After the Storm: A Story of the Prairie

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

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WHEN the men drove up for supper, they found the table unset, the fire out, and the woman tossing on the bed.

There were six of the men, besides Tennant, the Englishman, who, "by the bitter road the younger son must tread," had come to Nebraska and the sandhill country, ranching, and who was put over the rest of the men because he did not get drunk as often as they did.

Sharpneck, the cattleman, was in town. So was his daughter, whose hungry cats darted about the disorderly room, crying to be fed.

The men were astonished at the condition of affairs. The woman had never failed them before in all the months that she had cooked, and made beds, and washed and scrubbed for them. They swore hungry oaths, for the autumn air gets up a sharp appetite when a man is in saddle all day.

"Poor old prairie dog," said Fitzgerald, who was rather soft−hearted, "she's clean petered out!"

Tennant had been feeling her head.

"Get in your saddles again," he said, "and ride down to Smithers' for something to eat. You, Fitzgerald, go on to town and get the doctor. Get Sharpneck, too — if you can. And you might look up Kitty."

Kitty was the daughter who owned the cats. These animals appeared to be voracious. Their eyes shone with evil phosphorescence as Tennant sent the men off and closed the door. He lit a fire in the stove, and then tried to make the woman more comfortable. Her toil−stained clothes were twisted about her; her wisps of hair straggled about her face.

"Poor old prairie dog!" he murmured, repeating Fitzgerald's words. "Not one of us noticed at noon that she was not as usual — and why should we? What do we care?"

He had his own reasons for being out of love with his kind, and with himself, and he smiled sardonically, as, in making her more comfortable on the bed, he noticed the wretched couch, the poor garments smelling of smoke, the uncared−for body.

"She has borne two sons and a daughter," he went on, "and known the brutal boot of that drunken Dutchman, and, after all, she lies here alone, dies here alone, perhaps — and it doesn't make any difference."

The sick woman was a stranger to him. To be sure, he had known her for three months. He had eaten at her table three times a day. Her little brown parchment−like face looked familiar to him from the first, not because he had seen it before, but because some things have, for certain persons, an indefinable familiarity. Besides doing the housework, she milked three cows, fed the pigs and chickens, and made the butter. Tennant had often seen her working far into the night. When he was on the night shift with the cattle, he had seen her moving about noiselessly, while the others slept.

As for Sharpneck, the proprietor of the land, the cattle, and her, he was a big fellow from Pennsylvania, who got drunk on vile compounds. Tennant never heard him address her except to give an order, and he usually gave it with an oath. Once Tennant had brought her some bell−like yellow flowers that he picked among the tall grasses. She nodded her thanks hurriedly, — she was cooking cakes for the men, — and put the blossoms in a glass. Her husband got up and tossed the flowers out of the window. Tennant did not find it worth his while even to be angry. After that, however, he thought it the part of kindness to leave her alone.

He lit his pipe now, and sat down near her. The hours passed, and the men did not return. Tennant guessed, with a good deal of accuracy, that in the allurements of a rousing game of poker they had forgotten him and his charge. It was not surprising; on the contrary, it seemed perfectly natural. Tennant decided to bend his energies to the getting up of a meal for himself. He found some bacon, which he fried, and some cold prune sauce, and plenty of bread. Then he made tea, and persuaded the sick woman to take a little of it by giving it to her a teaspoonful at a time. He placated the cats, too, but they would not sleep. He drove them all from the house, but they ran in again

through holes they had scratched in the structure, near the floor — for the shack was built of sod. Their eyes, red and green, seemed to light the whole place with a baleful radiance. Once, in anger, Tennant hurled a glowing brand at them, but furious, they rushed up the sides of the room, hissing and spitting, and making themselves much more hideous than before.

Toward morning, he could see that the sick woman was sinking into a state of coma. He grew seriously worried, and wondered if Fitzgerald had forgotten to go for the doctor. When it came time for the men to be at their places, he signaled them, and Fitzgerald came in answer to his summons. He had seen the physician, who had said he would be along in the course of the day. Sharpneck had been fool−drunk, and in no mood to listen to anything. Kitty said she would be home in the morning. But the whole forenoon passed without word from any of them. In the afternoon, however, Dr. Bender came out. He was a young man, with avaricious eyes and a sensual mouth. His long body was lank and ill−constructed. His hair was red, and an untidy mustache gave color to an otherwise colorless face. When he saw the unconscious figure on the bed, so inert, so mortally stricken, a peculiar gleam came to his eye.

"Her chance is small, I'm afraid," said Tennant, "but do what you can. She is here with you and me, and none beside. We mustn't fail her, you know, by Jove!"

