how that was to be carried out, but I insisted that the principle was right, and, that being so, the working of it out was only a matter of detail. I realize now that this was all fanatical heresy to my father; I remember the pained look that came into his eyes. I thought at the time that it was anger, but I know now that it was grief−−grief and humiliation that a son of his should entertain such wild and unbalanced ideas.

"Well, there was more talk, and the upshot of it was that I got out, accompanied by an assurance from my father that I would never be burdened with any of the family ducats. Roy−−my younger brother−−succeeded to the worries of wealth, and I came to the ranges where, no doubt to the deep chagrin of my father, I have been able to make a living, and have, incidentally, been profoundly happy. I'll take a wager that to−day I look ten years younger than Roy, that I can lick him with one hand, that I have more real friends than he has, and that I'm getting more out of life than he is. I'm a man of whims. When they beckon I follow."

Grant had been talking intensely. He paused now, feeling that his enthusiasm had carried him into rather fuller confidences than he had intended.

"I'm sorry I bored you with that harangue," he said contritely. "You couldn't possibly be interested in it."

"On the contrary, I am very much interested in it," she protested. "It seems so much finer for a man to make his own way, rather than be lifted up by someone else. I am sure you are already doing well in the West. Some day you will go back to your father with more money than he has."

Grant uttered an amused little laugh.

"I was afraid you would say that," he answered. "You see, you don't understand me, either. I don't want to make money. Can you understand that?"

"Don't want to make money? Why not?"

"Why should I?"

"Well, everybody does. Money is power−−it is a mark of success. It would open up a wider life for you. It would bring you into new circles. Some day you will want to marry and settle down, and money would enable you to meet the kind of women−−"

She stopped, confused. She had plunged farther than she had intended.

"You're all wrong," he said amusedly. It did not even occur to Zen that he was contradicting her. She had not been accustomed to being contradicted, but then, neither had she been accustomed to men like Dennison Grant, nor to conversations such as had developed. She was too interested to be annoyed.

"You're all wrong, Miss−−?"

"I don't wonder that you can't fill in my name," she said. "Nobody knows Dad except as Y.D. But I heard you call me Zen−−"

"That was when you were coming out of your unconsciousness. I apologize for the liberty taken. I thought it might recall you−−"

"Well, I'm still coming out," she interrupted. "I am beginning to feel that I have been unconscious for a very long time indeed. Let me hear why you don't want money."

Grant was aware of a pleasant glow excited by her frank interest. She was altogether a desirable girl.

"I have observed," he said, "that poor people worry over what they haven't got, and rich people worry over what they have. It is my disposition not to worry over anything. You said that money is power. That is one of its deceits. It offers a man power, but in reality it makes him its slave. It enchains him for life; I have seen it in too many cases−−I am not mistaken. As for opening up a wider life, what wider life could there be than this which I−−which you and I−−are living?"

She wondered why he had said "you and I." Evidently he was wondering too, for he fell into reflection. She changed her position to ease the dull pain in her ankle, which his talk had almost driven from her mind. The rock had a perpendicular edge, so she let her feet hang over, resting the injured one upon the other. He was sitting in a similar position. The silence of the night had gathered about them, broken occasionally by the yapping of coyotes far down the valley. Segments of dull light fringed the horizon; the breeze was again blowing from the west, mild and balmy. Presently one of the segments of light grew and grew. It was as though it were rushing up the valley. They watched it, fascinated; then burst into laughter as the orb of the moon became recognizable. . . . There was something very companionable about watching the moon rise, as they did.

"The greatest wealth in the world," he said at length, as though his thoughts had been far afield, searching, perchance, the mazy corridors of Truth for this atom of wisdom; "the greatest wealth in the world is to be able to do something useful. That is the only wealth which will not be disturbed in the coming reorganization of society."

Zen did not reply. For the first time in her life she stood convicted, before her own mind, of a very profound ignorance. Dennison Grant had been drawing back the curtain of a world of the existence of which she had never known. He had talked to her about "the coming reorganization of society"? What did it mean? She was at home in discussions of herds or horses; she was at home with the duties of kitchen or reception−room; she was at home with her father or Transley or Linder or Drazk or Tompkins the cook, but Dennison Grant in an hour had carried her into a far country, where she would be hopelessly lost but for his guidance. . . . Yet it seemed a good and interesting country. She wanted to enter in−−to know it better.

"Tell me about the coming reorganization of society," she said.

"That is an all−night order," he returned. "Besides, I can't tell you all, because I don't know all. I know only very, very little. I see my little gleam of light and keep my eye close upon it. But you must know that society is always in a state of reorganization. Nothing continues as it was. Those who dismiss a problem glibly by saying it has always been so and always will be so don't read history and don't understand human nature."

He turned toward her as interest in his theme developed. The moonlight was now pouring upon them; her face was beautiful and fine as marble in its soft rays. For a moment he hesitated, overwhelmed by a sudden realization of her attractiveness. He had just been saying that the law of nature was the law of change, and nature itself stood up to refute him.

He brought himself back to earth. "I was saying that everything changes," he continued. "Look at our economic system, for instance. Not so many centuries ago the man who got the most wealth was the man with the biggest muscle and the toughest skin. He wielded a stout club, and what he wanted, he took. His system of operation was simple and direct. You have money, you have cattle, you have a wife−−I'm speaking of the times that were. I am stronger than you. I take them. Simplicity itself!"

"But very unjust," she protested.

"Our sense of justice is due to our education," he continued. "If we are taught to believe that a certain thing is just, we believe it is just. I am convinced that there is no sense of justice inherent in humanity; whatever sense we have is the result of education, and the kind of justice we believe in is the kind of justice to which we are educated. For example, the justice of the plains is not the justice of the cities; the justice of the vigilance committee is not the justice of judge and jury. Now to get back to our subject. When Baron Battle Ax, back in the fifth or sixth century, knocked all his rivals on the head and took their wealth away from them, I suppose there was here and there an advanced thinker who said the thing was unjust, but I am quite sure the great majority of people said things had always been that way and always would be that way. But the little minority of thinkers gradually grew in strength. The Truth was with them. It is worthy of notice that the advance guard of Truth always travels with minorities. And the day came that society organized itself to say that the man who uses physical force to take wealth from another is an enemy of society and must not be allowed at large.

"But we have passed largely out of the era of physical force. To− day, an engineer presses a button and releases more physical force than could be commanded by all the armies of Rome. Brain power is to−day the dominant power. And just as physical force was once used to take wealth without earning it, so is brain force now used to take wealth without earning it. And just as the masses in the days of Battle Ax said things had always been that way and always would be that way, just so do the masses in these days of brain supremacy say things have always been that way and always will be that way. But just as there was a minority with an advanced vision of Truth in those days, so is there a minority with an advanced vision of Truth in these days. You may be absolutely sure that, just as society found a way to deal with muscle brigands, so also it will find a way to deal with brain brigands. I confess I don't see how the details are to be worked out, but there must be a plan under which the value of the services rendered to society by every man and every woman will be determined, and they will be rewarded according to the services rendered."

"Is that Socialism?" she ventured.

"I don't know. I don't think so. Certainly it does not contemplate an equal distribution of the world's wealth. Some men are a menace to themselves and society when they have a hundred dollars. Others can be trusted with a hundred million. All men have not been equally gifted by nature−−we know that. We can't make them equal. But surely we can prevent the gifted ones from preying upon those who are not gifted. That is what the coming reorganization of society will aim to do."

"It is very interesting," she said. "And very deep. I have never heard it discussed before. Why don't people think about these things more?"

"I don't know," he answered, "but I suppose it is because they are too busy in the fight. When a self was dodging Battle Ax he hadn't much time to think about evolving a Magna Charta. But most of all I suppose it is just natural laziness. People refuse to think. It calls for effort. Most people would find it easier to pitch a load of hay than to think of a new thought."

The moon was now well up; the smoke clouds had been scattered by the breeze; the sky was studded with diamonds. Zen had a feeling of being very happy. True, a certain haunting spectre at times would break into her consciousness, but in the companionship of such a man as Grant she could easily beat it off. She studied the face in the moon, and invited her soul. She was living through a new experience−−an experience she could not understand. In spite of the discomfort of her injuries, in spite of the events of the day, she was very, very happy. . . .

If only that horrid memory of Drazk would not keep tormenting her! She began to have some glimpse of what remorse must mean. She did not blame herself; she could not have done otherwise; and yet−−it was horrible to think about, and it would not stay away. She felt a tremendous desire to tell Grant all about it. . . . She wondered how much he knew. He must have discovered that her clothing had been wet.

She shivered slightly.

"You're cold," he said, as he placed his arm about her, and there was something very far removed from political economy in the timbre of his voice.

"I'm a little chilly," she admitted. "I had to swim my horse across the river to−day−−he got into a deep spot−−and I got wet." She congratulated herself that she had made a very clever explanation.

He put his coat about her shoulders and drew it tight. Then he sat beside her in silence. There were many things he could have said, but this seemed to be neither the time nor the place. Grant was not Transley. He had for this girl a delicate consideration which Transley's nature could never know. Grant was a thinker−−Transley a doer. Grant knew that the charm which enveloped him in this girl's presence was the perfectly natural product of a set of conditions. He was worldly−wise enough to suspect that Zen also felt that charm. It was as natural as the bursting of a seed in moist soil; as natural as the unfolding of a rose in warm air. . . .

Presently he felt her head rest against his shoulder. He looked down upon her in awed delight. Her eyes had closed; her lips were smiling faintly; her figure had relaxed. He could feel her warm breath upon his face. He could have touched her lips with his.

Slowly the moon traced its long arc in the heavens.

CHAPTER VIII

Just as the first flush of dawn mellowed the East Grant heard the pounding of horses' feet and the sound of voices borne across the valley. They rapidly approached; he could tell by the hard pounding of the hoofs that they were on a trail which he took to be the one he had followed before he met Zen. It passed possibly a hundred yards to the left. He must in some way make his presence known.

The girl had slept soundly, almost without stirring. Now he must wake her. He shook her gently, and called her name; her eyes opened; he could see them, strange and wondering, in the thin grey light. Then, with a sudden

start, she was quite awake.

"I have been sleeping!" she exclaimed, reproachfully. "You let me sleep!"

"No use of two watching the moon," he returned, lightly.

"But you shouldn't have let me sleep," she reprimanded. "Besides, you had to stay awake. You have had no sleep at all!"

There was a sympathy in her voice very pleasant to the ear. But Grant could not continue so delightful an indulgence.

"I had to wake you," he explained. "There are several people riding up the valley; undoubtedly a search party. I must attract their attention."

They listened, and could now hear the hoof−beats close at hand. Grant called; not a loud shout; it seemed little more than his speaking voice, but instantly there was silence, save for the echo of the sound rolling down the valley. Then a voice answered, and Grant gave a word or two of directions. In a minute or two several horsemen loomed up through the vague light.

"Here we are," said Zen, as she distinguished her father. "Gone lame on the off foot and held up for repairs."

Y.D. swung down from his saddle. "Are you all right, Zen?" he cried, as he advanced with outstretched arms. There was an eagerness and a relief in his voice which would have surprised many who knew Y.D. only as a shrewd cattleman.

Zen accepted and returned his embrace, with a word of assurance that she was really nothing the worse. Then she introduced her companion.

"This is Mr. Dennison Grant, foreman of the Landson ranch, Dad."

Grant extended his hand, but Y.D. hesitated. The truce occasioned by the fire did not by any means imply permanent peace. Far from it, with the valley in ruins−−

Y.D. was stiffening, but his daughter averted what would in another moment have been an embarrassing situation with a quick remark.

"This is no time, even for explanations," she said, "except that Mr. Grant saved my life last evening at the risk of his own, and has lost a night's sleep for his pains."

"That was a man's work," said Y.D. It would not have been possible for his lips to have framed a greater compliment. "I'm obliged to you, Grant. You know how it is with us cattlemen; we run mostly to horns and hoofs, but I suppose we have some heart, too, if you can find it."

They shook hands with as much cordiality as the situation permitted, and then Zen introduced Transley and Linder, who were in the party. There were two or three others whom she did not know, but they all shook hands.

"What happened, Zen?" said Transley, with his usual directness. "Give us the whole story."

Then she told them what she knew, from the point where she had met Grant on the fire−encircled hill.

"Two lucky people−−two lucky people," was all Transley's comment. Words could not have expressed the jealousy he felt. But Linder was not too shy to place his hand with a friendly pressure upon Grant's shoulder.

"Good work," he said, and with two words sealed a friendship.

Two of the unnamed members of the party volunteered their horses to Zen and Grant, and all hands started back to camp. Y.D. talked almost garrulously; not even himself had known how heavily the hand of Fate had lain on him through the night.

"The haymakin' is all off, Darter," he said. "We will trek back to the Y.D. as soon as you feel fit. The steers will have to take chances next winter."

The girl professed her fitness to make the trip at once, and indeed they did make it that very day. Y.D. pressed Grant to remain for breakfast, and Tompkins, notwithstanding the demoralization of equipment and supplies effected by the fire, again excelled himself. After breakfast the old rancher found occasion for a word with Grant.

"You know how it is, Grant," he said. "There's a couple of things that ain't explained, an' perhaps it's as well all round not to press for opinions. I don't know how the iron stakes got in my meadow, an' you don't know how the fire got in yours. But I give you Y.D.'s word−−which goes at par except in a cattle trade−−" and Y.D. laughed cordially at his own limitations−−"I give you my word that I don't know any more about the fire than you do."

"And I don't know anything more about the stakes than you do," returned Grant.

"Well, then, let it stand at that. But mind," he added, with returning heat, "I'm not committin' myself to anythin' in advance. This grass'll grow again next year, an' by heavens if I want it I'll cut it! No son of a sheep herder can bluff Y.D!"

Grant did not reply. He had heard enough of Y.D.'s boisterous nature to make some allowances.

"An' mind I mean it," continued Y.D., whose chagrin over being baffled out of a thousand tons of hay overrode, temporarily at least, his appreciation of Grant's services. "Mind, I mean it. No monkey−doodles next season, young man."

Obviously Y.D. was becoming worked up, and it seemed to Grant that the time had come to speak.

"There will be none," he said, quietly. "If you come over the hills to cut the South Y.D. next summer I will personally escort you home again."

Y.D. stood open−mouthed. It was preposterous that this young upstart foreman on a second−rate ranch like Landson's should deliberately defy him.

"You see, Y.D.," continued Grant, with provoking calmness, "I've seen the papers. You've run a big bluff in this country. You've occupied rather more territory than was coming to you. In a word, you've been a good bit of a bully. Now−−let me break it to you gently−−those good old days are over. In future you're going to stay on your own side of the line. If you crowd over you'll be pushed back. You have no more right to the hay in this valley than you have to the hide on Landson's steers, and you're not going to cut it any more, at all."

Y.D. exploded in somewhat ineffective profanity. He had a wide vocabulary of invective, but most of it was of the stand−and−fight variety. There is some language which is not to be used, unless you are willing to have it out on the ground, there and then. Y.D. had no such desire. Possibly a curious sense of honor entered into the case. It was not fair to call a young man names, and although there was considerable truth in Grant's remark that Y.D. was a

bully, his bullying did not take that form. Possibly, also, he recalled at that moment the obligation under which Zen's accident had placed him. At any rate he wound up rather lamely.

"Grant," he said, "if I want that hay next year I'll cut it, spite o' hell an' high water."

"All right, Y.D.," said Grant, cheerfully. "We'll see. Now, if you can spare me a horse to ride home, I'll have him sent back immediately."

Y.D. went to find Transley and arrange for a horse, and in a moment Zen appeared from somewhere.

"You've been quarreling with Dad," she said, half reproachfully, and yet in a tone which suggested that she could understand.

"Not exactly that," he parried. "We were just having a frank talk with each other."

"I know something of Dad's frank talks. . . I'm sorry. . . I would have liked to ask you to come and see me−−to see us−−my mother would be glad to see you. I can hardly ask you to come if you are going to be bad friends with Dad."

"No, I suppose not," he admitted.

"You were very good to me; very−−decent," she continued.

At that moment Transley, Linder, and Y.D. appeared, with two horses.

"Linder will ride over with you and bring back the spare beast," said Y.D.

Grant shook hands, rather formally, with Y.D. and Transley, and then with Zen. She murmured some words of thanks, and just as he would have withdrawn his hand he felt her fingers tighten very firmly about his. He answered the pressure, and turned quickly away.

Transley immediately struck camp, and Y.D. and his daughter drove homeward, somewhat painfully, over the blackened hills.

Transley lost no time in finding other employment. It was late in the season to look for railway contracts, and continued dry weather had made grading, at best, a somewhat difficult business. Influx of ready money and of those who follow it had created considerable activity in a neighboring centre which for twenty years had been the principal cow−town of the foothill country. In defiance of all tradition, and, most of all, in defiance of the predictions of the ranchers who had known it so long for a cow−town and nothing more, the place began to grow. No one troubled to inquire exactly why it should grow, or how. As for Transley, it was enough for him that team labor was in demand. He took a contract, and three days after the fire in the foothills he was excavating for business blocks about to be built in the new metropolis.

It was no part of Transley's plan, however, to quite lose touch with the people on the Y.D. They were, in fact, the centre about which he had been doing some very serious thinking. His outspokenness with Zen and her father had had in it a good deal of bravado−−the bravado of a man who could afford to lose the stake, and smile over it. In short, he had not cared whether he offended them or not. Transley was a very self−reliant contractor; he gave, even to the millionaire rancher, no more homage than he demanded in return. . . . Still, Zen was a very desirable girl. As he turned the matter over in his mind Transley became convinced that he wanted Zen. With Transley, to want a thing meant to get it. He always found a way. And he was now quite sure that he wanted Zen. He had not known that positively until the morning when he found her in the grey light of dawn with Dennison Grant. There

was a suggestion of companionship there between the two which had cut him to the quick. Like most ambitious men, Transley was intensely jealous.

Up to this time Transley had not thought seriously of matrimony. A wife and children he regarded as desirable appendages for declining years−−for the quiet and shade of that evening toward which every active man looks with such irrational confidence. But for the heat of the day−−for the climb up the hill−−they would be unnecessary encumbrances. Transley always took a practical view of these matters. It need hardly be stated that he had never been in love; in fact Transley would have scouted the idea of any passion which would throw the practical to the winds. That was a thing for weaklings, and, possibly, for women.

But his attachment for Zen was a very practical matter. Zen was the only heir to the Y.D. wealth. She would bring to her husband capital and credit which Transley could use to good advantage in his business. She would also bring personality−−a delightful individuality−−of which any man might be proud. She had that fine combination of attractions which is expressed in the word charm. She had health, constitution, beauty. She had courage and sympathy. She had qualities of leadership. She would bring to him not only the material means to build a house, but the spiritual qualities which make a home. She would make him the envy of all his acquaintances. And a jealous man loves to be envied.

So after the work on the excavations had been properly started Transley turned over the detail to the always dependable Linder, and, remarking that he had not had a final settlement with Y.D., set out for the ranch in the foothills. While spending the long autumn day alone in the buggy he was able to turn over and develop plans on an even more ambitious scale than had occurred to him amid the hustle of his men and horses.

The valley was lying very warm and beautiful in yellow light, and the setting sun was just capping the mountains with gold and painting great splashes of copper and bronze on the few clouds becalmed in the heavens, when Transley's tired team jogged in among the cluster of buildings known as the Y.D. The rancher met him at the bunk−house. He greeted Transley with a firm grip of his great palm, and with jaws open in suggestion of a sort of carnivorous hospitality.

"Come up to the house, Transley," he said, turning the horses over to the attention of a ranch hand. "Supper is just ready, an' the women will be glad to see you."

Zen, walking with a limp, met them at the gate. Transley's eyes reassured him that he had not been led astray by any process of idealization; Zen was all his mind had been picturing her. She was worth the effort. Indeed, a strange sensation of tenderness suffused him as he walked by her side to the door, supporting her a little with his hand. There they were ushered in by the rancher's wife, and Zen herself showed Transley to a cool room where were white towels and soft water from the river and quiet and restful furnishings. Transley congratulated himself that he could hardly hope to be better received.

After supper he had a social drink with Y.D., and then the two sat on the veranda and smoked and discussed business. Transley found Y.D. more liberal in the adjustment than he had expected. He had not yet realized to what an extent he had won the old rancher's confidence, and Y.D. was a man who, when his confidence had been won, never haggled over details. He was willing to compromise the loss on the operations on the South Y.D. on a scale that was not merely just, but generous.

This settled, Transley proceeded to interest Y.D. in the work in which he was now engaged. He drew a picture of activities in the little metropolis such as stirred the rancher's incredulity.

"Well, well," Y.D. would say. "Transley, I've known that little hole for about thirty years, an' never seen it was any good excep' to get drunk in. . . . I've seen more things there than is down in the books."

"You wouldn't know the change that has come about in a few months," said Transley, with enthusiasm. "Double shifts working by electric light, Y.D! What do you think of that? Men with rolls of money that would choke a cow sleeping out in tents because they can't get a roof over them. Why, man, I didn't have to hunt a job there; the job hunted me. I could have had a dozen jobs at my own price if I could have handled them. It's just as if prosperity was a river which had been trickling through that town for thirty years, and all of a sudden the dam up in the foothills gives away and down she comes with a rush. Lots which sold a year ago for a hundred dollars are selling now for five hundred−−sometimes more. Old ranchers living on the bald−headed a few years ago find themselves today the owners of city property worth millions, and are dressing uncomfortably, in keeping with their wealth, or vainly trying to drink up the surplus. So far sense and brains has had nothing to do with it, Y.D., absolutely nothing. It has been fool luck. But the brains are coming in now, and the brains will get the money, in the long run."

Transley paused and lit another cigar. Y.D. rolled his in his lips, reflectively.

"I mind some doin's in that burg," he said, as though the memory of them was of greater importance than all that might be happening now.

Transley switched back to business. "We ought to be in on it, Y.D.," he said. "Not on the fly−by−night stuff; I don't mean that. But I could take twice the contracts if I had twice the outfit."

Y.D. brought his chair down on to all four legs and removed his cigar.

"You mean we should hit her together?" he demanded.

"It would be a great compliment to me, if you had that confidence in me, and I'm sure it would make some good money for you."

"How'd you work it?"

"You have a bunch of horses running here on the ranch, eating their heads off. Many of them are broke, and the others would soon tame down with a scraper behind them. Give them to me and let me put them to work. I'd have to have equipment, too. Your name on the back of my note would get it, and you wouldn't actually have to put up a dollar. Then we'd make an inventory of what you put into the firm and what I put into it, and we'd divide the earnings in proportion."

"After payin' you a salary as manager, of course," suggested Y.D.

"That's immaterial. With a bigger outfit and more capital I can make so much more money out of the earnings that I don't care whether I get a salary or not. But I wouldn't figure on going on contracting all the time for other people. We might as well have the cream as the skimmed milk. This is the way it's done. We go to the owner of a block of lots somewhere where there's no building going on. He's anxious to start something, because as soon as building starts in that district the lots will sell for two or three times what they do now. We say to him, 'Give us every second lot in your block and we'll put a house on it.' In this way we get the lots for a trifle; perhaps for nothing. Then we build a lot of houses, more or less to the same plan. We put 'em up quick and cheap. We build 'em to sell, not to live in. Then we mortgage 'em for the last cent we can get. Then we put the price up to twice what the mortgage is and sell them as fast as we can build them, getting our equity out and leaving the purchasers to settle with the mortgage company. It's good for from thirty to forty per cent, profit, not per annum, but per transaction."

"It sounds interesting," said Y.D., "an' I suppose I might as well put my spare horses an' credit to work. I don't mind drivin' down with you to−morrow an' looking her over first hand."

This was all Transley had hoped for, and the talk turned to less material matters. After a while Zen joined them, and a little later Y.D. left to attend to some business at the bunk−house.

"Your father and I may go into partnership, Zen," Transley said to her, when they were alone together. He explained in a general way the venture that was afoot.

"That will be very interesting," she agreed.

"Will you be interested?"

"Of course. I am interested in everything that Dad undertakes."

"And are you not−−will you not be−−just a little interested in the things that I undertake?"

She paused a moment before replying. The dusk had settled about them, and he could not see the contour of her face, but he knew that she had realized the significance of his question.

"Why yes," she said at length, "I will be interested in what you undertake. You will be Dad's partner."

Her evasion nettled him.

"Zen," he said, "why shouldn't we understand each other?"

"Don't we?" She had turned slightly toward him, and he could feel the laughing mockery in her eyes.

"I rather think we do," he answered, "only we−−at least, you−−won't admit it."

"Oh!"

"Seriously, Zen, do you imagine I came over here to−day simply to make a deal with your father?"

"Wasn't that worth while?"

"Of course it was. But it wasn't the whole purpose−−it wasn't half the purpose. I wanted to see Y.D., it is true, but more, very much more, I wanted to see you."

She did not answer, and he could only guess what was the trend of her thoughts. After a silence he continued.

"You may think I am precipitate. You intimated as much to me once. I am. I know of no reason why an honest man should go beating about the bush. When I want something I want it, and I make a bee− line for it. If it is a contract−−if it is a business matter−−I go right after it, with all the energy that's in me. When I'm looking for a contract I don't start by talking about the weather. Well−− this is my first experience in love, and perhaps my methods are all wrong, but it seems to me they should apply. At any rate a girl of your intelligence will understand."

"Applying your business principles," she interrupted, "I suppose if you wanted a wife and there was none in sight you would advertise for her?"

He defended his position. "I don't see why not," he declared. "I can't understand the general attitude of levity toward matrimonial advertisements. Apparently they are too open and above−board. Matrimony should not be committed in a round−about, indirect, hit− or−miss manner. A young man sees a girl whom he thinks he would

like to marry. Does he go to her house and say, 'Miss So−and−So, I think I would like to marry you. Will you allow me to call on you so that we may get better acquainted, with that object in view?' He does not. Such honesty would be considered almost brutal. He calls on her and pretends he would like to take her to the theatre, if it is in town, or for a ride, if it is in the country. She pretends she would like to go. Both of them know what the real purpose is, and both of them pretend they don't. They start the farce by pretending a deceit which deceives nobody. They wait for nature to set up an attraction which shall overrule their judgment, rather than act by judgment first and leave it to nature to take care of herself. How much better it would be to be perfectly frank−−to boldly announce the purpose−−to come as I now come to you and say, 'Zen, I want to marry you. My reason, my judgment, tells me that you would be an ideal mate. I shall be proud of you, and I will try to make you proud of me. I will gratify your desires in every way that my means will permit. I pledge you my fidelity in return for yours. I−−I−−' Zen, will you say yes? Can you believe that there is in my simple words more sincerity than there could be in any mad ravings about love? You are young, Zen, younger than I, but you must have observed some things. One of them is that marriage, founded on mutual respect, which increases with the years, is a much safer and wiser business than marriage founded on a passion which quickly burns itself out and leaves the victims cold, unresponsive, with nothing in common. You may not feel that you know me well enough for a decision. I will give you every opportunity to know me better−−I will do nothing to deceive you−−I will put on no veneer−−I will let you know me as I really am. Will you say yes?"

He had left his seat and approached her; he was leaning close over her chair. While his words had suggested marriage on a purely intellectual basis he did not hesitate to bring his physical presence into the scale. He was accustomed to having his way−−he had always had it−−never did he want it more than he did now. . . . And although he had made his plea from the intellectual angle he was sure, he was very, very sure there was more than that. This girl; whose very presence delighted him−−intoxicated him−−would have made him mad−−

"Will you say yes?" he repeated, and his hands found hers and drew her with his great strength up from her chair. She did not resist, but when she was on her feet she avoided his embrace.

"You must not hurry me," she whispered. "I must have time to think. I did not realize what you were saying until−−"

"Say yes now," he urged. Transley was a man very hard to resist. She felt as though she were in the grip of a powerful machine; it was as though she were being swept along by a stream against which her feeble strength was as nothing. Zen was as nearly frightened as she had ever been in her vigorous young life. And yet there was something delightful. It would have been so easy to surrender−−it was so hard to resist.

"Say yes now," he repeated, drawing her close at last and breathing the question into her ear. "You shall have time to think−−you shall ask your own heart, and if it does not confirm your words you will be released from your promise."

They heard the footsteps of her father approaching, and Transley waited no longer for an answer. He turned her face to his; he pressed his lips against hers.

CHAPTER IX

Zen thought over the events of that evening until they became a blur in her memory. Her principal recollection was that she had been quite swept off her feet. Transley had interpreted her submission as assent, and she had not corrected him in the vital moment when they stood before her father that night in the deep shadow of the veranda.

"Y.D.," Transley had said, "your consent and your blessing! Zen and I are to be married as soon as she can be ready."

That was the moment at which she should have spoken, but she did not. She, who had prided herself that she would make a race of it−− she, who had always been able to slip out of a predicament in the nick of time−−stood mutely by and let Transley and her father interpret her silence as consent. She was not sure that she was sorry; she was not sure but she would have consented anyway; but Transley had taken the matter quite out of her hands. And yet she could not bring herself to feel resentment toward him; that was the strangest part of it. It seemed that she had come under his domination; that she even had to think as he would have her think.

In the darkness she could not see her father's face, for which she was sorry; and he could not see hers, for which she was glad. There was a long moment of tense silence before she heard him say,

"Well, well! I had a hunch it might come to that, but I didn't reckon you youngsters would work so fast."

