THE GIRL OF O·K·VALLEY

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Title: The Girl of O. K. Valley

Date of first publication: 1919

Author: Robert Watson (1882-1948)

Date first posted: Oct. 24, 2013

Date last updated: Oct. 24, 2013

Faded Page eBook #20101204

This eBook was produced by: Barbara Watson, Mark Akrigg, Ross Cooling & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at http://www.pgdpcanada.net

THE GIRL OF O. K. VALLEY

A ROMANCE OF THE OKANAGAN

By ROBERT WATSON

A. L. BURT COMPANY

Publishers New York

Published by arrangement with George H. Doran Company

Printed in the United States of America

TO
A LADY CALLED NAN

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THE GIRL OF O. K. VALLEY

CHAPTER ONE

The Immigrant

With his shaggy brows down and his hands at his back, rancher Jackson was pacing the floor of his large airy kitchen. He was in one of his oft-recurring tantrums of anger-madness over small matters. His gloomy personality was hanging over the farm-house like an impending cloudburst, ready, on the slightest provocation, to break into a torrent of abuse.

A woman, shabbily clad, her bent back alone visible, was busy over the kitchen range stirring the contents of a large pot. This woman was Colin Jackson's wife—a three-quarter witted nobody who was at the beck and call of everybody; of little or no account to anybody, and likely to die as she was living, in pitiable obscurity.

"Colin, the train should be in soon. Aren't you thinking of sending Jim in with the buggy to bring your niece up?" she ventured timidly without raising her head or slackening in her stirring of the pot. "She's had a long journey and is sure to be tired out."

Jackson stopped to make sure that he had heard aright, although in reality he had been waiting, almost anxiously, for some considerable time, for a remark of such a nature. The storm was precipitated. To Jean Jackson it was almost more welcome than the tension and the gloom of its gathering.

"She can walk," he snapped. "It'll do her good after her long rest in the train. If she has managed over the Atlantic and across the Continent, there's a mighty poor chance of her missing her way between Vernock and here. Worse luck! If she happened to get off her track it would be little loss. She represents just another to feed, another to clothe and—Lord protect me!—another woman to put up with. Goodness only knows!—haven't I worries enough already without her?

"It beats me to understand," he continued, warming to his tirade as he strode to the window and back again to the kitchen cabinet, "why some men get married, raise a brood, then die—as if in their so doing they had attained the height of all possible earthly ambition—dying too, generally not worth a corn-cob. Why don't they die first and be done with it? It would save their relatives a deal of trouble in looking after their brats later on."

"I know it, Colin—well I know it," agreed his wife in a piping voice, "but the man didn't die intentionally. When your sister Mary was alive she never wrote you for any help. It was but natural that she should leave word for her orphan lass to be sent out to the only brother she had. It won't hurt the horse and buggy any to send them in to the station. It would be a kind of welcome to her besides."

"Hold your talk, woman!" interrupted the rancher. "I've said 'no' and that's an end of it. The oftener a horse runs the sooner it has to be shod. I don't believe in keeping horse-flesh for the pleasure of my ranch help. And a ranch help is what this lass will have to be so long as she is under my roof. She'll have to work here just as sure as she will want to eat here. The sooner too that she learns where she gets off at the better for her and all concerned with her. She's to be started in right. Do you understand? No ten days' wonder about it!

"But I tell you, this one thing on the top of another is enough to drive a man to the asylum. Here have I been waiting for three years to lease Broadacres—a ranch that can grow as much on one acre as mine can on five—and now, when the chance comes, Menteith throws my offer aside and rents Broadacres, with the option of buying, to that interloping, sun-baked, retired British Army Captain who knows as much about ranching as a dog does about the whooping cough. And has robbed me of Tom Semple besides—the best ranch foreman in the whole Okanagan Valley.

"There's a payment due on the mortgage and nothing to pay it with; interest overdue, wages a month behind, the flume requiring repairs, seed to pay for, new implements to make a first payment on before I can get them. Now this!—the place is to be turned into a damned orphanage.

"For two peas—ay, for a pea and a half—I would pack her off elsewhere. And, its as sure as God made little apples, she'll be of the strawberries-and-cream, ice-drink, afternoon-tea variety, always with a headache or a pain. That's what her father was, I'm thinking. And they say she's him over again.

"But—mark my words—into the barn and the dairy she goes, neck and crop, just as soon as she gets here."

Jackson took a long breath and sighed.

"Oh, well!—there's one grand consolation, she'll be something new for Lizbeth to put her spite out on. That'll maybe give me a rest from that sarcastic tongue of hers."

He sighed again.

"The Lord alone knows where Liz got her temper from!"

Dull as she was, Mrs. Jackson had her own opinion on that last point, but she wisely held her peace. She had long ceased to argue with her husband on any matter whatsoever, knowing only too well the futility of it. Colin Jackson's brow-beating, his senseless rage and his niggardliness had taught their lessons years before, had reduced her to the level of a kitchen drudge and, imperceptibly to herself, had sapped her individuality and were now slowly undermining her reasoning powers.

Jackson's daughter, Lizbeth, however, was a horse of a different colour. She possessed too many of her father's own characteristics to be easily, if at all, over-ruled by him. He got to know it early in her life and wisely left her to her own devices—at least so long as the devices did not clash too openly with his own.

For a brief moment, the light at the kitchen window was shut off as Lizbeth passed by. She came in at the open doorway, deposited a can of milk on the floor and wiped her hands hastily on a towel.

She was handsome in a buxom way, with full red lips and deep, expressive eyes; nicely featured, tall and well-formed; in every way good to look at as she stood there, breathing a little heavily from her exertions, her lips apart, her stout, shapely arms bared above her elbows and her full white throat exposed.

Lizbeth Jackson gloried in her virility and knew full well how to hide the darker sides of her nature under the visible charms of her blooming, almost flamboyant, maidenhood.

"I guess she's here at last, dad," she remarked with a backward nod of her head. "There's a slender slip of a miss, with a grip, coming up the road."

"Isn't anyone going to lend her a hand?" inquired Mrs. Jackson, turning round.

"No, siree!" replied Lizbeth. "She's to be lending me a hand before long. It would be kind of crazy starting her in the wrong way round. She might think she was coming to a sanatorium."

Mrs. Jackson made to go out, purposely to give the new arrival some assistance.

"Stay where you are—can't you?" commanded the rancher gruffly, barring her progress with his arm.

The woman drew back with a look of resignation, and resumed her work.

The sound of nervous feet was heard outside, then came a sigh and a plaintive exclamation.

"Oh, dearie me!"

The exclamation bespoke distress, also relief.

A slender girlish figure, with a pale, eager face, stood in the doorway, and a quiet little voice with a soft accent asked:—

"Is this Mr. Jackson's,—Mr. Colin Jackson's?"

"Yes! you're at the right enough place. Come in," replied the rancher.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" answered the girl wearily.

She clasped her hands and took a step forward.

"You'll be my sister Mary's lass?" continued Jackson. "I've never seen you. You don't favour the Jackson side in face or body. What's your name? Kate, isn't it?"

"They call me Kathie," she answered, trying bravely to smile and to thaw the iciness of her welcome.

"Ah, well! Kate or Kathie, it's all the same. Come over to the window and let's have a good look at you."

The girl came forward, looking about her timidly.

Jackson caught up her hands and examined them with the same scrutiny as he would have given to the mouth of a horse.

"Soft as butter! Never knew hard work, I'm thinking!" he said, more to himself than to his far-travelled niece.

His stern eyes went to her face and to the long plait of thick, jet-black hair which hung over her left shoulder.

"Bonny!" he soliloquised again. "Too bonny for your own good."

He turned to his daughter, who had been surveying the scene as one apart.

"Lizbeth, I'm fearing you'll have to keep her well hidden till you get first pickings of the men who have their ranches well stocked and their pockets well lined." He laughed coarsely.

Lizbeth did not answer, but continued to stare at her cousin in a rude way.

Colin Jackson resumed his questioning.

"Hum! Thought you were just a bairn! I see now you must be sixteen or seventeen."

"I am eighteen, uncle," she answered, looking down timorously before the cold gaze, a blush mantling her cheeks.

"Eighteen, eh! Well—I guess they don't grow so big or ripen so fast in Ballywhallen, Ireland, as they do here in the West. Lizbeth is only a year older, but she looks twice as big and half a dozen times as knowing as you.

"Kathie!—this is your cousin, Lizbeth," he exclaimed at last, ignoring the fact that so far he had monopolised the entire conversation.

"You'll get to know Lizbeth better as you go along," he continued slyly. "That's your aunt over there. I'll leave you with them."

He strode away, confident that he had performed a duty to the satisfaction of everybody—or rather, of himself, which, in his opinion meant everybody else as well. He made for the dairy where Meg Shaw, a Scotch farm lass and Lizbeth's chief help, was hard at work. He watched the girl intently for a while before he spoke.

"Meg—I won't require you after this month."

The girl looked up in surprise.

"What's wrang wi' ye noo? Have I no' been doin' my work to please ye? Am I no' worth all I get?" she inquired with just a little aggression.

Only a year before, with her old widowed mother, Meg had come out West at the urgent request of Jackson, who had known her in the Old Land and had jumped at the chance of obtaining her help on the cheap, for a time at least, until she should get thoroughly wise to conditions. Meg had learned many things during that short year, but with the expense of coming over and of keeping her old mother, combined with the low contract Jackson had made with her, her financial position was tremendously insecure.

"It isn't that you haven't been doing your work, Meg. I just won't require you—that's all."

"Oh, fine I ken!" cried Meg, throwing down the tin measure she had been using for filling the milk cans. "It's that peely-wally-faced ninny I saw comin' up the road. Another cheap one from the Old Country! Maybe you've managed to get her for her board. Weel—you're welcome to her till she gets wise. I'm glad I'm done wi' ye. I hadna the courage to tak' the step mysel', or I would have done it lang syne."

"That'll be enough from you now. I want none of your cheek."

"Oh, want or no' want, Colin Jackson,—you'll just have to tak' what ye get." Meg's eyes blazed in anger and she shook her fist. "If a woman works her fingers to the bone, you want the bones to pick yersel'.

"Ay!—and God help that new lass if she has to work under you and that she-cat Lizbeth. But I'm fired, as they say oot here, so what the de'il should I care?

"Give me my wages to date and I'll gang noo. That'll save you the three weeks o' this month that's worryin' you."

Meg shot through the weak spot in Colin Jackson's armour. The temptation was too strong for him. He grinned to himself as he thought how easily and profitably this would work out for him, for he had feared Meg might hold him to the two years' bargain—fraud of a bargain that it was—that he had made with her on her coming. Hastening to take her at her word, he pulled out his purse and counted out several dollars and small silver coins into her palm. Meg examined the silver closely.

"Bide a wee!" she exclaimed, pouncing on a fifty-cent piece. "I've seen this chappie before. It's the same Strait Settlements' one that ye tried on me last month. I wonder at a man like you no' passin' it off on some poor Chinaman lang before this."

Jackson exchanged the coin without a word.

"Thank ye for my ain," said Meg pertly. "I kent the plan would suit ye—ye cheap-skate. Lordie!—but you're weel named Colin Split-the-pea."

The rancher clenched his hands and turned upon her with rising anger. Meg edged away. When she got to the door, she turned for a parting word or two.

"Here's a bit o' advice. Oh!—it's free, so maybe ye'll tak' it. Keep you're weather-eye on Lizbeth. She's no' quite so fine and nice as you think she is. She'll lead ye a de'il's dance yet. You'll have to split two or three mair peas, and skin them too, before you're through wi her."

When Meg disappeared, Jackson, still in an ugly mood, returned slowly to the house.

His niece had eaten heartily of the meal which had been placed before her and was just rising from the table.

"Meg's away," said the rancher curtly, addressing no one in particular.

He turned to Kathie.

"I hope you are strong and able for hard work. There's lots of it here. This is a worker's country."

She looked over at him.

"Yes! uncle. I'm strong. At least—kind of strong! I shall soon get stronger and—I do want to work hard and be nothing of a burden to anybody. I'll do anything and everything I can to help."

"That's talking," said Jackson in a more conciliatory tone. "You can make a start with Lizbeth in the morning. And mind—it will have to be in coarser clothes than these you have on. Liz will rig you out.

"We bed early here and we rise early. It's a plan that saves artificial light. Now, you had better go upstairs with Liz and make the most of your time. You and she are to sleep together I hear."

Kathie turned obediently and Lizbeth led the way.

"That reminds me!" he continued off-handedly. "It will be better for everybody concerned and it will save a lot of questions and trouble if you call yourself Kathie Jackson from now on. Forget the other. It never brought you and yours much luck anyway."

Kathie gasped and her face grew more than ever pathetic-looking. She loved her own surname—her father's name. It held many pleasant recollections, many sad ones; but all none the less dear to her. But, somehow, she felt afraid of her big, bullying uncle and she was so anxious to be obedient to all his wishes right from the beginning. She answered him in almost a whisper.

"Ye-yes, uncle! I'll remember."

"This is our room," said Lizbeth a moment later. "We are to sleep together as father said, although, to tell you the truth, I'd much rather sleep alone. I'm more used to it."

The room was neatly, though plainly, furnished. Kathie went over to the window and sat down. It was a large window and opened to the south, overlooking acres upon acres of fruit trees in faultless rows, among which snugly sat the homes of the many neighbouring ranchers. Beyond the cultivation, Kathie could catch a glimpse of the blue waters of a lake, while, all around, the Valley seemed fringed with undulating ranges, walled in by purple tinged and fir clad mountains.

To the left, not very far off, a wood of small firs, with grassy lanes running through it—planted evidently at some time through the eccentric fancy of some wealthy rancher—divided her uncle's farm from the others beyond.

"I have packed my own clothes in the two top drawers of that bureau. You can have the bottom two," remarked Lizbeth in an easy off-hand way. "There's the peg you can hang your hat on. You'll require a bigger one than that if you don't want sunstroke."

Kathie rose and made use of the vacant peg.

She was tired almost to stupefaction.

"Your trunk is in the corner there. It arrived at the station yesterday and was hauled here two hours before you came. Your grip looks heavy. I wouldn't care to carry it as far as you did."

"Oh!" replied Kathie wearily, "there was nothing else for me to do but try with it, as nobody seemed to be coming the road I was coming. I was tired long before I was half-way here. I certainly never could have managed it all the way by myself. A gentleman overtook me and carried the handbag most of the way."

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Lizbeth, full of interest. "Who could he be, I wonder? Are you quite sure he *was* a gentleman? Guess I know most of them round here."

"Yes, quite sure! The kindly aid of him when I was standing in trouble, his quiet manner of speech and his well-bred way of not asking questions and refraining from unnecessary conversation, proved that he was a gentleman."

"I wonder—I wonder who he was," went on Lizbeth. "It might have been Bob Crawford, the Provincial Police Chief. No!—I don't think it would be, either. Guess Bob couldn't keep his tongue quiet. He would have gabbed to you all the way along."

"He was tall, with fair hair and big, honest eyes," said Kathie reflectively. "He wore a flower in his buttonhole and he had a book under his arm. He was quite young—twenty-three, or twenty-four, maybe twenty-five."

Lizbeth laughed.

"Oh, I know!" she cried, "Mr. Simpson, the Principal of the Vernock High School. He's some favourite in town, especially with the old women. Believe me! Personally, I don't know very much about him. He's too sober, too silent, too precise for me,—thank you!

"Still, Miss Kathie, you had better watch out whom you talk to here. You're a Jackson now and you better hadn't forget it, Jackson's don't pick up stray acquaintances. Better not let dad hear of it."

"Cousin, please don't think me of that kind," pleaded Kathie. "I never would think such things of you, even if I did not know you;—besides, I am so terribly tired to-night."

"Oh!—I'm not saying and I'm not thinking anything," answered Lizbeth, "only putting you wise to some things. It looks bad meeting and talking to men before you are right in the Country. It reflects back on the ranch, on dad and on me, that's all."

Kathie refused to continue the argument. She took a few articles from her grip, undressed, tumbled into bed and soon was fast asleep.

An hour later, she awoke, startled by a noise. She looked up. The light was still burning. Lizbeth was seated before the

mirror, brushing and plaiting her dark, brown hair and coquetting the while with her own reflection. Kathie lay quietly watching her cousin, who in turn smiled, looked disdainful or laughed outright to herself as fancy led her.

Kathie could not help admiring Lizbeth's round, supple arms as they reached to the longest strands of her curling hair; the full white bosom, the graceful ripple of her moving shoulders and the easy poise of her shapely head. She envied that healthy, rosy face with the large, languid, hazel eyes. She felt her own thin limbs and wondered if work on the ranch would ever make her so strong and so beautiful; and she vowed she would strive hard to attain her desire—never to be found wanting at her work.

It was not Lizbeth's wont to linger quite so long over her toilet as she did that night, but she was brooding over this newly-acquired cousin who was sharing her room and now lay, as she thought, asleep in her bed. She did not like this new cousin nor her intrusion, and she had no intention of making believe that she did.

This Kathie, this poverty-stricken interloper from over the seas, with her quiet, refined manner! She was far too pretty for one thing—too apt to share in some of the attentions that had been lavished on her alone. Lizbeth had no love for this sharing business—it was too one-sided for her taste. Again, her cousin talked too nicely; too like the well-bred and better class of English ranchers in the neighbourhood. She never seemed to have to resort to a localism to express her meaning—an accomplishment which Lizbeth had tried so hard to acquire but with moderate success and an attainment which she fancied so necessary to the setting of a real lady.

But as she sat there, Lizbeth found deep consolation in the knowledge that Kathie would have to take all her orders from her at all times and would require to execute them in the way she wished them done. It would be a pleasure for her to watch the growth of a tired and care-worn expression in that face which now looked so refined, and to note the gradual appearance of toughness on her white delicate hands. Kathie would have few idle moments. She would see to that, for the more Kathie got to do, the less it would leave for Lizbeth. And, in Lizbeth's mind, that was as it should be. Why should she, the only daughter of Colin Jackson, have to soil her hands when there were servants for the work?

She did not mind seeing that the work was done. Oh, no! That was something of a pleasure. And she knew how to drive. She had been at it and watching it done long enough to know. She had driven girls, and men, too, away from the ranch. But now she had one at last who would not be driven away, for she was alone in a strange country and had nowhere to go.

Lizbeth smiled again and forgot her troubles. She passed her hands lovingly over her shapely arms. She raised her firm shoulder and laid her cheek against it. She admired her lips, her eyes and her glossy curls in the mirrored reflection, blew a kiss to herself and smiled again, happy and confident in the security of her apparent and abundant beauty.

CHAPTER TWO

Day-Dreams

It seemed to Kathie as if she had hardly fallen asleep, when the loud, imperative tingling of an alarm clock aroused her. She looked up. Lizbeth already was on the floor. She, at any rate, was no lazy lie-a-bed.

"Time to get up!" she shouted. "Work for you starts to-day. It's Sunday, but ranching folks have always something that must be done Sundays. I'm going to church at Vernock at eleven, so we shall have to get good and busy."

Kathie needed no second bidding. She had had a refreshing sleep and felt that at last she was about to be of some practical use in a practical world.

Lizbeth threw her an old, kilted petticoat, a sweater and a pair of heavy boots.

"Get into these," she said. "They're what you need for the work we have to do."

Kathie dressed hurriedly, laughing gaily at her appearance as she glanced in the mirror. But suddenly her expression changed, her eyes opened in astonishment and she looked around.

"Why, Lizbeth!" she cried tremulously, "someone has been through my trunk. See!—my things are lying scattered around everywhere. And—and—and——" She stepped short as she gazed at her cousin and the truth of the whole matter dawned on her.

Lizbeth laughed. "That's nothing," she replied. "I knew your trunk wasn't full of diamonds, and you were too tired last night to show me what you had, so I just turned the key and raised the lid and had a good look all by myself. Besides," she added, "girls always inspect one another's clothes and trinkets. If you and I are to live together, we might as well be quite free with each other."

Kathie was too taken aback to say very much. That a stranger should take liberties with her belongings,—liberties that her own mother would not have dreamed of taking—the indignity of it overwhelmed her.

She looked at her dainty, ivory comb and brush lying on the bureau. These were new; a gift from an old Irish lady-friend on her leaving Ballywhallen; and she had thought so much of them that she had never used them, being content with an older and a plainer set that she had.

"But you've been using these," she exclaimed. And tears came to her eyes.

"That's right! Be a grouch and play the kid," replied Lizbeth. Then with some heat:—"Do you think I injured them even if I did use them. I'm clean skinned and clean blooded. See!"

She bared her arms and her bosom to Kathie's gaze.

"Oh,—it isn't that! You know it isn't that, I mean. But there are some things—like hair-brushes and combs and toothbrushes that we don't like others to use."

"Well, you needn't get scared about your toothbrush, or anything else, after this, now I know how touchy you are," remarked Lizbeth, in a tone of slight conciliation. "But it's time we were making a start. It's getting late."

Kathie followed her down the wooden stairway and out into the gloriously refreshing morning air whose spring crispness had not yet evaporated in the drying sunshine.

They went across the yard and into the barn, down between the long row of stalls where the cows were lowing and swishing their tails, impatient to be milked.

With a little three-legged stool and a pail, Lizbeth taught Kathie how it was done, and soon the latter was bending forward, the pail between her knees, her check against the animal's soft, comfortable flank, and with deft fingers was filling her pail with warm, creamy milk. It was a new and strange experience and so delightful to one who had never seen the inside of a cow-barn before. She enjoyed the labour and worked hard, trying her best to keep up with her

energetic cousin, who had already finished her own row and had started at the other end of Kathie's.

When the last cow was relieved, Kathie rose and stretched herself. It surprised her to discover how stiff and strained her back had become and how cramped, and sore, and almost useless her fingers had grown.

"That's one good job done," remarked Lizbeth. "I'll mount Jess and take the cows to the range. That's their pasture over there; up the hill and beyond the old barn, right on to the fence at the woods.

"Take this milk into the dairy and fill up the empty cans there ready for Jim to take to Vernock. Dad will see him loaded up himself. That's dad's own job. He likes to keep an eye on what milk goes out, then he can tell what money to expect coming in.

"Yes!—and here's the broom. You can get all the water you want from the pump. Clean up the barn, swill the stalls out to the middle there, then flush everything down the gutters."

In business-like fashion, Lizbeth loosed the cows from their chain halters and with an encouraging word here and a smart rap there she soon had the barn clear of them. She loosed her horse, Jess, from a neighbouring stall, jumped astride, bareback, and was off with a shout.

Kathie was left to her own devices.

The work was all such a new experience to her and besides she had not yet got quite over the weariness of her six thousand miles journey. But, although her poor thin arms were tired and paining, she set-to and kept at it with a will. She did not know just how nicely it had to be done, and, in fear that her work might be adversely criticised, she went at it carefully and laboriously and long before she had finished, Lizbeth was back again.

"I'm going in now to get ready for the church, Kathie," she said. "Wing does the cooking here, so, when you're through you can tidy up the bedroom a bit; then, if we get the milking done early enough this afternoon, you can go to the church for the evening service:—that is, if you care to. On Sundays we don't do any more work than we actually have to.

"Kathie!" she continued.

"Yes!"

"I wish to ask you something." She stood back from her cousin and posed in pride and confidence. "Look at my face; look at my arms and at my figure. Kathie,—do you think I am pretty:—really and truly pretty?"

The wind was blowing Lizbeth's hair. Her eyes were langourous; her cheeks were aglow with the glories of the morning; her white teeth shone from between her full, parted lips. She had the form of a goddess.

Kathie replied unhesitatingly and in admiration. "Yes, Lizbeth, you are pretty; you are beautiful. How happy and how thankful you ought to be!"

"I'm glad you think so, Kathie," replied the coquette with a condescending smile. "I love to be pretty,—to be beautiful. It means everything to me—to any woman—even away out here in this humdrum, out-of-the-way corner of the Universe."

Kathie sighed slightly.

"You know," went on Lizbeth, "you are pretty, too—in a way—a sickly sort of prettiness:—the prettiness of a hot-house plant or a hospital ward:—not the prettiness the men hereabout will go silly over. They're simply crazy on figure and size No!—I can't say that I am jealous of you, Kathie. I think I love my own loveliness best."

With a heartless laugh she turned and went off.

Kathie followed later and partook of her delayed breakfast, served up by the grumbling and muttering shuffler, Wing, whose slink and creep and general greasiness she felt most repulsive.

Lizbeth was upstairs dressing, and, half an hour before time for worship, she came down, robed in a clinging white silk gown of the very latest design and crowned with a large, white hat profuse with ostrich feathers. A parasol and her Bible were tucked under her arm. She sailed out, buttoning up her gloves with as much of the airs and graces of a lady as she knew how; perfectly conscious of the pleasing picture her fresh, robust loveliness presented.

Jim, a young ranch-hand, was waiting at the door with the buggy, to drive her in to Vernock.

After she had gone, Kathie fixed up her bedroom. And when she finished she felt tired and unstrung.

The next hour or two were her own, so she lay down to rest. She tried hard to sleep, but could not. She had reached that stage of physical exhaustion where sleep is an impossibility. Her brain was busy and her body was weary. From side to side she tossed in a feverish nervousness. Although her window was wide open, she felt oppressed. The air seemed to be closing in and tightening around her. She was seized with a longing to scream out; but she fought against the impulse.

And it was then that she bethought herself of the old mellow-toned violin upon which her father had taught her to pour out her pent-up feelings. How quickly her troubles would vanish, if she were only able to poise it against her throat and run her fingers over the sensitive strings once more! She recalled the miserly love and fond care which her father used to bestow upon it. How eagerly he would lift it from its black case! How transporting was his music! How reluctantly and tenderly he would put the violin away again!

She felt the thrill of the moments long gone by, when he placed the instrument and the bow in her hands for the first time; when he taught her some of the wonderful touches by which, as if by magic, he charmed the music from its empty shape. She saw again her father's pale, gaunt face; the eyes of fire; the thin, tapering fingers which never tired.

But, alas! like all else that was dear to her, he was gone; so was the worn violin. Only her thoughts remained; bitter in their very sweetness.

It had been a valuable old violin—the costliest and most treasured of all her father's possessions. But it had been taken away and sold, with so many other things that were dear to her in the old home in Ballywhallen.

She felt the uncontrollable taking hold of her again, for all of her thoughts seemed to lead back to sorrow and tears. Still—she might read. Yes!—there was no violin, but surely there were books—something—anything to make her forget.

She rose and passed slowly down the wooden stairway in her quest. Half-way, she encountered her uncle going up. She put out her hand and touched his arm.

"Uncle," she inquired, "is there anything downstairs that I may read, just for a little while till Lizbeth comes back? I am so tired and—I cannot sleep or rest."

Her uncle grunted.

"We don't go much on reading here, lass—we're generally too busy for that. But, if you look, I think you will find a Bible and a ready-reckoner on top of the kitchen cabinet. Take your pick,—they're both very good books in their way.

"But it's funny to hear of anybody tired and not able to rest. It's an uncommon complaint on a ranch."

Kathie sighed and passed down to the kitchen, where the smell of boiling broth predominated.

She went through the open doorway and into the bright sunshine. There was a tranquillity in all around. A warm breeze was blowing. It played with her hair and quieted her throbbing temples, soothing her like a mother's touch. She walked on past the barns, through the orchard, up the green incline and on to the crest of the hill, among the flaring yellow sun-flowers.

It was calm and peaceful up there.

She lay down on the grassy slope. Away in the distance was the lake; behind her the densely planted wood of firs. She stretched her limbs and looked up to the great expanse of blue and to the white, rolling clouds. She grew dreamy and languid; then, gently, gently, she floated into that blissful unconsciousness she had courted so much in vain up in her bedroom.

Kathie dreamed of her babyhood; of her mother; of the little village of Ballywhallen by the sea; of the rugged headland which stood bold and defiant against the buffeting of the Ocean. She saw herself snuggling safely in the shelter of the old, shelving rock, with the salt-flavoured wind whistling overhead, the waves booming down on the shingly shore and the seagulls shrieking and complaining.

Then she fancied someone came and looked down on her as she lay: someone broad, and strong, and handsome; clear-eyed and sympathetic; someone she had seen before, although where, she could not recall; someone whom she trusted and with whom she felt secure.

At last, like a faint echo, a voice floated up from the far away. It came nearer and grew louder. Suddenly, Kathie felt herself jolted and shaken up. She opened her eyes and blinked in the strong light.

Her disturber was Lizbeth, holding her horse by the bridle;—angry and rude—the reality, so different from her dreams; Lizbeth in her working garb again, calling her from refreshment to work, declaiming her laziness;—sarcastic—impertinent—furious.

Kathie sprang up with a momentary flash of defiance in her eyes, but quickly it faded away. What was the use, she thought? This was the first day of her new life; her cousin was the mistress; she was but the servant. It would never do to start in quarrelsome and rebellious.

She answered meekly and disjointedly.

"I'm sorry, Lizbeth. It must be late. I've been asleep. I did not mean to—but—I feel better now—and ready. I hope——"

"Oh! cut out the hoping," interrupted Lizbeth. "It is past milking time. You've been asleep for hours, while we've been searching all over the ranch for you. Get back down to the barn quickly!"

Lizbeth mounted and trotted off to gather in the cows, while Kathie turned humbly toward the house.

And thus was the work of the morning repeated in the afternoon, as the work of one day was duplicated in the next: each day in the weekly cycle with the additions of its own special duties; seldom changing, never ending, until, to Kathie, the novelty became a drudgery and the drudgery began to lie upon her young shoulders like the burden of Atlas.

In a week she was able to ride a horse. In a month she could stick fearlessly on the bare back of Jess when that equine lady was in her most frolicsome mood.

After all, life on the ranch, with all its labours, was not without its pleasures. To Kathie, the greatest of these pleasures was the growing knowledge that rich, red blood was capering merrily in her veins, where a watery fluid had previously crept sluggishly onward. Her cheeks no longer held that deathly pallor of a self-condemned invalid; her eyes were clear and bright and her arms were fast becoming rounded and firm, in harmony with the new sensation of suppleness which the dry, clarified air and the open life were fast giving to her entire body.

Gone from her were the frailty and the little habitual cough; gone was the dread thought of a weakness inherited; the foolish, yes! the criminal thought which creates and nurtures a bastard child to its own vile imaginings and maims and kills where disease has never been.

Kathie did not assume the dowdy, smug rotundity, so common to many of the ranchers' daughters. She was slender of figure, though full and firm bosomed; her eyes had caught at last the consciousness of the awakening of those luscious charms of womanhood which had been lying dormant within her and had only so lately been aroused by the call of all the nature-beauties surrounding her daily life in this Garden of Eden where everything grew and fructified as in no other land or clime.

She preferred the quiet tenor of the orchards and the wood to the social atmosphere of Vernock. All her precious, spare moments were spent in nature's solitude. Few indeed were the people privileged to set eyes on Kathie; but young and old alike who caught the glimpse, turned and looked again. Yet, she was modestly unconscious of this effect of her presence on others. She resented the familiar stare of the farm-hand and the impertinent gape of the chinaman, as she did the patronage of the visiting ranchers and the attempted, coarse civilities of some of their grinning sons. She shunned their would-be sociability. When they called unexpectedly, she would quietly slip off. If their visits were anticipated, she kept busy in the dairy or in the barns, out of the way. In her love of retirement, she was applauded and aided by the cousin, Lizbeth, who enjoyed the field to herself and resented even a surreptitious glance in any feminine direction but her own, and it was with an ever-increasing sense of annoyance that she perceived in Kathie a growing beauty which would not long be kept hidden away and an indescribable charm of manner which she knew she, herself, could never hope to acquire.

In all the petty ways of which only a jealously disposed woman is mistress, she vented her wrath. She increased Kathie's work and, in the process, reduced her own. She found fault in everything; she nagged and threatened, and succeeded fairly well in quelling any spark of spirit which Kathie might have possessed.

With a hopeless kind of fatalism, Kathie bore it all quietly and uncomplainingly, for well she knew—she had been reminded only too often—the humble position she filled at Jackson's Ranch.

It never occurred to Kathie that she was earning her own livelihood in a land where woman-help was scarce; that her labour had a considerable market value; that dozens of ranchers would have been glad to give her good wages in return for her services. She seemed simply to be looking forward to the time when she would feel that the bread she ate and the clothes she wore were her very own, the fruits of her own labour, won by the skill of her brain and the strength of her body.

CHAPTER THREE

The Lure of the Violin

Saturday afternoon was the afternoon of the week for shopping, visitation and bargaining among the ranchers of the Valley.

On this particular day, in the dining room, Colin Jackson was deep in a heated contest for the extension of time and the reduction of another five dollars in the price per head of some cows which he contemplated purchasing from the genial old cattle-breeder, Muir of Saughs Ranch; while, in the sitting room, the only and spoiled son of the worthy visitor was bathing in adolescent admiration of Lizbeth's lusty charms and languishing personality.

Kathie, as usual on such occasions, had betaken herself to the out-houses. She was seated in the shade and cool of the dairy porch, cleaning and brightening up the utensils which she had recently been using at her work, and she was vaguely wondering how much longer she was going to be held in her self-imposed banishment, when the tattered but interesting figure of the old, country wanderer, Rube Stahl, hobbled across the yard.

Rube was a character—a strange being who seemed to have been uprooted too late in life to change either his manner or his calling, who seemed to have been transplanted, with his peculiarities and disabilities, in a country he did not understand and one that did not understand him.

As was his habit, he was muttering to himself, with his head bent, as he came along.

Kathie listened and caught the drift of his soliloquy.

"Beezness is punk—beezness is punk—ain't no damn good. Half a dollar for a golt brooch mit diamonts—ach!"

He kept on repeating his sing-song monotony.

Kathie eyed him curiously and a little sympathetically, for, although his face showed hardness and dissipation, even cruelty, yet his clothes were in rags, his hair was unkempt and he was very old; besides betraying a growing frailness brought on with the buffetings of time and circumstances.

Immediately he caught sight of Kathie in the shadows, his movement quickened. With a grunt, he deposited a heavy sack on the ground, for the purpose of giving his hands free play. Without the aid of his hands, Rube was unable to talk convincingly.

"Ah,—gol-darn!" he exclaimed, with a deferential bow, "it is zee pretty kid mit zee night in her hair and zee morning in her eyes. You bet!—I haf sometings ver' ver' beautiful to show zee dame. Pretty leetle golt brooches mit pearls, golt bangles dat vould make von prinzess gasp; combs for zee hair;—ya! and somethings vot will catch a fine hantzome sveetheart everytimes."

The Jew swung a box in front of him, and his boney fingers threw up the lid.

"Now!—you close that box," commanded Kathie, with a smile. "I don't wish brooches, or bangles, or combs. I have no sweetheart and I have no immediate desire to be after getting one."

"Vot!" exclaimed Rube in feigned astonishment. "No sveetheart, and you mit hair and eyes like dat and dese? Ah—gol-darn! dat is chust your leetle joke and I von't belief a vord of it; no, I von't belief it. Ah, ya!" he went on. "I savvey. You haf a leetle quarrel mit him. Dat is vot is wrong. But dis leetle ting in dis bottle I haf got vill fix it all up and you vill kiss and be friends again, vonce more, all over, instantly. Ya, you bet!" he croaked. "You vill kiss and be friends—and all for —-" (He threw out his hands) "half-a-dollar.

"Ah, zee pretty hair!" he continued with a sigh. "Zee pretty, long, black, glossy hair! Tree feet long if it's an inch."

His fingers almost touched it, ere Kathie shrank away in disgust. "Never mind my hair, Rube, if you please. Keep your distance. I have told you already you are simply wasting your time trying to sell anything to me."

"Ah, forgeeve me!" fawned the Jew. "But it vas so long, and thick, and so black. Ya!—it vas so black. Zee very devil

could not vant blacker hair dan dat."

Kathie laughed, and the Jew continued to display his wares: yellow bracelets, blazing rings, paste beads and ribbons galore, all made to charm an Indian maid on a reservation.

"Now! there isn't a thing in your whole stock that I need," she reiterated, "and, even if there were, I haven't a cent with which to buy—not a single cent."

Rube looked disappointed.

"Nein, nein!—don't say dat, missy. You haf moneys, plenty moneys;—pretty girls alvays haf. I von't belief dat. No, gol-darn! I vill not belief."

"Well,—it is true anyway," replied Kathie.