The physician leered at him, stupidly. He looked the woman over, put some powders in a glass of water, and arose to go.

"Then you don't know what is the matter with her!" exclaimed Tennant roughly. "You're going to leave her to her fate?"

"I've done all there is to do," said the doctor sullenly. "I ought to have been called sooner."

"You were called sooner, you fool!" almost shouted Tennant. "Get out, will you? I'd take more interest in a dying cow than you do in this woman."

There was a sort of menace in the man's white face as he quitted the place, but Ralph Tennant was not worrying about expressions of countenance. He gave the stuff the doctor had left — merely to satisfy his conscience, and watched the road for Sharpneck. About three o'clock, the woman's breathing became so slight, he could no longer hear it. He tried to arouse her with stimulants, but it was of no avail. The last spark of life presently went out.

He rode four miles for a neighbor woman, who came and performed the last offices for the poor creature. She got supper for Tennant, too, and then left him. He had to sit up all night to keep off the cats, and one of the other fellows sat up with him; the two men played poker gloomily, occasionally varying the monotony by throwing brands at the cats, which, smelling death, were seized with some grim carnivorous atavism. The jungle awoke in them, and they were wild beasts, only more contemptible.

When morning came, Tennant set about making preparations for the funeral. He imagined how dismal the whole thing would be; he never dreamed that events would shape themselves otherwise than monotonously and drearily. But to his astonishment, the men came in their best clothes. They were, in fact, in a state of fine excitement.

"I'll be riding down to Gester's to see if they have a spring seat to give us the loan of," said young Fitzgerald, who was the first to appear in the morning. The other men were close behind him. They had all breakfasted at Smithers'; Smithers' was a place which sometimes served as a road−house, and they were well fed and in form for some novel entertainment.

"Spring seats?" gasped Tennant. "What is wanting with spring seats?"

"To accommodate the mourners, to be sure! You don't want the mourners to ride on boards, do you, man?"

"Mourners!" Tennant's voice was almost hollow. He felt a terrible kinship with the "poor little prairie dog," who, a small mass of mortality, lay under the cold sheet in her miserable home. "Who in God's name are the mourners?"

"We are the mourners!" cried Fitzgerald, with grandiloquence, sweeping his hand around to indicate his companions.

"And the cattle, and the other work — who, pray, will attend to them?" Tennant put this question more to drown the sardonic guffaw that was ready to leap out, than because of any care for Sharpneck's possessions.

"In times of mourning," said the Irishman, winking to his companions, but drawing a lugubrious face to Tennant, "other matters have to go to the wall."

The men nodded. Tennant wanted to roar — or would, if he had not wanted to weep. So he went back to his watch, and to fighting the cats, and let the humans have their way.

There had not been so much riding in that part of the country since Tennant came into it. Gester sent up two spring seats, which Fitzgerald and Duncan brought home across their horses' backs. Abner Farish dashed to town with the news of the event — no one, it seemed, considered the death a catastrophe — and encountered Sharpneck on the way. Sharpneck made back for town, to interview his brother, Martin Sharpneck, the undertaker, and then turned his face homeward again. With him came his daughter, silent and straight, carrying in her lap a black crape hat she had borrowed for the occasion. There was a keg of something in the rear of the wagon calculated to raise the spirits of the mourners, and the sight of this insured Sharpneck a welcome from his men.

The air was indeed charged with excitement. The horses were combed and brushed, the wagons were washed. A missionary clergyman, who happened to be passing through the next town west, was sent over by the thoughtful neighbors, who had somehow learned of Mrs. Sharpneck's demise, and he was warmly received. The house swarmed with people. There were even a number of women present, though few or none had come to see the lonely little creature while she still lived. Tennant would have fled from it all and got out with the cattle, only he felt as if he could not desert that pitiful body. He stayed to appease his conscience, which cried out to him that he was on guard.

Kitty Sharpneck showed a bright red spot on each cheek, but her eyes were dry. The Englishman could not make her out at all. He had sometimes seen her about the house, though she spent most of her time in town, where she was serving a sort of apprenticeship with a milliner. She was little and brown, like her mother, with the same restless, nervous glance that she had had. The cats all rubbed up against her as she entered, and leaped to her shoulders and her lap. The women poured questions upon her; the men regarded her fixedly. Every one was alert to see what her deportment would be, and was quite willing that there should be a scene. They were disappointed. The girl, after a few moments' rest, brushed away her pets, and, walking over to the place where the form of her mother was lying in a cold inner room, lifted the sheet and looked at the face. The body had been wrapped in a clean sheet.