"This was a stake worth working fast for," Transley was saying, as he shook Y.D.'s hand. "I wouldn't trade places with any man alive." And Zen was sure he meant exactly what he said.

"She's a good girl, Transley," her father commented; "a good girl, even if a bit obstrep'rous at times. She's got spirit, Transley, an' you'll have to handle her with sense. She's a−−a thoroughbred!"

Y.D. had reached his arms toward his daughter, and at these words he closed them about her. Zen had never known her father to be emotional; she had known him to face matters of life and death without the quiver of an eyelid, but as he held her there in his arms that night she felt his big frame tremble. Suddenly she had a powerful desire to cry. She broke from his embrace and ran upstairs to her room.

When she came down her father and mother and Transley were sitting about the table in the living−room; the room hung with trophies of the chase and of competition; the room which had been the nucleus of the Y.D. estate. There was a colored cover on the table, and the shaded oil lamp in the centre sent a comfortable glow of light downward and about. The mammoth shadows of the three people fell on the log walls, darting silently from position to position with their every movement.

Her mother arose as Zen entered the room and took her hands in a warm, tender grip.

"You're early leaving us," she said. "I'm not saying I object. I think Mr. Transley will make you a good husband. He is a man of energy, like your father. He will do well. You will not know the hardships that we knew in our early married life." Their eyes met, and there was a moment's pause.

"You will not understand for many years what this means to me, Zenith," her mother said, and turned quickly to her place at the table.

She could not remember what they had talked about after that. She had been conscious of Transley's eyes often on her, and of a certain spiritual exaltation within her. She could not remember what she had said, but she knew she had talked with unusual vivacity and charm. It was as though certain storehouses of brilliance in her being, of which she had been unaware, had been suddenly opened to her. It was as though she had been intoxicated by a very subtle wine which did not deaden, but rather quickened, all her faculties.

Afterwards, she had spent long hours among the foothills, thinking and thinking. There were times when the flame of that strange exaltation burned low indeed; times when it seemed almost to expire. There were moments−−hours−−of misgivings. She could not understand the strange docility which had come over her; the unprecedented willingness to have her course shaped by another. That strange willingness came as near to frightening Zen as anything had ever done. She felt that she was being carried along in a stream; that she was making no resistance; that she had no desire to resist. She had a strange fear that some day she would need to resist; some day she would mightily need qualities of self− direction, and those qualities would refuse to arise at

her command.

She did not fear Transley. She believed in him. She believed in his ability to grapple with anything that stood in his way; to thrust it aside, and press on. She respected the judgment of her father and her mother, and both of them believed in Transley. He would succeed; he would seize the opportunities this young country afforded and rise to power and influence upon them. He would be kind, he would be generous. He would make her proud of him. What more could she want?

That was just it. There were dark moments when she felt that surely there must be something more than all this. She did not know what it was−−she could not analyze her thoughts or give them definite form−−but in these dark moments she feared that she was being tricked, that the whole thing was a sham which she would discover when it was too late. She did not suspect her mother, or her father, or Transley, one or all, of being parties to this trick; she believed that they did not know it existed. She herself did not know it existed. But the fear was there.

After a week she admitted, much against her will, that possibly Dennison Grant had something to do with it. She had not seen him since she had pressed his fingers and he had ridden away through the smoke−haze of the South Y.D. She had dutifully tried to force him from her mind. But he would not stay out of it. It was about that fact that her misgivings seemed most to centre. When she would be thinking of Transley, and wondering about the future, suddenly she would discover that she was not thinking of Transley, but of Dennison Grant. These discoveries shocked and humiliated her. It was an impossible position. She would throw Grant forcibly out of her mind and turn to Transley. And then, in an unguarded moment, Transley would fade from her consciousness, and she would know again that she was thinking of Grant.

At length she allowed herself the luxury of thinking frankly about Dennison Grant. It WAS a luxury. It brought her a secret happiness which she was wholly at a loss to understand, but which was very delightful, nevertheless. She amused herself with comparing Grant with Transley. They had two points in common: their physical perfection and their fearless, self−confident manner. With these exceptions they seemed to be complete contradictions. The ambitious Transley worshipped success; the philosophical Grant despised it. That difference in attitude toward the world and its affairs was a ridge which separated the whole current of their lives. It even, in a way, shut one from the view of the other; at least it shut Grant from the view of Transley. Transley would never understand Grant, but Grant might, and probably did, understand Transley. That was why Grant was the greater of the two. . . .

She reproached herself for such a thought; it was disloyal to admit that this stranger on the Landson ranch was a greater man than her husband−to−be. And yet honesty−−or, perhaps, something deeper than honesty−−compelled her to make that admission. . . . She ran back over the remembered incidents of the night they had spent together, marooned like shipwrecked sailors on a rock in the foothills. His attentiveness, his courtesy, his freedom from any conventional restraint, his manly respect which was so much greater than conventional restraint−−all these came back to her with a poignant tenderness. She pictured Transley in his place. Transley would probably have proposed even before he bandaged her ankle. Grant had not said a word of love, or even of affection. He had talked freely of himself−−at her request−−but there had been nothing that might not have been said before the world. She had been safe with Grant. . . .

After she had thought on this theme for a while Zen would acknowledge to herself that the situation was absurd and impossible. Grant had given no evidence of thinking more of her than of any other girl whom he might have met. He had been chivalrous only. She had sat up with a start at the thought that there might be another girl. . . . Or there might be no girl. Grant was an unusual character. . . .

At any rate, the thing for her to do was to forget about him. She should have no place in her mind for any man but Transley. It was true he had stampeded her, but she had accepted the situation in which she found herself. Transley was worthy of her−−she had nothing to take back−−she would go through with it.

On the principle that the way to drive an unwelcome thought out of the mind is to think vigorously about something else, Zen occupied herself with plans and day−dreams centering about the new home that was to be built in town. Neither her father nor Transley had as yet returned from the trip on which they had gone with a view to forming a partnership, so there had been no opportunity to discuss the plans for the future, but Zen took it for granted that Transley would build in town. He was so enthusiastic over the possibilities of that young and bustling centre of population that there was no doubt he would want to throw in his lot with it. This prospect was quite pleasing to the girl; it would leave her within easy distance of her old home; it would introduce her to a type of society with which she was well acquainted, and where she could do herself justice, and it would not break up the associations of her young life. She would still be able, now and again, to take long rides through the tawny foothills; to mingle with her old friends; possibly to maintain a somewhat sisterly acquaintance with Dennison Grant. . . .

After ten days Y.D. returned−−alone. He had scarcely been able to believe the developments which he had seen. It was as though the sleepy, lazy cow−town had become electrified. Y.D. had looked on for three days, wondering if he were not in some kind of a dream from which he would awaken presently among his herds in the foothills. After three days he bought a property. Before he left he sold it at a profit greater than the earnings of his first five years on the ranch. It would be indeed a stubborn confidence which could not be won by such an experience, and before leaving for the ranch Y.D. had arranged for Transley practically an open credit with his bankers, and had undertaken to send down all the horses and equipment that could be spared.

Transley had planned to return to the foothills with Y.D., but at the last moment business matters developed which required his attention. He placed a tiny package in Y.D.'s capacious palm.

"For the girl," he said. "I should deliver it myself, but you'll explain?"

Y.D. fumbled the tiny package into a vest pocket. "Sure, I'll attend to that," he promised. "Wasn't much of these fancy trimmin's when I settled into double harness, but lots of things has changed since then. You'll be out soon?"

"Just as soon as business will stand for it. Not a minute longer."

On his return home Y.D., after maintaining an exasperating silence until supper was finished, casually handed the package to his daughter.

"Some trinket Transley sent out," he explained. "He'll be here himself as soon as business permits."

She took the package with a glow of expectancy, started to open it, then folded the paper again and ran up to her room. Here she tempted herself for minutes before she would finally open it, whetting the appetite of anticipation to the full. . . . The gem justified her little play. It was magnificent; more beautiful and more expensive than anything her father ever bought her.

She hesitated strangely about putting it on. To Zen it seemed that the putting on of Transley's ring would be a voluntary act symbolizing her acceptance of him. If she had been carried off her feet−−swept into the position in which she found herself−−that explanation would not apply to the deliberate placing of his ring upon her finger. There would be no excuse; she could never again plead that she had been the victim of Transley's precipitateness. This would be deliberate, and she must do it herself.

She rather blamed Transley for not having left his old business and come to perform this rite himself, as he should have done. What was one day of business, more or less? Yet Zen gathered no hint from that incident that always, with Transley, business would come first. It was symbolic−−prophetic−−but she did not see the sign nor understand the prophecy.

She held the ring between her fingers; slipped it off and on her little fingers; held it so the rays of the sun fell through the window upon it and danced before her eyes in all their primal colors.

"I have to put this on," she said, pursing her lips firmly, "and−− and forget about Dennison Grant!"

For a long time she thought of that and all it meant. Then she raised the jewel to her lips.

"Help me−−help me−−" she murmured. With a quick little impetuous motion she drew it on to the finger where it belonged. There she gazed upon it for a moment, as though fascinated by it. Then she fell upon her bed and lay motionless until long after the valley was wrapped in shadow.

The events of these days had almost driven from Zen's mind the tragedy of George Drazk. When she thought of it at all it presented such a grotesque unreality−−it was such an unreasonable thing−−that it assumed the vague qualities of a dream. It was something unreal and very much better forgotten, and it was only by an unwilling effort at such times that she could bring herself to know that it was not unreal. It was a matter that concerned her tremendously. Sooner or later Drazk's disappearance must be noted,−−perhaps his body would be found−−and while she had little fear that anyone would associate her with the tragedy it was a most unpleasant thing to think about. Sometimes she wondered if she should not tell her father or Transley just what had happened, but she shrank from doing so as from the confession of a crime. Mostly she was able to think of other matters.

Her father brought it up in a startling way at breakfast. Absolutely out of a blue sky he said, "Did you know, Zen, that Drazk has disappeared? Transley tells me you were int'rested a bit in him, or perhaps I should say he was int'rested in you."

Zen was so overcome by this startling change in the conversation that she was unable to answer. The color went from her face and she leaned low over her plate to conceal her agitation.

"Yep," continued Y.D., with no more concern than if a steer had been lost from the herd. "Transley said to tell you Drazk had disappeared an' he reckoned you wouldn't be bothered any more with him."

"Drazk was nothing to me," she managed to say. "How can you think he was?"

"Now who said he was?" her father retorted. "For a young woman with the price of a herd of steers on her third finger you're sort o' short this mornin'. Now I'm jus' wonderin' how far you can see through a board fence, Zen. Are you surprised that Drazk has disappeared?"

She was entirely at a loss to understand the drift of her father's talk. He could not connect her with Drazk's disappearance, or he would not approach the matter with such unconcern. That was unthinkable. Neither could Transley, or he would not have sent so brutal a message. And yet it was clear that they thought she should be interested.

Her father's question demanded an answer.

"What should I care?" she ventured at length.

"I didn't ask you whether you cared. I asked you whether you was surprised."

"Drazk's movements were−−are nothing to me. I don't know that I have any occasion to be surprised about anything he may do."

"Well, I'm rather glad you're not, because if you don't jump to conclusions, perhaps other people won't. Not that it makes any partic'lar diff'rence."

"Dad," she cried in desperation, "whatever do you mean?"

"It was all plain enough to me, an' plain enough to Transley," her father continued with remarkable calmness. "We seen it right from the first."

"You're talking in riddles, Y.D.," his wife remonstrated. "You're getting Zen all worked up."

"Jewelry seems to be mighty upsettin'," Y.D. commented. "There was nothin' like that in our engagement, eh, Jessie? Well, to come to the point. There was a fire which burned up the valley of the South Y.D. Fires don't start themselves−−usually. This one started among the Landson stacks, so it was natural enough to suspec' Y.D. or some of his sympathizers. Well it wasn't Y.D., an' I reckon it wasn't Zen, an' it wasn't Transley nor Linder an' every one of the gang's accounted for excep' Drazk. Drazk thought he was doin' a great piece of business when he fired the Landson hay, but when the wind turned an' burned up the whole valley Drazk sees where he can't play no hero part around here so he loses himself for good. I gathered from Transley that Drazk had been botherin' you a little, Zen, which is why I told you."

The girl's heart was pounding violently at this explanation. It was logical, and would be accepted readily by those who knew Drazk. She would not trust herself in further conversation, so she slipped away as soon as she could and spent the day riding down by the river.

The afternoon wore on, and as the day was warm she dismounted by a ford and sat down upon a flat rock close to the water. The rock reminded her of the one on which she and Grant had sat that night while the thin red lines of fire played far up and down the valley. Her ankle was paining a little so she removed her boot and stocking and soothed it in the cool water.

As she sat watching her reflection in the clear stream and toying with the ripple about her foot a horseman rode quickly down through the cottonwoods on the other side and plunged into the ford. It happened so quickly that neither saw the other until he was well into the river. Although she had had no dream of seeing him here, in some way she felt no surprise. Her heart was behaving boisterously, but she sat outwardly demure, and when he was close enough she sent a frank smile up to him. The look on his sunburned face as he returned her greeting convinced her that the meeting, on his part, was no less unexpected and welcome than it was to her.

When his horse was out of the water he dismounted and walked to her with extended hand.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said. "How is the ankle progressing?"

"Well enough," she returned, "but it gets tired as the day wears on. I am just resting a bit."

There was a moment of somewhat embarrassed silence.

"That is a good−sized rock," he suggested, at length.

"Yes, isn't it? And here in the shade, at that."

She did not invite him with words, but she gave her body a slight hitch, as though to make room, although there was enough already. He sat down without comment.

"Not unlike a rock I remember up in the foothills," he remarked, after a silence.

"Oh, you remember that? It WAS like this, wasn't it?"

"Same two people sitting on it."

". . . . Yes."

"Not like this, though."

"No. . . . You're mean. You know I didn't intend to fall asleep."

"Of course not. Still. . . ."

His voice lingered on it as though it were a delightful remembrance.

She found herself holding one of her hands in the other. She could feel the pressure of Transley's ring on her palm, and she held it tighter still.

"Riding anywhere in particular?" he inquired.

"No. Just mooning." She looked up at him again, this time at close quarters. It was a quick, bright flash on his face−−a moment only.

"Why mooning?"

She did not answer. Looking down in the water he met her gaze there.

"You're troubled!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no! My−−my ankle hurts a little."

He looked at her sympathetically. "But not that much," he said.

She gave a forced little laugh. "What a mind reader you are! Can you tell my fortune?"

"I should have to read it in your hand."

She would have extended her hand, but for Transley's ring.

"No. . . . No. You'll have to read it in−−in the stars."

"Then look at me." She did so, innocently.

"I cannot read it there," he said, after his long gaze had begun to whip the color to her cheeks. "There is no answer."

She turned again to the water, and after a long while she heard his voice, very low and earnest.

"Zen, I could read a fortune for you, if you would not be offended. We are only chance acquaintances−−not very well acquainted, yet−−"

She knew what he meant, but she pretended she did not. Even in that moment something came to her of Transley's speech about love being a game of pretence. Very well, she would play the game−−this once.

"I don't see how I could be offended at your reading my fortune," she murmured.

"Then this is the fortune I would read for you," he said boldly. "I see a young man, a rather foolish young man, perhaps, by ordinary standards, and yet one who has found a great deal of happiness in his simple, unconventional life. Until a short time ago he felt that life could give him all the happiness that was worth having. He had health, strength, hours of work and hours of pleasure, the fields, the hills, the mountains, the sky−−all God's open places to live in and enjoy. He thought there was nothing more.

"Well, then he found, all of a sudden, that there was something more−−everything more. He made that discovery on a calm autumn night, when fire had blackened all the foothills and still ran in dancing red ribbons over their distant crests. That night a great thing−−two great things−−came into his life. First was something he gave. Not very much, indeed, but typical of all it might be. It was service. And next was something he received, something so wonderful he did not understand it then, and does not understand it yet. It was trust. These were things he had been leaving largely out of his life, and suddenly he discovered how empty it was. I think there is one word for both these things, and, it may be, for even more. You know?"

"I know," she said, and her voice was scarcely audible.

"But it is YOUR fortune I am to read," he corrected himself. "It has been your fortune to open that new world to me. That can never be undone−−those gates can never be closed−−no matter where the paths may lead. Those two paths go down to the future−−as all paths must−−even as this road leads away through the valley to the sunset. Zen−−if only, like this road, they could run side by side to the sunset−−Oh! Zen, if they could?"

"I know," she said, and as she raised her face he saw that her eyes were wet. "I know−−if only they could!"

There was a little sob in her voice, and in her beauty and distress she was altogether irresistible. He reached out his arms and would have taken her in them, but she thrust her hands in his and held herself back. She turned the diamond deliberately to his eyes. She could feel his grip relax and apparently grow suddenly cold. He stood speechless, like one dazed−−benumbed.

"You see, I should not have let you talk−−it is my fault," she said, speaking hurriedly. "I should not have let you talk. Please do not think I am shallow; that I let you suffer to gratify my vanity." Her eyes found his again. "If I had not believed every word you said−−if I had not liked every word you said−−if I had not−−HOPED−−every word you said, I would not have listened. . . . But you see how it is."

He was silent for so long that she thought he was not going to answer her at all. When he spoke it was in a dry, parched voice.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I should not have presumed−−"

"I know, I know. If only−−"

Then he looked straight at her and talked out.

"You liked me enough to let me speak as I did. I opened my heart to you. I ask no such concession in return. I hope you will not think me presumptuous, but I do not plead now for my happiness, but for yours. Is this irrevocable? Are−−you−−sure?"

He said the last words so slowly and deliberately that she felt that each of them was cutting the very rock from underneath her. She knew she was at a junction point in her life, and her mind strove to quickly appraise the situation. On one side was this man who had for her so strange and so powerful an appeal. It was only by sheer force of will that she could hold herself aloof from him. But he was a man who had broken with his family and quarrelled with her father−−a man whom her father would certainly not for a moment consider as a son−in−law. He was a foreman; practically a ranch hand. Neither Zen nor her father were snobs, and if Grant worked for a living, so did Transley. That was not to be counted against him. The point was, what kind of living did he earn? What Transley had to offer was perhaps on a lower plane, but it was more substantial. It had been approved by her father, and her mother, and herself. It wasn't as though one man were good and the other bad; it wasn't as though one thing were right and the other wrong. It would have been easy then. . . .

"I have promised," she said at last.

She released her hands from his, and, sitting down, silently put on her stocking and boot. She was aware that he was still standing near, as though waiting to be formally dismissed. She walked by him to her horse and put her foot in the stirrup. Then she looked at him and gave her hand a little farewell wave.

Then a great pang, irresistible in its yearning, swept over her. She drew her foot from the stirrup, and, rushing down, threw her arms about his neck. . . .

"I must go," she said. "I must go. We must both go and forget."

And Dennison Grant continued his way down the valley while Zen rode back to the Y.D., wondering if she could ever forget.

CHAPTER X

Linder scratched his tousled brown hair reflectively as he gazed after the retreating form of Transley. His hat was off, and the perspiration stood on his sunburned face−−a face which, in point of handsomeness, needed make no apology to Transley.

"Well, by thunder!" said Linder; "by thunder, think of that!"

Linder stood for some time, thinking "of that" as deeply as his somewhat disorganized mental state would permit. For Transley had announced, with his usual directness, that he wanted so many men and teams for a house excavation in the most exclusive part of the city. So far they had been building in the cheaper districts a cheap type of house for those who, having little capital, are the easier deprived of what they have. The shift in operations caused Linder to lift his eyebrows.

Transley laughed boyishly and clapped a palm on his shoulder.

"I may as well make you wise, Linder," he said. "We're going to build a house for Mr. and Mrs. Transley."

"MISSUS?" Linder echoed, incredulously.

"That's the good word," Transley confirmed. "Never expected it to happen to me, but it did, all of a sudden. You want to look out; maybe it's catching."

Transley was evidently in prime humor. Linder had, indeed, noted this good humor for some time, but had attributed it to the very successful operations in which his employer had been engaged. He pulled himself together

enough to offer a somewhat confused congratulation.

"And may I ask who is to be the fortunate young lady?" he ventured.

"You may," said Transley, "but if you could see the length of your nose it wouldn't be necessary. Linder, you're the best foreman I ever had, just because you don't ever think of anything else. When you pass on there'll be no heaven for you unless they give you charge of a bunch of men and teams where you can raise a sweat and make money for the boss. If you weren't like that you would have anticipated what I've told you−−or perhaps made a play for Zen yourself."

"Zen? You don't mean Y.D.'s daughter?"

"If I don't mean Y.D.'s daughter I don't mean anybody, and you can take that from me. You bet it's Zen. Say, Linder, I didn't think I could go silly over a girl, but I'm plumb locoed. I bought the biggest old sparkler in this town and sent it out with Y.D., if he didn't lose it through the lining of his vest−−he handled it like it might have been a box of pills−−bad pills, Linder−−and I've got an architect figuring how much expense he can put on a house−−he gets a commission on the cost, you see−−and one of these nights I'm going to buy you a dinner that'll keep you fed till Christmas. I never knew before that silliness and happiness go together, but they do. I'm glad I've got a sober old foreman−−that's all that keeps the business going."

And after Transley had turned away Linder had scratched his head and said "By thunder. . . . Linder, when you wake up you'll be dead. . . . After her practically saying 'The water's fine.' . . . Well, that's why I'm a foreman, and always will be."

But after a little reflection Linder came to the conclusion that perhaps it was all for the best. He could not have bought Y.D.'s daughter a big sparkler or have built her a fine home−−because he was a foreman. It was a round circle. . . . He threw himself into the building of Transley's house with as much fidelity as if it had been his own. He gave his undivided attention to Transley's interests, making dollars for him while earning cents for himself. This attention was more needed than it ever had been, as Transley found it necessary to make weekly trips to the ranch in the foothills to consult with Y.D. upon business matters.

Zen found her interest in Transley growing as his attentions continued. He spent money upon her lavishly, to the point at which she protested, for although Y.D. was rated as a millionaire the family life was one of almost stark simplicity. Transley assured her that he was making money faster than he possibly could spend it, and even if not, money had no nobler mission than to bring her happiness. He explained the blue−prints of the house, and discussed with her details of the appointments. As the building progressed he brought her weekly photographs of it. He urged her to set the date about Christmas; during the winter contracting would be at a standstill, so they would spend three months in California and return in time for the spring business.

Day by day the girl turned the situation over in her mind. Her life had been swept into strange and unexpected channels, and the experience puzzled her. Since the episode with Drazk she had lost some of her native recklessness; she was more disposed to weigh the result of her actions, and she approached the future not without some misgivings. She assured herself that she looked forward to her marriage with Transley with the proper delight of a bride−to− be, and indeed it was a prospect that could well be contemplated with pleasure. . . . Transley had won the complete confidence of her father and when doubts assailed her Zen found in that fact a very considerable comfort. Y.D. was a shrewd man; a man who seldom guessed wrong. Zen did not admit that she was allowing her father to choose a husband for her, but the fact that her father concurred in the choice strengthened her in it. Transley had in him qualities which would win not only wealth, but distinction, and she would share in the laurels. She told herself that it was a delightful outlook; that she was a very happy girl indeed−−and wondered why she was not happier!

Particularly she laid it upon herself that she must now, finally, dismiss Dennison Grant from her mind. It was absurd to suppose that she cared more for Grant than she did for Transley. The two men were so different; it was impossible to make comparisons. They occupied quite different spheres in her regard. To be sure, Grant was a very likeable man, but he was not eligible as a husband, and she could not marry two, in any case. Zen entertained no girlish delusions about there being only one man in the world. On the contrary, she was convinced that there were very many men in the world, and, among the better types, there was, perhaps, not so much to choose between them. Grant would undoubtedly be a good husband within his means; so would Transley, and his means were greater. The blue−prints of the new house in town had not been without their effect. It was a different prospect from being a foreman's wife on a ranch. Her father would never hear of it. . . .

So she busied herself with preparations for the great event, and what preparations they were! "Zen," her father had said, "for once the lid is off. Go the limit!" She took him at his word. There were many trips to town, and activities about the old ranch buildings such as they had never known since Jessie Wilson came to finish Y.D.'s up−bringing, nor even then. The good word spread throughout the foothill country and down over the prairies, and many a lazy cloud of dust lay along the November hillsides as the women folk of neighboring ranches came to pay their respects and gratify their curiosity. Zen had treasures to show which sent them home with new standards of extravagance.

Y.D. had not thought he could become so worked up over a simple matter like a wedding. Time had dulled the edge of memory, but even after making allowances he could not recall that his marriage to Jessie Wilson had been such an event in his life as this. It did not at least reflect so much glory upon him personally. He basked in the reflected glow of his daughter's beauty and popularity, as happily as the big cat lying on the sunny side of the bunk−house. He found all sorts of excuses for invading where his presence was little wanted while Zen's finery was being displayed for admiration. Y.D. always pretended that such invasions were quite accidental, and affected a fine indifference to all this "women's fuss an' feathers," but his affectations deceived at least none of the older visitors.

As the great day approached Y.D.'s wife shot a bomb−shell at him. "What do you propose to wear for Zen's wedding?" she demanded.

"What's the matter with the suit I go to town in?"

"Y.D.," said his wife, kindly, "there are certain little touches which you overlook. Your town suit is all right for selling steers, although I won't say that it hasn't outlived its prime even for that. To attend Zen's wedding it is−−hardly the thing."

"It's been a good suit," he protested. "It is−−"

"It HAS. It is also a venerable suit. But really, Y.D., it will not do for this occasion. You must get yourself a new suit, and a white shirt−−"

"What do I want with a white shirt−−"

"It has to be," his wife insisted. "You'll have to deck yourself out in a new suit and a while shirt and collar."

Y.D. stamped around the room, and in a moment slipped out. "All fool nonsense," he confided to himself, on his way to the bunk− house. "It's all right for Zen to have good clothes−−didn't I tell her to go the limit?−−but as for me, 'tain't me that's gettin' married, is it? Standin' up before all them cow punchers in a white shirt!" The bitterness of such disgrace cut the old rancher no less keenly than the physical discomfort which he forecast for himself, yet he put his own desires sufficiently to one side to buy a suit of clothes, and a white shirt and collar, when he was next in town.

It must not be supposed that Y.D. admitted to the salesman that he personally was descending to any such garb.

"A suit for a fellow about my size," he explained. "He's visitin' out at the ranch, an' he hefts about the same as me. Put in one of them Hereford shirts an' a collar."

Y.D. tucked the package surreptitiously in his room and awaited the day of Zen's marriage with mingled emotions.

Zen, yielding to Transley's importunities, had at last said that it should be Christmas Day. The wedding would be in the house, with the leading ranchers and farmers of the district as invited guests, and the general understanding was to be given out that the countryside as a whole would be welcome. All could not be taken care of in the house, so Y.D. gave orders that the hay was to be cleared out of one of the barns and the floor put in shape for dancing. Open house would be held in the barn and in the bunk− house, where substantial refreshments would be served to all and sundry.

Christmas Day dawned with a seasonable nip to the air, but the sun rose warm and bright. There was no snow, and by early afternoon clouds of dust were rising on every trail leading to the Y.D. The old ranchers and their wives drove in buckboards, and one or two in automobiles; the younger generation, of both sexes, came on horseback, with many an exciting impromptu race by the way. Y.D. received them all in the yard, commenting on the horses and the weather, and how the steers were wintering, and revealing, at the proper moments, the location of a well−filled stone jug. The faithful Linder was on hand to assist in caring for the horses and maintaining organization about the yard. The women were ushered into the house, but the men sat about the bunk−house or leaned against the sunny side of the barn, sharpening their wits in conversational sallies which occasionally brought loud guffaws of merriment.

In the house every arrangement had been completed. Zen was to come down the stairs leaning on her father's arm, and the ceremony would take place in the big central room, lavishly decorated with flowers which Transley had sent from town in a heated automobile. After the ceremony the principals and the older people would eat the wedding dinner in the house, and all others would be served in the bunk−house. One of the downstairs rooms was already filled with presents.

As the hour approached Zen found herself possessed of a calmness which she deemed worthy of Y.D.'s daughter. She had elected to be unattended as she had no very special girl friend, and that seemed the simplest way out of the problem of selecting someone for this honor. She was, however, amply assisted with her dressing, and the color of her fine cheeks burned deeper with the compliments to which she listened with modest appreciation.

At a quarter to the hour it was discovered that Y.D. had not yet dressed for the occasion. He was, in fact, engaged with Landson in making a tentative arrangement for the distribution of next year's hay. Zen had been so insistent upon an invitation being sent to Mr. and Mrs. Landson, that Y.D., although fearing a snub for his pains, at last conceded the point. He had done his neighbor rather less than justice, and now he and Landson, with the assistance of the jug already referred to, were burying the hatchet in a corner of the bunk−house.

"Dang this dressin'," Y.D. remonstrated when a message demanding instant action reached him. "Landson, hear me now! I wouldn't take a million dollars for that girl, y' understand−−and I wouldn't trade a mangy cayuse for another!"

So, grumbling, he found his way to his room and began a wrestle with his "store" clothes. Before the fight was over he was being reminded through the door that he wasn't roping a steer, and everybody was waiting. At the last moment he discovered that he had neglected to buy shoes. There was nothing for it but his long ranch boots, so on they went.

