

“Cattle”

Winnifred Eaton



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CATTLE

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BY

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TO MY OLD FRIEND
FRANK PUTNAM

CATTLE



HIS EYES RESTED ON THE GLOWING FACE OF THE GIRL
IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

CATTLE

CHAPTER I

FOUR Alberta ranches are the scene of this story. Of these, three were quarter sections of land in Yankee Valley, and the fourth the vast Bar Q, whose two hundred thousand rich acres of grain, hay and grazing lands stretched from the prairie into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, where it spread over the finest pastures and the "Chinook"-swept south slopes, where the cattle grazed all winter long as in summer-time, its jealous fingers, like those of a miser who begrudges a pinch of his gold, reaching across into the Indian Reserve.

For many years the Bar Q cattle had had the right of way over the Indian lands, the agents who came and went having found it more profitable to work in the interests of the cowman than in those of mere Indians. As everywhere else in the country thereabouts, including the Indians themselves, the agents soon came under the power, and were swept into the colossal "game," of the owner of the Bar Q, the man known throughout the country as the "Bull."

Few could recall when first the Bull, or to give him his proper name, Bill Langdon, had come into the foothills. His brand had blazed out bold and huge when the railroads were pushing their noses into the new land before the trails were marked. Even at that early period, his covetous eye had marked the Indian cattle, "rolling fat" in the term of the cattle world, and smugly grazing over the rich pasture lands, with the "I. D." (Indian Department) brand upon their right ribs, warning "rustlers" from east, west, south, and north, that the beasts were the property of the Canadian Government.

Little Bull Langdon cared for the Canadian Government and he spat contemptuously at the name. Bull had come in great haste out of Montana, and although he had flouted the laws of his native land, away from it he chose to regard with supreme contempt all other portions of the earth that were not included in the great Union across the line.

His first cattle were "rustled" from the unbranded Indian calves which renegade members of the tribe had driven to convenient forest corrals and traded them to the cowman for the drink they craved. Though the rustling of Indian cattle proved remunerative and easy,

Langdon by no means overlooked or despised the cattle of the early pioneers, nor the fancy fat stock imported into the country by the English "remittance men."

Slowly the Bar Q herd grew in size and quality, and as it increased, Bull Langdon acquired life-long leases upon thousands of acres of Government land—Forest and Indian Reserve. Closing in upon discouraged and impoverished homesteaders and pioneers he bought what he could not steal.

Somewhere, somehow, the Bull had come upon a phrase of the early days that appealed vastly to his greedy and vain imagination.

"The cattle on a thousand hills are mine!" he gloated, and roared aloud another favorite boast:

"There ain't no cattle on two or four legs that Bull Langdon fears."

He was a man of gigantic stature, with a coarse, brutal face, and in his expression there was something of the primitive savage.

The name "Bull" had been given him because of his bellowing voice, his great strength and his driving methods with men and cattle. Tyrannical, unprincipled and cruel, Bull was hated and feared. He had fought his way to the top by the sheer force of his

raging, dominating personality, and once there he reigned in arrogance without mercy or scruple.

To him cattle and men were much alike. Most men, he asserted, were "scrub" stock, and would come tamely and submissively before the branding iron. Very few were spirited and thoroughbred, and for these the Squeezegate had been invented, in which all who were not "broke," emerged crippled or were killed. Finally there were the mavericks, wild stuff, that escaping the lariat of the cowpuncher, roamed the range unbranded, and for these outlaws the Bull had a measure of respect. There was a double bounty for every head of such stuff rolled into the Bar Q, and quite often the Bull himself would join in the dangerous and exciting business of running them to ground.

If the Bull looked upon men in the same way as on cattle, he had still less respect for the female of the human species. With few exceptions, he would snarl, spitting with contempt, women were all scrub stock, easy stuff that could be whistled or driven to home pastures. A man had but to reach out and help himself to whichever one he wanted.

By some such contemptuous speeches as these he had overruled the alarmed objections with which his pro-

posal had been received by the timid, gentle girl from Ontario, whom he had found teaching in the rural school planted in the heart of the then stern and rigid country. It is true, he had thrown no lariat over the school teacher's neck, for he had no wish to kill the thing he coveted, but the cowmen knew of diabolical traps more ingenious than the Squeezegate in which a girl's unwary feet might be ensnared.

She was an innocent, harmless creature, soft and devoted, the kind that is born to mother things, but Mrs. Langdon had had only dream-things to mother; the babes that came to her with every year were born only to die immediately, as on some barren homestead the mother fought out her agony and longing alone and with no one to minister to their needs.

That was the tragedy of this land in the early days, that in innumerable cases the doctors' help would often come not at all, or come too late to be of any avail.

Time could neither accustom nor compensate the wife of the cattleman to those fearful losses, nor compensate her for them. And each time she would cling to the hope that the Bull would send her, before it was too late, to the city, to Calgary. Those were the years, however, when the Bull had had neither time nor thought

for such unimportant things as his wife's troubles. He was the type of man who will sit up all night long with a sick cow, or scour the range in search of a lost one, but look with indifference and callousness upon a woman's suffering, especially if she be his wife. Those were the years when the Bull was building up his herd. He was buying and stealing land and cattle. He was drunk with a dream of conquest and power, intent upon climbing to the top. It was his ambition to become the cattle king of Alberta—the King Pin of the north-west country.

And when the years of power and affluence did come, it was too late to help the cattleman's wife, for Mrs. Langdon had reached the age when she could no longer bear a child. The maternal instinct which dominated her, however, found an outlet in mothering the children of neighboring ranchers, the rosy-cheeked papooses on the little squaws' backs, the rough lads who worked upon the ranch, and she even found room in her heart for Jake, the Bull's half-witted illegitimate son.

Jake was a half-breed, whose infirmity was due to a blow Langdon had dealt him on the day when, as a boy, his mother having died on the Indian Reserve, he had come to the Bar Q and ingenuously claimed the Bull

as his father. As far as lay in her power, Mrs. Langdon had sought to atone to the unfortunate half-breed for the father's cruelty, and it was her gentle influence—she was newly married to the Bull at the time—that had prevailed upon him to allow Jake to continue upon the ranch. The boy worked about the house, doing the chores and the wood chopping and the carrying of water. He was slavishly devoted to his stepmother, and kept out of the reach of the heavy hand and foot of the Bull, for whom he entertained a wholesome terror.

CHAPTER II

ALTHOUGH this story chiefly concerns Bull Langdon, we must return at this point to the three humble quarter sections aforementioned, which are the scene of part of its action.

To the first of these the name of ranch or farm could only by courtesy be applied. It was known as the "D. D. D.," the "D's" being short for Dan Day Dump, as a neighboring farmer had once called the place, and the name had stuck to it ever since.

It was on the extreme rocky edge of Yankee Valley, an otherwise prosperous section of the "prairie" country, so named because most of its settlers had hailed originally from the U. S. A.

Dan Day himself had come from the States, but he had found a wife in Canada. They had "fetched up" finally at this sorry "stopping-off place," as they called it then, where first they squatted, and later, with the assistance of neighbors, who knew better than to let shiftless newcomers encroach upon the more fertile lands hard by, they had staked their homestead. There

Dan Day had put up the rickety shack and lean-to which had provided shelter of sorts for his growing family and stock, and in that rough environment the Day children had grown up like Indians.

Time had taught the homesteader at least one lesson, which was that he would never squeeze a living out of his barren acres. Day, as his neighbors were wont to declare, shaking disapproving heads, was not cut out to be a farmer. Nevertheless, they grudgingly gave him work, putting up with his inept services chiefly because as a community they waged unrelenting warfare against the stern approach of school authorities, who had begun to query whether the size of the Day family did not warrant the imposition upon the municipality of a new rural school.

Time and growth, however, are things the farmer, most of all men, must reckon with, and even as the crops leaped up tall and strong out of the rich black virgin soil, even as the cattle and the stock flourished and increased until they spread over all the wide pasture lands of Alberta, so the Day progeny shot upward, and seemed, hungrily, to clamor for their place in the world.

There were ten of them. A baby—and there was

always a baby in that family—of a few months old, a toddler of two, another of three, another of five, twins of seven, a boy of nine, twins of twelve, and Nettie, the eldest. The mother dying when she was fourteen, the girl found herself faced with the desperate problem of fending and caring for the whole wild and hungry brood of her brothers and sisters.

Nettie was of that blonde type seen often in the northern lands. She was a big girl, with milk-white skin and dead gold hair, a slow-moving, slow-thinking girl, simple-minded and totally ignorant of the world that lay beyond the narrow confines of their homestead land.

School had played no part in the life of Nettie Day. She knew vaguely of the existence of books and papers, things she remembered vaguely as having seen, but she had not been able to read them. She believed that the world contained two kinds of folk, the rich and the poor. The rich lived away off somewhere on big ranches, where the cattle were fat and the grain grew high, though some lived also in the cities. Nettie had heard of cities; her father had come from a small town in Oregon. As for the poor folk, with simple resignation Nettie accepted the fact that to them belonged such as

themselves, the Days, for whom life was one unceasing struggle against hunger and cold.

Occasionally a neighboring farmer, riding across the range or bringing home stray cattle, would drop in at the Day homestead and share the meager meal shyly set out by Nettie, and as the years went by and the girl began to unfold in the early blossoming of womanhood the visitor might linger a while longer to stare curiously at this maturing product of the D. D. D. Nettie possessed one true and unfailing friend in the man who had brought her and her nine little brothers and sisters into the world; who came periodically to scold, tease and teach; to clean and work, himself, in an effort to bring some semblance of order into the chaotic confusion that reigned in that shack.

Dr. McDermott, in spite of his twenty years in Canada, was still as stubbornly Scotch as on the day he landed. He was admitted to be the busiest man in the country, his practice extending from the prairie to the mountains. He had brought into the world most of the children born in that part of the country ever since he had planted his rough homestead there. There were other families as helpless as the Days and as dependent upon the "Doc" to scold and instruct them, and it was

not often that he found time to talk with Nettie. She would decide in advance the questions she meant to ask him when his monthly visit came round, but being so slow and shy, by the time the doctor had finished his dissatisfied inspection of the family affairs, the questions had all escaped her. But always the warm grip of his hand brought something surging up within her that sought utterance and expression.

“Growing! Growing! Growing!” the Scotch doctor would growl, glaring round at the circle of healthy, grimy faces, “like weeds! like weeds!” Latterly, however, like the neighbors, he had begun to look longer at Nettie, and with puckered brows he would change the word “weed” to “flower.” He told her she reminded him of a wild flower, and she liked that—it pleased her that her doctor friend had picked her out, as it were, from the weeds, and her bosom swelled with pride when he appeared one day unexpectedly at the shack and took her with him across the country to help care for a sick woman in a shack on the C. P. R. quarter section which had been Dr. McDermott’s own original homestead.

That swift running drive over the road allowances

in the doctor's democrat always stood out in her memory as one of the few sweet days in her life.

It was early March, but a "Chinook," the warm wind which has its origin in the Japanese current, had melted the flying snow of a March blizzard; it was as though a miracle had been wrought; the Chinook had sunk deep into the earth and thawed the last bit of frost out of the ground. Streams were running along the roads, the sloughs were filling to the top, the cattle no longer nibbled in the neighborhood of the fenced-in hay and straw stacks, but bit down into the upspringing grass, green already in this wonderful land. Eight-horse teams were pulling plow, disc and harrow out into the fields, preparatory for an early seeding. Overhead a great, warm sun sent its benevolent rays abroad, filling sky and earth with a warm glow; the land was bathed in sunlight. Small marvel that someone had fondly named it: "Sunny Alberta, the Land of Promise."

If Nettie was slow of speech and shy, Dr. McDermott was Scotch and brief. There was that, moreover, on his mind at this time, which dismayed and concerned him deeply. It is not strange, therefore, that as he whipped his horses to their top speed—they were upon an errand that he knew was a matter of life or death—

he forgot the girl at his side, looking about her in a sort of trance.

All the world seemed good and bonny to Nettie at this time; life was thrilling. The bumping, rickety old democrat was a luxurious coach, the rough trails and road allowances, full of holes and mud slews, a smooth highway over which she was being borne into a scene that spelled romance.

She had never before had so wonderful a chance of seeing the whole country, across to where, on the horizon, the mighty peaks of the Rocky Mountains held their snowy fronts. The hills always stirred something in Nettie that was vaguely yearning, something that thrilled even while it pained. Though prairie born, and prairie raised, she aspired to the hills, not knowing why, except that the hills seemed to her lifted up, up, up, into the clouds themselves. She had a childlike faith that "something good" would come to her out of the hills. That "something good" she recognized with rapture in the young rider from the great Bar Q who one autumn day had spent a never-to-be-forgotten hour at the D. D. D.

For several days long files of the Bar Q cattle had been trailing down from the hill country. They were

being driven from the summer range in the foothills to the grain ranches on the prairie where, in the shelter of the long cattle sheds, or loose in the sunlit pastures where stood the great straw and hay stacks, the mothers of the famous herd were especially housed and nurtured during the winter months, in preparation for the spring crop of calves.

This annual fall movement was an exciting event in the lives of the young Days. The children kept count of every head of cattle that passed along the road, and there was great excitement and glee the following spring, when the herd returned to the foothills, with the pretty, white-faced calves "at heel."

Nettie was no less thrilled than her small brothers and sisters by the advent of the Bar Q cattle, and up to the time of her mother's death she, too, had scrambled with them under and over barbed wire fences, and scampered across pasture lands to reach the road in time to see the cattle pour by. After her mother's death, things changed for Nettie. The babies tied her to the house, and the best she could do was to go as far as the edge of the corrals, a baby tucked under either arm, and toddlers clinging to her skirts. Here,

standing upon a rail, she would call across to the flying youngsters her admonitions to be careful.

That fall, however, hankering again to see the great herd from the hills as it passed to the lower lands, Nettie scrubbed the faces of her grimy little brood, arrayed them in clean jumpers made from bleached flour sacks, piled them aboard the old hay wagon, to which "Tick," a brother of thirteen, had already harnessed the team of geldings, and taking up the reins in her competent hands, she started for the trail.

Nettie was a big girl, with the softly maturing figure of a young Juno. She looked more than her fifteen years. Her hair was as gold as the Alberta sun, whose warmth, together with her unwonted excitement, brought a flush to either rounded cheek. Her blue eyes, wide and candid, returned the smiles of the riders, who were visibly impressed by the picture she made driving her wagonload of tow-headed children out into the road. The eyes of the young men brightened; wide hats and flowing ties were adjusted, as they rode on in the sunlight, whistling and singing and whirling loose lariats in their hands. More than one of them made a mental note of the necessity of seeking strayed cattle in the near neighborhood of the D. D. D., and when the last

of the herd disappeared down the grade, a single horseman rode out of the bush and paused alongside the Day wagon.

His broad face was sunburned, freckled, and ruddy, and wore a wide, friendly smile. He looked very straight out of clear eyes, eyes often seen in western Canada where men are ever gazing out over great distances, eyes that seem to hold the spirit of the outdoors and the freshness of unspoiled youth. The way he swept his large hat from his head and held it over the pommel of his saddle had something in it of unconscious grace and native courtliness, and he looked curiously boyish with his thick crop of brown hair ruffled by the slight wind.

Had anyone in the Day wagon seen a roan heifer? "She" had given him a "sight of trouble." Got into the bush half a mile down the grade, and "hanged if she didn't get plumb out o' sight somewhere in the willows."

No one in the Day wagon had seen a roan heifer; and the inquirer, screwing up his face, and scratching the side of his neck, ruminated in puzzled wonder as to the whereabouts of the missing animal, his eyes resting,

meanwhile, upon the lifted, glowing face of the girl in the driver's seat.

While random conjecture and suggestion were being offered by each of the boys and girls, the rider sat up suddenly alert and pointing toward some invisible speck, which he declared was "back of the shack there," he touched spurs to the flanks of his broncho and was off toward the house after the elusive lost one. But when the wagon pulled up into the barnyard, and the children and Nettie scrambled down, and crossed the yard to the house, they found the cowpuncher sitting disconsolately on the step, fanning himself with his great hat. Shaking his head at the shouted queries of the Day boys, as to whether he had found her, he replied:

"Nope. Guess she's flewed the coop. Gosh! but I'm hungry. Guess I'd better hop along and catch up with the bunch, before they bolt all o' the grub."

Which remark, needless to say, brought a clamorous invitation to dinner from the young Days, and after the usual protest at the trouble he'd be making, accompanied by a questioning, rather wistful look toward Nettie, who shyly seconded the children's invitation, he

“guessed, well, mebbe I will, though don’t go to any trouble for me.”

Trouble! Nettie flew about the mean room, her cheeks aflame, her eyes shining, her heart singing like a bird’s within her, while the children crowded about their guest, on whom, in his buckskin shirt, fur chaps, gauntlets and cowboy hat, their young prairie eyes gazed as upon a hero.

It may, moreover, be recorded that Nettie was by no means the only one through whose veins an exhilarating elixir seemed to be bounding like champagne. Young Cyril Stanley at that moment was violently aware of a thumping organ to the left of his cardiac region.

Love knows not time. It wells up in the human heart like the wave of the ocean that may not be beaten down. Nettie Day, hurrying about the kitchen, preparing a meal for the hungry stranger, and the stranger, with a “kid” on either knee and the others pressed as closely to him as space would allow, displaying his big jack-knife, quirt, beaded hatband and ticking watch to the delighted youngsters, looked at each other across the space of that poor and meager room, it seemed, though they could not have expressed it in words, that somehow life had become a poem, a glad dancing song.

CHAPTER III

THE winter was long and harsh, with scarcely a single Chinook to temper the intense cold. To Nettie, vainly seeking to cope with the work, the noise and the disorder, which the shutting in of a dozen husky youngsters must inevitably entail, and to Cyril Stanley, conscientiously at work in the purebred camp of the Bar Q, the Alberta winter had never seemed so long and grim. Cyril, however, found an outlet for the new feelings that he did not find hard to analyze. An Ontario-born boy, of pure Scotch ancestry, he was both sentimental and practical. Though he had met her but once, he was certain that Nettie was the only girl in the world for him, and with a canny eye to the near future, he began immediately to prepare for the realization of his dreams. It did not take Cyril long to make application for the quarter-section homestead land, which lay midway between the Day place and Dr. McDermott's original homestead. The savings of

several years were prudently expended upon barbed wire and fence post.

Though the best rider and roper of the Bar Q, and in line for the post of foreman of that tempestuous ranch, Cyril's faith was in the grain land, and he purposed to develop his homestead as soon as he could afford to do so. By sacrificing a certain amount of his pay, he could leave the Bar Q in the slack seasons and put in a certain amount of work each year upon his place. Already he possessed a few head of cattle and horses, and he planned to trade some of these for implements. He would begin the building of the house in the summer, after the fencing was done. The boy's thoughts dwelt long and tenderly upon that house all winter long. He had the heart and home hunger of the man in the ranching country, who has come little into contact with women, yet craves their companionship. Cyril's longing was the keener in that he now found himself in love for the first time in his life. He pictured Nettie in the house he would build, saw her moving about preparing their meal, thrilled at the thought of their eyes meeting and the touch of her hand in his. How she would light up the place.

Dreams these—dreams that kept the once easy-

tongued Cyril dumb and still, and aroused the good-natured questions of the fellows in the bunkhouses. Little cared Cyril for their jokes. He knew that spring would soon be there, and then——

Spring, in fact, came early that year, ushered in miraculously on the wings of a magnificent Chinook, which blew without ceasing for four days and nights, its warm breath thawing the land so lately rigid with cold.

Nettie, driving along the road in the Doctor's democrat, turned about in the seat to stare, with mild wonder, at the three rolls of barbed wire and the heaped-up willow fence posts that were piled on the unbroken quarter by which they were now passing.

"My!" said Nettie, "looks like someone's took up this quarter. D'you know who they are, doc?"

"Let's see. Seems to me I did hear that a Bar Q hand had staked here."

At the word "Bar Q," such a rush of color flooded the girl's face that, had the doctor been less intent upon driving the lagging team at a speed they were totally unused to, he might have surprised the girl's secret. But Dr. McDermott's eyes were fastened steadily ahead to where, across the bald prairie, his own first home in

Alberta thrust its blunt head against the skyline. He was in a hurry to reach that long deserted shack.

From up the grade the figure of a horseman stood out in silhouette against the sun. Nettie's heart began to beat so wildly that she was obliged to grip the sleeve of the doctor's coat.

"That's right," he growled. "Hold on tight. These roads are a mortal disgrace—a disgrace to the community. Hello, there!"

Whip up, he hailed the rider, stopping long enough to give Cyril an opportunity to join them.

"How do, doc! Business good?"

The rider had awkwardly lifted his wide hat, but his eyes lighted up as he saw the other occupant of the cart, and over the girl's cheeks there came a flush like the dawn.

"C'n I do anything for you, doc? Everything all right?"

"Nothing's right. Look at this road. It's an eternal disgrace—a disgrace to the community."

Dr. McDermott cursed heartily and without stint.

"Should've made the grade in quarter the time."

"Where you bound for? Shall I ride along with you?"

“You may. Might need you. Sick wom—” He started to say “woman” and then curiously changed, and blurted out angrily, “Lady over there.”

“You don’t say. Not at your old dump? Well, what’s she doin’ there? Shall I go ahead, doc?”

“She owns the place. Don’t know what happened, or when she arrived. Drove by this morning. Saw the door down and the nails off the window. Went in, and— Well, it’s a sick woman—a very sick woman! Get up, you, Mack!”

He growled angrily at the lagging horses.

Cyril rode close to the left-hand side of the democrat, his fur chapps at times brushing the girl. They looked at each other, flushed, turned away and looked back. For some time they rode along in an electric silence, tongue-tied but happy. Conversation at last bubbled forth, but of that which filled their young hearts to the brim no word was said; they talked of the common everyday topics of the ranching country.

“Well, how’s things at D. D. D.?”

“Not too bad. How’s things at Bar Q?”

“Jake-a-loo. Stock in plumb good shape. Two hundred and eighty calves dropped already. Expectin’ all of two thousand this spring.”

“Two thousand calves! Oh, my! That’s an awful sight of cattle.” She sighed. “We just got six head.”

“That’s not too bad. Bull Langdon started with less than that. I got twenty head of my own. Hope to ketch up with the Bull by’n by.”

They laughed heartily at that. Not so much because of the wit and brilliance of the remark, but because their hearts were young, the spring had come, the sun was overhead and it was good to hear each other’s voices and to look into each other’s eyes.

“What’s your brand?”

“Mine? You don’t say you never seen it yet?”

Again they went off into a happy gale of laughter.

“It’s a circle on the left rib. Gotter look out. Bar Q’s pretty much the same. All the Bull’s got to do to my circle is make a click to turn it into a Q and brand a bar above that. Pretty easy, huh?”

“Oh-h, but he wouldn’t do a thing like that!”

She was startled, palpably alarmed in his behalf, and that alarm was sweet and dear to him.

“Wouldn’t he, though! Sa-ay, where’ve you been living all your days that you never heard how the Bull got his herd?”

“Oh, my, I did hear once, b-but I didn’t suppose that

now he's so rich and owns half the cattle in the country, that he'd do such things any more."

"Oh, wouldn't he, though! Just give'm half a chance. He's got the habit, you see, and habits is like our skin. They stick to us."

Again they laughed merrily at this witticism.

"Orders are," went on Cyril, expanding under the girl's flattering attention and the shy admiration that shone from her wide blue eyes, "to lick in any and all stuff runnin' loose around the country, unbranded stuff, and stuff where the brand ain't clear. He give me the tip himself. Said there'd be a five to the rider for every head rolled in. Of course, I'm not losin' sleep about my stuff. I know just where they are on the range, you betchu, and I'm not leavin' them out o' sight too lōng. Thinkin' of tradin' them in, anyway, for—for—lumber and implements."

"Lumber?" she repeated innocently.

"Yep. Goin' to build."

As his gaze sank deeply into Nettie's, her heart rose up and stood still in her breast.

"Wh-what are you building?" she asked in a breathless whisper, so that he had to bend down from his

horse to catch the question, and the answer came with a boy's rich laugh:

"A *home*, girl!"

After that ecstatic sentence, and as if to relieve some of his pent-up joy, Cyril rode forward at a quick canter, raced on ahead and back again, bringing up beside the slow-traveling democrat.

The click of the doctor's whip, swinging above the horses' heads, became the only sound in the vast silence of the prairie. Dr. McDermott was considering the advisability of replacing his veterans which had given him such long and valiant service over many years; their feeble gait, though greatly to the taste of the engrossed young people, aroused the indignation and wrath of the harassed doctor. Just then a Ford, racing along the road at breakneck speed, jumped airily over a hole and splashed a stream of thick, black slimy mud over the slowly moving democrat and its occupants; it was the last straw in the cup of Dr. McDermott's fury. There and then he vowed to pension the ancient geldings, and get himself one of those infernal machines that had of late been at once his torment and his temptation.

Ever and anon, Cyril would ride a bit ahead, and

as if to perform for the girl's especial benefit, Bat, his mount, would rear up on his front or hind feet, plunge and buck recklessly, and perform other thrilling gyrations to the delight of his admiring audience of one. His wild tricks, however, could not feaze the rider, who sat firm and graceful, holding the peppery young broncho under complete and careless control. The horse, a youngster of five, grown impatient at their lagging pace along the trail, pulled and snorted in his efforts to race ahead of the slow, plugging veterans.

"Oh, my," said Nettie—he was riding close again—"he's an awful spirited animal, isn't he? Aren't you the least *bit* afraid?" And then as he smiled at the idea, she added with the most simple and unfeigned admiration: "You ride just as if nothing—no kind of horse—could ever unseat you."

His chest swelled with pride, and he beamed down upon her.

"'Bout time I knew how to ride. Been ridin' sence I was a two-year-ole."

He offered another sally that brought forth the young laughter that so rejoiced his ears:

"Say, didn't you notice that I'm a bowleg?"

Nettie looked at the brilliantly clad legs in their

orange-colored fur chapps, under which their shape was utterly hidden. Their eyes met and again they burst out laughing as if they had just heard the funniest joke in the world.

They had turned now into the road allowance which ran directly up to where the log cabin stood on the edge of the land. Something in the stillness, the solitary look of that lone cabin planted on the bare floor of the prairie sobered them, and they looked at the house with apprehension. Inside, they knew, was an English woman—a “lady” had said the doctor, and she was very sick.

Silently they dismounted. Dr. McDermott walked ahead of the trio, the cowpuncher leading his horse and keeping close to the girl.

As they stepped into the dim shadows of the bare room, the figure on the hard, home-made bed sat up suddenly. The face was thin and pinched, with spots of hectic color on either high cheek-bone. The woman's bright eyes were fixed upon them, full of suspicion and fierce challenging. Her hair had been cut to the scalp; jagged and unlovely it covered her head in grotesque tufts as if forcing its way out despite the murderous

shears. Crouched against the wall, she looked strangely like some wild thing at bay.