"Mother used to have a shawl," she said to Tennant; "I'll see if I can find it."

She searched about in the drawers and finally drew it forth, a great shawl of gray silk, delicately brocaded.

"It was her wedding shawl," said Kitty. "It came from Holland."

The women made a shroud of it. Tennant still kept watch. His presence was a check on the conversation and kept it within bounds. The women baked a great meal, and they all sat down to it — except Kitty, who could not be found. The men were convivial. It was part of the inevitable programme, apparently. Tennant needed sleep, but when night came, every one went away, and he was left there alone again. Kitty could not be found even now. He had been up two nights, and being a young fellow with a fixed habit of sleeping, the strain was telling on him a little. But the red eyes of the cats showed through the holes in the shack, and his aversion to the creatures keyed him to his task.

About midnight he heard some one cautiously approaching the shack from the outside. The door opened softly. Kitty Sharpneck came in. She stole past Tennant and into the room where her mother lay. She closed the door behind her, and there was silence. Presently she came out. There were no tears in her eyes; a look of peculiar hardness marred her young face.

She went up to Tennant and stood before him, looking at him.

"You have been good," she whispered. "Why?"

"Why not?" said Tennant, horribly afraid of sentiment. But he need not have feared it from Kitty.

"No doubt you had your reason," she said sharply. "Now go to sleep. I'll watch."

Tennant demurred.

"Get over there on the settle, I say, and go to sleep. I'll watch."

He obeyed her and lay on the settle. She took his seat before the fire, and from time to time made flourishes at the cats, even as he had done. Periodically she went to the inner room to change the cloths on the dead woman's face. The rest of the time she sat still, looking straight before her, and as she looked, her little brown face hardened ever more and more. Sometimes for a moment bright red spots would burn on her cheeks, and then die away again.

Tennant had passed the point where he was sleepy. He lay awake, watching the girl. Her low brow, her thin,

delicately curved lips, her shapely nose, the high cheek bones and dainty chin, the pretty ears and sloping shoulders, all indicated femininity and intelligence. It was difficult to account for the fineness of her quality. And yet, who could tell what the "poor little prairie dog" might have been? Women make strange marriages and travel strange roads. Tennant knew by what devious paths a human creature could tread. He himself — But that had nothing to do with the case, and he banished thoughts of self, for they were not pleasant. Anyhow, what was the use of reminiscence? Here he was, with one good lung and one not quite so good, out in the semi−arid belt, on horseback from twelve to sixteen hours a day, eating like a Zulu, and waiting for events. He reflected that the things which affected him personally he looked upon as events. Those which touched him indirectly, such as the death of Maria Sharpneck, he looked upon as episodes. Such is the involuntary egotism of man.

"I'm not sleeping," Tennant announced to the girl.

"I know it," she said.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

Her eye involuntarily went toward the room where the silent Thing was.

"The cats, of course," said she, her lip curling a trifle.

"Don't be angry with me," pleaded Tennant. "I feel very sorry for you."

"You needn't."

"Why not?"

"It's none of your funeral."

She had meant merely to use the slang, not to refer to the actual event.

"Shall I keep still?"

"Yes, I guess you'd better."

The minutes passed. Outside, silence — silence — silence. It reaches so far on the plains, does silence. The sky is higher above the earth than in other places. The night is of velvet. Vast breaths of wind and mystery blow backward and forward.

This night a wolf bayed, and gave the voice of life. Dismal as was the sound, it was not so bleak as the utter stillness had been.

"You were with mother when she died?" asked the girl suddenly.

She arose and stood near Tennant, looking down into his eyes.

"I was with her."

"Tell me what happened."

He told her.

"I'm glad she's dead. Of course you know I'm glad."

"If you loved her, I know you must be glad."

"I ought to have stayed with her."

"Yes."

"But — well, it was — Oh, you know what it was."

"I can guess."

"You know what I did. I went to town and worked for my board. My father is a rich man. I washed dishes in another woman's kitchen and went to school. Then I went to the milliner. I apprenticed myself to her. But I was sorry. I did not like her, nor the other girls, nor things that happened. I did not like the town. I dared not come home. Father was worse then. We always quarreled. He and mother quarreled about me."

"I never heard your mother say anything."

"No, she didn't say much, except when father pitched on me. But it was different — once."

She turned, went into the inner room, opened a drawer, and took something out. When she came back, she placed it in Tennant's hand. It was an ambro−type of a young girl with a face like that of the girl before him. The hair was parted smoothly from the low, lovely brow. Alert dark eyes looked gently from the picture. Around the bared neck was a coral necklace with a gold clasp, and the miniature−maker had gilded the clasp and tinted the cheeks and lips, and made the coral its natural tint. A dainty low−necked gown and big puffed sleeves confessed to the coquetry of the wearer.