He sought Zen in her room. "Will I do in this?" he asked, feeling very sheepish.

Zen could have laughed, or she could have cried, but she did neither. She sensed in some way the fact that to her father this experience was a positive ordeal. So she just slipped her arm through his and whispered, "Of course you'll do, you silly old duffer," and tripped down the stairs by the side of his ponderous steps.

After the ceremony the elder people sat down to dinner in the house, and the others in the bunk−house. Zen was radiant and calm; Transley handsome, delighted, self−possessed. His good luck was the subject of many a comment, both inside and out of the old house. He accepted it at its full value, and yet as one who has a right to expect that luck will play him some favors.

Suddenly there was a rush from outside, and Zen found herself being carried bodily away. The young people had decided that the dancing could wait no longer, so a half dozen hustlers had been deputed to kidnap the bride and carry her to the barn, where the fiddles were already strumming. Zen insisted that the first dance must belong to Transley, but after that she danced with the young ranchers and cowboys with strict impartiality. And even as she danced she found herself wondering if, among all this representation of the countryside, that one upon whom her thoughts had turned so much should be missing. She found herself watching the door. Surely it would have been only a decent respect to her−−surely he might have helped to whirl her joyously away into the new life in which the past had to be forgotten. . . . How much better that they should part that way, than with the memories they had!

But Dennison Grant did not appear. Evidently he preferred to keep his memories. . . .

When at last the night had worn thin and it was time for the bridal couple to leave if they were to catch the morning train in town, and they had ridden down the foothill trails to the thunder of many accompanying hoof−beats, the old ranch became suddenly a place very quiet and still and alone. Y.D. sat down in the corner of the big room by the fire, and saw strange pictures in its dying embers. Zen. . . . Zen! . . . Transley was a good fellow, but how much a man will take with scarce a thank−you! . . . Presently Y.D. became aware of a hand resting upon his shoulder, and tingling from its fingertips came something akin to the almost forgotten rapture of a day long gone. He raised his great palm and took that slowly ageing hand, once round and fresh like Zen's, in his. Together they watched the fire die out in the silence of their empty house. . . .

CHAPTER XI

Grant read the account of her wedding in the city papers a day or two later. It was given the place of prominence among the Christmas Day nuptials. He read it through twice and then tossed the paper to the end of his little office. Grant was housed in a building by himself; a shack twelve by sixteen feet, double boarded and tar−papered. A single square window in the eastern wall commanded a view of the Landson corrals. On the opposite side of the room was his bed; in the centre a huge wood−burning stove; near the window stood a table littered with daily papers and agricultural journals. The floor was of bare boards; a leather trunk, with D. G. in aggressive letters, sat by the head of his bed, and in the corner near the foot was a washstand with basin and pitcher of graniteware. In another corner was a short shelf of well−selected books; clothing hung from nails driven into the two−by−fours which formed the framework of the little building; a rifle was suspended over the door, and lariat and saddle hung from spikes in the wall. Grant sat in an arm chair by the stove, where the bracket lamp on the wall could shed its yellow glare upon his paper.

After throwing the sheet across the room he half turned in his chair, so that the yellow light fell across his face. Fidget, the pup, always alert for action, was on her feet in a moment, eager to lead the way to the door and whatever adventure might lie outside. But Grant did not leave his chair, and, finding all her tail−waving of no avail, she presently settled down again by the stove, her chin on her outstretched paws, her drooping eyes half

closed, but a wakeful ear flopping occasionally forward and back. Grant snuggled his foot against her friendly side and fell into reverie. . . .

There was nothing else for it; he must absolutely dismiss Zen−−Zen Transley−−from his mind. That was not only the course of honor; it was the course of common sense. After all, he had not sought her for his bride. He had not pressed his suit. He had given her to Transley. The thought was rather a pleasant one. It implied some sort of voluntary action upon Grant's part. He had been magnanimous. Nevertheless, he was cave man enough to know pangs of jealousy which his magnanimity could not suppress.

"If things had been different," he remarked to himself; "if I had been in a position to offer her decent conditions, I would have followed up the lead. And I would have won." He turned the incident on the river bank over in his mind, and a faint smile played along his lips. "I would have won. But I couldn't bring her here. . . . It's the first time I ever felt that money could really contribute to happiness. Well−−I was happy before I met her; I can be happy still. This little episode. . . ."

He crossed the room and picked up the newspaper he had thrown away; he crumpled it in his hand as he approached the stove. It said the bride was beautiful−−the happy couple−−the groom, prosperous young contractor−−California−−three months. . . . He turned to the table, smoothed out the paper, and studied it again. Of course he had heard the whole thing from the Landsons; they had done Y.D. and his daughter justice. He clipped the article carefully from the sheet and folded it away in a little book on the shelf.

Then he told himself that Zen had been swept from his mind; that if ever they should meet−−and he dallied a moment with that possibility−−they would shake hands and say some decent, insipid things and part as people who had never met before. Only they would know. . . .

Grant occupied himself with the work of the ranch that winter, spring, and summer. Occasional news of Mrs. Transley filtered through; she was too prominent a character in that countryside to be lost track of in a season. But anything which reached Grant came through accidental channels; he sought no information of her, and turned a deaf ear, almost, to what he heard. Then in the fall came an incident which immediately changed the course of his career.

It came in the form of an important−looking letter with an eastern postmark. It had been delivered with other mail at the house, and Landson himself brought it down. Grant read it and at first stared at it somewhat blankly, as one not taking in its full portent.

"Not bad news, I hope?" said his employer, cloaking his curiosity in commiseration.

"Rather," Grant admitted, and handed him the letter. Landson read:

"It is our duty to place before you information which must be of a very distressing nature, and which at the same time will have the effect of greatly increasing your responsibilities and opportunities. Unless you have happened to see the brief despatches which have appeared in the Press this letter will doubtless be the first intimation to you that your father and younger brother Roy were the victims of a most regrettable accident while motoring on a brief holiday in the South. The automobile in which they were travelling was struck by a fast train, and both of them received injuries from which they succumbed almost immediately.

"Your father, by his will, left all his property, aside from certain behests to charity, to his son Roy, but Roy had no will, and as he was unmarried, and as there are no other surviving members of the family except yourself, the entire estate, less the behests already referred to, descends to you. We have not yet attempted an appraisal, but you will know that the amount is very considerable indeed. In recent years your father's business undertakings were remarkably successful, and we think we may conservatively suggest that the amount of the estate will be very

much greater than even you may anticipate.

"The brokerage firm which your father founded is, temporarily, without a head. You have had some experience in your father's office, and as his solicitors for many years, we take the liberty of suggesting that you should immediately assume control of the business. A faithful staff are at present continuing it to the best of their ability, but you will understand that a permanent organization must be effected at as early a date as may be possible.

"Inability to locate you until after somewhat exhaustive inquiries had been made explains the failure to notify you by wire in time to permit of your attending the funeral of your father and brother, which took place in this city on the eighth instant, and was marked by many evidences of respect.

"We beg to tender our very sincere sympathy, and to urge upon you that you so arrange your affairs as to enable you to assume the responsibilities which have, in a sense, been forced upon you, at a very early date. In the meantime we assure you of our earnest attention to your interests.

"Yours sincerely,

"BARRETT, JONES, BARRETT, DEACON BARRETT."

"Well, I guess it means you've struck oil, and I've lost a good foreman," said Landson, as he returned the letter. "I'm sorry about your loss, Grant, and glad to hear of your good luck, if I may put it that way."

"No particular good luck that I can see," Grant protested. "I came west to get away from all that bothering nuisance, and now I've got to go back and take it all up again. I feel badly about Dad and the kid; they were decent, only they didn't understand me. . . . I suppose I didn't understand them, either. At any rate they didn't wish this on me. They had quite other plans."

"What do you reckon she's worth?" Landson asked, after waiting as long as his patience would permit.

"Oh, I don't know. Possibly six or eight millions by this time."

"Six or eight millions! Jehoshaphat! What will you do with it?"

"Look after it. Mr. Landson, you know that I have never worried about money; if I had I wouldn't be here. I figure that the more money a man has the greater are his responsibilities and his troubles; worse than that, his wealth excites the jealousy of the public and even the envy of his friends. It builds a barrier around him, shutting out all those things which are really most worth while. It makes him the legitimate prey of the unprincipled. I know all these things, and it is because I know them that I sought happiness out here on the ranges, where perhaps some people are rich and some are poor, but they all think alike and live alike and are part of one community and stand together in a pinch−−and out here I have found happiness. Now I'm going back to the other job. I don't care for the money, but any son−of−a−gun who takes it from me is a better man than I am, and I'll sit up nights at both ends of the day to beat him at his own game. Now, just as soon as you can line up someone to take charge I'll have to beat it."

The news of Grant's fortune spread rapidly, and many were the congratulations from his old cow puncher friends; congratulations, for the most part, without a suggestion of envy in them. Grant put his affairs in order as quickly as possible, and started for the East with a trunkful of clothes. But even before he started one thought had risen up to haunt him. He crushed it down, but it would insist. If only this had happened a year ago. . . .

Dennison Grant's mother had died in his infancy, and as soon as Roy was old enough to go to boarding−school his father had given up housekeeping. The club had been his home ever since. Grant reflected on this situation with

some satisfaction. He would at least be spared the unpleasantness of discharging a houseful of servants and disposing of the family furniture. As for the club−− he had no notion for that. A couple of rooms in some quiet apartment house, where he could cook a meal to his own liking as the fancy took him; that was his picture of something as near domestic happiness as was possible for a single man rather sadly out of his proper environment.

Grant reached his old home city late at night, and after a quiet cigar and a stroll through some of the half−forgotten streets he put up at one of the best hotels. He was deferentially shown to a room about as large as the whole Landson house; soft lights were burning under pink shades; his feet fell noiselessly on the thick carpets. He placed a chair by a window, where he could watch the myriad lights of the city, and tried to appraise the new sphere in which he found himself. It would be a very different game from riding the ranges or roping steers, but it would be a game, nevertheless; a game in which he would have to stand on his own resources even more than in those brave days in the foothills. He relished the notion of the game even while he was indifferent to the prize. He had no clear idea what he eventually should do with his wealth; that was something to think about very carefully in the days and years to come. In the meantime his job was to handle a big business in the way it should be handled. He must first prove his ability to make money before he showed the world how little he valued it.

He turned the water into his bath; there was a smell about the towels, the linen, the soap, that was very grateful to his nostrils. . . .

In the morning he passed by the office of Grant Son. He did not turn in, but pursued his way to a door where a great brass plate announced the law firm of Barrett, Jones, Barrett, Deacon Barrett. He smiled at this elaboration of names; it represented three generations of the Barrett family and two sons−in−law. Grant found himself speculating over a name for the Landson ranch; it might have been Landson, Grant, Landson, Murphy, Skinny Pete. . . .

He entered and inquired for Mr. Barrett, senior.

"Mr. David Barrett, senior, sir; he's out of the city, sir; he has not yet come in from his summer home in the mountains."

"Then the next Mr. Barrett?"

"Mr. David Barrett, junior, sir; he also is out of the city."

"Have you any more Barretts?"

"There's young Mr. Barrett, but he seldom comes down in the forenoon, sir."

Grant suppressed a grin. "The Barretts are a somewhat leisurely family, I take it," he remarked.

"They have been very successful," said the clerk, with a touch of reserve.

"Apparently; but who does the work?"

"Mr. Jones is in his office. Would you care to send in your card?"

"No, I think I'll just take it in." He pressed through a counter− gate and opened a door upon which was emblazoned the name of Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones proved to be a man with thin, iron−grey hair and a stubby, pugnacious moustache. He sat at a desk at the end of a long, narrow room, down both sides of which were rows of cases filled with impressive−looking

books. He did not raise his eyes when Grant entered, but continued poring over a file of correspondence.

"What an existence!" Grant commented to himself. "And yet I suppose this man thinks he's alive."

Grant remained standing for a moment, but as the lawyer showed no disposition to divide his attention he presently advanced to the desk. Mr. Jones looked up.

"You are Mr. Jones, I believe?"

"I am, but you have the better of me−−"

"Only for the moment. You are a lawyer. You will take care of that. I understand the firm of Barrett, Jones, Barrett, Deacon Barrett have somewhat leisurely methods?"

"Is the firm on trial?" inquired Mr. Jones, sharply.

"In a sense, yes. I also understand that although all the Barretts, and also Mr. Deacon, share in the name plate, Mr. Jones does the work?"

The lawyer laid down his papers. "Who the dickens are you, anyway, and what do you want?"

"That's better. With undivided attention we shall get there much quicker. I have a certain amount of legal business which requires attention, and in connection with which I am willing to pay what the service is worth. But I'm not going to pay two generations of Barretts which are out of the city, and a third which doesn't come down in the forenoon. If I have to buy name plates, I'll buy name plates of my own, and that is what I've decided to do. Do you mind saying how much this job here is worth?"

"Of course I do, sir. I don't understand you at all−−"

"Then I'll make myself understood. I am Dennison Grant. By force of circumstances I find myself−−"

The lawyer had risen from his chair. "Oh, Mr. Dennison Grant! I'm so glad−−"

Grant ignored the outstretched hand. "I'm exactly the same man who came into your office five minutes ago, and you were too busy to raise your eyes from your papers. It is not me to whom you are now offering courtesy; it's to my money."

"I am sure I beg your pardon. I didn't know−−"

"Then you will know in future. If you've got a hand on you, stick it out, whether your visitor has any money or not."

Grant was glaring at the lawyer across the desk, and the pugnacious−looking moustache was beginning to bristle back.

"Did you come in here to read me a lecture, or to get legal advice?" the lawyer returned with some spirit.

"I came in here on business. In the course of that business I find it necessary to tell you where you get off at, and to ask you what you're going to do about it."

The lawyer came around from behind his desk. "And I'll show you," he said, very curtly. "You've been drinking, or you're out of your head. In either case I'm going to put you out of this room until you are in a different frame of mind."

"Hop to it!" said Grant, bracing himself. Jones was an oldish man, and he had no intention of hurting him. In a moment they clenched, and before Grant could realize what was happening he was on his back.

He arose quickly, laughing, and sat down in a chair. "Mr. Jones, will you sit down? I want to talk to you."

"If you will talk business. You were rude to me."

"Perhaps. For my rudeness I apologize. But I was not untruthful. And I wanted to find something out. I found it."

"What?"

"Whether you had any sand in you. You have, and considerable muscle, or knack, as well. I'm not saying you could do it again−−"

"Well, what is this all about?"

"Simply this. If I am to manage the business of Grant Son I shall need legal advice of the highest order, and I want it from a man with red blood in him−−I should be afraid of any other advice. What is your price? You understand, you leave this firm and think of nothing, professionally, but what I pay you for."

Mr. Jones had seated himself, and the pugnacious moustache was settling back into a less hostile attitude.

"You are quite serious?"

"Quite. You see, I know nothing about business. It is true I spent some time in my father's office, but I never had much heart for it. I went west to get away from it. Fate has forced it back upon my hands. Well−−I'm not a piker, and I mean to show Fate that I can handle the job. To do so I must have the advice of a man who knows the game. I want a man who can look over a bond issue, or whatever it is, and tell me at a glance whether it's spavined or wind−broken. I want a man who can sense out the legal badger− holes, and who won't let me gallop over a cutbank. I want a man who has not only brains to back up his muscle, but who also has muscle to back up his brains. To be quite frank, I didn't think you were the man. I had no doubt you had the legal ability, or you wouldn't be guiding the affairs of this five−cylinder firm, but I was afraid you didn't have the fight in you. I picked a quarrel with you to find out, and you showed me, for which I am much obliged. By the way, how do you do it?"

Before answering Mr. Jones got up, walked around behind his desk, unlocked a drawer and produced a box of cigars.

"That's a mistake you Westerners make," he remarked, when they had lighted up. "You think the muscle is all out there, just as some Easterners will admit that the brains are all down here. Both are wrong. Life at a desk calls for an antidote, and two nights a week keep me in form. I wrestled a bit when I was a boy, but I haven't had a chance to try out my skill in a long while. I rather welcomed the opportunity."

"I noticed that. Well−−what's she worth?"

Mr. Jones ruminated. "I wouldn't care to break with the firm," he said at length. "There are family ties as well as those of business. A year's leave of absence might be arranged. By that time you would be safe in your saddle. By

the way, do you propose to hire all your staff by the same test?"

Grant smiled. "I don't expect to hire any more staff. I presume there is already a complete organization, doubtless making money for me at this very moment. I will not interfere except when necessary, but I want a man like you to tell me when it is necessary."

Terms were agreed upon, and Mr. Jones asked only the remainder of the week to clean up important matters on hand. Telegrams were despatched to Mr. David Barrett, senior, and Mr. David Barrett, junior, and Jones in some way managed to convey the delicate information to young Mr. Barrett that a morning appearance on his part would henceforth be essential. Grant decided to fill in the interval with a little fishing expedition. He was determined that he would not so much as call at the office of Grant Son until Jones could accompany him. "A tenderfoot like me would stampede that bunch in no time," he warned himself.

When he finally did appear at the office he was received with a deference amounting almost to obeisance. Murdoch, the chief clerk, and manager of the business in all but title, who had known him in the old days when he had been "Mr. Denny," bore him into the private office which had for so many years been the sacred recess of the senior Grant. Only big men or trusted employees were in the habit of passing those silent green doors.

"Well Murdy, old boy, how goes it?" Grant had said when they met, taking his hand in a husky grip.

"Not so bad, sir; not so bad, considering the shock of the accident, sir. And we are all so glad to see you−−we who knew you before, sir."

"Listen, Murdy," said Grant. "What's the idea of all the sirs?"

"Why," said the somewhat abashed official, "you know you are now the head of the firm, sir."

"Quite so. Because a chauffeur neglected to look over his shoulder I am converted from a cow puncher to a sir. Well, go easy on it. If a man has native dignity in him he doesn't need it piled on from outside."

"Very true, sir. I hope you will be comfortable here. Some memorable matters have been transacted within these walls, sir. Let me take your hat and cane."

"Cane? What cane?"

"Your stick, sir; didn't you have a stick?"

"What for? Have you rattlers here? Oh, I see−−more dignity. No, I don't carry a stick. Perhaps when I'm old−−"

"You'll have to try and accommodate yourself to our manners," said Jones, when Murdoch had left the room. "They may seem unnecessary, or even absurd, but they are sanctioned by custom, and, you know, civilization is built on custom. The poet speaks of a freedom which 'slowly broadens down from precedent to precedent.' Precedent is custom. Never defy custom, or you will find her your master. Humor her, and she will be your slave. Now I think I shall leave, while you try and tune yourself to the atmosphere of these surroundings. I need hardly warn you that the furniture is−− quite valuable."

Grant saw him out with a friendly grip on his arm. "You will need another course of wrestling lessons presently," he warned him.

So this was the room which had been the inner shrine of the firm of Grant Son. The quarters were new since he had left the East; the furnishings revealed that large simplicity which is elegance and wealth. A painting of the

elder Grant hung from the wall; Dennison stood before it, looking into the sad, capable, grey eyes. What had life brought to his father that was worth the price those eyes reflected? Dennison found his own eyes moistening with memories now strangely poignant. . . .

"Environment," the young man murmured, as he turned from the portrait, "environment, master of everything! And yet−−"

A photograph of Roy stood on the mantelpiece, and beside it, in a little silver frame, was one of his mother. . . . Grant pulled himself together and fell to an examination of the papers in his father's desk.

CHAPTER XII

Grant's first concern was to get a grasp of the business affairs which had so unexpectedly come under his direction. To accomplish this he continued the practice of the Landson ranch; he was up every morning at five, and had done a day's work before the members of his staff began to assemble. For advice he turned to Jones and Murdoch, and the management of routine affairs he left entirely in the hands of the latter. He had soon convinced himself that the camaraderie of the ranch would not work in a staff of this kind, so while he was formulating plans of his own he left the administration to Murdoch. He found this absence of companionship the most unpleasant feature of his position; it seemed that his wealth had elevated him out of the human family. He wavered between amusement and annoyance over the deference that was paid him. Some of the staff were openly terrified at his approach.

Not so Miss Bruce. Miss Bruce had tapped on the door and entered with the words, "I was your father's stenographer. He left practically all his personal correspondence to me. I worked at this desk in the corner, and had a private office through the door there into which I slipped when my absence was preferred."

She had crossed the room, and, instead of standing respectfully before Grant's desk, had come around the end of it. Grant looked up with some surprise, and noted that her features were not without commending qualities. The mouth, a little large, perhaps−−

"How do you think you're going to like your job?" she asked.

Grant swung around quickly in his chair. No one in the staff had spoken to him like that; Murdoch himself would not have dared address him in so familiar a manner. He decided to take a firm position.

"Were you in the habit of speaking to my father like that?"

"Your father was a man well on in years, Mr. Grant. Every man according to his age."

"I am the head of the firm."

"That is so," she assented. "But if it were not for me and the others on your pay roll there would be no firm to require a head, and you'd be out of a job. You see, we are quite as essential to you as you are to us."

Grant looked at her keenly. Whatever her words, he had to admit that her tone was not impertinent. She had a manner of stating a fact, rather than engaging in an argument. There was nothing hostile about her. She had voiced these sentiments in as matter− of−fact a way as if she were saying, "It's raining out; you had better take your umbrella."

"You appear to be a very advanced young woman," he remarked. "I am a little surprised−−I had hardly thought

my father would select young women of your type as his confidential secretaries."

"Private stenographer," she corrected. "A little extra side on a title is neither here nor there. Well, I will admit that I rather took your father's breath at times; he discharged me so often it became a habit, but we grew to have a sort of tacit understanding that that was just his way of blowing off steam. You see, I did his work, and I did it right. I never lost my head when he got into a temper; I could always read my notes even after he had spent most of the day in death grips with some business rival. You see, I wasn't afraid of him, not the least bit. And I'm not afraid of you."

"I don't believe you are," Grant admitted. "You are a remarkable woman. I think we shall get along all right if you are able to distinguish between independence and bravado." He turned to his desk, then suddenly looked up again. He was homesick for someone he could talk to frankly.

"I don't mind telling you," he said abruptly, "that the deference which is being showered upon me around this institution gives me a good deal of a pain. I've been accustomed to working with men on the same level. They took their orders from me, and they carried them out, but the older hands called me by my first name, and any of them swore back when he thought he had occasion. I can't fit in to this 'Yes sir,' 'No sir,' 'Very good, sir,' way of doing business. It doesn't ring true."

"I know what you mean," she said. "There's too much servility in it. And yet one may pay these courtesies and not be servile. I always 'sir'd' your father, and he knew I did it because I wanted to, not because I had to. And I shall do the same with you once we understand each other. The position I want to make clear is this: I don't admit that because I work for you I belong to a lower order of the human family than you do, and I don't admit that, aside from the giving of faithful service, I am under any obligation to you. I give you my labor, worth so much; you pay me; we're square. If we can accept that as an understanding I'm ready to begin work now; if not, I'm going out to look for another job."

"I think we can accept that as a working basis," he agreed.

She produced notebook and pencil. "Very well, SIR. Do you wish to dictate?"

The selection of a place to call home was a matter demanding Grant's early attention. He discussed it with Mr. Jones.

"Of course you will take memberships in some of the better clubs," the lawyer had suggested. "It's the best home life there is. That is why it is not to be recommended to married men; it has a tendency to break up the domestic circle."

"But it will cost more than I can afford."

"Nonsense! You could buy out one of their clubs, holus−bolus, if you wanted to."

"You don't quite get me," said Grant. "If I used the money which was left by my father, or the income from the business, no doubt I could do as you say. But I feel that that money isn't really mine. You see, I never earned it, and I don't see how a person can, morally, spend money that he did not earn."

"Then there are a great many immoral people in the world," the lawyer observed, dryly.

"I am disposed to agree with you," said Grant, somewhat pointedly. "But I don't intend that they shall set my standards."

"You have your salary. That comes under the head of earnings, if you are finnicky about the profits. What do you propose to pay yourself?"

"I have been thinking about that. On the ranch I got a hundred dollars a month, and board."

"Well, your father got twenty thousand a year, and Roy half that, and if they wanted more they charged it up as expenses."

"Considering the cost of board here, I think I would be justified in taking two hundred dollars a month," Grant continued.

Jones got up and took the young man by the shoulders. "Look here, Grant, you're not taking yourself seriously. I don't want to assail your pet theories−−you'll grow out of them in time−−but you hired me to give you advice, and right here I advise you not to make a fool of yourself. You are now in a big position; you're a big man, and you've got to live in a big way. If for nothing else than to hold the confidence of the public you must do it. Do you think they're going to intrust their investments to a firm headed by a two−hundred−dollar−a−month man?"

"But I AM a two−hundred−dollar−a−month man. In fact, I'm not sure I'm worth quite that much. I've got no more muscle, and no more sense, and very little more experience than I had a month ago, when in the open market my services commanded a hundred and board."

"When a man is big enough−−or his job is big enough−−" Jones argued, "he arises above the ordinary law of supply and demand. In fact, in a sense, he controls supply and demand. He puts himself in the job and dictates the salary. You have a perfect right to pay yourself what other men in similar positions are getting. Besides, as I said, you'll have to do so for the credit of the firm. Do you call a doctor who lives in a tumble−down tenement? You do not. You call one from a fine home; you select him for his appearance of prosperity, regardless of the fact that he may have mortgaged his future to create that appearance, and of the further fact that he will charge you a fee calculated to help pay off the mortgage. When you want a lawyer, do you seek some garret practitioner? You do not. You go to a big building, with a big name plate"−−the pugnacious moustache gave hint of a smile gathering beneath−−"and you pay a big price for a man with an office full of imposing−looking books, not a tenth part of which he has ever read, or intends ever to read. I admit there's a good deal of bunco in the game, but if you sit in you've got to play it that way, or the dear public will throw you into the discard. Many a man who votes himself a salary in five figures−−or gets a friendly board of directors to do it for him−−if thrown unfriended between the millstones of supply and demand probably couldn't qualify for your modest hundred dollars a month and board. But he has risen into a different world; instead of being dictated to, he dictates. That is your position, Grant. Look at it sensibly."

"Nevertheless, I shall get along on two hundred a month. If I find it necessary in order to protect the interests of the business to take a membership in an expensive club, or commit any other extravagance, I shall do so, and charge it up as a business expense. Besides, I think I can be happier that way."

"And in the meantime your business is piling up profits. What are you going to do with them? Give them away?"

"No. That, too, is immoral−−whether it be a quarter to a beggar or a library to a city. It feeds the desire to get money without earning it, which is the most immoral of all our desires. I have not yet decided what I shall do with it. I have hired an expert, in you, to show me how to make money. I shall probably find it necessary to hire another to show me how to dispose of it. But not a dollar will be given away."

"And so you would let the beggar starve? That's a new kind of altruism."

"No. I would correct the conditions that made him a beggar. That's the only kind of altruism that will make him something better than a beggar."

"Some people would beg in any case, Grant. They are incapable of anything better."

"Then they are defectives, and should be cared for by the State."

"Then the State may practise charity−−"

"It is not charity; it is the discharge of an obligation. A father may support his children, but he must not let anyone else do it."

"Well, I give up," said Jones. "You're beyond me."

Grant laughed and extended a cigar box. "Don't hesitate," he said, "this doesn't come out of the two hundred. This is entertainment expense. And you must come and see me when I get settled."

"When you get settled−−yes. You won't be settled until you're married, and you might as well do some thinking about that. A man in your position gets a pretty good range of choice; you'd be surprised if you knew the wire−pulling I have already encountered; ambitious old dames fishing for introductions for their daughters. You may be an expert with rope or branding−iron, but you're outclassed in this matrimonial game, and some one of them will land you one of these times before you know it. You should be very proud," and Mr. Jones struck something of an attitude. "The youth and beauty of the city are raving about you."

"About my money," Grant retorted. "If my father had had time to change his will they would every one of them have passed me by with their noses in the air. As for marrying−−that's all off."

The lawyer was about to aim a humorous sally, but something in Grant's appearance closed his lips. "Very well, I'll come and see you if you say when," he agreed.

Grant found what he wanted in a little apartment house on a side street, overlooking the lake. Here was a place where the vision could leap out without being beaten back by barricades of stone and brick. He rested his eyes on the distance, and assured the inveigling landlady that the rooms would do, and he would arrange for decorating at his own expense. There was a living−room, about the size of his shack on the Landson ranch; a bathroom, and a kitchenette, and the rent was twenty−two dollars a month. A decorator was called in to repaper the bathroom and kitchenette, but for the living−room Grant engaged a carpenter. He ordered that the inside of the room should be boarded up with rough boards, with exposed scantlings on the walls and ceiling. No doubt the tradesman thought his patron mad, or nearly so, but his business was to obey orders, and when the job was completed it presented a very passable duplicate of Grant's old quarters on the ranch. He had spared the fireplace, as a concession to comfort. When he had gotten his personal effects out of storage, when he had hung rifle, saddle and lariat from spikes in the wall; had built a little book−shelf and set his old favorites upon it; had installed his bed and the trunk with the big D. G.; sitting in his arm chair before the fire, with Fidget's nose snuggled companionably against his foot, he would not have traded his quarters for the finest suite in the most expensive club in the city. Here was something at least akin to home.