The Jew closed up his box almost in despair, but his nature and upbringing would not allow him to go away empty-handed. Perceiving an empty bottle lying a few feet away, he went over and picked it up, opened a corner of his sack and deposited it inside.

Kathie watched in amusement.

"Why, Rube!—what is that you have in the black box?" she asked, rising and peering into the sack curiously.

"Oh,—notings for a girl," he remarked off-handedly, "it's chust a coffin; chust a leetle coffin for a leetle kid."

Kathie stepped back with an exclamation of horror. Her inquisitiveness was more than assuaged.

Rube gave vent to a crackling laugh.

"Ach!—I vas chust funning," he said. "It is only chust an old feedle in a case. I bought him dis morning for—ach! never mind vot I paid for him. But I vill sell him for more anyvays. Ya, you bet! I vill sell him for more or I am no son of Abraham."

Kathie's eyes glowed with freshly awakened interest.

"Oh, won't you please let me look at it?" she pleaded, drawing closer, "just for a little, teeny moment."

"Certainly, mein tear," replied the affable Rube, "and you may look at him for-efer and for-efer if you give me two dollars,—zee bow and zee nice black case into zee bargain. And he is dirt cheap too.

"But, ah! you are so pretty, an old man can't keep from giving you a bargain."

Kathie opened the case and took out the violin. She tightened up the pegs and plucked at the strings lovingly. Then she sighed and handed it back.

"Put it away," she said sadly. "You might as well ask me for two million dollars as for two dollars. I have no money."

"Vell, vell!—dat's mighty hard luck," said Rube, scratching his head. "I thought I vas going to make a sale.

"Say! I maybe could loan you dat two dollars and you could pay von extra next month,—eh!"

"No, certainly not!" exclaimed Kathie in annoyance.

"All right, all right!" droned the Jew, packing up again.

With drooping spirits Kathie watched the return of the black case to the dirty sack.

"Wouldn't you take something in exchange for it?" she asked. "I could give you this brooch. See—it is gold and it is worth far more than two dollars. You haven't one in your box nearly so good!"

Rube scrutinised the proffered article of jewellery, shook his matted grey locks and handed the brooch back.

"Nein, nein! I could not do it. It vould chust be giving dat fine feedle avay: it vould inteed." He looked at Kathie again

with his crafty eyes, and sidled alongside.

"Mein Gott! vot nice long hair," he crooned. "Black and thick! I know a lady in Vernock—a fine, fancy lady, too—who haf zee same kint on her eyebrows, but none on her head. Ha-ha! Dat is a joke. Now,—if you don't haf no sveethearts, vell den, vhy not let me cut off your hair,—snip!—and zee feedle is yours for keeps—yours to play on, for-efer and for-efer and for-efer, see!"

He produced a pair of scissors from his pocket.

"Chust von leetle snip, and it is off, up close! It von't hurt a bit. And the feedle is yours, mit zee fine music. Everything is yours—all but zee hair. Ha-ha! anoder joke for Rube. But, ach! you can grow more again—plenty more. Grow chust like corn!"

Kathie drew away from him. Her blood chilled at his suggestion. What devil was he with his sneaking temptations! Exchange her hair—which she had cared for so long; which her mother used to stroke and tend so carefully, the pretty rope which people sometimes talked about—she would never do that! No, no!—it was too horrible.

She shrank farther away.

But in a few moments came the reaction. Her great, swelling love for the violin filled her bosom. The music for which she had hungered so long was now within her reach. The charmer which would dispel all her gloom and all her troubles! And she could have it in exchange—for what? A plait of hair—merely an adornment, and to Kathie, useless! Something which only attracted attention, and generally attention of an undesirable and questionable nature! Besides, she was merely a drudge on a ranch, without friends. She had no one to feel proud of her appearance. What need she care how she looked! Why should she not trade her hair for a pleasure worth while, now that the chance presented itself and she felt so inclined? Then, as old Rube had said,—her hair would grow again, and all that time she would have the violin, the music,—the old ballads and minuets. Yes, yes, yes! It was worth the sacrifice, if, after all, it could really be called a sacrifice.

Her bosom rose and fell rapidly.

"Here, Rube!" she panted, as the old man was leaving her, "cut it off and give me the violin. But,—be quick,—do it quick."

The Jew turned and ambled back, showing his yellow, broken teeth in a miserly grin.

"Ha-ha!" he exclaimed, "dat's a goot girl. Gol-darn!—I knew you vould. I knew you vould. Ya! he-he,—and it is such a fine feedle, too."

Kathie shut her eyes. Rube's dirty hands reached up and his clammy fingers closed on her hair. She could hear the scissors click ominously.

Rube was, first of all and before everything else, a Jew. He was not quite satisfied with his original position. His fingers were not close enough to the scalp. There was an extra inch in length that he almost missed. He moved the scissors further up.

A few long hairs were already severed by the sharp blades, when the touch of the cold steel on Katie's skin seemed to awaken her as from a trance. She dashed the Jew's sacrilegious hands away and pushed him roughly from her with a strength and frenzy greater by far than she thought she was capable of.

The old man tottered and fell in a heap on top of his sack, with a cry of bewilderment. Kathie looked at his hands in horror, then she put her own up to her head in terrible fear. She fancied her precious hair was severed, but, oh, joy! it was still intact. She tugged it to make sure, then she laughed tearfully. She kissed it and kissed it, again and again, burying her face in its silky softness.

"Ach, mein Gott!—vhy are you so rough, mein tear? It isn't goot manners mit an olt man. Vhy are you so rough? I didn't hurt," he remonstrated.

"Oh,—go away,—go away, you reptile!" cried Kathie. "I hate the very sight of you."

"All right,—all right!" he muttered in renewed disappointment, gathering his belongings and making a fresh start.

"Beezness is punk;—beezness is damn punk,—damn rotten. Half-a-dollar for a golt brooch mit a diamont,—ach!" he chanted again as he pulled his battered hat tightly over his head and crossed the yard.

Suddenly he turned and came shuffling back.

"Give me zee brooch, missy, and you can haf zee feedle. It is robbery—damn robbery," he grumbled, "but, ach! you are so pretty, I chust can't keep from giving you a bargain."

In unbecoming haste, lest the Jew might be tempted to change his vacillating mind again, Kathie made the exchange. Then, with a cry of joy, she darted off, hugging the violin-case to her bosom.

Across the orchard she skipped, up the grassy knoll and over to the other side, away from sight of the house and near the rough log fence which fringed the wood of firs; out in the sunshine among the singing birds and the bobbing inquisitive gophers which scampered about in the fearless confidence of a proven friendship. Breathlessly, she seated herself on the mound. She opened the case once more and took out the violin. It was old and dusty, but, still, it was a violin with its strings intact, ready to be played on,—and that was all Kathie cared.

With trembling fingers she turned the pegs and tuned the instrument; and, as she tightened up the bow, she chatted gaily to the quaint, inquisitive, half-rat, half-rabbit, animals, which sat up on their hind quarters at a respectable distance, timid and curious, watching her every movement. She laughed to the birds as they twittered on the branches of the firs around her.

Soon, however, she forgot all of them; for the first, faint strains which she produced thrilled her through and bore her away, slowly and sweetly, on a flowing tide of memories. Music, grave and gay, quiet and thunderous, poured from the sensitive violin which she fingered. She forgot how long it had been since she played before—she only knew that she was playing again; that ages could not smother up the dormant harmonies of her being and that her soul was at last experiencing a peace it had not known for ever so long.

She saw once more the little village of Ballywhallen; she imitated the whistling of the wind and the breaking of the sea on the jagged rocks; she saw the old barn with its flaring lights, and she heard again the merry shouts and jests of the happy, carefree dancers; and, ah! glory of music,—in it she forgot her drudgery and her sorrow, her surroundings and the fleeting time.

In her transport, she saw nothing of a shadow which hung over her for a brief moment ere it vanished, shadowlike, with its substance. For, behind every shadow is substance and behind substance must be the light. When evil befalls, thought flies to the shadow; but with the triumph of good, thought glories in the light. Substance, shutting out the light, suggests shadow. With the destruction of substance, the shadow dies, but the light cannot be destroyed and remains forever, of itself casting no shadow. And, as the creator is ever greater than that which he creates, so also is light greater, and so also must it overcome and govern both substance and shadow.

Kathie had sought the lea of the hill that she might be alone; alone with her music, alone in the sunshine, near the firs and the sun-flowers which she had so loved ever since her coming to the Valley a few short months previously.

On the other side of the old, log fence, deep in the shade of the firs, prone on the grass, lay another being with kindred fancies. He was scanning the pages of a little book in happy content. Softly the sound of Kathie's music floated on the air toward him, unnoticed at first, for it seemed to be part of the atmosphere and the environment of what he was reading. But ultimately it bore in on him that the fairy notes were from some outward source. Enthralled, he closed his book. He listened, scarce breathing lest he should disturb and thereby end such ethereal transport. The delicacy, the exquisiteness, the rapture, held him spell-bound, and for a long time he lay in abandonment to its witchery. Never had he heard such a co-mingling of laughter and tears interpreted by any human, if human it were. For the listener was a lover of music and had never admitted, even to himself, that there were no fairies.

At length he raised himself from the grass, bent on discovering whence such harmony came. Noiselessly, he crept through the brush to the fence, to the point to which his ear guided him, in the full expectancy of witnessing for the first time the progress of a state ball of all the elves and sprites of the surrounding hills and valleys. He peered through cautiously, but found himself still some way from the source of the music whose deceptive notes had issued in reality

only a few yards on the other side from where he had been lying.

Although he did not see the dancing fairies, the melodious sweetness still kept them alive in his imagination. He saw what was to him of farther reaching consequence—a musician, fair-skinned, elfin-shaped and simply-clad, oblivious of all about her, hypnotised and lost in the ecstasy and passion of her own conception.

He clambered over the fence and walked toward her. Yet she did not detect his proximity.

As he drew near his heart stood still, then it thundered on again. Never had he felt as he did then. He was almost afraid —afraid for himself, afraid for her. He recognised at once in Kathie, the pale, weakly, seemingly helpless creature whom he had encountered and befriended in a small way on the road a few months before, but the change she now presented was scarcely to be believed:—the glowing cheeks, the dark eyes asparkle with health and enthusiasm, the still slender but rounded figure: the perfect, the inexpressible beauty and charm, suggestive of sunshine, honey and bursting rosebuds.

As he gazed, he began to doubt, and doubting, he gazed again then doubted no more. He could never mistake that glorious wealth of jet-black hair, for there was none other like it in all the Valley.

He doffed his hat and listened almost in reverence to the sweetness of the melodies.

His was the shadow that hovered over Kathie, covering the ground at her feet. But in neither the substance nor the shadow was there any evil.

For a time he remained motionless, until he began to think of his intrusion and the embarrassment the discovery of his presence might occasion. He bent down carefully and, at Kathie's side, he placed the book which he had been reading. It was the impulse of a fleeting fancy and had to be obeyed. Then he stole away, softly, quietly, as he had come—unheard and unobserved.

With a sigh, Kathie at last rose and stretched her arms to the feathery clouds that scudded overhead. Her pent-up passion was expended now and she was once more awake to the call of the work-a-day world around her.

She did not know how long she had been on the mound, but she was aware how swiftly the time always flew by in the old days when she had a violin in her hands. The sun had swung well round over the lake, to the west, too far for her comfort. She trembled in dread of the reprimand which she felt must surely follow the discovery of her long absence.

In haste, she gathered some dry brush and tangle. She placed the violin in its case close to the fence and covered it over carefully, for she knew she must hide it, not daring yet to let her people into the secret of her newly-found treasure.

She was hurrying away, when her eyes fell upon the book lying on the ground. With a little cry of surprise, she picked it up. She could not realise how it ever could have got there: she had heard no one, and there was no one now in sight. She began to feel as if the very heavens were raining favours upon her.

But it was already so late that she could not spare the time to think or reason the matter out. She felt tempted to put the book down again and leave it where she had found it. But books were such friends; such good, kind, uplifting friends. The counter-temptation was too strong; she placed the volume in her bosom, under her heart, warm and snug; then she sped on toward the farmhouse.

Her good angel favoured her still: farmer Muir had concluded his business and he and his son were just riding off. During all the time of her long absence, Kathie had not once been thought of.

At the departure of the visitors, Lizbeth hitched up Jess to the buggy and drove in to Vernock. Far down the road, at the avenue of trees leading to the beautiful summer home and wonderful ranch of that old, wealthy Englishman of roving tendencies, David Menteith,—who in his early youth had seen the Valley and had possessed himself of as much of it as he could purchase or pre-empt; and now, in his old age, was still held by its ever-changing charms,—Lizbeth picked up young Crawford, the Police Chief, with whom she had been carrying on a violent flirtation for several months.

It was nearing midnight when she returned to the ranch—for neither Lizbeth nor Bob Crawford respected *elders' hours*; —the one did not care and the other boasted of being well able to look after herself, two very dangerous conditions of mind to get driving tandem.

Kathie had retired at her usual hour and, for the first time since her coming to the Valley, she felt really happy. She sat down on the bed and drew out the warm, leather-bound volume from her bodice.

She examined it with interest.

It was Longfellow's "Evangeline":—something she had often heard of but never perused. She turned over the fly-leaf in front and there read in childish hand-writing:—

> To Alexander Simpson, M.A., from a few of his scholars. Christmas, 19—

Her ears began to tingle as her memory flew back to the first interview she had had with her cousin, Lizbeth, when the latter had informed her that the quiet, manly person who had helped her on her way to the ranch was Mr. Simpson, the Principal of the High School at Vernock. That the book she held was his, Kathie had no doubt. Then she began to wonder again how it could have got on the mound. She had not noticed it when she sat down, although, to say truth, her excitement had been so great at that time, that she questioned if she would have noticed a whole library of books set out in rows on the hillside.

Then she wondered if, by any chance, he could have been near her and could have heard the semi-starved outpourings of her soul.

Her face became hot awhile, for in moments such as those she much preferred to think that no one had been within hail of her. She dismissed her conjecture as an idle fancy. Mr. Simpson was fond of walking; more than likely he had been that way early in the afternoon and had been reading there where she sat, then, in a moment of forgetfulness, had left the book lying on the grass. She wondered if he would hurry back when he noticed his loss and if he would be angry if he knew that Colin Jackson's serving lass had taken it. She thought of replacing it next morning when she took the cows to their pasturage, but, finally, she decided that she would take the pleasure of reading it through first, and after that the school teacher could have it if he ever chanced by way of the mound again.

She read that night until she heard Lizbeth's footsteps below, then she placed the book under her pillow and dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

High Lights and Shadows

During all the week which followed Kathie had little opportunity for visiting the mound. Lizbeth was ever beside her goading her on; grumbling and complaining at the manner in which she did her work despite the fact that Kathie was putting an energy into it which she had never equalled since her coming West. As soon as the old one was finished, a fresh task was always ready for her. Lizbeth's face the while was masked by a sneering smile of hidden knowledge, which Kathie in her openness failed to notice let alone interpret.

Once, in the stillness of a sultry night, Kathie had been awakened by the throbbing of her own heart, this organ seeming suddenly to have grown too large for her body to contain; and the old longing for her violin stole over her. She covered her head in an effort to stifle her desire, but it would not be quieted. At last she rose softly and stepped over her sleeping cousin. The house was still and all was in darkness. She threw on a few garments and tip-toed quietly downstairs, groping her way past her uncle's bedroom, through the kitchen and finally out into the cooler night air.

Her nimble feet carried her swiftly across the turfy grass to the old fence, and there, alone in that lonely place, with the strange silences of the woods around her, she played until the slumbering birds raised their heads from under their wings and twittered back to her.

And it was not until she perceived the softening of the blackness in the eastern sky, bespeaking the early coming of the morning, that she reluctantly replaced her violin at the foot of the fence, covered it up carefully and retraced her footsteps.

All was silent when she returned to the house; and, with the same noiselessness with which she had arisen, she crept back into her place behind her cousin, her body aglow with exercise and her mind overflowing with happiness and contentment.

When Saturday came again and Lizbeth had gone on her usual journey to partake of the pleasures of the town, Kathie resolved to return the school-teacher's book. As she drove the cows to the pasture, she ran up over the hill and placed the volume on the grass where she had originally found it. She saw the cows scatter over the range, then she hurried back and tethered her horse at the fence intent on a precious hour with her beloved violin. The little book, she observed, still lay on the grass where she had placed it. But, as she looked a second time, she gasped and rubbed her eyes to make sure she saw aright, for the copy of "Evangeline" which she had left there had been bound in black leather. The book which now lay before her was in bright red. She picked it up and turned it over, and her astonishment increased. The first book had been replaced by a volume of Tom Moore's poems. She almost cried out in her pleasure, for in her heart there was a strong affection for the country of her birth, even if it so happened not to be that of her parents'. And what Irish heart—or English heart for that matter—does not warm to the universal and searching lays of little Tom Moore?

As Kathie turned over the leaves, a slip of white paper fluttered toward the ground. She caught it smartly before it fell. One side of it bore some writing. She read it over quickly.

"You love literature and I love music. Music for literature; literature for music;—a fair exchange. Have no fear, I shall be only near enough to hear and to enjoy; far enough away neither to see nor to be seen. A. S."

A flush surmounted Kathie's cheeks and her breath came unevenly. She suffered at once from a deluge of conflicting thoughts, for she hated to think of anyone spying on her. Her first impulse was to throw the book away, mount the horse and gallop off. But then—this was her one best hour in all the week, and she could not bring herself to forego it now.

If the school-teacher only knew what it meant to her to give it up, she thought, he would have considered twice before encroaching on her privacy. As she turned to go away, she reasoned with herself again. Might it not be selfish in her to desire all the pleasure? Might not this lonely man be hungering for music and companionship just as she had been? Then, she had enjoyed his first book so well that she could not bring herself to think of parting with the one she now held in her hand before having read it over. He had enjoyed her music;—his note had said that much. Why should her pleasure and his be given up? It really mattered so little after all—so long as he did not intrude. And, judging from her slight experience of this man, he was not likely to do that.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder with the gesture of a wild pony and her dark eyes sparkled as she made the resolve.

She was going to play for the pleasure of the school-teacher, as well as for her own enjoyment. It would be a small return, after all, for the books he was putting her way.

She took her violin from its hiding place and played with all the power, passion and abandon of her nature; at times lost entirely in her music, at other times scrupulously careful in her execution as she remembered that somewhere in its density the woods held an audience silent and appreciative.

And so, for a time, the innocent exchange between the man and the maid went on—books for music, music for books—neither individual seeing the other, only their tokens telling of a friendship in tastes and a harmony of ideas, leaving each to judge, from the nature of the music heard and the books received, how it had fared with the other since the previous communication—whether the trend of thought had been toward joy or sadness.

There was a depth and a solidity, tempered with an abiding love for fellow creatures, in all the books perused by Kathie in those days, and they made her long to talk with the quiet, scholarly man and to know more of the great knowledge with which he seemed saturated.

And to Alick Simpson as he lay among the dry brush, and moss, and grass, Saturday after Saturday, the soft strains of that wild, untrammelled, plaintive—almost pitiful—music hung over him, suggesting a lost fairy crying in the woods as it searched and searched in vain for the hollow tree that led to its glittering palace-home in the elfin world far underneath.

On the one hand was a longing for sympathy and support; on the other a desire to encourage and to sustain: in both the natural call for companionship and love which has gone up from lonely mortals since the beginning of time. Then, over all, was the stern face of Mother Convention, glooming on her innocent children, Modesty and Reticence.

But, as the dry summer days crept toward the autumn, as the green was turning to gold, the dreamers were awakened swiftly, rudely and sure.

Kathie had been on the mound for some time; her thoughts far away, dancing merrily to the tones of her violin. She did not hear the pursing sound of feet on the short grass behind her and, for a while, she did not see the shadow which fell over her. But the shadow was there, dark and foreboding, and this time there was evil in the shadow and in the substance behind.

An unusual noise arrested the upward movement of her bow. She ceased her music and sprang to her feet, nervous and alert.

Before her stood her uncle with a face clouded and hard; beside him her cousin Lizbeth, a faint smile playing around the corners of her ruby mouth.

Colin Jackson held out his hand.

"Give these to me," he commanded.

Kathie's eyes held the ground and her lips trembled. The discovery she had so long dreaded had been made at last and, in her fear and dejection, she scarcely heard him.

"Do you hear me?" he thundered, "give these to me."

Slowly she handed over her precious violin and bow. Her uncle looked at them with a sneer, and then at her.

"So we have found out the secret place at last, you devil's bairn with your lady ways and your evil music; with your modest looks that hide the shame underneath. Thank God you are only my sister's child and not my own."

He searched around as if looking for someone.

"This is where you come on your midnight prowls, when decent folks are abed—is it? Setting the neighbourhood by the ears with stories and scandal and getting my place a bad name! Ay!—you may start, but that isn't all. This is where you get the books you hug in your bosom and hide among your bedclothes. This is where you play to your lovers, where your

witch's tunes make blackguards of decent men, making honest ranch-hands skulk in the woods like poachers or thieves. Like the fool you are,—you thought nobody knew?"

Kathie's blood ran cold at this torrent of abuse. Something seemed to be clasping over her heart. Her face grew terribly pale.

She had thought of the discovery of her innocent amusement, but she had not expected this, with its allusions, its insinuations, its horrors. She tried to speak in her defence, but it was long before the words came. The presence of her cousin—so cold and cynical—did not help her any.

"Don't, uncle,—don't," she wailed at last. "Please, oh, please stop! I cannot bear it. It is all wrong. Let me tell you. You will understand then. Oh!—don't look that way—believe what I say. I am not bad. I try so hard to be good and to do what is right. But I have nobody—nothing—oh! listen while I'd be telling you——"

"Not a word," he cried. "Do you want to make bad worse? Would you dare to set your voice against the men in the Valley who have been watching you for months? against Lizbeth here who sleeps in the same bed and uses the senses the Lord has given her? Would you cry 'liar' to the whole Countryside? This is the way you repay respectable-living folks who have brought you here and kept you when you might have been living in some Poor-house in Dublin or Belfast. If Lizbeth there had half your shame, she would run and hide her face, and you would try to brazen it out.

"Get out of my sight!" he cried at last in mad fury. "Go away before I lose control of myself! This for your damned music!" he continued, as she turned to go. With a snap he broke the violin across his knee.

Kathie screamed like a wounded animal and ran back to her uncle in a futile effort to save her instrument.

"My violin, oh my poor, innocent violin!" she cried, clutching desperately at the broken piece which was still in her uncle's hand.

Jackson threw her off savagely and with a quick movement struck her across the face with the violin bow, leaving a burning weal on her cheek. The act was sharp and sudden, but it was scarcely done when Colin Jackson measured his length upon the ground and Alick Simpson was standing over him the picture of incarnate vengeance, his body poised, his eyes glittering and his face pale and terribly calm.

He had noticed the stoppage of the music and had heard the angry words which had followed; and arrived just in time to witness the vicious blow.

"God forgive me for striking so miserable coward as you," he cried. "I heard your lying insinuations, and forebore, but I will not see that young lady abused—not if she is your slave as well as your relative."

Colin Jackson was a heavy and a powerful man, but he seemed to have little desire to match his strength against his unexpected adversary. Assisted by Lizbeth, he rose, blustering still.

"Damn you! I'll even up for that blow, you young upstart! Yes—if I have to hound you from Vernock," he shouted. "You and your hero-acting!—striking a man twenty years older than yourself! A fine example you are to the boys and girls you teach!"

"You struck *her*," put in Alick Simpson quietly.

"What if I did?" returned the rancher. "Who gave you the right to interfere? Mind your school and your brats, and leave me and mine alone. Anyway, your shame should be deeper than hers, for the world you live in teaches you that it is wrong to meet a young woman in the woods unknown to her people."

Kathie stepped in between imperiously.

"Please go away," she said. "Your assistance is not required here. Your high-handed interference was quite unnecessary."

She looked coldly at Alick Simpson, and he saw in her face that which told him that it would be better for him and for her that he obey her request.

"Ay!—go! And never set foot on my land again," interrupted Jackson, "or I'll take a delight in setting the dogs on you. If that doesn't do, some of the lads about the ranch will be glad to kick you off the place."

The school-master strode up to the blustering farmer.

"I'm not afraid of your threats, Mister Man, and I'm not going because you have made them. Any fool can threaten. I am going simply because she has asked me. A little bit of advice—when you want to use your fists, send for me. Use them on a man who can strike back—not on a woman."

He raised his hat and went slowly away.

During the week that followed, Alick Simpson's mind reverted, again and again, to the incident which had taken place on Jackson's ranch, and it was with a tingling feeling of indignation. Try as he liked he could attach little blame to himself for what had happened; yet he would have borne all willingly to have saved the hapless girl whose only fault seemed to be a love for the higher and nobler things of life, which the Jacksons, in their narrow, selfish groove, never would be able to understand let alone attain.

Time and again, in flights of imagery, he surprised himself, as he wove round this strange and beautiful creature fairy thoughts and fancies, for she appeared so much a part of the elements which surrounded her, and yet so very much apart from them.

He did not blame her for the manner in which she had taken his interference, for the cold dismissal she had given him; for well he knew—as Colin Jackson had said—that it was really no affair of his, and it would probably have been better had he turned the opposite way at the beginning and minded his own business.

But, at times, his blood boiled at the insults that this girl's relatives were heaping on her. The whole incident annoyed the even trend of his reasonings, and he tried hard to thrust it from his thoughts, for he was a busy man, and never before had he dipped into the domestic troubles of his neighbours.

It was common talk in Vernock that Alick Simpson had the makings of a bachelor of stubborn calibre. Since his coming there, four years before, he had resisted the charms and wiles of the ladies of the town to an extent bordering upon eccentricity. He was always courteous, always considerate, always deferential; but, although many had tried to get below the unruffled surface of his nature, none had ever succeeded.

Give Alick Simpson boys—rough, uncouth, uncared-for boys—and he would ask nothing better. His whole young life had been engrossed in making men of boys. And he had hopes that in the years to come his success would be stamped on the young farmers, and the business and professional men around him, who, but for his interest and encouragement, might have had to labour for a pittance as many of their fathers had had to do before them.

Little wonder then that he felt uneasy and perturbed when the vision of this dark-eyed, black-haired, country girl, with her hauteur and her passion for music, arose amid the calm of his everyday life.

As Saturday neared again, he found himself restless and anxious; and, earlier than was his wont, he was out on the Ordlake Road and making up over the hill toward the woods, where he had listened so often to the music which he expected never to hear again. He sat down and waited in forced patience. He heard the lowing of the cattle in the hollow, and, hidden among the foliage, he watched them come up over the hill. He looked beyond them for a glimpse of the girl who had so occupied his thoughts. But a pang of keen disappointment shot through him, for instead of her he had hoped for, came riding vigorously her voluptuous cousin, dressed plainly and suitably for her work, but moulded into her clothes—more like a goddess in appearance than a farmer's lass. Her cheeks glowed with health and her teeth shone in the sun from between her parted lips as she urged the animals along with a shout and a whirl of her riding whip.

The very sight of her would have been a delight to most men, but, to Alick Simpson in his then state of mind, she was merely a woman, a name,—nothing more.

Unobserved by her, he turned away. There was rage in his heart again for it was evident to him that Kathie was now no longer trusted out of sight of the farm-house.

He counselled with himself what was best to do. He thought of going boldly to the house to inquire for her, but he foresaw how foolish such an act would be and he knew it would only tend to bring fresh insult upon himself and probably upon her as well. So he wended his way slowly homeward, displeased with himself and at loggerheads with everything around him.

Next day, the longing to see her, if only for a moment, seized him stronger than ever, and the afternoon found him once more in the shelter of the wood above the farm-house.

Down in the valley, he could hear the rattle of loosened chains and the slippery scramble and clip-clop of cloven feet on the wet, stone flooring of the barn, for the day was one of those, quiet and still, when the slightest sound carries for miles.

A few minutes later, and the heads and bodies of the cows appeared over the crest of the hill.

Alick scarcely dared to look further, his fear of fresh disappointment was so keen; but, with a great effort, he did so at last. And his heart bounded like a school-boy's, all his melancholia fled and his blood pulsed and danced in his excitement, for she—the cause of all his mental tumult—was there, agile and beautiful as ever, hurrying along the cattle and humming softly to herself as she came riding on.

With an almost uncontrollable impatience he watched her pass on to the range, and, when she had gone, he vaulted the fence and seated himself on the mound, for he felt sure she would come that way, if only for a moment, to linger in the sweet, sad memory of the pleasures that were past.

He was reading disjointedly when she returned. He did not look up, but he heard her dismount and he felt she was near him.

She stood, shy and undecided, then slowly and gracefully she walked over to where he sat. He sprang up and stood before her, pulling his hat from his head. There was an unusual pallor on his face and his eager eyes shone brightly.

Alexander Simpson was not the man to be at a loss for words—although at all times he spoke with reserve—but he was speechless in the presence of this wonderful country-maid.

Her hair hung over her shoulder in a heavy plait, its jet-black, straying ends tumbling across her white bosom in deep contrast. Her plain, white blouse was turned down around the collar for greater freedom and her neck rose out from it full and beautiful. Her bared arms were partly hidden behind her, and her dark eyes held to the ground demurely. At last she raised them slowly and they met his. Neither one looked away nor was ashamed of the liberty taken. Then Kathie spoke softly and sweetly, her voice trembling a little nervously.

"I did not know that you were here," she said. "You know, you should not have come."

"Yes,—I know!" replied the school-master, finding voice finally. "I tried—you cannot tell how hard I tried—but I simply could not stay away. You have no idea how much I have missed your music; how I have missed the pleasant thought of you being somewhere around while—while I was over there.

"I was here yesterday and, when your cousin came instead of you, I could not contain myself for the fear that there might be something wrong. I came again to-day, determined on—I know not what. But I am glad to see that all my fears were groundless and that all is well with you."

"There was extra work to do in the dairy yesterday and my cousin kindly volunteered to deprive me of the little pleasure I enjoy in bringing the cattle up here," explained Kathie, looking away from the blue eyes that were searching hers so intently.

"I wished to tell you," continued Alick, "how sorry I am for my impetuosity last time we met. I had no right to interfere. I should not have done so, but I could not stand idly by and witness what I did. There was something controlling, something impelling me, and I could not help myself. Even now, so far as your uncle is concerned, I am not altogether contrite. If my interference has brought no further trouble upon you, I do not regret the blow I struck in your defence. Can I hope for a full forgiveness—from you?"

Kathie sighed and looked at him again with renewed interest.

"There is nothing to forgive," she said, "for, after all, you merely acted as I would have expected a man—a real man—to act."

Her voice faltered slightly. "I can assure you, nothing more was said to me by my people. In fact, it has made me almost afraid, the way they have allowed the matter to drop. I have been kept close to the house—that is all. All—except my violin, my music! It is gone, and, oh!—I loved it so much."

She appeared to be speaking beyond Alick Simpson, and he stood by quietly, not caring to break into her sorrow. She came to herself again and turned away confused. "Oh, what does it matter!—I have no right to burden you with my foolish troubles. It is really of no moment at all," she went on bravely, tossing her head and smiling in forced diffidence.

The school-teacher paused a little, then his eagerness carried him away.

"May I bring you a new violin to replace the old?" he asked. "It would be a pity to smother up your talents for so trivial a cause. And—I was partly to blame for its loss, you know. Besides, I have selfish reasons too, for I have missed your music more than you can ever guess."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Kathie in perturbation. "Your motive may be—I know it is—entirely generous; but, it would not be right." She dropped into her little Irish expressions, as she did once in a long while. "I couldn't be thinking of it, at all, at all. The violin that I used to play on was bought from old Rube, the Jew, and, although I loved it dearly, it was old and inexpensive, and the loss of it does not matter—at least, not so very much. There must be no more music—that is all it means," she concluded. And she sighed again and turned away.

"Oh,—how foolish I am! I had almost forgotten," she remarked suddenly, facing him again and placing her hand in her bosom. "Here is a book of yours. I have had it for ever so long. I enjoyed it so much. I read it over and over and over again; and now, I have brought it back."

As Alick Simpson took it from her he could feel its soft leather covers suffused with the warmth from her body.

"You will not deny me this privilege?" he asked almost sadly, offering her in exchange the book he had been making a pretence of reading on her approach.

"I will not," she answered with a smile, taking it from him with both hands, "because I cannot deny myself so great a pleasure."

She turned away once more, as he stood gazing at her, solemn and silent-stricken.

A distant "coo-ee" floated up from the farm-house.

"That is my cousin calling," said Kathie. "And we are standing right on the ridge, where all the world can see. I have stayed far too long already. I must go now. Good-bye!"

Her black eyelashes brushed her cheeks and she held out her hand in frank friendliness.

Alick took it in his. His eyes grew soft and his heart beat furiously.

"Coo-ee! Coo-ee!" louder and more imperative flew up the call again from the steading.

"Tell me," he asked anxiously, "may I come some time again and talk with you?"

"Oh,—no, no!" she replied, as warm tints came and went in her face. "I could not forbear from speaking this time, because, because, you misunderstood. But we must not meet any more. You must not think of it. I have your book. I shall read it then I shall place it here again for you. Good-bye!"

Alick released her hand hopelessly and she ran over to her horse where it was cropping grass. She threw the reins over its head, vaulted into the saddle, shook the reins and galloped off.

Lizbeth was waiting for Kathie at the door of the barn. She had been a distant witness of part of the meeting on the ridge and her tongue loosened as soon as her cousin got within earshot.

"For a new-comer, you are making great progress with the men," she sneered. "And the Principal at that,—a man who

should have more sense than waste his own time, and yours."

Kathie was stung to retort, an unusual thing for her and a big surprise to Lizbeth.

"He simply passed a few words and gave me a book to read," she returned. "If that is all the comings and goings you ever have with men, you won't be going very far astray."

"What do you mean?" cried Lizbeth suspiciously. "Spit it out, and don't be hinting and hedging." Then she laughed lightly. "It's all right, Kathie," she went on in a more friendly tone. "It is your own affair, after all. You keep on and mind your own business; and I'll mind mine. You can have as many fellows as you have fingers for all I care, so long as you don't interfere between Bob Crawford and me,—see! Only, take my advice—keep them all out of sight of father Jackson;—that is if you want to keep out of trouble."

This change of mood astonished Kathie and put her on her guard.

"Kathie," continued Lizbeth, "Bob Crawford said he might come down to the dairy to see me to-morrow afternoon. I like Bob—just as much as you seem to like Simpson."

Kathie flushed indignantly.

"Now—keep your mouth shut and don't say it. You make me tired. I like Crawford as much as dad hates him and Alick Simpson too,—and that's saying a whole lot. Say, Kathie,—when Bob comes, you beat it for a while and leave us to ourselves. Two's company," she added, with a knowing smile, as if to say, "We understand each other."

Kathie did not understand. But she made up her mind then and there that she would keep well out of the way of the lovers.

When she turned to go indoors, she looked across the orchard and up the slope, and she saw, still standing on the ridge where she had left him, silhouetted against the sky, the tall, motionless figure of the school-teacher. He was day-dreaming over this strange creature he had chanced upon—wondering where she had received her education, what her environment had been and how she could ever conform to her present condition of life.

He knew it must have been necessity which had driven her to make a home with the Jacksons. He knew the relationship. He had heard stray patches of her history down in Vernock and recounted by his talkative landlady, but all of it garbled and unreliable.

He was interested, more interested than he dared to admit even to himself, and something deeper than mere interest seemed to be catching hold of him.

Kathie had told him they must not meet again, and he respected her too much to thrust himself upon her, but nevertheless he closed his hands and tightened his lips, and made a resolution that some day he would find out for himself all about her.

CHAPTER FIVE

At the Toot of the Flute

The few weeks that followed were dreary and unsatisfactory for Alick Simpson. For the time being he lost all interest in the affairs of the town; even his interest for his scholars flagged. Time and again he had to draw himself up as he found himself dreaming at his desk while his pupils worked at their lessons. More and more in his spare hours, he sought the country, the hills and the solitude, but always keeping well away from sight and hail of Jackson's Ranch, in deference to Kathie's expressed wish. He seemed to have forgotten that a book of his was in Kathie's keeping and that he had almost promised to go to the mound and exchange another for it.

And Kathie lost interest too. In those hot days, when the sun beat down relentlessly, when the grass dried up and the sunflowers were no more, when everything growing would have died but for the artificial irrigation, when blossoms turned to fruit and gradually ripened for the harvest, there seemed to be nothing that would liven the weary drudgery of Kathie's dairy work; nothing to rouse her thoughts to the level to which they aspired: nothing but the monotony of the common-everyday.