Nettie's first impulse of shock and fear gave way to one of overwhelming pity as she moved toward the bed. The bright, defiant eyes met her own, and the woman moistened her dry lips:

"What do you want in my house? Who are you?"

"I'm Nettie Day," said the girl simply, "and I just want to help you."

"I don't want any help," cried the woman violently. "All I want is to be let alone."

The exertion, the violence of her reply brought on a fit of coughing that left her panting and too weak to resist the hands that tenderly lifted and held her. When the spasm had passed, she lay inert in Nettie's arms, but when she opened her eyes again, they widened with a strange light as they stared up fixedly at the pitying face bent above her. The dry lips quivered, something that was pitifully like a smile broke over the sick woman's face. She whispered:

"Why, you look—like—my mother did!"

CHAPTER IV

MORE than a year had passed since that day in March when Nettie, the doctor and Cyril Stanley had driven along the trail to the cabin on the C. P. R. quarter. Slowly but surely, the place had changed. The sturdy log house that had grown into being represented the efficient labor of young Cyril Stanley's hands. He had built it in the "lay-off time" he had taken that summer. Slowly the holes for the fence posts were going into the ground around the entire quarter. Soon the "home" would be ready for the radiant Nettie, and in a few more months Cyril would leave the Bar Q, with savings enough to give him and Nettie a fair start in life.

Things had moved also upon the quarter section of C. P. R. land where lived in defiant solitude the woman who had resented and fought the help forced upon her by the gruff Scotch doctor and Nettie Day.

Her name, it seemed, was Angella Loring, but some wag had named her "Mr." Loring, because of her clipped hair and her workingman's attire, and this

name had stuck, though Nettie Day called her "Angel."

Her appearance in Yankee Valley had caused the usual sensation always created by a strange newcomer. There had been the usual wagging of heads and tongues, and tapping of foreheads. The woman was a "bug," the farm people of Yankee Valley had decided. At all events, she was the kind of "bug" they found it prudent to keep at a safe distance. She had met all overtures of friendship with hostility and contempt. She was on her own land; she desired no commerce with her neighbors; and needed no help. It was nobody's business but her own why she chose to dress and live as she did. That was the substance of her replies to those who ventured to call upon her, and when some jocular fellows, intent on being smart, pressed their company upon her, she demonstrated her ability to shoot straight—at their feet, so that for a time a joke ran around the country about the number of young "bucks" who limped, and for a time the jeering taunt, "Mr. Loring'll git you if you don't watch out," was often heard. Thus she became a sort of bugaboo in the popular imagination, but as time passed the country grew accustomed to its woman hermit and gave her the wide berth she asked for.

She broke her own land and put in her own crop,

inadequately it is true, but with a certain persistence and intensity which at first amused, then slowly won the grudging respect and wonder of her neighbors. She had few implements, and those the antiquated affairs used by Dr. McDermott when first he had homesteaded in Alberta. Her horses were poor, scrub stock, palmed off upon her by Bull Langdon, who sent them down with the proposition that she could have the four head in exchange for her services on the Bar Q cook car over the harvesting period on his grain ranch. Cooks were rare and precious in those years when not even a Chinaman was to be had for love or money. The woman hermit considered the terms for a moment, and then, to the surprise of the grinning "hand" who had brought both the horses and the proposition, she accepted it.

She understood horses well enough, but not the kind used in Alberta for farming purposes. Her acquaintance had been with the English saddle horses. How should she know the type of draught horse necessary for the plow, the disc, the harrow and the seeder? So she harnessed up the poor stock advanced her by the Bull, obtained her seed by application to the Municipality, and her crop went in. Cutworms ate it to the ground before it had shown fairly above the soil.

Grimly and without altering her air of inimical aloofness, she went to the Bar Q ranch, and over the harvest period cooked for thirty or forty men. Throughout that time she dealt with the crew in absolute silence, cooking and dishing up the "grub" and passing it out to them without a word. She had never been known to address a voluntary sentence or question to a soul on the place, with the single exception of the half-breed Jake, who did her chores and wiped the dishes for her. When Mrs. Langdon made overtures of friendship to her, she curtly told her that she would "quit" if she were "interfered" with; she was in charge of the cook car and was to be let alone.

In the fall she broke more land, and in winter she shut herself in her shack, and no one, save Dr. McDermott who persisted in calling upon her on his monthly rounds, saw her again till the spring, when she put in a larger crop than the year before.

However, time allays even if it does not satisfy the hungriest curiosity, and in a country like Alberta, even in the present day, we do not scrutinize too closely the history or the past of the stranger in our midst. Alberta is, in a way, a land of sanctuary, and upon its rough bosom the derelicts of the world, the fugitive, the

hunted, the sick and the dying have sought asylum and cure. The advent of a newcomer, however suspicious or strange, causes only a seven days' wonder and stir. Human nature is, of course, the same the world over, and in the wake of curiosity, surmise, invention, slander reach forth their filthy fingers to bespatter the lives of those we do not know. Fortunately, however, curiosity is an evanescent quality in the ranching country, partly for reasons of time and distance. We cannot shout our gossip of a neighbor across hundreds of miles of territory, and he who toils upon the land from sunrise until sunset has no leisure to hustle from door to door with evil tales.

Nevertheless, there was one man in Alberta who knew something of the history of this strange woman's past, even if he did not understand why she had sought this strange isolation from her fellowmen.

She had failed to recognize in the country doctor who stubbornly forced his society upon her, the stable lad who twenty-five years before her father had sent away to college in Glasgow.

Dr. McDermott was one of Alberta's pioneer workers. When settlers followed upon the heels of the missionary and the C. P. R., and planted their homesteads on the

big raw land, Dr. McDermott was there to care for and scold and direct them. He had attended his patients all over the country, traveling in those days by any and all kinds of primitive vehicle, on horseback, by ox wagon, by dog sled, and often on foot, before the roads were staked, when there were no lines of barbed wire fencing to mark the trail, and when a blizzard meant possible blindness and death. He had gone to remote places to bring babies into the world, not only gave medical aid to the mother but looked after the whole household. He knew Alberta as a child knows his mother—knew that this “last of the big lands,” as they called it, was for those only who were capable of seizing life with strong, eager hands. It was no place for the weakling, or the feeble of heart, for Alberta was the Land of Romance, the Land of Heartbreak, cruel and tender, remorseless and kind.

Free and independent by nature, it seemed incredible that the doctor should have come of a race of servitors, men who for several generations had served a single family, as groom and servant, and always he experienced a deep sense of gratitude to the man who had picked him out from amongst the humble McDermotts and given him the opportunity for an education. He

had worked with the purpose of justifying by his achievements his master's faith in his abilities, and it had been a proud day for Angus McDermott when, cleared of all encumbrances, free of mortgages and taxes paid to date, his land broken and his rugged cabin planted upon it, he had deeded the beloved quarter section back to the man who had paid for his education.

Now after the passage of the years, the daughter of his former master had come to that bit of Alberta soil, seeking in her turn to wrest a living from the land, fighting a desperate fight with poverty, disease and the blows and buffets of the wild new land which "makes or breaks" a man.

As he rode along the rough roads, chirping absently to the old geldings that plugged slowly along, the doctor's mind persistently traveled back to a sunny day in June in the old land. He was a barefooted boy in a large stable yard. A little girl was there—a very little girl, with thick, brown, curly hair, crushed under a Derby hat, and she was leaning over from her seat on her pony's back to coax—to command favors of the stable boy. She wished to ride Spitfire. Angus was not to tell "Pop," which was her inelegant term for the Earl of Loring. He was to bring the animal around to

the far end of the south garden that evening, and she would be there under the bushes. He was not to forget, mind! He'd be sorry if he did.

He did not forget. He kept the tryst with the daughter of the earl, but he brought not the forbidden horse. He well recalled the furious, passionate little figure that crawled from out the bush and assailed him with bitter reproach and blows. Mechanically, Dr. McDermott's hand went up to the cheek where her crop had flashed, and he was moved afresh by the memory of the child's wild imploring voice, begging forgiveness, the touch of the small impetuous hand upon his hurt face, and the soft smudge of her tear-drenched face against his own.

Twenty-five years ago! He rode on and on through the Alberta sunshine, his wide Stetson tilted above a rugged face, whose chief charm lay in the sturdy honesty of its expression.

CHAPTER V

NETTIE sat listlessly on the single step of the Day shack, her hands loosely clasped in her lap. The ripening grain gleamed in the sunlight, golden as her own thick braids. The field seemed to ripple and stir under the breeze that moved over the heavily laden stalks.

This was a crop year, and even upon the rocky land of the D. D. D. the grain pushed up resistlessly. Yet as she looked out upon those waving fields, which represented largely the labor of her own and her brothers' hands, Nettie felt no sense of gratification or pride. For suddenly her world had changed and darkened.

The poor, shiftless, happy-go-lucky homesteader of the D. D. D. was dead, and of all that family of twelve only she remained. County officials had taken away the younger ones, who were to be "put out" for adoption, while neighboring farmers had snapped up the growing boys, as "likely timber for hard work."

The girl was quite alone, not knowing what was to become of her, nor whither she could go. She thought

vaguely of the great city of Calgary. There she could surely find work, but Nettie was a farm girl, and to her mind the city meant eternal speed and noise, a feverish, rushing activity which would only bewilder and terrify her.

She was a silent girl, given to day-dreaming, and the dreams of Nettie Day were humble and simple enough. A clean, small cabin on a quarter section of land; a cow or two; a few pigs; chickens; fields of grain, oats, thick and tall; gleaming, silvery barley; the blue-flowering flax; waves of golden wheat. Overall men upon the implements, and herself in a clean kitchen, cooking a meal for the harvest hands, and always her dream embraced within its circle one whose friendly face was tanned and freckled by the sun, whose smile was wide and all-embracing, and who looked at Nettie with eyes that spoke a language that needed no tongue.

“Some day soon,” he had said to Nettie, “you and me will be in our own home, girl.”

“Soon” to the Scotch-Ontario boy meant a year or two, maybe a year or two more than that; by which time the home for Nettie would be snug and complete, with a safe nest-egg in the bank or on the range.

But now everything had changed. Her home had

been broken up. There was to be an auction of the poor stuff upon the place, to raise the price of the mortgage upon the land.

Nettie felt helpless and forsaken. She missed her father and her little brothers and sisters cruelly, and dreaded to think how the baby might be faring, so dependent had it been upon her own care. Her gaze wandered irresistibly off to the hills, watching, a lump in her throat, for Cyril to come.

Though unable herself to read or write, Nettie had contrived to dispatch word to the rider of the Bar Q, through the medium of the half-breed, Jake, who had ridden by on the day after her father's death. She could not know that he had been stricken down by a fit of the epilepsy, to which he was subject, and long delayed on the trail.

With the noon hour came the farmers and ranchers, riding in from far and near, for a country auction in Alberta will bring out the people as to a celebration or a fair. They came to the Day auction with picnic baskets and hampers, in all kinds of vehicles, even by automobile or on horseback.

The auctioneer was a little man, with a barking voice. He bustled about the place, appraising the stock

and implements, the household effects and furniture. The few head of cattle and horses were driven into a hastily constructed corral of large logs. Bull Langdon held the mortgage upon the D. D. D., and he expected to get his money back with compound interest.

The sale began at the house, the home-made bits of furniture telling their own tale of how Nettie and her mother had been forced to work. These sold for practically nothing, and some of them created coarse laughter, as they were shoved out into the jovial circle of farm folk. As bit by bit the familiar pieces were brought from the house and dumped upon the ground for the amusement and inspection of the farmers, Nettie, unable to bear the pain of that pitiful sale, sought refuge in the barn, where she stood looking down at the fat sow, her father's especial pride and care, and the thirteen young ones that had come with the spring. Dry sobs tore her heart, and when a Bar Q "hand" spoke to her, she looked up with her drenched face all twisted like that of a wounded child's.

"'Tain't no use to cry about nothin'," said Batt Leeson, with affected roughness. "Them pigs'll fetch a fancy figger, though five of 'em's runts."

"I w-wasn't thinkin' of the pigs," said Nettie. "I

was w-wondering when Cyril Stanley would come. He's—a friend of mine," she added with a gulp of pride through all her grief.

"Him? Say, he's up at the purebred camp at Barstairs. Gittin' the herd in shape for the annual fair circuit. We got the greatest champeen bulls in the world, take it from me. You needn't look for him, girl. He's on his job."

She turned pale at this news, though Cyril had warned her of the possibility of his being dispatched to the Bull camp at Barstairs. She knew now that it would be impossible for him to come.

With a sickening sense of utter desertion, she returned to where the auction was continuing briskly, and with considerable hilarity. The auctioneer was jumping up and down, as a small bull was driven into the circle of log fencing.

"Oh, boys!" yelled the auctioneer (a one-time showman), "what have we here? This ain't no scrub bull! Betchu he's almost pure Hereford! Betchu he's got a good strain of Bar Q in him! Betchu he's an A No. 1 calf-thrower. What am I offered? Gentlemen, here's the chance o' your lifetime."

A loud laugh burst from the circle of farmers, and

Bull Langdon came closer to the fence, and squinted appraisingly at the animal.

“Dare say he ain’t in prime shape—poor nibblings on the D. D. D. as you know, gentlemen, but betchu you turn ’im out on some reglar grass, he’ll turn yound and ’sprize you. They’s the makin’s of a smooth Bull in that fellow!”

“How old is he?” yelled a wag, making a horn of his hands. “Seems like I seen him at D. D. D. when Dan Day first pulled in.”

Before the laughter that swelled up from this sally had half died down, a girl’s young savage voice broke upon the gathering. Eyes blazing, breathlessly facing the circle of rough men, Nettie sprang to the defense of the home product.

“It’s a lie, Jem Bowers, and you know it! He ain’t old. He ain’t more’n six year old, and he just looks that way—spare and done, ’cause we never had enough feed for our stock. Dad listened to you-all, and staked his land on this rocky part, while you got the fat places. That bull ain’t old, and don’t you dare say he is. I guess *I* ought to know, ’cause I raised him myself from a calf.”

A silence greeted this outburst from the girl. Eyes

shifted, tongues were stuck into cheeks. Compunction not unmixed with admiration showed on the faces of the farmers, aware possibly for the first time of the existence of Nettie, who until then had shrunk into the background. Bull Langdon, arms akimbo, had moved from his position by the fence, and for the first time his appraising eye fell fully upon Nettie. He looked the girl over slowly from head to foot, and as his bold gaze swept her his eyes slightly bulged and he licked his lips.

Her outburst, probably the first in all her gentle life, had left her flushed and breathless, and as her anger subsided, she shrank before the united gaze of that crowd of rough men gathered to buy up their poor possessions. She drew back into the shadow of the house and the sale went on.

Soon it was over. Auctioneer and buyers tramped across the muddy barnyard to the house, to make their reckoning there. As they came to the step Nettie met them, her hands spasmodically clasped.

“Is—everything—sold?” she asked the auctioneer quaveringly.

“Every last thing upon the place gone under the

hammer. Did pretty well, I'll say. Not too bad prices."

"Then there'll be something for my brothers and sisters?"

"Not on your life they won't. Scarcely enough to satisfy the mortgage and pay up the debts. You ask Mr. Langdon there. He holds the mortgage, and he's bought in most o' the truck hisself."

Nettie turned her head slowly and looked in the face of Bull Langdon. Then her head dropped. The Bull had stepped forward. One big, thick forefinger went up to the auctioneer, as it had risen when he had bought head by head the stock and cattle.

"How about the gell? My wife needs a good strong gell for the housework, and I'm willin' to take her along with her dad's old truck."

One of the farmers' wives, a pale, anemic creature who had sidled next to Nettie, whispered:

"Don't chu go with him, Nettie. He ain't no good."

As the eye of the Bull fell upon her, the woman quailed and, in a panic, she said aloud:

"Mrs. Langdon's the kindes' woman in this country. You'd be workin' for a good woman, Nettie. You're a lucky girl to get the chance."

All that Nettie was thinking then was that Cyril Stanley worked for the Bar Q. She would be near Cyril; they would meet, perhaps, daily. That thought sent her toward Bull Langdon with a hopeful light in the eyes she raised shyly, though fearfully, toward him.

“I’ll go, Mr. Langdon,” said Nettie Day. “I got to get a place anyway, and I might as well go along with you.”

The Bull withdrew his glance. Finger up again he summoned his “hands.”

“Round up them dogies, you Buzz. You, Batt, bring along the pigs in the wagon. Damn you, Block, git them horses back. Where in the h— d’yer think we’re rangin’? You, Boob, roll off o’ your horse there. Saddle that pinto for the gell. Here, tighter on the cinch. Shorten them stirrups. Here, gell!”

His big hand went under her arm, helping her to mount the horse, but it closed over the smooth yielding flesh, pressing it hard. As he tested the length of the stirrups, he looked up into her face with such an expression that she was suddenly filled with alarm and terror. His big hand continued to tug at the stirrup strap, his arm pressing against her knee, and she said hastily:

“Let ’em alone. Them stirrup’s is all right. I like them long.”

She shoved her foot into the leather thong and, slapping the horse across the neck with the reins, she urged it along. She had a sudden impulse to flee, though from what she could not have said; she was possessed with a furious urge to leave far behind her the huge cowman, with his wild, possessive eyes.

She flew along the trail at a breathless gallop, and it was only when his hand reached across the neck of her horse and planted itself upon the pommel of her saddle that she realized that he had never left her side.

“Hi, there, you don’t want to run as a starter. Take it easy.”

On and on they went, across country, past the wide-spreading pasture and grain fields, odorous of the bumper crop which that year was to put Alberta upon the grain map of the world, past the homely little log cabin that Cyril had built for her, and past the C. P. R. quarter, where the cropped-haired woman lived in her hermit-like seclusion. On and on, till the higher grades began and they climbed gradually upward toward the hill country.

Straight ahead, under a sunset that overspread the

whole sky with a glow of red and gold, the mighty Rocky Mountains rose like a vast dream before them. The girl and the man rode side by side into that sunset, while the perfect stillness of the Alberta evening closed in about them. Nettie lost herself once more in her old aspirations as the nearness of the long-yearned-for hills drew nearer. Sweet and wistful thoughts of Cyril calmed and reassured her. The man riding beside her was forgotten, forgotten everything but the spell of the Alberta twilight, and the dear thoughts of her love.

At last they drew up before one of those great Alberta ranch gates, with log rails ten feet long. The Bull had alighted and opened the gate, and they were cantering up the hill.

In Alberta the sunlight lingers till late into the night, and a mellow glow suffuses the land, gilding even the meanest spots and turning all the country into dim oceans and atolls of beauty. Under this light, the white and green ranch buildings of the Bar Q shone like a little city planted upon a hilltop, and at this first sight of the great Bar Q the girl from the Dan Day Dump caught her breath in awe and admiration.

The Bull had again dismounted, and Nettie, with his

hand under her arm, also found herself lifted to the ground; but instead of withdrawing his arm, the cowman kept it about her possessively, and drew her closely to his side. She stared, fascinated, into the face so close to her own.

“That pinto’s yours, gell,” said Bull Langdon, “and if you’re the right kind o’ gell, and treat the Bull right, it’s the first o’ the presents you’ll be gettin’!”

Nettie shrank back, but she tried valiantly to hide her fear and repulsion. She said breathlessly:

“I don’t want nothing that I don’t earn.”

At that the Bull laughed—a big, coarse chuckle.

“You’ll get all that’s comin’ to you, gell,” he said.

CHAPTER VI

LIFE was pleasant for Nettie Day at the Bar Q, where, in the pink and white gingham house dresses supplied by Mrs. Langdon, she looked prettier every day.

The clean and spacious ranch house, shining with sunlight, was a revelation to the girl who had lived all of her life in the two rooms of the poor shack with her parents and her nine little brothers and sisters.

It flattered the vanity of Bull Langdon to have a "show place" on the Banff National Highway. He had built the main ranch house upon the crest of a hill that commanded the road to Banff, and the wide, rambling buildings, ornate in design and brightly painted, had been placed where they would show up well from the road, so that all who traveled along the highway would slow up for a view of the Bar Q.

Nettie's advent was both a surprise and a joy to the wife of the cattleman, who took a childish pride in at last "keeping a girl."

For a number of years the Bar Q had maintained a cook car, whither the "hands" went for "grub." It was on such a vehicle that Angela Loring had served. Now a thin and musty smelling Chinaman dominated the car, a shrinking, silent figure, who banged down the chow before the men, and paid no heed to protest or squabble, save when the "boss" came in, when Chum Lee became frenziedly busy. In winter, the Chinaman was moved to the Pure-Bred Bull camp at Barstairs, and the men left at the foothill ranch, "batched" in the bunkhouses.

Though the main cooking was done on the cook car, there yet remained an enormous amount of work at the ranch house, for besides the housework, the bread and butter for the ranch were made there by Mrs. Langdon. She "put down" the pork in brine, cured and smoked it; made hundreds of pounds of lard, sausage meat, head-cheese, corned beef and other meat products. She made the soap, looked after the poultry and vegetable garden, she canned quantities of fruit and vegetables for the winter months. She was always working, always running hither and thither about the house, hurrying to "have things ready," for her husband had a greedy appetite, and her mind was exclusively occupied in de-

vising ways and means of propitiating and pacifying him.

Of late, however, her health had been visibly failing. The long years of hard work, the tragedy of the yearly still-born baby, life and association with the overbearing cattleman had gradually taken their toll of the strength of Bull Langdon's wife.

Bull was what is known in the cattle world as a "night rider." In the earlier days it was said he did all of his "dirty work" at night, moving and driving bunches of cattle under cover of darkness. Rivalry, strife and bitter enmity are a commonplace of life in the cattle country, and the Bull vented his vindictive spite upon his neighbors by slipping their herds out of pastures and corrals, and driving them over the tops of canyon and precipice. Those incursions were, however, events of the past. The cowman was cautious now that he had arrived at a place of security and power. Rustling and stealing were dangerous undertakings in those days when the trails had turned into highways, and small ranches were beginning to dot the edges of the range. Moreover, the mounted police were less easy to influence and intimidate than the former Indian agents had been.

Night riding had remained one of his habits, however, and one that told heavily upon the wife, who would always wait up for his return, with supper always ingratiatingly ready.

For some time symptoms of a coming breakdown had been ominously evident to Mrs. Langdon, but she persistently fought against the prospect of becoming an invalid. She had an ingenuous faith, imbibed from tracts and books that had drifted into her hands in her teaching days; she denied the existence of evil, pain or illness in the world, and when it pushed its ugly fist into her face, or wracked her frail body, she had a little formula that she bravely recited over and over again, like an incantation, in which she asserted that it was an error; that she was in the best of health, and that everything in the world was good and beautiful and in the image of God. Whether she deluded herself or not, it is certain that this desperate philosophy, if such it could be called, was the crutch that had upheld her and kept her sane throughout the turbulent years of her life with Bull Langdon, so that she had never lost her faith in mankind, and had remained curiously innocent of wrong.

She hailed Nettie's coming, therefore, as a "demon-

stration" of her faith, and welcomed the strong, willing, cheerful girl with a grateful heart and open arms.

It was pleasant for a change, to take things easy; to have all the heavier work done by the tall, competent girl, and, better than the relief from the hard labor, was the companionship of another woman in the ranch house. Only a woman who has been isolated long from her own sex can appreciate what it means when another woman comes into her life.

Nettie would place a rocking chair for her mistress on the back veranda, bring the basket of mending, and with her slow, shy smile, say:

"Now, Mrs. Langdon, you fall to on them socks, and leave me to do the work."

This Mrs. Langdon would do, and Nettie would bring her work on to the veranda, the one sewing or crocheting, the other churning and working the butter, kneading the bread or preparing the vegetables for the day. Work thus became a pleasure, and Mrs. Langdon's soft voice chattering of many happy topics made a pleasant accompaniment to their work. If Nettie went indoors to work, Mrs. Langdon soon followed her. She took pride in teaching Nettie her own special recipes, and they would both laugh and exclaim over the mistakes

or success of the girl, who was all eagerness to learn. Slowly a feeling warmer than mere friendship drew the two women together.

Although it was against the rules for the Bar Q "hands" to come to the ranch house, save when summoned by the Bull, or on some special errand, Nettie's presence there was widely known and commented upon, and many were the ingenious devices invented by the men to obtain a sight of or a word with the girl. Bull, however, was more than ever on the watch for an infraction of this rule, and more than one employee found himself fired for loitering in the neighborhood of the ranch house or suffered the indignity and pain of a blow from the boss's heavy hand. Harvest time came at last to the prairie, where Bull Langdon had a great grain ranch, and thither the owner of the Bar Q departed to superintend the harvesting operations.

From time immemorial lovers have found a way to meet, and Cyril and Nettie were not long in solving their own problem.

Nettie would slip from the house after supper, for Mrs. Langdon went early to bed, as farmers do. Between the house and a clump of willows there was a small field, behind it a deep coulee, where the wild rasp-

berries and gooseberries grew in profusion. There, hidden by the thick growth, Nettie would go to pick berries, stopping ever and anon to listen for a sound that only she and Cyril understood, the long-drawn whistle that was like the call of an oriole. At the sound of that musical note, Nettie would stop picking, and, with parted lips, shining eyes and beating heart, she would wait for her lover to come to her in the deep bush.

This was the season when the daylight lingered far into the night; when the soft light of the late sun lay romantically upon the still and sleeping land. Young Cyril and Nettie would sit on a knoll, with the berry bushes all about and above and below them, and with clasped hands, thrilling at each other's nearness, they would murmur their joyful confidences and hopes.

Cyril was what the country folk would have described as "slow" with girls, and Nettie was as innocent as a child. She had never had companions of her own age, not even a girl friend, and Cyril was her first "beau." This simple holding of hands was rapture for these two, an exciting adventure that made them tremble with a vague longing for something more. With the clumsy shyness of the country boy who has known no women, it had taken Cyril two weeks to find courage and power

to put his arm awkwardly about the girl's waist. That daring progress, full of joyous excitement, was the prelude to something he had not foreseen. The close pressure of the girl's warm young body against his, the involuntary raising of her face, as it almost touched his own, brought the inevitable consequence. For the first time in either of their lives they kissed. Lost in that single, ever closer embrace, time and place, knowledge of all else on earth, vanished from their minds as, amidst the dense berry bushes, they clung ecstatically together.

Upon their blissful dream, a harsh voice broke. Even as they drew apart, still heavy with the lassitude of the new rapture they had but just discovered, they dimly recognized the voice of Bull Langdon. From somewhere in the direction of the corrals, he was calling for his "hands." They could hear him cursing, and knew he must have ridden up noiselessly, and annoyed at finding no one about the place was venting his temper in this fashion.