As he was arranging the books on his shelf the clipping with the account of Zen's wedding fell to the floor. He sat down in his chair and read it slowly through. Later he went out for a walk.

It was in his long walks that Grant found the only real comfort of his new life. To be sure, it was not like roaming the foothills; there was not the soft breath of the Chinook, nor the deep silence of the mighty valleys. But there was movement and freedom and a chance to think. The city offered artificial attractions in which the foothills had

not competed; faultlessly kept parks and lawns; splashes of perfume and color; spraying fountains and vagrant strains of music. He reflected that some merciful principle of compensation has made no place quite perfect and no place entirely undesirable. He remembered also the toll of his life in the saddle; the physical hardship, the strain of long hours and broken weather. And here, too, in a different way, he was in the saddle, and he did not know which strain was the greater. He was beginning to have a higher regard for the men in the saddle of business. The world saw only their success, or, it may be, their pretence of success. But there was a different story from all that, which each one of them could have told for himself.

On this evening when his mind had been suddenly turned into old channels by the finding of the newspaper clipping dealing with the wedding of Y.D.'s daughter, Grant walked far into the outskirts of the city, paying little attention to his course. It was late October; the leaves lay thick on the sidewalks and through the parks; there was in all the air that strange, sad, sweet dreariness of the dying summer. . . . Grant had tried heroically to keep his thoughts away from Transley's wife. The past had come back on him, had rather engulfed him, in that little newspaper clipping. He let himself wonder where she was, and whether nearly a year of married life had shown her the folly of her decision. He took it for granted that her decision had been folly, and he arrived at that position without any reflection upon Transley. Only−−Zen had been in love with him, with him, Dennison Grant! Sooner or later she must discover the tragedy of that fact, and yet he told himself he was big enough to hope she might never discover it. It would be best that she should forget him, as he had−−almost−−forgotten her. There was no doubt that would be best. And yet there was a delightful sadness in thinking of her still, and hoping that some day−− He was never able to complete the thought.

He had been walking down a street of modest homes; the bare trees groped into a sky clear and blue with the first chill presage of winter. A quick step fell unheeded by his side; the girl passed, hesitated, then turned and spoke.

"You are preoccupied, Mr. Grant."

"Oh, Miss Bruce, I beg your pardon. I am glad to see you." Even at that moment he had been thinking of Zen, and perhaps he put more cordiality into his words than he intended. But he had grown to have considerable regard, on her own account, for this unusual girl who was not afraid of him. He had found that she was what he called "a good head." She could take a detached view; she was absolutely fair; she was not easily flustered.

Her step had fallen into swing with his.

"You do not often visit our part of the city," she essayed.

"You live here?"

"Near by. Will you come and see?"

He turned with her at a corner, and they went up a narrow street lying deep in dead leaves. Friendly domestic glimpses could be caught through unblinded windows.

"This is our home," she said, stopping before a little gate. Grant's eye followed the pathway to a cottage set back among the trees. "I live here with my sister and brother and mother. Father is dead," she went on hurriedly, as though wishing to place before him a quick digest of the family affairs, "and we keep up the home by living on with mother as boarders; that is, Grace and I do. Hubert is still in high school. Won't you come in?"

He followed her up the path and into a little hall, lighted only by chance rays falling through a half−opened door. She did not switch on the current, and Grant was aware of a comfortable sense of her nearness, quite distinct from any office experience, as she took his hat. In the living−room her mother received him with visible surprise. She was not old, but widowhood and the cares of a young family had whitened her hair before its time.

"We are glad to see you, Mr. Grant," she said. "It is an unexpected pleasure. Big business men do not often−−"

"Mr. Grant is different," her daughter interrupted, lightly. "I found him wandering the streets and I just−−retrieved him."

"I think I AM different," he admitted, as his eye took in the surroundings, which he appraised quickly as modest comfort, attained through many little economies and makeshifts. "You are very happy here," he went on, frankly. "Much more so, I should say, than in many of the more pretentious homes. I have always contended that, beyond the margin necessary for decent living, the possession of money is a burden and a handicap, and I see no reason to change my opinion."

"Phyllis is a great help to me−−and Grace," the mother observed. "I hope she is a good girl in the office."

Grant was hurrying an assent but the girl interrupted, perhaps wishing to relieve him of the necessity of an answer.

"'Decent living' is a very elastic term," she remarked. "There are so many standards. Some women think they must have maids and social status−−whatever that is−−and so on. It can't be done on mother's income."

"That quality is not confined to women," Grant said. "I know I am regarded as something of a freak because I prefer to live simply. They can't understand my preference for a plain room to read and sleep in, for quiet walks by myself when I might be buzzing around in big motor cars or revelling with a bunch at the club. I suppose it's a puzzle to them."

Miss Bruce had seated herself near him. "They are beginning to offer explanations," she said. "I hear them−−such things always filter down. They say you are mean and niggardly−−that you're afraid to spend a dollar. The fact that you have raised the wages of your staff doesn't seem to answer them; they rather hold that against you, because it has a tendency to make them do the same. Other office staffs are going to their heads and saying, 'Grant is paying his help so much.' That doesn't popularize you. To be a good fellow you should hold your staff down to the lowest wages at which you can get service, and the money you save in this way should be spent with gusto and abandon at expensive hotels and other places designed to keep rich people from getting too rich."

"I am afraid you are satirizing them a little, but there is a good deal in what you say. They think I'm mean because they don't understand me, and they can't understand my point of view. I believe that money was created as a medium for the exchange of value. I think they will all agree with me there. If that is so, then I have no right to money unless I have given value for it, and that is where they part company with me; but surely we can't accept the one fact without the other."

Grant found himself thumbing his pockets. "You may smoke, if you have tobacco," said Mrs. Bruce. "My husband smoked, and although I did not approve of it then, I think I must have grown to like it."

He lighted a cigarette, and continued. "Not all the moral law was given on Mount Sinai. It seems to me that the supernaturalism which has been introduced into the story of the Ten Commandments is most unfortunate. It seems to remove them out of the field of natural law, whereas they are, really, natural law itself. No social state can exist where they are habitually ignored. But of course these natural laws existed long before Moses. He did not make the law; he discovered it, just as Newton discovered the law of gravitation. Well−−there must be many other natural laws, still undiscovered, or at least unaccepted. The thing is to discover them, to obey them, and, eventually, to compel others to obey them. I am no Moses, but I think I have the germ of the law which would cure our economic ills−−that no person should be allowed to receive value without earning it. Because I believed in that I gave up a fortune and went to work as a laborer on a ranch, but Fate has forced wealth upon me, doubtless in order that I may prove out my own theories. Well, that is what I am doing."

"It shouldn't be hard to get rid of money if you don't want it," Mrs. Bruce ventured.

"But it is. It is the hardest kind of thing. You see, I am limited by my principles. I believe it is morally wrong to receive money without earning it; consequently I cannot give it away, as by doing so I would place the recipient in that position. I believe it is morally wrong to spend on myself money which I have not earned; consequently I can spend only what I conceive to be a reasonable return for my services. Meanwhile, my wealth keeps rolling up."

"It's a knotty problem," said Phyllis. "I think there is only one solution."

"And that is?−−"

"Marry a woman who is a good spender."

At this moment Grace and Hubert came in from the picture−show together, and the conversation turned to lighter topics. Mrs. Bruce insisted on serving tea and cake, and when Grant found that he must go Phyllis accompanied him to the gate.

"This all seems so funny," she was saying. "You are a very remarkable man."

"I think I once passed a similar opinion about you."

She extended her hand, and he held it for a moment. "I have not changed my first opinion," he said, as he released her fingers and turned quickly down the pavement.

CHAPTER XIII

Grant's first visit to the home of his private stenographer was not his last, and the news leaked out, as it is sure to do in such cases. The social set confessed to being on the point of being shocked. Two schools of criticism developed over the five o'clock tea tables; one held that Grant was a gay dog who would settle down and marry in his class when he had had his fling, and the other that Phyllis Bruce was an artful hussy who was quite ready to sell herself for the Grant millions. And there were so many eligible young women on the market, although none of them were described as artful hussies!

Grant's behavior, however, placed him under no cloud in so far as social opportunities were concerned; on the contrary, he found himself being showered with invitations, most of which he managed to decline on the grounds of pressure of business. When such an excuse would have been too transparent he accepted and made the best of it, and he found no lack of encouragement in the one or two incipient amorous flurries which resulted. From such positions he always succeeded in extricating himself, with a quiet smile at the vagaries of life. He had to admit that some of the young women whom he had met had charms of more than passing moment; he might easily enough find himself chasing the rainbow. . . .

Mrs. LeCord carried the warfare into his own office. The late Mr. LeCord had left her to face the world with a comfortable fortune and three daughters, of whom the youngest was now married and the oldest was a forlorn hope. To place the second was now her purpose, and the best bargain on the market was young Grant. Caroline, she was sure, would make a very acceptable wife, and the young lady herself confessed a belief that she could love even a bold Westerner whose bank balance was expressed in seven figures.

The fact that Grant avoided social functions only added zest to the determination with which Mrs. LeCord carried the war into his own office. She chose to consult him for advice on financial matters and she came accompanied

by Caroline, a young woman rather prepossessing in her own right. The two were readily admitted into Grant's private office, where they had opportunity not only to meet the young man in person, but to satisfy their curiosity concerning the Bruce girl.

"I am Mrs. LeCord, Mr. Grant," the lady introduced herself. "This is my daughter Caroline. We wish to consult you on certain financial matters, privately, if you please."

Grant received them cordially. "I shall be glad to advise you, if I can," he said.

Mrs. LeCord cast a significant glance at Phyllis Bruce.

"Miss Bruce is my private stenographer. You may speak with perfect freedom."

Mrs. LeCord took up her subject after a moment's silence. "Mr. LeCord left me not entirely unprovided for," she explained. "Almost a million dollars in bonds and real estate made a comfortable protection for me and my three daughters against the buffetings of a world which, as you may have found, Mr. Grant, is not over−considerate."

"The buffetings of the world are an excellent training for the world's affairs."

"Maybe so, maybe so," his visitor conceded. "However, there are other trainings−−trainings of finer quality, Mr. Grant−−than those which have to do with subsistence. I have been able to give my daughters the best education that money could command, and, if I do say it, I permit myself some gratification over the result. Gretta is comfortably and happily married,−−a young man of some distinction in the financial world−−a Mr. Powers, Mr. Newton Powers−−you may happen to know him; Madge, I think, is always going to be her mother's girl; Caroline is still heart−free, although one can never tell−−"

"Oh, mother!" the girl protested, blushing daintily.

"I said you could never tell, Mr. Grant,−−while handsome young men like yourself are at large. Mrs. LeCord laughed heartily, as much as to say that her remark must be regarded only as a little pleasantry. "But you will think I am a gossipy old body," she continued briskly. "I really came to discuss certain financial matters. Since Mr. LeCord's death I have taken charge of all the family business affairs with, if I may confess it, some success. We have lived, and my girls have been educated, and our little reserve against a rainy day has been almost doubled, in addition to giving Gretta a hundred thousand in her own right on the occasion of her marriage. Caroline is to have the same, and when I am done with it there will be a third of the estate for each. In the meantime I am directing my investments as wisely as I can. I want my daughters to be provided for, quite apart from any income marriage may bring them. I should be greatly humiliated to think that any daughter of mine would be dependent upon her husband for support. On the contrary, I mean that they shall bring to their husbands a sum which will be an appreciable contribution toward the family fortune."

"If I can help you in any way in your financial matters−−" Grant suggested.

"Oh, yes, we must get back to that. How I wander! I'm afraid, Mr. Grant, I must be growing old."

Grant protested gallantly against such conclusion, and Mrs. LeCord, after asking his opinion on certain issues shortly to be floated, arose to leave.

"You must find life in this city somewhat lonely, Mr. Grant," she murmured as she drew on her gloves. "If ever you find a longing for a quiet hour away from business stress−−a little domesticity, if I may say it−−our house−−"

"You are very kind. Business allows me very few intermissions. Still−−"

She extended her hand with her sweetest smile. Caroline shook hands, too, and Grant bowed them out.

On other occasions Mrs. LeCord and her daughter were fortunate enough to find Grant alone, and at such times the mother's conversation became even more pointed than in their first interview. Grant hesitated to offend her, mainly on account of Caroline, for whom he admitted to himself it would not be at all difficult to muster up an attachment. There were, however, three barriers to such a development. One was the obvious purpose of Mrs. LeCord to arrange a match; a purpose which, as a mere matter of the game, he could not allow her to accomplish. One was Zen Transley. There was no doubt about it. Zen Transley stood between him and marriage to any girl. Not that he ever expected to take her into his life, or be admitted into hers, but in some way she hedged him about. He felt that everything was not yet settled; he found himself entertaining a foolish sense that everything was not quite irrevocable. . . . And then there was−−perhaps−−Phyllis Bruce.

When at length, for some reason, Mrs. LeCord visited him alone he decided to be frank with her.

"You have thought me clever enough to advise you on financial matters?" he queried, when his visitor had discussed at some length the new loan in which she was investing.

"Why, yes," she returned, detecting the personal note in his voice. "I sometimes think, Mr. Grant, you hardly do yourself justice. Even the hardest old heads on the Exchange are taking notice of you. I have heard your name mentioned−−"

"Then it may be presumed," he interrupted, "that I am clever enough to know the real purpose of your visits to this office?"

She turned a little in her chair, facing him squarely. "I hardly understand you, Mr. Grant."

"Then I possess an advantage, because I quite clearly understand you. I have hesitated, out of consideration for your daughter, to show any resentment of your behavior. But I must now tell you that when I marry, if ever I do, I shall choose my wife without the assistance of her mother, and without regard to her dowry or the size of the family bank account."

"Oh, I protest!" exclaimed Mrs. LeCord, who had grown very red. "I protest against any such conclusion. I have seen fit to intrust my financial affairs to your firm; I have visited you on business−− accompanied at times by my daughter, it is true−−but only on business; recognizing in you a social equal I have invited you to my house, a courtesy which, so far, you have not found yourself able to accept; but in all this I have shown toward you surely nothing but friendliness and a respect amounting, if I may say it, to esteem. But now that you are frank, Mr. Grant, I too will be frank. You cannot be unaware of the rumors which have been associated with your name?"

"You mean about Miss Bruce?"

"Ah, then you know of them. You are a young man, and we older people are disposed to make allowance for the−−for that. But you must realize the great mistake you would be making should you allow this matter to become more than−−a rumor."

"I do not admit your right to question me on such a subject, Mrs. LeCord, but I shall not avoid a discussion of it. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I were to contemplate marriage with Miss Bruce; if she and her relatives were agreeable, what right would anyone have to object?"

"It would be a great mistake," Mrs. LeCord insisted, avoiding his question. "She is not in your class−−"

"What do you mean by 'class'?"

"Why, I mean socially, of course. She lives in a different world. She has no standing, in a social way. She works in an office for a living−−"

"So do I," he interrupted, "and your daughters do not. It would therefore appear that I am more in Miss Bruce's 'class' than in theirs."

"Ah, but you are an employer. You direct things. You work because you want to, not because you have to. That makes a difference."

"Apparently it does. Well, if I had my way, everybody would work, whether he wanted to or not. I would not allow any healthy man to spend money which he had not earned by the sweat of his own brow. I am convinced that that is the only economic system which is sound at the bottom, but it would destroy 'class,' as at present organized, so 'class' must fight it."

"I am afraid you are rather radical, Mr. Grant. You may be sure that a system which has served so long and so well is a good system."

"That introduces the clash between East and West. The East says because things are so, and have always been so, they must be right. The West says because things are so, and have always been so, they are in all probability wrong. I guess I am a Westerner."

"You should not allow your theories of economics to stand in the way of your success," Mrs. LeCord pursued. "Suppose I admit that Caroline would not be altogether deaf to your advances. Suppose I admit that much. Allowing for a mother's prejudice, will you not agree with me that Caroline has her attractions? She is well bred, well educated, and not without appearance. She belongs to the smartest set in town. Her circle would bring you not only social distinction, but valuable business connections. She would introduce that touch of refinement−−"

But Grant, now thoroughly angry, had risen from his chair. "You speak of refinement," he exclaimed, in the quick, sharp tones which alone revealed the fighting Grant;−−"you, who have been guilty of−− I could use a very ugly word which I will give you the credit of not understanding. When I decide to buy myself a wife I will send to you for a catalogue of your daughter's charms."

Grant dismissed Mrs. LeCord from his office with the confident expectation that he soon would have occasion to know something of the meaning of the proverb about hell's furies and a woman scorned. She would strike at him, of course, through Phyllis Bruce. Well−−

But his attention was at once to be turned to very different matters. A stock market, erratic for some days, went suddenly into a paroxysm. Grant escaped with as little loss as possible for himself and his clients, and after three sleepless nights called his staff together. They crowded into the board−room, curious, apprehensive, almost frightened, and he looked over them with an emotion that was quite new to his experience. Even in the aloofness which their standards had made it necessary for him to adopt there had grown up in his heart, quite unnoticed, a tender, sweet foliage of love for these men and women who were a part of his machine. Now, as he looked in their faces he realized how, like little children, they leaned on him−−how, like little children, they feared his power and his displeasure−−how, perhaps, like little children, they had learned to love him, too. He realized, as he had never done before, that they WERE children; that here and there in the mass of humanity is one who was born to lead, but the great mass itself must be children always, doing as they are bid.

"My friends," he managed to say, "we suddenly find ourselves in tremendous times. Some of you know my attitude toward this business in which we are engaged. I did not seek it; I did not approve of it; I tried to avoid it; yet, when the responsibility was forced upon me I accepted that responsibility. I gave up the life I enjoyed, the environment in which I found delight, the friends I loved. Well−−our nation is now in a somewhat similar

position. It has to go into a business which it did not seek, of which it does not approve, but which fate has thrust upon it. It has to break off the current of its life and turn it into undreamed−of channels, and we, as individuals who make up the nation, must do the same. I have already enlisted, and expect that within a few hours I shall be in uniform. Some of you are single men of military age; you will, I am sure, take similar steps. For the rest−−the business will be wound up as soon as possible, so that you may be released for some form of national service. You will all receive three months' salary in lieu of notice. Mr. Murdoch will look after the details. When that has been done my wealth, or such part of it as remains, will be placed at the disposal of the Government. If we win it will be well invested in a good cause; if we lose, it would have been lost anyway."

"We are not going to lose!" It was one of the younger clerks who interrupted; he stood up and for a moment looked straight at his chief. In that instant's play of vision there was surely something more than can be told in words, for the next moment he rushed forward and seized one of Grant's hands in both his own. There was a moment's handclasp, and the boy had become a man.

"I'm going, Grant," he said. "I'm going−−NOW!"

He turned and made his way out of the room, leaving his chief breathless in a rapture of joy and pride. Others crowded up. They too were going−−NOW. Even old Murdoch tried to protest that he was as good a man as ever. It seemed to Grant that the drab everyday costumings of his staff had fallen away, and now they were heroes, they were gods!

No one knew just how the meeting broke up, but Grant had a confused remembrance of many handclasps and some tears. He was not sure that he had not, perhaps, added one or two to the flow, but they were all tears of friendship and of an emotion born of high resolve. . . . The most wonderful thing was that the youngster had called him Grant!

As he stood in his own office again, trying to get the events of these last few days into some sort of perspective, Phyllis Bruce entered. He motioned dumbly to a chair, but she came and stood by his desk. Her face was very white and her lips trembled with the words she tried to utter.

"I can't go," she managed to say at length.

"Can't go? I don't understand?"

"Hubert has joined," she said.

"Hubert, the boy! Why, he is only in school−−"

"He is sixteen, and large for his age. He came home confessing, and saying it was his first lie, and the first important thing he ever did without consulting mother. He said he knew he wouldn't be able to stand it if he told her first."

"Foolish, but heroic," Grant commented. "Be proud of him. It takes more than wisdom to be heroic."

"And Grace is going to England. She was taking nursing, you know, and so gets a preference. We can't ALL leave mother."

He found it difficult to speak. "You wanted to go to the Front?" he managed.

"Of course; where else?"

Her hand was on the desk; his own slipped over until it closed on it.

"You are a little heroine," he murmured.

"No, I'm not. I'm a little fool to tell you this, but how can I stay−−why should I stay−−when you are gone?"

She was looking down, but after her confession she raised her eyes to his, and he wondered that he had never known how beautiful she was. He could have taken her in his arms, but something, with the power of invisible chains, held him back. In that supreme moment a vision swam before him; a vision of a mountain stream backed by tawny foothills, and a girl as beautiful as even this Phyllis who had wrapped him in her arms . . . and said, "We must go and forget." And he had not forgotten. . . .

When he did not respond she drew herself slowly away. "You will hate me," she said.

"That is impossible," he corrected, quickly. "I am very sorry if I have let you think more than I intended. I care for you very, very much indeed. I care for you so much that I will not let you think I care for you more. Can you understand that?"

"Yes. You like me, but you love someone else."

He was disconcerted by her intuition and the terse frankness with which she stated the case.

"I will take you into my confidence, Phyllis, if I may," he said at length. "I DO like you; I DID love someone else. And that old attachment is still so strong that it would be hardly fair−−it would be hardly fair−−"

"Why didn't you marry her?" she demanded.

"Because some one else did."

"Oh!"

Her hands found his this time. "I'm sorry," she said. "Sorry I brought this up−−sorry I raised these memories. But now you−−who have known−−will know−−"

"I know−−I know," he murmured, raising her fingers to his lips. . . .

"Time, they say, is a healer of all wounds. Perhaps−−"

"No. It is better that you should forget. Only, I shall see you off; I shall wave my handkerchief to YOU; I shall smile on YOU in the crowd. Then−−you will forget." . . .

CHAPTER XIV

Four years of war add only four years to the life of a man according to the record in the family Bible, if he happen to spring from stock in which that sacred document is preserved. But four years of war add twenty years to the grey matter behind the eyes−− eyes which learn to dream and ponder strangely, and sometimes to shine with a hardness that has no part with youth. When Captain Grant and Sergeant Linder stepped off the train at Grant's old city there was, however, little to suggest the ageing process that commonly went on among the soldiers in the Great War. Grant had twice stopped an enemy bullet, but his fine figure and sunburned health now gave no evidence of those experiences. Linder counted himself lucky to carry only an empty sleeve.

They had fallen in with each other in France, and the friendship planted in the foothills of the range country had grown, through the strange prunings and graftings of war, into a tree of very solid timber. Linder might have told you of the time his captain found him with his arm crushed under a wrecked piece of artillery, and Grant could have recounted a story of being dragged unconscious out of No Man's Land, but for either to dwell upon these matters only aroused the resentment of the other, and frequently led to exchanges between captain and sergeant totally incompatible with military discipline. They were content to pay tribute to each other, but each to leave his own honors unheralded.

"First thing is a place to eat," Grant remarked, when they had been dismissed. Words to similar effect had, indeed, been his first remark upon every suitable opportunity for three months. An appetite which has been four years in the making is not to be satisfied overnight, and Grant, being better fortified financially against the stress of a good meal, sought to be always first to suggest it. Linder accepted the situation with the complacence of a man who has been four years on army pay.

When they had eaten they took a walk through the old town−−Grant's old town. It looked as though he had stepped out of it yesterday; it was hard to realize that ages lay between. There are experiences which soak in slowly, like water into a log. The new element surrounds the body, but it may be months before it penetrates to the heart. Grant had some sense of that fact as he walked the old familiar streets, apparently unchanged by all these cataclysmic days. . . . In time he would come to understand. There was the name plate of Barrett, Jones, Barrett, Deacon Barrett. There had not even been an addition to the firm. Here was the old Grant office, now used for some administration purpose. That, at least, was a move in the right direction.

They wandered along aimlessly while the sunset of an early summer evening marshalled its glories overhead. On a side street children played in the roadway; on a vacant spot a game of ball was in progress. Women sat on their verandas and shot casual glances after them as they passed. Handsome pleasure cars glided about; there was a smell of new flowers in all the air.

"What do you make of it, mate?" said Grant at last.

Linder pulled slowly on his cigarette. Even his training as a sergeant had not made him ready of speech, but when he spoke it was, as ever, to the point.

"It's all so unnecessary," he commented at length.

"That's the way it gets me, too. So unnecessary. You see, when you get down to fundamentals there are only two things necessary−− food and shelter. Everything else may be described as trimmings. We've been dealing with fundamentals so long−−−mighty bare fundamentals at that−−that all these trimmings seem just a little irritating, don't you think?"

"I follow you. I simply can't imagine myself worrying over a stray calf."

"And I can't imagine myself sitting in an office and dealing with such unessential things as stocks and bonds. . . . And I'm not going to."

"Got any notion what you will do?" said Linder, when he had reached the middle of another cigarette.

"Not the slightest. I don't even know whether I'm rich or broke. I suppose if Jones and Murdoch are still alive they will be looking after those details. Doing their best, doubtless, to embarrass me with additional wealth. What are YOU going to do?"

"Don't know. Maybe go back and work for Transley."

The mention of Transley threw Grant's mind back into old channels. He had almost forgotten Transley. He told himself he had quite forgotten Zen Transley, but once he knew he lied. That was when they potted him in No Man's Land. As he lay there, waiting . . . . he knew he had not forgotten. And he had thought many times of Phyllis Bruce. At first he had written to her, but she had not answered his letters. Evidently she meant him to forget. Nor had she come to the station to welcome him home. Perhaps she did not know. Perhaps−− Many things can happen in four years.

Suddenly it occurred to Grant that it might be a good idea to call on Phyllis. He would take Linder along. That would make it less personal. He knew his man well enough to keep his own counsel, and eventually they reached the gate of the Bruce cottage, as though by accident.

"Let's turn in here. I used to know these people. Mother and daughter; very fine folk."

Linder looked for an avenue of retreat, but Grant barred his way, and together they went up the path. A strange woman, with a baby on her arm, met them at the door. Grant inquired for Mrs. Bruce and her daughter.

"Oh, you haven't heard?" said the woman. "I suppose you are just back. Well, it was a sad thing, but these have been sad times. It was when Hubert was killed I came here first. Poor dear, she took that to heart awful, and couldn't be left alone, and Phyllis was working in an office, so I came here part time to help out. Then she was just beginning to brace up again when we got the word about Grace. Grace, you know, was lost on a hospital ship. That was too much for her."

Grant received this information with a strange catching about the heart. There had been changes, after all.

"What became of Phyllis?" He tried to ask the question in an even voice.

"I moved into the house after Mrs. Bruce died," the woman continued, "as my man came back discharged about that time. Phyllis tried to get on as a nurse, but couldn't manage it. Then her office was moved to another part of the city and she took rooms somewhere. At first she came to see us often, but not lately. I suppose she's trying to forget."

"Trying to forget," Grant muttered to himself. "How much of life is made up of trying to forget!"

Further questions brought no further information. The woman didn't know the firm for which Phyllis worked; she thought it had to do with munitions. Suddenly Grant found himself impelled by a tremendous desire to locate this girl. He would set about it at once; possibly Jones or Murdoch could give him information. Strangely enough, he now felt that he would prefer to be rid of Linder's company. This was a matter for himself alone. He took Linder to an hotel, where they arranged for lodgings, and then started on his search.

He located Murdoch without difficulty. It was now late, and the old clerk came down the stairs with inoffensive imprecations upon the head of his untimely caller, but his mutterings soon gave way to a cry of delight.

"My dear boy!" he exclaimed, embracing him. "My dear boy−−excuse me, sir, I'm a blithering old man, but oh! sir−−my boy, you're home again!" There was no doubting the depth of old Murdoch's welcome. He ran before Grant into the living−room and switched on the lights. In a moment he was back with his arm about the young man's shoulder; he was with difficulty restraining caresses.

"Sit you down, Mr. Grant; here−−this chair−−it's easier. I must get the women up. This is no night for sleeping. Why didn't you send us word?"

"There is a tradition that official word is sent in advance," Grant tried to explain.

"Aye, a tradition. There's a tradition that a Scotsman is a dour body without any sentiment. Well−−I must call the women."

He hurried up the stairs and Grant settled back into his chair. So this was the home of Murdoch, the man who really had earned a considerable part of the Grant fortune. He had never visited Murdoch before; he had never thought of him in a domestic sense; Murdoch had always been to him a man of figures, of competent office routine, of almost too respectful deference. The light over the centre table fell subdued through a pinkish shade; the corners of the room lay in restful shadows; the comfortable furniture showed the marks of years. The walls suggested the need of new paper; the well−worn carpet had been shifted more than once for economy's sake. Grant made a hasty appraisal of these conditions; possibly his old clerk was feeling the pinch of circumstances−−

Murdoch, returning, led in his wife, a motherly woman who almost kissed the young soldier. In the welcome of her greeting it was a moment before Grant became aware of the presence of a fourth person in the room.

"I am very glad to see you safely back," said Phyllis Bruce. "We have all been thinking about you a great deal."

"Why, Miss−−Phyllis! It was you I was looking for!" The frank confession came before he had time to suppress it, and, having said so much, it seemed better to finish the job.

"Yes, Phyllis is making her home with us now," Mrs. Murdoch explained. "It is more convenient to her work."