She had taken Alick Simpson's book with her every afternoon and had left it on the mound as she passed with the cattle to the range. She had returned, always full of hope and expectancy, only to find the little volume still lying where she had placed it. With a sigh she would pick it up, put it in her bosom again and continue toward the farm.

But one time, as she sat down on the ridge in a deeper despondency than usual, thinking and dreaming of the days gone by; unbidden tears came to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She brushed them away almost in anger, then she threw herself prone on the ground, pulling nervously at the tufts of grass by her head. Something hard caught in her fingers. She picked it out, sat up and looked at it curiously. With a sudden cry she pressed it to her breast, then she kissed it passionately over and over again. In a moment more she was lying again upon the turf, sobbing as if her heart were breaking, as she clutched in her hand the bridge of her broken violin.

When her emotion had spent itself and she was prone with her head on her arm in that drowsy, tranquil, half-way place between consciousness and insensibility, her mind slowly became awakened by the clear, high-pitched, unfamiliar lilt of some strange bird. Almost all the birds had been strange to her at first, but gradually she had grown to know each by his lilt. This note, however, was a new one to her. She roused herself and listened intently to the quivering, flute-like tones.

The music was too varied for even a meadowlark; too high and clear for a mavis. As she strained her ears, the lilt changed suddenly into a thousand little trills and ecstasies.

Kathie's curiosity gained the mastery. She rose quickly and tip-toed to the fence, over which she clambered silently.

The strange whistling continued, coming from somewhere in the density of the firs. She took the broad, grassy path between the trees. Not a sound did she make as she glided along over the springy turf. On and on she went, peering cautiously about her. Ever the whistling seemed to keep the same distance away from her, luring her on and still on until she began to fancy her warbler a will-o'-the-wisp. She reached almost half-way along the trail, when the whistling ceased. She stood stock-still, all her senses on the alert; her eyes searching the shrubbery. Then, with a fresh burst, the melodious notes in weird, trilling, little ripples burst out from the trees on Kathie's left.

Full of curiosity, she parted the bushes and branches, and pushed her way through, careful lest a twig should crackle under her feet. As she worked along, there came into her view a small clearing, carpeted by short grass and flat as a lawn.

An extraordinary sight presented itself to her astonished gaze as she stood there hidden among the foliage.

In the centre of the lawn, with his back to her, sat a man, his knees bent and his feet crossed in the fashion of an Indian snake-charmer. He was playing softly on a flute; his head was swinging slowly from side to side in time with the rhythm of his melody. Scurrying around him, or sitting upright on their hind legs, were hundreds of squirrels, fathers, mothers and old grandfathers and grandmothers of all sizes, children right down to the tiniest of baby squirrels. They seemed entirely without fear of the player and some of the more daring were even jumping over his feet and legs as if he were one of themselves.

The trees and the air were alive with numberless birds—robins, larks, orioles, chickadees, finches, cat-birds and sparrows, all bursting into song time and again as if to show the flutist how he ought to trill and play.

Kathie watched in breathless interest, held by the peculiar music and by the beauty and novelty of the scene. As she watched, she noticed the flap of the man's jacket pocket rise suddenly and from the depth a little squirrel popped up its inquisitive head and bobbed back again. It was so unexpected, so amusing, so ludicrous, that Kathie vented an exclamation of surprise.

The next moment, she felt as if she could have bitten out her tongue, for the effect of her ejaculation was instantaneous. Fawn and brown flashed in all directions and in the quickness of a thought not a squirrel or a bird was to be seen anywhere near.

The flutist sprang to his feet and darted a look around, annoyance showing in his face.

Kathie gasped.

The Vernock school-teacher was standing only a few yards from her.

From his back and from the huddled position he had been assuming on the grass, she had not recognized him before. Now, with alarm and confusion, she was overwhelmed. She drew back to screen herself the more, but the dead branches on the ground crackled and snapped about her. Alick Simpson came forward to where she was standing. There was no escape for her. With her eyes wide, she ceased to breathe. She held her hand to her thumping heart. The bushes parted and the school-teacher pushed through. As his eyes fell upon her, his face went deathly pale and he staggered back a step or two.

"Kathie!" he exclaimed.

He hardly knew that he had spoken. But Kathie heard, and a flashing thought of wonderment went through her as to how he had learned her name.

With her hat swinging in her hand, she came forward into the open; out of the shadows into the sunshine. She hung her head and blushed as she stood before him.

"I am very, very sorry, sir," she said demurely. "I have frightened all your little playmates away."

She looked up suddenly at him. There was the faintest twinkle of merriment in her eyes.

Alick Simpson regained some of his wonted composure.

"Oh, never mind about that," he replied. "They will return as soon as they know a lady visitor has called to see them."

"They may—and again—they may not," returned Kathie. "But—a moment ago you were angry with me. I could read it in your face."

"Angry!" he interposed in surprise. "Oh, no, no!—anything but angry. A little astonished at first maybe; then a little taken aback;—but—angry with you—" He smiled sadly. "Never angry with you!"

His eyes spoke his admiration for the simple but pretty picture of feminine daintiness before him; just a little disconcerting to Kathie, who had expected instead a reprimand for her intrusion.

"But—really—" she went on, "I was not aware that you were here. And now that I know you are not angry, I shall leave you to your music and to your—your squirrels and birds."

"And, if I maintain that I am still angry—very angry?" he queried.

Kathie looked at him curiously.

"Oh!—I might be constrained to wait a few moments until your anger melted," she said.

"Please stay then," he insisted. "Sit down upon my green table cloth and be introduced to my friends. And—talk to me for a little while; I have so wanted to hear you talk. I have wished to feel, truly, that you are not angry with me for my past

interference in your affairs. I have been unable to find this out, really and truly, for, you know, you forbade me."

There was something compelling, cajoling, in the school-teacher's voice; something akin to the music of his flute; something earnest and sincere; something that seemed to be completely breaking down the cold reserve that Kathie had for so long hedged around herself.

With a smile, she sat down at his bidding, clasping her hands over her knees. Alick squatted by her side.

"You are very kind," he remarked.

"Not kind," she said, "selfish!"

"Why so?"

"Because there are none to talk intelligently with down at the ranch and nothing to talk about but dollars and cents; crops, cattle and milk. It does get so wearisome. Why!—it seems ages to me since I read a book even. The good fairies do not leave books on the mound now, as they used to do."

She raised her eyes to Alick's and a smile started at the corners of her mouth. She was mistress of the situation.

"But, you know, you told me we must never meet again."

Kathie sighed.

"Yes!—and here I am."

"Oh,—this is simply an accident," put in the school-teacher. "But—tell me, how did you discover this secret fairy glade?"

"Well, when I was coming back from the range, I sat down on the mound. I got to thinking of my poor old violin and the happy times I used to have with it. I was getting very, very disconsolate, when I heard an unfamiliar whistling. I wished, being of an inquiring disposition, to discover what wonderful bird had taken up his abode in the woods without first consulting me."

Alick laughed.

"Yes!—and you found the wonderful bird;—a sort of whistling crow—very rare in these parts."

Kathie laughed in turn, and as she did so all her shyness flew away and she felt completely at ease.

"Hardly a crow, Mr. Simpson—a piper—a modern, pied piper."

"Explain?"

"Well—first you lured the squirrels, instead of the orthodox rats, with your piping: next—me. I wonder how many other charmed creatures are now on their way here. But really—I did not know you were such a musician."

"Not a musician," returned the school-teacher, his blue-gray eyes still searching and admiring Kathie's elfish beauty, "merely a tooter on the flute!"

"Ah, but it *is* music. All harmonious sounds, whether they be the rippling of the water, the rustling of the wind in the trees, the thunder in the heavens, the ring of a hammer on an anvil, the soul-searching vibrations of a violin, or—the tooting on a flute—all are music to me. And, oh!—how I hunger for music. Won't you please play again, Mister Music-man, before I go? Won't you show me how you charm your agile friends from their hiding places in the trees?"

"I am afraid that will be quite a hard matter. They are most timid before strangers. It took me months and months of patient persevering to make them understand that I meant no harm to them. But—if you keep perfectly still, I'll try."

He put the flute to his lips and blew a few, high, staccato notes, then three prolonged, mellow blasts. This he repeated several times.

The higher branches of the trees immediately became animated, as small brown heads with bright curious eyes peeped

out from everywhere. But no effort of the whistler would induce them to descend from their high altitudes. Alick Simpson tried again and again; every kind of musical artifice of which he was capable; but all to no purpose.

At last Kathie sighed and rose to her feet.

"It is useless, Mr. Simpson," she said. "They do not love me or trust me as they do you. I congratulate you," she smiled, "for animals are said to be discerning, discriminating,—very particular in their choice of friends."

Her eyes lit up and twinkled mischievously.

"I have enjoyed myself immensely. It does one good to tumble on something of this nature so unexpectedly. But—I must be off. Already, I have stayed longer than I ought to have stayed."

The schoolmaster sprang up also.

"You will allow me to see you to the edge of the wood?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered.

He pushed ahead, parting the bushes and branches, and clearing the way for her. Twice she gave him her hand for assistance across some fallen timber and twice he thrilled at her touch; while his ears sang at the sweetness of her voice.

Soon they were together on the level trail between the trees, and only then did Alick Simpson realize how tall she was—merely a paltry inch shorter than himself—and how graceful!

On nearing the log fence she held out her hand to him and smiled, looking into his eyes. "Good-bye," she said. "And—thank you."

He kept her hand in his longer than he felt he should have done. He wished to speak to her of something, but he dared not. Yet his eyes declined to remain dumb and they spoke the message that was in his heart. He bowed to Kathie, then stood silently looking after her as she went before him.

At the fence Kathie stopped, turned slowly and came back to him. Her cheeks were aglow, her eyes were bright, her bosom was rising and falling riotously in sympathy with her feelings.

"I know what you wish to ask, Mr. Simpson, and it is kind of you to hold back. But I also wish it, for I feel we have so much in common, so much to talk about with little or no opportunity for conversation.

"After milking time on Saturday, I shall be at the clump of trees away over there by the Lake. You know the place." She pointed with her finger. "Over yonder! There it is vast and free, with trees behind and the open lake before; with no disturbers but the crows and the jackdaws quarrelling over the berries on the bushes."

The words fell on Alick Simpson's ears like the tinkle of silver chimes, and before he could speak she had climbed over the fence.

He heard her call her horse. He heard it whinny in answer, as it trotted forward. He saw her spring into the saddle and disappear over the crest of the hill.

CHAPTER SIX

The Tryst

"You have come," cried Alick Simpson, rising from a log upon which he had been sitting in the shade of the clump of trees by the lakeside, and holding out his hands in open welcome. "How glad I am and how afraid I was that something would interfere."

Kathie's hand rested in his for a brief moment as she returned his look of undisguised pleasure.

"Nothing could have kept me away to-day," she laughed, "for you know this engagement was of my making; and an Irish girl dearly loves to plan once in a while."

"Yes! it was your making and my suggesting," returned Alick. "I wish all such suggestions of mine were as fruitful. But now that you are here—shall we take a row across the lake in the face of the breeze? There is a boat down there on the beach. Or shall we sit upon this old log and talk as fancy leads us?"

"Oh! let us sit and talk," decided Kathie. "That, most of all, is what I came for. I have no one to talk to over there on the ranch and you know that a woman, especially if she is from Ireland, must talk at times or die."

"And sometimes a man must listen to the melody of a woman's voice or lose his reason," replied the school-teacher. "So —you must talk and I shall listen."

Kathie sat down on the log from which Alick had so recently risen. He stood beside her, his elbow resting on the trunk of a tree.

"What shall I talk about to you that can possibly interest you?" asked Kathie, looking up at him.

"Tell me of yourself," he cried impetuously, "nothing can be of more interest to me than that. Tell me of the home you knew across the sea; of the people you met; of the life you led. Tell me who endowed you with the manners of a lady; who dropped the cloak of a master-musician across your shoulders; whose beauty it is that lingers in your face. Tell me of those people, that I may remember them in my quiet moments."

Kathie looked up and blushed at his apparent seriousness, then, as she sat there, with her hands clasped before her and her dark eyes looking to the horizon, she told him in simple words of her baby days; of her home by the sea; of the love of her mother; of the genius of her father which was smothered in his physical weakness; of their happiness and their poverty. She laughed as she recounted the pranks they played, and tears welled in her eyes over her childhood losses and disappointments.

Alick watched her intently, joining in her pleasure and sympathising with her as she told of her sorrows. His heart swelled in his breast and a great longing filled the soul of him. Her frankness carried him away, her agile beauty captivated him and the hunger in her eyes drew him as a magnet.

He did not interrupt her as she talked on. She seemed almost to have forgotten his presence in the thrall of her reminiscences.

She told him how her father had taught her to play on the violin hour by hour, day by day, until at last he had had to confess that he had imparted to her all he knew and that the pupil was now master of the teacher: how, one day, there came a stout, well-dressed, showy, fancy-waist-coated and gold-ringed individual, offering her father and her more wealth than they had known for years if they would only go on tour, and how she had held out against it, because her father's health was gone and could not stand the travel and further because she would never prostitute the art she so loved for the sake of monetary gain, even if, by so doing, she should be thought old-fashioned and should starve in the process.

Her voice became low and sorrowful as she dwelt on the last sad days of all, when her father and then her mother were taken away from her and she was left alone.

When all was told she sat quiet and still. Her bosom rose and fell unevenly and she looked away before her with

swimming eyes.

The school-teacher sat down on the ground at her feet and looked into her face in heartfelt sympathy.

"Kathie——"

His hand clasped over hers. She did not move.

They remained in silence for a while. Overhead, the crows cawed in protest at the intrusion of the humans.

"My poor, poor lass!" he whispered at last. "Now I know what the wistful look in your eyes means. You have sounded the depth of all the sorrows, although to one so young in years as you are life should only be beginning and sorrow should be merely a conjecture.

"And life *is* only just beginning, Kathie—for you and for me, if only you care to make it so.

"I did not mean to speak—not yet. But the craving of my heart will not be silent. I love you—oh, how I love you!—I, who have never held a woman to my breast; I who have grown to manhood and am only now beginning to understand this great and wonderful gift from God. I have loved you since the first sweet strains of your tender outpoured feelings sang through your violin in my ears. Ay! I loved you ages and ages before that, only I did not understand. I love you now, Kathie, with all my heart and all my soul, with the strength of my body and all the power of my mind; with the great heart-love of my mother, with all the wild and wayward blood of my forefathers which now throbs so fiercely in my veins.

"Kathie! Kathie! How sweet your name is! Tell me—tell me that my first love and my only love is not to be a lonely love?

"We could be married right away. Or I can wait your own sweet will; ay! I can wait twenty years if only I know that you will love me and be mine in the end.

"Speak to me, dear heart, tell me you also—you also love.

"Forgive me if I have been daring," he went on softly, "if I have been daring in the great and overpowering love that would dare all, and do all, for you. Kathie—Kathie—Kathie!" he murmured.

She rose slowly from her seat, extending her hand and raising him with her. Her eyes were wide with sorrow and dread, and her white throat trembled.

"You should not have spoken to me so," she said in mournful tones, looking at him intently. "It has spoiled everything. And,—I have been so very, very happy—oh, so happy. But it's always that way with me," she added almost bitterly, "my happiness never lasts.

"You are a few years older than I am, but I seem to have lived as long as you have. Surely—surely you must know that what you have asked, that the rosy picture you have painted, can never be for us. I have told you of myself and of my past, because I feared the coming of this and I wished to stay it; to warn you if I could."

Alick held out his hands in protest.

"No, no!" she continued quickly, "you must listen further.

"I am only a stray child—an odd number—one of the many in this world. My father was a strolling player and my mother a poor country woman cast adrift by her people because she loved. But you—you are different. You have won honour and respect, you have your work, your boys. You must think of them, and nothing must ever interfere or put one little blot, not even of gossip, upon the name and fame which you have won for yourself in this Province; for already—oh! I know it!—already you are reckoned the foremost educationalist in the Province, although your educational methods are considered by many as revolutionary.

"Mr. Simpson, I know my own folly, for I am simply a dreamer, just a foolish little dreamer. But you must forgive me—and forget me."

Alick Simpson hung his head, and a softened look came into Kathie's eyes.

"Oh!" she supplicated with an intensity of feeling, "can't you see—can't you understand? I have been brought here because I was homeless and friendless, and for many years to come I must work for the people who have taken me in and cared for me. You, yourself, have seen the wildness of my uncle's anger, you know the strength of my cousin's dislike—but still, they are all I have. I owe something to them, and I must be loyal.

"I am young. My uncle's right to be my guardian is the right of relationship. You know, also, he would never consent to a friendship between you and me. Why—he has forbidden even that we should see each other again. Please, please forget me. Let me leave you and see you no more. Try to find someone in your own sphere—and there must be someone who could be all to you that a wife should be.

"I must go now—good-bye, my own, dear, good friend."

She turned from him. But he ran after her, catching her wrists in his strong hands.

"Kathie—my Kathie!" he called fiercely, "do not go. You must not, you shall not go. It would kill me now. There is something in your eyes that bids me hope and those eyes of yours could never lie if they tried to."

Her eyelashes brushed her cheeks and her breath came fast.

She was melting in his hands. He led her back gently to the old log, and she did not seek to resist.

"You have told me your history and you have spoken of your position and mine. Sit down, my sweet—and let me tell you what is known to one man only in this great Continent. Then you shall judge which of us is the more unworthy."

Obedient and silent, she sat down. And he stood beside her by the tree.

"Not so very long ago," he commenced, "there lived in the North of Scotland a proud Squire who could trace his lineage for six hundred years. All the broad acres for miles around, further than human eye could scan, were his.

"He wooed and married one of the first ladies in the land—a tender, noble woman with the heart of an angel.

"The Squire was a gay, pleasure-loving spend-thrift who in his later years became a drunkard—and worse. Bit by bit his estates became mortgaged. His wife's fortune was swept away with that of his own, swallowed up in paying for his banquetting and his gambling debts. At last, she died—broken-hearted—leaving a husband and an only son, both driving headlong to ruin.

"What the father had become, he taught his son to be; and, with his father's blood in his veins and the example of his father's wild orgies ever before him, he outran his sire in all that was evil.

"When the sire died—the aftermath of a terrible dissipation—his fortune, and the vast lands which had taken centuries to build up and the blood of a hundred heroes to cement and hold, were gone—and the son was left penniless and without a friend.

"For a time, the shock of all this steadied the young man, and he tried hard to live as a gentleman should. He succeeded in winning the heart and hand of one of the sweetest and gentlest of God's creations. How it ever came about, only the Great Architect of the Universe can tell, for the debauches of the son and the father were known broadcast throughout the land.

"With his hands and his head, the son worked honestly and soberly for two years, and happiness was his in a little cottage in a country town. But, one day, be was blamed for the act of another and was dismissed with ignominy from his employment.

"That night he arrived home crazed with drink—and never again was he known to be sober. The little home in the country was broken up; the slums in the city became their habitation.

"The tender young wife faded like an early flower nipped by the frost in Spring. Lying on a bundle of straw, in a dark corner of a dismal room, she passed away, leaving a little son whimpering at her side for the warmth and comfort his mother could no longer give; while that little boy's father was reeling through the streets in mental oblivion.

"That baby's first nutriment was gin and water fed through a bottle by a drunken parent.

"Next day, the body of the father was found floating on the muddy waters of the Firth.

"The child was found, cold and almost dead. He was cared for by a kindly woman, who, although already nourishing her own infant, had still a little to spare for a poor, orphan waif.

"A noble soldier—who still lives to witness the results of his kindness—heard the story and took an interest in the bairn. He saw to its proper upbringing and to its education, never for a moment forgetting his self-imposed charge, although, at times, serving his country at its uttermost outposts. He made a man of this little foundling—a man with a heart that is ever ready in the service of every child that breathes.

"The grandsire of my story was the well-known Alexander Simpson of Glen Uiske; the suicide was his son. And I—I was the orphan babe."

Alick seated himself on the log by the side of Kathie and his earnest face was close to hers.

For a time they sat thus. Then Alick spoke again.

"Kathie, dearest.—I have nothing to offer you but myself. I am descended from God-knows-what; but this I do know,—I love you dearly and I want you for my very own. With me, yours cannot be the ancestral castle and it shall not be the drunkard's hovel. I can offer you the happiness of a home in this great and glorious West, a home set up by honest toil, where neither the temptations of the castle nor the horrors of the hovel shall ever penetrate, where happiness shall be our watchword and love our very life."

Suddenly, with a wild cry which was caught up by the hovering birds as they circled wide, Kathie threw her arms around Alick's neck.

"Oh!—I don't care—I don't care," she sobbed. "I love you—I love you. You are mine, Alick, you were always mine."

She laid her head on his shoulder and wept quietly.

Alick stroked her hair until she became calm again.

"My little girl! My dear little girl!" he crooned.

She raised her head and her eyes looked into his. She took his face in her hands and she kissed him on the lips.

"Now, Kathie, sweetheart," said Alick at last, "however unpleasant the task may be, I must tell your uncle of this."

But dread showed again in Kathie's face. In those sweet moments she had forgotten the people who claimed her almost body and soul.

"Oh, no, Alick!" she said. "Please,—not yet! Leave us alone with our love for a while—just you and I together in this!

"You must know that my uncle will never agree to any proposal you may make regarding me and that I must do his bidding in this or wait until I reach the age when I can follow the dictates of my own heart with a free will and a clear conscience. That was what my father taught me, and, above all things, I wish to live up to my father's teachings, for he was kind and good, and he always knew what was best.

"Alick, my love, these years will not be lost, for although you and I must not be seen together with the frequency that awakens scandal, we can still meet now and again out here by the lake or up there by the wood.

"My work is hard and my burdens are sometimes greater than I feel I can bear, because no one at the ranch has any love or friendship to give me; but there goes with it, all the same, a glorious health that I never knew until I came to this wonderful Okanagan Valley. Why!—when you saw me first I was pale and thin and worn; the suggestion of a dread disease clung around me like a shroud. That has all gone now. My cheeks glow, my arms are full and firm, my body is supple and strong. It has surely been worth it all, Alick;—and more besides. And, I must stay by the ranch yet a little while, if only to secure and insure for all time—for you and for me—the health to which I can now lay claim."

She laid her hand on his shoulder.

"You will not be impetuous,—Alick. You will wait until—until I am ready."

"Why, yes, my darling, I promise that," he answered quickly, with a merry laugh. "I know I have your love, and nothing else matters. I will wait until your own good time."

"Then it is a bargain between us," she cried gaily, "our first bargain. When my difficulties are all swept away and my conscience is clear, I will come to you, I will lay my hands on your broad shoulders, I will look into your eyes and I will say, 'Alick, my own, I am ready now.'" Her clear rippling laugh rang out as she concluded.

Alick caught her in his arms and sealed the compact.

"Now, my dear," he said, "that relentless sun is hurrying on his western journey and dipping as he goes. Before you leave me, though, I should like to do one service for you. You are a lonely young lady—you never have the companionship of a true and loving woman. I know one—the dearest, sweetest and most motherly woman I have ever met. She is getting on in years now and she has no children of her own. If I speak to her of you, will you visit her sometimes and make her your confidant? She would help you if ever you were worried about anything."

"Thanks, Alick! I shall, and gladly, for often I long for a lady friend in whom I can trust. Tell me who she is?"

"Her name is Mrs. Gray," he answered. "Her home is over there on the other side of the wood, at Broadacres. Her husband is Captain Gray, the finest gentleman that ever wore the King's uniform."

Kathie looked away without a word. Her face was solemn again.

"Why, Kathie dearest—what's wrong? Have I said anything to hurt you?"

She shook her head sadly.

"No, no!—but, of all places, I dare not go there. Captain Gray is considered by my uncle to be my uncle's greatest enemy. Surely you know that but for his coming when he did we would now be occupying Broadacres Ranch, instead of being where we are. My uncle was on the point of closing a deal for it on a rental basis, when Captain Gray stepped in and made a better offer. At least, that is how I understand it. And everyone knows that Broadacres is the finest Ranch in the Valley; and cheap at any price. Tom Semple left my uncle too, to be Captain Gray's Ranch-foreman; and everything has gone wrong with us since Tom left. My uncle detests the name of Captain Gray. He will not allow it to be spoken in the house. And it would rouse the demon in him if it ever came to his knowledge that I had visited there.

"Don't you worry about me, Alick. I shall be all right; no harm shall come to me. All the shadows will clear away when the sun comes up again in the morning."

They kissed each other tenderly, and Kathie left Alick with his newly-found happiness, nursing her own in a clamorous bosom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Storm Fiends

As time went on the work of the barn and dairy was left more and more in Kathie's expert hands. And she preferred it so, for it meant relying on her own judgment in the execution of her duties, without the continual dread of unnecessary interference.

True, she had the company of Lizbeth in the dairy now and again. But only when Lizbeth had an ulterior motive for being there.

The dairy was a favourite rendezvous for Bob Crawford during his clandestine visits. And, when he put in an appearance there, Kathie gladly surrendered her place and sought work elsewhere, and that without having to receive any eye-signals from her sly cousin.

Crawford was not allowed the privileges of a recognised suitor, for Colin Jackson had other and mere ambitious plans for his daughter's future.

Impoverished as the rancher was, he had never begrudged money when it meant dressing Lizbeth out as a lady, for he had constant hopes that sooner or later she would make a match with one or other of his more wealthy neighbours, a match which might relieve him of some of his pressing financial difficulties.

And it was because of this that Lizbeth and Crawford met in secret when and where they could. Often it was in the dairy, when they knew Colin Jackson would be out of the way for an hour or two. At times it was among the trees in the Avenue leading to Sir David Menteith's great home; and more than once Lizbeth had slipped out from her bedroom in the dead of night, when all the others were supposedly asleep, to keep company with Crawford by the lake or in the wood, when he happened to be in either direction on some night duty.

Crawford was a tall, broad-shouldered, thin-limbed, well set up young fellow. He had been in the Valley for a number of years and was well known. His picturesque garb and his easy swinging gait as he strode along, or his devil-may-care dash as he galloped on his horse, caused men as well as women to take a second look in his direction. He was swarthy skinned and dark eyed; and he wore that dash of don't-give-a-rip on his face that seldom fails to attract good women and bad alike to its owner. He was a good hearted fellow in the main and he had an inveterate love for animals. But his eyes and lips suggested a recklessness in morals, which, now and again, betrayed itself rather openly in an over-fondness for liquor. Crawford was a man whom a good woman might have moulded into a steady, honest husband, but Lizbeth Jackson was hardly the woman to work a reformation of any kind on anybody. And he would have been a daring man indeed who had attempted a prophecy on the outcome of this friendship which was so rapidly springing up between the pair.

All too quickly for Kathie, the summer days had flown and the autumn with its fading foliage and its golden sunsets had crept stealthily away in its wake, goaded from behind by the cold rain and chilling gusts of November.

The fields had long been stripped of their verdure and the fruit trees now stood up, stark and naked and gaunt, like an army of skeletons.

The apple harvest and the small fruits had been gathered, packed and shipped; the barns were full of grain and alfalfa; the hard work of the ranchers' busy season was over. And now, the first snow of the winter had arrived, strewing all around with a tiresome monotony of white—pure as a winding sheet. The dry snow had been falling steadily and heavily all over the Valley for twenty-four hours, and still there was no sign of an uplift.

The laden sky hung low overhead like a pall, as a penetrating wind from between the hills swirled around the outhouses with the mournful wail of a banshee. All other sounds were muffled or stifled by the oppression of the elements; and all humanity who could were gathered around their fireplaces for warmth and comfort.

Early that forenoon, Lizbeth had driven into Vernock when the roads were more passable. So far, she had not returned. As usual, Kathie was left to look after the cattle. All morning she had been busy in the barn, cleaning, milking and stall-feeding; all afternoon she had gone over the process again, in soul-wearying repetition. And now, in the dairy, her flagging energies were being concentrated in getting the milk ready for the evening distribution. She was working hard and rapidly, for the raw cold felt as if it were eating into her flesh and chilling her very heart. Her bare arms were red with exposure and little patches of skin were peeled from her fingers through contact with the clinging, frozen handles of the heavy, bottom-leaded milk-cans.

She straightened up her back at last with a sigh and rubbed at the dimmed, frosted glass of the window with her apron. She peered through at the storm, but her eyes could not penetrate the feathered veil which was driving in the teeth of the wind, hard against the window pane.

No other sounds disturbed the stillness, save her own laboured breathing and the echoing clang of her tin measure against the buckets and the irritating rattle of the tin cans on the cement flooring.

The dreary outlook, the ghostly silence, the loneliness and the gathering gloom sent a shiver through the scantily-clad girl. She set to work once more with augmented vigour, in her anxiety to be through with it all and to get to the warmth of the kitchen where she knew the cheery blaze of the open fire would soon counteract the effects of the cold on her drooping spirits.

Without warning, the dairy door flew back on its hinges, striking the wall in force as a rush of cold air swirled around the dairy. A tall figure strode in, caught the door quickly and swung it closed again full in the face of the storm. A shower of dry, powdery snow tumbled about him on to the floor.

Kathie looked up hurriedly from her work, and at a glance, even in the semi-darkness, she recognised the tall, sinewy form as that of Crawford, the police chief. Full well she knew that she was not the object of his visit, so she went on pouring the milk from the wooden buckets into the cans, setting the latter, when full, high up on the shelves above her.

Crawford turned down the collar of his coat and shook himself like a healthy animal. He pulled off his gloves and blew on his hands. Next he swung his arms and stamped his feet in an effort to accelerate his partially frozen circulation.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, "but that's a blizzard for you. The wind bites right through to the bone. I'm thinking, Liz, you will have your work cut out finding your way back to the kitchen. The snow is two feet deep if it's an inch."

"Phee-ugh!" he whistled in feigned surprise, as his eyes got accustomed to the altered light, "so it ain't Liz after all. It's the little Music Witch. If this ain't what I call real good luck!"

Kathie turned and faced him.

"Lizbeth went to Vernock this morning to make some purchases at The Hudson's Bay Store. We expected her back by this time, so if you go down the road a bit, Mr. Crawford, you are almost certain to meet her," she put in quickly, her woman's intuition detecting something in his tone that she did not like and that she was a little afraid of.

"You—don't—say!" he bantered. "Now, ain't that just the broadest kind of a hint. You want me to face that out there again on the mere off-chance of meeting Lizbeth—and you in here all by your lonesome. Not on your life! Not by a jugful!

"I'm just going to sit on the bench here and watch you for a while. That is, if you don't mind," he added with an elaborate bow.

"I cannot prevent you from doing as you wish, Mr. Crawford, but if Lizbeth happens in she may not see it in the same light as you do."

"Lord!—that's no dream either," he answered whimsically, scratching his forehead in thought. "And she's got a devil of a temper too. But I should worry! We'll just forget about her for a while, if you don't mind. I never get a chance to talk to you anyway. Nobody does—except maybe the Vernock school-man; you know—the fellow you used to play the fiddle to. Eh,—little Miss Sly Puss!"

Kathie's cheeks flushed scarlet as she wondered what he knew about her music and her meetings.

"If you wish to remain here, Mr. Crawford, you will please talk of something else. Better still, you won't talk at all," she retorted with dignity. "I have work to do and I am anxious to get it done quickly. It isn't too enjoyable out here in the cold; even *you* should know that."

"By gosh! You are right, Kathie," he said a little sympathetically, swinging his legs. "It's a damned shame to have you puddling around here among this freezing stuff, and these pretty little arms of yours all exposed—and on a day like this too."

Kathie was moving across the dairy floor, as Crawford spoke. He put out his hand as she passed him and touched her bare arm, as if merely to emphasise his remarks. Kathie sprang away with the same loathing as she would have done from an adder. Her eyes flashed and she clenched her hands. But she suddenly swallowed her anger and continued her work in silence.

"Quite a little spit-fire, eh!" he went on sarcastically. "Runs in the blood."

Kathie felt uneasy; primarily for herself, but for her cousin as well for it was long past Lizbeth's time to be home and it was within the bounds of possibility that she had been caught in the storm somewhere and was unable either to proceed with the buggy or go back. Furthermore, Kathie felt that there had been a secret arrangement between Lizbeth and Crawford to meet in the dairy. And when her cousin did ultimately get home she knew the dairy would be the first place she would make for.

Kathie had no desire to be found alone in the company of her cousin's sweetheart.

"Don't you think you ought to go and meet Lizbeth?" she suggested. "If I were a man, I would. Not expecting the snow so soon nor so much of it, she did not take the cutter. Likely as not, the buggy is causing her trouble on the road. There is no saying what may happen to her on an afternoon like this."

"Yep! You're right there," he agreed easily, "there's no saying—and I've as good a chance of meeting her here as I have out in that snowstorm!"

His remark merely confirmed Kathie's previous conjecture, and it was the means of increasing her anxiety.

"Guess you're scared she might be jealous," he continued, following her admiringly with his eyes. "And what if she were?

"You're not such a big cheery armful as Liz," he said coarsely, "but, by gosh! there's the same difference between you and her as there is between a peach and an apple—and you're the peach,—you bet. I prefer a peach to an apple any day. Ha-ha! That's pretty good now for a lout of a country cop like me. Isn't it now, Kathie?"

She felt her blood go hot and cold alternately.

"You must not speak to me like that," she said quietly. "You profess to be a gentleman—in your own way. Act like one, and so make me believe it too."

"Ho-ho, hoity-toity, saucy-sally!" he droned, not in the slightest way perturbed and looking her over impudently. "Damned if I don't like you the better for it. Say!—I'll go right back to Sunday school again if you'll only promise to be my teacher. And you might make something of me too. Wouldn't you like to try to make me a good little boy, Kathie?"

Kathie continued her work. She felt his gaze upon her and her heart was beating fast.

"Ain't you going to be friends and talk to a fellow?" he asked. "Why, I might as well go outside and talk to the hitching post."

"You might as well," answered Kathie, "and the post would probably have no objections!"

Crawford laughed. "Quick in the uptake too,—eh! Quicker even than Liz!"

Kathie hurried on with her task. She was nearing the end of it; only one more can to fill and she would be out of reach of Crawford's glib tongue and his unwelcome presence.

Well she understood the subtle power this man possessed with womankind, and, despite his impertinences, she found

herself admiring his peculiar attractive appearance and his impelling tone of voice. But she hated and almost feared the searching look of his mastering eyes.

"By gosh!" he exclaimed suddenly and passionately, "I would throw Liz over this minute if I thought I could have you for a steady. The way you have; your hair and your black eyes; your tempting lips and the silky white of your skin—they would provoke the devil that sleeps in the saintliest saint. To look into your face, you little devil, one would think it was farthest away from your thoughts to dress to attract men like me, but, Good Lord! you could do it with a petticoat and shawl. It's a way some of you women have. Your skirt is just the right height to show the neatness of your ankles—your sleeves are rolled up just far enough to expose the dimples on your elbows—and your hair is plaited and twisted as if it wanted to twine around a man's soul. Your collar turns down to where the rise of your throat shines the whitest,—your eyes say 'Keep away,' and your lips say 'Come on.' Which am I to believe? Do you wonder that a man wants to stay inside this place beside you and to look at you and keep right on looking at you until he gets pretty near drunk? You're not a woman, damn it,—you're a witch,—a damned, elusive, tantalising, glorious little witch."

Kathie did not speak. Her throat was parched with an unknown terror. Even if words could have come she knew they would have been impotent, useless, with such a man as Crawford.

Her one desire was to get away. She bent down and lifted the last of the heavy, lead-bottomed cans, and raised it slowly above her with both hands. Her figure was tense, and the graceful poise of her supple body displayed its curving lines. Her swelling bosom, her shapely limbs and her bewitching neatness roused the slumbering furies in Crawford. With the quiet, slippery movement of a snake he slid from the bench and tip-toed behind her as she stretched to place the can of milk securely on the shelf. Her thoughts were all of Crawford, but she was all unconscious of his proximity.

"Come on—a kiss if it kills me," he shouted suddenly, catching her round the waist.

With a startled exclamation, Kathie lost her hold of the can which was resting on the edge of the shelf. In the flash of a moment it toppled over, crashing, with a sickening sound, on to Crawford's head. Without even a moan, he crumpled to the floor and lay at Kathie's feet still and senseless, with a little stream of blood trickling slowly over his brow.