"That was mother," said Kitty.

And then the storm broke at last, and she was on the floor, face downward, in a passion of weeping, and the

young man — he who had trod the bitter road — felt his own frame quiver at sight of her woe, at thought of his own, at knowledge of the world's big burden.

By and by, when Kitty lay on the settle and Tennant sat beside her, she grew confidential, and told him in detail the life at which he had guessed.

"He'll expect me to be the drudge now," she said in conclusion, referring to her father. "Now I'll be the one to get breakfast and dinner and supper, and breakfast and dinner and supper, and stay here at home forever, and wear dirty clothes, and scrub and wash and iron! I know how it will be. That is — if" —

"If what?"

"If I stay."

"What else can you do? Go back to the millinery shop?"

"No. He wouldn't give me a minute's peace there. He never comes to town that he doesn't make me ashamed of him. I suppose you wonder why I didn't come out as soon as you sent word that mother was sick. Well, he wouldn't let me. He sat himself down there, and swore I ought to stay. Miss Hiner, the milliner, was having her fall opening, and she got round him and said I ought to stay. So I stayed."

She set her teeth hard and looked unutterable protest at the young man.

Tennant was a gentleman, and not given to parading his own troubles, yet now, in the desolation and silence, with the dead within and the wolves without, it seemed natural that he should tell the girl something of his own life. It was a familiar tale. Thousands of young Englishmen, crowded out of their own land and their own families, who come here to wring something from fortune's greedy grasp, could tell a similar one. But given the personal quality, it seemed unique, particularly to the inexperienced girl who listened. The two had a community of suffering and deprivation and loneliness. They looked at each other with eyes of profound sympathy. Each felt so deep a pity for the other that for a time self−pity was submerged.

Morning dawned. Presently the men came from the adjoining buildings for breakfast. Kitty had risen to the emergency, — the emergency of breakfast; she had it ready, — corn bread, salt port, potatoes, eggs, and black coffee. In her fear lest she should not have enough to satisfy these men of prodigious appetite, she had cooked even more than they could eat. She had set the table just as her mother had been in the habit of doing. Everything was cluttered together. As she worked, imitating in each most trifling particular the ways of the dead woman, a gray look settled about her face. Tennant, who had both sympathy and imagination, knew she was looking down the long, long road of monotonous and degrading toil which lay before her. He saw her soul shuddering at the captivity to which it was doomed. Now and then she cast at him a glance of mute horror.

The men were excited, and eager to do anything to help to the success of the day. Sharpneck himself was restless. His little green eyes rolled around in their fleshy sockets. He shuffled about constantly, and at last said he was going to town to make the final arrangements, but would be back soon. A number of men immediately offered to go for him. In spite of all they knew of the truth, they had created a fiction regarding him now in this supreme hour, and had actually persuaded themselves that he was a sufferer. He insisted on making the journey himself, and some of the simple fellows chose to believe this to be an evidence of devotion.

Kitty did not share this belief. She cast an apprehensive glance at Tennant. He looked as reassuring as he could. They both feared he was going to get drunk and shirk the funeral altogether. But he was back in a wonderfully short time, wearing a new suit of clothes. Kitty had the house cleared up, and the neighbors began to arrive. The coffin came, — a brilliantly varnished coffin, with much nickel plate on it. It was placed in the front room. The men stood around, the big sombreros in their hands, their pretty, high−heeled boots carefully cleaned. Five women were present. Their sobs, oddly enough, were genuine, and at moments became even violent, though none of them had known the dead woman well. But who could know that silent and inscrutable creature?

The minister wore squeaky boots, and had a red beard, which claimed much of his attention. Fitzgerald, who found the whole proceeding tamer than it ought to have been, took him into an inner room and braced him for his melancholy duties. The clergyman had never met Mrs. Sharpneck, but he seemed to be cognizant of all her virtues, and exploited them in tones at once strident and nasal. Poor Kitty, behind her crape veil, grew hard and angry, and Tennant knew that the quivering of her frame did not denote grief so much as inarticulate rage and revolt. The girl's passion was setting her apart from her world in his estimation. Something tragic in her surroundings and her soul put her above the others.

The men did not appear to be at all surprised at the way the women wept. They considered weeping the

function of women at a funeral. That they were weeping from self−pity did not once occur to them. The minister neglected none of his duties, and they included an address lasting forty−five minutes and two prayers, one of thirty minutes' duration. The people sang Nearer, my God, to Thee. At this Kitty grew almost rigid, and at last, her misery passing all bounds, she caught Tennant's hand in hers — he was sitting near her — and pressed it in a bitter grasp.