Grant wondered how much of this arrangement was due to Mrs. Murdoch's sympathy for the bereaved girl, and how much to the addition which it made to the family income. No doubt both considerations had contributed to it.

"I called at your old home," he continued. "I needn't say how distressed I was to hear−− The woman could tell me nothing of you, so I came to Murdoch, hoping−−"

"Yes," she said, simply, as though there were nothing more to explain. Grant noticed that her eyes were larger and her cheeks paler than they had been, but the delight of her presence leapt about him. Her hurried costume seemed to accentuate her beauty despite of all that war had done to destroy it. There was a silence which lengthened out. They were all groping for a footing.

Mrs. Murdoch met the situation by insisting that she would put on the kettle, and Mr. Murdoch, in a burst of almost divine inspiration, insisted that his wife was quite incompetent to light the gas alone at that hour of the night. When the old folks had shuffled into the kitchen Grant found himself standing close to Phyllis Bruce.

"Why didn't you answer my letters?" he demanded, plunging to the issue with the directness of his nature.

"Because I had promised to let you forget," she replied. There was a softness in her voice which he had not noted in those bygone days; she seemed more resigned and yet more poised; the strange wizardry of suffering had worked new wonders in her soul. Suddenly, as he looked upon her, he became aware of a new quality in Phyllis Bruce−−the quality of gentleness. She had added this to her unique self−confidence, and it had toned down the angularities of her character. To Grant, straight from his long exile from fine womanly domesticity, she suddenly seemed altogether captivating.

"But I didn't want to forget!" he insisted. "I wanted not to forget−−YOU."

She could not misunderstand the emphasis he placed on that last word, but she continued as though he had not interrupted.

"I knew you would write once or twice out of courtesy. I knew you would do that. I made up my mind that if you wrote three times, then I would know you really wanted to remember me. . . . I did not get any third letter."

"But how could I know that you had placed such a test−−such an arbitrary measurement−−upon my friendship?"

"It wasn't necessary for you to know. If you had cared−−enough−− you would have kept on writing."

He had to admit to himself that there was just enough truth in what she said to make her logic unanswerable. His delight in her presence now did not alter the fact that he had found it quite possible to live for four years without her, and it was true that upon one or two great vital moments his mind had leapt, not to Phyllis Bruce, but to Zen Transley! He blushed at the recollection; it was an impossible situation, but it was true!

He was framing some plausible argument about honorable men not persisting in a correspondence when Murdoch bustled in again.

"Mother is going to set the dining−room table," he announced, "and the coffee will be ready presently. Well, sir, you do look well in uniform. You will be wondering how the business has gone?"

"Not half as much as I am wondering some other things," he said, with a significance intended for the ear of Phyllis. "You see−−I was just talking it over with a pal to−day, a very good comrade whom I used to know in the West, and who pulled me out of No Man's Land where I would have been lying yet if he hadn't thought more of me than he did of himself−−I was talking it over with him to−day, and we agreed that business isn't worth the effort. Fancy sitting behind a desk, wondering about the stock market, when you've been accustomed to leaning up against a parapet wondering where the next shell is going to burst! If that is not from the sublime to the ridiculous, it is at least from the vital to the inconsequential. You can't expect men to take a jump like that."

"No, not as a jump," Murdoch agreed. "They'll have to move down gradually. But they must remember that life depends quite as much on wheat−fields as it does on trenches, and that all the machinery of commerce and industry is as vital in its way as is the machinery of war. They must remember that, or instead of being at the end of our troubles we will find ourselves at the beginning."

"I suppose," Grant conceded, "but it all seems so unnecessary. No doubt you have been piling up more money to be a problem to my conscience."

"Your peculiar conscience, I might almost correct, sir. Your responsibilities do seem to insist upon increasing. Following your instructions I put the liquid assets into Government bonds. Interest, even on Government bonds, has a way of working while you sleep. Then, you may remember, we were carrying a large load of certain steel stocks. These I did not dispose of at once, with the result that they, in themselves, have made you a comfortable fortune."

"I suppose I should thank you for your foresight, Murdoch. I was rather hoping you would lose my money and so relieve me of an embarrassing situation. What am I to do with it?"

"I don't know, sir, but I feel sure you will use it for some good purpose. I was glad to get as much of it together for you as I did, because otherwise it might have fallen to people who would have wasted it."

"Upon my word, Murdoch, that smacks of my own philosophy. Is it possible even you are becoming converted?"

"Come, Mr. Grant; come, everybody!" a cheerful voice called from behind the sliding doors which shut off the dining−room. The fragrant smell of coffee was already in the air, and as Grant took his seat Mrs. Murdoch declared that for once she had decided to defy all the laws of digestion.

At the table their talk dribbled out into thin channels. It was as though there were at hand a great reservoir of thought, of experience, of deep gropings into the very well−springs of life, which none of them dared to tap lest it should rush out and overwhelm them. They seemed in some strange awe of its presence, and spoke, when they spoke at all, of trivial things. Grant proved uncommunicative, and perhaps, in a sense, disappointing. He preferred to forget both the glories and the horrors of war; when he drew on his experience at all it was to relate some humorous incident. That, it seemed, was all he cared to remember. He was conscious of a restraint which hedged him about and hampered every mental deployment.

Phyllis, too, must have been conscious of that restraint, for before they parted she said something about human minds being like pianos, which get out of tune for lack of the master−touch. . . .

When Grant found himself in the street air again he was almost swallowed up in the rush of things which he might have said. His mental machinery, which seemed to have been out of mesh,−−came back into adjustment with a jerk. He suddenly discovered that he could think; he could drive his mind from his own batteries. In soldiering the mind is driven from the batteries of the rank higher up. The business of discipline is to make man an automatic machine rather than a thinking individual. It seemed to Grant that in that moment the machine part of him gave way and the individual was restored. In his case the change came in a moment; he had been re−tuned; he was able to think logically in terms of civil life. He pieced together Murdoch's conversation. "Not as a jump," Murdoch had said, when he had argued that a man cannot emerge in a moment from the psychology of the trenches to that of the counting−house. Undoubtedly that would be true of the mass; they would experience no instantaneous readjustment. . . .

There are moments when the mind, highly vitalized, reaches out into the universe of thought and grasps ideas far beyond its conscious intention. All great thoughts come from uncharted sources of inspiration, and it may be that the function of the mind is not to create thought, but only to record it. To do so it must be tuned to the proper key of receptivity. Grant had a consciousness, as he walked along the deserted streets toward his hotel, that he was in that key; the quietness, the domesticity of Murdoch's home, the loveliness of Phyllis Bruce, had, for the moment at least, shut out a background of horror and lifted his thought into an exalted plane. He paused at a bridge to lean against the railing and watch the trembling reflection of city lights in the river.

"I have it!" he suddenly exclaimed to the steel railing. "I have it!"

He paused for a moment to turn over his thought, as though to make sure it should not escape. Then, at a pace which aroused the wondering glance of one or two placid policemen, he hurried to the hotel.

Linder and Grant had been assigned to the same room, and the sergeant's dreams, if he dreamt at all, were of the sweet hay meadows of the West. Grant turned on the light and looked down into the face of his friend. A smile, born of fields afar from war's alarms, was playing about his lips. Even in his excitement Grant could not help reflecting what a wonderful thing it is to sleep in peace. Then−−

"I have it!" he shouted. "Linder, I have it!"

The sergeant sat up with a start, blinking.

"I have it!" Grant repeated.

"THEM, you mean," said Linder, suddenly awake. "Why, man, what's wrong with you? You're more excited than if we were just going over the top."

"I've got my great idea. I know what I'm going to do with my money."

"Well, don't do it to−night," Linder protested. "Someone has to settle for this dug−out in the morning."

"We're leaving for the West to−morrow, Linder, old scout. Everybody will say we're crazy, but that's a good sign. They've said that of every reformer since−−"

But Linder was again sleeping the sleep of a man four years in France.

CHAPTER XV

The window was grey with the light of dawn before Grant's mind had calmed down enough for sleep. When Linder awoke him it was noon.

"You sleep well on your Big Idea," was his comment.

"No better than you did last night," retorted Grant, springing out of bed. "Let me see . . . . yes, I still have it clearly. I'll tell you about it sometime, if you can stay awake. When do we eat?"

"Now, or as soon as you are presentable. I've a notion to give you three days' C.B. for appearing on parade in your pyjamas."

"Make it a cash fine, Sergeant, old dear, and pay it out of what you owe me. Now that that is settled order up a decent meal. I'll be shaved and dressed long before it arrives. You know this is a first−class hotel, where prompt service would not be tolerated."

As they ate together Grant showed no disposition to discuss what Linder called his Big Idea, nor yet to give any satisfaction in response to his companion's somewhat pointed references as to his doings of the night before.

"There are times, Linder," he said, "when my soul craves solitude. You, being a sergeant, and therefore having no soul, will not be able to understand that longing for contemplation−−"

"It's all right," said Linder. "I don't want her."

"Furthermore," Grant continued, "to−night I mean to resume my soliloquies, and your absence will be much in demand."

"The supply will be equal to the demand."

"Good! Here are some morsels of money. If you will buy our railway tickets and settle with the chief extortionist downstairs I will join you at the night train going west."

Linder sprang to attention, gave a salute in which mock deference could not entirely obscure the respect beneath, and set about on his commissions, while Grant devoted the afternoon to a session with Murdoch and Jones, to neither of whom would he reveal his plans further than to say he was going west "to engage in some development work." During the afternoon it was noted that Grant's interest centred more in a certain telephone call than in the very gratifying financial statement which Murdoch was able to place before him. And it was probably as a result of that telephone call that a taxi drew up in front of Murdoch's home at exactly six− thirty that evening and bore Miss Phyllis Bruce and an officer wearing a captain's uniform in the direction of the best hotel in the city.

The dining−room was sweet with the perfume of flowers, and soft strains of music stole vagrantly about its high arching pillars, mingling with the chatter of lovely women and of men to whom expense was no consideration.

Grant was conscious of a delicious sense of intimacy as he helped Phyllis remove her wraps and seated himself by her at a secluded corner table.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "I don't make compliments for exercise, but you do look stunning to−night!"

A warmth of color lit up her cheek−−he had noticed at Murdoch's how pale she was−−and her eyes laughed back at him with some of their old−time vivacity.

"I am so glad," she said. "It seems almost like old times−−"

They gave their orders, and sat in silence through an overture. Grant was delighting himself simply in her presence, and guessed that for her part she could not retract the confession her love had wrung from her so long ago.

"There are some things which don't change, Phyllis," he said, when the orchestra had ceased.

She looked back at him with eyes moist and dreamy. "I know," she murmured.

There seemed no reason why Grant should not there and then have laid himself, figuratively, at her feet. And there was not any reason−−only one. He wanted first to go west. He almost hoped that out there some light of disillusionment would fall about him; that some sudden experience such as he had known the night before would readjust his personality in accordance with the inevitable. . .

"I asked you to dine with me to−night," he heard himself saying, "for two reasons: first, for the delight of your exquisite companionship; and second, because I want to place before you certain business plans which, to me at least, are of the greatest importance.

"You know the position which I have taken with regard to the spending of money, that one should not spend on himself or his friends anything but his own honest earnings for which he has given honest service to society. I have seen no reason to change my position. On the contrary the war has strengthened me in my convictions. It has brought home to me and to the world the fact that heroism is a flower which grows in no peculiar soil, and that it blossoms as richly among the unwashed and the underfed as among the children of fortune. This fact only aggravates the extremes of wealth and poverty, and makes them seem more unjust than ever.

"For myself I have accepted this view, but our financial system is founded upon very different ethics. I wonder if you have ever thought of the fact that when the barons at Runnymede laid the foundations of democratic government for the world they overlooked the almost equally important matter of creating a democratic system of finance. Well−−let's not delve into that now. The point is that under our present system we do acquire wealth which we do not earn, and the only thing to be done for the time being is to treat that wealth as a trust to be managed for the benefit of humanity. That is what I call the new morality as applied to money, although it is not so new either. It can be traced back at least nineteen hundred years, and all our philanthropists, great and little, have surely caught some glimpse of that truth, unless, perhaps, they gave their alms that they might have honor of men. But giving one's money away does not solve the problem; it pauperizes the recipient and delays the evolution of new conditions in which present injustices would be corrected. I hope you are able to follow me?"

"Perfectly. It is easy for me, who have nothing to lose, to follow your logic. You will have more trouble convincing those whose pockets it would affect."

"I am not so sure of that. Humanity is pretty sound at heart, but we can't abandon the boat we're on until we have another that is proven seaworthy. However, it seems to me that I have found a solution which I can apply in my individual case. Have you thought what are the three greatest needs, commercially speaking, of the present day?"

"Production, I suppose, is the first."

"Yes−−most particularly production of food. And the others are corollary to it. They are instruction and opportunity. I am thinking especially of returned men."

"Production−−instruction−−opportunity," she repeated. "How are you going to bring them about?"

"That is my Big Idea, as Linder calls it, although I have not yet confided in him what it is. Well−−the world is crying for food, and in our western provinces are millions of acres which have never felt the plow−−"

"In the East, too, for that matter."

"I know, but I naturally think of the West. I propose to form a company and buy a large block of land, cut it up into farms, build houses and community centres, and put returned men and their families on these farms, under the direction of specialists in agriculture. I shall break up the rectangular survey of the West for something with humanizing possibilities; I mean to supplant it with a system of survey which will permit of settlement in groups−− villages, if you like−−where I shall instal all the modern conveniences of the city, including movie shows. Our statesmen are never done lamenting that population continues to flow from the country to the city, but the only way to stop that flow is to make the country the more attractive of the two."

"But your company−−who are to be the shareholders?"

"That is the keystone of the Big Idea. There never before was a company like this will be. In the first place, I shall put up all the money myself. Then, when I have prepared a farm ready to receive a man and his family, I will sell him shares equivalent to the value of his farm, and give him a perpetual lease, subject to certain restrictions. Let me illustrate. Suppose you are the prospective shareholder. I say, Miss Bruce, I can place you on a farm worth, with buildings and equipment, ten thousand dollars. I do not ask any cash from you; not a cent, but I want you to subscribe for ten thousand dollars stock in my company. That will make you a shareholder. When the farm begins to produce you are to have all you and your family−−this is an illustration, you know−− can consume for your own use. The balance is to be sold, and one− third of the proceeds is to be paid into the treasury of the company and credited on your purchase of shares. When you have paid for all your shares in this way you will have no further payments to make, except such levy as may be made by the company for running expenses. You, as a shareholder of the company, will have a voice with the other shareholders in determining what that levy shall be. You and your descendents will be allowed possession of that farm forever, subject only to your obeying the rules of the company. You−−"

"But why the company? It simply amounts to buying the land on payments to be made out of each year's crop, except that you want me to pay for shares in the company instead of for the land itself."

"That, as I told you, is the keystone of my Big Idea. If I sold you the land you would be master of it; you could do as you liked with it. You could let it lie idle; you could allow your buildings and machinery to get out of repair; you could keep scrub stock; all your methods of husbandry might be slovenly or antiquated; you could even rent or sell the land to someone who might be morally or socially undesirable in the community. On the other hand you might be peculiarly successful, when you would proceed to buy out your less successful neighbors, or make loans on their land, and thus create yourself a land monopolist. But as a shareholder in the company you will be subject to the rules laid down by the company. If it says that houses must be painted every four years you will paint your house every fourth year. If it rules that hayracks are not to be left on the front lawn you will have to deposit yours somewhere else. If it orders that crops must be rotated to preserve the fertility of the soil you will obey those instructions. If you do not like the regulations you can use your influence with the board of directors to have them changed. If you fail there you can sell your shares to someone else−−provided you can find a purchaser acceptable to the board−−and get out. The Big Idea is that the community−−the company in this case−−shall

control the individual, and the individual shall exert his proper measure of control over the community. The two are interlocked and interdependent, each exerting exactly the proper amount of power and accepting proportionate responsibility."

"But have you provided against the possibility of one man or a group of men buying up a majority of the stock and so controlling the company? They could then freeze out the smaller owners."

"Yes," said Grant, toying with his coffee, "I have made a provision for that which I think is rather ingenious. Don't imagine that this all came to me in a moment. The central thought struck me last night on my way home, and I knew then I had the embryo of the plan, but I lay awake until daylight working out details. I am going to allot votes on a very unique principle. It seems to me that a man's stake in a country should be measured, not by the amount of money he has, but by the number of mouths he has to feed. I will adopt that rule in my company, and the voting will be according to the number of children in the family. That should curb the ambitious."

They laughed over this proviso, and Phyllis agreed that it was all a very wonderful plan. "And when they have paid for all their shares you get your money back," she commented.

"Oh, no. I don't want my money back. I didn't explain that to you. I will advance the money on the bonds of the company, without interest. Suppose I am able to finance a hundred farms that way, then as the payments come in, still more farms. The thing will spread like a ripple in a pool, until it covers the whole country. When you turn a sum of money loose, WITH NO INTEREST CHARGE ATTACHED TO IT, there is no limit to what it can accomplish."

"But what will you do with your bonds, eventually? They will be perfectly secured. I don't see that you are getting rid of your money at all, except the interest, which you are giving away."

"That, Phyllis, is where autocracy and democracy meet. All progress is like the swinging of a pendulum, with autocracy at one end of the arc and democracy at the other, and progress is the mean of their opposing forces. But there are times when the most democratic countries have to use autocratic methods, as, for example, Great Britain and the United States in the late war. We must learn to make autocracy the servant of democracy, not its enemy. Well−−I'm going to be the autocrat in this case. I am going to sit behind the scenes and as long as my company functions all right I will leave it alone, but if it shows signs of wrecking itself I will assume the role of the benevolent despot and set it to rights again. Oh, Phyllis, don't you see? It's not just MY company I'm thinking about. This is an experiment, in which my company will represent the State. If it succeeds I shall turn the whole machinery over to the State as my contribution to the betterment of humanity. If it fails−−well, then I shall have demonstrated that the idea is unsound. Even that is worth something.

"I like to think of the great inventors, experimenting with the mysterious forces of nature. Their business is to find the natural laws that govern material things. And I am quite sure that there are also natural laws designed to govern man in his social and economic relationships, and when those laws have been discovered the impossibilities of to−day will become the common practice of to−morrow, just as steam and electricity have made the impossibilities of yesterday the common practice of to−day. The first need is to find the law, and to what more worthy purpose could a man devote himself? When I landed here yesterday−−when I walked again through these old streets−−I was a being without purpose; I was like a battery that had dried up. All these petty affairs of life seemed so useless, so humdrum, so commonplace, I knew I could never settle down to them again. Then last night from some unknown source came a new idea−−an inspiration−−and presto! the battery is re−charged, life again has its purposes, and I am eager to be at work.

"I said 'some unknown source,' but it was not altogether unknown. It had something to do with honest old Murdoch, and his good wife pouring coffee for the midnight supper in their cozy dining−room, and Phyllis Bruce across the table! We never know, Phyllis, how much we owe to our friends; to that charmed circle, be it ever so

small, in which every note strikes in harmony. I know my Big Idea is only playing on the surface; only skimming about the edges. What the world needs is just friends."

Grant had talked himself out, but he continued to sit at the little table, reveling in the happiness of a man who feels that he has been called to some purpose worth while. His companion hesitated to interrupt his thoughts; her somewhat drab business experience made her pessimistic toward all idealism, and yet she felt that here, surely, was a man who could carry almost any project through to success. The unique quality in him, which distinguished him from any other man she had ever known, was his complete unselfishness. In all his undertakings he coveted no reward for himself; he was seeking only the common good.

"If all men were like you there would be no problems," she murmured, and while he could not accept the words quite at par they rang very pleasantly in his ears.

A movement among the diners reminded him of the flight of time, and with a glance at his watch he sprang up in surprise. "I had no idea the evening had gone!" he exclaimed. "I have just time to see you home and get back to catch my train."

He called a taxi and accompanied her into it. They seated themselves together, and the fragrance of her presence was very sweet about him. It would have been so easy to forget−−all that he had been trying to forget−−in the intoxication of such environment. Surely it was not necessary that he should go west−−that he should see HER again−−in order to be sure.

"Phyllis," he breathed, "do you imagine I could undertake these things if I cared only for myself−−if it were not that I longed for someone's approval−−for someone to be proud of me? The strongest man is weak enough for that, and the strongest man is stronger when he knows that the woman he loves−−"

He would have taken her in his arms, but she resisted, gently, firmly.

"You have made me think too much of you, Dennison," she whispered.

CHAPTER XVI

On the way west Grant gradually unfolded his plan to Linder, who accepted it with his customary stoicism.

"I'm not very strong for a scheme that hasn't got any profits in it," Linder confessed. "It doesn't sound human."

"I don't notice that you have ever figured very high in profits on your own account," Grant retorted. "Your usefulness has been in making them for other people. I suppose if I would let you help to swell my bank account you would work for me for board and lodging, but as I refuse to do that I shall have to pay you three times Transley's rate. I don't know what he paid you, but I suspect that for every dollar you earned for yourself you earned two for him, so I am going to base your scale accordingly. You are to go on with the physical work at once; buy the horses, tractors, machinery; break up the land, fence it, build the houses and barns; in short, you are to superintend everything that is done with muscle or its substitute. I will bring Murdoch out shortly to take charge of the clerical details and the general organization. As for myself, after I have bought the land and placed the necessary funds to the credit of the company I propose to keep out of the limelight. I will be the heart of the undertaking; Murdoch will be the head, and you are to be the hands, and I hope you two conspirators won't give me palpitation. You think it a mistake to work without profits, but Murdoch thinks it a sin. When I lay my plans before him I am quite prepared to hear him insist upon calling in an alienist."

"It's YOUR money," Linder assented, laconically. "What are YOU going to do?"

"I'm going to buy a half section of my own, and I'm going to start myself on it on identically the same terms that I offer to the shareholders in my company. I want to prove by my own experience that it can be done, but I must keep away from the company. Human nature is a clinging vine at best, and I don't want it clinging about me. You will notice that my plan, unlike most communistic or socialist ventures, relieves the individual of no atom of responsibility. I give him the opportunity, but I put it up to him to make good with that opportunity. I have not overlooked the fact that a man is a man, and never can be made quite into a machine."

The two friends discussed at great length the details of the Big Idea, and upon arrival in the West Linder lost no time in preparing blue−prints and charts descriptive of the improvements to be made on the land and the order in which the work was to be carried on. Grant bought a tract suitable to his purpose, and the wheels of the machine which was to blaze a path for the State were set in motion. When this had been done Grant turned to the working out of his own individual experiment.

During the period in which these arrangements were being made it was inevitable that Grant should have heard more or less of Transley. He had not gone out of his way to seek information of the contractor, but it rather had been forced upon him. Transley's name was frequently heard in the offices of the business men with whom he had to do; it was mentioned in local papers with the regularity peculiar to celebrities in comparatively small centres. Transley, it appeared, had become something of a power in the land. Backed by old Y.D.'s capital he had carried some rather daring ventures through to success. He had seized the panicky moments following the outbreak of the war to buy heavily on the wheat and cattle markets, and increases in prices due to the world's demand for food had made him one of the wealthy men of the city. The desire of many young farmers to enlist had also afforded an opportunity to acquire their holdings for small considerations, and Transley had proved his patriotism by facilitating the ambitions of as many men in this position as came to his attention. The fact that even before the war ended the farms which he acquired in this way were worth several times the price he paid was only an incident in the transactions.

But no word of Transley's domestic affairs reached Grant, who told himself that he had ceased to be interested in them, but kept an alert ear nevertheless. It would seem that Transley rather eclipsed his wife in the public eye.

So Grant set about with the development of his own farm, and kept his mind occupied with it and with his larger experiment−−except when it went flirting with thoughts of Phyllis Bruce. He was rather proud of the figure he had used to Linder, of the head, hands, and heart of his organization, but to himself he admitted that that figure was incomplete. There was a soul as well, and that soul was the girl whose inspiring presence had in some way jerked his mind out of the stagnant backwaters in which the war had left it. There was no doubt of that. He had written to Murdoch to come west and undertake new work for him. He had intimated that the change would be permanent, and that it might be well to bring the family. . . .

He selected a farm where a ridge of foothills overlooked a broad valley receding into the mountains. The dealer had no idea of selling him this particular piece of land; they were bound for a half section farther up the slope when Grant stopped on the brow of the hill to feast his eyes on the scene that lay before him. It burst upon him with the unexpectedness peculiar to the foothill valleys; miles of gently undulating plain, lying apparently far below, but in reality rising in a sharp ascent toward the snow− capped mountains looking down silently through their gauze of blue− purple afternoon mist. At distances which even his trained eye would not attempt to compute lay little round lakes like silver coins on the surface of the prairie; here and there were dark green bluffs of spruce; to the right a ribbon of river, blue−green save where the rapids churned it white, and along its edge a fringe of leafy cottonwoods; at vast intervals square black plots of plowed land like sections on a chess−board of the gods, and farm buildings cut so clear in the mountain atmosphere that the sense of space was lost and they seemed like child−houses just across the way.

Grant turned to his companion with an animation in his face which almost startled the prosaic dealer in real estate.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "We don't need to go any farther if you can sell me this."

"Sure I can sell you this," said the dealer, looking at him somewhat queerly. "That is, if you want it. I thought you were looking for a wheat farm."

The man's total lack of appreciation irritated Grant unreasonably. "Wheat makes good hog fodder," he retorted, "but sunsets keep alive the soul. What is the price?"

Again the dealer gave him a queer sidelong look, and made as though to argue with him, then suddenly seemed to change his purpose. Perhaps he reflected that strange things happened to the boys overseas.

"I'll get you the price in town," he said. "You are sure it will suit?"

"Suit? No king in Christendom has his palace on a site like this. I'd go round the world for it."

"You're the doctor," said the dealer, turning his car.

Grant completed the purchase, ordered lumber for a house and barn, and engaged a carpenter to superintend the construction. It was one of his whims that he would do most of the work himself.

"I guess I'm rather a man of whims," he reflected, as he stood on the brow of the hill where the material for his buildings had been delivered. "It was a whim which first brought me west, and a whim which has brought me west again. I have a whim about my money, a whim about my farm, a whim about my buildings. I do not do as other people do, which is the unpardonable sin. To Linder I am a jester, to Murdoch a fanatic, to our friend the real estate dealer a fool; I even noticed my honest carpenter trying to ask me something about shell shock! Well−−they're MY whims, and I get an immense amount of satisfaction out of them."

The days that followed were the happiest Grant had known since childhood. The carpenter, a thin, twisted man, bowed with much labor at the bench, and answering to the name Peter, sold his services by the day and manifested a sympathy amounting to an indulgence toward the whims of his employer. So long as the wages were sure Peter cared not whether the house was finished this year or next−−or not at all. He enjoyed Grant's cooking in the temporary work−shed they had built; he enjoyed Grant's stories of funny incidents of the war which would crop out at unexpected moments, and which were always good for a new pipe and a few minutes' rest; he even essayed certain flights of his own, which showed that Peter was a creature not entirely without humor. He developed an appreciation of scenery; he would stand for long intervals gazing across the valley. Grant was not deceived by these little devices, but he never took Peter to task for his loitering. He was prepared almost to suspend his rule that money must not be paid except for service rendered. "If the old dodger isn't quite paying his way now, no doubt he has more than paid it many times in the past," he mused. "This is an occasion upon which to temper justice with mercy."

But it was in the planning and building of the house he found his real delight. He laid it out on very modest lines, as became the amount of money he was prepared to spend. It was to be a single− story bungalow, with veranda round the south and west. The living− room ran across the south side; into its east wall he built a capacious fireplace, with narrow slits of windows to right and left, and in the western wall were deep French windows commanding the magic of the view across the valley. The dining−room, too, faced to the west, with more French windows to let in sun and soul. The kitchen was to the east, and off the kitchen lay Grant's bedroom, facing also to the east, as becomes a man who rises early for his day's labors. And then facing the west, and opening off the dining−room, was what he was pleased to call his whim−room.

The idea of the whim−room came upon him as he was working out plans on the smooth side of a board, and thinking about things in general, and a good deal about Phyllis Bruce, and wondering if he should ever run across

Zen Transley. It struck him all of a sudden, as had the Big Idea that night when he was on his way home from Murdoch's house. He worked it out surreptitiously, not allowing even old Peter to see it until he had made it into his plan, and then he described it just as the whim−room. But it was to be by all means the best room in the house; special finishing and flooring lumber were to be bought for it; the fireplace had to be done in a peculiarly delicate tile; the French windows must be high and wide and of the most brilliant transparency. . . .

The ring of the saw, the trill of the plane, the thwack of the hammer, were very pleasant music in his ears. Day by day he watched his dwelling grow with the infinite joy of creating, and night after night he crept with Peter into the work−shed and slept the sleep of a man tired and contented. In the long summer evenings the sunlight hung like a champagne curtain over the mountains even after bedtime, and Grant had to cut a hole in the wall of the shed that he might watch the dying colors of the day fade from crimson to purple to blue on the tassels of cloud−wraith floating in the western sky. At times Linder and Murdoch would visit him to report progress on the Big Idea, and the three would sit on a bench in the half−built house, sweet with the fragrance of new sawdust, and smoke placidly while they determined matters of policy or administration. It had been something of a disappointment to Grant that Murdoch had not considered Phyllis Bruce one of "the family." He had left her, regretfully, in the East, but had made provision that she was still to have her room in the old Murdoch home.