Kathie staggered back against the bench, looking down at the man, fascinated and horror-stricken. She knelt down beside him and tried to rouse him, and failing, she endeavoured to wipe away the blood from his wound. In the process, her hands became red and moist, and clammy. A shudder passed through her, leaving a feeling of faintness in its train.

She was still bending over Crawford when the door opened softly and Lizbeth, snug in furs and storm-proof garments, stood surveying the scene.

She threw her robes aside and with a cry ran forward.

"What are you doing? What have you done? Oh, my God!—it's Bob—it's my Bob!"

With all the frenzy of a grief-stricken woman, she caught Kathie by the shoulder and threw her across the place like a toy. Tearing off her gloves, she bent over her lover. She held him to her breast. She smoothed his matted hair, she laid her cheek against his, she crooned his name lovingly and tenderly. But Crawford's eyes remained closed and he showed no signs of returning consciousness.

"You did this—you she-cat," shouted Lizbeth, jumping up suddenly and confronting Kathie. "See!—his blood is wet on your hands, fear is showing in your face. You—with your damned daintiness and your double-scheming. Tell me why you did it?"

She swayed unsteadily. Her voice broke and her demeanour changed.

"Why did you do it?" she cried in piteous tones. "Couldn't you let him be? He didn't need your looks and smiles. Even if you are pretty—you didn't want him. But I loved him. I loved him—I tell you. Wasn't Simpson enough for you? Oh,—I hate you," she railed on, stamping her foot in her anger and grief. "I could—I could——He was mine before you came here. You knew he was mine—you knew he was mine."

Kathie stood back dazed and stupid. She heard her cousin's voice afar off and she felt as if she were passing through some evil dream.

"What the devil are you two quarrelling over?" cried a gruff voice; and it brought both girls back to their normal senses.

Colin Jackson lunged through the doorway in a cloud of snow.

"Isn't it enough to have a storm outside, without creating another inside? Hello! What's this?"

He looked at the two women questioningly. Then he bent down. "Why—it's Crawford. What the devil was he doing here? Good Lord!—he's in a bad way too. What does it mean? Who did this?" he asked, looking up sharply.

"She did," replied Lizbeth, pointing with her finger at Kathie.

Colin Jackson glared at his niece, and without a word he placed his hand on Crawford's wrist. He threw it from him and put his ear to the prostrate man's heart.

"My God!" he exclaimed in a trembling voice, "the man's dead."

"Oh, no! no! no!" cried Kathie hysterically, "not that, uncle; he can't be. He was speaking to me a moment ago. He isn't dead. Oh, uncle, uncle, please say he isn't dead." She wrung her hands distractedly.

"I tell you, he *is* dead," repeated Jackson with decision.

Kathie, poor distraught Kathie, could bear no more. Pressing her fingers against her ears, she ran to the door, and sped out into the storm, uttering a wild, despairing cry.

"Lizbeth, pour some cold milk on that cloth there," commanded her father in a businesslike way, "and hold the cloth against his temples. If I know Bob Crawford, I have something here that'll bring him round, if a spark of life remains in him. This is a bad business though. The whole countryside will be scandalised."

He pulled a flask from his back pocket, withdrew the cork with his teeth and poured some of the contents of the bottle down Crawford's throat.

With a heavy sigh the injured man opened his eyes and looked round him stupefied. Lizbeth and her father raised him to a sitting posture.

"Yep!" he murmured thickly, "something fell and I— But where is she?" he broke in anxiously.

"Oh! that's all right, Bob," soothed Lizbeth. "She's gone—she won't trouble you any more."

Crawford struggled to his feet, his body swaying unsteadily as he clutched at the woodwork for support.

"No!—she won't trouble me," he said, with a sickly smile. "She's too darned good for that. Say!" he continued, eyeing them suspiciously, "you ain't blaming her for this, you two, are you? Because she didn't do it—see! She was hoisting that can up and I— Oh, hell!—never mind what I did. But anyway,—she let it go and it came down and struck me. I got what was coming to me all right, so don't be putting any blame on to her,—that's all."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Victim

The wind was still high and biting, the moon was bursting through the clouds and only a belated snowflake, crisp and scintillating, was falling here and there, as Captain Gray got off the main road and trudged up the hill on his way home from a neighbourly call on Doctor Orr, the kindly though busy old bachelor who lived in his little bungalow on the outskirts of Vernock.

A long-haired, sharp-nosed collie trotted at his heel, with a grudge in her canine substitute for a soul against wintry weather in general and powdery, unpacked snow in particular.

The Captain did not seem to mind the elements so much, and his weather-beaten face betrayed an usage to the forces of nature in all her wildest vagaries. Nevertheless, he preferred the warmth of his own fireside to the sharp stinging air which had already begun to put a hard crust on the broad expanses of white which spread before him in all directions.

"Come on, Flora," he said to the dog. "Let's jump the fence and take the clearing through the wood. It is harder going, but it is only half the distance and it will bring us home in far less time. It isn't a night for man or beast to be out in, and your mistress will be getting as anxious as a tabby-cat with a lost kitten. We should not have left her, you know, Flora lass, but you can bear witness—Doctor Orr was waiting for us and had his cribbage-board set out on the table, ready to begin. It would have been a sore disappointment for the Doctor if we hadn't turned up. Wouldn't it now, Flora?"

The dog wagged her tail, hung out her tongue and gasped, smiling assent with her eyes and with the corners of her mouth. Then she took the fence with a bound, snapping at the snow in annoyance as she rolled over and over in the soft drift beyond.

"It is pretty deep, Flora, but we'll just make the best of it," said the Captain, struggling along, up to the legging tops at every stride.

They went up ever the hill behind Jackson's ranch, then through the clearing between the closely-set firs, and down the other side. The dog ran on ahead, occasionally lost to view altogether in the soft snow as she progressed along by leaps and bounds.

Suddenly she stood still and listened with her head tilted toward the ground. Then she barked sharply once or twice.

Her master came up alongside and walked round her.

"Come on, lass, come on! We've no time for gopher chasing or any of that kind of nonsense to-night," he remarked. "They are all snug at home—wise like—where we should be ourselves. Come on here!"

And he started off again.

But the dog remained behind. And as the Captain was disappearing in the distance, she whined piteously, like a lonely wolf in a winter famine.

"What has got into that dog, anyway?" remarked the Captain impatiently. "I suppose to please her I shall have to go back and unearth an old pail, or a dead chicken, or something equally as foolish."

He trudged slowly back. Flora in her excitement commenced to throw up the snow with her feet. Captain Gray prodded around with his walking cane, and just as he was giving up, the end of the cane came in contact with something unyielding but soft. He had no idea what it could be, but his curiosity was sufficiently aroused by this and by the behaviour of his sagacious collie that he was spurred to further investigation.

He cleared away the snow with his hands and feet, and soon was on his knees, working furiously.

With startling suddenness his fingers brushed aside a piece of clothing. It was part of a woman's skirt. In a moment more, two well-shod feet appeared. Working like one possessed, he quickly uncovered the entire body.

"Why!—Flora,—it's a woman," he cried, "—and all so cold and stiff. She's young:—just a lassie. Poor thing—caught in

the storm somehow, like many another I have seen."

He threw off his coat and wrapped it round the head and shoulders of the unconscious girl.

"Run home, Flora. Run and warn them," he cried. "I'll be at your tail."

He lifted the girl up in his strong and willing arms and pushed his way after the dog through the deep drift, with an energy equal to his brightest subaltern days.

The lights of Broadacres soon showed in the distance. In a few moments more he broke in upon his wife's reveries as she sat on a couch before a blazing fire.

Mrs. Gray rose quickly to meet her husband. She raised her hands in alarm as her eyes fell on the burden he bore.

"Oh, Allan, Allan,—what is wrong?" she cried. "And it's a lassie, too!"

"Yes, Margery dear! Hurry with something warm. Flora found her buried in the snow on the trail in the wood."

Gently he laid the senseless form on the couch and unwrapped his coat from the head and shoulders. Mrs. Gray dispatched her terrified-looking Indian maid for warm drink and warm blankets, while she, herself, chafed the limp hands and arms.

"She's a bonny lass, Margery," said the Captain looking down admiringly.

"Yes, Allan,—bonny as she can be. Look at her hair; look at her face; there's breeding there that belies her dress. I wonder who she is and what she was doing out in a night like this. It seems queer—unless, maybe, she fell and hurt herself."

Mrs. Gray turned to her husband in alarm, as he staggered back and supported himself by the mantelshelf. "What ails you, man? Am I to have two invalids on my hands instead of one?"

"I—I hardly know, Margery. There's something—I don't know what and can't explain it—but it makes me feel as if I knew that poor, helpless lass. Yet, to my knowledge, I have never seen her before. It's an uncanny kind of sensation. I dare-say it is just the shock of finding her so suddenly in the wood. I am not so strong as I once was, Margery,—I'll be all right in a minute or so.

"The lass is alive though, Margery? You don't think it is anything very serious with her?" he inquired anxiously.

"Alive!—of course she's alive. She'll live to laugh at an old soldier like you for his folly. She's coming round now—and here's Zella with the blankets."

The Indian girl came forward and looked curiously at the white girl on the couch. She turned almost pale under her tan and stepped back a bit, nervously.

"Goodness Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Gray, "have you all gone silly at the look of a poor, storm-stressed young woman? Zella, have you ever seen her before? Do you know who she is?"

"Ya! mam,—I see her before, ya!" replied the maid. "I see her long time, long way. She Missy Jackson. She work down Jackson ranch. She heap good work. Crazy, me think! She no speak much—just little bit, sometime. No same other white girl."

"What do you mean, Zella?" asked her mistress, still chafing the semi-conscious girl's hands and pushing the hair back from her forehead. "She looks a good girl."

"Ya, mam! Nobody speak to her. She no speak anybody much. Indian no like ver' much. She go into wood, play music, heap magic. What you call devil, he come dance—see! She make me plenty scare. She what you call, witch, mam.

"Maybe you wrap her up, give her hot drink you'-self. No me do it."

"Zella, you talk lots of rubbish," reprimanded Mrs. Gray. "I am surprised a sensible girl like you believes in devils and witches.

"Don't you know this early part twentieth century—not the middle ages? Witch indeed!—just a poor, helpless bairn.

"Zella!"

"Ya, ya, mam!"

"Take these blankets into the spare bedroom—and the tray as well. Allan!—lift up the lass and bring her in here. Then you can send Tom Semple for Doctor Orr. Tell him to leave word at Jackson's on his way back. After that, just sit down quietly and recover your senses."

With the gentleness of a mother, the old soldier raised the limp form of Kathie and carried her into the adjoining room.

"You're quite sure she is all right, Margery dear?" he inquired again.

"She'll be all right once the Doctor gets here," his wife replied pointedly. She closed the bedroom door on his anxiety, leaving him to dispatch his foreman for the Doctor.

When he was satisfied that his man was well on the way, Captain Gray sat down by the fire and mused for a while. He seemed to feel himself going through all the tortures of being buried alive and frozen to death, as he thought of the peril of the girl he had rescued.

How strangely the sight of her had acted on him and how swiftly a thousand doors in his memory had opened and closed again, giving him a fleeting glimpse of something within; but leaving him on a sea of conjecture as to what that something was! He, who had spent two-thirds of his life in foreign lands and always in times of surprises and excitement! He smiled at the thought of his foolishness, for in all the wide world he was without a living link of any kind that he knew of likely to awaken such fancies.

He rose and began to pace the floor in impatience. He went to the bedroom door and listened, but as he seemed to obtain little relief from this, he raised his hand to knock. Eventually, he thought better of it, and started to wear out the carpet again.

His courage grew with his anxiety. This time he knocked gently, but with no uncertainty.

The maid opened the door.

"How is she now, Zella?" he asked, almost deferentially.

"Please,—you wait. I ask Missy Gray, if you be told," she replied, still in a state of nervousness.

Mrs. Gray came out and held up her hands in dismay.

"My dear husband, whatever is the matter with you? The girl has had something to drink and is wrapped up snugly; and I believe she will be all right soon."

"Good—good!" ejaculated the Captain.

"Now—go and sit down and try to be the dignified, imperturbable, cold-blooded Captain Gray of the Black Watch."

"So long as you say she is all right, my love—I'll do anything. Yes!—I'll even sit down. But you must admit it is very trying on the patience to be out here by one's self, with nothing to do, when one might be assisting."

"I quite agree with you, Allan, but surely you do not expect me to enlist you in the service as a hospital orderly. You are taking more interest in this case than would the girl's sweetheart himself. I sincerely hope you haven't switched your affections," she added severely.

"Now, Margery! You know quite well——"

"Yes, yes! I know Allan, that you never did love anybody, or anything, half so well as you love me—not even your nightcap. There!—--"

She kissed him affectionately. "Now, go and sit down again, and when you get tired sitting, walk about and have a little exercise. But, for the sake of somebody, try to have a modicum of patience. And don't forget to send the Doctor in the

very moment he gets here."

The Captain had hardly been left alone again, when Doctor Orr came in.

The little man, rubbing his hands together, was all geniality and energy.

"What do you mean, sir, by hustling a respectable man out of his home on a night like this?" he asked, addressing the Captain.

"It is just tit for tat, Doctor. You hauled me out for a game of cribbage and a glass of punch. But I don't grudge the journey, Doctor, for it meant the saving of a poor lassie's life."

"I haven't heard anything yet, Captain. What is the trouble?" asked the Doctor, growing serious.

"On my way home, I found one of the Jackson girls covered up in the snow, cold and frozen. You had better hurry in. I know you will do your best, Doctor. I am particularly interested in the case:—I don't know why exactly. So, everything that can be done for her must be done."

"She's a young lass, isn't she?" asked the Doctor.

The Captain nodded.

"And—a—a good-looker?"

The Captain nodded once more.

"Um!—I thought so," remarked the Doctor with a twinkle in his eyes. "It's the old story: 'No fool like an old fool,' eh!"

He turned the handle of the door and entered the sick room.

But Captain Gray was not to be left long undisturbed. The Doctor had no sooner disappeared than the sound of a gruff voice on the outside broke in on his reveries: and the owner of the voice put an end to any further solitary meditation.

"It's a wintry night, Captain Gray," he remarked.

"It is indeed, Mr. Jackson."

"I understand my niece met with an accident of some kind in the wood: sprained her ankle or something, and got caught in a drift. I'm obliged to you for the help you gave her. I've brought the cutter round to drive her home; although a night like this is mighty hard on man or beast. Here's some extra clothes for her. Tell her to throw them round her and hurry; for I'm anxious to get back."

The Captain tugged his mustache the while and looked curiously at the sour-visaged rancher who stood, with spread legs, before him.

"I'm afraid, my friend, you hardly realise the extent of the injury to your niece. It would hardly be wise even to think of moving her to-night."

"Tuts—rubbish!" replied Jackson testily. "She's coming home, where she should be. She's none of your milk-and-bread babies;—she's a Jackson.

"Tell her I'm here:—that'll be sufficient."

"Do you know that the girl is nearly dead?" asked Captain Gray with rising anger. "Are you aware she was buried under the snow in the wood—God only knows how long—and was frozen and unconscious when found? Do you know what it would mean to move any sick person on a night like this?"

"I didn't come here to be curtain-lectured or bulldozed," replied rancher Jackson. "I came to take my niece home, and, by the Lord! I'll do it in spite of the contrary opinions of you and all the malaria-saturated Captains in the English Army or out of it."

Allan Gray may have been easy-going with women-folks, but when dealing with men of the kidney of Colin Jackson, he

became a different type; and his stern, unbending, military dignity proved not a little disconcerting to his visitor.

"You will please bear in mind, neighbour, that you are in my house—where my word goes. I am responsible meantime for the safety of your niece and I will not allow her to suffer for the sake of a foolish whim or a little personal feeling. Assuredly, she shall not go out of here to-night."

"Stand aside, sir," commanded Colin Jackson furiously. "If you won't bring her out—I'll fetch her myself."

"Get back!" cried the Captain. "If they will not allow me in there, I certainly shall not allow you. Get back—or I'll——"

"Easy—easy! What's all this to-do?" said Doctor Orr in a conciliatory tone, coming out of the bedroom opportunely.

"The fact was he had had his hand on the door-knob for the past five minutes and had been enjoying the altercation immensely.

"Allan, you look positively furious. Colin, before you work yourself up any more go home and put on a larger collar. If you don't, I'll have to treat you for apoplexy.

"Now—look here, you two, that poor maid in there is in a serious plight. She is conscious now, and there is practically no danger to her from the exposure;—but there is something on her mind that she is fretting over. I am the more certain of this, because she has met with no physical accident that could cause her to fall down in the snow. There are no cuts, no knocks, no sprains, no broken bones;—but,—there are stains, like blood stains, on her hands. Now, if this mental condition does not get removed soon, there will be a brain-fever to contend with. She has tried to speak several times, but cannot. She seems to have lost the power. I have heard of such cases before. And it takes a severe shock, indeed, to strike a person dumb, more especially if the person be of the feminine gender.

"This is a desperately serious business, all the same. She may never speak again."

"My God, Doctor,—do you mean this?" asked the Captain in grief-stricken tones.

"Most assuredly I do, Allan;—although I am hoping for a change soon."

"Then she cannot come home to-night?" queried her uncle.

"No, Colin—nor to-morrow night, nor the next night," replied the Doctor.

Captain Gray gesticulated.

"—Nor even next week! It will be many a day before she can be moved from here," continued the Doctor imperiously.

"She might speak if she saw me," said Jackson, moving again in the direction of the door. "I guess there will be no objection to me seeing her?"

"She must not be disturbed to-night by any one. You shall see her after I have seen you, Colin," was the little Doctor's suggestive rejoinder.

"You have to go my way for a bit anyway; and, as the cutter of every rancher in the Valley is at the service of Doctor Orr, you shall have the pleasure of driving me right home. We can have a nice, quiet, little, friendly chat on the way."

There was nothing left for Colin Jackson to do but to obey, which he did with bad grace.

"Good night, Allan," cried the genial Doctor. "Take care of the lass and send for me if anything goes wrong. In any case, I'll be back early in the morning."

Through all the long night Kathie tossed from side to side in a maddening fever of unrest. No sound escaped her parched lips; not even a moan formed in her throat. She seemed, however, quite conscious of her surroundings, and her grateful eyes, bright with fever, followed the tender, loving little woman who smoothed her pillow and stilled the throbbing at her temples with a soothing hand, moving about patiently and noiselessly, hour after hour, bestowing her sympathy and

whispering words of cheer when the tension seemed straining to the unendurable.

Daybreak brought a dazzling sunshine upon a dazzling sea of crystalline white, but it brought no relief to the silent, restless sufferer.

Doctor Orr was in attendance before the robins were astir, but in response to Mrs. Gray's tearful inquiry he could only shake his head sadly.

"She cannot stand the strain twelve hours longer. And she shall not be allowed to do so if I have to drag the information from the very vitals of that cantankerous, old skinflint, Jackson," he said, with rising anger. "He told me nothing last night. He knows the girl is likely to die, yet he refuses to say a word of what happened in the dairy before she ran out into the storm. Whether he is shielding her or someone else, I cannot say, but his sympathy, if he has any at all, does not seem to be with her. However, I must—I shall have the truth before this day is gone—or my name isn't Orr."

At noon that day, the maid, Zella, ran in with a note.

"Please, mam," she said, "big chief Crawford—he bring this. He say, from Doctor Orr and it very special. He wait now outside."

"Bring him in, Zella," replied Mrs. Gray, tearing open the envelope.

> "Dear Mrs. Gray," the note ran,
>
> "I have reached the truth at last. Crawford was lying in wait for me, to inquire how my patient was. I asked him what he knew about the matter, and he told me all. It seems he had gone into the dairy and had found Miss Jackson alone. He tried to kiss her. There was a struggle, in which he came off second best. A heavy can fell from a shelf on to his head. He dropped unconscious and she thought she had killed him. She still thinks so.
>
> "Crawford is contrite. He will gladly do anything he can to repair the wrong he has done.
>
> "Now, it is for you to tell your patient quietly that Crawford is alive and well. You can do it better than I. If necessary, take Crawford in to her so that she may be thoroughly convinced.
>
> "The girl's reason is at stake, so do your best.
>
> "I shall run in early in the afternoon.
>
> "William Orr."

Mrs. Gray braced herself for the ordeal and entered the sick room. The sight of the poor, suffering girl, tossing in a mental unrest like one of Dante's tortured souls, went to her heart and opened up the way for her. She sat down beside Kathie and spoke softly and gently.

"My dear, someone has called to see you and to ask your forgiveness. Whatever made you think that a little knock on the head would kill a big, strong man like Crawford?"

At the mention of Crawford's name Kathie's eyes lit up with an uncertain fear.

"Poor girl," continued the kindly old lady, "how foolish to worry so much over so little! Why!—he was all right again in a few moments after you ran out into the snow."

Although Kathie understood what was being said to her, she only shook her head doubtfully.

"If I show Crawford to you—healthy and well—will you promise to go to sleep?"

Kathie smiled faintly and nodded assent.

Mrs. Gray went to the door and beckoned the constable.

He came in with his head down. Penitent tears welled in his eyes as he gazed on Kathie's pale face. He stood helplessly at the bedside, twisting his hat in his hands.

"I'm mighty sorry, miss, for what I did," he said huskily. "You didn't hurt me—you really didn't. I ain't hurt so easy. I've stood twenty times that much many a time. Please forgive me, miss, and I'll never say a wrong word to you as long as I live."

A sigh escaped the invalid. She nodded her head to Crawford in token of forgiveness. Her eyes flickered and closed, opened, flickered, and closed again; and she dropped into a deep, health-giving, life-sustaining sleep.

When Doctor Orr arrived the house was wrapped in silence.

"You need not tell me the result," he remarked to Mrs. Gray. "I can see it in your eyes. Did she speak?"

"She did not," answered Mrs. Gray. "That is the one sad feature. Her lips moved and she tried hard, but no sound came—not so much as a whisper."

The Doctor's face fell in disappointment and he shook his head.

"It was the only chance," he answered with a sigh. "I am afraid now she will never speak again. Still, we must be thankful that her reason is saved. It was touch and go."

CHAPTER NINE

Witchery

Kathie's convalescence was quick as it was surprising. In a few days she was up and going about the house, to the delight of the Captain and his wife, whose interest in their enforced guest grew deeper and more affectionate with every hour she remained under their hospitable roof. Their love went out to this happy, though sad-eyed girl, and they sorrowed in the loss of her power of speech even more than she did, for she bore her new affliction with a bright smile and a stout heart, conveying all her thoughts and fancies through the agency of paper and a pencil, and suggestive gestures.

One day, on a prowl of discovery, she ventured timidly into the Captain's den. It was her first visit there. She looked round the quaint, mannish place with inquisitive interest. The Captain's strong, ivory paper-knives; the gruesome Hindoo gods he used for paper-weights; the grotesquely wrought, brass inkstand; the cunningly designed pipe-rack; the beautiful inlaid, Japanese card-table—all came in for their measure of her scrutiny and admiration.

Here and there, aimlessly and dreamily, she turned in the little room until something hanging from a hook in the wall sent her blood whirling and chasing from her toes to her face and back to her toes again, in a tingling, gleeful swirl, making her forget all else that the world contained. She did not even hear the footsteps of Zella, the Indian help, nor did she observe that individual peeping into the den, watching her suspiciously and intently, albeit fearfully—poised and ready to run on the slightest alarm.

It was an old violin that had caught Kathie's eye and had so absorbed her interest. It was a violin which had travelled with Captain Gray on most of his journeyings. Not that he ever fancied he could bring dulcet tones from its shapely body: he had given up that idea years and years before. But he liked to scrape and twang when the door of his den was closed and his pipe was going well, when all the world, including his wife, was shut outside.

With trembling fingers, Kathie took it down from the wall and gazed upon it with admiration.

What a violin it was! A glance was enough to her practiced eye to tell her that she had never before had the opportunity of playing upon such an instrument. She felt almost afraid to handle it. But the temptation was too strong to be overcome by any little trembling scruples.

She turned the pegs and tightened up the bow, then she floated away in a whirl of entrancing music; melody tumbling over melody in the mad hilarity of their new creation, charging the very air with vibrant harmonies.

In the adjoining room, Zella stood spellbound, wide of eye and open-mouthed, held by the thrilling and universally understandable ecstasy; but all the time shaking with an inexplicable terror and unable to cry out and move away.

Suddenly the music ceased. Kathie pressed the violin to her cheek with a radiating smile of pleasure.

"Oh, you dearest, sweetest of human creations! What a violin you are to be sure! How I love you!"

The sound of Kathie's voice, following the stoppage of the music, broke the spell. Zella did not wait for anything more. With a bound and an inarticulate noise in her throat she ran out into the garden and into the conservatory where the Captain and his wife were examining some plants.

"What on earth is wrong with you, girl?" cried Mrs. Gray in alarm at the terror-stricken look of Zella.

"Oh, Missy Gray," she moaned, "she do it again—she do it again. I tell you she witch. You no b'lieve. You b'lieve me now,—him heap true. She play Mister Gray music box—she play dreadful. Dish all jump up—little god up mantelshelf he nod his head and do witch-dance.

"She no good. She raise what white man call Hell before she stop—see! She kiss music-box all same kiss man. She talk music-box all same other girl talk you, talk me."

"Talk!" put in the Captain, catching Zella and shaking her up a bit. "Did you say she was talking?"

"Ya, ya, Mister Gray! She talk music-box. Me scared. Me go away,—me no stay along her."

"Look here, Zella—pull yourself together. You talk nonsense," exclaimed Mrs. Gray. "Come along with us and we shall see for ourselves what all this silly commotion is about."

"Please, mam—please, I just stay right here—see! I no much good help inside."

"All right," said her mistress, "stay here—like the foolish girl you are."

As the two neared the house, the strangest, softest, sweetest melody floated around them, seeming to issue from nowhere and to penetrate everywhere. They went quietly inside and remained in the room next to the den, where they could hear and not be seen, as Kathie was still in the den and was again playing in a transport of enjoyment.

The Captain's heart beat loudly.

"Did you ever hear anything so thrilling; so wild, so plaintive?" he whispered. "It isn't music—its witchery. Zella wasn't very far wrong after all."

"Hush!" commanded his wife. And they listened in silence for a longer time than they ever dreamed of.

At last Kathie stopped and came running lightly into the room where they were. Her face was aglow with enthusiasm.

"Oh, it's just glorious," she cried. "You sweet old violin—I could play on you for ever and ever."

She started back as she observed her two friends; yet she did not appear at all abashed.

"Captain Gray—you are not angry with me?" she asked. "I simply could not keep from playing on it. What a violin it is, to be sure! What a dear old, dear old violin!"

They looked at Kathie in bewilderment, surprised to hear the sound of a voice which they had never heard before and had given up all hope of ever hearing.

"Why!—you are crying. Oh, whatever have I done? What have I said?" she asked innocently, her voice aquiver with distress.

Mrs. Gray took her in her arms and kissed her cheek, leading her slowly over to the couch.

"My darling girl," she said, "I am weeping because I am very happy. Can't you understand what it is? Don't you know the great, good change that has come over you? Don't you know that you have been dumb since your accident and that you are speaking again—just as if your dumbness had never been?"

Kathie laughed—a tinkling little laugh.

"So I am," she replied, and I never thought of it, I was so taken up with the music. But—when all around is harmony, how could I possibly remain dumb and in discord? I just had to tell that violin what a dear old thing it was.

"Yet," she mused thoughtfully, "I am glad my voice has come back. I am glad if only for Alick's sake."

The words slipped out, suddenly, almost unintentionally; more in soliloquy than in conversation. She stopped short, a rosy tint flooding her cheeks.

"Well now!—and who may Alick be?" asked Mrs. Gray, sitting up primly. "Allan—I do believe we have stumbled across something at last. This young lady has a sweetheart."

Kathie blushed and kept silent.

"Now, Margery, my dear, we must not pry into a young lady's secrets. She shall tell us all about it some day—maybe."

"Oh, I am not ashamed of his name," put in Kathie. "But it is our secret yet. Some day—maybe—as the Captain says—I'll tell you, although I cannot just now—not yet."

"In your own good time," said the Captain kindly. "There is something else I wish to ask you, however. Where did you learn to play the violin as you do? At times you play just what you seem to feel and just as your fancy leads you. I knew only one other person who could do that. It brings back strange, uninvited, half-forgotten memories to an old man. Tell

me, my dear—who was it who taught you?"

"I can hardly tell you that," replied Kathie thoughtfully, gazing at the crackling logs in the fireplace. "I just feel—and play. You know, a real artist in his own particular art, ought to be able to translate his every feeling and emotion through his art so clearly and plainly that even one who has no knowledge of art cannot fail to interpret correctly what the artist has endeavoured to express. If he falls short of this, he has not mastered his art.

"I seem to have grown up expressing myself through the violin. True, my father showed me all he knew. He was only a strolling player, but those who heard him said they never listened to such music as he could produce. I never found out who it was who taught him. His past, to the time of his meeting my mother, seemed to us to be a room with the door locked and the blinds drawn down over the windows—and we never tried to pry inside.

"Poor father!—his music did not bring him much outside of happiness and oblivion of time. But we were always happy then, boisterously happy almost."

"Well, Kathie," put in Mrs. Gray, "we must not dwell upon sad subjects to-day, for we are all so glad to hear your voice among us; a voice which we thought had been stolen away from you for all time."

"But I am not sad," interjected Kathie, "far from it. I am very, very happy. And my voice has had a long rest.

"Captain Gray was just about to tell us of the memories my playing brought back to him. I wonder now what those memories were?"

"There isn't very much to tell, lass; only the story of genius misunderstood. It is as common as the milk-weed.

"When I was but a boy, I had a brother, a little brother, who could play like you do. A rum little chap he was too. Music was born in him—from some far back ancestor, no doubt. It seemed to grow with him, out of him and over him; a terrible, over-mastering passion for music—nothing but music.

"My father was a stern Scot of the old stock. For me he mapped out a career in the army. He planned my brother for the ministry. When my father mapped and planned anything, that settled the matter definitely and for all time so far as he was concerned.

"He never allowed music of any kind in our home. He said it was the destroyer of time and the slayer of ambition. He hated the very sound of the 'devil's tuning fork,' as he styled the violin; and he maintained in no uncertain tones that no son of his should ever be a common, three-penny fiddler.

"And my poor little brother would have swapped his immortal soul for a violin.

"The youngster learned the rudiments of music from an old Italian who lived in a garret in a back lane of the little town near to which we lived. And he used to steal away there at all hours, striving and struggling to express his genius under the tuition of this kindly old foreigner, who grew to love my brother as his own son.

"Not once but a thousand times did my father issue his mandate against music, and a thousand times was his mandate ignored.

"When the time came for my brother to choose between 'the call of the devil and the call of the Lord'—as my father put it—the little fellow slipped away with his violin under his arm.—And—we—never—heard—of—him—again.

"At least, not while he lived;—and that was only the matter of some five or six years. There was a shipwreck on the Solway Firth and my brother's poor, emaciated body was discovered on a lonely part of the beach, washed up by the sea. His features were unrecognisable, but his violin, wrapped in a water-proof bag, was buttoned up firmly inside his ragged coat. My father knew the violin—there was no mistaking it. It was given my brother by that old Italian master as he lay dying. It is that very violin you are holding now, Kathie. See the peculiar grain it has on the back of it, forming the face of a grimacing man.

"Well, my father died soon afterwards, mourning his harshness when it was all too late. That is a way the world has—we are sorry afterwards, when we should have been forbearing before.

"I was in India, a young officer, at the time of my brother's death. My father wrote me, sending me the violin; the only

relic left of him who might have accomplished great things had he but been understood."

Kathie put her hand into that of the old soldier.

"So few people seem to understand the soul of the artist, whether the artist be a musician, a painter, a poet or an inventor," she said, "how highly the fibres of his heart are keyed, how sensitively his nerves are strung, how the lure of his art, with its mysterious, hypnotising influences, draws him away and away from all the world! his deep hurt at the slightest word or gesture—which another would brush aside laughingly—and, above all, the sacrifices he will make and the sufferings he will endure for that relentless art which lies, ever famishing, never satisfied, down in his innermost self!"

"Yes," mused Mrs. Gray, "and we have always had so much more of this world's goods than we really required—for we had his share as well as our own—and now we have neither kith nor kin to leave it to when we go; while he, poor lad, was an outcast, tramping from town to town, trying to exchange his music for bread, until his worn-out body found peace on the flow of the tide."

They sat in silence, watching the reaching flames in the fireplace and thinking of the sorrow which lay deepest in their hearts.

"Come, Kathie!" said Mrs. Gray at last. "We are all sad now. You must rest after this eventful afternoon. For our lives, we dare not incur the anger of that little volcano, Doctor Orr."

"Before you go, lass, play to us once more: something measured and merry; something stately and dignified," asked the Captain.

Ever ready, Kathie rested the violin under her chin and with a graceful movement capered into these bewitching, ear-haunting, old English dances of Edward German—modern, but bringing with them, as on a cinema screen, pictures of fair ladies and gallant dandies; silk gowns, patches and powdered wigs, ruffles and silver buckled shoes; the polite bow, the dainty minuet; the flirting fan, the honeyed phrase and the merry laugh; an atmosphere of wealth, gaiety and friendly rivalry; an undercurrent of intrigue.

And, on the still wintry air, those sweet strains floated high and clear through the slightly opened window, across the bare orchards, until they reached the edge of the wood, where they became mere whisperings of the fairies—more imaginary than real.

Faint and elusive, they reached the ear of one who sat on the low fence, in gloomy despondency. He raised his head and looked around quickly, like a startled stag; then he gave vent to a hollow laugh. But, as he listened again, he knew that he had not been deceived the first time. He bent anxiously to catch the direction of the notes.

What ethereal will-o'-the-wisp was this that haunted his fancies? It was Kathie's music—his Kathie's—but—where was she? Was she in the woods—in the hollow at Jackson's ranch—over by the lake—on the mound where she used to play to him?

"Kathie,—Kathie!" he cried to the solitude around him. "Tell me where to find you;—oh, my love, tell me where I may find you."

In the quiet that ensued, the notes came clearer and louder. He caught at their source, and with a glad shout he ran forward to Broadacres, his heart filled with thankfulness and his eyes blurred with tears. He bounded through the orchard and into the house, bursting among the little group without ceremony, ignoring his old friends for the girl in the midst of them.

He held out his arms to her.

"Kathie,—Kathie,—my darling—my own dear heart," he cried. "They told me you had gone and they would not tell me where."

His voice was strained with the depth of his emotion. She rose to meet him, put her face to his and kissed him full on the lips. He held her close, looking long and searchingly into her steady eyes.

Quietly, unobtrusively, the old couple slipped out of the room, leaving their young friends with their love. They knew now who was the Alick of Kathie's day-dreams, and they rejoiced in the knowledge.

"My darling!" exclaimed Alick, "how I have hungered for you! how I have hungered! I went over to the old trysting place by the lake, but you did not come. I stayed long, but at last had to return home, sad and troubled. I could not rest; I could not eat; I could not think properly. My mind seemed to be filling with some dreadful foreboding. At last in desperation I called at your uncle's, but they laughed at me and refused to tell me where you were. Day after day, as soon as school was over, I have wandered about aimlessly, hoping I might find you or hear of you, yet despairing of ever seeing you again. Strange, I never called here.

"But tell me, Kathie—what has happened? Your cheeks are pale and your arms are thin. Tell me all? And if you have been wronged, as I fear you have, I will right the wrong if it takes me a lifetime to do it in."

Kathie placed her hand lightly over his lips.

"Hush, hush! How could I tell you if I thought by so doing, evil would come of it? I met with an accident on the night of the blizzard. I was found buried in the snow and was brought here by Captain Gray. Mrs. Gray has nursed me through all my illness and both have brought me back to health again by their kindnesses and their generous sympathies—although they never saw me before in all their lives.

"Once, Alick, you asked me to come here and I refused, but fate has intervened for my own good and has given me these friends who now are dearer to me than any of my own people."

"Aren't they just splendid?" returned Alick. "Now I owe a double debt to Captain Gray. It was Captain Gray who pulled me out of the slums in a city in the Old Land. It was he who made me what I now am. And now he has saved for me the greatest treasure the world holds.

"But you have not told me of the accident which befell you. I must know all about it, dear, before I can ever hope to rest with a peaceful mind again."