"Oh, my!" murmured Nettie, drawing half out of Cyril's arms and unconsciously leaning towards him, "he'll be wantin' you, Cyril."

"Let'm want," said the boy, hungry again to feel

the touch of those warm lips upon his own. "I'm not workin' nights for no man, and if he ain't satisfied, I guess I can quit any old time now. You say the word when, Nettie. I'm ready for you, girl. And Nettie—give us another kiss, will you?"

"Oh, Cyril, I got to get to the house. Mrs. Langdon's gone to bed, and he'll be lookin' for something to eat, and it's not her place to get his meals when I'm here to do the work."

"You won't have to work for no one but me soon, Nettie. I'll take care of you for the rest of your days. Nettie, I never kissed a girl before. That is true as God."

"Neither did I—never kissed a fellow."

"Kiss me again, then."

This time she remained in his arms for a moment only as the clamorous voice of Bull Langdon was heard close at hand, his words, causing Nettie to tear herself away in fear.

"Where's that gell? Why ain't she on her job?"

Nettie clambered up the slope of the coulees and went running across the grass to the house. As she paused at the wide opened door, her basket still on her arm, Bull Langdon, now in his seat, his legs stretched

out before him, turned around to stare at her, his fierce, covetous glance, as always, holding her fascinated and breathless with vague terror.

“Where’ve ye been at this early hour of the night?”

“I been picking berries,” faltered Nettie, trying vainly to steady her voice.

“Oh, you have, heh?”

Her cheeks were redder than any berries that ever grew and her eyes shone star bright. Her white bosom rose and fell with the thrill of her late adventure and her sudden fear.

“Pickin’ berries in the night, huh? You’re smart, ain’t you?”

“Oh, yes, it was light as day you see and I don’t mind——”

“Let’s see what you got.”

He reached out seemingly for the basket, but his hand closed over the handle upon hers. Gripping it tightly with his other hand he lifted the cover and peered into the empty basket.

“Let go my hand!” she cried in a stifled voice. “You’re hurtin’ me!”

For answer he possessed himself of the other and steadily drew her nearer and nearer to him. She

struggled and twisted in his grasp, suppressing her desire to scream for fear that her mistress might hear. But, in fact, it was the clip clop of Mrs. Langdon's loose bedroom slippers on the stairs that brought her release.

Mrs. Langdon, her hair in paper curlers and with a gray flannellete kimono thrown over her night dress, hurried down the stairs.

"Oh, Bill—" She was the only person who never called him "Bull"—"is it you? Are you back? I'm so sorry I didn't hear you get in or I'd a been down at once. We'll have something ready for you in a minute. Nettie, bring some of that fresh headcheese, and cut it from the new bowl, mind you, and maybe Mr. Langdon'd like something to drink too. You made butter today, didn't you? Well, bring some fresh buttermilk, or maybe you'd like something hot to drink. Which'd you rather have, Bill?"

He never replied to her many light questions and she seldom expected him to. She nodded and smiled at Nettie and the girl hurried to the pantry. Mrs. Langdon fluttered about her husband, helping him to remove his heavy riding boots and coat, and putting away his hat and gauntlets. He endured her minis-

trations, but in spite of her chatter and numerous questions he remained curiously silent. When Nettie brought the tray with its fresh cut homemade head-cheese and thick layer cake and buttermilk he drew up before it and ate in a sort of absorbed silence.

“Will you be wanting me any more tonight, Mrs. Langdon?” asked Nettie.

“No, Nettie, thank you. Run along to bed. If Mr. Langdon needs anything else I’ll get it. Good-night, dear.”

Bull, having finished the last of the food before him, reached for his boots and began again to pull them on.

“Oh, Bill, you’re not goin’ out again, are you?” exclaimed Mrs. Langdon with nervous anxiety.

He tightened his belt without speaking, his big chest swelling under his moosehide shirt. Spurs rattling, he tramped across the room and out into the yard.

At the bunkhouse lights were out and all hands save one abed. Cyril sat on the edge of his bunk, still dressed, chin cupped in his hands, giving himself up to his dreams.

The great bulk of the cattleman filled the doorway.

His forefinger up, he beckoned to Cyril. The young man stood up and with a glance back at his sleeping mates he joined his employer outside the bunkhouse.

Clenched hands on hips, a characteristic attitude, the Bull scrutinized in the now steadily deepening dusk of the night the young fellow sturdily and coolly facing him, apparently unmoved and unafraid.

“Want chu to be ready first thing in the morning to ride over to Barstairs. Want chu to git them bulls in shape for the circuit. Goin’ to exhibit in St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, San Francisco and other cities in the States. You do well by the bunch here and there’s a bonus on your pay and you go along with the herd to the U. S.”

Until this night the unexpected promotion would have elated Cyril. Now, in spite of his astonishment, he hesitated, and in his slow Scotch way turned the matter over in his mind. After a moment he said:

“I don’t know as I want the job, boss. Fact is, I’m thinkin’ of quittin’. Thinkin’ of goin’ on my own.”

“On your own! You ain’t got nothin’ to go on your own with.”

“I got my homestead. House’s built, land partly fenced. I traded in my cattle for implements and I

got six head of horses left, and that's not too bad as a starter."

"How far d'you think you can git on that much unless you got a stake behind you?"

The young man weighed this question thoughtfully and carefully. A bit sadly he replied:

"Not very far, but it'll do as a starter, and next year——"

"Next year ain't here yet. Besides it depends on what you're countin' on. You aimin' to get married?"

Somehow the question infuriated the Bull so that he shot it at the boy, despite his effort at self-control and his eyes blazed through the darkness. But Cyril was too absorbed in his own dreams to note the Bull's voice or manner. After a pause he answered slowly.

"Yes."

"You can't raise no family on what you got now," said the Bull hoarsely. "Things ain't the same as when I started in. You better wait a year or two. Take on this proposition I'm offerin' you and you'll be in better shape to do the right thing by the gell you marry then. There's a ten dollar a month raise for you and a bonus of a hundred at the end of the season."

A long pause, as this sunk into Cyril, and he slowly weighed the matter in his mind. A few months more or less would matter little to him and Nettie. The money would mean a lot. There were certain articles he had set his heart on buying for Nettie for the house, household utensils, of which a country traveling salesman, who had put up overnight at the Bar Q, had shown him enticing samples. Soon his mind was made up.

“Maybe you’re right, boss. I’m on. Barstairs, eh? I’ll be on the job first thing in the morning.”

But when he rode out in the quiet dawn, with no one but Jake to bid him good-by, Cyril’s heart was heavy, and as he went by the ranch house his glance sought Nettie’s window, in the vain hope that she might by some chance be up and in sight. He had given Jake a message for her and felt sure that she would understand. It was a common occurrence for riders to be despatched on such trips as this, and Cyril was of a race that always puts duty before pleasure. Farsighted and canny, he was prepared to serve and wait an extra year if need be for the girl he loved.

At the thought of that future, shared with Nettie, his heart lifted. The grayness of the approaching

dawn grew slowly lighter and the miracle of the sunrise broke over the sleeping land. Far and wide on all sides stretched an incomparable sky, a shadowy, gilded loveliness, as if a misty veil were slowly being unrolled till there burst into full bloom the marvelous sunglow of Alberta. Cyril's spirits rose with the sun and as his horse loped along the trail to Barstairs he lifted up his young voice and sang.

CHAPTER VII

THE days were getting longer. The fall round-up was under way and the Bull rode the range with his men. For a week long files of cattle had been pouring down from the hills to meet in the lower pastures of the ranch and automatically form into symmetrical rank that moved lowing before the drivers to the corrals and pens where they were sorted over and separated.

It was a period of torture for the cattle for the Bar Q branded, dehorned and weaned in the early fall. Day and night the incessant crying of over two thousand calves and outraged mothers, penned in separate fields or corrals, rent the air.

The round-up was an early and swift one that year for Bull Langdon was due to leave in early November for the States with his purebred bulls. He seemed possessed of inexhaustible energy and vitality and no amount of riding appeared to tire him. It was no uncommon thing for him after a night and day of riding to bring up finally at the ranch house at midnight

and sit down to the big meal prepared by the girl whom he would summon with a thump upon her door. Little conversation passed between them at these times, but once when the cattleman had volunteered the information that they were about through Nettie said, with apparent relief:

“Then there will be no more branding. I’m glad of that.”

The cattleman leaned across the table, his elbows upon it and a knife and fork in either hand. His meaning glance pinned the girl fairly.

“One more head,” he said. “I’ll put my personal brand upon that maverick before I go.”

She felt as if an icy hand were clutching at her heart.

The following day she was sent to Morley, an Indian trading post, where was the nearest post office for the Bar Q mail. It was eight miles from the ranch and Nettie went on horseback, returning in about two and a half hours, in time to get the supper.

There was no one about the place when she rode into the corrals. Dismounting, she unsaddled her horse, hung bridle and saddle in the barn, and let the horse out to pasture. Hurrying to the house she found the

big kitchen deserted. Usually when the girl went off on long errands Mrs. Langdon prepared the supper, but Nettie supposed her mistress was taking her afternoon nap. So she busied herself with the preparation of the supper. She peeled the potatoes and set them on the range, quickly beat up a pan of buttermilk biscuits and put them in the oven. Her table set, she sliced the cold meat and put the kettle on for tea.

Having finished, and there being still no sign of Mrs. Langdon, she ran upstairs and tapped upon her door. There was no reply. Nettie opened the door and looked in. The room was empty and the wide-open closet door revealed the fact that it had been stripped.

A wave of fear swept over the girl; she ran panting downstairs and out into the barnyard. Not a "hand" was about, though far across the pastures she could see the fence riders riding toward the ranch, their day's work done. Jake, driving in the six milk cows, came over the crest of the hill and loped slowly down to the barnyard, stopping to water his horse. He did not see Nettie at first waiting for him at the cowshed and when he did began to jabber without dismounting. One by one the cows went into their stalls and stood, bags full, patiently waiting to be milked. Jake, full

of his news, dismounted. He had a pronounced impediment in his speech and when excited became almost unintelligible.

“Mis’ Langdon—her gone off—off—off——” He pointed vividly toward the mountains. “Rode on nortermobile to a station. Goin’ far away on train—choo-choo—coo!”

Nettie stared at him blankly. She could barely understand the bare fact that her mistress was gone and in her anxiety she plied the boy with questions.

“Where had she gone? When? Who had gone with her? Why did she go? What had she taken? How long was she to be gone?”

As desperately she shook the half-breed’s ragged sleeve in her impatience to make him understand her the honk of an automobile horn caused her to look toward the garage and there she saw the Bull backing in the car. She hurried across the barnyard, her fear of the man forgotten in her intense anxiety about her mistress.

In his characteristic pose at the wide door of the garage he awaited her approach.

“Is—is it true that Mrs. Langdon has gone away?”

“Yep. Just taken her to the station. Gone up to Banff.”

“Banff! Will she be gone for long?”

She hardly realized that her lips were quivering and her eyes were so full of tears that she could not see the strange expression on the Bull’s face as he looked down gloatingly upon her.

The soft golden sunset was all about them and the brooding hush of the closing day lent a beauty and stillness to the evening that was full of poetry, but the man, with his calculating, bulging eyes, saw nothing but her softly maturing loveliness, the rounded curve of her bosom, the white softness of her neck, the rose that came and went in her cheeks, the scarlet lips that aroused in his breast a tormenting passion such as he had never experienced for any woman before.

Nettie repeated her question, her voice catching in the sob that would come despite her best efforts. With the going of both Cyril and her mistress she felt deserted and forlorn.

“Will she be gone long I asked you?”

“Long enough to suit me,” said the Bull slowly.

“She’s took a holiday. Guess she’s entitled to one now we’ve got a gell like you to take her place up to the

house. I'm thinking you'll fill the bill fine and suit me down to a double T. Is supper ready?"

She stared up at him through the haze before her eyes, piteously, her lips moving, almost as if entreating him. She tried to say:

"It'll be on the table in a few minutes," but the words came indistinctly through the tears which now began to fall heavily in spite of her effort to restrain them. Blindly she moved toward the house, holding her apron to her face. Absorbed in her grief, she was unconscious of the fact that the Bull pressed close to her side and that it was his big hand under her arm that guided her to the house. Inside the kitchen he held her for a space as she gasped and cried:

"I won't stay here alone."

"Yer don't have to, gell," said the Bull huskily. "I'm here."

"You!"

She wrenched her arm free.

"I'm not going to stay in this house alone with *you!*" she cried.

"Ain't you? Mebbe you'd prefer the bunkhouses then?"

The Bull was chuckling coarsely.

“I won’t stay nowhere at Bar Q. I’m goin’ to get out—tonight.”

“As you say, gell. I told the wife not to set too much store by you, but no, she’d have her way. Said you could take her place and do the work fine, and she thought she should do as the doctor said and git away for a change.”

Nettie paused, the thought of her mistress’s confidence in her holding her in her headlong purpose to escape.

“So I could do the work alone. It’s not that. It’s just that—that I’m afraid to be here alone—with you,” she blurted out.

“Far’s that goes, I’m hikin’ for Barstairs myself tonight. Goin’ on up to the Bull camp. We’re leavin’ for the States shortly, and I got to go alone.”

Something was burning on the stove and she rushed to lift off the potatoes. The Bull had seated himself at the table and was buttering a chunk of bread. Nettie hesitated a moment and then, as the man apparently oblivious of or indifferent to her presence continued to munch in abstracted silence, Nettie took her place at the table. She poured out the tea and passed his cup to him, helping herself to a piece of the cold

roast pork. The potato dish was to the left of him and after a moment she timidly asked him to pass it to her. He shoved the dish across without looking up and continued to "pack down"—an expression of his own—the food.

The meal came to an end in this strange silence and afterwards she cleared the table and washed the dishes, acutely aware of every move the man made in the big room. He had taken down his sheepskin riding coat and pushed his legs into fur chapps. The spurs clanked as he snapped them onto his heels. He took down the quirt and huge hat hanging to a deer head's horns, clapped the hat upon his head, and tramped to the door. All his preparations indicated a long ride. At the door he threw back an order to Nettie.

"Anyone telephones, I'll reach Barstairs by six or seven in the mornin'. They can get me there. Have Jake at the house for chores. Let 'im sleep off the kitchen."

She nodded dumbly, conscious only of a vast sense of relief. He was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

NEVER had the ranch house seemed so large or so empty. A wave of homesickness overwhelmed the lonely girl, a terrible longing to see her little brothers and sisters, now so widely scattered about the country, and be with them once again.

The days were gradually shortening and when the light faded about ten o'clock darkness closed silently in upon the hill country. Though the days were sunny the nights were very quiet and somewhat chilly.

Nettie Day knelt by her window. She could see the lights in the row of bunkhouses and someone moving about the corrals with a lantern in his hand. How long she knelt by her window she could not have said, but she felt no inclination for sleep and put off preparing for bed as long as possible.

The vast silence of the hills seemed to press down about the place and in the utter stillness of the night the low wailing of a hungry coyote in the hills awakened weird echoes. A healthy, placid girl, nerves had never

troubled Nettie; yet on that night she experienced a psychic premonition of disaster, and when the depression weighed unbearably down upon her she called to Jake from her window.

Stick on shoulder, the breed came from the kitchen door and grinned up at her in the dusk. Jake was in one of his periods of delusions and as sentry before an Indian war camp he patrolled fearlessly but with catlike caution. His mere presence, however, comforted her, but her cheek blanched as the breed returned to the house, gave a startled cry—the cry of a man struck suddenly. She said to herself:

“Jake’s playing! I guess he’s shootin’ at himself with his old arrows. My, he’s a queer one.”

Long since the twinkling lights in the bunkhouses had disappeared one by one as the men “turned in.” The “hands” of the Bar Q were early risers and “hit the bunks” as soon as the light left the sky.

The last sign of life had vanished. Even the coyote was silent and the darkness grew ever deeper.

Nettie turned from her window at last. Her long plaits of hair hung down, like a Marguerite’s, on her shoulders. In her white night dress she looked very virginal and sweet. She had raised her hands and

begun to coil up the golden braids when something—a stealthy, cautious motion—caused her to pause. She stood still in the middle of the room, her eyes wide and startled, staring at the door.

The bureau stood by the door and a lamp burned on it. Slowly the knob turned and she felt something push against the frail door which she had, however, locked.

Though well-nigh paralyzed with fear she found strength to seize her one chair and thrust its back underneath the knob so that its two back legs firmly on the floor might help the now loudly cracking door to resist the force that was slowly pushing it in. She blew out the light and retreated towards the window.

There was the sound of snapping steel and the lock was burst. The upturned chair quivered on its two back feet, held sturdily in place a moment and then splintered under the iron strength of the man without.

As the door gave way a numbness came upon her and, without power to move, like some fascinated thing, she watched the approach of the Bull. She knew that she was trapped and clutching her throat with both hands she tried to force to her lips the cry that would not come.

She was in a black dream, a merciless nightmare.

She awoke, screaming wildly:

“Cyril, Cyril, Cyril! Cyril! *Cyril!*” and over and over again, “Cyril!”

Like one gone stark mad she groped her way to the window and threw herself out.

When she regained consciousness the bright, hard sun was in her eyes. She stared up at a brilliant blue sky. Jake knelt on the grass beside her and tried to move her to the shadow of the house. She moaned:

“Leave me be. I want to die.”

Jake muttered excitedly:

“Him! Him! Him see—him hurt Nettie. Last night him hurt Jake bad.”

“Him!” She knew whom Jake meant by “him” and threw up her arm as if to shield herself from a blow. At that moment his shadow loomed above her and she cowered and cringed from it.

“How’d you git here?” He looked up at the window. “You got to cut out this damn nonsense. I ain’t aimin’ to hurt you, but you can’t lay out here. Here, I’ll carry you into the house. Keep still, will yer? D’you want me to tie you?”

Her struggles ceased. Eyes closed, she submitted limply as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to

the house. Jake followed, wringing his hands and whimpering like a dog.

On the fourth day, holding to the bannisters, she managed to limp downstairs. For a long time she sat on the hard kitchen chair, staring with unseeing eyes before her. Even when she heard the heavy tramp of the Bull's feet on the outside porch she did not raise her head and as he came in her hopeless gaze remained still fixed on space.

“Hello! Whatchu doin' down here? How'd you get down here?”

“I come down myself,” said Nettie listlessly. “My ankle ain't hurtin' me no more.”

“I'd a' carried you down if you asked me,” he grunted angrily. “I done everything a man could for a girl. Who's been waiting on you hand and foot these last four days just's if you was a delicate lady instead of a hired girl on a ranch. What more d'you want? The more you do for some folks the more they want.”

Nettie said nothing, but two great tears suddenly rolled out of her eyes and splashed slowly down her cheeks. She resented those tears—a sign of weakness, where she felt hard and frozen within, and she peevishly brushed them away.

“What you cryin’ about?”

“I jus’ want that you should let me alone,” said Nettie.

“You’ll be let alone soon enough now. I got to go to Barstairs, and I got to go on to the States. We’re billed up at the fairs over there, and I got to go along with my bulls. I’d take you with me if it wasn’t for that young buck at Barstairs. I ain’t plannin’ on sharing you with no one, do you get me? You belong to Bull Langdon. I got you at the sale, same’s I got the rest of your dad’s old truck, and what the Bull gets his hands on he keeps. It’s up to yourself how you git treated. I’m free handed with them that treats me right. My old woman ain’t strong. She’ll croak one of these days and ’twon’t be long before they’ll be another Mrs. Langdon at Bar Q. You treat the Bull right and you’ll be the second Mrs. Langdon.”

Nettie twisted her hands in her apron. Her heart ached dully and at the mention of her mistress’s name a fierce lump rose persistently in her throat.

“Well, what you got to say to that?”

She did not answer and he pursued wrathfully:

“You’re sulking now and you’re sore on me, but you’ll get over that, gell. I’ll knock it out of your sys-

tem damn soon if you don't, and you'll find out that it'll pay you to be on the right side of the Bull rather than the wrong."

"I ain't aiming to make you mad," said Nettie piteously, shrinking under the implied threat. He chuckled, relishing his power.

"Well, I'll be off. If it weren't for them bulls nothing could take me from you now, gell, but I ain't fool enough to neglect my *bulls* for a gell. I'm goin' along with the herd far as St. Louis, and I'll be back to you before the month is out."

His big lips closed over hers. The loathsome embrace seemed to strangle her. Then she was alone again.

She sat in the kitchen for more than an hour after the departure of the Bull, still in that attitude of stupefied apathy, then limped upstairs, into her room, closed the battered door, and sat down on the edge of her bed, holding her head in her hands. She had no feeling save that of intense weariness and dead despair. Presently, still dressed, she fell sideways upon the bed and slept the long, unbroken sleep of one physically and mentally exhausted.

CHAPTER IX

PART of journal kept by Lady Angella Loring:
I hate men and despise women. I am afraid of children. Animals are my only friends.

I'm not pretty. My face is hard, my hair—what is left of it—of no color. My hands are calloused. I am a “tough old nut” as once I heard a “hand” of the Bar Q describe me. I wear men's clothes because they are comfortable and because I want to forget that I am a woman.

My father was the victim of a swindler, a smiling-faced, lying-tongued scoundrel, who robbed him of all we possessed in the world. The man I was to have married was as surely my father's murderer as if he had held the hand that sent the shot through my father's brain that killed him. I am the last of the Loring, I—the poor old man-maid recluse, on the edge of Yankee Valley in the Canadian Northwest.

This bit of Alberta land is all that is left of the

once vast Loring estate. That I still have this is due purely to the accident of a groom paying back a debt he owed my father. It was strange that I should have learned of its existence at a time when I believed that the end had come for me even as it had come for my father. True, I was not to go out of life by the act of my own hand and will. A quite eminent scientist had pronounced my death sentence. He gave me a few months in which to live. It was a ghastly situation for one who had been through what I had and who desired to live for the noble purpose of revenge. That sounds melodramatic and I suppose if I were pious I would bear in mind that revenge is sweet only for God. But my nature is not sweet and hell raged within me at that time. It was strange, as I have said, at that time suddenly to learn of the existence of this ranch. I seemed to see it as in a dream—it lay far off under a spotlight of Alberta sunlight and it called to me with a clarion call.

I came out here. I am hard and strong. I don't intend to die. I've something to live for. Not a *man*. I hate men, as I have said above. I have deep-rooted, never-dying aversion for the whole mean race of men. That which I have to live for is this quarter section

of Alberta land. It's *mine*. I love it better than anything else on earth.

I broke my own land. I've put in my own crop. I hayed and chored, fenced and drudged, both in house and upon the land. I made most of my own furniture and I practically rebuilt the inside of this old shack.

"Necessity is the mother of invention" goes the proverb, but I loathe proverbs. One can find an opposing one for even the best of them. Some people pin proverbs and poems and texts upon their souls as on their walls. I suppose they get the sort of comfort and help from it that a cripple gets from a crutch. As far as that goes we are all cripples in life, and few there be who can walk without a crutch. I never saw a human being yet who did not limp, at least mentally. . . .

There's one man in Alberta who comes to see me regularly once a month and no snub or plain telling that I prefer my own company to that of any others makes any impression upon him. He is painfully, hopelessly Scotch. However, one cannot quarrel with a man who has saved one's life. I am, or was, what they call in the west a "lunger." I was definitely diagnosed as "T.B." But if any one doubts that my lungs are sound

now they should hear me let̄ out a war whoop that would compare well with old Chief Pie Belly's. Pie Belly is a Stony Indian and I have learned some things of that Indian. Not that I make a daily practice of war whooping, but there's sport in letting the full volume and force of one's lungs pour out across the utter silence of the prairie. If my voice carries to my neighbors—the nearest is five miles off—no doubt they take me for a coyote.

That Scotch doctor likes to pick a quarrel, to argue, to find fault and to bark like a dog. Alberta, according to him, is a "mon's land." There is no sentimental reference to "God's country" or "Sunny Alberta" from him. It is a hard land—a mon's land. I've no right here. I should not work outside the house. I should engage a couple to work the place on shares. I should dress as a "lass"; I should permit my hair to grow "as God planted it"; I should chasten my bitter tongue and heart; I should cultivate my neighbors, and I should not set myself up against my fellow men. Hm! Sounds very fine, my Scotch friend, but what do you know of what I have been through? How can you know that I am frozen inside?

My ranch—and I would rather write of my ranch

than dig into my personal thoughts and emotions—if there are any left in me—my ranch lies midway between the good grain lands on one side and the hill country, the cattle lands, on the other. I suppose I am part of Yankee Valley. I am sorry for that because I do not like Americans. They are noisy, insincere, and a boasting, bragging lot. As far as that goes, I like the English less. The Scotch are hard to tolerate, and as for the Irish, the devil made them in his own likeness. If it comes down to that, I don't know a single nationality that I can respect, and I have lived all over the world.

To farm is to gamble on the largest scale possible, for the earth may be said to be our board, the seed our dice and the elements, the soil, the parasites, the hail, the frost and the drought, these are the cards stacked against us. But, like all gamblers, we are reaching out for a prize that enthralls and lures us, and that “pot of gold at the end of our rainbow” is the harvest—the wonderful, glorious golden harvest of Alberta. Some day, it will come to me also.

In the spring, our land is excessively fragrant. The black, loamy soil fairly calls to one to lay the seed within its fertile bosom. Anything will grow in Al-

berta. It's a thrilling sight to see the grain prick up sturdy and strong. When first my own showed its green head above the earth, I suffered such exhilaration that I could have thrown myself upon the ground, and kissed the good earth. Those tiny points of green, there on the soil that I myself had plowed, disked, harrowed and seeded. I suffered the exquisite pang of the creator.

If only one might shut up memories in a box, close the lid tight and turn the key upon them. If but the past could be blotted out, as are our sins by death, then, methinks, we would find comfort and compensation in this poor life once again.

The last generation of the Lorings were a soft-handed, dependent race. I come of an older, primitive breed, I am a reversion to type, for I love to labor with my hands. Had I been a man, I might have been a ditch or a grave digger. I love the earth. When I die, I do not want to be cremated. I want to go back to the soil.

I talk here of compensations and of my ranch which I say is what I have to live for, yet life has not been sweet or easy for me in Alberta. It's been a battle with a grim antagonist—for poverty and sickness and cold

—what can be grimmer than these? And then, much as I love to put in my crop, I have not yet had the joy of reaping it, for cutworm took my first, and this year early frost destroyed my grain when it had attained almost full growth. But never mind—that is all part of the game. The hardest part has been the enforced work at the Bar Q. No one enjoys laboring for those beneath them. I don't mean the laboring men. I have no sense of caste whatsoever, and they are as good as I am, I suppose. But Bull Langdon, the man whose pay I must take. He is a wild beast, one of the two legged cattle that should go to the shambles with his stock.