"Phyllis would have come west, and gladly, if I could have promised her a position," Murdoch explained, "but I could not do that, as I knew nothing of your plans, and a girl can't afford to trifle with her job these days, Mr. Grant."

And Grant said nothing, but he thought of his whim−room, and smiled.

Grant was almost sorry when the house was finished. "There's so much more enjoyment in doing things than in merely possessing them after they're done," he philosophized to Linder. "I think that must be the secret of the peculiar fascination of the West. The East, with all its culture and conveniences and beauty, can never win a heart which has once known the West. That is because in the East all the obvious things are done, but in the West they are still to do."

"You should worry," said Linder. "You still have the plowing."

"Yes, and as soon as the stable is finished I am going to buy four horses and get to work."

"I supposed you would use a tractor."

"Not this time. I can admire a piece of machinery, but I can't love it. I can love horses."

"You'll be housing them in the whim−room," Linder remarked dryly, and had to jump to escape the hammer which his chief shied at him.

But the plowing was really a great experience. Grant had an eye for horse−flesh, and the four dapple−greys which pressed their fine shoulders into the harness of his breaking plow might have delighted the heart of any teamster. As he sat on his steel seat and watched the colter cut the firm sod with brittle cracking sound as it snapped the tough roots of the wild roses, or looking back saw the regular terraces of shiny black mould which marked his progress, he felt that he was engaged in a rite of almost sacramental significance.

"To take a substance straight from the hand of the Creator and be the first in all the world to impose a human will upon it is surely an occasion for solemnity and thanksgiving," he soliloquized. "How can anyone be so gross as to see only materialism in such work as this? Surely it has something of fundamental religion in it! Just as from the soil springs all physical life, may it not be that deep down in the soil are, some way, the roots of the spiritual? The soil feeds the city in two ways; it fills its belly with material food, and it is continually re−vitalizing its spirit with

fresh streams of energy which can come only from the land. Up from the soil comes all life, all progress, all development−−"

At that moment Grant's plowshare struck a submerged boulder, and he was dumped precipitately into that element which he had been so generously apostrophizing. The well−trained horses came to a stop as he gathered himself up, none the worse, and regained his seat.

"That WAS a spill," he commented. "Ditched not only myself, but my whole train of thought. Never mind; perhaps I was dangerously close to the development of a new whim, and I am well supplied in that particular already. Hello, whom have we here?"

The horses had come to a stop a short distance before the end of the furrow, and Grant, glancing ahead, saw immediately in front of them a little chap of four or five obstructing the way. He stood astride of the furrow with widespread legs bridging the distance from the virgin prairie to the upturned sod. He was hatless, and curls of silky yellow hair fell about his round, bright face. His hands were stuck obtrusively in his trouser pockets.

"Well, son, what's the news?" said Grant, when the two had measured each other for a moment.

"I got braces," the boy replied proudly. "Don't you see?"

"Why, so you have!" Grant exclaimed. "Come around here until I see them better."

So encouraged, the little chap came skipping around the horses, and exhibited his braces for Grant's admiration. But he had already become interested in another subject.

"Are these your horses?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Will they bite?"

"Why, no, I don't believe they would. They have been very well brought up."

"What do you call them?"

"This one is Prince, on the left, and the others are Queen, and King, and Knave. I call him Knave because he's always scheming, trying to get out of his share of the work, and I make him walk on the plowed land, too."

"That serves him right," the boy declared. "What's your name?"

"Why−−what's yours?"

"Wilson."

"Wilson what?"

"Just Wilson."

"What does your mother call you?"

"Just Wilson. Sometimes daddy calls me Bill."

"Oh!"

"What's your name?"

"Call me The Man on the Hill."

"Do you live on the hill?"

"Yes."

"Is that your house?"

"Yes."

"Did you make it?"

"Yes."

"All yourself?"

"No. Peter helped me."

"Who's Peter?"

"He is the man who helped me."

"Oh!"

These credentials exchanged, the boy fell silent, while Grant looked down upon him with a whimsical admixture of humor and tenderness. Suddenly, without a word, the boy dashed as fast as his legs could carry him to the end of the field, and plunged into a clump of bushes. In a moment he emerged with something brown and chubby in his arms.

"He's my teddy," he said to Grant. "He was watching in the bushes to see if you were a nice man."

"And am I?" Grant was tempted to ask.

"Yes." There was no evasion about Wilson. He approved of his new acquaintance, and said so.

"Let us give teddy a ride on Prince?"

"Let's!"

Grant carefully arranged teddy on the horse's hames, and the boy clapped his hands with delight.

"Now let us all go for a ride. You will sit on my knee, and teddy will drive Prince."

He took the boy carefully on his knee, driving with one hand and holding him in place with the other. The little body resting confidently against his side was a new experience for Grant.

"We must drive carefully," he remarked. "Here and there are big stones hidden in the grass. If we were to hit one it might dump us off."

The little chap chuckled. "Nothing could dump you off," he said.

Grant reflected that such implicit and unwarranted confidence implied a great responsibility, and he drove with corresponding care. A mishap now might nip this very delightful little bud of hero−worship.

They turned the end of the furrow with a fine jingle of loose trace−chains, and Prince trotted a little on account of being on the outer edge of the semicircle. The boy clapped his hands again as teddy bounced up and down on the great shoulders.

"Have you a little boy?" he asked, when they were started again.

"Why, no," Grant confessed, laughing at the question.

"Why?"

There was no evading this childish inquisitor. He had a way of pursuing a subject to bedrock.

"Well, you see, I've no wife."

"No mother?"

"No−−no wife. You see−−"

"But I have a mother−−"

"Of course, and she is your daddy's wife. You see they have to have that−−"

Grant found himself getting into deep water, but the sharp little intellect had cut a corner and was now ahead of him.

"Then I'll be your little boy," he said, and, clambering up to Grant's shoulder pressed a kiss on his cheek. In a sudden burst of emotion Grant brought his team to a stop and clasped the little fellow in both his arms. For a moment everything seemed misty.

"And I have lived to be thirty−two years old and have never known what this meant," he said to himself.

"Daddy's hardly ever home, anyway," the boy added, naively.

"Where is your home?"

"Down beside the river. We live there in summer."

And so the conversation continued and the acquaintanceship grew as man and boy plied back and forth on their mile−long furrow. At length it occurred to Grant that he should send Wilson home; the boy's long absence might be occasioning some uneasiness. They stopped at the end of the field and carefully removed teddy from his place of prestige, but just at that moment a horsefly buzzing about caused Prince to stamp impatiently, and the big hoof came down on the boy's foot. Wilson sent up a cry proportionate to the possibilities of the occasion, and Grant in alarm tore off the boot and stocking. Fortunately the soil had been soft, and the only damage done was a slight

bruise across the upper part of the foot.

"There, there," said Grant, soothingly, caressing the injury with his fingers. "It will be all right in a minute. Prince didn't mean to do it, and besides, I've seen much worse than that at the war."

At the mention of war the boy suspended a cry half uttered.

"Were you at the war?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Did you kill a German?"

"I've seen a German killed," said Grant, evading a question which no soldier cares to discuss.

"Did you kill 'em in the tummy?" the boy persisted.

"We'll talk about that to−morrow. Now you hop up on to my shoulders, and I'll tie the horses and then carry you home."

He followed the boy's directions until they led him to a path running among pleasant trees down by the river. Presently he caught a glimpse of a cottage in a little open space, its brown shingled walls almost smothered in a riot of sweet peas.

"That's our house. Don't you like it?" said the boy, who had already forgotten his injury.

"I think it is splendid." And Grant, taking his young charge from his shoulder, stepped up on to the porch and knocked at the screen door.

In a moment it was opened by Zen Transley.

CHAPTER XVII

Sitting on his veranda that evening while the sun dropped low over the mountains and the sound of horses munching contentedly came up from the stables, Grant for the twentieth time turned over in his mind the events of a day that was to stand out as an epochal one in his career. The meeting with the little boy and the quick friendship and confidence which had been formed between them; the mishap, and the trip to the house by the river−−these were logical and easily followed. But why, of all the houses in the world, should it have been Zen Transley's house? Why, of all the little boys in the world, should this have been the son of his rival and the only girl he had ever−−the girl he had loved most in all his life? Surely events are ordered to some purpose; surely everything is not mere haphazard chance! The fatalism of the trenches forbade any other conclusion; and if this was so, why had he been thrown into the orbit of Zen Transley? He had not sought her; he had not dreamt of her once in all that morning while her child was winding innocent tendrils of affection about his heart. And yet−−how the boy had gripped him! Could it be that in some way he was a small incarnation of the Zen of the Y.D., with all her clamorous passion expressed now in childish love and hero−worship? Had some intelligence above his own guided him into this environment, deliberately inviting him to defy conventions and blaze a path of broader freedom for himself, and for her? These were questions he wrestled with as the shadows crept down the mountain slopes and along the valley at his feet.

For neither Zen nor himself had connived at the situation which had made them, of all the people in the world,

near neighbors in this silent valley. Her surprise on meeting him at the door had been as genuine as his. When she had made sure that the boy was not seriously hurt she had turned to him, and instinctively he had known that there are some things which all the weight of passing years can never crush entirely dead. He loved to rehearse her words, her gestures, the quick play of sympathetic emotions as one by one he reviewed them.

"You! I am surprised−−I had not known−−" She had become confused in her greeting, and a color that she would have given worlds to suppress crept slowly through her cheeks.

"I am surprised, too−−and delighted," he had returned. "The little boy came to me in the field, boasting of his braces." Then they had both laughed, and she had asked him to come in and tell about himself.

The living−room, as he recalled it, was marked by the simplicity appropriate to the summer home, with just a dash of elegance in the furnishings to suggest that simplicity was a matter of choice and not of necessity. After soothing Wilson's sobs, which had broken out afresh in his mother's arms, she had turned him over to a maid and drawn a chair convenient to Grant's.

"You see, I am a farmer now," he had said, apologetically regarding his overalls.

"What changes have come! But I don't understand; I thought you were rich−−very rich−−and that you were promoting some kind of settlement scheme. Frank has spoken of it."

"All of which is true. You see, I am a man of whims. I choose to live joyously. I refuse to fit into a ready−made niche in society. I do what other people don't do−−mainly for that reason. I have some peculiar notions−−"

"I know. You told me." And it was then that their eyes had met and they had fallen into a momentary silence.

"But why are you farming?" she had exclaimed, brightly.

"For several reasons. First, the world needs food. Food is the greatest safeguard−−I would almost say the only safeguard−−against anarchy and chaos. Then, I want to learn by experience; to prove by my own demonstrations that my theories are workable−−or that they're not. And then, most of all, I love the prairies and the open life. It's my whim, and I follow it."

"You are very wonderful," she had murmured. And then, with startling directness, "Are you happy?"

"As happy as I have any right to be. Happier than I have been since childhood."

She had risen and walked to the mantelpiece; then, with an apparent change of impulse, she had turned and faced him. He had noted that her figure was rounder than in girlhood, her complexion paler, but the sunlight still danced in her hair, and her reckless force had given way to a poise that suggested infinite resources of character.

"Frank has done well, too," she had said.

"So I have heard. I am told that he has done very well indeed."

"He has made money, and he is busy and excited over his pursuit of success−−what he calls success. He has given it his life. He thinks of nothing else−−"

She had stopped suddenly, as though her tongue had trapped her into saying more than she had intended.

"What do you think of my summer home?" she had exclaimed, abruptly. "Come out and admire the sweet peas," and with a gay little flourish she had led him into the garden. "They tell me Western flowers have a brilliance and a fragrance which the East, with all its advantages, cannot duplicate. Is that true?"

"I believe it is. The East has greater profusion−−more varieties−− but the individual qualities do not seem to be so well developed."

"I see you know something of Eastern flowers," she had said, and he fancied he had caught a note of banter−−or was it inquiry?−−in her voice. Then, with another abrupt change of subject, she had made him describe his house on the hill. But he had said nothing of the whim−room.

"I must go," he had exclaimed at length. "I left the horses tied in the field."

"So you must. I shall let Wilson visit you frequently, if he is not a trouble."

Then she had chosen a couple of blooms and pinned them on his coat, laughingly overriding his protest that they consorted poorly with his costume. And she had shaken hands and said good−bye in the manner of good friends parting.

The more Grant thought of it the more was he convinced that in her case, as in his own, the years had failed to extinguish the spark kindled in the foothills that night so long ago. He reminded himself continually that she was Transley's wife, and even while granting the irrevocability of that fact he was demanding to know why Fate had created for them both an atmosphere charged with unspoken possibilities. He had turned her words over again and again, reflecting upon the abrupt angles her speech had taken. In their few minutes' conversation three times she had had to make a sudden tack to safer subjects. What had she meant by that reference to Eastern and Western flowers? His answer reminded him how well he knew. And the confession about her husband, the worshipper of success−−"what he calls success"−−how much tragedy lay under those light words?

The valley was filled with shadow, and the level rays of the setting sun fell on the young man's face and splashed the hill−tops with gold and saffron as within his heart raged the age−old battle. . . . But as yet he felt none of its wounds. He was conscious only of a wholly irrational delight.

As the next forenoon passed Grant found himself glancing with increasing frequency toward the end of the field where the little boy might be expected to appear. But the day wore on without sign of his young friend, and the furrows which he had turned so joyously at nine were dragging leadenly at eleven. He had not thought it possible that a child could so quickly have won a way to his affections. He fell to wondering as to the cause of the boy's absence. Had Zen, after a night's reflection, decided that it was wiser not to allow the acquaintance to develop? Had Transley, returning home, placed his veto upon it? Or−−and his heart paused at this prospect−−had the foot been more seriously hurt than they had supposed? Grant told himself that he must go over that night and make inquiry. That would be the neighborly thing to do. . . .

But early that afternoon his heart was delighted by the sight of a little figure skipping joyously over the furrows toward him. He had his hat crumpled in one hand, and his teddy−bear in the other, and his face was alive with excitement. He was puffing profusely when he pulled up beside the plow, and Grant stopped the team while he got his breath.

"My! My! What is the hurry? I see the foot is all better."

"We got a pig!" the lad gasped, when he could speak.

"A pig!"

"Yessir! A live one, too! He's awful big. A man brought him in a wagon. That is why I couldn't come this morning."

Grant treated himself to a humble reflection upon the wisdom of childish preferments.

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Eat him up, I guess. Daddy said there was enough wasted about our house to keep a pig, so we got one. Aren't you going to take me up?"

"Of course. But first we must put teddy in his place."

"I'm to go home at five o'clock," the boy said, when he had got properly settled.

The hours slipped by all too quickly, and if the lad's presence did not contribute to good plowing, it at least made a cheerful plowman. It was plain that Zen had sufficient confidence in her farmer neighbor to trust her boy in his care, and his frequent references to his mother had an interest for Grant which he could not have analyzed or explained. During the afternoon the merits of the pig were sung and re−sung, and at last Wilson, after kissing his friend on the cheek and whispering, "I like you, Uncle Man−on− the−Hill," took his teddy−bear under his arm and plodded homeward.

The next morning he came again, but mournfully and slow. There were tear stains on the little round cheeks.

"Why, son, what had happened?" said Grant, his abundant sympathies instantly responding.

"Teddy's spoiled," the child sobbed. "I set him−−on the side of−− the pig pen, and he fell'd in, and the big pig et him−−ate him−−up. He didn't 'zactly eat him up, either−−just kind of chewed him, like."

"Well that certainly is too bad. But then, you're going to eat the pig some day, so that will square it, won't it?"

"I guess it will," said the boy, brightening. "I never thought of that."

"But we must have a teddy for Prince. See, he is looking around, waiting for it." Grant folded his coat into the shape of a dummy and set it up on the hames, and all went merrily again.

That afternoon, which was Saturday, the boy came thoughtfully and with an air of much importance. Delving into a pocket he produced an envelope, somewhat crumpled in transit. It was addressed, "The Man on the Hill."

Grant tore it open eagerly and read this note:

"DEAR MAN−ON−THE−HILL,−−That is the name Wilson calls you, so perhaps you will let me use it, too. Frank is to be home to− morrow, and will you come and have dinner with us at six? My father and mother will be here, and possibly one or two others. You had a clash with my men−folk once, but you will find them ready enough to make allowance for, even if they fail to understand, your point of view. Do come.−−ZEN.

"P.S.−−It just occurs to me that your associates in your colonization scheme may want to claim your time on Sunday. If any of them come out, bring them along. Our table is an extension one, and its capacity has never yet been exhausted."

Although Grant's decision was made at once he took some time for reflection before writing an acceptance. He was to enter Zen's house on her invitation, but under the auspices, so to speak, of husband and parents. That was

eminently proper. Zen was a sensible girl. Then there was a reference to that ancient squabble in the hay meadow. It was evidently her plan to see the hatchet buried and friendly relations established all around. Eminently proper and sensible.

He turned the sheet over and wrote on the back:

"DEAR ZEN,−−Delighted to come. May have a couple of friends with me, one of whom you have seen before. Prepare for an appetite long denied the joys of home cooking.−−D. G."

It was not until after the child had gone home that Grant remembered he had addressed Transley's wife by her Christian name. That was the way he always thought of her, and it slipped on to paper quite naturally. Well, it couldn't be helped now.

Grant unhitched early and hurried to his house and the telephone. In a few minutes he had Linder on the line.

"Hello, Linder? I want you to go to a store for me and buy a teddy−bear."

The chuckle at the other end of the line irritated Grant. Linder had a strange sense of humor.

"I mean it. A big teddy, with electric eyes, and a deep bass growl, if they make 'em that way. The best you can get. Fetch it out to−morrow afternoon, and come decently dressed, for once. Bring Murdoch along if you can pry him loose."

Grant hung up the receiver. "Stupid chap, Linder, some ways," he muttered. "Why shouldn't I buy a teddy−bear if I want to?"

Sunday afternoon saw the arrival of Linder and Murdoch, with the largest teddy the town afforded. "What is the big idea now?" Linder demanded, as he delivered it into Grant's hands.

"It is for a little boy I know who has been bereaved of his first teddy by the activities of the family pig. You will renew some pleasant acquaintanceships, Linder. You remember Transley and his wife−−Zen, of the Y.D?"

"You don't say! Thanks for that tip about dressing up. I may explain," Linder continued, turning to Murdoch, "there was a time when I might have been an also−ran in the race for Y.D.'s daughter, only Transley beat me on the getaway."

"You!" Grant exclaimed, incredulously.

"You, too!" Linder returned, a great light dawning.

"Well, Mr. Grant," said Murdoch, "I brought you a good cigar, bought at the company's expense. It comes out of the organization fund. You must be sick of those cheap cigars."

"Since the war it is nothing but Player's," Grant returned, taking the proffered cigar. "They tell me it has revolutionized the tobacco business. However, this does smell a bit all right. How goes our venture, Murdoch? Have I any prospect of being impoverished in a worthy cause?"

"None whatever. Your foreman here is spending every dollar in a way to make you two in spite of your daft notion−−begging your pardon, sir−−about not taking profits. The subscribers are coming along for stock, but fingering it gently, as though they can't well believe there's no catch in it. They say it doesn't look reasonable, and I tell them no more it is."

"And then they buy it?"

"Aye, they do. That's human nature. There's as many members booked now as can be accommodated in the first colony. I suppose they reason that they will be sure of their winter's housing, anyway."

"You don't seem to have much faith in human nature, Murdoch."

"Nor have I. Not in that kind of human nature which is always wanting something for nothing."

Linder's report was more cheerful. The houses and barns were built and were now being painted, the plowing was done, and the fences were being run. By the use of a triangular system of survey twelve farm homes had been centralized in one little community where a community building would be erected which would be used as a school in daytime, a motion−picture house at night, and a church on Sunday. A community secretary would have his office here, and would have charge of a select little library of fiction, poetry, biography, and works of reference. The leading periodicals dealing with farm problems, sociology, and economics, as well as lighter subjects, would be on file. In connection with this building would be an assembly−room suitable for dances, social events, and theatricals, and equipped with a player piano and concert−size talking machine. Arrangements were being made for a weekly exchange of records, for a weekly musical evening by artists from the city, for a semi−monthly vaudeville show, and for Sunday meetings addressed by the best speakers on the more serious topics of the time.

"What has surprised me in making these arrangements," Linder confessed, "is the comparatively small outlay they involve. The building will cost no more than many communities spend on school and church which they use thirty hours a week and three hours a week respectively. This one can be used one hundred and sixty− eight hours a week, if needed. Lecturers on many subjects can be had for paying their expenses; in some cases they are employed by the Government, and will come without cost. Amateur theatrical companies from the city will be glad to come in return for an appreciative audience and a dance afterward, with a good fill−up on solid farm cooking. Even some of the professionals can be had on these terms. Of course, before long we will produce our own theatricals.

"Then there is to be a plunge bath big enough to swim in, open to men and women alternate nights, and to children every day. There will be a pool−room, card−room, and refreshment buffet; also a quiet little room for women's social events, and an emergency hospital ward. I think we should hire a trained nurse who would not be too dignified to cook and serve meals when there's no business doing in the hospital. You know how everyone gets hankering now and then for a meal from home,−−not that it's any better, but it's different. I suppose there are farmer's wives who don't get a meal away from home once a year. I'm going to change all that, if I have to turn cook myself!"

"Bully for you, Linder!" said Grant, clapping him on the shoulder. "I believe you actually are enthusiastic for once."

"I understand my orders are to make the country give the city a run for its money, and I'm going to do it, or break you. If all I've mentioned won't do it I've another great scheme in storage."

"Good! What is it?"

"I am inventing a machine that will make a noise like a trolley−car and a smell like a sewer. That will add the last touch in city refinements."

When the laugh over Linder's invention had subsided Murdoch broached another.

"The office work is becoming pretty heavy, Mr. Grant, and I'm none too confident in the help I have. Now if I could send for Miss Bruce−−"

"What do you think you should pay her?"

"I should say she is worth a hundred dollars a month."

"Then she must be worth two hundred. Wire her to come and start her at that figure."

CHAPTER XVIII

Promptly at six Linder drew his automobile up in front of the Transley summer home with Grant and Murdoch on board. Wilson had been watching, and rushed down upon them, but before he could clamber up on Grant a great teddy−bear was thrust into his arms and sent him, wild with delight, to his mother.

"Look, mother! Look what The−Man−on−the−Hill brought! See! He has fire in his eyes!"

Transley and Y.D. met the guests at the gate. "How do, Grant? Glad to see you, old man," said Transley, shaking his hand cordially. "The wife has had so many good words for you I am almost jealous. What ho, Linder! By all that's wonderful! You old prairie dog, why did you never look me up? I was beginning to think the Boche had got you."

Grant introduced Murdoch, and Y.D. received them as cordially as had Transley. "Glad to see you fellows back," he exclaimed. "I al'us said the Western men 'ud put a crimp in the Kaiser, spite o' hell an' high water!"

"One thing the war has taught us," said Grant, modestly, "is that men are pretty much alike, whether they come from west or east or north or south. No race has a monopoly of heroism."

"Well, come on in," Transley beckoned, leading the way. "Dinner will be ready sharp on time twenty minutes late. Not being a married man, Grant, you will not understand that reckoning. You'll have to excuse Mrs. Transley a few minutes; she's holding down the accelerator in the kitchen. Come in; I want you to meet Squiggs."

Squiggs proved to be a round man with huge round tortoise−shell glasses and round red face to match. He shook hands with a manner that suggested that in doing so he was making rather a good fellow of himself.

"We must have a little lubrication, for Y.D.'s sake," said Transley, producing a bottle and glasses. "I suppose it was the dust on the plains that gave these old cow punchers a thirst which never can be slaked. These be evil days for the old−timers. Grant?"

"Not any, thanks."

"No? Well, there's no accounting for tastes. Squiggs?"

"I'm a lawyer," said Squiggs, "and as booze is now ultra vires I do my best to keep it down," and Mr. Squiggs beamed genially upon his pleasantry and the full glass in his hand.

"I take a snort when I want it and I don't care who knows it," said Y.D. "I al'us did, and I reckon I'll keep on to the finish. It didn't snuff me out in my youth and innocence, anyway. Just the same, I'm admittin' it's bad medicine in onskilful hands. Here's ho!"

The glasses had just been drained when Mrs. Transley entered the room, flushed but radiant from a strenuous half hour in the kitchen.

"Well, here you are!" she exclaimed. "So glad you could come, Mr. Grant. Why, Mr. Linder! Of all people−− This IS a pleasure. And Mr.−−?"

"Mr. Murdoch," Transley supplied.

"My chief of staff; the man who persists in keeping me rich," Grant elaborated.

"I mustn't keep you waiting longer. Dinner is ready. Dad, you are to carve."

"Hanged if I will! I'm a guest here, and I stand on my rights," Y.D. exploded.

"Then you must do it, Frank."

"I suppose so," said Transley, "although all I get out of a meal when I have to carve is splashing and profanity. You know, Squiggs, I've figured it out that this practice of requiring the nominal head of the house to carve has come down from the days when there wasn't usually enough to go 'round, and the carver had to make some fine decisions and, perhaps, maintain them by force. It has no place under modern civilization."

"Except that someone must do it, and it's about the only household responsibility man has not been able to evade," said Mrs. Transley.

As they entered the dining−room Zen's mother, whiter and it seemed even more distinguished by the years, joined them, accompanied by Mrs. Squiggs, a thin woman much concerned about social status, and the party was complete.

Transley managed the carving more skilfully than his protest might have suggested, and there was a lull in the conversation while the first demands of appetite were being satisfied.

"Tell us about your settlement scheme, Mr. Grant," Mrs. Transley urged when it seemed necessary to find a topic. "Mr. Grant has quite a wonderful plan."

"Yes, wise us up, old man," said Transley. "I've heard something of it, but never could see through it."

"It's all very simple," Grant explained. "I am providing the capital to start a few families on farms. Instead of lending the money directly to them I am financing a company in which each farmer must subscribe for stock to the value of the land he is to occupy. His stock he will pay for with a part of the proceeds of each year's crop, until it is paid in full, when he becomes a paid− up shareholder, subject to no further call except a levy which may be made for running expenses."

"And then your advances are returned to you with interest," Squiggs suggested. "A very creditable plan of benefaction; very creditable, indeed."

"No, that is not the idea. In the first place, I am accepting no interest on my advances, and in the second place the money, when repaid by the shareholders, will not be returned to me, but will be used to establish another colony on the same basis, and so on−−the movement will be extended from group to group."

Mr. Squiggs readjusted his large round tortoise−shell glasses.

"Do I understand that you are charging no interest?"

"Not a cent."

"Then where do YOU come in?"

"I had hoped to make it clear that I am not seeking to 'come in.' You see, the money I am doing this with is not really mine at all."

"Not yours?" cried a chorus of voices.

"No. Mr. Squiggs, you are a lawyer, and therefore a man of perspicuity and accurate definitions. What is money?"

"You flatter me. I should say that money is a medium for the exchange of value."

"Very well. Therefore, if a man accepts money without giving value for it in exchange he is violating the fundamental principle underlying the use of money. He is, in short, an economic outlaw."

"I am afraid I don't follow you."

"Let me illustrate by my own experience, and that of my family. My father was possessed of a piece of land which at one time had little or no value. Eventually it became of great value, not through anything he had done, but as a result of the natural law that births exceed deaths. Yet he, although he had done nothing to create this value, was able, through a faulty economic system, to pocket the proceeds. Then, as a result of the advantages which his wealth gave him, he was able to extract from society throughout all the remainder of his life value out of all proportion to any return he made for it. Finally it came down to me. Holding my peculiar belief, which my right and left bower consider sinful and silly respectively, I found money forced upon me, regardless of the fact that I had given absolutely no value in exchange. Now if money is a medium for the exchange of value and I receive money without giving value for it, it is plain that someone else must have parted with money without receiving value in return. The thing is basically immoral."

"Your father couldn't take it with him."

"But why should _I_ have it? I never contributed a finger−weight of service for it. From society the money came and to society it should return."

"You should worry," said Transley. "Society isn't worrying over you. Some more of the roast beef?"

"No, thank you. But to come down to date. It seems that I cannot get away from this wealth which dogs me at every turn. Before enlisting I had been margining certain steel stocks, purely in the ordinary course of affairs. With the demands made by the war on the steel industry my stocks went up in price and my good friend Murdoch was able to report that it had made a fortune for me while I was overseas. . . . And we call ourselves an intelligent people!"

"And so we are," said Mr. Squiggs. "We stick to a system we know to be sound. It has weathered all the gales of the past, and promises to weather those of the future. I tell you, Grant, communism won't work. You can't get away from the principle of individual reward for individual effort."

"My dear fellow, that's exactly what I'm pleading for. I have no patience with any claim that all men are equal, or capable of rendering equal service to society, and I want payment to be made according to service rendered, not according to the freaks of a haphazard system such as I have been trying to describe."

"But how are you going to bring that golden age about?" Murdoch inquired.

"By education. The first thing is to accept the principle that wealth cannot be accepted except in exchange for full−measure service. You, Mrs. Transley−−you teach your little boy that he must not steal. As he grows older simply widen your definition of theft to include receiving value without giving value in exchange. When all the mothers begin teaching that principle the golden age which Mr. Murdoch inquires about will be in sight."