"Alick, if I tell you everything, will you promise to bear no grudge? You must promise, for it was all a mistake and I have forgiven. Now that all is well again, why should we dig up the troubles that have been buried?"

Reluctantly, Alick passed his word and Kathie told him of the scene in the dairy, of her grief and her stricken sense, of the return of her voice and of her present happiness.

He sat quietly listening until she had finished.

"My sweetheart," he whispered when all was told, "we must put a stop to all this. There need be no more of it—not in this free West. You are not safe down there; you are not loved.

"It is evident that even your life counts for nothing with them. Let me take you away from it all. I need you and you need me. Why should you work like a slave and stand whatever abuse they care to heap on you? You are worth far more to them than they are to you. You are under no obligation to them. They have no claim upon you but that of relationship. They are simply using you for their own ends. Come, my dear, and we shall be happy—just you and I together."

"Oh, Alick, Alick! Do not make it harder for me to bear. You promised that you would wait and be patient until I was ready. This has brought that time nearer than it was, but I cannot do as you ask; not until the breaking strain has been reached. They are not to blame for what happened so recently; besides, they are my mother's people. I must stand by them until I feel that I have paid the debt I owe to them for making a home for me when I was practically homeless."

Kathie took Alick's face in her hands. Her eyes were moist and her voice was pleading.

"Kiss me, my lover, and let us be content in the happiness of our love for each other—just as we are. I could go on—and on—and on—neither hoping nor expecting—in the knowledge that I had your love. Bear with me, boy, just a little longer, for I must go back and help. There is trouble down there. There are difficulties which they shall never be able to surmount and there are debts which shall never be paid. Not that the ranch doesn't pay!—but there are other debts, oil

speculations and mining speculations of my uncle in his foolishness when he should have devoted his every cent to his ranch. These are eating the family up like a cancer. Everything has been mortgaged for them. I have seen some of it and I know.

"A cloud of ruin is gathering over their heads, growing bigger, darker, as the days go by. And it must never be said that I deserted them in their trouble.

"They have given me a home, no matter how unhomelike it may seem. They will need me. It is my duty to stand by them until the worst is past. Then, Alick, I shall be free.

"And, if our love be unselfish in between times, we shall be happy then; for there is deep and lasting satisfaction to the sailor after he has been saved from the sea, when he knows that he stood by his ship until she went down."

CHAPTER TEN

Roanstone Fair

The mare's silky coat glistened in the Spring sunshine and her brass-mounted harness trappings shone like burnished gold, as Lizbeth and Kathie sprang into the newly varnished buggy and drove away with a flourish of whip and a merry good-bye.

It was the first day of Roanstone Fair, the annual Saturnalia of the Ranch hands, when the meanest rancher in the Valley had, perforce, to declare a holiday; for even his youngest help—the moment he crawled out of bed—proceeded with undue haste to deck himself out in his best cow-boy trappings and went off without as much as "by your leave."

The person who did not know that Roanstone Fair was on, was indeed a dullard. All roads that day led to Roanstone, seven miles north from Vernock; and all traffic seemed to be wending in that direction—from old, four-wheeled, broken-down outfits, with their father-and-mother-and-eight-of-a-family loads to automobiles and the smart single and tandem buggies of the well-to-do, bearing their gaily clad and happy, care-free sweethearts.

Now and again, a young rancher on a prancing horse would dash up alongside, with a cheery greeting, proud to be on speaking terms with the Jackson girls, whose contrasting beauty—full and voluptuous; sylph-like and graceful—stirred their feelings in most perplexing uncertainty as to which was the more beautiful of the two. But, as Kathie's quiet reserve was more often misconstrued than understood, Lizbeth's ready tongue and careless freedom generally won the verdict for herself.

After a joyful morning ride, Lizbeth and Kathie put up the horse at the Kalahalla Hotel at Roanstone and made for the Fair Grounds; having cheerfully endured the inane jests of relay escorts in the shape of the many galloping gallants who were evidently intent on making every moment of the day contribute its quota to the general good time.

Thus early, the scene which the Fair presented was lively and kaleidoscopic. Resplendent showmen, elevated on high platforms, in front of great placarded tents, were already lustily drawing attention to the marvellous wonders inside;—Fat Ladies; Wild Men from Borneo who ate raw meat; Snake Charmers; Armless Wonders; Freaks; Performing Animals; Vaudeville Entertainments; languishing Oriental Dancers, and a hundred other dime-catchers—emphasising their glib harangues with an occasional resounding whack of a riding whip on the lurid canvas illustrations at their backs, or a heavy thump on a big drum.

Sight-seers in their hundreds were thus early pushing their way to the pay boxes and up the rickety stairs leading to the entertainments; taking the loud-mouthed Münchausens at their own estimates, having made up their minds that this was a day on which they must necessarily be swindled and duped right from the beginning and it was useless holding back.

Others, particularly the young local fry, less fortunate in their possession of worldly wealth, gaped from below, staving their unsatiated appetites on the short-winded, short-skirted, gum-chewing, smirking, fat and lean advertisements for powder and rouge, who pirouetted disdainfully on the creaky platforms in front of the show-entrances, endeavouring vainly to keep time to the shrieking music of a steam calliope attached to the merry-go-round.

Here and there, husky, red-cheeked and sun-tanned ranch-hands were exhibiting their ability before admiring and lusty wives and sweethearts, in knocking down fuzzy dolls, toppling over cocoanuts and trying to cover impossible, red, circular patches on a board with tin discs.

A huge iron-bound mallet was being swung with unceasing regularity, at five cents a time, thumping a peg and throwing a metal mark high up a pole to within hailing distance of a bell at the top, every inch of the way up the pole emblazoned with bewilderingly increasing numbers, productive of a feeling in the minds of the performers that they were executing prodigious feats of strength.

The young men, to a man, were armed with paper and feather ticklers, while the girls gigglingly strewed confetti by the handful upon their own and other girls' male escorts.

Once in a while, sweethearts embraced, unabashed by the glare of the noon-day sun; while, at one end of the show-ground, on a specially erected platform, an orchestra was endeavouring to make itself heard to a bevy of hilarious and

buxom two-steppers and fox-trotters.

Over all the wildest noise of pandemonium reigned, making it impossible to hear other than the loudest shouts and the most discordant sounds.

Kathie gazed upon this scene with a co-mingling of surprise, amazement and curiosity. It was her first visit to Roanstone's Annual Fair—or for that matter, to any other Fair, outside of the Ballywhallen Market Fair where a merry-go-round, some swing boats, a ghost-show and a shooting gallery comprised the amusements—and all was so very new to her.

She felt she merely wished to stand idly by for hours to come, and watch the panorama.

But suddenly and unexpected by her, the deep, bass voice of Bob Crawford roused her from her reverie.

Crawford was smartly set out in real Western police fashion and looked every inch a man.

At his repeated insistence, she and Lizbeth followed him to another part of the extensive grounds, where the better-class had already foregathered for the exhibition of live stock and horse-racing. All the early part of that afternoon, from one point to another, with the polished manners of a gentleman, Crawford escorted the two young ladies round, protecting them when the throng became too great and explaining a thousand-and-one things to them which they did not fully understand.

Many were the soft glances that passed between him and Lizbeth. Endearing phrases were exchanged, and, once in a while when the crowd gathered closely, their fingers touched and pressed in passionate ignition.

But, in her deep interest in the novelties on every side of her, Kathie was oblivious of the flirtation.

Only when they were all seated in the large, markee tent at dinner time, did it occur to Kathie that the intimacy between Crawford and Lizbeth had grown to avowed love. All through the meal, their heads were together in whispered converse, and Kathie's presence seemed almost forgotten by them.

Ere she had finished, the two rose as if moved by a common impulse.

"Don't hurry, Kathie," said Lizbeth, leaning over her shoulder, "we are going for a quick run over to Menstone to see a friend of Bob's. We'll be back in an hour or so."

"You won't mind staying here—will you?" asked Crawford.

"Not a bit," replied Kathie innocently. "Go along. There are heaps and heaps to amuse me here until you come back." And she spoke sincerely, for there were many little things at the Fair that she had wished to investigate but had not been able to, while the others were with her, with their special likes and dislikes to be considered and their constant hurrying away here and there.

"We'll meet you at the Kalahalla Hotel at six o'clock," continued Lizbeth. "But if we should happen to be a little late, harness up and drive home. We won't be long behind you and Bob can easily get us a conveyance of some kind."

Kathie did not relish the idea of driving home alone, but as she had no say in the matter one way or the other, she accepted the instruction with good grace, hoping there would be no necessity for her having to meet such a contingency.

The few intervening hours passed all too quickly. Kathie sauntered over to watch the last of the horse races; she examined the butter and baking exhibits and she witnessed the judging of the Beauty Show, where tittering local girls stood on a platform, before their joking swains, and were gone over by a committee of respectable townsmen, who surely had accepted their appointments without considering what they were letting themselves in for.

She heard the decision, which was accepted amid a volley of protests from the men and was the occasion of much heart-burning among the girls. However, it was all in the day's enjoyment and had to be swallowed with the rest.

At the approach of six o'clock Kathie was at the hotel corner, awaiting the return of Lizbeth and Crawford. She was tired out with so much walking and sight-seeing and was ready and anxious to begin her homeward journey.

The clock on the old town hall opposite clanged out the hour, then, in monotone, it signalled half an hour more—but still

there was no sign of her cousin and her cousin's lover.

One after another, the various parties returned to the Kalahalla Hotel on foot, harnessed up and drove merrily away.

Kathie walked up and down impatiently until another hour had flown. Rancher Muir—that kindly old neighbour—saw her and offered to drive her home with him, but she declined, feeling sure that the truants would soon put in an appearance.

But after he had gone, misgivings began to assail her. There was a ten-mile journey ahead, darkness was gathering, and she was not at all certain of her way.

She wandered aimlessly back to where the cattle exhibit had been held. Here and there in the distance the gruff voices of departing ranchers and their men were audible. Still farther away the hoot of an automobile and the laughter and singing of a joyous party starting out for home struck her ears and gradually died away until the sounds faded into silence.

The scene of the afternoon's gaiety was now lonely-looking and almost deserted.

Kathie turned from the place, back again to the Hotel, where the glow of the electric lamps presented a slightly cheerier aspect than the darkness and empty benches of the Show Grounds. She had little hope now of meeting her cousin, yet she hesitated to go in and prepare for her homeward journey.

She sauntered to the other side of the little town.

The discordant music of the steam calliope, the rattle of musketry in the shooting galleries and the raucous shouts of the showmen all seemed to be struggling in a deadly conflict with the approaching night, madly endeavouring to hold the local roisterers still a little longer. Flaring oil lamps hung from poles alongside the various stands; the ground was trodden and somewhat miry. But the crowd was still gathered there, and it was more emphatic in the little forgiveable flagrancies with which it had bespread the day. The tireless dancers still threw themselves with a careless abandon into each other's arms, wiggled and side-stepped, bandied jests and chewed gum amid hilarious laughter.

Somewhere else wild and angry voices would start up in altercation, the sound of a blow would be heard, a mad rush, a circle all animated and excited; encouraging shouts, then a scattering in all directions; telling Kathie of another phase in the life of the day.

She shrank back into one of the many looming shadows, timid and horrified, yet fascinated by the strangeness of the scene. A man swung round the booth behind her. To fly would have been to show herself in the glare of the lights. She gathered close against the woodwork. The man came up, peered into her face, tipped her chin up and passed on with a laugh. He was followed by another of his kind—slouching and singing a maudlin chorus—who pushed against her as by accident and clutched at her in a befuddled manner, without even raising his head from his chest where it swung helpless. Kathie's nostrils became filled with the nauseating fumes from his foul breath. She struck out in loathing. She wrenched herself from the man's grasp as he staggered back, and with a cry and with cheeks afire, she ran from the nightmare of a place back to the main street and the Hotel.

The sound of loud voices, popping corks and clinking glasses issued from the busy bar-room. A stable-boy was leaning lazily against the corner hitching-post.

"Would you please let me have Mr. Jackson's horse and buggy?" Kathie asked, approaching him nervously.

"Guess there ain't no horse and buggy of Jackson's here, miss," he answered, without changing his position but squirting some tobacco juice through a hole in his front tooth on to the plank sidewalk.

"Oh yes there is!" she reiterated positively. "I saw them put up myself."

"Maybe you did, miss. I ain't contradictin'. But the stable is empty now, thank the Lord! The last horse beat it for home-and-mother an hour ago."

Kathie stood in utter despair. Her alarm and anxiety grew great indeed, so much so that it aroused the sympathy of the stable boy.

"Say!—cut out any faintin' stuff, miss. The road ain't very clean.

"Now I rec'l'ect," he went on, scratching his head as an aid to his memory, "Crawford, the Police Chief, and Miss Jackson drove away in their buggy this afternoon. They were the very first to go."

"You must be making some mistake," remonstrated Kathie, tapping her foot on the ground nervously. "They said they were going to walk and would come back later for the buggy."

"Guess the dame must have changed her mind, miss. That's a habit with them high-steppers," rejoined the boy, his air and tone that of one who had been through the mill. "And they didn't come back neither.

"Say!—what's the mat—? Been left at an auction sale?"

"Is that the Vernock Road?" she asked, ignoring his inquisitiveness.

"You bet it is! But, say!—lookee here,—a young lady like you ain't going to leg it there at this time of night."

"Oh yes, I am!"

"Oh no, you ain't!—not until I've told the boss, anyway," he persisted. "You just freeze to this spot a minute, miss. They've got to fix you up somehow."

He turned into the bar-room, but the moment he disappeared Kathie hurried off into the darkness.

For a time her trust in herself was gone, so was her faith in her fellow beings; and the loneliness and the darkness were more welcome to her than the doubtful kindness of others. So she made along the road which she knew must bring her in time to Vernock and ultimately to her uncle's ranch.

There was a rebellious feeling in Kathie's heart at the deceit of her cousin, but, as she trudged along, its bitterness got washed away by an inflow of anxiety, as it gradually bore in on her that there might have been an accident—perhaps a runaway or an overthrow. The more she thought of it the more she became convinced that that, and that only, could account for the non-appearance of Lizbeth and her escort at the time they had appointed.

On and on she trudged, steadily and almost listlessly: behind her, the fading lights of Roanstone; before her, darkness and uncertainty; with her, forebodings with which she had not the strength to battle.

The way felt interminable, as seemingly hour after hour dragged on. Her heart would start off beating furiously at the barking of a dog. The dislodging of a stone with her foot would send her trembling to the side of the road. The pathway before her was deserted and the night air was uncannily quiet. Of humanity, she encountered only one, a tattered hobo who passed in the opposite direction and after he had gone a few yards turned back and looked after her. But Kathie's flying feet left him with nothing but the gloom of night to gaze upon.

Time and again, as a light gleamed ahead, her spirits would revive with the hope that it would prove to be Vernock at last, and time and again she encountered the same disappointment, as only a rancher's barn or a labourer's house would loom up, strange and unknown.

When her hopes were almost gone, a number of twinkling lights came to view at a turn of the road. As she drew nearer, familiar steeples and buildings loomed up, and Vernock—more welcome than she could ever express—came within hail. She hastened forward and was soon trudging along through the quiet, sleeping, little town, past the Post Office and the Hotel, then on to the Ordlake Road, which, after three miles more, must bring her home.

She walked on and on with the mechanical movement of an automaton. A lethargy settled over her, killing her weariness; and almost before she was aware of it, the angry but familiar and welcome voice of her uncle aroused her. He was standing at the road-end which she would have passed in her semi-stupor.

"What the devil does this mean?" he demanded. "One o'clock in the morning. Where's Lizbeth?"

In her weakness, Kathie almost collapsed, and her uncle went to her aid and assisted her into the house.

"Where's Lizbeth?" he asked again with considerable concern.

"I—I don't know, uncle. I thought she might be here. They left me early in the afternoon to visit someone in Menstone. They promised to be back for me at six o'clock. I waited and I waited—but they did not come. Finally, I had to walk

home alone."

"And you mean to tell me you walked home that road, on this night of all nights?" he inquired.

Kathie nodded listlessly.

"What did you mean, Kathie, when you said *they* left early in the afternoon. Who was with Lizbeth?"

"Crawford."

"Damn and blast that man anyway," he exclaimed angrily. "Some of these days I'll be the death of him or he'll be the ruin of me."

"But you go up to your bed, lass," he continued almost kindly. "You've had more than enough for one day. I'll stay up till Lizbeth gets here."

All night long Colin Jackson sat at the fire, waiting Lizbeth's return. But it was not until Kathie had the cows milked and pastured; not until the rigs were distributing their contents in Vernock, that the buggy dashed up the road leading to Jackson's, with Lizbeth and Crawford chatting pleasantly in evident unconcern.

Colin Jackson met them at the door.

Lizbeth jumped down and ran toward him, throwing her arms on his shoulders.

"Aren't you awfully glad to see me, dad?" she asked with a pout, as if her feelings were hurt at his apparent cold reception. "Do you know, you might never have seen me again?"

Colin Jackson little knew how near the truth she spoke.

"Why the deuce didn't you come home with Kathie?" he asked.

"Is she home?" asked Lizbeth. "Oh good! I'm so glad. You see, dad,—Bob and I went for a drive to visit some friends of his. On the way back for Kathie, the buggy slipped a tire and we were thrown into the ditch. We had to lead the horse back to Menstone and had to put up there over night. We had the tire refixed first thing this morning by the blacksmith—and here we are."

Lizbeth patted her father's cheek playfully.

"Don't be angry, dad," she reproached. "I was well looked after, and it is all right now."

All this time Crawford was standing holding the horse by the head. Jackson went over and examined the tire. It had been repaired, bearing out the verbal evidence of Lizbeth. He turned to Crawford.

"I am much obliged to you, Crawford, for seeing this through and for looking after Lizbeth. I'll be still more obliged if you say nothing about this mishap to anybody."

"Sure thing, boss!" replied Crawford good-naturedly. "I won't say a word."

Colin Jackson put his face close to Crawford's.

"But the biggest obligement you can do me, Crawford, is to turn your back and go—and never let me hear of you or see you again."

He took the reins from the police chief and pointed to the side road.

"Nothin' like asking a lot when you are at it," remarked Crawford, laughing sarcastically. He turned on his heel. "I'm sorry, old man, but I can't oblige."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Off With the Old, On With the New

Kathie awoke with the cool night air blowing on her face. The moonlight was streaming into her bedroom. Lizbeth was amissing from her side. This latter, however, was no new experience for Kathie, so she gave the matter little thought. She rose to pull down the blind. As she got up close to the window she stumbled over a rope which had been attached to the bedpost and led to the open casement. She looked over the sill and saw that the rope was attached to a crude rope-ladder.

She smiled as she thought how old the scheme was and how often it had been used by lovers in the centuries long gone by.

The sound of voices from below caught her ear and arrested her attention. She looked out and saw two figures standing in the shadow of the spreading Manitoba Maple whose branches reached to within a few yards of the window. She could see at a glance that the two were her cousin and her cousin's sweetheart.

Lizbeth was clinging round Crawford's neck and straining her face to his. Her voice was raised in anxious entreaty.

"You mustn't go, Bob," she pleaded. "It isn't right—it isn't fair to leave me here now."

"Then why won't you come with me?" he replied. "I have asked you until I am sick of asking. You won't let me speak to the old man—not that speaking would make any impression on him. You tell me I've got to make a home for you first. I can't do that decently here, so what else can I do. I've got to go. You know that as well as I do. I'm too well known here to run a bluff the way so many strangers can do.

"I'm no damned good in this Valley. I've tried it for a good number of years now and I give it up. I've got to get out to some place where nobody knows me; I've got to cut old acquaintances and old boozing habits. See here, Liz!—you've got to be reasonable about this. For God's sake! don't kill the only little bit of good there is in me. If I stay here I'll never get any better. Too many would-be good sports around here! If I stay here I won't be able to have you;—for to have you I've simply got to save. Oh, I know! Now this kind of a dog-in-the-manger life we've been living can't go on. If I go away, I'm going for you. You know that. There ain't anybody else I would go for. Do you hear, Liz,—for you, for you—and for——"

Lizbeth quickly clamped her hand over his mouth.

"Shut up!" she exclaimed fiercely. "Don't be a fool—even if there isn't anybody about."

"It will be only for a year or two, Liz," he went on, ignoring her interruption. "Then I'll send for you and you can come after me. It'll be a fine life there, and we are both suited for it. I was brought up on a sheep farm in Oregon. You know something of stock-raising. They tell me it's a great country over there in Australia; that it can't be beat for sheep raising. My uncle there is willing to show me the ropes, and later, start me in on my own. It's the chance of a life-time. God, Liz!—it's my only chance—*our* only chance. I'm not going to miss it. Understand me, Liz—it's got to be."

His force and power held Lizbeth for a while.

"Oh, Bob," she cried tremulously, "you know I love you. You can make me agree to almost anything. But I don't feel so keenly on this as you do. Maybe what you say is true—but I like the Valley here. Maybe it is a wonderful country—but you are going away from here and I have to remain and do the weary waiting. Two years is a long time. One year is a long time. Too long! Anything might happen."

Her emotion carried her away and her passion blazed out again hysterically as she pushed him from her.

"I tell you what it is, Bob—if you go away there, bad is going to come of it. I know it as surely as I know you. You have no right to leave me. You would not do it if you really cared for me. Oh, I know you. You've been the same since the first time I heard your name mentioned. The woman you are with is the only woman for you—for a time, till you get tired of her. Then, she is like all the others, and, if you can't slip out of it with a fair front, you slink away by the back door. But I won't keep you back. You can go. When you do go—stay. That's all!"

Crawford caught her by the shoulders almost angrily. His face was tense and close to hers.

"Good God! Liz,—do you know what you are saying. You're crazy-mad, stark mad. I ain't like that—not now. You know I ain't. But you keep on driving at me and driving at me. I love you, Liz. Love—" he laughed bitterly, "Hell!—love ain't the word;—it ain't half strong enough. I used to love you, but ever since the Roanstone Fair, two months ago, I would roast in blazes for you—and you know it, too. You're mine. Liz—mine; from the top of your curls to your toes. And the good God help any man that says you ain't, or tries to come between us."

He caught her and crushed her to him with his powerful arms, showering kisses on her face and her hair, until she cried out in protest. She laid her head on his shoulder at last and sighed contentedly, with the purr of a satisfied kitten.

"Bob—I know you love me and that no one will ever love me better. I'll wait for you—only, you must not keep me waiting too long."

What a chance, thought Kathie, as she turned away from the window, for a good woman with a man who could love like that. It was the love of the savage; the love that would kill whatever came between, and glory in the killing; the love that would become criminal and would rot in prison at the command of the beloved; and, better still, the love that would strive and achieve, and rise to immeasurable heights, all at the call of a woman.

A few moments later, Lizbeth climbed over the sill, released the ropes and cast them free, closing the window softly. Kathie was already abed. Lizbeth threw herself into a chair and sobbed in utter dejection.

Kathie rose again to comfort her.

"What's the matter, Lizbeth?" she asked kindly. "You must not cry like that. Come to bed! It will be all right."

"Oh, no it won't," said Lizbeth bitterly. "He is going away on Saturday and I won't see him again—I know I won't."

"Yes!—I heard him tell you," answered Kathie quietly and innocently. "Your voices awakened me."

Lizbeth sat up at once.

"Say! You haven't been spying on us?"

"No!—not a bit of it. I could not help hearing."

"You heard him saying he was going away. Well!—what else did you hear?"

"Nothing—only that; and that he loved you, Lizbeth,—nothing more. If I had, and it was not intended that I should know I would have made it my duty to have forgotten it by this time."

"You're a pretty deep one, you are, Kathie. There's no knowing just what you know. But I don't mind you, for you know how to keep your mouth shut. That's one good thing about you anyway.

"When Bob Crawford is here beside me, I love him—every woman does—every woman but you. You're too smart for his kind. But, when he's away, I hate him like poison."

"All the same, there's something good in Crawford," remarked Kathie, "and a good woman could make a good man of him."

"That's as good as saying I'm not good," was Lizbeth's quick retort. "All right!—you have a go at him and we'll see what kind of a job you make. I'm through with him. As sure as he goes away from here, he sees the last of me. There are other men beside Bob Crawford—better men, too. The quicker he understands that the better for him.

"Maybe it is as well that he is leaving the country. I had a letter yesterday from young Tom Menteith. You don't know him. He's been on his father's tea plantation in Ceylon since he left school, but he's in Winnipeg now and is coming home next week. Tom and I used to play at being sweethearts. He liked me then—maybe he'll like me now. We'll see."

She sat for a while, carried away by her new train of thought, then she sprang to her feet, throwing her arms in the air with a despairing cry.

"Oh, I hate you, Crawford. I hate you as I hate the devil himself. Would to God I had never seen your face."

She threw herself on her knees at the bedside, burying her face in the sheets and sobbing as if her heart would break.

And thus it was; when Crawford went away to make a place on an Australian sheep-farm for Lizbeth Jackson, Tom Menteith returned to his old home after a long sojourn abroad in the interests of his father's business.

Tom Menteith drove to the church at Vernock with his old father, behind a pair of prancing greys. He looked about him for familiar faces and he saw one, like the face of the older sister of one he had once known. The bloom on the ripening cheek, the large languorous eyes with the long, drooping eyelashes, the blood-red lips and the perfectly formed bosom—these were the sermon he listened to that morning; and the impressions that that sermon left were deeper and more refreshing to him than any he had ever before listened to, making him wish that every day were Sunday and that every hour were the hour of worship.

When the service was over, he drove back from church in Lizbeth's buggy. In the quiet of that Sunday evening, he dropped in to shake hands with the eldest neighbouring rancher and he stayed for tea—just for old acquaintance's sake.

Next day, a new man was working on Jackson's Ranch, and Lizbeth was temporarily relieved of all her farm duties.

The last link was being forged, and many were the eventualities which depended on that last link's ability to hold the entire chain together.

Tom Menteith called for Lizbeth early in the afternoon and took her driving. He feasted his eyes on her fresh beauty. He gloried in her small-talk. He smiled at her gossip and laughed at the caricatures she drew of old, known faces.

She accelerated the sluggish flow of his sun-boiled blood and roused him to his best—just as she used to do, years before, when she taunted him to take the fences as high as his pony, showing him the way herself and laughing him to ridicule and emulation.

By an accident during that little journey, her hand touched his. And it set the spark. The contact thrilled him like wine of some rare vintage. He longed for the touch again, and when it did not come, manlike, he longed the more.

How temptingly her hand lay on her lap!—too near to be resisted. He placed his own over hers and toyed with her fingers for the briefest of sweetest moments. She withdrew her hand from his and looked away to the uplands. He begged forgiveness, but she did not speak again—not until they were nearing home. Then she granted him full pardon for his daring, bestowing on him a smile of tenderness which remained with him long after she had gone indoors.

And he liked her the more for her reserve, for he felt then that she was no light-o'-love to be wooed by a glance and won by a stolen kiss.

Next forenoon he called for her once more. But she had gone off early in the morning on a visit to a friend somewhere on the other side of Vernock. He departed with a careless laugh, and spent the remainder of the day in irritability and gloom.

A note, delivered by a ranch-hand, awaited Lizbeth's return. She read it, and kissed it, and placed it in her bosom.

The anger of her father at the apparent slight she had given to young Menteith, when she must have known he would call, frothed and bubbled over.

"Are you going to let this chance slip by like a fool?" he asked, "when you know you'll never get another like it. Tom Menteith is the man, and the only man at that, who can twist the old man round his little finger. He's a man who can make you a lady and who can lift the burden from your old father's shoulders with a snap of his thumb and finger."

"Now, dad, if you want things to run smoothly just leave me alone and mind your own affairs," Lizbeth replied.

"Yes, yes, lass!" he went on in ruffled excitement. "But I sold the stallion a month ago—you know that. I sold six of my best milkers yesterday. One thing after another is going and will have to go if matters don't mend. There's a threat from

the makers of the new reaper that they will take it back if the payments are not kept up. They're talking of closing me out of the ranch because I am away behind. There are debts as high as the Court House. It can't last but a few months more. For God's sake, Lizbeth, don't fail me this time. I've done my best by you and I am at my wits' end and at the end of my resources."

"Well, then, leave me alone," she retorted. "What do you know about managing a lover? Can't you see I love Tom Menteith so much that it takes all that is in me to make him believe that I don't? Do you think I wanted to be away from him to-day? I did it only to make him the more keen. He'll be here again, more anxious than ever. Leave me alone. Leave him to me, and—whatever I do I do with my head screwed on and my eyes wide open? Don't you forget it. Give me credit for being a little more than an idiot.

"But there is one thing you *can* do. Keep Kathie hard at work and out of the way, for if Tom Menteith sees her he may be like others and transfer his fancy. That would be the end of Jackson's Ranch and everything else connected with it. But, if that ever happens," she added bitterly, "I'll mark her, so that she'll never attract another."

Lizbeth went up to her room, leaving her father scratching his head in perplexity, as many another man had done before him at the ways of women.

But Colin Jackson did not interfere again. He saw that, with all his astuteness, his daughter was more than his equal and was perfectly able to conduct her own love affairs without any outside aid.

When next young Menteith called, he was astride a sprightly mare and he held the reins of Jess as he waited for Lizbeth. He sprang down to meet her; he helped her into the saddle, mounted again, and they cantered gaily away. On their way back, they tethered their horses on the outer fringe of the wood. He assisted her over the stile. As she jumped down, her wayward curls brushed his cheek. He caught the sweetness of her breath and the lingering perfume from her hair.

That was the day he tied the string of her shoe: the day he pressed her hand against his lips: the day she ran from him and he followed far into the deepest shade of the firs: when he caught up with her, panting, her eyes wide and her bosom straining tight for greater freedom, her ivory-like teeth gleaming round a gurgling laugh:—the day he called on his God and caught her in his arms, unresisting, against his breast, with his lips on hers, her breath mingling with his, and the green world whirling dizzily around both of them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Vow

Lizbeth came in by the open doorway, her face aglow with the enjoyment of her homeward gallop. She threw her riding switch into a corner, sat down with a sigh of relief and started to peel off her gloves.

"Where's mother?" she asked.

Her father looked up from the papers which lay spread before him on the table.

"You're getting out of touch with the work around here. This is washing day, Lizbeth, and your mother is in the basement among the wash-tubs."

"That means she won't be up here for a bit," remarked Lizbeth.

"That's exactly what it means, lass."

"Dad,—Tom Menteith has asked me to marry him."

Colin Jackson jumped up, scattering his papers and over-turning his chair in his excitement.

"Eh!—has he? Thank the Lord for that!" he cried, going over to his daughter and catching hold of her hands. "Eh, Lizbeth, but you're a lass. I knew you could make it. I knew it from the start.

"Tell your old father all about it. When is it going to be, and where, and everything else? This is the best news I've heard for years. Say! but it'll create a stir among our neighbours. Colin Jackson's daughter a lady! Think of it!

"Let me look into that bonny face of yours. Yes!—it's just perfect. He couldn't help but fall in love with it. If I were a young man and eligible, I'd want to marry you myself. Fine I knew when I laid out the money on you that it was money well spent. Lizbeth, you're the best paying investment I ever went into.

"Phew!—but this is a relief though," he went on, mopping his brow with his handkerchief. "I was just wondering, when you came in, what new lies I could invent to stall off these damned, persistent creditors of mine. I can manage them now all right, all right. It will be a cheery smile and open defiance. You know, Lizbeth,—it beats all how the very men who would hound you to death at the slightest show of the white feather, are ready to cringe, and smirk, and apologise before a bold front. I feel twenty years younger already, and you're the lass that has worked the miracle."

Lizbeth watched him coldly for a time, almost enjoying his exhibition of unconcealed delight.

"Gee! but you're running fast, dad," she exclaimed. "I just said he had asked me."

Colin Jackson looked at her. His brows wrinkled in perplexity, then they cleared again and he laughed boisterously.

"It won't do, lass. You were always keen on a bit of fun, but you can't fool your old father this time. I see it in your face, and you're happy as a jenny-wren in springtime."

She leaned back lazily on the arm of the couch.

"Guess I'm not fooling this time, dad. It is too serious for fooling. I haven't accepted Tom Menteith."

"What?" gasped her father. "You haven't accepted him? Well, the idea! You had better go right now and do it then. When did you become so mighty particular? Have you gone crazy all at once?"

He shook her roughly by the shoulder.

"Keep your hands off me," she ordered. "Go and sit down!"

He stood for a second dumfounded, then he obeyed her like a child. His nerves were more than a little jangled and he was hardly in a fit condition to stand very much discussion. "Don't keep me on the nettles," he begged. "I'm not feeling too good. But I fancy I see your reason, Lizbeth;—you haven't accepted Menteith, but you haven't said, 'No!' You're just

thinking it over, the way the grand dames do. Quite right, too! He'll know you are not sitting waiting for him.

"But you'll take him all the same, Lizbeth—eh!" he went on rather anxiously. "You could tell him to-morrow—or maybe, to-night.

"Don't wait too long. He might change his mind. Independent young customers like him do that sometimes."

"I haven't said, 'Yes!' and I haven't said, 'No!' But unless I have your help, dad, my answer to Tom Menteith will be 'No!' It must be 'No!' Now do you get me?"

The old man shook his head vaguely.

"There's no 'getting' you, Lizbeth. I've tried that for twenty years, but I've never managed it yet."

Lizbeth's face grew suddenly pale. Her bosom was aflutter in suppressed excitement, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She went over to her father, caught hold of his arm and whispered a few words into his ear.

"Guess that's speaking plain enough," she exclaimed. "Tell me now—what am I to do? I want Tom. I don't want to give him up."

Colin Jackson furrowed his brows again. But he did not appear altogether displeased at what he had heard.

"And why should you give him up? Eh, Lizbeth! but you're a sly lass to trap your hare and then to tie it up in case it might run away. All the same, it's taking big chances. It isn't safe taking chances now-a-days with these young gentry. But don't fret about it, lass," he went on, with a wave of his hand as if dismissing care forever. "It's past now, and it'll be all right. He's different from other fellows. He's as straight a lad as ever trod shoe-leather. The very fact that he asked you to marry him proves that.

"Lizbeth—take an old man's advice," he continued, patting her on the shoulder, "give him your answer at once and get married as soon as you can. The sooner the better for all concerned! Then you two can go somewhere on a good long holiday, and nobody will be any the wiser. Then you can come back and snap your fingers at the whole community."

"Oh, for goodness sake! Stop your raving or you'll drive me silly," groaned Lizbeth, rising and walking across the room in her excitement. "You men are all alike—dull as dust. Do you think I would hold back a minute if I could lay this at Tom Menteith's door? He's not to blame. Can't your slow brain guess that Crawford is the responsible party,—Crawford, he and no other? And he is in Australia, safe away from all trouble, damn him!" she panted between her teeth.

She stood clutching the edge of the table and watching her father, who seemed to have shrivelled in his seat, the personification of stupid despair. He did not speak. Only gradually did the poignancy of the real situation break through his befogged mind.

"That's right!" sneered Lizbeth. "Sit there and nurse your anger. Why don't you say something? Why don't you do something? Anything would be better than that. Do you think I am made of granite and can stand anything—everything? I know it's a muddle, a muddle from beginning to end—it's all a muddle, and I wish to God I were dead or a thousand miles away. But it's too late now for wishing. You bet it is. And we've just got to put it through—see! I've been planning and scheming to find a way. You're a man. Why don't you wake up and say you'll help me? Have I ever failed yet? Do you think I'm going to fail now? No, siree! But you've got to help me. Do you hear? You've got to rouse yourself and help me."

Lizbeth's talk sounded hysterical, but, nevertheless, a vigorous, virile fire was running behind it and lending it life.

"Don't say another word to me, you shameless hussy," groaned her father, his head between his hands. "To think that a daughter of mine would land herself in a muddle like this—with the chance you had, too. The richest and handsomest man in the Okanagan! And lost, lost, all over that drunken, blackguardly, ne'er-do-well. Oh, to think of it—just to think of it!"

He sprang to his feet suddenly in uncontrolled irritation.

"So this is the end—is it?" he stormed. "I ruined, the ranch let over our heads, you disgraced, and all of us hounded out of the district, or remaining in it to be sneered and jeered at by every common-ordinary about the place—and all by the

doings of that sneaking, gambling thief."

He raised his fists over Lizbeth's head in a burst of passion. "Get out of my sight," he fumed, "get out before I strike you where you stand."