Yet I am not afraid of Bull Langdon. He never shouts at me. He only blusters, and his bloodshot eyes fall before mine. He may be the great boss and bully of the Bar Q. With his big bull whip in hand, his cattle may cower before him, and his men quail and slink away; his wife and Jake may tremble at the sound of his voice or step. I have his "number." I know that he is a coward, a great sneaking bully. He can lord it over small men and women and half-witted Indian boys. He never employs stronger or bigger men than himself. A giant in stature, and a Samson

in strength, nevertheless I assert he is a coward, a big unwhipped bully, whose own strength will some day prove his boomerang.

It's queer, as I have run along, I have omitted all mention of one in Alberta whom I should call a friend. Just a poor, illiterate young girl. I never can forget Nettie Day as I first saw her. Sickness, delirium even, may cast a glamour over things. It may be then our imagination pictures things as they are not; but nevertheless, Nettie's face, bending above my own, with its gentle look of tenderness and compassion, seemed to me as sweet as the "blessed damozel's" as she looked down from heaven to the earth beneath. She had wide, deep blue eyes, a child's eyes, full of an unplumbed innocence and questioning. Strange how one can come into our lives for such a little spell, disappear beyond our sight, and still remain in our hearts. I have seen little enough of Nettie, and the last time I saw her I hate to recall that I scolded her.

Next to my place is a quarter section of homestead land, owned by a young man named Stanley. One day I was fencing, when this young fellow, who had made attempts upon several occasions to speak to me, came over and watched me at my work. I ignored him, but

like my doctor friend, above mentioned, he is Scotch and thick. He didn't even know he was being ignored, and presently in a disgustingly friendly way he had the colossal nerve to attempt to instruct me in the art of making post holes. At that juncture I turned around and looked at him. Now I may seem as that Bar Q hand said, like a "tough old nut." No doubt I look like one, but I know the English trick of freezing ordinary people by a mere look. It *is* a trick, like the Englishman's monocle and the strange part is only an English person can do it. You just stare, stonily, at the insignificant atom before you. I begin at the feet, and travel contemptuously up the whole despised body, till I reach the abashed and propitiating face. One need not say a single word. That look—if you know the technique of the act—is enough. This young Stanley dropped his hammer in a hurry and turned very red.

"I say, you're not mad at me, are you?" he stammered.

And just then Nettie, whom the doctor had dropped at my house that day, came from out the house, and something about that boy's face, just a flicker of the eye and the deepening red about his ears apprised me

of the reason why he was so keen on being friends with me. I turned just in time to see on Nettie's guilty face the identical flicker I had noted on Stanley's. As cross as two sticks, I grabbed that girl by the arm and shoved her along the field to the house.

Once inside, I made her sit down, while I told her in detail all of the miseries and pitfalls and deceits and heartbreaks, the general unhappiness that befalls one foolish enough to fall in love. Love I told her was an antiquated emotion which had been burned out by the force of its own mad fire. I said something like that, for I was talking with feeling, upon a topic I understood, and as I talked, becoming more and more moved and excited as my subject warmed me, suddenly I observed that Nettie's eyes were fixed on space, as if on something very far away. She had her large, white hands unconsciously clasped upon her bosom; she was kneeling beside me, and something about her pose struck me at that moment as so divinely beautiful, so exquisitely madonna-like and lovely, that I choked upon my words and could go no further.

Then Nettie came out of her dream—I am sure she had heard not a word of my discourse—and said:

“Thank you, Angel.” That girl calls me—Angel.

God alone knows why. There is little of the angel in me.

I have not seen her since that day. Life has played strange tricks upon my little friend since then. Her father dead, her brothers and sisters scattered about in institutions and on farms, Nettie herself—at the Bar Q—of all places in the world, the last I would have wished to have seen her go!

Sometimes in the evening, when my work is done, I can recall to my mind Nettie as I last saw her with almost photographic clearness, and I experience a sense of nearness to her. The other night I had an impulse to start out then and there for the Bar Q. I felt that she needed me.

That young man on the adjoining quarter section sings a great deal as he works. I can hear him clear across the field—he has a real voice, a full, fine baritone, and in the still evenings, I confess there is something uplifting about that fresh young voice as it rings across the prairie. His home is nearing completion, he says, and that is why he sings. The thought of home and Nettie warms his heart till it bursts into song. Ah—well, who am I to judge what is best for these young people? So, sing on, young Cyril. I hope

that that clear brave voice of yours, as full of melody as a lark's, will never falter.

Last night, when I came in from the field, the half-breed Jake sidled along from behind my house. It gave me a start to see the poor idiot with his wild, witless face. He wanted to tell me something about the Bar Q. He jabbered and gibbered, and I could hardly make head or tail of what he was saying, save that Bull Langdon was eating something up.

CHAPTER X

BRIGHT sunlight flooded Alberta. The miraculous harvest was over, and the buzz of the thousand threshing machines, day and night, sounded like music in the ears of the ranchers. The greatest bumper crop in the history of the continent had made Alberta famous throughout the grain world.

Settlers were pouring in from across the line. Land values soared to preposterous heights; and wherever there were municipalities of open range and unbroken land, the territory was being staked and fenced.

On the heels of the famous crop came first the fatal oil and then the fatal city real estate boom, which later was to act as a boomerang to the land, since it brought in the wildcat speculator, the get-rich-quick folk, the gold-brick seller and the train of clever swindlers that spring up from nowhere when a boom is on. The great province was to be exploited by these parasites. The boom swelled to fabulous proportions

almost overnight. The streets of Calgary were thronged, train loads poured into the country; hysterical, half-crazed gamblers and "suckers" made or lost fortunes overnight; businesses of all kinds were started on "a shoe-string"; the wildest stories of oil flowing like water raced about the land. Oil indeed there was, as also coal in unlimited quantities, for the mineral wealth of the province had barely been scratched, but the boom was in full swing before the tests had been properly made, with the result that conservative people began to regard it askance, and almost as quickly as it had started, like an inflated bubble the oil boom burst. This brought undeserved desertion and wholesale ruin upon the country. Alberta had been made the "goat" of a flock of get-rich-folk from across the line, intent on making fortunes which then existed only upon paper.

The one solid and substantial asset that all the deflated booms could not affect, was the agricultural wealth of the province, real and potential. During this period, Bull Langdon's power and wealth swelled to enormous proportions. Before the year was out, he had become a multimillionaire. His cattle ranged over those "thousand hills"; his hundreds of granaries were

overflowing with the grain of that bumper crop, grain that he held to sell as soon as the market was right; his grip was upon the stockyards and packing house industry and the stock market was under his control. No one questioned his right to be called the Cattle King of Canada.

Bloated with affluence and power, illiterate and uncouth as ever, his vanity was boundless. It flattered him to be known as the richest and most powerful man in the Province; to have his cattle, his stock, his immense ranches pointed out; to see his brand far-flung over the cattle country, and encroaching into the western States; his name stamped upon the beef that topped the market, not merely in the east but in the west, even into the Chicago stockyards—there to be exhibited, and wondered at—grass fed steers, competing with and surpassing the cornfeds of the U.S.A.

Above all his possessions he placed his magnificent purebred Hereford bulls, a race whose stamp was upon the whole cattle country, for scarcely a farmer or rancher in the country, but aspired to have his herd headed by a Bar Q bull. He had spared neither expense nor labor upon the breeding of these perfect animals, whose sires had come from the most famous herds in

England and the States, and whose mothers were pure Canadian stock.

He coveted now the world championship for his latest product, a two-year-old Hereford bull, Prince Perfection Bar Q the Fourth. The Prince, as he was known throughout the purebred world, was of royal ancestry, and already, as a mere calf, his career at the cattle fairs in Canada had brought him under the eyes of the experts and cattle specialists. He was the son of that Princess Perfection Bar Q the Third, who had brought the lordly price when exhibited by Bull Langdon in Chicago of \$40,000. His sire was of foreign birth, shipped to Canada by a member of the royal family, who, infatuated with the "cattle game," had acquired a ranch in Canada, and declared it to be the sport of kings.

Annually there was a showing of the Bar Q bulls, and from far and near ranchers and farmers trekked from all over Canada and the States to see the latest products of the famous herd. This year was exceptional, inasmuch, as the two-year-old Prince was to be examined and shown before a jury of experts, who would pronounce upon his chances of winning the coveted championship in the United States.

His curly hide brushed and smoothed, oiled and trimmed; his hoofs all but manicured; his face washed with soft oiled cloths; his eyes and nostrils wiped with boracic acid solution; fed on the choicest of green feed and chop, a golden ring in his nose, through which a golden chain was passed, the petted brute was led out to gladden the eyes of stock enthusiasts, experts, agriculturists, scientific cattle students, and others connected with the purebred game, who had come literally from the four corners of the earth, with a passion similar to that of the scientist or the collector, discovering some coveted rare specimen. They crowded about this perfect product of the Hereford race, and looked the massive brute over with the eyes of connoisseurs.

In that crowd of men about the roped-in space, around which Cyril Stanley led the bull by the chain, university men, men of title, an English Prince and an ex-president of the U.S.A., millionaire cattlemen and sportsmen, the overall cattlemen, ranchers, farmers, stock enthusiasts, stockyard and packing-house men, to say nothing of the humble homesteaders and derelicts, the numerous "remittancemen" from the old country, and speculators from cattle centers in Canada and

the States. A mixed "bunch," socially as wide apart as the poles, but in that cattle shed as close as brothers. They rubbed elbows, swapped expensive cigars for grimy chews, held their sides at each other's jokes, and joshed and roared across to each other. They were kindred spirits, and cattle was the bond between them.

Glowering and grinning at each other, as at a prize fight, applauding, groaning out oaths of enthusiasm, strange explosive utterances, they were a motley company. Professor Morton Calhoun made a circle of his hands, and squinted through it with one screwed-up eye, the attitude of an artist before a masterpiece, and after a long scrutiny, shook his head and groaned with joy.

Through this group of men moved Bull Langdon, in high good humor, dominant and arrogant, intimate with everyone, yet close to no one. When the big shed was full, and the circle about the ropes entirely surrounded his exhibit, Bull Langdon nonchalantly stepped into the ring, where the Prince followed Cyril Stanley tamely about. Cyril had a curiously hypnotic influence over the animal, and could even make him submit to having his head caressed and his nose patted.

On either horn two bright ribbons had been coyly twisted and tied, and these gave the animal a peculiarly festive look. As Bull Langdon stepped into the ring, a murmur of admiring and respectful applause broke forth. He approached the Prince from the left side, and reaching out a careless hand pulled the ribbon from one of the horns.

“We ain’t raisin’ no dolls!” said the cowman. “This is a *Bull!*” and he reached for the other horn.

“Careful, boss!” warned Cyril. “He’s not used to all this excitement, and I got my hands full keeping him calm.”

“Who’s talking?” growled the cattleman, spitting with amusement. “Are you trying to teach Bull Langdon the cattle game, you young whelp? I knowed it before the day you was born.”

The young bull’s head had suddenly uplifted. He sniffed the air, his neck bristling. Slowly, growing in depth and power, there burst from his throat a mighty roar that shook the tent, and drove the color from the faces about that ring, as with an almost concerted movement there was a backing from the lines and an exodus from the tent. Bull Langdon, as swiftly as a cat, had backed to the lines and was over them.

Cyril was alone in the inclosure with the roaring bull. Half talking, half singing, not for a moment did his hand relax its grip upon the chain. Slowly the animal's head turned in his direction and again dropped submissively. There was a breath of relief about the lines, and Cyril led the bull back to his stall, fastening him securely to his post by the ring in his nose.

Bull Langdon was swearing foully, but his fury against Cyril and the Prince subsided at the approach of Professor Calhoun, the greatest authority on pure-bred cattle in the world.

“Sir,” said the little man, glaring at Bull Langdon through double-lensed glasses, scrutinizing the cattleman with the scientific air with which he examined cattle, “I will not hesitate to predict that your animal's progress throughout the United States—I will go farther and say, throughout the world—will be one of unbroken triumph. It has been my pleasure to look upon the most perfect Hereford specimen in the world. I congratulate you, sir.”

Bull Langdon grunted, rose on the balls of his feet, chewed on the plug in his cheek, spat, and, his chest swelling, roared across at one of the Bar Q “hands.”

“Take the gentleman—take all of the gentlemen—”

he added, with a sweeping gesture of his arm toward the crowd, "to the booze tent. The treat's on Bull Langdon. Fill up, gentlemen, on the Bar Q."

Meanwhile, satiated with gloating over his great treasure, he bethought of another possession and upon which at this stage he set if possible an even greater value. True, he reckoned Nettie as "scrub" stock, while the Prince was of lordly lineage. On the auction block, the prince might bring a price that was worth a king's ransom; yet as he thought of the big, white-skinned, blue-eyed girl, the cowman knew that he would not give her up for all the champions in the cattle world. He owned the Prince; but though he had held the girl in his arms, he knew in his heart of hearts that she had never been his. That was what fretted and tormented him—the thought that his brand upon Nettie could never be permanent.

It was a boast of the cowman that what he wanted he took, and what he took, he held. He had wanted Nettie Day. He had taken her by mad force, as a barbarian might have fallen upon a Christian slave, yet he knew, with a sense of smoldering hatred and fury that a single hair upon the head of the young Bar Q hand was more to her than the Bull and all his pos-

sessions. He was torn with a desire to return to Bar Q, and again take forcible possession of the girl; but the prize herd was now almost ready for the tour. It would be disastrous, ruinous to his reputation and career, if, at this psychological moment, anything should interfere with the departure of the herd, and there was no man in the outfit who could be trusted to take the place of Bull Langdon himself. Well, it would be the matter of a month or two only, and he would be back.

He found himself at the Prince's stall, glowering down upon the back of the kneeling Cyril, who was brushing down his charge's legs with an oiled brush. Presently Cyril looked up, and seeing his employer, he arose. The Bull cleared his throat noisily.

"Well, how about it, bo? You goin' along with Prince to the States?"

Cyril waited in his slow way, before replying, and as he hesitated, the Bull threw in savagely:

"Bonus of \$500 to the 'hand' that takes special charge of the Prince and another \$10 raise to his wages."

\$500! It was a mighty sum of money, and the young man felt his heart thump at the thought of what it would buy for Nettie.

“When would you want me to leave?”

“Two weeks.”

“When’d we be back?”

“Two months. I’ll go along as far as St. Louis; leave for a spell, and join you at Chicago, comin’ back with the outfit.”

“I’d want a week off.”

“What for?”

“I got a bit of fencing to finish on my homestead, and I got to ride over to Bar Q.”

“What you want at Bar Q?”

Cyril’s straight glance met his.

“My girl’s there.”

“Who’d you mean?”

“Nettie Day. We’re planning to get married this winter.”

The savage in Bull Langdon was barely held in check. He could scarcely control the impulse to throttle the life out of this cool-eyed youth, who dared to claim for his own what was the Bull’s.

“You’re countin’ your chickens before they’re hatched, ain’t you?” he snarled. “Mebbe the gell’s stuck on someone else.”

“Not on your life she’s not,” said Cyril with calm conviction. “She and me are promised.”

“Beat it, then,” roared the Bull, “and the sooner you’re back, the sooner we’ll start. I’ll hold the job for you for two weeks—not a day longer.”

“You can count on me,” said Cyril. “I’ll be on the job.”

CHAPTER XI

EVERY day Nettie arose at six and went about her dull duties. There was the cream to separate, the pails and separator to clean and scald; there was the butter to make; the chickens to feed, washing, ironing and cleaning. The canning season was at hand and the Indians rode in with wild cranberries, gooseberries, raspberries and saskatoons. From day to day she picked over and washed the fruit, packed it in syrup in jars, and set them in the wash boiler on the range.

Time accustoms us even to suffering, and one of the penalties of youth and health is that one thrives and lives and pursues one's way, even though the heart within one be dead. Vaguely Nettie groped for a solution to her tragedy. She knew that it was not something that could be pushed away into some recess of the mind; it was something unforgettable, a scar upon the soul rather than the body. Of Cyril she could think only with the most intense anguish of mind, and knew

that she could never face the man she loved and tell him what had befallen her. Already he had come to exist in her mind only as a loved one dead. He was no longer for her. She had lost Cyril through this act of Bull Langdon.

Two weeks after the departure of the Bull for the purebred camp, Nettie was startled at her work by the insistent ringing of the telephone, which had been unusually silent since then. Her first thought was that the Bull was calling from Barstairs, and the thought of his hated voice, even upon the wire, held her back. The telephone repeated its ring, and with lagging feet Nettie at last answered it.

“Hello!”

“Is that the Bar Q?”

It was a woman's voice, quavering and friendly. Nettie's hand tightened in a vise about the receiver. Her eyes closed. Pale as death, she leaned against the wall.

“Is that Bar Q? Is that you, Nettie?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Is Mr. Langdon home?”

“No, ma'am.”

“Any of the men about?”

"They're all in the fields.

"That's too bad. I'm here at the station. Came down on the noon train. 'Twould take too long for you to harness up and meet me, so I'll go over to the Reserve, and maybe Mr. Barrons will bring me up. Good-by, Nettie. Is everything all right?"

A pause, and then Nettie answered faintly:

"Yes, ma'am."

Nettie hung up the 'phone, and stood with her face pressed to the wall. A great tide of fear and shame swept over her. How was she to face her gentle mistress? How speak to her? How find words to tell her? She longed to escape from the kind and questioning eyes that would look so trustingly and fondly into her own.

It was but half an hour's run by automobile from the station, and the grating noise of the car, valorously trying to make the high grade to the house, brought Nettie violently back to life. She dabbed at her eyes with her apron, smoothed her hair and tried to compose herself as best she could as the little car chugged to the back door.

An appalling change had taken place in Mrs. Langdon. Despite her feeble protest, the Indian agent, in

whose car she had come, insisted upon lifting the frail little woman from the automobile, and carrying her into the house. She tried to laugh, as Nettie placed a chair for her, and when her breath would permit it, she said bravely:

“Well, here I am, Nettie, back like a bad penny, and feeling just fine!”

Fine! When there was scarcely anything left of her but skin and bones. Fine! When she was so weak she could scarcely stand without holding on to something. Nettie knelt in a passion of mothering pity beside her, and removed the little woman’s coat and hat. Meanwhile, the faint tinkle of her mistress’s chiding laughter hurt Nettie more than if she had struck her.

“Why, Nettie, one would think I was a baby the way you are fussing over me. I really feel *very* well. I’m in perfect health. We all are, dear, you know. Illness is just an error of the imagination, just as sin and everything that is ugly and cruel in the world is. We are all perfect, made in God’s image, and we can be what we will. Why, Nettie, dear, what on earth——!”

Nettie’s head had fallen upon her mistress’s lap, great sobs rending her.

“Nettie! Nettie! I’m real cross with you. This

won't do at all. Don't you see that by giving way like this, we bring on our illnesses and troubles? We really are manufacturers of our own ills, and the solutions of all our problems are right within ourselves."

Nettie raised her head dumbly at that, and tried to choke back the overwhelming sobs.

"Mrs. Langdon, I can't never leave you now."

"Never leave me! Were you thinking of going, then?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Langdon. I thought I'd *have* to go. There—were reasons why, and——"

"Nettie, if the reasons are—Cyril, why, I know all about it. You can't possibly marry anyway until he gets back. Bill wants him to go to the States with the bulls."

"Mrs. Langdon, I can't never marry Cyril Stanley. I'd die first. Oh, Mrs. Langdon, I wisht I was dead. I wisht I had the nerve to drown myself in the Ghost River."

"Nettie Day, that is downright wicked. Whatever's come over you? Have you fallen out with Cyril? You've been brooding here alone. Now I'm back, things will right themselves. I want you to be the cheerful girl I'm so fond of—so very fond of, Nettie."

Very slowly, but bravely waving back the help Nettie proffered with outstretched hand, Mrs. Langdon moved to the stairs, smiling and reiterating softly her health formula:

“I am strong; in perfect health; in God’s image; His creation. All’s well with me and God’s good world.”

Nettie watched her as slowly she climbed the stairs. There was the sound of a closing door, and then a hollow, wrenching, barking cough. Words of the Bull flashed like lightning across Nettie’s mind:

“My old woman ain’t strong. She’ll croak soon. There’ll be another Mrs. Langdon at Bar Q. You——”

Nettie’s hand went to her strangling throat. Her voice rang out through the room in wild despair:

“Oh, my *God!*” prayed Nettie Day. “Don’t let Mrs. Langdon die. Don’t let her die. Please, please, please, oh, God! let her live!”

CHAPTER XII

THE long, golden fall of Alberta was especially beautiful that year, and although well into November, the weather was as warm and sunny as the month of May. Winter came late to Alberta, sometimes withholding its frosty hand till considerably after Christmas; but it stayed late, extending even into the spring months. There was a popular saying that there was no spring in Alberta; one stepped directly out of winter into summer. But the Alberta fall was incomparably beautiful. The days were laden with sunlight, and the night skies, with their myriad stars, set in a firmament more beautiful than anywhere else on earth, were remarkable for their lunar rainbows, and the white blaze of the Northern lights.

Yet the long, sunlit days, and the cool, starry nights brought no balm to the distracted Nettie. She felt undone—body and soul.

As she trailed listlessly across the barnyard, she no longer chirruped happily to the wee chicks or reproved the contentious mother hens. All joy in work and in

contact with the live things on the ranch was gone for her. She lived on like a machine, automatically wound up. There were certain daily duties to be done; she went about them dully and mechanically.

One November evening as she came, basket in hand, out of the cowbarn, where she had been looking for eggs in the stalls where the hens loved to lay, Jake raced through the yard on his broncho, shouting and screaming with excitement.

“Him! Him!” wildly yelled Jake, pointing toward where along the Banff highway a solitary horseman could be seen. At the word “Him” Nettie’s first thought was of the Bull, and she stiffened and paled; but as she looked down the slope, to where the rider was passing through the main gate to the road, she turned even whiter, and longing and fear together shook her so violently that she could hardly keep from swooning at the sight of the well-remembered wide hat, the bright flowing scarf, loosely tied beneath the boyish chin, the orange-colored chapps, and the peppery young broncho bearing his rider now so swiftly up that slope. She did not recover from her emotion in time to take flight, as her terrified impulse urged her, for Jake had already opened the gate of the corral, and Cyril passed

through. He had seen the girl at the barn door, and leaping from his horse, was at her side in an instant.

The basket of eggs in her hand crashed to the ground. She lifted up both her hands, and her eyes looked wildly about her like a trapped thing, seeking some way of escape, as steadily, with face aglow, he closed in upon her. With a muffled cry, she beat him back from her, crying loudly:

“No-o! No! *No!*”

Like one possessed, she pushed him from her with mad strength and rushed through the corral out into the yard. Dumfounded, Cyril looked after her, and then calling her by name he pursued her.

“Nettie! Nettie! I say—Nettie!”

She fled as if demented, running in a circle around the house; then darted in at the back kitchen door. She tried to hold the door closed, but his impetuous hand forced it open. Her breath coming in spasmodic gasps, leaning against the wall of the back kitchen for support, Nettie faced him.

She cried out loudly:

“Go away! Go away!”

“Go away? What do you mean? What for? Nettie, for God’s sake, what’s the matter, little girl?”

She repeated the words wildly, with all her force.

“Go away! Go! Don’t come near me. Don’t touch me. Don’t even look at me.”

“Why not? What’s the matter? You’re playin’ a game, and it ain’t fair to go so far. What’s the matter, girl? Nettie—you—you ain’t gone back on me, are you?”

She could not meet those imploring young eyes, and turned bodily about, so that now her face was to the wall, and her back to him. Her voice sounded muffled, strangled:

“Leave me be. I mustn’t see you.”

“Why not? Since when? What’ve I done? I got a right to know. What’s happened?”

His voice quavered though he sought manfully to control it. There was a long, tense silence, and then Nettie Day said in a low, dead voice:

“I ain’t the same.”

“You mean you’ve changed?” he demanded, and she answered in that same lost voice:

“Yes—all changed. I ain’t the same.”

He took this in slowly, his hands clenching, the hot tears scalding his lids. Then burst out with boyish anguish and passion:

“Don’t say that, Nettie. I can’t believe it. It ain’t true. You and me—we’re promised. I been thinking of nothing else. I built the little house for you. It’s all ready now, dear, and I come on up to Bar Q now to tell you I got a chance to go to the States with the purebred stuff, and there’s a bonus of \$500 in it for me, and a \$10 raise to my wages. Nettie, girl, I took him up on that proposition, because I wanted to do more for you.”

“Why did you go away?” said Nettie harshly.

“I went on your account. You ain’t mad about that, are you, girl? Why, I wanted to make things softer for you, and I got a chance now to make good money—\$500, Nettie, and I says to myself: ‘Here’s where Nettie and me’ll go off on our honeymoon to the U.S.,’ and I come up here now thinking, ‘Here’s where we’ll put one over on the Bull, and we’ll slip down to Calgary and get married, and then we get aboard the train. I’ll spring my wife on the outfit and——’”

He choked and gulped, and Nettie moaned aloud, crying:

“I tell you I ain’t the same. I’m changed. You oughtn’t to’ve gone away.”

Dark suspicions began to mount and with their

growth jealous fury caused him to swing her roughly about, so that again she faced him. But she evaded his glance, turning her head from side to side, so that she need not meet his accusing hot young eyes.

“You got another fellow, have you? Have you? You can answer that, anyway.”

But there was no answer from the girl, and as his grip relaxed on her arms, her head dropped dumbly down. A cruel laugh broke from the boy's lips.

“I see! Someone's cut me out, heh? I'm dead on to you now. I got your number, I have. If you're that sort—if you couldn't stand a few months' separation without goin' back on a fellow, I'm well rid of you. I wish you luck with your new fellow. I hope he ain't the fool like I been.”

Still there was no answer from the girl, standing there with her head down, and her arms hanging like a dead person's by her sides.

Presently there was a clatter of hoofs in the corral, and Cyril went out at a furious trot. As the flying horseman disappeared over the hills, Nettie slowly sank to her knees, and her arms stretched out, she cried aloud:

“I wisht I was dead! I wisht I was dead!”

CHAPTER XIII

CYRIL reached the purebred camp the following morning. He had ridden without stopping the whole of the previous night. His mind was a burning chaos; and he suffered all the torments of jealousy and uncertainty. Even while he told himself that he now hated Nettie, his heart went back to her—in aching tenderness about her. He pictured her as he had known her—her hair shining in the sun, and that look which love alone brings to the human eyes, lighting up her face and making it divinely beautiful to her lover. He recalled her at the little shack, where she had helped him fashion some of the rude pieces of furniture; riding across the prairie, their horses' necks touching as they pressed as close to each other as the horses would permit; the nightly meetings in the berry bushes; her hand nestling in his own. He remembered her in his arms, her lips upon his!