"What is it? What is it?" he whispered.

"The song!" she managed to say. "As if she knew anything about God, or ever thought" —

"Hush! Hush! Perhaps it wasn't as bad as you think. She did her duty well, you know, and may be she will be rewarded."

Kitty looked about the room, — at the stove where she had seen the soiled little figure of her mother standing these years and years, at the pots she had patiently scoured, at the low walls, the deep windows, the unstable sandhills beyond, the wind−stricken pool where the cattle stood, — she looked at it all, and thought of the slave bound to it, loaded with heavy chains, starved in the midst of it, and her eyes turned to meet those of Tennant, big with knowledge which knew no words.

Since Ralph Tennant put the world behind him and came out into the wilderness with the cattle and the men who herd them, he had never seen so comprehensive a glance, or been so conscious of the fact of mind. Though the hour was so hideous, though the poor girl beside him was bowed with shame and tortured with inexpressible grief, yet a joy came to his heart at finding once more the human soul, sane, susceptible, responsive, courageous. He drew his chair a little closer, as if he would protect her from the facts that confronted her.

But the people, watching him and her, while the minister droned on and on in dull explanation to his Creator, saw in his sympathy only what was natural and the outcome of the occasion. They guessed at nothing more.

The getting of the coffin into the wagon was no easy task.

"By the saints, it ought to go in feet first," said Fitzgerald, who was one of the pall−bearers. "You'll not be launchin' the woman head foremost into her own grave!"

"It goes head on, you fool!" replied Watson.

The six men stood still, arguing.

"Oh, what's the difference?" asked a bystander. But Watson, who had been an Englishman some time or other, — or at least the father before him had, — was not one to yield to a man who had once called the British jack a dirty rag, as Fitzgerald had, more than once, in the heat of argument. So the discussion waxed hot, and might have ended in a manner more or less sensational, for the men had had a taste of novelty and their appetites were whetted by it, had it not been for Tennant, who came out, leaving Kitty standing in the door, and pointed a stern finger at the wagon; and poor Maria Sharpneck was laid in, head foremost as it happened. It was thought proper that Sharpneck should ride in this wagon, but he was somewhat loath to do so, as the owner of the team, who insisted on driving his own horses, was not of the same politics as himself, and was, moreover, stone−deaf. He had an offensive way of airing his own opinions, and he was so deaf — or affected to be — that he never could hear anything his opponent might say. There was only one bond of sympathy between them, and that was plug tobacco. Some sympathizing friend, endeavoring to mitigate present woes, loaded Sharpneck up with this succulent commodity, and, thus placated, the enemies sat side by side in a semblance of amicability. Behind came two wagon−loads of chief mourners, composed of the men of the ranch, and Kitty. After them came five or six loads of neighbors who took this opportunity to enjoy an outing, to which they considered themselves entitled after weeks of monotonous toil. It happened that the horses which drew the wagon containing the coffin were very frisky, and it was not long before this wagon was well in advance of the others, the coffin bumping meantime from side to side.

"Hold on, man!" cried Sharpneck to his deaf driver, "hold on, I say! There's reasons why I don't want that there coffin scratched up. Hold in the horses, I say!"

The driver did not hear, and the horses were really too excitable for Sharpneck to risk meddling with the reins.

The mourners were soon left well behind, though they did their utmost to urge on their animals. In fact, the Dickeys, who had some freshly broken colts of their own raising, had taken another road to town, boasting confidently to the Abernethys that their colts would get them there before the far−famed black team of the Abernethys saw the first church spire. The Abernethys were behind the mourners, and when it developed that the off horse on the second wagon was winded, and it was proved to be impossible for one team to get ahead of

another on the steep grade of the road, indignation ran high. The Abernethys fumed, knowing that their neighbors were amused at their predicament.

The mourners were not very far distant, and, being on a rise of ground, they could see the Sharpneck wagon brought to a halt by a horseman who had dashed out from town.

"It's Martin Sharpneck. It's the undertaker," the men made out. He had apparently brought out a big rubber cloth to protect the coffin, for it was beginning to look like rain, and by the time the others were up with the group, the coffin was wrapped from sight.

Tennant began to wonder what this could mean. Not a man living would have ridden out that way to meet the "poor little prairie dog" in her lifetime — not a man!

"You're to come around to my place after it's over," the undertaker said. "You'll need to steady your nerves a bit. Come around as soon as you can, boys. You must be about used up." He looked with solicitude at the strapping bronzed men in the wagons.