Lizbeth did not flinch under his anger. She returned his glare for a moment, then she laughed in his face contemptuously.

"Go on!" she cried, "and in another minute I'll take you at your word. Guess maybe you think I'm not sick of it—sick and tired of it—and ready to throw it up for two pins? If you do, change your mind.

"I have a plan that can fix all this—a plan to marry Tom Menteith and so pay off every dollar you owe but another threat from you and you'll never set eyes on me again. Crawford is not likely to come back here, but there's nothing to prevent me going to Crawford. He wants me. He's ready to welcome me with both arms. I don't want to go unless I have to. You know that as well as I do. I prefer to be with Tom Menteith. Life with Tom would be easier for me—a deal easier.

"Are you going to help me with my plans? Yes or No is what I want from you. For months I have been lying awake at nights scheming and plotting. Do you think I have been doing this for no end? Not if I know it! Listen to me! I've already promised to marry Tom Menteith. He wishes me to be ready to go out to him to Ceylon in six months' time. He would leave here sometime before me in order to get a house built for us to his liking and to prepare for my coming. He's got to wait ten months. He'll be none the worse for the waiting. All the same—a careless word would frighten him away like a scampering squirrel. He mustn't hear the slightest whisper of my connection with this business.

"Now—here's the plan, and you'd better agree to it, for it's your last chance:—You've got to get someone else at once to take Kathie's place in the dairy, then you must send her and me away without delay to some quiet place on the coast, up from Vancouver a-ways. The farther away you send us the better. When it is all over we can come back again. Kathie can play nurse. That will leave me free. Savvy?"

Her father looked at her stupidly.

"Do you think young Menteith will have you with another man's youngster tagging at your heels?" he asked.

"No, I'm not so foolish as to think that. And that's where you come in. Can't you see that when we're away Tom will be inquiring for me. You must tell him that I have gone to nurse Kathie and that he must not go for good until I return. Oh,—I'll blaze the trail before I go. I know where I stand with him. I have him where I want him and you needn't be scared that he won't wait.

"You've got to get Kathie to agree to act as nurse to the child, and if necessary get her to swear that she will not mention to a living soul who its father and mother are until—until I am safely married away in Ceylon, or until you give her permission. How you are going to manage her is your affair. But it has to be done. Tell her of the ruin that is hanging over us. Impress it upon her as a duty. Let her know what it will mean if she doesn't help out now. Tell her anything. Promise her anything. Coax her; threaten her;—only get her into it. After she's in, it'll be easy to keep her there.

"It is a simple matter to get gossip going. A word here and there is all that is necessary. There are lots of women, and men too, in this Valley just gasping to carry a tale, especially if there's a flavour to it. And why, I should like to know, couldn't it be she as well as I?

"Now, dad—this is all for yourself, remember. You are not doing it for me. And, if you fail with Kathie, I shall still be free, for I'll beat it to Crawford."

"My God, Lizbeth—I believe you are in league with the devil. I can't do this—I won't do it. Kathie's only a child herself—and a better one than ever you have been. I would sooner let everything go," he answered with a spark of his old determination.

"All right, dad! That ends it. I'm going to Australia on Saturday's boat sailing from Vancouver."

Colin Jackson immediately began to relent.

"Wait a bit, Lizbeth—wait a bit. Give an old man time to think. You go along too fast for me."

"Oh, I have no patience with you. Haven't I told you that it need only be for a time. After I am safely married, Tom will

do as I want.

"Now, think of yourself for a moment. Think what my marriage with Tom will mean to you:—freedom from debt, freedom from worry; independence. And for me—it will mean Tom Menteith and respectability, instead of nobody and disgrace," she contended cunningly.

"No!" he complained. "A secret like that is sure to come out somehow. Some busybody will get wind of it. Kathie might tell it herself. She might run off at my first suggestion of it."

"Oh, no she won't! Not if you go about it in the right way. Only tell her what will be good for her to know. And later on, if it should so happen that I am unable to persuade Tom to take the child under his protection—what would there be to prevent Kathie keeping it as if it were her own? She has no friends here to whom she could go; and you know as well as I do that she will do anything under the sun if she thinks it is a duty. And after all, she's nothing to us. Can't you see how this would all work out to your advantage? Simpson would have nothing more to do with her. No one else would want her to work for him. You would have a good, cheap servant on the ranch as long as she lived. It takes a man, dad, to be blind to his own interests."

Jackson stopped his impatient walking across the floor and Lizbeth read from his face that she had gained the victory. She exulted inwardly. Her father looked into her eyes.

"You she-devil," he cried, half in passion and half in admiration, "to think that I could have fathered your like! I'm going to try this though—and if I fail blame yourself. Yes,—I'll try it. It's for me and mine, and I and mine come first."

Lizbeth laughed, but it was a laugh of relief more than of merriment.

"I am going upstairs now," she said. "Kathie should be in soon. You and she will be better alone for a while."

Her skirts had hardly disappeared round the turn of the stairway when Kathie stepped in, humming good-naturedly and bringing with her the suggestion of rich cream, new butter and young clover. Her eyes were radiant and she portrayed the pliant embodiment of health as she raised her shapely, bared arm to her head in an endeavour to gather up the rebellious strands of her hair, scented and blown awry by the warm, fragrant breeze of that midsummer's day.

She filled the kettle, cleared aside her uncle's papers and spread the table cloth for the evening meal, for she knew her aunt would be worn out after her hard day over the wash tub; and Wong, the Chinaman, was off burying one of his numerous cousins.

Colin Jackson watched her narrowly, admiring the quiet deftness with which she went about her work and almost sorrowing that such a splendid creature would have to be sacrificed on his family altar. Sentiment, however, was an emotion somewhat foreign to Jackson and he dismissed it summarily.

"Kathie!"

"Yes, uncle!"

"Come and sit down beside me for a minute. I have something of importance to tell you."

Kathie obeyed, looking into her uncle's face in perfect frankness.

"Things have been in a pretty bad way here, Kathie, and they don't seem to be mending any. I am pressed on every side by debt and I don't know where next to turn. I sold the Percheron stallion some time ago and since that I have sold a number of the cows."

"Yes, uncle—I know, and I am very, very sorry. We girls are poor helpless things at that part of ranch work. It must be the most harassing of all to do the financing. I only wish I could help you. If I can do anything by getting up earlier in the morning I shall gladly do it, for you are my uncle and my nearest living relative. You gave me a home when I had nowhere to go. I have grown strong and healthy since I came out here. I can never forget these things.

"Lately I have noticed your hair turning grey. I have watched the wrinkles gather in your face and the alert look fade from your eyes, and I have worried at these signs. Unfortunately, I am a girl and I can do only a very little to help in such a dilemma."

She put her hand over his, and her sympathy awoke within him a mighty surge of self-pity which filled and almost overwhelmed him.

"You are right, Kathie. As long as I can remember, I have always been the willing horse that bore the load. I have had to bear the burden of others, too. But it cannot be much longer now," he sighed. "In a few months we shall be auctioned off, bag and baggage, out of house and home. You shall have to go your way then, lass, and we shall have to go ours. For me, it will be down the hill and under, for I am too old now to start over again."

He dropped his head on his chest.

"I didn't think it would come to this after all these years of hard work both here and in the Old Land," he added. "I didn't deserve it."

Tears welled in Kathie's eyes.

"Oh! I wish I could help you, uncle. Is there anything that can be done? Surely—surely there is some way?"

Her uncle looked up.

"Kathie, would you help me if you thought by so doing it would put everything right?"

"Would I? Would I? Oh, uncle," she answered sincerely, "you know that I would. I would do anything—everything—that I possibly could do. But—I don't know how. If you do—tell me."

"It is surprising what a girl of your good sense can do. There is one way out, but I shall never find it without your aid."

"Tell me the way, then," she cried enthusiastically, "and I'll do it if I die."

"Well—first and foremost, young Tom Menteith wants to marry Lizbeth. When he does marry her, all our troubles will be over, for Lizbeth has promised to see them right—and so has he," he added as an afterthought.

Kathie sat in silence, wondering where her assistance was to be required.

"Unfortunately, Lizbeth and he have been a bit too fond of each other," he went on slyly, "and the result is, Lizbeth is in trouble."

Kathie's face paled and her eyes grew large.

"I always thought that Mr. Menteith was a gentleman," she said simply.

"Tuts!—and so he is—one of the best. But he is young and just a little bit rash at times. And, of course, he isn't altogether to blame. Lizbeth is as much at fault as he is. It has just been a little bit of foolishness on the part of both. It is a great pity, all the same," pursued her uncle, wagging his head. "Old David Menteith would be in a great way about it if he knew. Tom has got his father to agree to their marriage, but this new phase would certainly be the means of putting an end to it. Tom feels that his father must be kept in the dark regarding their—their impetuosity, until after they are nicely settled down in Ceylon. Then, of course, Menteith senior can fret and fume as much as he likes—it won't make any difference.

"Now, Kathie—you have promised to help us. It is only a little thing we want you to do, but it means a great deal to us. I was thinking of sending you and Lizbeth to some quiet little town or settlement up the Coast from Vancouver. You could look after Lizbeth and nurse her. It would be a grand change for both of you.

"Then we were thinking that when you came back you could take charge of the baby, just until Lizbeth and Tom are away and married. It could fellow them later in charge of a competent nurse.

"I'll get someone else to do the dairy work and you will be free to give it all your attention. Do you see the idea?"

"Yes, uncle,—I see it, but, but I can't say I like it at all," said Kathie. "It seems so mean and so deceitful to that straight, high-minded, honourable old gentleman, not to tell him. Why does not Tom Menteith be a man, make a clean breast of it now and save a hundred heart-burnings later on?"

"It wouldn't do at all," declared her uncle with emphasis. "You must give us credit for having thought of all that already. You know the reputation David Menteith has and the stand he takes in all matters of this kind. You know how unforgiving he can be. All he would do would be to bundle Tom off right away to Ceylon, and settle some small allowance on Lizbeth. And what good, think you, would that do us? There's Lizbeth to think of, there's the poor innocent child to think of. It would be nameless to the end of its days.

"When they are married, the old fellow cannot play any such tricks. He will have to come to the mark and be forgiving and generous. They all do it finally. They have to, to save their name."

"Oh—you must not think I do not want to help, uncle," she interposed, clutching her fingers nervously, "but there seem to be so many different outlets to this thing, and I do hate the very thought of it. Would it not be better and cheaper to give the child out to someone else to nurse? There are lots of kindly, motherly women in Vernock who would be glad of the chance to earn a little. And I am sure I can be of far more use to you in the dairy and around the ranch, especially if Lizbeth is not to be helping any more and is going away soon."

"Kathie—you seem to understand neither your own sex nor the gentry. If you were a mother, would you like your child to be sleeping under a strange roof at nights? Do you think young Menteith would allow it to be farmed out where there would be the slightest chance of anything going wrong? It has to be properly nursed and well looked after in every way, and in the safekeeping of relatives. That can only be done here. We cannot take any neighbours into our confidence because it would set up a nest of gossip. The fewer people who get their eyes on the babe, the better for our plans.

"Now, Kathie, are you or are you not going to take on this simple little duty? It is not a question for argument? If you *are* not, it means the end of everything for us."

"Oh, don't put it that way, uncle," she interposed in deep concern. "You know I'll do it. I promised to do anything I could. I'll do this, much as I dislike it."

"There, there, girlie,—I knew you would," he said, patting her on the shoulder, surprised and delighted at the slight opposition he had experienced to his proposals. "It is only a little thing I am asking of you, but you are the only one who can do it properly. Besides, it is Tom Menteith's express desire that you should do this for him, although he is not likely, personally, ever to mention this to you in any way.

"But, mind you, it is a serious business and the slightest word or suggestion from you would utterly ruin everything. You must not open your mouth about it—not to your dearest friend."

He let the words sink in, as Kathie busied herself about the kitchen.

"Kathie, you might bring me that book that is lying at the back of the dresser," he said, breaking the silence suddenly.

"Which one," she asked, "the ready-reckoner?"

"No! The one below it—the Bible."

Kathie brought the Book to him with a look of surprise. As he took it from her he held her hand on it with both his own, looking at her in a manner that was intended to be reassuring.

"You must not think that I mistrust you, my dear, but we've got to be so careful. I have let you into a great secret, so I wish you to swear that you will keep it a secret. It is just a kind of form, but it helps to impress the memory."

Kathie shrank away.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried hurriedly, "not that."

"Don't be silly, woman," retorted her uncle, smiling grimly. "Lizbeth and I have done it, so surely you can."

It was a brazen lie, but it carried the additional weight he had intended it should.

"Oh, please don't ask me to swear on the Bible. I have never done that—and it seems so much like a sacrilege. Surely you can take my word for it?" she pleaded. "I have always kept my word without force and I give it now to you, without reserve."

"I don't doubt you a bit, Kathie, but temptations come sometimes to all of us and, anyway, if you are so sure about keeping your word, you needn't be afraid that harm will come to you by swearing to it. It is only those who are not sure of themselves who are alarmed at an oath. Why, it is done every day in the Courthouse, and it is a grand thing, too—one of the sensible things a Bible can be used for."

Kathie's resistance crumbled away. After all, it did not really make very much difference to her. A promise was a promise, whether given lightly or on oath.

"Hurry, then—please," she protested, "and let me back into the open air for a few minutes."

"Don't be nervous, Kathie. It is only a trifle. You are a good lass, and your uncle won't forget it either."

Jackson was more than elated at the success of his eleventh hour scheme, into which he now entered heart and soul.

"Just put your hand on the Book again, and repeat after me," he said solemnly, imitating, as well as he knew how, the Court Official whom he had heard on more than one occasion.

"I swear—that until I am released from this vow by my uncle—Colin Jackson—or until my cousin, Elizabeth Jackson is married—I will not divulge to anyone—what I know regarding the parentage of Elizabeth's child.—So help me, God."

Slowly and mechanically, as if heart weary, with dry lips and staring eyes, Kathie repeated the formula after her uncle; and when the last solemn clause was ended she dropped into a chair and threw her arms on the table before her, sobbing unrestrained.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Canker of Doubt

"Good morning, Mr. Jackson! I should like to speak with Elizabeth if she is disengaged. I thought she and I might take a ride over to Grange Ranch. I have some business to do there for the dad and I hate to go alone when there is the chance that Elizabeth might come with me," remarked young Menteith, accosting the rancher on the Avenue leading from the house to the main road.

"Morning, Mr. Tom. But I guess you'll have to go alone to-day. We've had rather a trying time here lately—a bad business. Didn't Lizabeth mention it to you?"

"Mention what, Mr. Jackson?" asked Tom Menteith, a little perplexed.

"Oh, I thought maybe she had said something to you about it. But it being a delicate subject no doubt she didn't like to approach it.

"You see, it's like this—there's a girl I have working in the dairy—you may have noticed her. She's a far out relative of mine. All her people are dead. I brought her out from Ireland and made a home for her here. Well, you know how it always goes when a man tries to do a good turn. She's gone and got herself into trouble with some lad about the district, and I have had to send her away until it's all over."

"Well, well! That's too bad," sympathised Menteith. "Now I come to think of it, Elizabeth did say something or other about it, but I did not give it much thought."

"Well, Tom, if I had had my way I would have turned the baggage out neck and crop, but Lizbeth has quite a fancy for the girl, besides being naturally soft-hearted and generous; so she would not hear of such a thing. Instead, she insisted on going away with the girl to the Coast and up to some quiet little settlement where she could nurse her until it was all over. It is going to be an expensive business for me, Tom, but then I didn't feel like trying to crush out the charitable feelings that seem always to be part of my Lizbeth's very nature, so I just let her have her way, knowing you would soon be taking her away from me. She left with the girl on yesterday's train. She gave me a note for you and she says that when you read it you will know she is doing her duty, and that you will be willing to wait patiently for her for a few months.

"If you have time to come up to the house for a few minutes, I'll let you have the letter."

Tom Menteith followed the rancher up the Avenue and into the house. He did not seem very well pleased at the sudden stoppage of the pleasant times he had been having of late and he was inclined to blame his sweetheart for impetuosity and lack of consideration for him; but, as he read Lizbeth's letter through, his face cleared, he pressed the paper to his lips and put it into his breast pocket.

"It is all right, Mr. Jackson," he said more cheerfully. "Liz is the dearest, most kind-hearted woman in the world, and I'll wait as many years as she asks months, if she says so—only I hope she won't say so.

"I have an invitation to Los Angeles and 'Frisco, to spend the winter there with some old friends, so I shall take advantage of it until Liz gets back. Then I can shoot out to Ceylon and pave the way for her. But I won't go until I see her again on this side; we have so many things to talk over and so many plans to make. I have no doubt the dad will chafe at my delay in getting back to the plantations, but he'll just have to chafe till I'm ready, or go himself. It isn't every year that I get a holiday."

As young Menteith went down the road, Colin Jackson rubbed his hands and chuckled.

"That girl of mine is a perfect genius," he soliloquised. "If she had been a man she would have been another Napoleon. But it's maybe just as well for me," he reflected, "that she's only a woman.

"Well—I guess it's about time now that I was setting the news quietly around, here and there, where it will have the best effect and the widest circulation."

He told it casually to the ne'er-do-well son of a neighbouring rancher. He mentioned it, in an off-hand way, to the woman

who kept the little candy store at the corner of Orchard Street in Vernock.

The minister's wife missed Lizbeth from her usual pew in church and called down one afternoon to inquire about it. Colin Jackson sent her off in a perfect buzz of excitement, tingling from head to heels in the enjoyment of the tit-bit she had received straight from the baker's oven, as it were, and bursting to unburden herself upon the first member of the Ladies' Guild whom she might happen to encounter.

And it was almost common property before it reached the ears of him who was most concerned. He had it thrown to him by his landlady when she was serving the dinner on the afternoon of his usual walk to meet Kathie down by the Lake.

"That's sure some business up there at the Ranch, Mr. Simpson," she remarked by way of introduction, adjusting her hair and clasping her hands in front of her under her apron.

Alick Simpson looked up in mild inquiry.

"What!—you didn't hear about it? For the Land Sakes!" she commented. "One hardly knows what the world is coming to now-a-days, especially among the young folks. You that's a school principal will know that—indeed you will. And to think that the hussy would keep her head so high in the air and never speak to a soul, as if she was a cut above the rest of us. But it's just what I've always said." She bent over the table confidentially. "The quiet ones are always the worst, Mr. Simpson—they are indeed. You bet they are.

"If you will take the advice of a woman up in years, you will marry a cheery, free-and-easy woman, for 'Still waters run deep,' Mr. Simpson. You bet they do."

How long she would have rattled on in this strain it is hard to tell, but Alick Simpson interrupted the flow.

"You forget, Mrs. Halford, I am quite in the dark as to what all this refers."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I completely forgot. You'll excuse me—but it is such a disgrace to the neighbourhood, and it's enough to make any respectable woman ashamed of her sex, let alone keep in mind what she says and what she doesn't say, and what she intends to say."

"I quite agree with you," put in the teacher drily.

"Well, well, Mr. Simpson—it is that black-haired, mealy-mouthed girl at Jackson's. She's been carrying on with some of the young fellows and they're expecting——"

The school teacher rose unsteadily from the table, pale to the lips. He held up his hands before his astonished landlady.

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," he commanded fiercely. "It is a lie—a damned, slanderous lie."

Mrs. Halford gasped in astonishment and wrung her hands.

"Oh, Mr. Simpson,—Mr. Simpson,—I—I am sure I wouldn't have mentioned it at all—only—only you seemed to encourage me to go on?

"All the same," she continued, a little belligerently, "there seems to be truth in it, for I got it from Mrs. Gordon, my next door neighbour—a very respectable person—and she got it from her milkman the day before yesterday."

Alick Simpson could not trust himself to speak. He walked to the door and pointed downstairs with no uncertain gesture. Mrs. Halford marched out, indignant.

"Shown out of my own rooms, indeed! If that doesn't beat all," she exclaimed, as the door closed behind her and the handle turned sharply, throwing the lock securely into the socket.

Simpson fancied that in closing the door on his scandal-mongering landlady he had secured himself against her gossip, but she left something with him of which he could not rid himself so easily.

In a few minutes he hurried out, leaving his dinner untouched. The fresh air and the sunshine, however, brought with them a reaction. His morbid thoughts took flight, and soon he was laughing at his foolishness in having allowed such idle prattlings to influence him in the slightest way in regard to the pure, sweet girl who, some day, would be his wife.

In fancy, but in all humbleness, he bent before her and offered to her his deepest apologies.

He took out his watch. It still wanted an hour and a half to the time of his appointed meeting with Kathie. He went back to his rooms at Mrs. Halford's and ate his dinner. He then dressed himself in his gayest attire, pinned a flower into his button-hole and strolled out leisurely, swinging his cane and whistling "The Soldiers' Chorus," from William Tell; much to the bewilderment of the goodly Mrs. Halford, who was watching him covertly from behind the drawn curtains.

He reached the quiet of the trees by the Lake, and there he waited long and patiently. But Kathie did not come.

Only once had she disappointed him before and that was the time of her accident in the snow.

He tried to put away all thought of ill, but always the question kept arising within him:—why did she not come?—why did she not come?

An hour flew by, but still he walked forward and backward, loth to leave without some sign: some word from her in explanation. Back again to him came the gossip of the landlady.

"God!" he thought, "what if there be some truth in it?"

The rush of the idea of such a terrible possibility sent a stab through him which made him gasp. He could hear distinctly the uneven beating of his throbbing heart, going faster and faster as it called up his reserve forces to its aid, then gradually slowing down again as his mind grasped at the hope that the alarm was a false one—leaving him limp, and cold, and unsatisfied.

The gaunt skeleton was grinning in the dark corners of his brain cells. And this time all the exhilaration of the sunshine and the open air were unavailing to dispel it. He conjured up a thousand forms and fancies from this one, prolific, spectral thought; forms and fancies of which he would have blushed to think only a few short hours before; spuming, bastard conjectures which for the moment crowded out all good, tore his idol from the pedestal upon which he had placed her and shattered his dreams.

He laughed again, but his laugh failed to ring true. It was tainted with some of the poison which was working silently and surely within him.

He looked at the old, weather-worn log, upon which Kathie and he had so often sat together. He beat his fist upon it until the skin peeled away from his knuckles. It was then that he saw the flash of a scrap of white paper which seemed to have been inserted into a crack under the broken bark. He pulled it out. It was a note hastily scrawled and containing only a few words, but words enough surely to recall a strong man to himself and to the duty he owed to himself and to the woman he professed to love. He read them over:—

"Alick—I have to go away. Bear with me yet a little while. Kathie."

A mist came over his eyes. He threw himself on the ground. He wrestled long with the evil thoughts that had possessed him, and in the end he was victorious.

He rose, taking the trail to the edge of the Lake, then over the hill to the wood, through the grassy pathway there, and straight on to the house of his old friends at Broadacres.

The kindly, motherly old lady met him at the door.

"Alick, my dear boy! Come right in. We have missed you lately. Allan has been looking for you every day and wondering where you have been hiding yourself," she greeted warmly. "Allan is over at Doctor Orr's just now, but you shall stay a while with me."

She could read in Alick Simpson's face the effects of internal conflict and her heart softened toward him, for she also had heard of his sorrow, and his sorrow was hers as well.

"Poor boy!" she said, laying her hand lightly on his. "We have all been badly hit by this awful news. And you must feel it worst of any."

Alick looked at her in utter despair, as all the ghosts and shadows with which he had fought on the moor came back again

and assailed him.

"Do you believe this thing too?" he asked slowly and desperately. "If *you* believe it—it must be true."

He pulled the tiny scrap of paper from his vest pocket, tore it into shreds and tossed the pieces into the fire with the deliberation of a man who had made a final decision.

"I am afraid, Alick, I cannot help myself. Wherever I have turned—and I have turned many ways—it is confirmed. It has been a heavy blow to me, but heavier still to Allan, for he loved her as he would have loved a daughter of his own. He could talk with her by the hour and never weary. He seemed to grow young again when she was in the house, and he worshipped the very air she breathed. He refuses to speak of this trouble, and he looks older than ever before, these last few days. I doubt if even now he really believes that she is anything but pure, and sweet, and innocent, although it worries him greatly, and I think he would still maintain that if there is any evil, it is not in her. Nor do I think he will condemn her until her own lips acknowledge her guilt.

"I wish I had his faith. But, my boy, this is something that we women place high above all else, and we cannot turn in love to one who has failed to preserve her true womanliness. I cannot think how I should ever be able to talk calmly with her again."

Alick listened nervously until she had concluded.

"Would to God," he cried, "that I had insisted on our marriage when she was swaying in the balance. All this would have been prevented."

"No, no, Alick! But, in the light of what we now know, rather thank your Maker that he controlled your will and guided your destiny as he did.

"Yet—there is another to blame equally with her in this. And, do you know, Alick—oh, my boy, forgive me, but I cannot keep this back from you—" she cried, tears springing to her eyes, "some are coupling your name with hers."

"Oh, God in Heaven!" cried Alick, passing his hand over his brow and rising, "What next—what next? I wish that all of those canting, cavilling, gossiping scandal-mongers were stricken dumb for all Eternity."

Mrs. Gray's restraining hand was on his arm, for she had never seen this quiet, studious man in such a passion before.

"Alick—Alick!" she whispered in chiding tones.

"Do *you* give credence to this?" he cried.

"Ah, Alick—God forbid that you should ever come to that. Still, I think it would be better if you went away for a little while, until the worst has blown over."

He caught her hands, and their eyes held each other.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him as his own mother would have done.

And Alick turned and went away.

Back over the hill he climbed, with the leaden steps of a man who had heard the pronouncement of his doom. He dipped into the wood, through the tangle of underbrush of berry bushes and vines, aimlessly and carelessly, until he found himself upon the grassy plane, near the fence where he had lain so often listening to the bewitching strains of Kathie's music. And his heart grew tender in protesting confliction with his sterner reason.

He stood, peeling the loose curling ends of bark from a birch tree, his thoughts far away and all unconscious of his surroundings. A voice at his ear startled him with uncomfortable suddenness.

"You sure are a hummer to ferret out the silent places, Mr. Simpson!"

It was Copley, the gamewarden, who spoke.

"I saw you by the Lake an hour and a half ago, and I hardly expected to stumble across you here next. But it's the dandiest

time of the year now, and I don't wonder at you taking it all in."

"I like to be in the open and in the solitude, Copley," replied Alick shortly.

"Say!—it's too bad about that young girl down at Jackson's," went on the warden with a jerk of his head. "Just heard it the other day. She was a swell-looker and a real nice, quiet kind of a kid besides. If I was her big brother, or if she was anything to me, I'd find the man and strangle the miserable life out'n him—the cowardly brute. That blackguard, Crawford, knows more about it than anybody else—or I'm an injun. What did he beat it for, if he wasn't skeered? What happened in the dairy, the night of the first snowfall last winter, was, I'm thinking, more serious than some folks imagined at the time. But guess time will tell, Mr. Simpson—and all the gossips in the Valley are busy with an eye on the calendar."

The school-teacher underwent a strange tumult of emotion. Here was another phase in the case which had not occurred to him before. And it set him at opposites again. Simpson was a well-balanced man, but he felt that he would be unable to stand much more of the strain he had been put to these last few hours.

"You ain't lookin' too well, Mr. Simpson—if I might mention it," said Copley.

"Nor am I feeling well," replied Alick, "and I want to be alone."

The game warden took the hint, disappearing into the thicket and throwing back a final sentence as he went.

"Crawford was nothing but a damned, sneaking blackguard, and I hope he gets what's comin' to him before he's through."

Alick Simpson was now past all doubting. His mind had accepted the inevitable, but, nevertheless, he determined on a talk with Colin Jackson before he shook himself entirely free from the place which had now lost all charm for him. He walked down to the ranch and inquired for the owner.

"You'll find him at the front gate," said Meg Shaw, who had lately been reinstated in her old position as maid of all work, but with a considerable raise in wages. "Take it from me, though—you're wastin' your time, for you'll no' get muckle oot o' him that'll help you ony," she added drily.

Alick did not reply, but hastened to where the rancher was leaning against the gate-post, lazily admonishing a vicious-looking bull terrier which looked up into his master's face familiarly, with open jaws, slithering fangs and lolling tongue.

"Mr. Jackson," Alick asked curtly, "I would like Kathie's address. Where can I find her?"

The stout, dour rancher looked him over without making a move.

"Guess that's a like you'll have to do without, teacher. And, what's more—you can't find her. She's being well looked after; better than she deserves:—if that's any comfort. But she's not for the likes of you to be inquiring after."

"Mr. Jackson—it is little use you and I mincing matters. I know what is being said about her and I mean to know more before I am through with it—and, by God! if she is the victim of any of your underhand scheming, I'll tar and feather you and set you on fire on your own rubbish heap."

Colin Jackson winced at the vehemence of the school-teacher's onslaught, but he felt too secure within the breastworks which he had built about himself to trouble much over threats; and he knew that Alick Simpson was labouring under a strong excitement.

"If you are going to be insulting, Simpson, the best thing you can do is to git. I threatened once to put the dog on you. The Lord save you if that brute ever takes you in tow."

The farmer turned as if to leave him. Simpson's lips tightened to a narrow line. He laid a detaining hand on Jackson's coat sleeve. Jackson pulled himself free, roughly.

"Look here, young fellow," he cried, "keep your hands off."

"I wish to know Kathie's address," repeated Simpson determinedly.

"And you are not going to know it," replied Jackson. "It is none of your damned business where she is. Although—

maybe, after all, it is—" he went on craftily, "for either you or Crawford know more about this than all the rest of us."

The rancher vented a hoarse laugh.

Alick sprang at him, but quickly controlled himself again.

"Here, Pat!" yelled Jackson to his dog, in a considerable fear. "Fix him—fix him—quick!"

The brute, surly and ill-tempered like his master, seemed to be yearning for such an unusual pleasure. Without even a warning growl, it flew at Alick and embedded its sharp teeth firmly in the fleshy part of his leg.

Colin Jackson grinned and encouraged the dog with a word now and again.

Simpson bent down and tried to disengage it, but it was like trying to pry apart the teeth of a bear trap. The pain was excruciating, and great drops of perspiration began to come out on his forehead. His pent-up madness broke loose on this sullen, vicious, clinging animal. He caught it firmly by the throat with both hands, burying his fingers among the cords and tubes that lay under its soft, loose skin.

Then commenced a struggle for the mastery.

Still retaining its grip, the dog, growling savagely the while, fought and struggled with its feet and body. Jackson laughed boisterously at the apparent futile efforts of the school-teacher, who, goaded by pain and anger, was exercising every ounce of his strength and straining every fibre of his well-trained muscles to overpower his brute antagonist.

The grin slowly began to fade from Colin Jackson's face as the well-nigh incredible took place before his eyes.

From some of Simpson's hero-worshipping scholars, Jackson had heard of the physical prowess of the Principal, but he never could have believed that such strength was possible in any man; and he stood gaping in helpless amazement at the display.

Slowly but surely Alick was working his fingers into the animal's throat, and moment by moment the dog was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe. It struggled fiercely and violently, but the clamping fingers held tight. Its jaws relaxed at last and it snapped at the air in futile madness.

Alick rose from the ground, holding the squirming object at arm's length before him. Gradually, its struggles ceased; its eyes turned inward, its under-jaw fell and a violent shudder passed through its body; then it hung from his hands, limp and harmless.

With a look of unbridled contempt, the Principal hurled the dead thing full in the face of the astonished rancher; leaving him in stupefaction, wiping his face and surveying the lifeless object at his feet.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Madness of a Man

On reaching home that evening, Alick Simpson sat in his upstairs rooms and wrote to his School Trustees, asking an extended leave of absence. He had made up his mind that he was going away somewhere, anywhere, from the familiar scenes and the disturbing memories which they aroused.

He decided to go away the following noon, before there would be any time either to grant or to refuse his request. It mattered little to him now anyway, and the sooner he was off the better for him and his peace of mind.

He turned down the lamp and retired to his plain, but spotless and cosy, little bedroom.

He felt a horrible throbbing at his temples and behind his eyes—a new sensation to one who, from his birth, had never known a moment's illness. He knew that if he could only sleep he would be all right. He courted sleep long and earnestly, but hour after hour he lay awake, wooing a loved one who would not respond. A fever was surging in his veins, increasing as the time wore on.

His brain refused to rest. It had been overworked. Now it had passed the stage where, by throwing off the driving belt, the machinery would cease its revolutions. He, a strong man, began to feel afraid of himself. He could not lie still. He wanted to scream aloud. He could hear his landlady in the room below chopping her kindling wood for the next morning. Every chop was like the beat of a drum in his ear. She coughed and to him it was an irritation. He heard her retire to rest and, although he was almost waiting for her to close her door, the noise of it caused him to start up nervously. The creaking of the flooring boards, under the effect of the cooling temperature, annoyed him unmercifully. Somewhere outside, a cat wailed dismally with the cry of a peevish child. The clock in his sitting room chimed twelve and its chiming seemed eternal and like the thundering of mighty cannon. Every tick thereafter was the loud, clear ring of a blacksmith's sledge on the anvil of his brain. The heat in his room became overpowering. The air felt stifling.

At last, in desperation, he threw the bedclothes aside and sprang up. He walked into the adjoining room, turned up the lamp light and gazed at his own reflection in the mirror. It was gaunt and haggard, with glaring, blood-shot eyes.

"Oh God! Why cannot I rest?" he groaned, passing his fingers through his ruffled hair. "I, who am as innocent as the yet unborn baby, must suffer while the guilty one rests. Why can't I stop thinking—if only for a little time? Why don't I drop senseless—dead—anything but this continued think—think—think—and the clamouring, hammering, thumping in my head? I am losing my grip on things. I am conscious of that much. It is more than I can stand—this thing is driving me insane."

He laughed strangely, as he walked nervously up and down the room in his slippered feet.

"Yes, Alick Simpson, you thought yourself a mighty strong man, and self-reliant; but a woman comes along and the strong man is no more. It isn't the first time in history that has happened; and, so long as there are women, it won't be the last time. But I don't want to be strong any more! What's the use? Weak and evil men seem to be happier, after all, than the men who fight and strive for what is right. What the evil man desires, generally comes to him. When it doesn't come, he takes it. It is all the same—he gets it.

"Men who strive after good seldom attain it, and, when they do, they find the good which they have striven for is impregnated with evil.

"Tush! Good is a byword for children and old wives. I am sick of the very word—heart sick of it."

He sat down and poked at the smouldering fire. He reached across the table for a book. He tried to read it, but, with an ejaculation of disgust, he tossed it across the room and jumped up wildly, clenching his fists and closing his jaws tightly.

For a second, he glared at the clock on the mantelshelf, as it kept on its monotonous, maddening tick-tick-ticking; then, with an oath on his lips, he drove his fist into its dial, putting an end forever to the clock's usefulness.

This action seemed to arouse some demon within him—a demon which he had held in chains all his life; the demon of evil before whom he had bowed in his soliloquy. He moved across the room, and suddenly threw wide open the doors of

the buffet, displaying an assortment of liquors that might have done credit to the wine-cellar of a Railway Magnate or a Pork-packing Millionaire.

"Ho!" he exclaimed callously, "I've kept you there, year in and year out, just to show your master, the Devil, how well I have beaten his mad myth called hereditary taint. All these years I have proved that the powers of my mind are greater than the physical weaknesses inherited and that I, the mind part of me, am the real master of Alick Simpson.

"You have outlived your usefulness for that purpose though. I have long ceased to dread you and I am now going to make friends and take you to my bosom—purer than any maid and always true to the one who buys you.

"They say you are the Mother of Oblivion. Better that than harrowing, maddening, damning wakefulness. Oblivion—that's the word. That's what I'm seeking—that's what I require. Just a few hours of Mr. Oblivion, then I shall be able again to fight all the Devils in hell and out of it—and beat them at their own game."

A high-pitched, unearthly, rippling, gloating laugh invaded the room, issuing evidently from the far recesses of the cupboard. The school-teacher closed the door quickly and sprang back.

"Good God!" he cried soberly. "What was that? It sounded like the laugh of some hell-fiend with an eternal soul fast in its clutches."

He looked around suspiciously, as great beads of perspiration oozed out on his forehead.

"It came from the cupboard," he whispered hoarsely. "I feel sure of that—but how on earth could it? That receptacle could not hold anything larger than a cat, with all these bottles in it. How foolish I am! Nervous as a school-girl!"