In the darkness of the night, the boy rode sobbing. In the gray of the morning, red of eyes, his hat well

over his face, he pulled into the Bull camp, and with as steady a gait and voice as he could command he faced Langdon.

“You back already?”

“Yes.”

“Ready to go on?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We’ll get away a few days ahead. Hold on there!”

Cyril had moved to go. He stood now at the door of the cattle shed.

“Where’ve you been?”

There was no answer, and the Bull persisted.

“You been to Bar Q?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

There was silence again, and the Bull cut in with seeming indifference.

“How’s your gell? When you gettin’ married?”

A deep pause, and Cyril answered slowly.

“It’s off. I ain’t marryin’.”

“Turned you down, did she? Huh! Well, what do you care? There’s plenty good fish in the sea. There ain’t nothing to bellyache about. When you get over

to the States, you'll get all this female guff out of your bones. Women ain't no good, anyways. They ain't worth fretting about. They're a bad lot. Gimme *cattle* in preference."

He extended the plug of tobacco, which the boy ignored. His reddened eyes looked levelly into the Bull's, and he said sturdily:

"It's a lie what you said about women. They ain't bad!"

CHAPTER XIV

SHUT in all of that winter, throughout which spells of bitter cold had alternated with blinding blizzards, dissipated only by the tempering warmth of Chinook winds, Nettie and Mrs. Langdon were thrown upon their own resources, and drew closer together.

As the winter deepened, something of the girl's strange depression reacted upon the spirits of the sick woman, so that she, too, lapsed into long spells of silence. She would lie on the couch in the dining-living room close to the radiator, propped up high with the pillows Nettie piled around her, her book on Health and Happiness held loosely in her thin hands, as over and over again she conned its lessons, beautiful lessons in which surely no one who read, could fail to find that crumb of hope and comfort that means so much to the hungry heart.

Occasionally her attention would stray from her beloved book, and then she would lie there idly and ab-

sently watching the silent Nettie, as she moved about her duties. One day, watching her more intently than usual, and puzzling over the change in the formerly lighthearted and happy girl, something about her movements, a certain lassitude, brought Mrs. Langdon's thoughts to an abrupt pause. At first she put the idea from her as fantastic and impossible; but moving round the better to scrutinize the girl, she knew she had made no mistake. The book slipped from her hand. Mrs. Langdon sat up on her couch, and stared with a startled gaze at Nettie Day. The fall of the book caused the girl to turn from her work, and as she stooped to pick it up, she met her mistress's eyes.

"Come here, Nettie. I want to speak to you."

Nettie advanced slowly, instinctively holding back, and in her unquiet heart there stirred a dread of the question she knew was trembling on her mistress's lips. Mrs. Langdon's eyes rose steadily, as she scanned the girl from head to foot.

"Nettie, you are in *trouble!*"

Nettie could not speak for the tightness in her throat and held her dry lips pressed together.

"Oh, you poor child! You poor little girl! Why didn't you tell me before? *Now* I understand!"

Nettie moved around sideways, averting her gaze from those eyes so full of compassion and tenderness.

“Mrs. Langdon,” she said in a low voice, “I done nothing wrong.”

“Oh, Nettie! Don’t deny it, dear. I can see for myself. Sit beside me, dear. I am not condemning you. I only want your confidence. Tell me all about it, Nettie.”

“I *can’t* tell you, Mrs. Langdon! I *can’t*. It’s something can never be told you.”

Nettie was past that stage where tears would have relieved her. All of her senses seemed numbed and hardened, but she clung persistently to the one passionate purpose, to hide the truth, at all costs, from Mrs. Langdon.

Of all who had known Bull Langdon, his wife alone, despite her cruel experiences with him over the years, did not hate him. To her, he was an erring child, who had started on the wrong trail, and went, misguided and blind, stumbling on in the darkness, never finding his way to that peaceful haven of thought that had been his wife’s comfort and refuge. Incapable of evil herself, she had the child’s simple faith in the goodness of others, or in their ultimate regeneration from wrong,

or error, as she preferred to call it. She never wavered in her faith that sooner or later her "lost lamb" would return to the fold.

It was probable that only her strange faith in the Bull had kept him from doing her physical harm. Harsh and gruff and neglectful, he had never been actually cruel to her, and to himself he liked to boast defiantly that he had "never raised his hand" to his wife.

Now, as she begged for Nettie's confidence, she never dreamed of connecting her husband with the girl's trouble; that was a crime she never could have suspected.

"Do you realize, Nettie, what is about to happen to you?"

"I expect you'll want to turn me out now," said Nettie dully, and then turning swiftly, she added with sudden force: "But don't do it till the spring, Mrs. Langdon, because you ain't strong enough to do the work this winter, and it's nothing to me, and I want to stay and take care of you."

"Don't you know me better than that? Turn your face around, Nettie. Do you think I'm the kind of woman to turn a girl out because she is going to be what I have all my life longed to be—a mother?"

“Don’t! Oh, don’t, don’t!” cried the girl, loudly, rocking to and fro in tearless anguish. “I wisht I were dead. I wisht I’d had the nerve to drown myself in the Ghost River, but now it’s all froze over.”

“It’s wicked to talk in that way. Why should you wish to drown yourself? I am not judging you. I only want to help you. Things are clear to me now. Cyril——”

“Please don’t, Mrs. Langdon——”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t speak his name even.”

“Why not? Why should you carry this burden alone? If there’s any blame, it belongs to him, not you.”

“No! No! He never done anything wrong. He’s not capable of doing wrong to a girl. Please don’t say anything about him. I can’t bear it!”

“But we must face this thing fairly. You are in an abnormal condition of mind. It’s not an uncommon thing. Some women lose their minds at this time. I appreciate all that you have been suffering, and I pity you from the very bottom of my heart.”

Nettie said nothing now, but she wrung her hands and clenched them together as if in physical pain.

“Listen to me, Nettie dear. I want you to know that *I* know what it means to be as you are.” Her voice dropped to a wistful whisper. “Eight times, dear, just think of that. You know we pioneered in the early days. We didn’t always have a grand place like this, and—and—well, in those days the distances were so great. We were so far from everything—it was just as if we were on the end of the world, and we didn’t have the conveniences, or even vehicles to carry us places, and the doctors always came too late, or not at all. I lost all of my babies. They just came into the world to—to go out again; but I always thought that even the weakest of them had not lived in vain, because you see, they brought something lovely into my life. It was just as if—as if—an angel’s wing had touched me, don’t you see? It brought to me a knowledge of Love—love eternal and everlasting. No woman who bears a child can fail to feel it.”

She broke off, in strange, breathless, smiling pause, as if she sought to conquer her present pain with the elusive joy that she believed had come with her dead children into her life. “So you see, Nettie, I don’t hold anything against any woman who bears a child, no matter how or where. It doesn’t matter what you or

Cyril have done. I have great faith in that boy, and I feel he will make it right.”

“Mrs. Langdon,” said Nettie in a suffocating voice, “I ask you not to believe that he is to blame for anything wrong about me.”

“I won’t, then. I’ll believe the best of you both. We are going to be very happy, all of us. Just think, you are going to be a mother! It’s the sublimest feeling in life. I know it, because all my life I’ve heard baby voices in my ears and in my heart, Nettie, and my arms have ached and yearned to press a little baby to my breast. My own dear little ones have passed, but, Nettie, I’ll hold yours, won’t I, dear?”

“Oh, Mrs. Langdon, when you talk like that, I feel just as if something was bursting all up inside me. I don’t know what to do.”

“Do nothing, dear; but look out at God’s beautiful world. Lift your eyes to the skies, to the sun, to the hills’ hills!”

“There’s no sun no more,” said Nettie. “The days are all dark and cold now, and the hills are all froze, too. They’re like me, Mrs. Langdon. I’m all froze up inside.”

“Oh, but you’ll change now. Look, Nettie, it won’t

be long before they'll be back—my husband and your Cyril. I had a letter. Where is it, now? I put it in my book—no, under my pillow. See, what they write.” The paper fluttered in her hand, and she looked up to smile at Nettie. “It was thoughtful of Bill, wasn't it, to have the letter typed? You know he hates to write letters. Poor fellow hasn't much of an education— You know, Nettie, he came to the school when I was teaching, to learn. It was pathetic, really it was. But now, he's had some stenographer write to tell me that they'll be home in a couple of weeks. They should have been home two months ago, but they've had a terrible time of it in the States. You see there's a kind of sickness over there—a plague that's running around. It's all over Europe and now the States. People, he writes, are afraid to go to public places, and everything is closed up. It's a great disappointment for him, poor fellow. He expected so much from the Prince, and he's hung on from week to week, and been through all sorts of aggravating times. You know they even quarantined his herd on a false suspicion of disease, when they were in *perfect* health. But, never mind, we have to have disappoint-

ments in life. All I'm thankful for now is that he's coming back—he and Cyril."

Nettie said in a low voice:

"Mrs. Langdon, I don't want to see neither of them again. I can't."

"That's the way you feel now. It's natural in your condition. I had notions, too. Wanted the strangest things to eat, and had *such* fits of crying about nothing at all. You'll be all over these moods by the time Cyril rides in. My! I'm going to scold that boy. Yes, yes, you may be angry if you want, but I'm going to give him a real piece of my mind, and then—well, it's never too late to mend a wrong, Nettie."

"Mrs. Langdon," said Nettie violently, "I tell you Cyril Stanley never done me no wrong."

"Well, that's how you look at it, Nettie, and maybe you are right. I'm the last person to judge you."

Nettie bent down suddenly and grasping Mrs. Langdon's thin hand tightly, she kissed it. Then as quickly dropping it, she got up, threw her apron over her face and ran from the room.

CHAPTER XV

IN the winter the Bar Q outfit in the foothill ranch had dwindled down to eight men. These were all riders, men who "rode the fences" and kept them in repair; men who rode the range, and made the rounds of the fields, counted and kept account of the cattle remaining on the ranch, and reported sick or crippled cattle to the veterinary surgeon maintained at the ranch.

The breeding stock had been despatched to the prairie ranch in the fall, where they were especially housed and cared for. The beef stock, three-year-old steers, were also disposed at the grain ranch, where they were fed on chop and green feed and hay, to fatten them for the spring market.

The purebred heifers and cows had their own home at Barstairs, where also was the camp of the purebred bulls.

At the foothill ranch only the younger stuff was left, the yearling and rising two-year-old heifers and steers,

and these sturdy young stuff "rustled" over the winter range, finding sufficient sustenance to carry them through the winter. The cook car was closed, and the men "batched" in the bunkhouses but came to the main ranch house for bread, butter and general supplies.

Nettie, long ignorant of her condition, had from day to day passed out the supplies to the men, unconscious of and indifferent to their scrutiny. She failed to realize that what had become apparent to her mistress, had also been revealed to the cunning eyes of the Bar Q "hands."

Bunkhouses in a ranching country are breeding places for the worst kind of gossip and scandal, to which disgusting commerce men even more than women are addicted. It was, therefore, not long before Nettie's name became first whispered and then carelessly bandied among them. At her name eyes rolled, winks and coarse laughter were the rule where but a little while ago she had been the object of admiring respect and aspiration.

Cyril Stanley's name was also on each man's tongue, and they all took it for granted that he was responsible for Nettie's condition. A change in their manner

toward the girl followed the loose talk about her; there were certain meaning looks, a new familiarity of speech, and presently worse than that. "Pink-eyed" Tom, a man whose dirty boasts concerning women were a source of endless fun among the men, came to the house one day for a side of bacon. He followed Nettie into the big storeroom, where the Bar Q meat supply hung. As she passed the bacon to him, Pink-Eye managed to seize her hand, and with a broad grin, he squeezed it, and attempted to draw her to him. It was only a momentary grasp, but with the chuckle that went with it the girl understood and turned first deathly white and scarlet with anger.

"Guess you ain't used to man-handling—oh, no!" said Tom, and as she fiercely withdrew from his grasp, he laughed in her face, with an ugly meaning leer that set her heart frantically beating.

She flew from the storeroom to the kitchen, and stood with her back pressed against the door, holding it closed. A sickening fear of the whole race of men consumed her. She longed to escape to some place beyond their sight or ken where she might at least hide herself and be allowed the boon of suffering unmolested and unseen. She had a passionate longing to escape

from the Bar Q—to leave forever the hateful place where she had been so cruelly betrayed, where she had suffered almost beyond endurance. But the thought of leaving Mrs. Langdon hurt her more than the thought of staying, and her mind wandered in the hopeless search of a solution to her appalling problem. She thought of her friend “Angel” Loring, with her cropped hair and men’s clothing, and for the first time comprehended what might drive a woman to do as the Englishwoman had done.

“A bad report runs a thousand miles a minute,” says an oriental proverb. Certainly that is true of a ranching country. From bunkhouse to farm and ranch house raced the tale of a girl’s fall; it was a morsel of exciting news to those dull souls shut in by the rigid hand of the winter

On the first Chinook day, women harnessed teams to democrats and single drivers to buggies, and took the road to Bar Q. Never had that ranch been favored with so many visitors. Neither Nettie nor her mistress suspected that their guests had come to see for themselves whether there was truth in the story concerning the girl which had percolated over the telephone and been carried by riders intent upon retailing the latest

sensation of the foothills. Caste exists not in a ranching country like Alberta, save among a few rare and exclusive souls, and a hired girl on a ranch has her own social standing in the community, especially if she is that rarity, a pretty girl. So Nettie's plight was of as supreme an interest to the ranch and farm wives as if instead of a poor servant girl she had been any prosperous farmer's daughter. Hired girls are potential wives for the best of the ranchmen, and many a farmer's wife has begun her career on a cook car.

Nettie, cutting cake and brewing tea in the kitchen, paused, tray in hand, white-faced, behind the door, as the voices of the women close at hand floated through.

"Looked me right in the face, innocent as a lamb, and she——"

"She's six months' gone if a day."

"Seem's if she might've gone straight, being the oldest in the family. You'd thought she'd want to set an example to her little brothers and sisters."

"Pshaw! she should worry."

"Ain't girls awful today!"

"When you told me on the 'phone, I couldn't b'lieve it, and I come along on purpose to make sure for myself."

“Well, now you see, though I’m not used to havin’ my word doubted.”

“Why, Mrs. Munson, I hadn’t the idea of questioning your word; but I thought as you hadn’t seen for yourself, and got it third-hand.”

“I got it straight—straight from Batt Leeson, and *he* ought to know after workin’ more’n ten years at the Bar Q.”

“Personally, I make a point of standing up for the girl.”

The voice this time was a shade gentler, but it was also flurried and apologetic.

“You know as well as I do, Mrs. Young, if a girl acts decent, men let her alone. You can tell me!”

Her face stony, her head held high, Nettie pushed the door open with her foot, and came in with the tray. She silently served them, but her glance flickered toward her mistress, who was leaning forward listening to the whispered words of Mrs. Peterson, cringing toward the rich cattleman’s wife. For the first time since she had known her, Mrs. Langdon’s voice sounded sharp and cold.

“I’ll thank you not to repeat a nasty tale like that.

Nettie Day has just as much right to have a child as you have.”

“Why, I’m a married woman,” blurted the outraged farm wife.

“How do you know Nettie isn’t married?”

Chairs were hunched forward. The circle leaned with pricked-up ears toward the speaker.

“*Is* she, now?”

“Well, that accounts for it!”

“You couldn’t make me believe Nettie was that kind. We all thought—well, you know how girls carry on to-day. I’m sure you’ll excuse us. We’re all liable to make mistakes.”

The Inquisition turned to Nettie.

“My word, Nettie Day, why didn’t you let us know? What on earth did you want to keep it secret for? The whole country’d turned out to Chivaree for you. We haven’t had a marriage in a year, and Cyril Stanley is mighty popular with the boys.”

Nettie’s gaze went slowly around that circle of faces. She wanted to make sure that all might hear her words.

“I ain’t married to Cyril Stanley, and he done me no wrong. You got no right to talk his name loose like that.”

An exclamatory silence reigned in the room. Mrs. Langdon, her cheeks very flushed, was sitting up, her bright eyes, like a bird's, scanning the faces of her visitors.

"Nettie," her thin, piercing voice was raised, "you forgot my tea, and—and—maybe you ladies'll excuse me today. I'm not well, you know."

For the first time since she had become a convert to her strange philosophy she was admitting illness; but she was doing it in another's behalf.

As the last of the women disappeared through the door, and before the murmur of their voices outside had died out, Mrs. Langdon made a motion of her hands toward Nettie, and the girl ran over, dropped on her knees by the couch and hid her face in her mistress's lap.

"Nettie, don't you mind what they say. Women are terribly cruel to each other. I don't know why they should be, I'm sure, for I believe that we all have in us the same capacities for sinning, only most of us escape temptation. It's almost a gamble, isn't it, Nettie; and I'm so sorry, poor child, that you should have been the one to lose." Her voice dropped to a

whisper. "I'll confess something to you now, Nettie. I—yes, I—almost——"

"If you're goin' to say something against yourself," said Nettie hoarsely, "I don't want to hear it. You ain't capable ever of doing anything wrong."

On the road, the carriages were grouped together. Their occupants leaned out and called back and forth to each other.

"What do you know of that?"

"I'm certainly surprised at Mrs. Langdon. I didn't think she'd hold to anything like that."

"I did, and I'm not a bit surprised. I could've told you a thing or two. Birds of a feather flock together, and she——"

Voices were lowered, as another woman's reputation was pulled to shreds.

"Well, Mrs. Munson, you don't say so."

"I certainly do."

"I remember when the Bull first married her. Sa-ay, there was all kinds of talk. Ask anyone who was here in them times."

Murmurs and exclamations, and a woman's voice rumbling out a tale that should never have been told.

“Would you’ve believed it! And she so sweet and sly of tongue.”

“Still waters run deep. You can’t trust them quiet kind. I had it direct from Jem Bowers. You know Jem. He was right along when it happened. They were shut in that schoolhouse for two whole days, and the door locked and bolted. The Bull himself asked Jem to go for the missionary, and everyone knows Jem was one of the witnesses at the Langdon wedding. Said she looked just like a little scared bird, and her eyes were all screwed up with crying, so I guess doin’ wrong did bring *her* no happiness.”

“Well, I’d never have believed it if you hadn’t told me. I’m going to hustle right off now. I want to stop and see Mrs. Durkin on my way. She couldn’t get off to come, as they’ve had the mumps up to their house, and I promised to let her know, and I’ll bet her tongue’s hangin’ out waitin’.”

“Well, don’t say I said it.”

“I won’t. I’ll say I got it from—from—I’ll not name the party. Get ap, Gate! My, that mare’s smart.”

“I like geldings for driving. They aren’t so quick,

but they're dependable and strong. Good-by. Will you be at the box social?"

"Sure, what's it for?"

"Oh, them sick folks in the east. Did you hear that that plague sickness they got in the States has sneaked across to Canada, and everybody's scared nearly to death. They've got it awful out in Toronto and Montreal."

"Didn't know it was as bad as that."

"It's something awful out east I heard. My husband brought home a paper from Calgary, and they had the whole front page in headlines about it. Them Yankees brought it in with them when they run away to escape from it in their own country. Wish they'd stay home and look after their own sicknesses, 'stead of coming across the line and carrying it along with them. Others have been flying out west here, and they say if we don't look out, first thing we know Calgary'll have it, and then—well, it'll be our turn. I heard they were shipping all the sick ones out of the city to the country."

The women looked at each other waveringly, licking their lips and turning white with dread. They drew their rugs closer about them and said they had to be off, as it was getting dark and they didn't want to catch

cold, and no one ever knew when a change might blow up in the weather and that cloud off to the north looked mighty threatening. In the sudden panic of the approaching plague, Nettie was for the time being forgotten. The clatter and rattle of their wheels was heard along the road, as with whip and tongue they urged their horses homeward.

CHAPTER XVI

ALL night long the wind blew wildly. It raved like a live, mad thing, tearing across the country with tornado-like force.

The house shook and rocked upon its foundations, the rattling windows and clattering doors ready to be burst open every moment.

To the girl, lying wide-eyed throughout the night, it seemed almost as if the voice of the wild wind had the triumphant, mocking tone of the man she loathed. It seemed to typify his immense strength, his power and madness. It was gloating, triumphing over her, buffeting and trampling her down.

Nettie was not given to self-analysis, but for all her simplicity she was capable of intense feeling. Behind her slow thought there slumbered an unlimited capacity for suffering. Now even the elements were preying upon her morbid imagination. She could not sleep for the raging of the terrific wind, the incessant shaking of windows and doors, and all the sounds of a loosely

built old ranch house, rattling and trembling in the furious tempest. As she lay in bed, her face crushed into her pillow, her hands over her ears, as though to deaden the roar of the wind, she could not rid her mind of the thought of the man she hated. She was doomed that night to relive the hideous hours spent with him, until, the vision becoming intolerable to her fevered mind, she sprang up in bed, and rocking herself to and fro like one half demented, sat in judgment upon her own acts.

Why had she not killed herself? Why was she living on? Why was she crouched here now upon her bed, when the Ghost River was at hand? True, it was frozen over, but there were great water holes, where the cattle came to drink, and into one of these she might throw herself as into a deep well. Oblivion would come then. Her sick mind would no longer conjure up the loathsome vision of Bull Langdon, and her ears would be deaf to the taunting, beating challenge of the wind, calling to her with its roaring voice to come forth and fight hand to hand with the fates that had crushed her.

“I got to go out!” she moaned. “I got to go out! I can’t live no longer.”

She put her foot over the side of the bed, and with her head uplifted she listened to what her disordered mind fancied was a voice out of the river, calling to her above the raging of the wind. And as she sat in the dark room, above the raving of the wind, she heard indeed a call—a living voice. Instantly she drew up tensely, holding her breath the more clearly to catch the faint cry.

“Nettie! Nettie!”

It was her mistress. She was out of bed, fumbling for the matches.

The Bar Q was equipped with electricity, but the wires were not connected with the hired girl’s room. It was a pitch-dark night. Frightened as she was of the darkness and the storm, the cry of her well-loved mistress awoke all the defensive bravery of her nature, and she called aloud in reply, feeling along the walls, groping her way to the door.

“I’m coming, Mrs. Langdon! I’m coming! I’m coming!”

In the hall she found the electric button, and hurried across to Mrs. Langdon’s room. She found the cattleman’s wife propped high up on her pillow, breathing with the difficulty of an asthmatic. The window was

wide open, and the shades flapped angrily and tore at the rollers. The face on the bed smiled up wanly at Nettie in the reflected light from the hall.

“Oh, Mrs. Langdon, did you call me? Do you want something?”

“Yes, dear. I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind closing my window for me. I tried to get up myself, but I had a sort of presentiment that—that you were awake and that perhaps you would—would like to come to me.”

“Oh, I was awake, wide, wide awake. I couldn’t sleep to save myself. Isn’t the wind terrible!”

“It’s dying down, I think.”

“Oh, it’s fiercer than ever,” cried the girl wildly. “It’s just terrible. I can’t bear to hear it. I been awake all night. Just seems as if that wind was shoutin’ and screamin’ and makin’ mock of me, Mrs. Langdon. It’s banging upon my—heart. I *hate* the wind. I think it’s alive—a horrible, wild thing. It fights and laughs at me. It’s driving me mad.”

“Ah, Nettie, you are not yourself these days. It is not the wind, but what is in your heart that speaks. We can even control the wind if we wish. Christ did,

and the Christ spirit is in us all, if we only knew how to use it.”

Nettie had closed the windows. On her knees by Mrs. Langdon's bed, she was pulling the covers up and tucking them closely about her, and chafing the thin, cold hands.

“You're cold. Your hands are just like ice. I'm going downstairs to heat some water and fill the hot-water bag for you.”

“No, no, Nettie. You go right back to bed. I'll go down myself by and by, if I feel the need of the bag.”

But though Nettie promised to go back to bed, she hurried down to the lower floor. She had no longer fear of the wind or the darkness. Her mind was intent upon securing the hot-water bag, and she built up a fire in the dead range, and set the kettle upon it.

She was bending over the wood-box, picking out a likely log, when something stirred behind her. Still stooping, she remained still and tense. Slowly the Bull's great arms reached down from behind and enfolded her.

The noise of the wind had deadened his approach to the house. He had come through the living room to

the opened kitchen door, by the stove of which was the bending girl.

She twisted about in his arms, only to bring her face directly against his own. She was held in a vise, in the arms of the huge cattleman. His hoarse whispers were muttered against her mouth, her cheek, her neck.

He chuckled and gloated as she fought for her freedom, dumbly, for her thoughts flew up to the woman upstairs. Above all things, Mrs. Langdon must be spared a knowledge of that which was happening to Nettie.

“Ain’t no use to struggle! Ain’t no use to cry,” he chortled. “I got you tight, and there ain’t no one to hear. I been thinkin’ of you day and night, gell, for months now, and I been countin’ off the minutes for this.”

She cried in a strangled voice:

“She’s upstairs! She’ll hear you! Oh, she’s coming down. Oh, don’t you hear her? Oh, for the love of God! let me go.”

The man heard nothing but his clamoring desires.

“Gimme your lips!” said the Bull huskily.

The clipclop of those loose slippers clattering on the stairs broke upon the hush that had fallen in the kitchen.

Through all her agony Nettie heard the sound of those little feet, and she knew—she felt—just when they had stopped at the lower step as Mrs. Langdon clung to the bannister. Slowly the wife of the cowman sank to the lowest step. She did not lose consciousness, but an icy stiffness crept over her face; her jaw dropped, and a glaze came like a veil before her staring eyes.

With a superhuman effort Nettie had obtained her release. She sprang to Mrs. Langdon, and groveled at her feet.

“Oh, Mrs. Langdon, it ’twant my fault. I didn’t mean to do no harm. Oh, Mrs. Langdon, I wisht I’d heeded the wind! It must’ve been warning me. I wisht I’d gone to the Ghost River, when it called to me to come.”

Mrs. Langdon’s head had slowly dropped forward, just as if the neck had broken. Nettie, beneath her, sought the glance of her eyes, and saw the effort of the moving lips.

“God’s—will,” said the woman slowly. “A dem-on-stration—of—God. I—had—to leave, Nettie. God’s will you—take—my—place.”

Across the half-paralyzed face something flickered

strangely like a faint smile. Then the girl saw her mistress fall, inert and still against the staircase.

A loud cry broke from the frantic Nettie.

“We’ve killed her! We’ve killed Mrs. Langdon!”

“Killed her—nothing,” said the man hoarsely, his face twitching and his hands shaking. “I told you she was ’bout ready to croak, and you heard what she said. You was to take her place. That means——”

Nettie had arisen, and her eyes wide with loathing she stared at him in a sort of mad fury. Somehow she seemed to grow strong and tall, and there was a light of murder in her eyes.

“I’d sooner drown myself in the Ghost River,” she said.

Like one gone blind she felt her way to her room, and this time the man did not follow her.