"How would you drive it home?" said Y.D. "We have too many laws already."

"Let us agree on that. The acceptance of this principle will make half the laws now cluttering our statute books unnecessary. I merely urge that we should treat the CAUSE of our economic malady rather than the symptoms."

"Theoretically your idea has much to commend it, but it is quite impracticable," Mr. Squiggs announced with some finality. "It could never be brought into effect."

"If a corporation can determine the value of the service rendered by each of its hundred thousand employees, why cannot a nation determine the value of the service rendered by each of its hundred million citizens?"

"THERE'S something for you to chew on, Squiggs," said Transley. "You argue your case well, Grant; I believe you have our legal light rather feazed−−that's the word, isn't it, Mr. Murdoch?−−for once. I confess a good deal of sympathy with your point of view, but I'm afraid you can't change human nature."

"I am not trying to do that. All that needs changing is the popular idea of what is right and what is wrong. And that idea is changing with a rapidity which is startling. Before the war the man who made money, by almost any means, was set up on a pedestal called Success. Moralists pointed to him as one to be emulated; Sunday school papers printed articles to show that any boy might follow in his footsteps and become great and respected. To−day, for following precisely the same practices, the nation demands that he be thrown into prison; the Press heaps contumely upon him; he has become an object of suspicion in the popular eye. This change, world wide and quite unforeseen, has come about in five years."

"Is that due to a new sense of right and wrong, or to just old− fashioned envy of the rich which now feels strong enough to threaten where it used to fawn?" Y.D.'s wife asked, and Grant was spared a hard answer by the rancher's interruption, "Hit the profiteer as hard as you like. He's got no friends."

"That depends upon who is the profiteer−−a point which no one seems to have settled. In the cities you may even hear prosperous ranchers included in that class−−absurd as that must seem to you," Grant added, with a smile to Y.D. "Require every man to give service according to his returns and you automatically eliminate all profiteers, large and small."

"But you will admit," said Mrs. Squiggs, "that we must have some well−off people to foster culture and give tone to society generally?"

"I agree that the boy who is brought up in a home with a bath tub, and all that that stands for, is likely to be a better citizen than the boy who doesn't have that advantage. That's why I want every home to have a bath tub."

Mrs. Squiggs subsided rather heavily. In youth her Saturday night ablutions had been taken in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"I have a good deal of sympathy," said Transley, "with any movement which has for its purpose the betterment of human conditions. Any successful man of to−day will admit, if he is frank about it, that he owes his success as much to good luck as to good judgment. If you could find a way, Grant, to take the element of luck out of life,

perhaps you would be doing a service which would justify you in keeping those millions which worry you so. But I can't see that it makes any difference to the prosperity of a country who owns the wealth in it, so long as the wealth is there and is usefully employed. Money doesn't grow unless it works, and if it works it serves Society just the same as muscle does. You could put all your wealth in a strong−box and bury it under your house up there on the hill, and it wouldn't increase a nickel in a thousand years, but if you put it to work it makes money for you and money for other people as well. I'm a little nervous about new−fangled notions. It's easier to wreck the ship than to build a new one, which may not sail any better. What the world needs to−day is the gospel of hard work, and everybody, rich and poor, on the job for all that's in him. That's the only way out."

"We seem to have much in common," Grant returned. "Hard work is the only way out, and the best way to encourage hard work is to find a system by which every man will be rewarded according to the service rendered."

At this point Mrs. Transley arose, and the men moved out into the living−room to chat on less contentious subjects. After a time the women joined them, and Grant presently found himself absorbed in conversation with the old rancher's wife. Zen seemed to pay but little attention to him, and for the first time he began to realize what consummate actresses women are. Had Transley been the most suspicious of husbands−−and in reality his domestic vision was as guileless as that of a boy−−he could have caught no glint of any smoldering spark of the long ago. Grant found himself thinking of this dissembling quality as one of nature's provisions designed for the protection of women, much as the sombre plumage of the prairie chicken protects her from the eye of the sportsman. For after all the hunting instinct runs through all men, be the game what it may.

Before they realized how the time had flown Linder was protesting that he must be on his way. At the gate Transley put a hand on Grant's shoulder.

"I'm prepared to admit," he said, "that there's a whole lot in this old world that needs correcting, but I'm not sure that it can be corrected. You have a right to try out your experiments, but take a tip and keep a comfortable cache against the day when you'll want to settle down and take things as they are. It is true and always has been true that a man who is worth his salt, when he wants a thing, takes it−−or goes down in the attempt. The loser may squeal, but that seems to be the path of progress. You can't beat it."

"Well, we'll see," said Grant, laughing. "Sometimes two men, each worth his salt, collide."

"As in the meadow of the South Y.D.," said Transley, with a smile. "You remember that, Y.D.−−when our friend here upset the haying operations?"

"Sure, I remember, but I'm not holdin' it agin him now. A dead horse is a dead horse, an' I don't go sniffin' it."

"Perhaps I ought to say, though," Grant returned, "that I really do not know how the iron pegs got into that meadow."

"And I don't know how your haystacks got afire, but I can guess. Remember Drazk? A little locoed, an' just the crittur to pull off a fool stunt like that. When the fire swept up the valley, instead of down, he made his get−away and has never been seen since. I reckon likely there was someone in Landson's gang capable o' drivin' pegs without consultin' the boss."

The little group were standing in the shadow and Grant had no opportunity to notice the sudden blanching of Zen's face at the mention of Drazk.

"You're wrong about his not having been seen again, Y.D.," said Grant. "He managed to locate me somewhere in France. That reminds me, he had a message for you, Mrs. Transley. I'm afraid Drazk is as irresponsible as ever, provided he hasn't passed out, which is more than likely."

Grant shook hands cordially with Y.D. and his wife, with Squiggs and Mrs. Squiggs, with Transley and Mrs. Transley. Any inclination he may have felt to linger over Zen's hand was checked by her quick withdrawal of it, and there was something in her manner quite beyond his understanding. He could have sworn that the self−possessed Zen Transley was actually trembling.

CHAPTER XIX

The next day Wilson paid his usual visit to the field where Grant was plowing, and again was he the bearer of a message. With much difficulty he managed to extricate the envelope from a pocket.

"Dear Mr. Grant," it read, "I am so excited over a remark you dropped last night I must see you again as soon as possible. Can you drop in to−night, say at eight. Yours,−−ZEN."

Grant read the message a second time, wondering what remark of his could have occasioned it. As he recalled the evening's conversation it had been most about his experiment, and he had a sense that he had occupied a little more of the stage than strictly good form would have suggested. However, it was HIS scheme that had been under discussion, and he did not propose to let it suffer for lack of a champion. But what had he said that could be of more than general interest to Zen Transley? For a moment he wondered if she had created a pretext upon which to bring him to the house by the river, and then instantly dismissed that thought as unworthy of him. At any rate it was evident that his addressing her by her Christian name in the last message had given no offence. This time she had not called him "The Man−on−the−Hill," and there was no suggestion of playfulness in the note. Then the signature, "Yours, Zen"; that might mean everything, or it might mean nothing. Either it was purely formal or it implied a very great deal indeed. Grant reflected that it could hardly be interpreted anywhere between those two extremes, and was it reasonable to suppose that Zen would use it in an ENTIRELY formal sense? If it had been "yours truly," or "yours sincerely," or any such stereotyped conclusion, it would not have called for a second thought, but the simple word "yours"−−

"If only she were," thought Grant, and felt the color creeping to his face at the thought. It was the first time he had dared that much. He had not bothered to wonder much where or how this affair must end. Through all the years that had passed since that night when she had fallen asleep on his shoulder, and he had watched the ribbons of fire rising and falling in the valley, and the smell of grass−smoke had been strong in his nostrils, through all those years Zen had been to him a sweet, evasive memory to be dreamed over and idealized, a wild, daring, irresponsible incarnation of the spirit of the hills. Even in these last few days he had followed the path simply because it lay before him. He had not sought her out in all that great West; he had been content with his dream of the Zen of years gone by; if Fate had brought him once more within the orbit of his star surely Fate had a purpose in all its doings. One who has learned to believe that no bullet will find him unless "his name and number are on it" has little difficulty in excusing his own indiscretions by fatalistic reasoning.

He wrote on the back of the note, "Look for me at eight," and then, observing that the boy had not brought teddy along, he inquired solicitously for the health of the little pet.

"He's all right, but mother wouldn't let me bring him. Said I might lose him." The tone in which the last words were spoken implied just how impossible such a thing was. Lose teddy! No one but a mother could think such an absurdity.

"But I got a knife!" Wilson exclaimed, his mind darting to a happier subject. "Daddy gave it to me. Will you sharpen it? It is as dull as a pig."

Grant was to learn during the day that all the boy's figures of speech were now hung on the family pig. The knife was as dull as a pig; the plow was as rough as a pig; the horses, when they capered at a corner, were as wild as a

pig; even Grant himself, while he held the little chap firmly on his knee, received the doubtful compliment of being as strong as a pig. He went through the form of sharpening the knife on the leather lines of the harness, and was pleased to discover that Wilson, with childish dexterity of imagination, now pronounced it as sharp as a pig.

The boy did not return to the field in the afternoon, and Grant spent the time in a strange admixture of happiness over the pleasant companionship he had found in this little son of the prairies and anticipation of his meeting with Zen that night. All his reflection had failed to suggest the subject so interesting to her as to bring forth her unconventional note, but it was enough for him that his presence was desired. As to the future−−he would deal with that when he came to it. As evening approached the horses began their usual procedure of turning their heads homeward at the end of each furrow. Beginning about five o'clock, they had a habit of assuming that each furrow was obviously the last one for the day, and when the firm hand on the lines brought them sharply back to position they trudged on with an apologetic air which seemed to say that of course they were quite willing to work another hour or two but they supposed their master would want to be on his way home. Today, however, he surprised them, and the first time they turned their heads he unhitched, and, throwing himself lightly across Prince's ample back, drove them to their stables.

Grant prepared his supper of bacon and eggs and fried potatoes, bread and jam and black tea, and ate it from the kitchen table as was his habit except on state occasions. Sometimes a touch of the absurdity of his behavior would tickle his imagination−−he, who might dine in the midst of wealth and splendor, with soft lights beating down upon him, soft music swelling through arching corridors, soft−handed waiters moving about on deep, silent carpetings, perhaps round white shoulders across the table and the faint smell of delicate perfumes−−that he should prefer to eat from the white oilcloth of his kitchen table was a riddle far beyond any ordinary intellect. And yet he was happy in this life; happy in his escape from the tragic routine of being decently civilized; happier, he knew, than he ever could be among all the artificial pleasures that wealth could buy him. Sometimes, as a concession to this absurdity, he would set his table in the dining−room with his best dishes, and eat his silent meal very grandly, until the ridiculousness of it all would overcome him and he would jump up with a boyish whoop and sweep everything into the kitchen.

But to−night he had no time for make−belief. Supper ended, he put a basin of water on the stove and went out to give his horses their evening attention, after which he had a wash and a careful shave and dressed himself in a light grey suit appropriate to an autumn evening. And then he noticed that he had just time to walk to Transley's house before eight o'clock.

Zen received him at the door; the maid had gone to a neighbor's, she said, and Wilson was in bed. It was still bright outside, but the sheltered living−room, to which she showed him, was wrapped in a soft twilight.

"Shall we have a lamp, or the fireplace?" she asked, then inferentially answered by saying that a cool wind was blowing down from the mountains. "I had the maid build the fire," she continued, and he could see the outline of her form bending over the grate. She struck a match; its glow lit up her cheeks and hair; in a moment the dry wood was crackling and ribbons of blue smoke were curling into the chimney.

"I have been so anxious to see you−−again," she said, drawing a chair not far from his. "A chance remark of yours last night brought to memory many things−−things I have been trying to forget." Then, abruptly, "Did you ever kill a man?"

"You know I was in the war," he returned, evading her question.

"Yes, and you do not care to dwell on that phase of it. I should not have asked you, but you will be the better able to understand. For years I have lived under the cloud of having killed a man."

"You!"

"Yes. The day of the fire−−you remember?"

Grant had started from his chair. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "There must have been justification!"

"YOU had justification at the Front, but it doesn't make the memory pleasant. I had justification, but it has haunted me night and day. And then, last night you said he was still alive, and my soul seemed to rise up again and say, 'I am free!'"

"Who?"

"Drazk."

"DRAZK!"

"Yes. I thought I had killed him that day of the fire. It is rather an unpleasant story, and you will excuse me repeating the details, I know. He attacked me−−we were both on horseback, in the river−−I suppose he was crazed with his wild deed, and less responsible than usual. He dragged me from my horse and I fought with him in the water, but he was much too strong. I had concluded that to drown myself, and perhaps him, was the only way out, when I saw a leather thong floating in the water from the saddle. By a ruse I managed to flip it around his neck, and the next moment he was at my mercy. I had no mercy then. I understand how it might be possible to kill prisoners. I pulled it tight, tight−−pulled till I saw his face blacken and his eyes stand out. He went down, but still I pulled. And then after a little I found myself on shore.

"I suppose it was the excitement of the fire that carried me on through the day, but at night−−you remember?−−there came a reaction, and I couldn't keep awake. I suddenly seemed to feel that I was safe, and I could sleep."

Grant had resumed his seat. He was deeply moved by this strange confidence; he bent his eyes intently upon her face, now shining in the ruddy light from the fire−place. Her frank reference to the event that night seemed to create a new bond between them; he knew now, if ever he had doubted it, that Zen Transley had treasured that incident in her heart even as he had treasured it.

"I was so embarrassed after the−−the accident, you know," she continued. "I knew you must know I had been in the water. For days and weeks I expected every hour to hear of the finding of the body. I expected to hear the remark dropped casually by every new visitor at the ranch, 'Drazk's body was found to−day in the river. The Mounted Police are investigating.' But time went on and nothing was heard of it. It would almost have been a relief to me if it had been discovered. If I had reported the affair at once, as I should have done, all would have been different, but having kept my secret for a while I found it impossible to confess it later. It was the first time I ever felt my self−reliance severely shaken. . . . But what was his message, and why did you not tell me before?"

"Because I attached no value to it; because I was, perhaps, a little ashamed of it. I learned something of his weaknesses at the Front. According to Drazk's statement of it he won the war, and could as easily win another, if occasion presented itself, so when he said, 'If ever you see Y.D.'s daughter tell her I'm well; she'll be glad to hear it,' I put it down to his usual boasting and thought no more about it. I thought he was trying to impress me with the idea that you were interested in him, which was a very absurd supposition, as I saw it."

"Well, now you know," she said, with a little laugh. "I'm glad it's off my mind."

"Of course your husband knows?"

"No. That made it harder. I never told Frank."

She arose and walked to the fire−place, pretending to stir the logs. When she had seated herself again she continued.

"It has not been easy for me to tell all things to Frank. Don't misunderstand me; he has been a model husband, according to my standards."

"According to your standards?"

"According to my standards−−when I married him. If standards were permanent I suppose happy matings would be less unusual. A young couple must have something in common in order to respond at all to each other's attractions, but as they grow older they set up different standards, and they drift apart."

She paused, and Grant sat in silence, watching the glow of the firelight upon her cheek.

"Why don't you smoke?" she exclaimed, suddenly springing up. "Let me find you some of Frank's cigars."

Grant protested that he smoked too much. She produced a box of cigars and extended them to him. Then she held a match while he got his light.

"Your standards have changed?" said Grant, taking up the thread when she had sat down again.

"They have. They have changed more than Frank's, which makes me feel rather at fault in the matter. How could he know that I would change my ideal of what a husband should be?"

"Why shouldn't he know? That is the course of development. Without changing ideals there would be stagnation."

"Perhaps," she returned, and he thought he caught a note of weariness in her voice. "But I don't blame Frank−−now. I rather blame him then. He swept me off my feet; stampeded me. My parents helped him, and I was only half disposed to resist. You see, I had this other matter on my mind, and for the first time in my life I felt the need of protection. Besides, I took a matter−of−fact view of marriage. I thought that sentiment−−love, if you like−−was a thing of books, an invention of poets and fiction writers. Practical people would be practical in their marriages, as in their other undertakings. To marry Frank seemed a very practical course. My father assured me that Frank had in him qualities of large success. He would make money; he would be a prominent man in circles of those who do things. These predictions he has fulfilled. Frank has been all I expected−−then."

"But you have changed your opinion of marriage−−of the essentials of marriage?"

"Do YOU need to ask that? I was beginning to see the light−− beginning to know myself−−even before I married him, but I didn't stop to analyze. I plunged ahead, as I have always done, trusting not to get into any position from which I could not find a way out. But there are some positions from which there is no way out."

Grant reflected that possibly his experience had been somewhat like hers in that respect. He, too, had been following a path, unconcerned about its end. . . . Possibly for him, too, there would be no way out.

"Frank has been all I expected of him," she repeated, as though anxious to do her husband justice. "He has made money. He spends it generously. If I live here modestly, with but one maid, it is because of a preference which I have developed for simplicity. I might have a dozen if I asked it, and I think Frank is somewhat surprised, and, it may be, disappointed, that I don't ask it. Although not a man for display himself, he likes to see me make display. It's a strange thing, isn't it, that a husband should wish his wife to be admired by other men?"

"Some are successful in that," Grant remarked.

"Some are more successful than they intend to be."

"Frank, for instance?" he queried, pointedly.

"I have not sought any man's admiration," she went on, with her astonishing frankness. "I am too independent for that. What do I care for their admiration? But every woman wants love."

Grant had changed his position, and sat with his elbows upon his knees, his chin resting upon his hands. "You know, Zen," he said, using her Christian name deliberately, "the picture I drew that day by the river? That is the picture I have carried in my mind ever since−−shall carry to the end. Perhaps it has led me to be imprudent−−"

"Imprudent?"

"Has brought me here to−night, for example."

"You had my invitation."

"True. But why develop another situation which, as you say, has no way out?"

"Do you want to go?"

"No, Zen, no! I want to stay−−with you−−always! But organized society must respect its own conventions."

She arose and stood by his chair, letting her hand fall beside his cheek.

"You silly boy!" she said. "You didn't organize society, nor subscribe to its conventions. Still, I suppose there must be a code of some kind, and we shall respect it. You had your chance, Denny, and you passed it up."

"Had my chance?"

"Yes. I refused you in words, I know, but actions speak louder−−"

"But when you told me you were engaged what could I honorably do?"

"More−−very much more−−than you can do now. You could have shown me my mistake. How much better to have learned it then, from you, than later, by my own experience! You could have swept me off my feet, just as Frank did. You did nothing. If I had sought evidence to prove how impractical you are, as compared with my super−practical husband, I would have found it in the way you handled, or rather failed to handle, that situation."

"What would your super−practical husband do now if he were in my position?" he said, drawing her hands into his.

"I don't know."

"You do! He says that any man worth his salt takes what he wants in this world. Am I worth my salt?"

"There are different standards of value. . . . Goodness! how late it is! You must go now, and don't come back before, let us say, Wednesday."

CHAPTER XX

Whatever may have been Grant's philosophy about the unwisdom of creating a situation which had no way out he found himself looking forward impatiently to Wednesday evening. An hour or two at Zen's fireside provided the social atmosphere which his bachelor life lacked, and as Transley seemed unappreciative of his domestic privileges, remaining in town unless his business brought him out to the summer home, it seemed only a just arrangement that they should be shared by one who valued them at their worth.

The Wednesday evening conversation developed further the understanding that was gradually evolving between them, but it afforded no solution of the problem which confronted them. Zen made no secret of the error she had made in the selection of her husband, but had no suggestions to offer as to what should be done about it. She seemed quite satisfied to enjoy Grant's conversation and company, and let it go at that−−an impossible situation, as the young man assured himself. She dismissed him again at a quite respectable hour with some reference to Saturday evening, which Grant interpreted as an invitation to call again at that time.

When he entered Saturday night it was evident that she had been expecting him. A cool wind was again blowing down from the mountains, laden with the soft smell of melting snow, and the fire in the grate was built ready for the match.

"I am my own maid to−night," she said, as she stooped to light it. "Sarah usually goes to town Saturday evening. Now we shall see if someone is in good humor."

The fire curled up pleasantly about the wood. "There!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "All is well. You see how economical I am; if we must spend on fires we save on light. I love a wood fire; I suppose it is something which reaches back to the original savage in all of us."

"To the days when our great ancestors roasted their victims while they danced about the coals," said Grant, completing the picture. "And yet they say that human nature doesn't change."

"Does it? I think our methods change with our environments, but that is all. Wasn't it you who propounded a theory about an age when men took what they wanted by force giving way to an age in which they took what they wanted by subtlety? Now, I believe, you want society to restrain the man of clever wits just as it has learned to restrain the man of big biceps. And when that is done will not man discover some other means of taking what he wants?"

She had seated herself beside him on a divanette and the joy of her nearness fired Grant with a very happy intoxication. It recalled that night on the hillside when, as she had since said, she felt safe in his protection.

"I am really very interested," she continued. "I followed the argument at the table on Sunday with as much concern as if it had been my pet hobby, not yours, that was under discussion. If I said little it was because I did not wish to appear too interested."

Her amazing frankness brought Grant, figuratively, to his feet at every turn. She seemed to have no desire to conceal her interest in him, her attachment for him. Hers was such candor as might well be born of the vast hillsides, the great valleys, the brooding silences of her girlhood. Yet it seemed obvious that she must be less candid with Transley. . . .

"I am glad you were interested," he answered. "I was afraid I was rather boring the company, but it was MY scheme and I had to stand up for it. I fear I made few converts."

"You were dealing with practical men," she returned, "and practical men are never converted to a new idea. That is one of the things I have learned in my years of married life, Dennison. Practical men find many ways of turning an old idea to advantage, but they never evolve new ones. New ideas come from dreamers−−theoretical fellows like you."

"The dreamer is always a lap ahead of the rest of civilization, and the funny thing is that the rest always thinks itself much more sane than the dreamer, out there blazing the way."

"That's not remarkable," she replied. "That's logical. The dreamer blazes the way−−proves the possibilities of his dream−−and the practical man follows it up and makes money out of it. To a practical man there is nothing more practical than making money."

"Did I convert you?" he pursued.

"I was not in need of conversion. I have been a follower of the new faith−−an imperfect and limping follower, it is true−−ever since you first announced it."

"I believe you are laughing at me."

"Certainly not! I have been brought up in an environment where there is no standard higher than the money standard. Not that my father or husband are dishonest; they are rigidly honest according to their ideas of honesty. But to say that a man must give actual service for every dollar he gets or it isn't his−−that is a conception of honesty so far beyond them as to be an absurdity. But I have wanted to ask you how you are going to enforce this new idealism."

"Idealism is not enforced. We aspire to it; we may not attain to it. Christianity itself is idealism−−the idealism of unselfishness. That ideal has never been attained by any considerable number of people, and yet it has drawn all humanity on to somewhat higher levels as surely as the moon draws the tide. Superficial persons in these days are drawing pictures of the failure of Christianity, which has failed in part; but they could find a much more depressing subject by painting a world from which all Christian idealism had been removed."

"But surely you have some plan for putting your theories to the test−−some plan which will force those to whom idealism appeals in vain. We do not trust to a man's idealism to keep him from stealing; we put him in jail."

"All that will come in time, but the question for the seeker after truth is not 'Will it work?' but 'Is it true?' I fancy I can see the practical men of Moses' time leaning over his shoulder as he inscribed the Ten Commandments and remarking 'No use of putting that down, Moses; you can never enforce it.' But Moses put it down and left the enforcement to natural law and the growing intelligence of the generations which have followed him. We are too much disposed to think it possible to evade a law; to violate it, and escape punishment; but if a law is true, punishment follows violation as implacably as the stars follow their courses. And if society has failed to recognize the law that service, and service only, should be able to command service in return, society must suffer the penalty. We have only to look about us to see that society is paying in full for its violations.

"Yes, I have plans, and I think they would work, but the first thing is the ideal−−the new moral sense−−that value must not be accepted without giving equal value in return. Society, of course, will have to set up the standards of value. That is a matter of detail−−a matter for the practical men who come in the wake of the idealist. But of this I am certain−−and I hark back to my old theme−−that just as society has found a means of preventing the man who is physically superior from taking wealth without giving service in return, so must society find a means to prevent men who are mentally superior from taking wealth without giving service in return. The superior person, mark you, will still have an advantage, in that his superiority will enable him to EARN more; we shall merely stop him taking what he does not earn. That must come. I think it will come soon. It is the next step in the social evolution

of the race."

She had drunk in his argument as one who hangs on every word, and her wrapt face turned toward his seemed to glow and thrill him in return with a sense of their spiritual oneness. She did not need to tell him that Transley never talked to her like this. Transley loved her, if he loved her at all, for the glory she reflected upon him; he was proud of her beauty, of her daring, of her physical charm and self−reliance. The deeper side of her mental life was to Transley a field unexplored; a field of the very existence of which he was probably unaware. Grant looked into her eyes, now close and responsive, and found within their depths something which sent him to his feet.

"Zen!" he exclaimed. "The mystery of life is too much for me. Surely there must be an answer somewhere! Surely the puzzle has a system to it−−a key which may some day be found! Or can it be just chaos−−just blind, driveling, senseless chaos? In our own lives, why should we be stranded, helpless, wrecked, with the happiness which might have been ours hung just beyond our reach? Is there no answer to this?"

"I suppose we disobeyed the law, back in those old days. We heard it clearly enough, and we disobeyed. I allowed myself to be guided by motives which were not the highest; you seemed to lack the enterprise which would have won you its own reward. And as you have said, those who violate the law must suffer for it. I have suffered."

She drew up her chin; he could see the firm muscles set beneath the pink bloom of her flesh. . . . He had not thought of Zen suffering; all his thought of her had been very grateful to his vanity, but he had not thought of her suffering. He extended his hands and took hers within them.

"I have sometimes wondered," he said, "why there is no second chance; why one cannot wipe the slate clear of everything that has been and start anew. What a world this might be!"

"Would it be any better? Or would we go on making our mistakes over again? That seems to be the only way we learn."

"But a second chance; the idea seems so fair, so plausible. Suppose you are shooting on the ranges, for instance; you are allowed a shot or two to find your nerve, to get your distance, to settle yourself to the business in hand. But in this business of life you fire, and if some distraction, some momentary influence or folly sends your aim wild, the shot is gone and you are left with all the years that follow to think about it. You can do nothing but think about it−−the most profitless of all occupations."

"For you there is a second chance," she reminded him. "You must have thought of that."

"No−−no second chance."

She drew herself up slightly and away from him. "I have been very frank with you, Dennison," she said. "Suppose you try being frank with me?"

In her eyes was still the fire of Zen of the Y.D., a woman unconquered and unconquerable. She gave the impression that she accepted the buffetings of life, but no one forced them upon her. She had erred; she would suffer. That was fair; she accepted that. But as Grant gazed on her face, tilted still in some of its old− time recklessness and defiance, he knew that the day would come when she would say that her cup was full, and, throwing it to the winds, would start life over, if there can be such a thing as starting life over. And something in her manner told him that day was very, very near.

"All right," he said, "I will be frank. Fate HAS brought within my orbit a second chance, or what would have been a second chance had my heart not been so full of you. She was a girl well worth thinking about. When an employee introduces herself to you with a declaration of independence you may know that you have met with

someone out of the ordinary. I am not speaking of these days of labor scarcity; it takes no great moral quality to be independent when you have the whip−hand. But in the days before the war, with two applicants for every position, a girl who valued her freedom of spirit more than her job−−more than even a very good job−−was a girl to think about."

"And you thought about her?"

"I did. I was sick of the cringing and fawning of which my wealth made me the object; I loathed the deference paid me, because I knew it was paid, not to me, but to my money−−I was homesick to hear someone tell me to go to hell. I wanted to brush up against that spirit which says it is as good as anybody else−−against the manliness which stands its ground and hits back. I found that spirit in Phyllis Bruce."

"Phyllis Bruce−−rather a nice name. But are the men and women of the East so−−so servile as you suggest?"

"No! That is where I was mistaken. Generations of environment had merely trained them into docility of habit. Underneath they are red−blooded through and through. The war showed us that. Zen−−the proudest moment of my life−−except one−−was when a kid in the office who couldn't come into my room without trembling jumped up and said 'We WILL win!'−−and called me Grant! Think of that! Poor chap. . . . What was I saying? Oh, yes; Phyllis. I grew to like her−−very much−−but I couldn't marry her. You know why."

Zen was looking into the fire with unseeing eyes. "I am not sure that I know why," she said at length. "You couldn't marry me. It was your second chance. You should have taken it."

"Would that be playing the game fairly−−with her?"

She rested her fingers lightly on the back of his hand, extending them gently down until they fell between his own.

"Denny, you big, big boy!" she murmured. "Do you suppose every man marries his first choice?"

"It has always seemed to me that a second choice is a makeshift. It doesn't seem quite square−−"

"No. I fancy some second choices are really first choices. Wisdom comes with experience, you know."

"Not always. At any rate I couldn't marry her while my heart was yours."