He laughed a little uneasily.

"What strange tricks imagination can play with a tired mind! Hallucinations! What next I wonder? Yes, Alick—old chap—you are sure losing your grip. A few hours more, a few more fantastic fancies, a snap—and madness. Ah well! What of it? Who cares? Anything would be more welcome than sanity—gnawing, festering, bloated sanity."

He laughed again, and as he did so the weird, haunting laugh, which he had heard before, replied—quickly and loudly; dying gradually in muffled tones to a far distant echo.

Alick, after all, was not a coward, and he jumped to the cupboard and threw wide the doors.

"Devil or fancy," he cried, "you shall not hold me from the rest I require."

He took out a large bottle and some glasses.

"With this inside, Illusion cannot frighten me," he muttered, looking through the bottle against the light. "I cannot say much about you, old fellow, from personal contact," he soliloquised, "but I've heard plenty, and I've seen your work. One thing I do know; you cannot harm me as you harmed my father, and my father's father;—for it is long, long ago since I mastered you. And—if I am the master, you're the servant. What's the good of keeping servants when one never makes use of them. Ho, my minion! To-night you must work for me. Lead me by the hand to the land of Oblivion—the land of No-One-Cares, the haven for tormented mortals."

He seated himself at the table and poured out a glass of the raw spirits.

As he did so, the door opened noiselessly and the calm, soldierly figure of Captain Gray, muffled to the neck, silhouetted itself against the impenetrable black beyond him. With a grim, set look he surveyed the situation, and pulling out a small, silver revolver from his vest pocket, he stood stock-still with his finger on the trigger, closely watching every movement of the school-teacher, and ready to act in a moment.

Simpson neither heard nor saw him. He was too intent upon the new sensation which he was about to experience.

He held up the glass in roystering fashion.

"Tush!" he exclaimed. "That isn't enough to obliviate a cat."

He filled the tumbler to the brim, and smiled as he looked at it.

"Whole hog or nothing!" said he, with a dash of devil-may-care. "It is worth a toast. I have never given a toast before, so I must give a real good one."

He stood up.

"Here's to the eternal confusion of all women, and of all men who are fools enough to have anything to do with them."

He raised the glass to his lips. The fumes filled his nostrils and sought his brain.

Something within him—which had previously given way—seemed to clamp together again. With a wild oath he dashed the glass of liquor from him, shivering it in fragments against the fireplace.

He passed his hand over his brow and sank limply into a chair.

"Oh, my God!" he cried despairingly. "What was I doing—what *was* I doing?"

A new tone crept into his voice—a tone of triumph.

"But I didn't. No, no,—I didn't!"

He sat for a while in silence, with his head resting on his hand, the picture of dejection.

"What would my boys have said to that—the boys who hold me up as an example to the whole district; the boys whose parents tell them to follow me in all things if they would do well; the dear little fellows who look to me to help them on to becoming men, real men with brains, instead of simple beasts of burden?

"They have been true to me, and, by God! if I die doing it, I'll be true to their ideal of me."

He collected the bottle and the remaining glasses, raised the window and tossed the lot far out into the darkness of the garden.

As he turned again, his eyes fell upon the silent witness at the door; his head dropped on his chest and he stood, ashamed.

The Captain came forward with outstretched hand, and, placing the other on Alick's shoulder, made him look up.

"Shake hands, my lad," he cried, almost cheerily, "Allan Gray is proud of you. I have seen fighting all over the Empire, but that was the greatest victory I ever witnessed. I was ready to help—whether you desired it or not—but you didn't know that; and you fought, single-handed, and won. Good boy, Alick!

"Maybe you never thought of it, but, for you, that meant life or death. So—bravo again!"

Tears were in the old fellow's eyes as he gripped Alick's hand and led him over to the fireplace, for he dearly loved the young fellow.

"Alick, I've something to tell you regarding a discovery I made to-day. I could not keep it until to-morrow, and, as I felt anxious for you anyway, I stepped over, late and all as it is. I saw the light in your room, and knew from it that you were still awake. The back door was open. I did not have to disturb anyone—I walked in, and here I am."

"Yes—and what a miserable weakling you must think me," put in Alick. "I have been a fool—foolish and almost mad—but that is all over now. It was the thought of those little school-fellows of mine that turned the trick. Thank God!—I still have them to work for."

"Yes, my lad!" replied the Captain, "and, who knows, but there may be yet another to work for as well.

"I have little wish to open up the wound which we all feel, but I cannot rest until I have satisfied myself on every point.

"I was going through the path in the wood this afternoon, and I was thinking of Kathie—I always seem to be thinking of her, poor lass. I passed the spot where I found her in the snow last winter, and, as I stood for a moment, ruminating, I caught sight of this, half-buried in the soil. It must have lain there all this time. See, Alick!—it is a little baby brooch. Do you know whose name that is?"

Alick scrutinised it carefully.

"Kathie Gray," he read. "Why, yes,—Captain!—that is her real name. She told me this in confidence once. But she was always Kathie *Jackson* to me, and to everyone else."

"That is just the point," replied the Captain with suppressed excitement. "Her name couldn't be Jackson—for that is her mother's maiden name. Her mother was Jackson's sister. And it is right there, in the first place that I have had strange fancies.

"Kathie Gray is her real name, Alick. And, that being so, she bears a name that is very dear to me—for my dear mother bore that name before her—Kathie Gray."

A light began to dawn on Alick's understanding.

"Surely you don't mean——?" he queried eagerly.

"I really don't know what I mean, my boy,—and I don't know exactly what to think. I am simply groping around. But ever since the first time I saw her, I have had strange feelings of ownership over that girl. And this has given me stranger feelings still. I am interested—more than interested: I am anxious. Now I shall never rest until I have satisfied myself that my vague surmises are true, or merely silly notions.

"You know that my brother was a musician and was found drowned when only a lad:—at least his violin was discovered in the clutch of a dead person, supposed to be he. The features of that drowned being were unrecognisable; but the violin was the clue. Nothing has ever happened to disturb these original conclusions—nothing until Kathie came into my life. Now I fancy I can trace little traits in her peculiar to my boyish memories of my little brother—although these memories are somewhat faded and blurred. But, more than anything else, she reminds me of my mother—the same dark eyes; the same sad face; the same perfect form; the same kind of nature and the same proud bearing. Only one other person could handle a violin as she can, and that one was my little brother. Such genius as hers could only have been brought to perfection through genius.

"Margery is inclined to laugh at me—but I tell you, Alick, I am going to probe this to the bottom, and I am anxious to begin right away. It may mean months of search in the South of Scotland and as long in the East Coast of Ireland, but I shall never let up until I know.

"You must apply for leave of absence. It is due you after these years of ceaseless service. Your health demands it. You must come with me. It will do both of us good. Will you come, Alick? I shall require your assistance, as well as your company."

"I had intended going away," replied Alick. "I have a letter here, written, addressed to the Trustees. I might as well go with you as anywhere else, even if I can give but slight credence to your strange fancies. It is of little use or moment to me now where I go. And you seem to have forgotten, Captain, that even if what you surmise proves true, it will mean nothing but fresh sorrow to all of us. At one time, it might have been a glorious discovery, but that time has gone."

The old soldier stared at his young friend in surprise.

"Mean nothing, do you say, Alick! Look here, my boy—if this proves true and she is really my brother's daughter, then, were she the most degraded woman in the country, I still would be her uncle and her guardian, and as responsible for her well-being—ay, and more so—than that tight-fisted, scheming scamp, Jackson; and I shall look after her and care for her, and bring her back if I be ostracised by every family in the Okanagan Valley."

Captain Gray's excitement grew apace.

"But it is all a lie," he cried vehemently. "Alick, I tell you it is a lie."

He shook the teacher by the arm.

"Why don't you agree with me? Why don't you stand up and say with me that it is a lie? You are as much interested in her as I am. You have condemned her without a trial, never giving her a fair chance to defend herself. That dear, sweet, pure, innocent girl, without an evil thought let alone an evil action: what do you know about her? Nothing! nothing but the garbage talk of the neighbourhood. Ask her yourself and get her answer before you play so sure.

"I am getting to be an old man, Alick, but by God! my faith in women hasn't wavered yet. I know a good face when I see it:—and so do you. I know a pure woman when I am in her company:—and—so—should—you."

Alick listened to the outburst, and his old feeling of confidence tried to reassert itself.

"Look here!" continued the Captain, "what was your first thought when you heard of this?"

"That it was a vile, slanderous lie," responded Alick quickly.

"Precisely! And your second thought?"

"That I should never believe it until her own lips acknowledged her guilt."

"Yes!—and your next?"

"That even with her acknowledgment, she might still be suffering silently for another; and that I would find the man if I searched a lifetime and extract the truth from him if I had to pick it from his bones with pincers."

"Yes, yes!" nodded the Captain, "and here she is, banished from your mind in disgrace; condemned and put out of your life forever;—all on talk, talk, mere old wives' talk—with not a solitary proof in your hands.

"Do you think she would have treated you that way? For shame, Alick!

"Buckle to, man—and stand by me, and by her, until this new evidence is complete. By the time we have discovered all about her parents, she will be home here again. Time enough then to hear her defence."

Alick Simpson looked up with a faint, but new hope in his face.

"All right, Captain! I shall be ready to go with you to-morrow morning."

"No sir!" replied the Captain. "I am not losing sight of you any more. Push a few things in your bag now, come with me and spend the night at Broadacres. We can be up with the lark, and off by the afternoon train for Sicamous, then East, and over the sea to the 'Tight Little Island.'"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Martyrdom of the Music Witch

The early springtime, with its rapidly departing snow, its chinook breezes, its bright sunshine and its warbling birds, spread its cheery glow and its whispered promise over the fair and fertile Valley of the Okanagan.

A new Principal still temporarily filled the position of Alick Simpson, M.A., at the Vernock High School. Tom Semple, that able, shrewd and honest ranch-foreman, with the aid of the indefatigable Mrs. Gray, kept Broadacres in garden-like order in the absence of the genial Captain who, with Alick, was still over in Britain.

Jackson's ranch wore a strange, hectic flush of unnatural prosperity, born of a willingness on the part of certain creditors to grant extra time concessions, in the hope, thereby, of coming out of a shady jack-pot with something approaching that with which they went in. Colin Jackson was now known to smile upon occasion.

Twice already had Tom Menteith run up from the South, in anticipation of the return of Lizbeth, but twice he had to go away disappointed; for Lizbeth was still somewhere up the Coast, nursing her unfortunate cousin, Kathie.

Though impatient, young Menteith's love merely waxed the warmer in his sweetheart's absence, and he vowed a vow, much to his despairing sire's annoyance, that all Ceylon and all Ceylon's tea-plantations could "fade away and gradually die," but they should never shelter him until he had had a few more days' sweethearting in the Valley with her who would follow him so soon after his departure and wed him in real plantation style away there in far Ceylon—although why she would not marry him in the Valley and go with him was still, to him, an irritating enigma.

The spring gave way to the maturing heat of the summer, and the summer sweltered on. But only when the cooler nights and the ripening fruits of the orchards heralded the early coming of the golden fall was Tom Menteith's great longing satisfied and was he at last able to welcome the returning runaway love.

Lizbeth—somewhat pale, to be sure, from her alleged nursing, yet fresh, and full, and lovely as of yore—was whisked away, here, there, everywhere, by that impetuous and long-suffering lover of hers; while Kathie—snuggling to her breast the reinforced evidence of an unconscious shame—sought the byways and the quiet places; the woods, the orchards, the solitude of the Lakeside.

Kathie had nursed her cousin, and now, faithful to her promise, she was tending her cousin's child.

All innocent of the scandal which had been spread about during her absence and guilty only of hiding the secret of two others—if that be guilt—she did not at first understand the meaning of the fingers which were pointed in her direction, nor the action of the local girls when she met them on the roadway in the drawing in of their skirts as she passed them by. She did not grasp the innuendo contained in the chuckle and side-long looks of the young ranch-hands and helpers. She was perturbed, it is true, by the increased show of familiarity on the part of old Wong, her uncle's Chinese cook, but she was unable to find a reason for it other than that of length of service. The sad head-wagging of the old ranchers and the chin-tilting of their righteous wives were, for a time, entirely lost on her, and she went on her way holding her head high and her eyes level, thus unconsciously adding fresh fuel to the fire which was already well ablaze.

But it was not very long before the whole truth of the position she had assumed was forced upon her rudely and with an emphasis that could not be denied.

One evening, shortly after her return, as the sun was going down behind the spreading hills, as she sat quietly and lonely on a grassy bank at the foot of the orchard, resting in the welcome, cool, rising breeze—a bright flame sprang up from a vacant field on the great ranch of David Menteith. It was lurid and high-reaching for a few minutes, then gradually it settled down to the steady glow of a well-tended bon-fire.

Several times within the past two weeks, she had watched it and on each occasion she had listened to the cheery voices and the merry laughter, to the sweet songs and the hearty choruses of girl voices as they wafted up the hill from those light-hearted, clean-minded, healthy, young fruit-gatherers, students from the colleges and teachers from the schools of far distant towns and cities, all banded together, organised, housed and chaperoned, during the weeks they had arranged to lend their valuable aid to the ranchers in the garnering of the Valley's bountiful fruit crop; pioneers of an organisation

that, in later years, was to prove of such great service in saving the food supply of the country, when the men who looked after it, ordinarily, were doing sterner work.

Kathie had often longed to be down among the girls, talking, and laughing, and singing as they were; but her inborn reticence had so far kept her away.

This evening, however, the ache at her heart for the companionship of those healthy girls gnawed so persistently that she found herself, almost unconsciously, at the fringe of the bon-fire ere she awakened in her shyness to her apparent daring.

A merry dance tune, played by a girl violinist, was ending, and the nimble-footed girl couples were just returning to their seats on the fallen logs round the fire.

Kathie stood shyly in the shadows, until the bright-eyed little violinist, doubtless drawn by that strange, magnetic kinship that all artists feel, ran over to her and drew her quietly and lovingly with her to a place on one of the hewn trees.

"What's your name?" asked Bright Eyes. "Mine is Dorothy. I come from Vancouver. I go to the Normal there. We are spending our holidays fruit-gathering—and we're having the time of our sweet, young lives."

She laughed. And Kathie laughed too. And she told Dorothy Bright Eyes her name. Before three minutes had gone, Kathie heard the names of a dozen of Dorothy's friends. In five minutes more she forgot her sorrows, and in ten she was laughing and singing and dancing, as merry as the merriest there.

But ever she kept near to little Dorothy Bright Eyes: sometimes with a hand in hers, sometimes an arm round her waist.

And the evening skipped gaily along to the joy of the dance and the song.

As Dorothy sat chatting her little gay tongue away, Kathie's hands went lovingly to the violin that lay, for the moment idle, on Dorothy's lap. She picked it up, and by the very movement in so doing she betrayed herself. Dorothy turned on her quickly and excitedly.

"You play! Don't tell me! You do! I just know you do.

"Say, girls! Here's a find! Kathie can play the violin. She's just aching to do it, too."

Kathie blushed.

"No, no!" she remonstrated, "I haven't played for ever so long."

"All the mere reason," cried Bright Eyes.

"It's your turn to do something, anyway," shouted someone else.

"Yes, yes! Come on! Come on—be a sport!" put in half a dozen, as they gathered round. And before she realised it, she was standing in the ring, in the glow of the fire-light, with the violin of Dorothy Bright Eyes under her chin and all ready to begin; her eyes wide in a distant and dreamy contemplation, her black, curling hair playing over her brow with the evening's breeze, her lips apart in a contented smile and her tall, graceful figure poised and motionless.

With the first sweet notes, the chatter and laughter ceased and a hush fell over that merry, boisterous crowd, which was not broken until the player had finished.

They were the dear home songs that Kathie played that night, and she played them as they had never before been played by any human.

"Killarney,"—and all the home-hunger and heart-rending love of an emigrant for the days of long ago, for the scenes of happy childhood, for the dear land of birth, welled up and overflowed.

A pause, then the player's mood changed and she glided into that swinging, lilting, Irish melody, "The Low Backed Car," and such was her interpretation that many of the college girls around her, who had never been out of British Columbia in their sweet young lives and who knew Ireland only from their Geography books, got their first real glimpse of The Emerald Isle:—the white-washed stone houses, the thatched roofs, the railed village fountain and the market place; the cows tethered to the iron rails; the squealing and grunting pigs in the high carts; the ducks and geese and chickens; the

delf set out on the side streets for sale; the pretty colleens and the bargaining Pats; the jarvey in his jaunting car:—and PEGGY, the "girl wid the way wid her."

From that sweet song of Irish love—which is the same delightful, old-fashioned, never-satisfying, all-absorbing love that they have in other lands, only more so—Kathie tossed her head, banished the memory and pattered into the "Irish Washerwoman" until every foot around that bon-fire was an Irish foot and beat in true Irish fashion; until every heart became an Irish heart and gave an extra beat in every three for Ireland; until the very sparks from the crackling fire flew upward with greater light and gusto, as if glad to die to such an abandonment of rollicking melody.

When at last Kathie stopped, there seemed to be a hollow place somewhere in the earth; a hollow place where Ireland had been. And that hollow was felt until Kathie had seated herself once more by the side of Dorothy Bright Eyes, and they were holding hands in sympathy.

Then the girls cheered, and shouted, and laughed in their delight; the hollow filled up again, and Ireland, though Ireland still, was to them but a memory of some aching folksong.

When the noise and the hand-clapping abated, it was echoed a few yards away from the fire, away in the part-shadows where David Menteith and young Tom were standing, having been drawn, evidently, by the witchery of Kathie's music.

And from out the part-shadows came the awakening.

A haughty, imperious dame, with the garb of a Pilgrim Mother, the eye of a hawk and a mouth firm-set and relentless—David Menteith's Old Country house-keeper and the self-appointed Keeper of Morals for the Okanagan Valley; and all Canada if she had been permitted—came forward to where the two chaperons of the girls were seated. She spoke to them quietly, then she crossed over to Kathie like an avenging she-devil.

She stood in front of the girl and her words came sharp and cutting.

"What are you doing here among innocent girls? Go home!"

Kathie stared in surprise, then she sprang up indignantly.

Most folks in and near Vernock were afraid of this goodly Keeper of Morals, but not so Kathie, for she had never encountered her before, and furthermore, had nothing to be afraid of.

"What do you mean?" she asked, suppressing her excitement.

"What do I mean! You ask me that? Haven't you a spark of shame left, woman? Go home to your child! Don't say a word! Get from here and home.

"Don't dare set your shameless feet on this ranch again."

Kathie's face turned pale and she clutched at her throat for a greater freedom in breathing.

The terrible truth of the insinuation was at last dawning on her.

Already the chaperons were calling the girls around them. Kathie turned to go. But Dorothy Bright Eyes was at her side in a moment and her eyes were flashing defiance at Sir David's house-keeper.

"Hush, my dear!" commanded the house-keeper. "Don't be carried away in your childish ignorance."

"I won't hush," cried Dorothy, stamping her feet. "You go away and mind your own affairs. Leave us alone. She's as good as we are—you—you sour, old, spoil-sport!"

Dorothy's words made no impress upon the cold nature of the Keeper of Morals.

"You are a very ignorant little girl—and very foolish. That woman has a child—and no husband. Never had a husband."

"It's a l—," flashed Kathie, but she stopped ere the word came out, for she remembered her promise to her uncle.

Innocent little Dorothy stood back and gasped.

"If you're wise,—*Miss* Jackson—you'll go home—quick," put in the house-keeper coldly. "This is something that can't be lied out of."

"Say!—Mother Anne," interposed the genial voice of Tom Menteith, "what's all this to do? Can't you leave the girl alone for a few hours' amusement?"

"And contaminate the whole neighbourhood, Tom?" she asked composedly; "no, my boy!"

"Oh contaminate fiddlesticks! Contaminate nothing!"

"Allow me to know better, Tom! We are responsible for the welfare and the well-doing of these young ladies."

"Anne, it's a beastly shame," he continued.

"Yes, Tom, I agree—*shame* is the correct word."

"Oh, shame be damned! There are lots worse than she, only they haven't been found out," he exploded unguardedly.

As the words fell, a feeling of scorn and loathing arose in Kathie.

To think, as she did, that she should be suffering for his misdeeds, and yet he should seek to shield himself by referring to the shame of it as her own—the deceit, the hollow sham and the devilish mockery with which she seemed to be connected, filled her with dismay.

"Let me see you home," said young Menteith courteously, addressing her and placing his hand lightly on her arm.

She stepped away from him with flashing eyes and panting bosom.

"Keep away!" she cried. "Don't touch me, please:—you—you beast. I hate you. I despise you. You are not a man—you are a coward."

Tom Menteith threw out his arms and shrugged his shoulders as if relieving himself of further responsibility. Then he turned and walked off.

The girls were still standing in a cluster at the other side of the fire, as Kathie made to leave.

Dorothy Bright Eyes was at Kathie's side.

"Dorothy!" called one of the chaperons. "Dorothy—come away—please!"

"No!" defied Dorothy.

"I'm coming to walk part of the way with you, Miss Jackson:—just to show them. See!"

"Oh, you dear!" cried Kathie, sweeping little Bright Eyes into her arms and kissing her lovingly on the lips.

Then she released her and ran off, leaving the girl surprised yet sadly happy.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Changing Lights

Grief-stricken and almost afraid, Kathie left the bon-fire and the merry crowd behind her, never looking aside, never stopping until she had reached the ranch and had broken into the kitchen where her uncle was.

"What the devil's wrong now?" he inquired, surveying her, as she stood before him all breathless and excited. "Have you been chased by a ghost?"

She dropped at her uncle's feet and cried as if her heart would burst.

"Come—come!" he exclaimed. "What's all this about?"

She clung to him in supplication.

"Uncle, uncle—surely you have heard what the people are saying about me? They say I am bad—I have done wrong. They say that Lizbeth's baby is mine. I have been insulted before all the girls down at Menteith's. Oh, uncle!—the shame of it is burning me up. I feel as if I were really guilty. You must tell them that I am not bad. You will tell them, uncle. Oh, I know you will tell them, for I have never done anything wrong: I have only tried to help you, as you wished me to. Please, uncle, please tell them. If you don't, I think I shall die.

"I have obeyed you always—even in this—but you did not let me know that it would mean this—what they would infer. And I—I never thought.

"I can't bear it. Oh,—I can't bear it."

The cry of that innocent heart for justice would have met with a feeling of response from a beast; but Colin Jackson, coldly calculating, had already anticipated the outburst and had been gradually preparing himself to meet it: his only surprise was that it had not taken place sooner.

He raised Kathie and set her on the couch.

"Tut-tut, woman! I am surprised at you, working yourself into a state like this for nothing. Can't you see that it is only inquisitiveness on their part, and nothing more; that they are just trying to guess at something they do not understand? You are doing the very thing that would make them think they are right in their surmise. Keep your mouth shut and say nothing—absolutely nothing—as you promised you would; and they will be none the wiser. Keep out of their way. In two months' time this will be all over; Lizbeth will be in Ceylon and married, and you will be free from your charge.

"Surely you are not the one to spoil our plans for the sake of a few idle words by a few idle women? What difference does it make what they say, anyway? You know within yourself that it is untrue. You are the same now as you were before they spoke. In a few months, they will be saying something else about somebody else, and will have forgotten all about you.

"Lizbeth has a far harder part to play than you have, yet she is doing it without a grumble, just because she vowed she would. You made a vow too,—a Jackson never goes back on her word. Fie, Kathie!

"It isn't for long now. Stick to your promise. I have no patience with people who don't know their own minds two minutes. You knew at the time that it wasn't a picnic we were arranging.

"For shame, to trouble me over these silly notions, when you know I am so harassed over more important matters."

This was meant as a dismissal of the subject; but, as an apparent afterthought, he added:

"By the by—here is something I got for you when I was at the Coast last month."

He threw a little package into Kathie's lap, and went out, leaving her alone.

Kathie undid the wrappings. It was a gold locket, with a fine linked chain. She opened the locket mechanically. It contained a scroll, in the small, skilful penmanship of which Colin Jackson was so justly proud: letters of bright scarlet

on a background of black:—"I swear, that until I am released from this vow by my uncle, Colin Jackson, or until my cousin, Elizabeth Jackson, is married, I will not divulge to anyone what I know regarding the parentage of Elizabeth's child.—So help me, God."

As she read the remembrance of her vow, the words seared into her brain like the brand of a red-hot iron. She groaned at her first folly in having given way to her uncle's coercion: but now that she had sworn to secrecy, that vow was a promise to her Maker and it would have to be carried out and obeyed as a command from God himself, even should it bring suffering, pain and dishonour. That was how she had been trained by her father to look upon a vow. There was no evading it—there was no going back. It must—it would be kept.

"God give me strength and courage," she exclaimed piteously, as she hung the gold chain round her neck and slipped the locket into her bosom.

Next day when she arose, there was a yearning in her heart for a word of comfort from someone—even a look of sympathy. But there seemed to be none to whom she could turn. It was the one day in the week which had been set apart, so long ago, by her and Alick, as their trysting time; and she longed as she had never longed before just for a word from him that he trusted her still. Even a glimpse of his figure in the distance would have satisfied, for, under the shadow of her vow, she had refrained from that weekly tryst since her coming back, and, during all the weary months of her enforced absence, she had not communicated with him in any way.

Away out there on the ranch, she had not heard that there was a new School Principal at Vernock.

As the hours of that day wore on, she could not contain herself longer. She hushed Lizbeth's child to sleep, placed it in its little cot, and stole away to the Lake. With beating heart and scanning eyes she waited for him whom she had known as her lover—as he had once waited for her. Hour after hour sped quickly on, but he did not come to her. Her hopes sank and her soul became loaded down with sorrow. At first she feared—then fear grew to a surety—that he had been tried too long and had, human-like, wearied in the waiting and had gone away out of her life. She looked to see if the note she had left for him was still in the crevice under the bark of the log, but the bark was peeled away and the note was gone.

Surely then, she reasoned, when he read her message he would understand. Surely he would wait and trust. He had promised to do that when first she had timidly opened to the warmth and strength of his ardorous wooing, when for all Time and all Eternity she had given him her unblemished love.

She would have trusted him, and stood by him in the face of all the world.

Then Kathie did as Alick had done—it was her last flickering hope. She thought of the dear, old people who had been so kind to her and who had shown their love for her before she had gone away. She hurried over to the ranch at Broadacres.

Her hand was on the door, ready to push it open and to go in unannounced, as had been her privilege, when Zella, the maid, blocked her entrance: not timidly and afraid, as she once had been, but bold and impudent, and altogether fearless.

"Zella—I wish to see Mrs. Gray," exclaimed Kathie quickly. "I have only lately got home again."

"Mrs. Gray, she not home, see!" came the cold reply.

"Oh, Zella! That isn't true, you know. I saw Mrs. Gray go indoors as I came along the path from the main road."

"Well,—Missy Jackson, you think maybe you know. But she no be in to you—see! She tell me tell you—see!"

Once again Kathie's face flushed scarlet and she became overwhelmed with the shame which she was bearing in her cousin's stead. But this time only she was aware of her embarrassment, for her eyes were looking into the woodwork of a door tightly closed against her.

Her last hope was gone. All who had loved her now believed in her guilt and shunned her. They did not love her any more. Insulted, ostracised,—and all because of an innocent mind, a kindly heart and an anxiety to be useful to those who had given her a home when she had none:—there was nothing left for her now but the ashes of dead memories, a broken

heart and a life of sorrow-laden drudgery.

With despair in her face and lagging footsteps, she retraced her way to her uncle's ranch.

A plaintive little cry came from the cot beside the fireplace in the dining room. She went over, lifted up the innocent cause of all her sorrow, kissed it tenderly and carried it out into the open.

She sat down on a bench, under the very tree where the leave-taking of Lizbeth and Crawford had taken place, and she tried to hush the little child to sleep.

Everything was quiet and there was no one in sight, until Meg Shaw, that happy-go-lucky, easy-going farm lass, came out of the doorway of the dairy, drying her hands on her haunches. As soon as she espied Kathie, she sauntered over.

"I've never seen this wonderful bairn yet, Kathie. Let's ha'e a squint at it?"

Kathie drew back.

"No, no, Kathie! I'm not like the fools you ran up against last night," she remarked, noting Kathie's timidity.

She opened up the cashmere shawl and scrutinised the child carefully.

"Uhm! It's no' very like you," she remarked bluntly. She scratched her head. "Do you feed it yoursel'?"

"No," said Kathie, "I don't."

"Huh!—I thought so. They say bairns look mair like their mithers when their mithers feed them themsel's. If I only kent its faither, maybe I could tell better who it's like."

Meg spoke with the confident air of one who knew more than she ventured to let out.

"Your uncle and the rest o' them turned mighty good to you when you got tangled up in this trouble," she continued, with a jerk of her head. "Many a man would ha'e shown you the door. Some dae that wi' their ain daughters, and often they are the very men who are misbehavin' themsel's at the same time."

Kathie could feel her resentment rising at Meg's critical observations, but she tried to hide it.

"It was real nice o' Lizbeth too, going away to nurse you for such a lang time, especially when young Menteith was hanging roon' her skirts. It was the brawest thing she ever did. In fact, it was the only braw thing she ever did it her life—if she did it."

Kathie rose, but Meg pushed her back into her seat.

"Oh—sit still and don't excite yoursel'," she went on in her rough, Scotch way, but not unkindly. "I kent Lizbeth before you kent her and I'm up to the maist o' her tricks. I ken too that there's little love lost between you and her—especially on her side—so you needna pretend to be so terrible annoyed at what I'm sayin'. It's for the good o' your health onyway.

"She wants to marry Tom Menteith. And if looks go for onything, Menteith wants to marry her. If it's a fair question, Kathie—when is it going to come off?"

"In two months, I believe," said Kathie unguardedly.

"And what's going to happen then?" asked Meg.

"I don't quite understand," said Kathie.

"Who's going to look after the bairn then?"

"Look here, Meg," returned Kathie, somewhat ruffled, "I don't pretend to know what you are driving at and you have no right to question me in this way, at all. I'm not In a fit condition to stand very much more of it at present. Will you please go away? I wish to be alone."

Tears struggled to Kathie's eyes, and Meg's soft, honest heart melted at the sight of them.

"Kathie," she said, sitting down beside her, "when you first came here I didna like you, because it meant me lookin for anither job with maybe a month or two idle, which I could ill afford, for I had my widow mither to look after,—but since that time I've learned a wheen things and I don't mislike you ony mair. I'm sorry for you and—I like you forby. But you are one o' the kind that will suffer and slave and starve, and go in tatters, just because you imagine it is a duty you owe. You fancy everybody is as honest as you are yoursel'; and you never admit the truth to yoursel' even when you ken you are being imposed on.

"I've seen one or two like you before in the Auld Country—although they're getting mighty scarce even there;—but all the same, your kind gets the worst o' it every time.

"Colin Jackson has been imposin' on you since the first day you came here. He's a liar and a cheat—and the whole Valley kens it. Maybe you feel like askin' me why I work for him then,—but I'm workin' for him just because it suits me at the minute to work for him—that's a'."

Kathie looked in helpless remonstrance at the robust, indignant girl before her.

"Oh,—fine I ken he's your uncle. Mair's the pity! Lizbeth is his right-hand helper—in fact, I wouldna wonder if it is the ither way aboot—she's the boss and he's the helper.

"But they can scheme and plan as much as they like, and they can fool you, and Tom Menteith, and auld Menteith, the kirk folks, and a' the rest o' them:—but here's one they can't fool so easy."

Kathie sat and stared before her in dreamy stupefaction, as she held the child tightly to her bosom.

Meg went on.

"That bairn is as like you as it's like me—and I'm no' its mither. It is as much my bairn as it is yours."

"I cannot listen to any more," protested Kathie, rising and holding out her hand as if to ward off something.

Meg pulled her to her seat again.

"Sit doon, lassie. I'm no' finished yet. It's bad manners to interrupt when folk are talkin'. As I was going to say—that bairn is a Jackson through and through—with a touch in it o' somebody else I ha'e seen before. Look at its een, and tell me it's no' like Lizbeth! Look at the lobes o' its ears, look at its chin, ay! and look at that birthmark on the back o' its wee hand—then tell me you've forgotten what Bob Crawford was like! There!" she concluded, preparing to return to the dairy. "I've said my say, and I'm done—only, you're a damned fool that didna see it for yoursel' long before this."

Kathie was stunned by the suddenness of the intelligence, and the more she looked at the child the more she became convinced of its strong resemblance to Crawford.

She could now forgive Tom Menteith for what he had said of her to the fruit gatherers, knowing that if this were really true, he was being duped and tricked as well as she. Further than forgiving him, however, she refused to allow her mind to go.

Her emotions were stupefied. She deliberately thrust all reasoning aside. Crawford or Menteith—it was of no moment to her. In two months or so, she would be released from her vow, and then she would be done with them all. She would go away to some place where no one would know her, and start afresh to work out her own salvation. But, meantime, and until that time, her vow held good. Come what may, she would keep it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Old Acquaintances

Meg Shaw was hurrying along the narrow trail leading to the little, old, vine-covered bungalow where her mother lived, at the edge of the Lake. She generally ran over there in the evening when she had half an hour to spare, in order to exchange the gossip of the day and read the chief items of the previous day's newspaper, for, like all Scots, Meg and her mother were deeply interested in the affairs of their own and all other countries.

Meg was trudging through the sticky mud which always lay in that shady, dismal part of the way for days after a rain-fall: more a swamp than a trail. Her mind was dwelling on nothing in particular, and, when a tall figure stepped out from behind a tree and slapped her across the shoulders as she passed, her heart jumped.

"Hullo, Meg!" cried a hearty voice.

She turned round quickly. There was no mistaking the owner of that voice, nor was there any mistaking the man who stood beside her: not even in the gathering darkness of the evening with the accelerated gloom caused by the close, overhanging trees.

"My God!" she exclaimed. "Crawford!"

He nodded and snapped his eyes.

"'The girl guessed right the very first time'; up to the top of the class, Meg."

"But I never thought ye'd come back here," she said. "Why, man! it's not so very many months since ye went away."

"Well!—did you think I would stay there after I got the message you sent me?" asked Crawford.

"Didn't you ask me to let you know quick if anything extraordinary was going on at Jackson's?"

"Yep!" said Crawford. "And I'm darned glad you did too. But, say! Come on under the trees here. I don't want to be seen—not just yet.

"Meg—what did you mean by that message?"

"Och!—you had better ask Lizbeth aboot that; she'll tell you—maybe," was the tantalising rejoinder. "Have you no' been to visit her yet?"

"No, not yet! Nobody knows I'm here: not even the police. I'm staying in Roanstone for quietness. I only arrived in the Valley from Vancouver yesterday.

"Now, Meg—I know nothing. Tell me all about it. There's a good kid!"

"Don't kid me, Bob Crawford, for you can't do it. Keep your kidding for them that like it.

"But there's no' much to tell," continued Meg. "The spicy bits have been told so often that they have lost their nippy taste.

"Well!—first and foremost, Tom Menteith came home the day you went away, and Lizbeth is following him out to Ceylon in a week or so to marry him. He goes the end of this week I think."

"Good Lord! You don't mean——"

"Don't interrupt, Bob. I'm no' through yet. There's a bairn on the scene, and, if I may say it, that shouldna,—it's mighty like yersel'."

Crawford's lips relaxed and his face softened.

"Poor little beggar!" he exclaimed.

"Ay,—poor little beggar is right," answered Meg. "But this is the first time I ever heard you wi' a tear in your voice.

Maybe you've been drinkin'."

"No, no, Meg! I have had no time for that, even if I had the inclination. Go on!"

"Go on, yersel'," exclaimed Meg pertly.

"Lizbeth is going Scot-free as usual. Kathie Jackson—the lassie that put that mark on your brow and spoiled your good looks—is nursin' your bairn and is takin' the blame of it besides."

"My God! Meg—what do you mean? Am I being blamed for this?"

"Some folks are blamin' you; others are blamin' Mr. Simpson, the School Principal,—but the women folks, woman-like, are blamin' her."

"Say!—I'm all at sea, Meg," put in Crawford, in bewilderment. "I don't get the hang of this thing at all."

"No!—I never expected you would. You're as thick in the haid as the rest o' them.

"First of all, that bairn is yours, and you can't deny it, for it's your born image. And, what's more, Lizbeth is its mother."