The wind raved on; the windows shook; the door casements creaked as if an angry hand were upon them; the white curtains flapped in and out. There was the heavy tramp of men’s feet upon the stair; the rough murmur of men’s voices in the hall. She knew they were carrying the dead woman to her room.

Hours of silence followed. The Bull had gone with his men to the bunkhouse, and she was alone in the

house with the dead woman. For the first time, a sense of peace, a passionate gladness swept over the tortured girl. Mrs. Langdon would know the truth at last! She would have no blame in her heart for Nettie—Nettie, who had a psychic sense of the warm nearness and understanding of the woman who had passed away.

As she dressed in the darkness of the room, Nettie talked to her, she believed was with her, catching her breath in trembling little sobs and laughs of reassurance.

“You understand now, don’t you, and you don’t hold it against me? I didn’t mean no wrong. . . . I done the best I could. You don’t ask me to stay now that you know, do you, dear?”

The plaid woolen shawl, a Christmas gift from Mrs. Langdon, covered her completely. The gray light of dawn was filtering through the house; the wind had died down. In its place the snow was falling upon the land, spotless and silent. Nettie’s face was whiter than the snow as she left her room. Mrs. Langdon’s door was closed, and, hesitating only a moment, Nettie stole to it on tiptoe. With her face pressed against it, she called to the woman inside

“Good-by, Mrs. Langdon. Nobody will ever be so kind to me in this world as you have been.”

She listened, almost as if she heard that faint, sweet voice in reply. Then, strangely comforted, she wrapped her cape closer about her, and in her rubbered feet Nettie Day stole down the stairs and went out into the storm.

CHAPTER XVII

THE veteran geldings that had pulled Dr. McDermott for years over the roads of Alberta had long since been replaced by a gallant little Ford, that purred and grunted its way along the roads and trails in all kinds of weather, and performed miraculous feats over the roughest of trails, across fields, plowed land, chugging sturdily through to the medical man's goal.

Many of the farmers belonged to that type that seemed to believe implicitly in the proverb, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." They laughed or poohpoohed the doctor's warning admonitions in regard to the plague, already as far west as Winnipeg. They "joshed" and "guyed" him, and asked: "Lookin' for trade, doc? You can't make me sick with your pills, so you better keep them to home. Haw, haw!" And they threw the disinfectant and pills (to be taken should certain symptoms develop) away out of sight and mind, and made jokes when he was gone about,

“Doc gettin’ cold feet like the city guys. If he don’t look out he’ll be gittin’ just like them paper collar dudes in town and want soothin’ syrup for white liver.” They hugged to themselves the imbecile delusion that since they lived a cleaner and healthier life than mere city dwellers, they would prove immune to diseases that were a peculiarity of the city.

It may not be out of place to mention here that county and city hospitals numbered among their patients far more people from the country than the cities, and that the insane asylums were almost wholly recruited from the lone farm and ranch houses, where the monotonous pressure of the long life of loneliness took its due toll of those condemned, as it were, to solitary confinement.

Howbeit, the “doc” kept his stubborn vigil. He did not propose to be caught “napping,” and he traveled the roads of Alberta, going from ranch to ranch, with his warnings and instructions and despised pills.

While returning from some such expedition into the foothills he stopped, in the dawn of the day, to fasten the curtains about his car, as the wind of the wild night before had turned with the morning into a snowstorm. A straight, level road was before him, and the doctor

figured on making Cochrane in half an hour. Up to this time, in spite of the weather and the perilous trail to Banff, he had had no trouble with the engine. Now, however, as he cranked, the Ford, a peculiarly temperamental and uncertain car, refused to produce the spark. He lifted the hood, made an inspection, cranked again and again; held his side, and groaned and grunted with the exertion, raged and cursed a bit, regretted the old veterans; then, throwing his dogskin coat over the engine, he searched for the trouble underneath. He was lying on his back, a sheepskin under him, tinkering away with the "dommed cantankerous works," when, putting out his head to look for his wrench, he saw something approaching on the road that caused him to sit bolt upright in blank astonishment.

Her cape flapping about her, her head weighed down with the falling snow, her eyes wide and blank, snow-blind, Nettie Day swept before the wind on the Banff trail. The doctor, on his feet now, blocked her further passage, for she seemed not to see him but to be walking in a somnambulist's trance.

"What are you doin' on the road at this hour, lass?"

She did not answer, but stared out blankly before her, shaking her snow-crowned head.

A quick professional glance at the girl and the doctor realized her condition and the need for immediate action. She made no demur; indeed, was touchingly meek, as he assisted her into the car. He tucked the fur robe about her, buttoned the curtains tightly, and, his face puckered with concern, he poured out a stiff "peg" of whisky. She drank mechanically, gulping slightly as the spirits burnt her throat. Her eyes were drooping drowsily, and when the doctor put his sheepskin under her head, she sighed with intense weariness, and then lay still at the bottom of the car.

The doctor "doggoned" that engine, shoved the crank in, and, miraculously, there was the healthy chug-chug of the engine, and the little car went roaring on its way.

"You're a dommed good lad!" gloated Dr. McDermott and pulled on his dogskin gloves, wiped the frost from the glass, threw a glance back to make sure the girl was all right, and put on top speed.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Lady Angella Loring arose at five in the morning, put on overalls, sheepskin coat, woolen gauntlets, and heavy overshoes. She tramped through the steadily falling snow to her barn, which housed a cow, a sow, a mare heavy in foal, a saddle horse and the poultry.

The March winds that had raged all the previous night had turned with the morning to a snowstorm, and the flakes were now falling so heavily that the barn was only just visible from the house as the woman rancher plodded through the blinding flakes.

First she threw into the pig-pen the pails of swill and mush she had brought from the house, then watered the stock, no easy matter, for the pumped water froze quickly in the trough, and she was forced to refill it several times. That done, she climbed into the hay-loft, and with her pitchfork thrust down through the openings the morning feed for the cow, carefully measured chop from the bin for the mare, allowing half a

pail of oats and a bunch of hay for the saddle horse; she threw to the chickens, hens that had followed hungrily in her wake, a pan full of ground barley and wheat seasoned with cayenne pepper, epsom salts and bits of bones and eggshells.

Finally she went to her milking. The cow was fresh, and she had a full pail. Half of this, however, she fed to the restless little calf, nosing near its mother, and trying to shake off the muzzle that Angella had snapped on the night before in order to wean it. The task of feeding the calf required patience and time, for the restive little "dogie" nearly knocked over the pail, and had to be taught how to drink by feeling the woman's fingers thrust, wet with the milk, into its mouth. She was more than an hour about her chores. With the half-filled pail in one hand, she tramped back to the house through the snow, falling now more heavily than before.

Before leaving the house Angella had lit her fire, and now the place was warm and snug, and the singing kettle lent it an air of cheer. There was a certain attractiveness about the poor shack on the prairie, in spite of its rough, bare log walls and two wee windows. Though she chose to wear men's clothing, and had cut

her hair like a man's, yet one had only to look about that room to perceive that the eternal feminine had persisted notwithstanding her angry and pitiful attempt to quench it.

She had made most of the furniture herself, crude pieces fashioned from willow fence posts and grocery boxes, yet they betrayed a craftsman's talent, for the chairs, though designed for use, were rustic and pretty, and she had touched them in spots with bright red paint. The table, over which a vivid red oilcloth was nailed, made a bright patch of color in the room. Red, in most places, for decorative purposes, can be used only sparingly, but in a bleak log shack a splash of this ruddy color gives both warmth and cheer. The floor had been scrubbed until it was almost white, and a big red-brown cowhide made a carpet near the couch, which was covered with a calfskin. Indian ornaments and beadwork, bits of crockery and pewter were on the shelves that lined one side of the shack, and where also she kept her immaculately shining kettles, cooking utensils and dishes. A curtain of burlap sacks, edged with scarlet cloth, hung before the bedroom doorway. The pillows on the spotless bed were covered with cases made of flour bags. A large grocers' box, into which shelves

had been nailed, was also covered with similar cloth and served as a sort of dressing table. Two chairs, made from smaller boxes, were padded with burlap, and a triangular shelf with a curtain before it made a closet in the corner of the room.

A huge gray cat followed the woman recluse about the room, sleepily rubbing itself against her, and purring with contentment when she picked it up in her arms.

Angella made her breakfast of oatmeal and tea, serving from the stove directly onto her plate. Her cat nestled in her lap while she breakfasted, and she smoothed it absently as she ate.

Time had smoothed out the lines on her face instead of adding to them, and the strained look of suffering in her eyes had given way to a healthy gaze. Her skin had almost the fresh color of a girl's. Her hair had grown abundantly, though it still was short and almost gray, but its natural curliness lent her face a soft and youthful air. There was no sign of the dread disease which had once threatened her life. She looked normal and wholesome as she sat at her table, her cat in her lap, deep in a brown study. It would be hard to say what filled Angella's thoughts when she was thus shut in

alone in her shack upon the prairie. She had ceased long since to conjure up bitter visions of the man who was responsible for her father's death and her own exile. Her thoughts, at least, were no longer unbearably painful as in those early days when first she had come to Alberta, and many a day and night, shut in alone with her dismal secret, she had wrestled in bitter anguish with the crowding thoughts that came like ghosts to haunt her.

However, even in winter she had little enough time for thinking. Her life was crowded with work. When she had finished her meal, she washed her dishes, made her bed, kneaded the dough for her weekly baking, set a pot of beans, soaked overnight, into the oven, and prepared to go out again, this time to the pasture, where her few head of stock "rustled" for their feed all winter. A snowstorm at this time of year is always dangerous for the breeding stock dropping their calves with the approach of the spring. There were water holes, too, in the frozen slough that had to be broken in every day so that the cattle might have the water they needed. Angella, ax in hand, opened the door of her shack. A gale of wind and snow almost blinded her, so that at first she did not see the Ford that was plow-

ing its way noisily and pluckily down the road allowance that led to her house. At the honk of the doctor's horn, which he worked steadily to attract her, she peered out through the storm, and she turned to the gate, where the car had now stopped.

She never encouraged the visits of Dr. McDermott, who had saved her life when first she had come to Alberta; but neither was she ever uncivil when he did come. Time had accustomed her to his regular calls, and, in truth, though she would not have admitted it for anything in the world, she had come to look forward to these visits, and to depend upon them for her news of the world, which she so bitterly told herself she had cast off forever.

Now, as his ruddy face was thrust through the curtains, Angella, frowning slightly, tramped to the car.

"Are you strong enough to lend me a hand lifting something?" asked the doctor.

"Certainly I'm strong enough. What do you mean?"

Dr. McDermott, out of the car now, unbuttoned the back curtains, and revealed to the amazed Angella the still heavily sleeping Nettie.

"There's a sick lass here," he said solemnly, "and a lass in sore trouble, I'm thinking."

A strange expression had come into the face of Angella Loring. Not so long since, it seemed to her, she had seen as in a dream this girl now lying on the floor of the doctor's car leaning over her, and had regarded her with the tender, compassionate gaze of her own mother. In the days of semi-consciousness that had followed her first seizure, the Englishwoman could endure the sight and touch of no one but the girl with the Madonna face. Without realizing what was amiss, all she knew was that Nettie was now as helpless as she had been when the girl had cared for her, and without a word or a question she helped the doctor lift Nettie out of the car and to carry her into the house.

Angella Loring believed that there was nothing about her of which this Scotch doctor approved. He came, she thought, merely to exercise his abnormal habit of interference in other folks' affairs and to find fault with her chosen manner of life. She had at first, in her desire to be alone, not hesitated to tell him she preferred her own company to any other. He had barked back that her taste was unnatural, and it would take more than "a bitter-tongued lass" to drive him from his duty. Questioned sarcastically as to what he conceived his duty to be, he had replied solemnly, "To

keep an eye on you, lass, and to see that you come to no harm.”

Furious as this gratuitous resolve to care for her had made the woman who believed she could fend for herself in the world, his answer had nevertheless brought the bitter tears to her angry eyes, so that she could not find words for a retort. The doctor's intention to protect the woman by no means made him lenient in his judgment of her; he denounced her cut hair as outrageous; her men's clothes as disgraceful, and her work in the field as against nature. She secretly enjoyed his explosion of rage when she took service at Bar Q.

No lass, declared the doctor, in her sober senses would disfigure herself by cutting off her head the hair that her Maker had planted there. No true woman would wear a mon's clothes. Mere contact with a wild brute like Bull Langdon would muddy any pure woman in the land. Her obsession—which is what he termed her aversion to his own sex—and her unnatural life alone was a pathological matter, for which she needed to be treated as for the unfortunate illness she had contracted in London. Some day, he warned her, she would thank him for the one cure as well as for the other.

She let him talk on, usually disdainingly to answer, and she pursued her way undeterred by his wholesale condemnation of her and her course of life.

Yet Angella Loring, holding a little baby in her arms for the first time in her life, and looking down with dewy eyes upon the small blonde head resting so helplessly against her breast, could she have seen the face of the country doctor as he looked at the cropped bent head, would have known that all his thoughts of her were not wholly hard.

Glaring up at him to hide the impending tears, she almost surprised that look of grave tenderness on the rough face of the man who had known her as a child.

“She doesn’t want it,” said Angella Loring. “Her own child! Well, then, I’ll keep it! It shan’t want. I’ll care for it.”

“It’s a wee laddie—born before its time, and nane too strong.” He had a habit when unduly moved of lapsing into Gaelic, and what he muttered was unintelligible to the woman, wholly taken up with the baby in her arms. Could she have understood him she would have heard the doctor say that a woman who could mother another woman’s “bairn” would be a good mother to her own.

Outside the snow was still heavily falling. Great mounds were piling up on all sides. That world of snow might have appalled the stranger, but to the farmer it meant certain moisture in the soil. A spring snowstorm was even more desirable for the land than rain, as it melted gradually into the earth. Already the sun was gleaming through the falling snowflakes, and the intense cold had abated.

“Weel, weel, I’ll be off for a while, lass. There’s much still to attend to.”

“You can’t go out in that storm,” said Angella roughly. “Wait, I’ll get you something to eat. Not even your Ford could plow through snow like that.”

“Maybe not, and I’ll not be taking the Ford.”

“Well, I’ve no vehicle to lend you.”

“I’ll go afoot,” said the doctor, wrapping his woolen scarf about his neck, preparatory to going out.

“You’re a fool to go out,” said Angella crossly. “Wait till you have a cup of coffee anyway.”

“I’ll be going just across the land, to the lad’s cabin. I heard last night that he was back.”

“Who’s cabin? What land?”

“Young Cyril Stanley’s—the scallawag. I’ll have

thot to say to him, I'm thinking, will bring him across in a hurry."

"He needn't come here!" Angella had started up savagely. "I don't want any man here, least of all a dog like that who'd do such a thing to a girl. He can keep away from *my* house. He's not fit to—to even look at her now. No man is."

"Weel, weel, 'tis true, but we're all liable to mistakes, ma'am, and young blood is hot and careless, and who are we—you and I—to judge another? We must look to our own consciences first, ma'am."

"Yes, stand up for him—defend him. You men all hang together. I know you all, and I hate you. I——"

She broke off, for the doctor was looking at her with such a strange look of mingled earnestness and tenderness, that the stormy words died on her lips, and she dropped her wet face upon the soft little one in her arms.

Dr. McDermott closed the door softly.

CHAPTER XIX

THE tour of the Bar Q purebred bulls had been a disastrous and costly one. From city to city, at a staggering expense, went the prize herd, from which extraordinary things had been expected. Wherever they touched it was their misfortune to be turned back or shunted farther afield. That winter the country was suffering from the fearful scourge, which having stricken down its victims by the thousands in Europe had passed over the sea to America.

Then there was a time when the Bar Q herd was condemned by a harassed and irritated authority who, upon the diagnosis of an incompetent veterinary surgeon, pronounced the cattle to be suffering from foot and mouth disease, and an order was issued for the slaughter of the entire herd, and the burning of all sheds, cars or other houses in which they had been penned. Bull Langdon found himself held indefinitely in the States, as he fought by injunction proceedings the destruction of his herd, which would have meant an incalculable loss—even ruin—to him.

The adjournments and delays, the long, drawn-out legal processes, kept the herd in the States from December till February, and when at last they were freed the penned-in brutes were in a deteriorated condition. Their long confinement, the unaccustomed traveling, and the lack of proper care, made the once smooth bulls difficult to handle and dangerous, so that by the time the herd was ready to start back for Canada more than one of the "hands" who had come to the States with them deserted the outfit rather than risk looking after the uncertain animals on tour.

Bull Langdon, raging and fretting over the enforced delays in the States, harassed by his losses and his failure to obtain a showing of the famous herd, was in a black mood when at last the outfit reached Barstairs.

Here fresh trouble awaited him. Of all the bulls, the Prince had proved the most dangerous and erratic of temper; his ceaseless bellowing and attempts to break loose had done much to make the outfit unpopular throughout their travels. Always uncertain and dangerous, back at Barstairs he became well-nigh uncontrollable, and there was no "hand" of the entire outfit, save Cyril, who dared approach the raging beast, as behind heavily barred fences he ranged up and down

restlessly, calling his resounding cries to the cattle that he could smell even if he could not see them in adjoining pastures, and something of the wild spirit of the animal appealed to his owner, whose own pent-up rage seemed to find vent in a savage roaring voice. A kindred spirit bound them together. Often, when the exasperations of the tour threatened to overwhelm him, he would go to where the Prince ranged up and down within the narrow space of his shed bellowing and moaning his demands for freedom. At such times Bull Langdon, from the other side of the bars, would call to the bull, not soothingly, but in a tone of encouragement, as though cheering and "rooting" for the rebellious brute.

"Go to it!" he would snarl through the bars. "Let 'em know you're here! Keep 'em awake. Make their nerves jump. Go to it, *bull!*"

Up to the time of their return to Barstairs, Cyril Stanley had looked after the animal, and so long as he was at hand the Prince remained fairly well under control. But Cyril, who had been silent and morose all through the tour in the States, suddenly decided, once back in Canada, to quit the outfit. The cattleman received his quiet request to be relieved of his job with consternation and fury.

What did he want to leave for? Hadn't he had his pay raised four times already? Hadn't he got \$500 he'd been promised? He had practically full charge of the herd already, and the foreman's job and wages would belong to him before spring.

But neither bluster nor curses moved him, and the offer of increases in wages, heavy bonuses and enormous salary were steadily refused. Money meant nothing now to Cyril. He was heartily sick of the whole business. He felt the restlessness that comes to a man as soon as he feels himself free again and on his native soil, and longs to be moving along the trail. To roam from place to place seemed all that was left to him since his dream of a home had been shattered, and long absence had not cured him of the sickness of love. He had had enough of cattle. He was done with ranching, and when the Bull demanded just what it was that he proposed to do, he answered after a thoughtful pause: "Think I'll hike for Bow Claire. Plenty of work there, I guess. The river'll be high when the snows begin to melt, and they'll be wantin' 'hands' and loggers at the camp."

Meanwhile, Bull Langdon found his hands full. Those were the days of labor unrest when there were

a dozen employers in the employment offices for every employee; when wages were soaring; when men looked the "bosses" squarely in the face, and made their own terms. The cattleman had returned at a time when labor was so scarce and independent in Alberta, that many of the farmers were forced to do their own work, or grub together with other farmers on shares. It is certain that there was not a ranchman in the country willing to work with Bull Langdon. Even those he had formerly been able to tyrannize over gave him a wide berth; never had the Bar Q been so short-handed, and the departure of Cyril, who was invaluable among the purebred, was a real disaster to the Bull camp.

For some time Langdon had been beset with an almost insensate craving for Nettie Day. All the time he had been in the States she had never been wholly absent from his mind, though the anxieties of the tour had kept his desire for the girl in check; but once back in Canada, his mind reverted to her incessantly.

As he stood watching Cyril Stanley disappear at a slow lope over the hills, it occurred to him that he might be making for Bar Q and Nettie, and the thought gave him pause. The idea that Nettie and Cyril should come together again was more than he could stand. The

blood rushed madly to his head, and everything went red before his eyes.

Batt Leeson, a hand who had served directly under Cyril, was the second-best upon the place; he could be trusted to look after the cattle, and was known to be a conscientious workman, although he had never yet been entrusted with any position of authority. When Cyril's job was offered him, therefore, he was rather afraid and hesitant. However, there was no foreman at this time at the Bull camp, which had been stripped for the trip to the States, and there was no other man in the outfit fit to be one.

The Bull considered the possibility of Cyril's changing his mind and returning to Bar Q. He knew what logging in the lumber camps meant, and that though the work would not daunt the young man, the food and the dirt would. The daily association with them "damn dirty forriners," as Bull named the Russian loggers, would soon be too much for a white man, he decided, and counted upon Cyril's return.

When he left the camp he was by no means easy in his mind about his cattle. He took the trail for Bar Q in his big car, racing ahead in the teeth of a veritable cyclone, but the good car held its straight course gal-

lantly. It was late at night when Bull Langdon reached the ranch in the foothills, and the noise of his arrival could not be heard above the gale. When he saw that light in the kitchen, he came warily upon the place. Sniffing the air like a bloodhound tracking down his prey, he cautiously approached the kitchen where Nettie's light still burned. Concealed in the darkness of the living room his greedy eyes devoured the girl as she moved about the room busy at the great range. All thought was swept from his mind, leaving only the mad desire to crush in his arms once again the girl who awakened in him this overmastering passion.

Meanwhile, Cyril Stanley had mechanically turned his horse's head toward the foothills. He had no definite purpose in mind; he was vaguely conscious of being hungry for a sight of Nettie. His long absence had not cured him; he loved the girl as deeply as on that first day when their eyes had met across the space of the poor D. D. D. shack, and the room was full of laughter.

How pretty she had looked, in spite of her shabby dress; how her hair had shone in the sun! How gentle and sweet and good she had been to her little brothers

and sisters! Even the strange woman in the C. P. R. shack had melted before Nettie's shy effort to help her in those days, reflected the unhappy Cyril. No one could have resisted her, and he told himself that it was small wonder that he had "fallen so hard" for her. He had seen many women in the big cities of America, but had found no face like Nettie's. No, he wouldn't change *his* girl for any girl in the States. And as in his thought he called her "his," he awoke suddenly to the realization that Nettie was "his" no longer; someone had stolen her heart from him! Yet such a longing was on him to see the beloved face again, that he resolved to risk her displeasure by going to Bar Q before burying himself in the deep woods at the lumber camp.

On the road he fell in with a couple of riders from the hill country, and their suggestive gossip aroused him somewhat from his gloom, for he caught the girl's name and the sneer that came into their voices caused him to sit up abruptly, his hat pushed back, and his eyes full of dangerous interrogation. They protested they had only been "stringing" him, and rode rapidly off. What they had hinted was that the quicker the girl at Bar Q was married, the better, and that he, Cyril Stanley, had come back only just in time.

Cyril turned this over heavily in his mind, shaking his head as though the problem were beyond him, but he changed his course away from the hill, deciding to spend a few days at his homestead. He would stay in the little house he had built for Nettie; he wanted to look over the place that was to have been their home. He would go to Bar Q later. At least, Nettie would not refuse to bid him good-by.

As he rode along, his hat over his eyes, smarting tears bit at the lids, and the heart of the lad who used once to go singing along the trail and about his work was heavy as lead within him.

At the homely little cabin, faith and confidence in Nettie seemed to come back to him; perhaps her strange behavior had all been some hideous mistake. Perhaps she had been merely angry at his going to Barstairs. Well, a girl had a right to be angry, and maybe she had gotten over it by now. There was no accounting for a girl's moods, he reasoned; he "wasn't no saint himself" to hold anything against her. If only Nettie would smile at him again he would forget all he had suffered during all those cruel months. If only she would look at him and speak to him as she used to do. Nettie! *His* girl! His own, out of all the world. It

had been love at first sight; so much they had always agreed on, and she had been fond of repeating that it was also a love that would never die. She had meant it then, as they sat hand in hand amongst the berry bushes, with the evening sunlight on the tree-tops glistening like moon rays on the whispering leaves.

The longer Cyril stayed there gazing around the cabin that was filled with things Nettie herself had helped him to make, the stronger grew his hope and faith. A new exhilaration suddenly possessed him, making him feel that life was worth living again. He looked with a new warmth and kindness upon the world, and not even the slowly gathering storm that darkened the March day could quell his mounting spirits.

He was whistling and bustling about the shack when he heard a banging upon the door, and opened the door to find Dr. McDermott standing there. He greeted his old friend with unaffected delight, for the doctor was always associated in his thoughts with Nettie, whom he had brought into the world in the best day's work he ever accomplished, so thought Cyril.

"Hello, doc. Gee, it's great to see your good old mug again. How'd you know I was back? How're you?"

But the old doctor was scowling at him like an angry

bulldog, underlip thrust out, and his face puckered into lines of unmistakable disapproval; worse still, he was pointedly refusing Cyril's proffered handshake.

"No, sir," he said, "I'll not shake hands with a scallawag. Not till he's done the right thing, by gad!"

"Wow, doc! What's bitin' you?"

"Lad," said Dr. McDermott sternly, "I'm not here on any pleasure call. I've come as a matter of duty, mon to mon to ask—to demand—that you do the right thing by that puir lass."

"Lass? Who do you mean?"

"You know domned well who I mean. None other, mon, but Nettie Day."

At the mention of that name Cyril's face turned suddenly gray and stern.

"There are certain things I don't discuss with no man, doc. One of them's—Nettie. I don't let no man talk to me about *her*. Some coyotes on the road stopped me, and started to blat some stuff about her, but they shut up tight enough and gave me the heels of their broncs before they'd barely got started with that line of talk. And I ain't lettin' even an old friend like you say anything about Nettie. What's fallen between her and me is our affair."

Dr. McDermott's fist came heavily down upon the table.

"Lad, ye're going to marry that girl, if I have to shove you by your neck to the parson."

A light flamed in the boy's face; his eyes widened as he stared incredulously at the doctor.

"I say," he said, all but weeping for joy, "that's a good joke on me. Is *that* what you're drivin' at, doc? Marry her! Say, I'd marry Nettie Day this blessed minute if she'd have me!"

"Very good, lad. You'll have your chance. I've got her now at Miss Loring's. I'll go myself after the missionary, if you'll lend me a horse. Trail's not fit for a car. I'll do my best to get back first thing in the morning. Meanwhile, you'll have a chance to get your house in shape. You'll want it to shine for that wife and baby of yours."

"That wi—and— Say, what's the joke, anyway?"

The doctor was now in better humor. His errand had been highly successful, and after all a lad was only a lad, and he liked young Cyril Stanley. There was good stuff in Cyril—good Scotch stuff.