"I suppose not," she answered, and again he noted a touch of weariness in her voice. "I know something of what divided affection−−if one can even say it is divided−−means. Denny, I will make a confession. I knew you would come back; I always was sure you would come back. 'Then,' I said to myself, 'I will see this man Grant as he is, and the reality will clear my brain of all this idealism which I have woven about him.' Perhaps you know what I mean. We sometimes meet people who impress us greatly at the time, but a second meeting, perhaps years later, has a very different effect. It sweeps all the idealism away, and we wonder what it was that could have charmed us so. Well−−I hoped−−I really hoped for some experience like that with you. If only I could meet you again and find that, after all, you were just like other men; self− centred, arrogant, kind, perhaps, but quite superior−−if I could only find THAT to be true then the mirage in which I have lived for all these years would be swept away and my old philosophy that after all it doesn't matter much whom one marries so long as he is respectable and gives her a good living would be vindicated. And so I have encouraged you to come here; I have been most unconventional, I know, but I was always that−−I have cultivated your acquaintance, and, Denny, I am SO disappointed!"

"Disappointed? Then the mirage HAS cleared away?"

"On the contrary, it grows more distorted every day. I see you towering above all your fellow humans; reaching up into a heaven so far above them that they don't even know of its existence. I see you as really The Man−On−the−Hill, with a vision which lays all this selfish, commonplace world at your feet. The idealism which I thought must fade away is justified−−heightened−−by the reality."

She had turned her face to him, and Grant, little as he understood the ways of women, knew that she had made her great confession. For a moment he held himself in check. . . . then from somewhere in his subconsciousness came ringing the phrase, "Every man worth his salt. . . . takes what he wants." That was Transley's morality; Transley, the Usurper, who had bullied himself into possession of this heart which he had never won and could never hold; Transley, the fool, frittering his days and nights with money! He seized her in his arms, crushing down her weak resistance; he drew her to him until, as in that day by a foothill river somewhere in the sunny past, her lips met his and returned their caress. He cared now for nothing−−nothing in the whole world but this quivering womanhood within his arms. . . .

"You must go," she whispered at length. "It is late, and Frank's habits are somewhat erratic."

He held her at arm's length, his hands upon her shoulders. "Do you suppose that fear−−of anything−−can make me surrender you now?"

"Not fear, perhaps−−I know it could not be fear−−but good sense may do it. It was not fear that made me send you home early from your previous calls. It was discretion."

"Oh!" he said, a new light dawning, and he marvelled again at her consummate artistry.

"But I must tell you," she resumed, "Frank leaves on a business trip to−morrow night. He will be gone for some time, and I shall motor into town to see him off. I am wondering about Wilson," she hurried on, as though not daring to weigh her words; "Sarah will be away−−I am letting her have a little holiday−−and I can't take Wilson into town with me because it will be so late." Then, with a burst of confession she spoke more deliberately. "That isn't exactly the reason, Dennison; Frank doesn't know I have let Sarah go, and I−−I can't explain."

Her face shone pink and warm in the glow of the firelight, and as the significance of her words sank in upon him Grant marvelled at that wizardry of the gods which could bring such homage to the foot of man. A tenderness such as he had never known suffused him; her very presence was holy.

"Bring the boy over and let him spend the night with me. We are great chums and we shall get along splendidly."

CHAPTER XXI

Grant spent his Sunday forenoon in an exhaustive house−cleaning campaign. Bachelor life on the farm is not conducive to domestic delicacy, and although Grant had never abandoned the fundamentals he had allowed his interpretation of essential cleanliness to become somewhat liberal. The result was that the day of rest usually confronted him with a considerable array of unwashed pots and pans and other culinary utensils. To−day, while the tawny autumn hills seemed to fairly heave and sigh with contentment under a splendor of opalescent sunshine, he scoured the contents of his kitchen until they shone; washed the floor; shook the rugs from the living−room and swept the corners, even behind the gramophone; cleared the ashes from the hearth and generally set his house in order, for was not she to call upon him that evening on her way to town, and was not little Wilson−−he of the high adventures with teddy−bear and knife and pig−−to spend the night with him?

When he was able to view his handiwork with a feeling that even feminine eyes would find nothing to offend, Grant did an unwonted thing. He unlocked the whim−room and opened the windows that the fresh air might play

through the silent chamber. To the west the mountains looked down in sombre placidity as they had looked down every bright autumn morning since the dawn of time, their shoulders bathed in purple mist and their snow−crowned summits shining in the sun. For a long time Grant stood drinking in the scene; the fertile valley lying with its square farms like a checker−board of the gods, with its round little lakes beating back the white sunshine like coins from the currency of the Creator; the ruddy copper−colored patches of ripe wheat, and drowsy herds motionless upon the receding hills; the blue−green ribbon of river with its yellow fringes of cottonwood and bluffs of forbidding spruce, and behind and over all the silent, majestic mountains. It was a sight to make the soul of man rise up and say, "I know I stand on the heights of the Eternal!" Then as his eyes followed the course of the river Grant picked out a column of thin blue smoke, and knew that Zen was cooking her Sunday dinner.

The thought turned him to his dusting of the whim−room, and afterwards to his own kitchen. When he had lunched and dressed he took a stroll over the hills, thinking a great deal, but finding no answer. On his return he descried the familiar figure of Linder in a semi−recumbent position on the porch, and Linder's well−worn car in the yard.

"How goes it, Linder?" he said, cheerily, as he came up. "Is the Big Idea going to fructify?"

"The Big Idea seems to be all right. You planned it well."

"Thanks. But is it going to be self−supporting−−I mean in the matter of motive power. Would it run if you and I and Murdoch were wiped out?"

"Everything must have a head."

"Democracy must find its own head−−must grow it out of the materials supplied. If it doesn't do that it's a failure, and the Big Idea will end in being the Big Fizzle. That's why I'm leaving it so severely alone−−I want to see which way it's headed."

"I could suggest another reason," said Linder, pointedly.

"Another reason for what?"

"For your leaving it so severely alone."

"What are you driving at?" demanded Grant, somewhat petulantly. "You are in a taciturn mood to−day, Linder."

"Perhaps I am, Grant, and if so it comes from wondering how a man with as much brains as you have can be such a damned fool upon occasion."

"Drop the riddles, Linder. Let me have it in the face."

"It's just like this, Grant, old boy," said Linder, getting up and putting his hand on his friend's shoulder, "I feel that I still have an interest in the chap who saved all of me except what this empty sleeve stands for, and it's that interest which makes me speak about something which you may say is none of my business. I was out here Monday night to see you, and you were not at home. I came out again Wednesday, and you were not at home. I came last night and you were not at home, and had not come back at midnight. Your horses were in the barn; you were not far away."

"Why didn't you telephone me?"

"If I hadn't cared more for you than I do for my job and the Big Idea thrown in I could have settled it that way. But, Grant, I do."

"I believe you. But why this sudden worry over me? I was merely spending the evening at a neighbor's."

"Yes−−at Transley's. Transley was in town, and Mrs. Transley is−− not responsible−−where you are concerned."

"Linder!"

"I saw it all that night at dinner there. Some things are plain to everyone−−except those most involved. Now it's not my job to say to you what's right and wrong, but the way it looks to me is this: what's the use of setting up a new code of morality about money which concerns, after all, only some of us, if you're going to knock down those things which concern all of us?"

Grant regarded his foreman for some time without answering. "I appreciate your frankness, Linder," he said at length. "Your friendship, which I can never question, gives you that privilege. Man to man, I'm going to be equally frank with you. To begin with, I suppose you will admit that Y.D.'s daughter is a strong character, a woman quite capable of directing her own affairs?"

"The stronger the engine the bigger the smash if there's a wreck."

"It's not a case of wrecking; it's a case of trying to save something out of the wreck. Convention, Linder, is a torture− monger; it binds men and women to the stake of propriety and bids them smile while it snuffs out all the soul that's in them. We have pitted ourselves against convention in economic affairs; shall we not−−"

"No! It was pure unselfishness which led you into the Big Idea. That isn't what's leading you now."

"Well, let me put it another way. Transley is a clever man of affairs. He knows how to accomplish his ends. He applied the methods−−somewhat modified for the occasion−−of a landshark in winning his wife. He makes a great appearance of unselfishness, but in reality he is selfish to the core. He lavishes money on her to satisfy his own vanity, but as for her finer nature, the real Zen, her soul if you like−−he doesn't even know she has one. He obtained possession by false pretences. Which is the more moral thing−−to leave him in possession, or to throw him out? Didn't you yourself hear him say that men who are worth their salt take what they want?"

"Since when did you let him set YOUR standards?"

"That's hardly fair."

"I think it is. I think, too, that you are arguing against your own convictions. Well, I've had my say. I deliberately came out to−day without Murdoch so that I might have it. You would be quite justified in firing me for what I've done. But now I'm through, and no matter what may happen, remember, Linder will never have suspected anything."

"That's like you, old chap. We'll drop it at that, but I must explain that Zen is going to town to−night to meet Transley, and is leaving the boy with me. It is an event in my young life, and I have house−cleaned for it appropriately. Come inside and admire my handiwork."

Linder admired as he was directed, and then the two men fell into a discussion of business matters. Eventually Grant cooked supper, and just as they had finished Mrs. Transley drove up in her motor.

"Here we are!" she cried, cheerily. "Glad to see you, Mr. Linder. Wilson has his teddy−bear and his knife and his pyjamas, and is a little put out, I think, that I wouldn't let him bring the pig."

"I shall try and make up the deficiency," said Grant, smiling broadly, as the boy climbed to his shoulder. "Won't you come in? Linder, among his other accomplishments learned in France, is an excellent chaperon."

"Thank you, no; I must get along. I shall call early in the morning, so that you will not be delayed on Wilson's account."

"No need of that; he can ride to the field with me on Prince. He is a great help with the plowing."

"I'm sure." She stepped up to Grant and drew the boy's face down to hers. "Good−bye, dear; be a good boy," she whispered, and Wilson waved kisses to her as the motor sped down the road.

Linder took his departure soon after, and Grant was surprised to find himself almost embarrassed in the presence of his little guest. The embarrassment, however, was all on his side. Wilson was greatly interested in the strange things in the house, and investigated them with the romantic thoroughness of his years. Grant placed a collection of war trophies that had no more fight in them at the child's disposal, and he played about until it was time to go to bed.

Where to start on the bedtime preparations was a puzzle, but Wilson himself came to Grant's aid with explicit instructions about buttons and pins. Grant fervently hoped the boy would be able to reverse the process in the morning, otherwise−−

Suddenly, with a little dexterous movement, the child divested himself of all his clothing, and rushed into a far corner.

"You have to catch me now," he shouted in high glee. "One, two−−"

Evidently it was a game, and Grant entered into the spirit of it, finally running Wilson to earth on the farthest corner of the kitchen table. To adjust the pyjamas was, as Grant confessed, a bigger job than harnessing a four−horse team, but at length it was completed.

"You must hear my prayer, Uncle Man−on−the−Hill," said the boy. "You have to sit down in a chair."

Grant sat down and with a strange mixture of emotions drew the little chap between his knees as he listened to the long−forgotten prattle. He felt his fingers running through Wilson's hair as other fingers, now long, long turned to dust, had once run through his. . . .

At the third line the boy stopped. "You have to tell me now," he prompted.

"But I can't, Willie; I have forgotten."

"Huh, you don't know much," the child commented, and glibly quoted the remaining lines. "And God bless Daddy and Mamma and teddy−bear and Uncle Man−on−the−Hill and the pig. Amen," he concluded, accompanying the last word with a jump which landed him fairly in Grant's lap. His little arms went up about his friend's neck, and his little soft cheek rested against a tanned and weather−beaten one. Slowly Grant's arms closed about the warm, lithe body and pressed it to his in a new passion, strange and holy. Then he led him to the whim−room, turned down the white sheets in which no form had ever lain and placed the boy between them, snuggled his teddy down by his side and set his knife properly in view upon the dresser. And then he leaned down again and kissed the little face, and whispered, "Good night, little boy; God keep you safe to−night, and always." And suddenly Grant

realized that he had been praying. . . .

He withdrew softly, and only partly closed the door; then he chose a seat where he could see the little figure lying peacefully on the white bed. The last shafts of the setting sun were falling in amber wedges across the room. He picked up a book, thinking to read, but he could not keep his attention on the page; he found his mind wandering back into the long−forgotten chambers of its beginning, conjuring up from the faint recollections of infancy visions of the mother he had hardly known. . . . After a while he tip−toed to the whim−room door and found that Wilson, with his arms firmly clasped about his teddy−bear, was deep in the sleep of childhood.

"The dear little chap," he murmured. "I must watch by him to−night. It would be unspeakable if anything should happen him while he is under my care."

He felt a sense of warmth, almost a smothering sensation, and raised his hand to his forehead. It came down covered with perspiration.

"It's amazingly close," he said, and walked to one of the French windows opening to the west. The sun had gone down, and a brooding darkness lay over all the valley, but far up in the sky he could trace the outline of a cloud. Above, the stars shone with an unwonted brightness, but below all was a bank of blue−black darkness. The air was intensely still; in the silence he could hear the wash of the river. Grant reflected that never before had he heard the wash of the river at that distance.

"Looks like a storm," he commented, casually, and suddenly felt something tighten about his heart. The storms of the foothill country, which occasionally sweep out of the mountains and down the valleys on the shortest notice, had no terror for him; he had sat on horseback under an oilskin slicker through the worst of them; but to−night! Even as he watched, the distant glare of lightning threw the heaving proportions of the thundercloud into sharp relief.

He turned to his chair, but found himself pacing the living−room with an altogether inexplicable nervousness. He had held the line many a bad night at the Front while Death spat out of the darkness on every hand; he had smoked in the faces of his men to cover his own fear and to shame them out of theirs; he had run the whole gamut of the emotion of the trenches, but tonight something more awesome than any engine of man was gathering its forces in the deep valleys. He shook himself to throw off the morbidness that was settling upon him; he laughed, and the echo came back haunting from the silent corners of the house. Then he lit a lamp and set it, burning low, in the whim−room, and noted that the boy slept on, all unconcerned.

"Damn Linder, anyway!" he exclaimed presently. "I believe he shook me up more than I realized. He charged me with insincerity; me, who have always made sincerity my special virtue. . . . Well, there may be something in it."

A faint, indistinct growling, as of the grinding of mighty rocks, came down from the distances.

"The storm will be nothing," he assured himself. "A gust of wind; a spatter of rain; perhaps a dash of hail; then, of a sudden, a sky so calm and peaceful one would wonder how it ever could have been disturbed." Even as he spoke the house shivered in every timber as the gale struck it and went whining by.

He rushed to the whim−room, but found the boy still sleeping soundly. "I must stay up," he reasoned with himself; "I must be on hand in case he should be frightened."

Suddenly it occurred to Grant that, quite apart from his love for Wilson, if anything should happen the child in his house a very difficult situation would be created. Transley would demand explanations−−explanations which would be hard to make. Why was Wilson there at all? Why was he not at home with Sarah? Sarah away from home! Why had Zen kept that a secret? . . . How long had this thing been going on, anyway? Grant feared neither

Transley nor any other man, and yet there was something akin to fear in his heart as he thought of these possibilities. He would be held accountable−−doubly accountable−−if anything happened the child. Even though it were something quite beyond his control; lightning, for example−−

The gale subsided as quickly as it had come, and the sudden silence which followed was even more awesome. It lasted only for a moment; a flash of lightning lit up every corner of the house, bursting like white fire from every wall and ceiling. Grant rushed to the whim−room and was standing over the child when the crash of thunder came upon them. The boy stirred gently, smiled, and settled back to his sleep.

Grant drew the blinds in the whim−room, and went out to draw them in the living−room, but the sight across the valley was of a majesty so terrific that it held him fascinated. The play of the lightning was incessant, and with every flash the little lakes shot back their white reflection, and distant farm window−panes seemed heliographing to each other through the night. As yet there was no rain, but a dense wall of cloud pressed down from the west, and the farther hills were hidden even in the brightest flashes.

Turning from the windows, Grant left the blinds open. "Only cowardice would close them," he muttered to himself, "and surely, in addition to the other qualities Linder has attributed to me, I am not a coward. If it were not for Willie I could stand and enjoy it."

Presently rain began to fall; a few scattered drops at first, then thicker, harder, until the roof and windows rattled and shook with their force. The wind, which had gone down so suddenly, sprang up again, buffeting the house as it rushed by with the storm. Grant stood in the whim−room, in the dim light of the lamp turned low, and watched the steady breathing of his little guest with as much anxiety as if some dread disease threatened him. For the first time in his life there came into Grant's consciousness some sense of the price which parents pay in the rearing of little children. He thought of all the hours of sickness, of all the childish hurts and dangers, and suddenly he found himself thinking of his father with a tenderness which was strange and new to him. Doubtless under even that stern veneer of business interest had beat a heart which, many a time, had tightened in the grip of fear for young Dennison.

As the night wore on the storm, instead of spending itself quickly as Grant had expected, continued unabated, but his nervous tension gradually relaxed, and when at length Wilson was awakened by an exceptionally loud clap of thunder he took the boy in his arms and soothed his little fears as a mother might have done. They sat for a long while in a big chair in the living−room, and exchanged such confidences as a man may with a child of five. After the lad had dropped back into sleep Grant still sat with him in his arms, thinking. . . .

And what he thought was this: He was a long while framing the exact thought; he tried to beat it back in a dozen ways, but it circled around him, gradually closed in upon him and forced its acceptance. "Linder called me a fool, and he was right. He might have called me a coward, and again he would have been right. Linder was right."

Some way it seemed easy to reach that conclusion while this little sleeping form lay in his arms. Perhaps it had quickened into life that ennobling spirit of parenthood which is all sacrifice and love and self−renunciation. The ends which seemed so all−desirable a few hours ago now seemed sordid and mean and unimportant. Reaching out for some means of self−justification Grant turned to the Big Idea; that was his; that was big and generous and noble. But after all, was it his? The idea had come in upon him from some outside source−−as perhaps all ideas do; struck him like a bullet; swept him along. He was merely the agency employed in putting it into effect. It had cost him nothing. He was doing that for society. Now was the time to do something that would cost; to lay his hand upon the prize and then relinquish it−−for the sake of Wilson Transley!

"And by God I'll do it!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. He carried the child back to his bed, and then turned again to watch the storm through the windows. It seemed to be subsiding; the lightning, although still almost continuous, was not so near. The air was cooling off and the rain was falling more steadily, without the gusts and

splatters which marked the storm in its early stages. And as he looked out over the black valley, lighted again and again by the glare of heaven's artillery, Grant became conscious of a deep, mysterious sense of peace. It was as though his soul, like the elements about him, caught in a paroxysm of elemental passion, had been swept clean and pure in the fire of its own upheaval.

"What little incidents turn our lives!" he thought. "That boy; in some strange way he has been the means of bringing me to see things as they are−−which not even Linder could do. The mind has to be fertilized for the thought, or it can't think it. He brought the necessary influence to bear. It was like the night at Murdoch's house, the night when the Big Idea was born. Surely I owe that to Murdoch, and his wife, and Phyllis Bruce."

The name of Phyllis Bruce came to him with almost a shock. He had been so occupied with his farm and with Zen that he had thought but little of her of late. As he turned the matter over in his mind now he felt that he had used Phyllis rather shabbily. He recalled having told Murdoch to send for her, but that was purely a business transaction. Yet he felt that he had never entirely forgotten her, and he was surprised to find how tenderly the memory of her welled up within him. Zen's vision had been clearer than his; she had recognized in Phyllis Bruce a party to his life's drama. "The second choice may be really the first," she had said.

Grant lit a cigar and sat down to smoke and think. The matter of Phyllis needed prompt settlement. It afforded a means to burn his bridges behind him, and Grant felt that it would be just as well to cut off all possibility of retreat. Fortunately the situation was one that could be explained−−to Phyllis. He had come out West again to be sure of himself; he was sure now; would she be his wife? He had never thought that line out to a conclusion before, but now it proved a subject very delightful to contemplate.

He had told himself, back in those days in the East, that it would not be fair to marry Phyllis Bruce while his heart was another's. He had believed that then; now he knew the real reason was that he had allowed himself to hope, against all reason, that Zen Transley might yet be his. He had harbored an unworthy desire, and called it a virtue. Well−−the die was cast. He had definitely given Zen up. He would tell Phyllis everything. . . . That is, everything she needed to know.

It would be best to settle it at once−−the sooner the better. He went to his desk and took out a telegraph blank. He addressed it to Phyllis, pondered a minute in a great hush in the storm, and wrote,

"I am sure now. May I come? Dennison."

This done he turned to the telephone, hurrying as one who fears for the duration of his good resolutions. It was a chance if the line was not out of business, but he lifted the receiver and listened to the thump of his heart as he waited.

Presently came a voice as calm and still as though it spoke from another world, "Number?"

He gave the number of Linder's rooms in town; it was likely Linder had remained in town, but it was a question whether the telephone bell would waken him. He had recollections of Linder as a sound sleeper. But even as this possibility entered his mind he heard Linder's phlegmatic voice in his ear.

"Oh, Linder! I'm so glad I got you. Rush this message to Phyllis Bruce. . . . Linder? . . . Linder!"

There was no answer. Nothing but a hollow, empty sound on the wire, as though it led merely into the universe in general. He tried to call the operator, but without success. The wire was down.

He turned from it with a sense of acute impatience. Was this an omen of obstacles to bar him now from Phyllis Bruce? He had a wild thought of saddling a horse and riding to town, but at that moment the storm came down

afresh. Besides, there was the boy.

Suddenly came a quick knock at the door; the handle turned, and a drenched, hatless figure, with disheveled, wet hair, and white, drawn face burst in upon him. It was Zen Transley.

CHAPTER XXII

"Zen!"

"How is he−−how is Wilson?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"Sound as a bell," he answered, alarmed by her manner. The self− assured Zen was far from self−assurance now. "Come, see, he is asleep."

He led her into the whim−room and turned up the lamp. The lad was sleeping soundly, his teddy−bear clasped in his arms, his little pink and white face serene under the magic skies of slumberland. Grant expected that Zen would throw herself upon the child in her agitation, but she did not. She drew her fingers gently across his brow, then, turning to Grant,

"Rather an unceremonious way to break into your house," she said, with a little laugh. "I hope you will pardon me. . . . I was uneasy about Wilson."

"But tell me−−how−−where did you come from?"

"From town. Let me stand in your kitchen, or somewhere."

"You're wet through. I can't offer you much change."

"Not as wet as when you first met me, Dennison," she said, with a smile. "I have a good waterproof, but my hat blew off. It's somewhere on the road. I couldn't see through the windshield, so I put my head out, and away it went."

"The hat?"

Then both laughed, and an atmosphere that had been tense began to settle back to normal. Grant led her out to the living−room, removed her coat, and started a fire.

"So you drove out over those roads?" he said, when the smoke began to curl up around the logs. "You had your courage."

"It wasn't courage, Dennison; it was terror. Fear sometimes makes one wonderfully brave. After I saw Frank off I went to the hotel. I had a room on the west side, and instead of going to bed I sat by the window looking out at the storm and at the wet streets. I could see the flashes of lightning striking down as though they were aimed at definite objects, and I began to think of Wilson, and of you. You see, it was the first night I had ever spent away from him, and I began to think. . . .

"After a while I could bear it no longer, and I rushed down and out to the garage. There was just one young man on night duty, and I'm sure he thought me crazy. When he couldn't dissuade me he wanted to send a driver with me. You know I couldn't have that."

She was looking squarely at him, her face strangely calm and emotionless. Grant nodded that he followed her reasoning.

"So here I am," she continued. "No doubt you think me silly, too. You are not a mother."

"I think I understand," he answered, tenderly. "I think I do."

They sat in silence for some time, and presently they became aware of a grey light displacing the yellow glow from the lamp and the ruddy reflections of the fire. "It is morning," said Grant. "I believe the storm has cleared."

He stood beside her chair and took her hand in his. "Let us watch the dawn break on the mountains," he said, and together they moved to the windows that overlooked the valley and the grim ranges beyond. Already shafts of crimson light were firing the scattered drift of clouds far overhead. . . .

"Dennison," she said at length, turning her face to his, "I hope you will understand, but−−I have thought it all over. I have not hidden my heart from you. For the boy's sake, and for your sake, and for the sake of 'a scrap of paper'−−that was what the war was over, wasn't it?−−"

"I know," he whispered. "I know."

"Then you have been thinking, too? . . . I am so glad!" In the growing light he could see the moisture in her bright eyes glisten, and it seemed to him this wild, daring daughter of the hills had never been lovelier than in this moment of confession and of high resolve.

"I am so glad," she repeated, "for your sake−−and for my own. Now, again, you are really the Man−on−the−Hill. We have been in the valley of late. You can go ahead now with your high plans, with your Big Idea. You will marry Miss Bruce, and forget."

"I shall remember with chastened memory, but I shall never forget," he said at length. "I shall never forget Zen of the Y.D. And you−− what will you do?"

"I have the boy. I did not realize how much I had until to−night. Suddenly it came upon me that he was everything. You won't understand, Dennison, but as we grow older our hearts wrap up around our children with a love quite different from that which expresses itself in marriage. This love gives−−gives−−gives, lavishly, unselfishly, asking nothing in return."

"I think I understand," he said again. "I think I do."

They turned their eyes to the mountains, and as they looked the first shafts of sunlight fell on the white peaks and set them dazzling like mighty diamond−points against the blue bosom of the West. Slowly the flood of light poured down their mighty sides and melted the mauve shadows of the valley. Suddenly a ray of the morning splendor shot through the little window in the eastern wall of the living−room and fell fairly upon the woman's head, crowning her like a halo of the Madonna.

"It is morning on the mountains−−and on you!" Grant exclaimed. "Zen, you are very, very beautiful." He raised her hand and pressed her fingers to his lips.

As they stood watching the sunlight pour into the valley a sharp knock sounded on the door. "Come," said Dennison, and the next moment it swung open and Phyllis Bruce entered, followed immediately by Linder. A question leapt into her eyes at the remarkable situation which greeted them, and she paused in embarrassment.

"Phyllis!" Grant exclaimed. "You here!"

"It would seem that I was not expected."

"It is all very simple," Grant explained, with a laugh. "Little Willie Transley was my guest overnight. On account of the storm his mother became alarmed, and drove out from the city early this morning for him. Mrs. Transley, let me introduce Miss Bruce−− Phyllis Bruce, of whom I have told you."

Zen's cordial handshake did more to reassure Phyllis than any amount of explanations, and Linder's timely observation that he knew Wilson was there and was wondering about him himself had valuable corroborative effect.

"But now−−YOUR explanations?" said Grant. "How comes it, Linder?"

"Simple enough, from our side. When I got back to town last night I found Murdoch highly excited over a telegram from Miss Bruce that she would arrive on the 3 a.m. train. He was determined to wait up, but when the storm came on I persuaded him to go home, as I was sure I could identify her. So I was lounging in my room waiting for three o'clock when I got your telephone call. All I could catch was the fact that you were mighty glad to get me, and had some urgent message for Miss Bruce. Then the connection broke."

"I see. And you, of course, assured Miss Bruce that I was being murdered, or meeting some such happy and effective ending, out here in the wilderness."

"Not exactly that, but I reported what I could, and Miss Bruce insisted upon coming out at once. The roads were dreadful, but we had daylight. Also, we have a trophy."

Linder went out and returned in a moment with a sadly bedraggled hat.

"My poor hat!" Zen exclaimed. "I lost it on the way."

"It is the best kind of evidence that you had but recently come over the road," said Linder, significantly.

"I think no more evidence need be called," said Phyllis. "May I lay off my things?"

"Certainly−−certainly," Grant apologized. "But I must introduce one more exhibit." He handed her the telegram he had written during the night. "That is the message I wanted Linder to rush to you," he said, and as she read it he saw the color deepen in her cheeks.

"I'm going to get breakfast, Mr. Grant," Zen announced with a sudden burst of energy. "Everybody keep out of the kitchen."

"Guess I'll feed up for you, this morning, old chap," said Linder, beating a retreat to the stables.

And when Phyllis had laid aside her coat and hat and had straightened her hair a little in the glass above the mantelpiece she walked straight to Grant and put both her hands in his. "Let me see this boy, Willie Transley," she said.

Grant led her into the whim−room, where the boy still slept soundly, and drew aside the blinds that the morning light might fall about him. Phyllis bent over the child. "Isn't he dear?" she said, and stooped and kissed his lips.

Then she stood up and looked for what seemed to Grant a very long time at the panorama of grandeur that stretched away to the westward.

"When may I expect an answer, Phyllis?" he said at length. "You know why my question has been so long delayed. I shall not attempt to excuse myself. I have been very, very foolish. But to−day I am very, very wise. May I also be very, very happy?"

He had taken her hands in his, and as she did not resist he drew her gently to him.

"Little Willie christened me The Man−on−the−Hill," he whispered. "I have tried to live on the hill, but I need you to keep me from falling off."

"What about your settlement plan? I thought you wanted me for that."

"We will give our lives to that, together, Phyllis, to that, and to making this house a home. If God should give us−−"

He did not finish the thought, for the form of Phyllis Bruce trembled against his, and her lips had murmured "Yes." . . .

"Mr. Grant! Mr. Grant! The telephone is ringing," called the clear voice of Zen Transley. "Shall I take the message?"

"Please do," said Dennison, inwardly abjuring the efficiency of the lineman who had already made repairs.

"It's Mr. Murdoch, and he's highly excited, and he says have you Phyllis Bruce here."

"Tell him I have, and I'm going to keep her."