Meg watched him closely and saw that what she had surmised was only too true.

"So, you see,—Meg Shaw isn't so green as she is cabbage looking. Lizbeth and Kathie were away from here all winter and most of the summer; and before they came back, old Split-the-Pea Jackson had all the gossips of Vernock busy. When they did come back, Kathie had the bairn. The Jacksons have that lassie in their clutches, that's sure, and she's no' wise enough to see it hersel'.

"It is all being kept dark from Tom Menteith. Colin Jackson is in debt up to the neck, and I think he is relyin' on Lizbeth pullin' him oot after she gets married. How they are ever going to manage to straighten it all oot afterwards, the Lord only knows and the de'il has no business."

Crawford had been standing staring at Meg in sheer amazement as she gave him the whole story.

"Meg,—do you know that you have been talking sheer bunk for the last five minutes?" he asked sarcastically. "You're clean nutty, woman. There's a bee buzzing in your head. Wake up!" he urged.

"Maybe there is a bee buzzin'," retorted Meg, "but I'm no' the one that's going to be stung, anyway."

"But is all this the real dope, Meg?" he inquired.

"It's the best I can make of it, Bob. If you can improve on it, go ahead."

"Well, I guess I must not see Lizbeth," argued Crawford, "not just yet. But Tom Menteith won't get her—not so long as I'm alive, that's sure."

"What's to hinder him?"

"The youngster will. Do you think he would marry her if he knew of it?"

"It's hard to say," retorted Meg, "men are such a pack of damned fools. What are you going to do if he takes her, bairn and all?"

"There's one thing I will do, Meg,—and you can bet your sweet life it'll put a bigger crimp on this marriage than was ever put on anything you ever heard of! I can't tell you what it is——"

The sound of voices arrested his talk. The fading light was blotted out from the far end of the double row of trees and a man and woman sauntered on toward them. They were Lizbeth and Tom Menteith, out having an evening airing. Tom was tapping his leggings with his riding switch and was twitting Lizbeth about getting mud on her shoes.

"I think I had better carry you, my dear," said the man's voice.

"No, indeed you won't!" braved the woman. "I am not afraid of mud. I'm well used to it. I've been among it more or less

all my life."

It was an unintended double entendre, but Tom Menteith was too much in love to notice it. Lizbeth raised her skirts high and daintily, and Tom tapped her playfully above the ankle and whispered to her.

She gave a rippling laugh, and it was only then that Crawford recognised them. The hiss of his breath informed Meg Shaw of the recognition and of the excitement under which Crawford was labouring. Meg pulled him into the deeper shadows.

When Lizbeth and the young tea-planter were almost opposite, Tom caught her up in his arms and kissed her vigorously. She immediately returned his caresses with a sigh of abandoned pleasure. A noise in the shadows caused them to break apart quickly. An old wooden rail which Crawford had gripped desperately had given way under his pressure. Words were on his lips, but Meg Shaw clapped her hand over his mouth.

"Shut up! Don't be a fool!" she whispered.

In the middle of the trail, Lisbeth clung to Tom Menteith's arm.

"Why!—they are only two lovers like ourselves—silly little sweetheart," said the latter. "Don't you know that in the evening around here every tree is a *pair* tree?" And with the little jest, he turned her fears aside.

They wandered on, and the crisis was over.

"You nearly put your foot in it that time," remarked Meg.

"What if I did?" replied Crawford truculently. "I have no scrap with young Menteith—he's a gentleman:—all the same—she's mine. But he is welcome to her for an hour or two longer," he continued.

"Do you mean that, Bob? Do you really mean to say you would have anything more to do with her after all this?"

"What do you think I came all the way back from Australia for? Just to watch the show! Nothing stirring!

"See here, Meg! I made Lizbeth's cousin suffer once and she's not going to suffer again on my account if I can help it. That's one reason why I'm going to butt in.

"Tom Menteith is too good a sport to be allowed to marry Lizbeth under present conditions. That's another reason.

"Reason number three:—I love Lizbeth—and I would love her if she were the devil himself.

"Now, you run along and see your mother. Don't mention to anybody that I'm here. If I need you any time, I know where to get you.

"Meg,—you're a decent sort of a scout, and I'm darned grateful to you."

"You don't look it," remarked Meg as she left him still standing there under the trees.

Crawford remained for a long time in deep thought. He was in a quandary as to what was best to do. Should he leave everything over until the morrow, then endeavour to see Kathie and find out what she knew? Should he way-lay Tom Menteith to-night and thrash the matter out with him, or should he wait for the first favourable opportunity of confronting Lizbeth and surprising her?

But as his impatience would not permit him to wait, he moved slowly toward Jackson's ranch, and sat on a fence near the house, dangling his legs, watching the shadows on the window blinds and listening drowsily to the hum of voices and the sound of Lizbeth's laughter. He was in no hurry; the night was fine, and Tom Menteith was still inside.

At last the front door opened and Lizbeth came out to the veranda to kiss her lover good night.

Soon all was dark again. But the sound of footsteps on the Avenue told Crawford that Tom Menteith was coming his way. He slid off the fence and walked slowly down the roadway in front of the man who had unwittingly usurped him; and it was not until they reached the main road that the two came abreast.

Several years had passed since Tom Menteith had last seen Crawford, but the familiar figure of the picturesque fellow

was inextricably entwined in Menteith's boyish memories and he recognised the other in an instant.

"By jove!" he cried, peering into the face of the man beside him. "Bob Crawford, as sure as I'm alive!"

He held out his hand and shook the other's heartily.

"Man, man—I heard you were in Australia. Got tired of it, eh!—and back to the old haunts. Well, Bob, if you want a job, I'll bet the dad will place you the minute you show your face, for he talks well of you—sinner and all as he says you are."

Crawford was overwhelmed by the sincerity of the greeting of his young friend and was almost tempted to evade the issue:—at least for the time being. But, with the darkness and the quiet, he knew he would seldom have such a favourable opportunity.

"Thanks, Tom! You have some memory for faces and figures. I would not have known you. You were only a bit of a kid when you went away. You're a full-grown man now."

"Yes, Bob—a few years abroad make a difference in a fellow," said Menteith genially. "What went wrong with the sheep-farming in Australia, though? Didn't you like it?"

"Oh, I liked it all right enough," replied Crawford. "Guess I'll be back there in another couple of months. I just took a trip over about a little business matter I wanted to straighten out."

Tom laughed.

"Ha, ha! Bob—I'll bet I know what it is too. Looking for a wife! And you might do worse too, old man. A wife must be a mighty big comfort over there in that bachelor-land."

"Maybe I am, Tom. And, as you say,—I might do worse."

The two walked along the road together.

"They tell me you are on the same tack yourself," continued Crawford cautiously.

"Well—not exactly, Bob! On the same course, maybe, but on a different tack."

"I might not have been in such a gol-durned hurry myself," pursued Crawford, "only there's a little shaver on the scene and it is hardly fair to stay away under these conditions."

"Ah, Bob, Bob!" put in the younger man admonishingly. "You always were a harum-scarum devil. But it was the manly thing for you to come back and face the music though; and I admire you for it. Who is the lady, if I may ask?"

"Oh,—her up at the farm!" replied Crawford in an offhand way.

"You don't say!" was Menteith's rejoinder. He, like most young men, was fond of a little bit of scandal told on the sly. "Well, by gad, Bob!—she's a peach what I've seen of her, and I don't wonder at you coming all the way from Australia to claim her. I would do the same myself."

"Oh, she's a good enough looker," conceded Crawford.

"There are all kinds of stories floating around about her," said Menteith. "If we are to believe all we hear, she is able to tell our past and foretell our future; and conjure up ghosts and goblins, witches, demons and sprites, and do all kinds of uncanny things—all simply by striking up a few bars on an old violin. I did hear her play once, and I'll never forget it. It was wonderful. Say! I should like to hear her again sometime, for she's a perfect witch on the instrument and can draw you along, against your will; even if you are a mile away. Before you go away with her, Bob, bring her over and get her to play for us down home. Will you?"

"Easy, Tom! Don't you think you are a bit mixed up in the women?"

"How do you mean? Didn't you say it was the girl at Jackson's who had the child?"

"Yep!"

"Well—there are only two of them at Jackson's. I'm mighty certain Elizabeth isn't a violinist," laughed Tom Menteith.

"She might not be a fiddler, but there's nothing to prevent her being a mother, is there, Tom?"

Menteith looked at Crawford curiously, without replying, while Crawford seemed to be interested in his own thoughts for a brief moment.

"It's a queer kind of a world this," went on Crawford at last. "Sometimes it is hard to find a father for a youngster, but generally you can lay your finger on the mother."

"That's so!" agreed Menteith.

"What would you say if somebody tried to make you believe that Liz Jackson was the mother of that baby up at the ranch?"

"I would push the suggestion back down the man's throat," retorted Menteith.

"And what if the man could prove it?"

"Look here, Crawford," put in Menteith angrily, "I used to like you, but either you have been drinking or you are trying to make trouble. What's your game? What are you driving at?"

"Just what I've been trying to tell you, Tom."

"Crawford, you're a damned liar, and you know it," flamed Menteith, his temper giving way as he stepped up in front of his companion. "Take back what you've said, and don't dare to breathe her name long with your own, or, by God, I'll—. Take it back, will you?" he commanded, opening and closing his hands excitedly.

Crawford watched him in a lazy kind of way, standing with his legs slightly apart and twisting a piece of straw between his fingers.

"Crawford, you are asking for it, and, by God, you shall have it," cried Tom Menteith, rushing at him impetuously.

Without any apparent effort, Crawford caught him by both arms and almost lifted him against a tree.

"Don't be a fool, man!" he muttered. "I could twist you like this piece of straw. I have no quarrel with you, Tom, so, damn it, forget that part of it. Do you think I would say what I have said if I couldn't produce the goods? That youngster up there is mine. Liz is its mother. I'm here to take them both back with me to Australia. Now, the best thing you can do is to beat it quickly and quietly away for a while, until the wind has died down."

He released his younger antagonist, who stood by his side helpless and dumfounded, with white lips and a clammy ooze of perspiration on his face.

"Say,—Crawford!" he said brokenly. "Don't fool me any more. Tell me this isn't true—that it's only a yarn you're stringing. Crawford—I can't believe it. I——"

"Look at this then, Tom," interposed Crawford in a kindly tone. "I'm sorry for you, old sport, damned sorry, and I would spare you if I could. Your own good heart and good nature have been made fools of. Brace up! Do you think you can manage to read this?"

Crawford handed him a document.

"I'll strike a match as you glance over it," he went on.

With trembling fingers, Menteith took the paper from Crawford and read it through. Then he folded it up again and handed it back.

"That's sufficient, Bob," he said firmly, bracing his shoulders and facing Crawford boldly. "I'm sorry I spoke and acted as I did. I didn't know. It's a bit of a shock to me. Forgive me, old fellow, and forget all about my part in this."

He held out his hand.

"Good-bye!" he said, "and, good luck! I won't see you again, I guess. I'll take the train out to-morrow. In a week I'll be on the way back to old Ceylon."

Crawford held Menteith's hand for a moment, and the hand was cold and limp.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cold Kail Hot Again

Next forenoon early, when Lizbeth and Colin Jackson were alone in close conversation in the ranch kitchen, the noise of grinding footsteps on the gravel outside—better than any burglar-alarm or electric push-button—warned the pair of the approach of a caller.

Something familiar in the measured tread caused Lizbeth to start up, and scarcely had she done so when the door was unceremoniously pushed open and Crawford entered. With the old, well-remembered, easy-going, devil-may-care swagger, as disconcerting as it was exasperating, he doffed his Stetson. Colin Jackson stood staring at him as if turned to stone; and the draperies which Lizbeth had been showing to her father fell from her hands to the floor.

"Crawford!" was all she could gasp.

"You don't seem to be particularly glad to see me, Liz," he remarked,—a trifle bitterly. "It's quite a time since you last saw me."

"What the devil are you after anyway?" cried Colin Jackson, compressing his mouth in his rage. "Nobody wants you here. Get out of this, you damned virtue-thief, and don't dare to show your face in the neighbourhood on the peril of your life."

"Whoa! Steady up! Go easy, Jackson, old man!" cried Crawford. "Why don't you offer an over-seas visitor a chair?"

"What do you want here, you unhung blackguard? Aren't you content with the havoc you have already wrought, without coming back to gloat over it? Can't you leave the girl alone who has suffered through you and your slippery wiles, and give her a chance to make good—instead of coming here to crow over your misdeeds?"

"Oh,—I just dropped in while passing to offer my congratulations," exclaimed Crawford sarcastically.

With fear in her eyes, Lizbeth stared, unable to speak and almost unable to move.

"What do you want?" snarled Jackson. "If it's money—I haven't got any: if it's the brat—you are welcome to it, and good riddance: if it is Lizbeth—then she'll give you your answer in double-quick time."

"Say, Jackson—if I wanted money, I have the good sense to know that this isn't the place to come for it. As for the kid, I'll pay you for its keep, so you needn't worry on that score. When I want Liz, I'll tell her. Then it'll be time enough to get her answer."

Colin Jackson walked over to the door and held it wide open.

"There's the door, Crawford! Get out!"

"No!" replied Crawford in defiance. "I won't! Not on your tin-tacks!"

The rancher was beside himself. He clutched at a heavy cudgel which stood in the corner by the door; and there were madness and fierce hatred in his eyes.

Lizbeth sprang between and intervened.

"Dad!—surely you have sense enough to know that this is not the way to settle matters with Bob Crawford. This is between him and me. Why not go yourself, and leave us alone for a bit?"

"All right!" replied her father savagely, throwing the club back again in the corner. "But tell him, and tell him straight, where he is getting off at. There must be no half measures with that skunk. And if I find him here when I come back, don't blame me for what happens."

He went out, shutting the door noisily behind him.

In the next moment, Lizbeth's whole nature changed. She ran to Crawford, threw her arms round his neck and in tones of

softness and tenderness she supplicated him.

"Oh, Bob, Bob! Why did you not leave me here as I was? Why did you come back? I did not know that I would ever see you again. I did not know you loved me really and truly. Everybody told me you only loved for the time being, and I felt I had been made a fool of.

"Tom Menteith is going out to Ceylon. I am to follow him there and marry him. It is my own arrangement. Bob, won't you go away and forget me altogether? Forget what has passed between us. Take the kiddie if you wish him, and go away. Please, please, Bob,—if you ever really loved me, go away."

Crawford looked at her and his hands sought her hair, as they used to do. He caught her arms and held her from him, looking into her eyes.

"Liz—you've done me a great wrong—almost the greatest wrong a woman can do to any man. But, because I love you—more than ever I did—and because my love makes me forgive you, I am not going away—not until you consent to come with me.

"You're not all bad, Liz, not nearly all bad; you are mostly good. The little bad in you is what you have been taught by that rascally father of yours. You never had a chance—a real chance. You have been with him too long. You are mine. You are coming with me. It's a great country out there, Liz. We'll start all over again. Yes!—you are coming with me if I have to carry you there. I crossed the Pacific to get you and I'm going to take you with me.

"Do you hear that, Liz? Do you understand me?"

He spoke with the deliberation and the assurance of one who had no doubt as to the outcome of his plans.

Lizbeth threw her head on his breast in a conflict of uncertainty.

"No, no, Bob! I can't go with you. Don't you see it is too late now?" she said at last. "It means too much for me. It means giving up a beautiful home in Ceylon; a position of importance for which I have craved all my life; and all that money can buy. It means ruin for those left here; it means getting out of the ranch, selling up the remaining stock, for father hasn't a dollar to call his own. Oh—go away! If you really love me as you say you do—go away and leave me.

"Our secret need never be known, Bob! Only one person knows it now, for the others do not know who we are. Go, Bob,—go! Do this much for me. I will send you money when you need it. I will see that you have horses, sheep, everything you need. Won't you go?" she pleaded. "And I might come to you out there, once. Yes, Bob!—I will come to you, alone, away out there; and we can be happy together for a little while. Tom need never know. Oh,—I can find a way," she went on, "if you only let me live as I feel I must live—secure in my new position for the balance of the time."

Mercurial in temperament, her manner changed again as he looked at her, obdurate and earnest.

"Oh, Bob!" she cried, in a breaking voice, "I cannot resist that look in your face. I thought I was strong, but I am not strong enough. What am I to do? I don't feel sure; I want to stay with Tom—I want to be with you. Oh, I don't know—I don't know!"

She leaned on his breast and sobbed. And Crawford knew that his old power with her still held.

Quickly he made up his mind how to act to secure her wavering allegiance. Her admission of indecision was an admission that she had loved him in his absence and that she would never let him go away again without her.

He threw her from him, almost roughly: and she cowered away in fear and surprise.

"All right!" he cried. "If you cannot make up your mind, I'll do it for you. Stay with your new lover; eat his grub and love him in exchange for it; be his doll—for that's all you can ever be to him anyway.

"I'm going. You'll never see me again. You've had your chance. I've done my part. I'm through now—so don't blame me."

He turned quickly away from her and strode toward the door. But, with a terrified cry, Lizbeth—the imperious, masterful Lizbeth—ran after him. All her affectation and all her insincerity were gone. She clung to him—a woman frail and weak, crying for peace and shelter from the only man in all the world from whom she felt she could ever obtain them.

"Don't go, Bob! Oh, don't go! I could never bear that now."

He turned to her again.

"Yes, yes,—wait!" she cried, her anxious face searching his, as she patted him with her hands. "Wait for me, Bob! I'll go too!

"We'll hurry away from this hell on earth, for that's what it is. I can't stand any more of it. I didn't love him. I see that all now. I only loved what he owned. He always did as I wanted him to. But you are a man—the only man who ever forced me to do what he wanted me to do—and, Bob, I love you for it. Yes!—I love you. Oh, Bob, Bob, I want you,—I want you!"

Her voice rang out, wild, unfettered, sincere; and all the wrong she had done Crawford was obliterated in that heart-hungry cry. His arms went round her and their lips met passionately.

A slender, girlish figure came slowly down the stairs from the room above and stood at the turn, almost hidden from view yet surveying the entire room. She had heard the sound of voices; and the high-pitched cry of Lizbeth had brought her down, startled and wondering.

For a time she could not understand what her eyes beheld, but soon all was made clear to her and she drew back again, unheard and unseen.

Slowly Lizbeth led Crawford over to the little cot by the fireplace and, lifting the coverlet, she showed him his little son, she looking upon the babe for the first time with real feelings of motherly love and tenderness.

And thus—stooping together and laughing over their little child—Colin Jackson found them on his return.

"In the name of thunder! Isn't that man out of here yet?" he growled. "Stop this fooling, you pair of silly idiots.

"I see you are up to all the tricks of your trade, Crawford—trying the sentimental stuff. Well!—it isn't going to work this time.

"Lizbeth—send that man about his business, and look sharp. It's mighty poor respect you show for the gentleman you are going to marry."

"I never will marry him," cried Lizbeth, defiantly.

"What? What? What? Do you tell me that to my face, at this hour?" he yelled, turning livid with rage. "You'll be telling me next that you are going to marry this scoundrel."

"No,—that won't be necessary either, dad," said Lizbeth quietly.

"We are married already."

Swift as a shot from a gun the words flew out and penetrated the mark.

"It's a lie! It's a trick!" cried Jackson in a futile endeavour to persuade himself, if not the others, that it was not true.

"It isn't a lie," remarked Crawford, "but you bet it was a pretty fine trick. We were married the day of the Roanstone Fair, a year ago last April. There's the certificate! There were just ourselves, a little, old, retired minister who was doddering at the brink of his grave, and a couple of witnesses who never saw us before. Quite safe if we didn't want it to come out, but everything absolutely O. K. all the same."

Colin Jackson read the certificate through, then tore it into scraps which he threw in Crawford's face.

Crawford laughed.

"I guess that means you've divorced us, Jackson. But you shouldn't tear up papers that don't belong to you," he

remonstrated. "It'll cost me five dollars for a fresh copy of that certificate—so you see it's a damned expensive temper that of yours."

There was little mirth in the situation for Colin Jackson, and he ignored entirely the sarcasm of his newly-discovered son-in-law. His hands trembled and his face became haggard. He seemed to have lost control over his words and his actions, as he turned to her upon whom he had staked so much, and lost.

"Why didn't you tell me about this before, Lizbeth? You owed that much to your old father. I may have wronged others, but, God knows! I never denied you what you wanted."

"Don't start in to lecture me," she replied in defiance. "What I did, I did in the hope of helping you, and it never would have happened if you hadn't urged me to marry Tom Menteith. It looked easy then, with Bob in Australia and the chances that he would never come back, no witness who knew us, and somebody to foist the youngster on. But I was a fool to think that it would never come out; and I'm glad now that it has been stopped before it got too far."

"Yes, yes,—smooth tongue and fine excuses!" complained her father impatiently. "You were always good at that. But there is only one word for what you were going to do, it's an ugly word,—maybe you've heard it before."

He threw up his hands in disgust.

"Oh, for God's sake, get out of my sight! You, and your brat, and your sneering fancy-man! Never let me see your face again. You are a disgrace to the lowest drab in any Chinatown. Get out, before I curse the day you were born!"

His face grew drawn and bloodless as he hounded them before him.

Lizbeth picked the child up from the cot, and Colin Jackson bundled them toward the door. His voice rose in a hysteria of passion.

"I wronged a good girl for you," he cried, "a good girl, I tell you—who would not harm a fly. You are going to turn tail and run away from it all, and leave me among the ruins. But she'll stay and help me the best she can. Would to God she'd been mine instead of you!"

Lizbeth turned and looked at him appealingly.

"Go away!" he yelled. "Don't speak a word! Go away—go away!"

When the door closed on them, he tottered over to the table with the gait of an old, worn-out man, and buried his face in his hands. All his courage and venom were gone. Years seemed to have rolled suddenly on top of him, burying him as under a funeral pyre.

When his grief had spent itself, he raised his head slowly and, with an effort, got to his feet, moving aimlessly around the kitchen, with his hands out in front of him.

"Yes! Kathie is a good girl," he murmured. "I did her wrong—but I'll go to her; I'll make it up to her; I'll tell her all about it. She won't run away and leave me. She won't be angry with an old man. She won't bring fresh ruin on top of old. Yes! —she's a good girl.

"Kathie, Kathie!" he cried. But his voice scarcely rose above a whisper.

"Kathie, Kathie!" he called louder.

He went to the turn in the stairs, still shouting.

"Kathie,—Kathie,—are you there?"

From room to room he tottered—only one word on his lips, the name of the girl he had bullied, and wronged, and almost broken.

But Kathie did not answer. She was far from the reach of his voice, and he was alone and helpless amid the ruins of his crumpled ambitions.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dissolving Shadows

Lizbeth's confession to her father sounded like the sweetest music to Kathie standing there at the turn of the stairway. She experienced no wild surge of maddening anger or resentment, nor had she any declamation to make before those who had wronged her so cruelly. All she knew and all she cared was that at last she was free from the horrible nightmare which had so long beset her.

Like hoar frost before the morning sun all the clinging shadows melted away and the brightness of a great peace radiated through her. Lizbeth was married, so she was free now—always had been free, in fact—to throw back the lie in the teeth of the world; free to shout gladly her innocence to the wind, the trees, the birds; free to defy those who had held her in bondage and, above all, free to vindicate herself in the eyes of those who once had been so kind to her although their faith had wavered because of her silence.

Kathie slipped quickly upstairs and into her bedroom. She swung herself over the window sill and dropped lightly to the turf below. Like the wind, she sped up over the hill, through the broad, green trail in the wood and over the other side to Broadacres, an aggressive defiance in her eyes, a wild tumult in her bosom and a gloriously untrammelled freedom dancing through the whole being of her.

This time, there was no Indian maid to block her way at the door. Had there been, it would have been of little consequence, for half a dozen maids could not have barred her entrance then to the people she loved.

Mrs. Gray was comfortably seated on a couch before a bright fire. On a wooden stand by her side rested a book from which she was reading. A ball of wool lay in her lap and she was plying her knitting needles with an amazing ease and dexterity. Like many another lady of her upbringing, she considered that to read without knitting at the same time was a waste of time, and, therefore, an unpardonable sin.

Kathie broke in on the quiet of her afternoon, with her heart-wrung cry of freedom, carrying with her a contagious thrill of excitement. Running forward with her arms outstretched, she threw herself at the feet of the elderly lady.

"I am good—I am good!" she cried wildly. "They said I was not; they said I was bad; but, oh,—I am good—I *am* good!"

She looked up into the face of her old friend, clutching at the sleeves of the old lady's gown with nervous fingers.

"Tell me you believe me now?" she pleaded. "Tell me you still love me; oh, tell me you love me! I am dying to be loved again!"

Mrs. Gray was startled by the sudden appearance of Kathie, and the girl's pleading cry resounded through to her very soul. Tenderly she caught the wet face between her hands.

"Let me look into your eyes, lassie, and I'll tell you," she said with motherly gentleness.

In that brief moment the truth shone out bright and clear, chasing away the last lingering shadow of a doubt.

"Yes, yes!" she went on decidedly, "you *are* good, my own, sweet lass. Good as gold and pure as the snow you once were buried in! A face like you have now can never lie. And I love you, my dear, with all my poor, old, weak, throbbing heart."

She kissed Kathie on the forehead and then looked into her face again.

"If I only had had you beside me and had looked at you as I do now, I never could have doubted—not for the tiniest moment. Ah!—how you have been slandered and misjudged—my sweet, innocent lamb! And I am one of the worst of the sinners, for I should have known better."

The old lady's eyes were dimmed with tears and, as Kathie rose, Mrs. Gray drew her on to the couch by her side. And thus, with her head on the old lady's breast, Kathie cried in happy relief from her long, pent-up feelings.

"We condemned you without a trial," said Mrs. Gray. "Tell me all you know, Kathie, so that I may help you to straighten

out the terrible tangle:—for, you see, I know so little."

Kathie felt in her bosom for the locket which her uncle had given her, and, with a vigorous tug she broke it from its fastenings and handed it to Mrs. Gray.

"Crawford is back from Australia," she sobbed. "Lizbeth and he were married long ago, and the child is theirs."

"And they made you take this vow to hide their duplicity?" asked the horrified lady. "But Lizbeth was to marry Tom Menteith! What of him?"

"My uncle and Lizbeth told me the child was Mr. Menteith's; and I believed them," faltered Kathie. "They said they wished to hide the fact from old Mr. Menteith until after their marriage. They deceived me into helping them, they threatened me, they played on my feelings, they said it would mean ruin to them if I did not consent and that I was the only one who could help them. They were my only relatives and I felt I owed them my assistance where possible. I consented. Then they tricked me and spread those horrible lies around.

"Oh, what a miserable fool I have been! I have almost missed my way. It has almost made me bad, for my belief in my fellows was nearly dead and I thought the evil in this world by far outweighed the good; and that it was useless to fight."

Kathie took back the locket and made to cast it into the fire.

"Steady, my dear! You must not do that," intervened Mrs. Gray. "We may need this. Give it back to me and I will keep it safe for you."

Kathie looked around the familiar room, and a feeling of something amiss came to her.

"Where is Captain Gray?" she asked. "Did he also lose faith in me?"

"Ah no, my dear! He, among all of us, has maintained your innocence. He shouted it from the hill-tops and down in the valley in the town. He has quarrelled and fought over it until the people are afraid to mention your name in his hearing.

"He and Alick have been away for months and months, trying to prove a theory he has regarding you. I am not very hopeful for the success of their mission, but, if it should prove true;—oh, my dear! what rejoicing there will be in Broadacres this night.

"I had a telegram last week saying they had arrived in the East.

"They are due here to-day. Tom Semple has gone in to meet them at the train. The train is several hours late, but they are due here any minute now."

Kathie could scarcely contain herself. "But what is it," she inquired, "that has taken them away from home so long? What is it connected with me that could be of such importance to busy men?"

"Probably I should not tell you, Kathie, for it is likely to be only an old man's strange fancy, after all;—but, do you know, you bear the same name, Kathleen Gray, as Captain Gray's mother did? He discovered that from a little brooch belonging to you which he found in the wood some time ago. He says you remind him of his mother in voice and manner. Your strange and wonderful talent for music brings back memories of his brother who ran away from home and was supposed to have been drowned—supposed, because his body never was really properly identified."

As well as she could, Mrs. Gray told her eager young listener all she knew of the story, and she tried her best to impress on her its improbability and what little chance there was of the investigations proving anything more than that they were fruitless.

But Kathie's more romantic nature would not let go of the possibility of the connecting links being forged—no matter how small the chances might be.

"But it might be true," she maintained, trying to discover a trace of hope in her less impressible companion. "Why couldn't it be true?"

"My dear, we must just wait quietly until they come back, then we shall know all about it."

"But was there no word in the telegram as to what progress they had made?" continued Kathie.

"Not a word! That is what makes me think they have discovered nothing. But, my dear, do not be downhearted, for it shall make no difference one way or the other. You are still our little foster daughter and you must stay with us always now, for we want you. You know you can never go back under the roof where you have been so outrageously treated."

"But yet it might be true!" harped Kathie, encouraging the faint, flickering hope. "I feel that my father was more than he pretended to be; that there was something great, and good, and noble in him—born in him—which no buffeting, nor privation, nor even despair could entirely obliterate."

In her impatience, she rose and walked across the floor, time and again soliloquising:—

"But what if it be true! Oh, what if it be true!" until Mrs. Gray's heart was pained to think of the disappointment which must surely be hers. And she wished she had held her peace and had kept her secret.

At last the well-known clip-clop of her favourite mare resounded from the roadway, and Mrs. Gray knew that her husband and Alick were being driven up the avenue, home once more.

She rose to go to meet them at the door. Kathie followed.

"No, my dear!" said Mrs. Gray kindly. "I think you had better remain here. I wish to see them first, to tell them in a few words what has transpired since they went away; to prepare them for the joy of meeting you without a cloud between."

She left Kathie walking the floor in a fever of unrest.

Along the hallway, at the wide-open door, she welcomed her boys back again, and in a few brief sentences she told them the glad news.

"Is she with you now?" interposed Alick excitedly?

"She is in the sitting room," smiled Mrs. Gray.

Alick did not wait for any more. He bounded along the hallway and disappeared. He stood at the door for a moment, gazing at the woman he loved so dearly. She turned and saw him and, with open arms, they ran toward each other.

Not a word was spoken. Their emotions were too great for that. Alick held her to his fast-beating heart in his strong embrace. Their lips met in the silent eloquence of their love.

"Tell me, Alick,—tell me," said Kathie at last, "is it true, oh, is it true?"

"That I love you, dearest?" he asked.

"No, no, no, Alick! That I know. But is it true that——"

"Hush, sweetheart! I am not at liberty to tell. You must ask that of your *Uncle*, Captain Gray."

With a glad shout she broke from his arms and clasped her hands together in ecstasy.

"Then it is true! It *is* true!" she cried. "Oh, I am so happy! How glad I am! The world seems a perfect Paradise!"

The jovial voice of Captain Gray heralded his approach. His tall figure was framed in the doorway and his arms were also outstretched in welcome for the woman in whom his trust had never wavered.

"My own, dear, little niece!" he exclaimed.

She threw herself into his arms.

"My Uncle, my Uncle!" she murmured. And the room became strangely quiet for a time.

"But is it really, and truly, and irrevocably true?" she asked anxiously, looking up at him.

Captain Gray smiled.

"Yes!—it is really, and truly, and irrevocably true, even 'cross-my-heart-and-may-I-die' true," he added, laughing.

"Then you must tell me all about it at once," she cried, still clinging to him. "I am dying to hear."

"I'll give you some of the headings, little sweetheart. The details must wait until after supper, for Alick and I are hungry as bears waking up after their winter sleep and having fed on nothing but sucked paw all the time.

"First of all, the man who was found drowned in the Solway Firth was not my brother. He was a travelling musician who had stolen my brother's violin from him at a wayside inn some months before. I traced my brother—your father—to Ireland, to the watering place where he first met your mother. All the rest lies proven there," he continued, producing a bundle of papers from his pocket and throwing it on the table. "Your parents' marriage certificate; the proof of your birth; and, best of all, a full and lucid diary of your father's doings and wanderings from the time he ran away from home until a week before his death. Alick found them, in the home of an old woman who had got some of your mother's belongings after her death. The old woman had not known their worth but had not cared to get rid of them."

Kathie could not speak. Her joy was complete and tears ran down her cheeks as she listened, as in a dream, to the wonderful story.

In the midst of their happiness, Zella appeared. She addressed the Captain.

"Mister Jackson he at door. He want see you quick."

"The devil!" testily exclaimed the Captain. "I don't want to see him. If I met that man now, I feel I would knock him down and tramp on him. Zella,—tell him I won't see him.

"It would be like bringing to a feast a man who had no stomach."

"Wait a moment, Zella!" interposed Mrs. Gray. "Allan," she continued, turning to her husband, "see him; let him know what we know;—get this cleared up now and done with for all time. The sooner the better!"

Reluctantly, the Captain gave assent.

"Tell him to come in, Zella. But, if he says a word out of place, I'll wring his neck," he added.

But all the Captain's anger faded at the sight of the old, done man who tottered into the room. They could scarcely believe that he who stood before them now was the strong and vigorous old rancher they had known and seen only a few months before.

Jackson's eyes travelled around the room, resting finally on Kathie.

"Kathie, my dear," he whimpered, in a trembling voice, "I knew you would not go far away. I have come for you. They have all gone and left me—all but you.

"There's a lot of work to be done and nobody to do it, so you must hurry. Come! We mustn't disturb the good folks here any longer than we can help."

He turned and hobbled toward the door as if he entertained no idea that she would not follow.

"Aren't you coming?" he exclaimed a little irritably, looking back over his shoulder.

"No,—I am not coming, Uncle Jackson,—not any more," replied Kathie in a voice aquiver with emotion.

"What!" screeched the old rancher. "Talk like that to your old uncle who has kept you all this time when no one else would have you! Say 'No' to me—you ungrateful young baggage!"

He advanced, shaking his stick in menace.

"That'll do, Jackson," interfered the Captain. "Get about your business. Kathie shall never set foot inside your door again—not with my sanction."

"With your sanction," screamed Colin Jackson, "did you say with your sanction? If that isn't the brightest! When did you get the power to sanction?"

"There's the sanction on the table," said Captain Gray calmly. "Kathie is my brother's daughter."

"I don't believe it. It's another lie—a damned lie. It's another scheme. You're all scheming to ruin me."

"Read for yourself then," went on the Captain. "As for the schemes and all such dirty work—I leave that to you. Your sister married my brother years ago. Kathie is the child of that marriage. The proofs are all there—read them!

"My brother's express desire is that I should become the guardian of his daughter."

The news fell almost unheeded on Colin Jackson's ears. His mind seemed to be clouded and unable to grasp with the swiftness of old times. He did not read the papers; he merely nodded his head as if accepting a final judgment.

"Everybody has turned against me," he exclaimed bitterly. "But still, you have no right to force my Kathie to leave me and to live with you here, when she does not want to go. Let her choose. I'll be content with her decision, for I know she still loves her old uncle. Don't you dear?" he doddered, looking at Kathie in supplication, his voice sounding hollow and sham.

"Tell him your choice, lass," said the Captain, "and let us be rid of him."

Kathie went slowly ever to the old rancher.

"Uncle, I can never forget the terrible wrong you have done me," she said, "but, because you are my uncle—my dear mother's brother—I forgive you gladly. For my own safety, though, I could never live under your roof again.

"Captain Gray is my uncle also; and I love him almost as much as I loved my dear father. I should love to live with him, but that can't be either. There is someone else who has waited long and patiently, someone who has suffered for my sake."

She turned to Alick Simpson.

"His claim on me is my claim on him—and these claims must come first."

Gently she laid her hands on the broad shoulders; and, looking with confidence and tenderness into his blue eyes, she murmured:—

"Alick, my own,—I am ready now."

THE END

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Transcriber's Notes:
original hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in the original
Page 36, unconciousness ==> unconsciousness
Page 56, farmhouse ==> farm-house [Ed. for consistency]
Page 72, chains and he slippery ==> chains and the slippery
Page 92, You have come," ==> "You have come,"
Page 167,168, only a a rancher's ==> only a rancher's
Page 204, Good morning ==> "Good morning
Page 257, Look at it's een ==> Look at its een
Page 304, Nataile Sumner Lincoln ==> Natalie Sumner Lincoln

[The end of *The Girl of O. K. Valley* by Robert Watson]