Tennant glanced sharply at Kitty. Was she not conscious that there was something in the wind? But she watched the wheels rolling in the sand, — watched them turning and dripping the sallow granules from the wheels, as if she dared look neither behind nor before, — and she did not see his look.

The minister had not accompanied the cortege to the cemetery. (One always refers to a cortege in the West, on even a very slight provocation.) So the coffin, shining and gleaming with its nickel plate, was dropped gently into the grave, and then, presently, the undertaker was urging all the boys to come around to his place and brace up, and they all went — Tennant with the rest. Etiquette in such matters is imperative in that section of the country. Tennant could not have refused without paying the penalty of a quarrel, and it was no time for self−assertion. So he cast a look of appeal and apology at Kitty, and went. Sharpneck followed them. There was no one left save the gravedigger, who insisted that he knew his business and did not need any one to help him.

The women drove the wagons back to town, and went into the stores to gossip and trade. Kitty accompanied them. She had no place to go to except the millinery shop, and it had never seemed more dreadful to her than this day. She felt she could not endure the scrutiny of the girls. She crept out of the big store at the back, and sat on a pair of stairs which made their way to the upper story. The day was growing bleak, and gray shadows trailed along the plain. Kitty was not warmly clothed, and the wind sifted through her black garments and chilled her. She had not an idea of what was to happen next. She did not know whether her father would look for her or not. She did not believe Tennant would remember to seek her. Indeed, why should he? She had known him no better than she had known the other men in her father's employ. She had, of course, always felt him to be different. No one could help noticing that he was not a part of his environment. But, after all, young English gentlemen were not an uncommon sight in the sandhill country, and every one was quite aware that of all fools an Englishman was the worst, and could go to the dogs generally with a rapidity which none could rival. With the reasons for this the natives did not trouble themselves. These poor tragedies merely amused them, or awoke their contempt.

The afternoon grew late. Kitty still sat crouched upon the stairs. She was facing her future. She was looking into the eyes of her destiny — and it was a fearsome thing to do.

The base drudgery of the ranch presented itself to her vision with no compensation. The life at the little millinery shop, with its temptations, its wretched scandal, it [sic] petty, never−ending talk, came before her too. On every side there seemed to be only what was unspeakably distasteful and disgustingly common. Romance and youth were fair and fleeting things; they were as the mirage which in August days trembled on the heat−misted horizon.

In the midst of all this she saw Tennant crossing over from the millinery shop, which stood, almost solitary, on the street behind the main one. He was looking for her. Kitty ran to meet him, glad to set aside her terrible scrutiny of the future. Perhaps he represented a change or a possibility.

His face was white. He had been drinking a little, but some sudden knowledge had banished all trace of it, save that in the shock his face had suffered.

"We went with your uncle," he began at once, too full of his theme to use judgment or mercy, — "we all went with him, and he 'braced us up,' though God knows why! I scented something in the wind — else why such generosity? It isn't your uncle's way — no, nor your father's — to give something for nothing. The others drank heavily. I drank some, but not enough to dull my curiosity. I got out unnoticed, Miss Kitty, and went back to — to the grave."

"Well — well?" gasped Kitty.

"Well, it was already empty!"

"What?"

"Yes, the coffin was" —

"Where?"

"Back in Martin Sharpneck's shop, by God!"

"And the — and my" —

"And the red−headed doctor had — had the rest!"

The wind blew the sand into dirty yellow spirals, and these danced in drunken fashion about the two who stood there. Down the street could be heard the voices of the drunken men. Kitty saw her father come out of his brother's shop and reel along the street. The women who had ridden to the funeral were coming out of the stores with their arms full of parcels. Their vociferous husbands were about to join them.

"Shall I go to the doctor," asked Tennant, "and" —

"No. What does it matter! It is of a piece with the rest."

Ralph Tennant felt a sudden revulsion. The girl seemed — but, after all, how could he judge her?

"There's no use in trying to do anything. We couldn't. There's no one to help us. Besides, father can do what he pleases — with his own."

"But if he was exposed?"

"No one would care — it would only give them something to talk about. They would pretend to care — but they wouldn't, really."

"Then you are going back, to−night, of course, with" —

"I'm not going back with anybody. I am never going back."

At the last her resolution was taken quite suddenly.

"What will you do, then?"

"In half an hour the train will be here. I am going to take it."

"I'll take it with you."

They were very young; they were half−mad with horror and disgust. They stood alone, and they were in revolt. This accounted for it.

"Very well," said Kitty.