Cyril, taking the doctor's remark for one of the coarse jokes commonly cracked in that countryside at

the time of a wedding, laughed half-heartedly, but the words stuck queerly in his mind. To change the subject, he said:

“Doc, what do you suppose ever possessed Nettie to treat me as she did? When I got back from Barstairs—let me see, that was last October—no, a bit before that—what does she do but run away from me, and when I chased after her, she turned me down dead cold. Said she’d changed—wasn’t the same, and a—and—she simply sent me packing—made me think someone’d cut me out with her and——”

Cyril broke off. The memory of that time was still an open wound in his mind.

“I don’t blame her a bit,” blustered the doctor, in assumed anger. “If it wasn’t for that baby now, she’d do better to send you packing altogether. What’s the matter with you young people today? Can’t you hold back like respectable folk? Don’t you realize that even though you marry the gell now, she’ll always be branded with the shame of this thing; and it’s not only the lass to be considered, there’s the innocent child—the baby to consider.”

“That’s the third or fourth time that you’ve said

that word. What do you mean, anyway? What baby? Whose?"

"Whose? Why, your own, lad—yours and Nettie's."

"Mine and— Have you gone plumb crazy, doc?"

"Not I, lad. I helped bring your child into the world this morning, and Nettie's resting quiet now, and waiting for you, I have no doubt. Now, lad——"

He broke off, for something in the look and motion of Cyril Stanley stopped him from further reproach.

"I've no intention of being hard on you. Young blood—is—young blood, and I was young myself once."

Cyril had staggered back, like one mortally struck. Slowly the truth had dawned upon him, and with the realization that Nettie had been false to him, something primitive and furious seemed to shake the foundations of his being; something that was made up of outrage and ungodly hatred.

"So—she's—got—a baby, has she?"

"A wee lad——"

"And you come to me—to *me* to get a name for it!"

"To you? Who else?"

"Who else?" jeered the lad frantically. "Ask *her*!"

Dr. McDermott recoiled before the savage glare in the young man's eyes, and slowly he began to realize

the truth. He was stunned by the thought that another man than Cyril had been the cause of the girl's downfall. Who could it be? Slowly he turned the matter over in his mind, rejecting one by one each of the possible men he could think of, till at last the great sinister figure of the Bull loomed up before his mind's eye. He began clearly to recall a certain day at Bar Q when he had caught the evil expression of the cowman's face as, behind his wife's back, he followed Nettie Day with his greedy, covetous eyes.

Dr. McDermott's shoulders seemed to bend as if a great burden lay upon them, and he looked long and searchingly at the furious boy before him. When he spoke his voice was shaken with emotion.

"The Lord help you, lad!" he said. "The Lord help us all in our deep trouble. Give us sober and humble hearts. Teach us to bear as best we can the iniquities of the wicked who beset us. Amen."

The sound of the door closing fell like a lash on Cyril Stanley's brain. Alone with his frenzy and despair, he looked wildly round as if to find some outlet for his feelings. A great ax lay on the floor near the out-kitchen door, and the young man seized it and swung it high in his hand. It crashed down upon the table,

splintering it in two. Again and again the ax descended until everything he had bought for Nettie Day lay in fragments about the room. Then he took from the storeroom a five-gallon can of kerosene, and emptied it deliberately over the floor.

He put on chapps, sheepskin, fur cap and spurs, tied up a few other necessaries in a bundle and walked heavily to the door. Outside, he smashed the windows and a gale of snow flew into the wrecked house. Lastly, he struck a match and, guarding the flame, he knelt in the doorway and threw it into a pool of kerosene.

The flames around the floor crept like snakes, then leaped up the walls, and from the piles of broken chairs and tables went roaring to the roof.

The house went up in a furious blaze. Long after Cyril Stanley had disappeared into the great timber country the smoke of his burning homestead rose above the blanket of snow, until the smoldering ruins were buried under the soft whiteness and covered from the eyes of the world. But later on the sunshine of the spring would melt the shroud away and reveal where his love lay ruined on the prairie.

CHAPTER XX

SPRING came late to Alberta that year, and it was May before the farmers were upon the land.

Zero weather followed the heavy March snowfalls, and May was well advanced before the first thaw began.

Angella Loring was particularly anxious that year to be upon her land early, for she wished to keep Nettie with her, and had conceived an ambitious scheme which she believed would tempt the girl to remain. Ever since her recovery Nettie had been waiting for the weather to break, so that she might go to Calgary and try to find work there, where she would be unknown, and Dr. McDermott had told her how great was the scarcity of help in the city. Angella, from the first day, had taken charge of the baby, and indeed it might have been her child rather than Nettie's. For Nettie was afraid of this child of the Bull's. Before the cold spell had broken, and while she was still weak, she would sit at the window and stare out over the bleak landscape with

unseeing eyes. Spring is always an unpleasant season in Alberta, and that year it was even worse than usual. While Angella was away at the barns or the fields busy with her work, Nettie found herself shut in alone with her baby, but she never went near it, or attempted to take it in her arms or caress it.

The child was undersized and frail, but it cried very little, and its tiny, weird face looked curiously like a bird's. There was something pitifully unfinished about it although it was in no way deformed. It had simply been forced into the world before its time, and denied the sustenance of its mother's breast—for Nettie was unable to nurse her child—it made slow progress. At the end of April it weighed no more than the day it was born.

If Nettie, immersed in her own sorrow, was oblivious of her child's condition, its foster-mother was filled with alarm and anxiety. Dr. McDermott was no longer an unwelcome visitor at the shack, indeed he was often sent for when Jake, who had taken to haunting the ranch, and sleeping in Cyril's deserted sheds, could be despatched upon such an errand. No matter where he was, or what he was doing, the doctor seldom failed to respond to Angella's summons. Tramping into the

shack, stamping the snow off his feet, he would look with pretended fierceness at the two women, looking for something to scold about and always, finding it, but although his words were rough, his hands were gentle as a mother's as he took the baby in his arms. He would gaze intently at the little creature with all a parent's anxiety while its mother held aloof, keeping her gaze riveted upon the window.

More than once, Angella Loring found herself very close to the doctor, and looking up, he would see her eyes were misty with solicitude over "her" baby. To cover his own feelings, he would ask her to fetch this and that and she waited upon him meekly. Once kneeling by his side, as the baby lay upon his knees, she saw its little wan face puckered into something that she firmly declared was a smile. In her delight and excitement she put her arms around the baby on his knee, and before she realized what was happening she found her hand enclosed in the doctor's warm clasp. Their eyes met, and the color slowly receded from her cheeks.

That night, she went into the bedroom, carefully closing the burlap curtain between it and the outer room, and searching amongst the contents of the box

she had brought with her from England, Angella Loring found something that was no familiar object in that prairie shack—a mirror—a woman's hand mirror, of tortoiseshell, with a silver crest upon it. For some time she held it in her hand, face down, before she mustered courage to lift it slowly to her face. For a long time she gazed into the glass, the bright, haunted eyes slowly scanning the strange face, with its crown of soft gray curls. She was kneeling on the floor by her bed, and suddenly the hand holding the mirror fell into her lap, and Angella Loring said in a choking whisper looking down at her reflection, "I'm an old fool! God help me!"

Her program for that season was an ambitious one for a fragile woman; she purposed to put in one hundred and fifty acres of crop, and to hay over sixty more acres, and not content with working her own land, she intended to work and seed Cyril's as well. This latter was the stake to which she hoped to tie Nettie to her. She felt sure that the girl would not fail to respond to this opportunity to help the man she loved, for according to the homestead law of that time, land had to be fenced, worked and lived upon for a certain term of years, and by abandoning his home-

stead, Cyril stood to lose the quarter, besides the waste of all the work and money already expended upon the place. When Angella laid her proposition before Nettie, she was rewarded by the first sign of animation the girl had shown since the doctor had brought her to the ranch. Her apathy and despair fell from her, and when Angella told her that unless Nettie would give her the help she needed she would be obliged to employ hired hands which she could not afford, Nettie's eagerness knew no bounds.

"Oh my, yes, Angel, I just wisht you'd give me the chance. I'd love to do the work. I'll do it alone if—you'll let me—I'll work my fingers to the bone to—to—make up to him—and to you, Angel."

"Thats all right. I'm glad you feel that way, because I need your help badly. I believe it's going to be a crop year anyway, because the snow when it does melt is bound to mean all sorts of moisture for the land. Meanwhile, we can do a bit of fencing. Mine need repairing badly, and so do parts of Cyril's. We've got to cross fence between his pasture land and where the crop is to go in. He's got quite a few head of horses and cattle running loose, I see, and they've got to be driven off the grain land. I'm going out after

a couple of heavy horses of his I saw the other day on his land. I think I can corral them, and they'll come in first rate for the plow."

"Oh, Angel, let me go. I understand horses better'n you do. It's awful hard to drive them when they've been loose like that all winter. So let me go along."

"You'll stay right here. Look here, now, *I'm* going to run things here, and you do as you're told."

"Well, don't forget to take a halter, will you, and Angel, you want to keep away from their hind feet—even if you are on horse. Sometimes they kick right out. Dad was lamed that way, drivin' in wild horses. Got kicked while on horse-back, right in the shin. My, it was awful!"

"I'm all right. Don't you worry about me," said Angella. "Mind the baby while I'm gone, and look here, if he cries, there's barley gruel in that bottle. Heat it by standing it in hot water—but don't let it get too hot. I think he'll be all right till I get back."

Nettie did a curious thing that day when Angella had left her alone. She went over to the rough cot that Angella had made out of a grocery box for the baby, and for a long time she stood looking down at the little sleeper. Almost unconsciously her hand touched her

baby's tiny hand that clung at once to her finger and at that warm contact a flood of emotion overwhelmed Nettie's heart. It was as if tentacles had reached out and fastened upon her very soul; the little curled up fist seemed to scorch her with its mute reproach and appeal for her affection. Nettie pulled her hand fiercely away, and fled into the adjoining room, her breath coming and going tumultuously.

"I don't want to love him," she cried. "I don't want to. He's *his*, and I wisht I'd died before I—I—come to this."

Seeking some physical outlet for her pent-up feelings she looked about her, and saw a pair of scissors on Angella's dressing table. A moment later she found herself slashing into her long hair. The heavy blonde braids dropped to the floor with a soft thud. Nettie, shorn of her beautiful hair, was not, however, disfigured, in fact her childlike, simple beauty seemed almost lovelier for the cropped head, accentuating her extreme youth. But when Angella coming in stopped on the threshold and stared at her condemningly, Nettie knew that she had done wrong.

"Nettie Day, what you have done is an act of sheer

vandalism," said the woman, who herself had cut her own hair to the scalp.

"Oh, Angel, I wanted to be like you. I didn't want no more to be like a woman——"

Angella's face paled.

"So I am not like a woman, then?"

"I didn't mean that, Angel. You're more like a woman in your heart than anyone I ever knew, 'cept Mrs. Langdon, and I just wanted to make myself so that—so that no one would ever want to look at me again. Just 's if I was same as a man and——"

"And I suppose you think you've succeeded," said Angella dryly. "Never fear. It will take more than the cutting of your hair to keep men from you, Nettie Day. However, it's your own hair, and I suppose you meant all right. They say 'Hell is paved with good intentions.' But you needn't think that because I—was fool enough to—to—make a freak of myself, that I approve of you or anyone else doing it."

"I'm sorry, Angel. I'm awfully sorry. I—I want to be as much like you as I can be. I want to wear them men's overalls too and do——"

"As for the overalls, that's all right, *they're* sensible; but, look here, Nettie, don't let me catch you doing

anything like that to disfigure yourself again, and don't you go slashing any more into your hair. It doesn't look bad now, but even you would look a fright if you had cut it as I did—right to the scalp.”

“It's growing in now. And it looks—right pretty, Angel,” said Nettie wistfully. “D'you know, you ain't nearly as ugly as you think you are,” she added with girlish naïveté, which brought a chuckle from Angella, warming the baby's bottle at the stove.

They began to fence in mid-April. The ground was hard, and having no proper hole diggers they were at a still greater disadvantage. However, Angella said she did not want to waste any time on repairing fences, once the land was ready for the crop. Cyril's quarter was already fairly well fenced, but the dividing line between the two quarters had never been completed. Now that the two places were to be worked as one the line-fence had become unnecessary. By persistent labor upon their first task of the season, they achieved an inadequate protection for the proposed crop. The uneven line of barbed wire, set on unsteady posts, aroused the derisive condemnation of Dr. McDermott, who warned them that cattle would have no trouble

in breaking through and that the two wires did not constitute a legal fence, three being the required number. Angella, colder and more unbending than ever in her attitude to the doctor, rejoined that "they would take their chances this year."

The herd law was in force, and it was against the law for cattle to be at large on the road or road allowances in that particular part of the country. The doctor grouchily warned them that that concerned stray cattle, but there was absolutely nothing to prevent a herd driven by riders from going through. Nothing, returned Angella indignantly, except the fact that reputable riders had a professional sense of honor, so far as other people's grain fields were concerned, and she knew none that would be likely to turn driven cattle into a grain field. Such things were not done in a country like Alberta. Besides, cattle were unlikely to be moved in the summer time, and by the fall, the harvest would be in, and the grain safe.

"Have it your way," returned the doctor. "But if you want to do a mon's work, you ought to do it in a mon's way." This gratuitous remark was received in the disdainful silence it deserved.

They had a truly gigantic task before them, the

putting in of over one hundred and fifty acres of grain—flax, barley, oats, wheat, green feed and rye.

As soon as the land was in condition to be worked, they began. For days they had been sorting over and mending harnesses and bridles, sharpening the implements and getting everything into shape. Eight work horses had been brought up from the pasture, and for a few days had been fed oats and given especial care. Nettie had regained her strength and was invaluable to the less experienced, though self-reliant Angella because of her long familiarity with farm work and horses too.

The baby went into the field with them, carried in a large box, where among its pillows, Nettie's child slept in blissful unconsciousness of the tragedy of his existence. In the latter weeks he had been gaining strength, and his roving blue eyes had smiled more than once at the adoring Angella.

Nettie went on the plow, the hardest of the implements to ride. There had been some argument between the girls as to which implement each should ride, Angella contending that Nettie was not yet in a fit condition to stand the rough shaking on the plow; and Nettie stubbornly insisting that she felt "strong as an ox," and that she had ridden the plow since she was a little

girl. "Dad put me into the field when I was just ten," she told Angella. "You know he couldn't afford to stay home to work our quarter, because our land was so poor; he had to go out on other farms to make some wages, because we was such a hungry family, and it took sights of food to fill us all."

So Nettie rode the plow, and then the disc, while Angella took the harrow and the seeder. Angella only yielded the plow to Nettie when the girl pointed out that the seeder required "brains," of which she sadly admitted she had little. She had never seeded, not even at home; Dad had always come back in time to do that. So Angella, feeling the importance of her two seasons' experience in seeding, argued no more, and, seeded six inches deep, a precautionary measure, she told Nettie, against a dry year. The weather favored them; intermittent rains and flurries of snow kept the ground damp enough for fertilization, but not too wet for sowing. Nevertheless, said Angella, you never could tell about Alberta's climate. Drought might start with June, and then where would the careless farmers be?

This period of hard work diverted Nettie's mind from its obsession of sorrow; for mind and body are alike exhausted at the end of a day from sunrise to sunset.

Intent upon being a first-rate helper, her mind ceased to dwell upon her troubles.

Having finished the preparation of the ground and the seeding, they spent the next few weeks bringing their few head of stock to the corrals and all alone they branded, dehorned and vaccinated them against blackleg. Nettie then went over to Cyril's quarter with the plow and broke new land, by no means an easy job, since the ground was rough virgin soil, where rocks and bushes and tree stumps abounded. Meanwhile Angella summer fallowed on her own quarter.

July came in on a wave of intense heat. There was haying to be done on Cyril's quarter; Angella's fields had been overpastured, and she proposed to let them lie fallow for that year. The two girls put up seventy-five tons of hay. Angella was on the rake, an easy implement to ride, Nettie on the mower. Then Angella ascended the buck, and Nettie did the stacking, and as the big golden pile grew from day to day under their hands, their pride and satisfaction in their work was great. Angella felt that she had something to show for her work at last and pinned her faith upon a sure crop—the first since her arrival in Alberta.

Before and after their field work, they had plenty of

chores and housework to do. Nettie milked, looked after the sitting hens and spring chicks, and the great sow with her litter; she watered and fed the horses and cleaned the barns and stables. Meanwhile, Angella prepared the meals, made the butter, cleaned the house, and took full charge of the baby.

In Nettie's avoidance of her child there was fear rather than aversion. This child that had been forced upon her by the man she hated aroused strange tumults within her. At the thought of its father, she would shudder and tell herself she hated it because it was his; but there were moments when melting, passionate impulses consumed her, and then it took all her strength not to snatch her baby up and clasp it tightly to her breast.

Throughout the long day she sat on the hard seat of the implement, rocked and shaken from side to side, as the four-horse plow broke up the rough land, and she tried hard to keep her mind upon her work. As her expert hand guided her horses, making a clean, workmanlike job of which not even a man could have been ashamed, she found a certain comfort in the thought that she was working for Cyril Stanley. Yet, as the implement swept on its circular path over the

field, each time it passed near the box beside the straw stack where the baby slept, a sob of anguish would tear her heart anew.

The harvest was close at hand, and for the first time since she had come to Alberta, Angella Loring was to have a crop.

Billowing waves of golden wheat, going forty bushels or more to the acre, lay spread out before her, barley, glistening, and silvery, oats as tall as a man and thick and heavy, the grain, like living creatures, stirring and murmuring drowsily in the sunshine as the warm wind passed over it.

“Come, we are waiting to be reaped,” it seemed to chant. “Gather us in, before the cold breath of the northland shall come shivering over the land, and freeze our strength with the touch of its icy finger.”

Their labors over the two women who had put in the crop would walk slowly in the cool of the day through the grain, and the soft swishing of their skirts brushing a pathway through the thick grain sounded like a whisper of peace in the quiet evening. The marvelous harvest moon hung like a great orange ball above the fields; the prairie land seemed to stretch illimitably into the distance; the far horizons disappeared into a chain

of white hills, rising like a mist against the sky still resplendent with the incomparable prairie sunset.

They talked little for the one was shy and reticent by nature, and in the other reticence and brevity of speech had become a habit. Yet each felt and understood the thought of the other, as they looked across at the moving grain, which was the visible sign of their long and arduous labor.

CHAPTER XXI

THERE was hail in the south and further west; it zigzagged across the country, beating down the tall grain; the stones lay as big as eggs upon the ground, breaking windows and lashing in its vindictive fury whatever stood in its path. The grain shuddered beneath the onslaught and bent to the ground. An angry black cloud overspread the sky like a gigantic hand from whose outstretched fingers the hail was falling. Not a stalk was left standing in the fields over which the storm passed, but its course was curiously eccentric. It ignored whole municipalities, and no one could tell where next it would choose to vent its wicked rage. Anxiously the girls had watched the path of the mad cloud, taking count of the destructive force that was wreaking such havoc upon the grain lands. Nettie prayed—prayed to the God of whom she knew so pitifully little, but to whom Mrs. Langdon had been so near, and begged that their fields, Angela's and Cyril's, might be spared.

The rural telephone wires were busy all that day and evening, with the calls of the excited farmers.

“Were you struck?”

“Yes, wiped out.”

“Insured?”

“Not a red cent.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry. There’s not a spear left in my fields neither, but I got ten dollars on the acre.”

“Think they’ll allow you one hundred per cent. loss?”

“Sure they will.”

“Hm! Betcha you’ll thresh just the same.”

Then the bang of a hanging up receiver; but the ceaseless buzzing went on, with all the other parties on the main wire listening in, gloating or commiserating over each others’ misfortunes.

“How about Smither’s?”

“Say, his fields aren’t touched.”

“You don’t say. Isn’t it the devil how them hail storms skip and miss.”

“Munsun’s got wiped off the map. So did Homan.”

“Pederson’s ain’t touched even.”

“Trust them Swedes to have the luck every time.”

“Did you hear about Bar Q?”

“No, what?”

“Heard they got it hardest of all. My land! There isn’t a field the hail didn’t get. The whole three thousand acres on the grain ranch. I see where his nibs won’t do much threshing this year.”

“He should worry. You can bet your bottom dollar he’s got double insurance on his crop, and, say, anyway, he’ll have a sight of green feed for his cattle. They say he’s short of hay in the hill country this year. I’ll bet he cuts the hailed stuff for feed.”

“I wouldn’t wonder!”

And so on.

As it happened, Nettie and Angella’s crops were among the few that had escaped untouched. When the storm had passed and the sun blazed out again over the battered fields there, strong and sturdy, shining in the clear light, the grain they had sown seemed to smile at them and call aloud to be reaped without further delay.

It was now mid-August, and the grain was ripe. Angella rode the binder, a picturesque implement with canvas wings, which when in operation resembles a sort of flying machine. Nettie followed on foot, stooking. This was a man’s job, for the sheaves of grain were heavy, and it was no easy matter to bend and grasp the

thick bundles and stook them in stacks ; but Nettie was strong and willing. She even tried to keep pace with the binder, by running to the stacks, until Angella brought up her horses sharply and refused to go on with the work, unless Nettie took her time about the stooking.

The harvest occupied three long weeks, but the day came at last when the work was all completed. There was no longer any danger of frost, hail or drought. Nothing remained to be done but the threshing. Under the mellow evening light that suffuses the Alberta country at the harvest season, the girls, having gleaned bravely and well, rode in from their last day of harvesting.

Sound carries far in the prairie country, and they could hear distinctly the buzz of the threshing machine eight miles away, droning like a comfortable bee, working steadily through the night. In a few days, the threshers would "pull in" to Angella's ranch and the harvested grain would be poured into the temporary granaries that they had constructed from a portion of the barn.

As they stood together in the twilight, looking across at the harvest field, they felt, though they might not

have been able to express their thoughts in words, that they had made of that land of theirs a picture no human brush could ever copy. And as this thought came simultaneously to their minds, their eyes met, and they smiled at each other like sisters. As they turned reluctantly from the contemplation of their masterpiece, Nettie's last glance toward the hills saw the figure of a rider silhouetted against the skyline. On his first appearance at the top of the grade, she did not recognize him, but as he approached, an uncontrollable agitation shook her from head to foot.

“Angel! Look—look—look—look—it’s—the Bull! Oh—h——”

“You have nothing to fear, Nettie. Nettie!”

“Oh, Angel, he’s come for me! I knowed he would! I’ve been lookin’ for him, dreadin’ it and now he’s here. Oh, what am I to do? Where can I hide?”

As on the night when the Bull had trapped her in her room and she had listened paralyzed with fear to the breaking down of her door, her eyes darted wildly about for a means of escape. This time, instead of the narrow room, the whole of the far-flung prairie lay before her with the great grain stooks which she herself had piled together. She broke from Angella’s grasp,

and fled across the field, and darting from one stack to another, crouched down in despair behind the farthest one.

Angella made no movement to stop the fleeing girl. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she gazed keenly at the man to discover whether it was indeed Bull Langdon; then she turned and quietly went into her house. She put the child in its basket into the inner room, and took down her rifle; the rifle her neighbors in the early days had jeered at but learned to respect. Angella did not load it in the house, but slowly and calmly as Bull Langdon rode up she fitted the bullets in place.

CHAPTER XXII

IN a country like Alberta, especially in the ranching sections, it is not difficult for a person to disappear, if he is so minded.

Nettie had lived several months with Angella Loring before her presence there was discovered. On one side of Angella's quarter was a municipality of open range, and on the other, Cyril Stanley's quarter section. Beyond Cyril's ranch was bush stretching for several miles to the Elbow River that intersected, south and north, the land towards the foothills fifty miles out of which was the Bar Q hill ranch. Beyond this dense timber land began, and in its very heart stood the Bow Claire Lumber Camp on the banks of the Ghost and Bow Rivers. Past the timber land the foothills still continued, growing higher and higher till they merged into the chain of Rocky Mountains.

Gossip about Nettie Day had been confined to the foothill ranching country. Her story had run from ranch to ranch, and the general comment was ex-

pressed in the customary country phrases of: "I never would have believed it" or "I told you so." But Nettie disappeared from the foothills, and curiosity, in a ranching country as has been said above, is short-lived. Besides, the death of Mrs. Langdon provided the ranchers with fresh excitement, and questions as to Nettie's whereabouts were rarely heard.

At this time new cares had begun to take possession of the country people of Alberta. Even as early as the spring, strange symptoms of unrest might have been observed, and here and there fear seemed to look out of the ranchers' eyes. Strange stories were percolating into the ranches of sickness in the cities, a certain sickness which the authorities purposely misnamed in order that the danger of panic might be averted. The ranch people stuck closely to their homes that spring and summer and were not cordial to strangers or of the usually welcome regular visitors from the city—the insurance and real estate men, the drug seller and the sly affable stranger who sold his Pain Killer to the hands with a wink. All these "paper-collar dudes" as the farmers called them, and the motor hoboes and camp-tramps, who stopped at the ranches to ask for anything from a measure of milk to a night's lodg-

ing, experienced that summer a cold reception, for the ranch people were shrewd enough to appreciate the fact that the plague might be carried to them through just such mediums as these. So they stuck close to home, and although the papers were filled with scare-head accounts of the fearful scourge in the east, Alberta believed or hoped it would prove immune.

In Yankee Valley, no one knew that the girl from the D. D. D. had returned, or that, with her child, she had found a refuge in the home of the Englishwoman who preferred to live like a hermit rather than accept the friendship of her neighbors. Angella's land lay well back from the main road and trails and there Nettie had found a true sanctuary. One day, Batt Leeson, who had taken Cyril's place at the Bull camp, was riding by Cyril's quarter, en route to the foothills and paused at the sight of a girl in a man's blue overalls, driving a six-horse plow team over new breaking.

Nettie, at a pause in the harvesting, while they were waiting for a field of oats to ripen, was filling in the time by breaking new land on Cyril's quarter.

Batt, gazing at her with his mouth open and his eyes blinking incredulously, could not believe it possible. To make doubly sure, he rode close to the fence line,

and from behind the shelter of a tree, he waited for the plow to make its next round of the field. On and on it came, its dull rumble and clatter of iron the louder for the stillness of the prairie. Over a piece of rising ground came Nettie Day upon the implement. Her head was bare, and her hair shone red-gold in the sunshine, seeming to radiate light like a halo. It had been cropped close as a boy's, and the gentle wind lifted and blew it back from her flushed face as she drove.

“Well, I'll be switched!” said the ranch hand.

He was, in fact, overjoyed at his discovery and would go back to the foothills with a rich morsel of news. He imagined himself saying, “What d'you think? That there girl that got into trouble at Bar Q is workin' on the land of the fellow that—” Once Cyril Stanley had punched his face for a much slighter offense than mentioning his (Cyril's) name in connection with a girl, and Batt bit his tongue upon the name of the man he suspected as the cause of Nettie Day's downfall.