"It is impossible to stay here longer," said the poor younger son, who might, had things been different, have wooed some sweet and well−bred girl in England, instead of this poor, angry savage of the sand wastes.

"It is impossible," said she. "We will go away."

"I have a little money with me."

"I have a little."

"I know the men on the freight, due here in an hour. If you like" —

"Do you think we could manage it?"

"I feel sure of it."

"Then we can save our money."

"Yes. We will go to Omaha."

"As you please."

The gray sky showed a gleam of pale gold at the horizon. The sun was setting. The wagons were driving out of town. Tennant and Kitty saw her father looking for her, and she and Tennant hid in a coal−shed, till Sharpneck's patience being exhausted he drove furiously out of town, cursing.

"He thinks I have gone home with some of the others," said Kitty.

The passenger train rushed into the town and out again. After a time they heard the freight in the distance, and ran down to the little station. Every one was home at supper. Only the station agent saw them talking with the conductor of the freight.

"Goin' away, Miss Sharpneck?" he asked. He did not blame her, but he wanted to know.

"I'm going away," she replied steadily, but hardly hearing him.

Tennant looked too severe to be questioned. He helped the girl into the caboose. She was famished with cold, hunger, and misery. He and the blowzy Irishman on the train built up a brisk fire, and laid her down on a bench

near it, wrapped in their cloaks. The Irishman shared his luncheon with them, and made coffee on the stove.

Kitty felt no anticipation. She looked forward to the morning with no emotion whatever. She did not taste the food she put in her mouth. But little by little the warmth of the friendly fire reached her, and she fell asleep and lay as still as — her mother.

. . . . . .

"Better come on to Council Bluffs," said the conductor when they reached Omaha.

"Why not?" said Tennant, and laughed.

"Why not?" echoed Kitty.

Both "why nots" sounded bitter. These young persons were adventurers by force of circumstances.

Council Bluffs is a charming place. Part of it lies on a flat lowland, beyond which are the bottom−lands of the river. The rest of the town is built on serrated bluffs, covered with foliage. Although the yellow Missouri separates it from the great American plain, yet it has the sky of the plain, which is a throbbing and impenetrable blue. Its abrupt bluffs have made precipitous and irregular streets. Some of them are almost in the shape of a scimitar; some run like a creek between high terraces; others look up to heights which drip with vineyards; many of them present yellow clay banks which the graders have cut like gigantic cheeses to make way for practical thoroughfares. In these clay cuts the swallows burrow industriously, and perforate the face of the cut with innumerable Zuni−like residences. The squirrels chatter in the fine old trees. Charming houses stand in the "dells," that is, in the umbrageous cul−de−sacs where the graded streets terminate in bluffs too bold to be penetrated.

Why nature is more prolific there than across the river it would be hard to say; but it is a fact that flowers and vines, and, no doubt, vegetables and fruit, grow better in that locality than in the great grain State over the way. It often happens in America that natural beauty fails to instruct the people who live in the midst of it. This has not been the case at Council Bluffs. From the time when the Mormons first settled there in their historical hegira and built their odd little huts with the numerous outside doors, — cutting an entrance for each housewife, — there has been something involuntarily quaint about the architecture of the place. Roofs slope off into the bluffs, houses are built on green ledges of earth, and back yards shoot skyward, so that the vineyards grow at an angle of forty−five degrees, and he who goes to look at his garden must needs take an alpenstock in his hands. Hammocks hang under the trees; cottages riot in porches; old mansions wander with a sort of elegant negligence over ground which has never been held at a fictitious value. An exclusive and self−conscious aristocracy looks down upon the ostentation of the fashionable set of Omaha, and lives its quiet life of sociable exclusion, making much of music and ceramics, and attaching no very great importance to commercial aggression or to literature.

Into this peaceful town the adventurers came one bleak autumn day, when the leaves were skirring about the narrow and tortuous streets and the nuts were rattling to the ground. Coming as they did from the treeless region, the place was enchanting to them. No sooner had they sat down to their breakfast than things began to wear a rosier hue. They ate in a fascinating restaurant, where a steel engraving of the destruction of Johnstown, with innumerable remarques, hung above them. Kitty had never eaten a breakfast just like it, and even Tennant, who had known flesh−pots, found it delicious.

As they sipped their coffee, they talked, scrutinizing each other all the time. Tennant was thinking the situation enchanting. Kitty was waiting — waiting for events — for life! She did not reflect. Her hour was a subjective one.

"What shall we do after breakfast?" asked Kitty.

"We must be married," said Tennant decidedly. The girl paled, then blushed and paled again.

"Oh no, no!" she gasped.

"There is nothing else to do," went on Tennant decidedly. "You needn't worry about it a bit. You needn't pay any particular attention to me, you know. But we've got to be married, my dear. We have cut loose from every one and everything. We must go into partnership. Perhaps you don't love me now, — how could you? — but we have cast in our lot together, and we're coming out on top, somehow. We're going to succeed. Moreover, I don't mind telling you that I'm happier and more contented with you here, this morning, and was happier and more contented all last night, while we were rushing along through the darkness escaping from all manner of hideous things, than I have been since — well, since I was a little boy, and thought my mother was greater than the Queen of England and lovelier than the angels."

The blush came gently back to the girl's cheeks and stayed there this time. She ventured on her confession, too.

"I never felt — well — safe, I guess you call it, before in all my life. Until that night when I talked with you (and I was so cross at first), there in the shack, with poor mother, I never told any one the whole truth about anything, or cared what they thought, or was glad to have them understand what I was thinking."

"What made you so cross with me?"

"Oh, I don't know. You bothered me. You made me want to be different. I thought you were hating me."

"I thought all the time you were hating me."

"I guess we were just hating the world."

"Probably that was it. Anyhow, fate has thrown us together. It's a case of united we stand."

They looked about the town after breakfast, and found a tiny cottage with three rooms on the side of a hill. A grassy bluff rose immediately behind it, and the roof of the kitchen ran into the bluff. Grapevines rioted down the side. Catalpas grew on the level ledge of ground, and straggling up the hill, holding on tenaciously by their roots, were great chestnut−trees. The little house was painted green, and in summer, Kitty could imagine, it would seem quite to melt into the hill.

"We can have a hammock up there," cried Tennant, after he had arranged to rent it for a trifle, and forgetful that winter was coming. There was actually a rude brick fireplace in the front room — indeed, the place had been the summer retreat of an artist. This filled the young Englishman with delight, and he was off to order some wood.

"To think that we shall have a wood fire!" he exclaimed over and over again. "I will put my pipe on the shelf, and smoke evenings, eh?"

"Yes," cried Kitty. Then she was silent, and something troubled came into her face.

"Well," said Tennant, seeing it, "what is it, my child?"

"I was thinking."

"Yes?"

"Well, please don't be offended with me. But — well, I don't like drinking."

"Don't you, my dear? Well, neither do I."

"But" —

"Oh, I know. But what else was there to do out there? You don't know how lonely I was. You needn't worry about that now!"

They had a wonderful day. They bought a pine table and three pine chairs, and a little second−hand cook−stove, and some shades for the window. Then Tennant asked every man he met for work. He would have made a nuisance of himself if he had not been so excited and generally filled with anticipation that the people pardoned him for his effervescence.

"I've got to have work," he declared to every one. "Anything — anything — manual, clerical, it makes no difference to me. I'll chop wood, or keep books, or coach for college, or work on the road — but I've got to have work!"

He got it — never mind what it was. it was not the sort he was destined to do by and by, but it served for bread and butter, and a little more. Incidentally, that day, he and Kitty were married. Tennant would have a clergyman perform the ceremony, though Kitty, poor little heathen, was indifferent about it. So they stood before the altar of a curious church up one of the tortuous streets, and were married by a young Episcopal priest, while the merry wind sang outside and red leaves tumbled down the wild hills beyond. They told a bit of their story to the young priest, and he took them to his home, which was on the very top of one of the hills, and they had dinner there, and met the young man's wife, who was a lovely girl from the East, and who took to Kitty at once. That was the beginning of many things — friendships, and little gayeties, and hours of study, — but it is easy to guess what could happen.

Ah, how bare the little green cottage was! But what of it? What of it?

Frequently Kitty spent an hour of her day up at the little wind−haunted rectory, hemming tablecloths and pillow−cases, and she learned to keep a potted fern on her table, — the minister's wife taught her that, — and to have the hearth swept at night, and the big chunks of wood blazing. Then Tennant smoked, and she read to him in the evening.

It was delightful to watch the new home grow! Neat clothes finally were hung up in the closets, and the

demure little lady who was Kitty's friend taught her all manner of things that could not be learned in books. She helped her buy her furniture bit by bit, and Tennant and Kitty would sit a whole evening and look at a new chair in amazement at the knowledge that it was their own.

Presently they had their hospitalities and their institutions and their beaten paths. It was quite wonderful how quickly they became an orderly part of the community — these two from the wilderness. Moreover, they were very happy. It was all simple and commonplace enough; but it was their life, and they lived it with honesty and with courage. Still, perhaps that is not remarkable either. Honesty and courage are so common — in the West.

Elia W. Peattie.