Chuckling with satisfaction, he followed the girl with his gloating eyes, but she was looking straight ahead and never turned her head to where the rider watched her from the trail.

Things had been going from bad to worse at Bar Q. More than the usual number of calves had died from blackleg, and a number of first-class heifers had perished in the woods where the larkspur poison weed grew wild. A Government veterinary surgeon, after a hurried survey of the animals on the home range, had put a blanket quarantine on all the cattle, which prevented their removal for months—in fact, until the “vet” gave them a clean bill of health.

The cowman's stock and ranch had been badly neglected in his absence. His cattle had been allowed to go at large; the fences were out of repair and the customary careful segregation of each different grade was a thing of the past. He found the whole ranch at sixes and sevens, and raged at the foremen for their neglect, swearing that not “a stitch of work” had been done all the time he had been away. He celebrated his return by “firing” all hands at the foothill ranch, and the new outfit who took their places proved worse than the old. Their term at the ranch was soon over, and the constant changing of hands that now began had an exceedingly bad effect upon the place. Good help was very scarce at that time, and wages had been as high

as one hundred dollars a month with board, so Bull Langdon had his hands full at Bar Q.

He went about in a state of chronic evil humor in these days, and found nothing about the place to suit him. Without his wife, the big ranch house got upon his nerves, for with the genius of the born home-maker she had created an atmosphere of comfort and peace that had made it impressive even on her husband's insensitive mind. She had catered to his appetite and his whims, and he had become used to having a woman's tender care about him; indeed, he had grown to depend upon the very services he had so roughly rewarded in the past. He could neither accustom himself to the empty house nor endure the meals at the cook car.

In these days he slept on the ground floor of the house, in the dining room. During his wife's lifetime the room had shone with orderliness and cleanliness; now boots, rough coats and trousers, shirts, and the cattlemen's riding accessories were strewn all over it, while the unmade bed, the unwashed pots and pans, the traces of muddy boots upon the floor, and the dust of weeks had turned it into a place of indescribable dirt and confusion.

The Bull had refused to sleep upstairs since his wife's

death; her bedroom door remained closed. Nettie's, too, still hung on its broken hinges, and sometimes on a windy night the knocking of that broken door, screeching and swinging upon its single hinge, was more than the overwrought cattleman could stand, and he would tramp out to the bunkhouse, and sleep there instead. He felt the need of his home more and more, however, and like a spoiled child whose favorite toy had been taken from him, he fumed and stormed at the ill-luck that had robbed him.

One day he returned to the house after a hard day's riding, and the sight of its grime and disorder set a spark to his already smoldering rage. His thoughts turned, as always at such moments, to the girl whose place he honestly believed was there in his house where he had intended to install her. She had been gone long enough. He had put up with enough of her damned nonsense now, and it was time to round her up. He regarded Nettie as a stray head of stock, that had slipped from under the lariat noose, and was wandering in strange pastures. True, she was a prized head, but that only strengthened the Bull's determination to capture her. He considered her his personal stuff; something he had branded, and he was not the man to part

with anything that belonged to him, as doggedly and repeatedly he assured himself she did, having been bought with the rest of her dad's old truck.

Batt Leeson riding in from Barstairs brought him the first news of the girl that he had had since the night she had fled in terror from his house.

"Say, boss, who d'you suppose I seen when I rode by Yankee Valley?"

"How the h—— should I know?"

"Well, I seen that Day girl that used to work up here."

Bull Langdon, busy making of a bull-whip, twisting long strips of cowhide about a lump of lead, stopped short in his work, and looked up sharply at the slowly chewing, slowly talking ranch hand.

"What's that you say?"

"I was sayin' that I seen her—Nettie Day—over to Yankee Valley, and where d'you suppose she's living? Say, she must be tied up now to that Stanley fellow, because I seen her on his land and——"

"That's a damned lie!" shouted the cattleman, and dashed the loaded cowhide to the floor with a foul oath. Batt, his knees shaking with terror, retreated before the advance of the enraged cowman.

“It’s true as God what I’m telling you. I seen her with my own eyes. She was breakin’ land on Stanley’s quarter.”

Bull Langdon’s eyes were bloodshot and his face twitched hideously.

“That young scrub’s at Bow Claire. His homestead’s burned to the ground. You can’t come to me with no such tale as that.”

“B—b-b-b—but I tell you she’s workin’ his land. I *seen* her. I stopped right close and looked her over to make sure. I ain’t makin’ no mistake. Thought at first I might be, cause I figure that a girl in her condition wouldn’t be——”

“What-cha mean by her condition?”

“Sa-ay boss.” Batt scratched his head, uncertain whether to proceed; itching to tell the tale of the girl’s fall, but fearing the menacing spark in the cattleman’s eyes. “I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“’Bout her condition.”

Batt essayed a sly, ingratiating wink, but it had no placating effect upon the man before him.

“I don’t know what the devil you’re talking about.”

“Gosh, boss, everyone knows ’bout Nettie Day. *She’s*

agoin' to have a baby—mebbe she's got it now. I expect she has."

"What-t!"

The Bull's eyes bulged; a tidal wave of unholy joy threatened to overwhelm him.

A baby! His! His! His own! His and that gell's!

He threw back his head and burst into a storm of laughter. His wild mirth shook the beams and rafters of the old room, and seemed to reverberate all through the great house.

"Well, by G——!" said the cowman and reached for his riding boots. He pulled them savagely on, still chuckling and chortling, and pausing ever and anon to smack his hip.

"Goin' riding, boss?"

"You betcher life I am."

"Where you goin'?"

"I'm going to a round up," said Bull Langdon, clicking his lips.

"After some loose stock?"

"A purebred heifer with a calf at heel," said Bull Langdon. "They've got my brand upon them."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Englishwoman stood in the doorway of her shack, rifle in hand, and gazed calmly at the blustering cowman, who had dismounted, and, fists on hips, was standing before her. For the first time in his life Bull Langdon found himself face to face with a woman who was not afraid of him. Her cold, unwavering glance traveled over him, from his flat head down to his great, coarse feet, and back with cool disparagement straight into his flinching eyes.

“You seen anything of that gell, Nettie Day?”

Angella disdained to answer. She was looking over his head, and presently she said:

“Will you kindly remove yourself from my place? I don’t want you here.”

“You don’t, heh? Well, I’m here to get something of my own, do you get me?”

“Oh, yes, I get you all right; but you’ll take nothing off *my* place, you may be sure of that.”

He stood his ground with bravado, and blurted out his errand; he had come for Nettie, and intended to

have her and his kid. She belonged to him; was his "gell," and he had bought her along with her "dad's old truck." He'd have been over sooner, but his cattle had tied him down since his return from the States, and he "wan't the kind o' man to neglect his cattle for a woman."

As he spoke, Angella's level gaze rested coolly upon him, and met his blustering outburst with a half-smile of detached and amused contempt. But when he made a movement as if to enter the house, Angella Loring slowly brought her rifle to her shoulder, and aimed straight at him. With the practiced eye of a dead shot, she squinted down the length of the barrel, and the Bull sprang back, when he saw her finger crooked upon the trigger.

"What the h— you tryin' to do?"

She answered without lowering the gun or moving her finger.

"You clear off my place! If you attempt to enter my house I'll shoot you down with less compunction than I would a dog."

He slouched a few paces farther back, and an evil laugh broke from his lips. Once he had reached his horse's side, his bravado returned.

“Guess there ain’t goin’ to be no trouble gettin’ what’s my own. The law’s on my side. I’ve got as much right to that kid, that’s my own stuff, as the gell has.”

“Oh, have you?” said Angella coolly. “Unfortunately for you, the child is no longer even Nettie’s. It’s mine. She gave me her child for adoption.”

“She hadn’t no right to do that,” said the Bull in a sudden access of rage. “It ain’t hers to give away.”

“Oh, isn’t it, though?”

“No, it ain’t, and I’ll show you a thing o’ two. There won’t be no funny business with guns neither when a couple of mounties come up here after what’s mine.”

“I wouldn’t talk about the law if I were you. You see, when you committed that crime against Nettie, she happened to be a minor. I don’t know just how many years in the penitentiary that may mean for you. Her lawyers will know.”

At the word “penitentiary,” his face had turned gray. Nettie’s youth had never occurred to him before, nor what it might mean for him.

“Besides,” went on the Englishwoman, “apart from the legal aspects of the case, I wonder that you take a chance in a country like this. Consider what is likely

to happen to you, if the truth about Nettie becomes known in this ranching country. We have an unwritten law of our own in such cases, you know, and everybody has been blaming an innocent boy. What will they say—what will they do, when they know that the most detested and hated man in the country attacked a young, defenseless girl when she was alone in his house? I wouldn't care to be in your shoes when *that* fact leaks out, as you may be sure it will. I'll take care of that! You can trust me to denounce you without reserve!"

The Bull shouted, purple with rage:

"There ain't no man livin' *I'm* afraid of, and there ain't no man in the country strong enough to lay a finger on me, see. I could beat every son of a gun in Alberta to a pulp."

"I don't doubt that. You look as if you might have the strength of a gorilla; but then where a hand will not serve a rope will, and you know it will be short work for your own men to hang you to a tree when young Cyril Stanley ropes you. Now I've talked to you enough. You get off my place, or I'll put a shot in that ugly fist of yours that'll lame you for the rest of your days."

He had remounted and she laughed at his haste; yet

as he rode off, the venomous expression on his face turned her heart cold with a new fear, and her ears rang ominously with his parting words.

“So long, old hen, you’ll sing another tune when we meet again.”

CHAPTER XXIV

“**J**AKE, I want you to ride like ‘hell on fire’ to Springbank, where you’ll find Dr. McDermott.

Ask at the post office for him, and you may meet him on the trail. Don’t spare Daisy, even if you have to kill her riding. Leave her at Springbank to rest up, and come back with the Doc. And Jake, if you get back by tomorrow night, I’ll—I’ll give you a whole pound of brown sugar and a can of molasses. Now skedaddle, and for God’s sake, don’t fail us.”

“Me go! Me fly on the air!” cried the breed excitedly. Without saddle or bridle—nothing but a halter rope, Jake was on the Indian broncho, and was off like a flash over the trail.

Angella concealed her fears from the white and trembling Nettie.

“Nothing to worry about,” she said carelessly. “He’s afraid of my gun, Nettie, the big coward!”

“Oh, Angel, I’m not afraid for myself, but for the

baby. He's a terrible man when he's in a passion, and he never gives up nothing that's his."

"But you're not his," said Angel sharply, "and neither is the baby. He's mine. You said I could have him, and I won't give him up."

"Oh, Angel, I don't want you to. He's better with you than anyone else, and although I do love him—" Nettie's voice was breaking piteously—"yet there are times when I *can't* forget that he's the Bull's——"

"He's not. He's all yours, Nettie. There's not a trace of that wild brute in our baby. I don't see how you can even think it. Just look at the darling," and she held up the laughing, fair-haired baby at arm's length. The days spent out of doors in the field had done much to give him the health and strength that had not been his at birth. He had Nettie's eyes and hair, but not her seriousness, for he crowed and laughed all day long, the happiest and most contented baby in the world.

Nettie looked at him now with swimming eyes.

"He *is* sweet!" she said in a choking voice, and kneeling beside Angella, on whose lap the baby lay, she buried her head in his little soft body.

Jake did not return the following night, nor the

night after. Though each sought to hide her anxiety from the other, the two women kept a constant look-out along the trail, straining their ears for the comforting sound of the motor, which on a still day could sometimes be heard at two or even three miles' distance.

They would have gone away somewhere, but for the fact that the threshers were due in a few days' time, and it would have meant ruin to leave the crop unthreshed. Once the threshing was done, and the grain safely stored in the granary, or sold direct to the commission men who had already called upon Angella, they would be free to make a trip to Calgary, and there seek counsel and protection.

Meanwhile, every night they bolted and barricaded their door, and with the baby between them, with loaded guns side by side on the bed, hardly slept through the night. Wide-eyed and silent in the darkness they kept their vigil, each hoping that the other slept.

On the third night, toward morning, Nettie started up with a cry. She had heard something moving outside the shack. They gripped their rifles and sat up listening intently. Then Angella declared that it was only the wind, and Nettie said:

“It sounds like thunder, doesn’t it? Maybe we’re goin’ to have another storm.”

“Let it storm,” said Angella, glad of the other’s voice in the darkness. “Our crop’s harvested, and no hail can hurt us now. Is the light still going in the kitchen?”

“Yes.” After a moment, Nettie said:

“I ain’t afraid of nothing now for myself, but I don’t want nothing to happen to you—and my baby.”

“My baby you mean,” corrected Angella, pretending to laugh. But with all the tenderness of her maternal heart, she drew the baby close to her side.

After another long tense pause, when they again imagined things stirring about the place, Angella said suddenly:

“Let’s talk. I can’t sleep and neither can you, and we never do talk much.”

“I expect that’s because we’ve always had to work most o’ the time,” said Nettie. “Isn’t it queer that you and me should be such friends.”

“Why queer?”

“I’m what they call ‘scrub’ stock—and you——”

“So’m I—scrub. That’s the kind worth being. The

common clay, Nettie. The other kind is shoddy and false and——”

“Oh, Angel, I think you’re so sweet and good.”

“I’m not sweet and good,” said Angella stoutly, “and there’s nothing heroic about me.”

“I don’t care what you are,” said Nettie, “I’ll always love you. Sometimes when I get thinkin’ of how hard everything’s been for me in this life, I think of you and Mrs. Langdon, and I say to myself: You’re a lucky girl, Nettie. Not everybody in the world has got a friend! Have they, Angel?”

“No—very few of us have,” said Angella sadly. “Nettie, did you hear that!”

“What?”

“It sounded like—like a moan. Listen!”

In the dark silence of the night, the long-drawn moaning sound was repeated.

“It’s cattle,” said Nettie.

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes, I know their calls, though I didn’t know there was any near us.”

“Passing along the trail probably. It’s getting toward the fall, you know.”

“Angel, do you believe in God?”

“No—that is, yes—in a way I do. Do you?”

“Yes. Mrs. Langdon used to say that God was in us—in our hearts. He can’t be in every heart, can he?”

“Why not?”

“Well, Bull Langdon’s for instance. God *couldn’t* abide in *his* heart, could he?”

“No, I should think not.”

“But Mrs. Langdon believed it. She used to say that God loved him as well as any of us, but that Bull was ‘in error,’ and that some day God would open his eyes, and then he would be powerful good.”

“Hm! He’d have to open his eyes pretty wide, I’m thinking,” said Angel. “But try and sleep now, Nettie. I’m feeling a bit drowsy myself. Maybe we can snatch a wink or two before morning. Good-night, Nettie.”

“Good-night, Angel. I think it’s true. God *is* in our hearts. I believe it.”

“I believe he’s in yours, anyway,” said Angella softly. “Good-night, old girl.”

But God dwelt not in the heart of Bull Langdon. Under the silver light of the moon, that lay like a spell upon the sleeping land, and across the shining valley, came the cowman, driving a great herd of steers.

Penned in corrals for shipment to the Calgary stockyards, they had been without food for two days, and now they came down the hill, eager and impatient for the feed that had been too long denied them.

The Bull, on his huge bay mare, drove them rapidly before him whirling and cracking his long whip over their heads. The Banff highway was deserted. He chose the gritty roads, and, heads down, the hungry steers nosed the bare ground, till they came to the level lands, and turned into the road allowances between the farms. The grain fields, odorous of cut hay and grain, inflamed the hunger-maddened steers, and they moaned and sniffed as they were driven mercilessly along.

All day and most of the night they traveled without pause and in the first gray of the dawn they arrived at the frail fences of the Lady Angella Loring. Down went the two insecure lines of barbed wire that the women had set up, never counting they would be needed to withstand the impetuous stampede of wild cattle.

When Angella and Nettie stepped out of their shack later that morning their shocked eyes were greeted with Bull Langdon's vindictive work. The road was still gray with the raised dust of the departing animals turning off the road allowance for the main trail, the

Bar Q brand showing clearly on their left ribs. Filled to the neck with the reaped grain, they were rolling heavily along the way into Calgary.

The two girls stood before their barren fields, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen them. Not a word was said, but Angella, as if grown suddenly old, turned blindly to the house, while Nettie threw herself down desperately upon the ground and burst into bitter tears.

Her little work-roughened hands fallen loosely by her side, Angella sat at the crude wooden table of her own making, and tried to figure a way out of the appalling problem now facing her. She had bought her implements on the installment plan, and the money was now due; she owed the municipality for her seed; a chattel mortgage was on her stock. That year's crop would have wiped out all her indebtedness, and left her free and clear.

When her crops had failed before, she had made up her losses by working at the Bar Q, and the small proceeds of the sale of eggs and butter; but now she had not only herself to consider. There were two other living creatures entirely dependent upon her. To the

desolate, heart-starved woman, Nettie and her baby had become nearer and dearer to her than her own kin.

Nettie, still lying on the bitten down stubble, was roused from her stupor of grief by a pulling at her sleeve, and looking up, she saw the half-breed Jake. He was kneeling beside her, holding out a little bunch of buttercups, and in the poor fellow's face she read his grief and anxiety. Nettie tried to smile through her tears, and she took the flowers gratefully.

"Thank you, Jake. Where'd you come from?" she asked, wiping her eyes, though her breath still came in gasping sobs, and she could not hide her tears.

"Jake come out like 'Hell on fire' in Doctor's notermobile. Beeg, beeg ride—run like wind—run like hell on road. Doc"—he jerked his thumb back—"go into house. He eat foods. Jake got a hongry inside too. *She* tell Jake she give'm molasses and sugar." He smacked his lips at thought of his favorite food, but the next moment he was studying Nettie's wet face in troubled bewilderment.

"What's matter, Nettie? *Him* hurt Nettie yes again?"

"Oh, yes, Jake, again." Her lip quivered.

The half-breed's face flamed savagely.

“The Bull! He no good! Jake kill 'im some day sure.”

He waved his arms wildly, and Nettie shook her head, smiling at him sadly.

“Keep away from him, Jake. He's powerful strong, and there wouldn't be nothing much left of you if he once got his hands on you.”

“Jake not afraid of the Bull,” said the half-breed, shaking his head. “Listen, Nettie. Me—Jake Langdon—me take a peech fork, beeg long likea this, and me jab him in the eye of the Bull, yes? That's kill him.”

“Oh, no, Jake. He'd get it from you. He'd rastle it out of your hands.”

“Then me—Jake steal on house when he's sleep. Get a long big nail—like this big—hammer him into ear. That same way many Indian do.”

“Keep away from him, Jake. You'll only get the worst of it.”

“Jake don't mind worst. That's nothing. Jake no like see cry on Nettie.”

“Well, then, I'll not cry any more. You pick me some more buttercups, Jake, and—and don't you worry about me. *I'm* all right.”

Inside the shack, Dr. McDermott had broken his habitual Scotch reticence and blazed into fluent fury. He had met the Bar Q herd along the road, and had suspected something wrong. As he drove by Angella's fields he realized what had happened, and her first words confirmed his suspicions.

"Bull Langdon turned his steers into my crop. He has ruined us."

"The hound! The dirty, cowardly hound! I'll have him jailed for this."

"You can't, doctor," said Angella wearily, "we didn't have the legal fence—just two wires. You warned us. I wish I had taken your advice."

"Then I'll beat him to a pulp, with my own hands!" said the enraged doctor.

Angella looked up at him with a pitying smile.

"No, man, you shan't do that. I wouldn't have you soil your hands touching him."

Her head dropped, and for a long time no word was spoken in the little shack. Dr. McDermott, tongue-tied, stared down at the bowed head of Angella. Presently she said, without looking up, but in a sort of hopeless, dead way:

“Dr. McDermott, I’m through. I can’t go on fighting. I’m beat.”

“Through!” roared her friend, who had once preached so violently against her laboring as a man, “lass, you’ve only begun! You’re of a fighting race—a grand race, and you’ll go down fighting. You’re not of the breed to admit you’re beat.”

“Little you know of my breed,” she said sadly.

Dr. McDermott took the chair opposite her, thrust out his chin and forced her to look at him.

“Do you remember the stable lad ye whipped because he’d not let you ride the young Spitfire?” he said. “Don’t you remember the lad that twenty-five years ago your father sent away to college in Glasgow?”

Her eyes grew wide and bright as she stared at him as though she saw him for the first time. Color touched her cheeks, she looked like a girl again. For a moment she could not speak, but only stare at him. Out of the mists of memory she was seeing again the barefooted boy she had stolen away many a time to play with; it was incredible that he and this rugged Scotch doctor, who had forced his friendship upon her out in the wilds of Canada, should be one and the same.

“Are you really that boy?”

And then, with a catch in her voice:

“Why, I must have been blind.” A little sob of delight at this miraculous encounter rose in her throat.

“Then you are—Angus. That was your name, wasn’t it. Oh, I *have* been blind!”

“Twenty-five years is a long time, my lady.”

“Don’t call me, my lady. I hate it.”

“I’m glad of that, ma’am,” said the doctor solemnly, which made her laugh.

“And now,” he pleaded, roughly, though in desperate earnest, “you’ll be taking back the money that your father spent to make a doctor of a stable lad, will you not? You’ll let me stake you, lass?”

“Oh, you’ve more than paid that debt. This ranch alone——”

“It’s a homestead—a free gift of the Canadian Government. It’ll not begin to pay for the cost of a mon’s education. A debt’s a debt, and I trust you’ll allow a mon to wipe out a heavy obligation.”

At that Angella smiled, but her eyes were wet.

“If you put it that way, Dr. McDermott, of course, there’s nothing else for me to do but let you—let you—stake me—will you?”

“I will!” said the man, scowling at her angrily, then

he cleared his throat, and asked for a "bite of food for a hungry mon who's been working day and night to hammer a bit of common sense into a bunch of farmers whose heads are made of wood."

Angella even laughed as she bustled about the kitchen, preparing a quick meal for the doctor, and when she set it before him she asked:

"Who's sick now, doctor?"

"The whole country's nigh down," he muttered. "If they don't heed the warning I've been trying to hammer into their systems for months now, there'll be a sad lot of sick and dead folk before the winter's out, I tell you."

"As bad as all that?"

He replied solemnly:

"Couldn't be worse. Mark my words, if the plague comes up to the country from Calgary, where it's got a foothold already, our population will be cut in half."

CHAPTER XXV

LIKE a thief in the night the plague crept into Alberta, disguised at first in the form of light colds to which the sufferers paid small attention, but before the year was out those neglected colds had turned into the scourge whose virulence singled out the strong, the fair and the young for its victims.

Calgary was like a beleaguered city at bay against the attack of a dread enemy. The printed warnings everywhere in the newspapers and placarded in public places and street cars; the newspaper accounts of the progress of the sickness in Europe, the United States and eastern Canada, with the long list of deaths threw the healthy city of the foothills into a state of panic.

Schools were closed; the people were afraid to go to church; disinfectant was sprayed over every store and office. The faintest symptom of a cold, the least sneeze was diagnosed as plague, and the growing fear in which the people awaited the disaster created a hysterical condition that probably precipitated its coming. Slowly and surely, undeterred by precaution and prayer

alike, the terrible plague was drawing in upon Alberta.

The first definitely diagnosed cases came in early summer, when the weather is raw and cold as it always is there. At that early season only two or three cases were discovered, but all the members of medical and nursing professions volunteered or were conscripted for service. By a curious negligence, no means of protection were taken for the vast country that surrounded the City of the Foothills on every side, and it was even said that many cases that the authorities failed to report had been sent off "to the country."

If the city authorities were indifferent to the fate of the country regions, on which, by the way Calgary was wholly dependent, there was one man at least who kept the welfare of his beloved country close to his heart. The erstwhile Scotch stable lad, who for many years had dedicated his thought, his labor and his heart to the farming and ranching people of Alberta, begrudged himself even a few hours sleep. Night and day, he "kept the road," keeping the keenest watch for the first outbreak of the epidemic, well knowing that plague respected neither person nor place, but leaped across the great cities even to the remotest places of the earth.

The warm summer brought an abatement of the menace, but when the first frost came in with the fall, the plague fell like a cloudburst upon the country.

Calgary, the city of sunlight and optimism, became a place of suffering and death. Scarcely a house but the dreaded visitor entered to take his tragic and inexplicable toll of the youngest and strongest there. People went about half-dazed, as if they were living in a nightmare. Hospitals, schools, churches, theaters, every available public building was turned into a house of refuge. No one was allowed on the street without a mask of white gauze fastened over nose and mouth.

The terrible crisis brought to light the extreme scarcity of nurses and doctors. Although an army of volunteer nurses were recruited by the city authorities, they were inadequate to the needs of all those stricken households, where one after another died for sheer lack of care and attention. The hospitals and all the emergency stations were filled to overflowing.

In spite of the almost superhuman expenditure of effort, the death lists grew from day to day. Crêpe hung from every second door in the city, and every day a ghastly procession of hearses, automobiles, and every

vehicle that moved on wheels, passed through the streets laden with Calgary's dead.

All the surrounding towns had succumbed meanwhile, and the smaller the towns, the heavier was the mortality for lack of skilled doctors and nurses and fit accommodation for the patients.

Most desperate of all, however, was the plight of those who lived on farms and ranches and at camps beyond the reach of help. The state of things in the Indian Reserves was appalling. The Indians were dying like flies, their misery forgotten by their white protectors. In their ignorance and helplessness, they sought help at the farms and ranches, only to be turned away, and often they carried the plague into places which had been immune until then.

Half the countryside was down with the disease, and still Dr. McDermott was vainly applying to the city and provincial authorities for help. Seeing that his demands were falling on deaf ears, he tried to impress into service men and women ranchers whose families had not yet been attacked, trying to make them understand that at such a time it was everybody's duty to do what he could. But the fear that had paralyzed the cities had now reached the farmers, and the doctor's

appeal brought little response. In their desire to escape, many families shut themselves up in their homes, discharged their help and hung signs on their gates: "Keep away!" They closed their doors in the faces of friends and strangers both, and only opened them when they in their turn were forced to cry for help. A few did respond, it is true, to the doctor's call for help, but nearly always were themselves overtaken before they had served very long, and the demand for help of any kind was so overwhelming that it was well-nigh impossible to do more than show the sick how to take care of themselves.

Overworked and exhausted, worn out with lack of sleep, Dr. McDermott stopped one day at Angella Loring's ranch.

The two girls were coming in from the field, Angella in the democrat with the baby, and Nettie on foot, driving home a team of work horses. They had been plowing and repairing the broken fences, for undaunted by the destruction of their crop, they were pluckily on the land again, preparing for the next year's seeding.

Dr. McDermott, his bag on the step by him, watched them as they watered and fed their horses and put up for the night. Then, each taking a handle of the baby's

basket, they came through the barnyard to the house.

For the first time since she had known her doctor friend, he failed to greet Nettie with his cheery:

“And how’s my lass today?”

Gaunt and haggard, he stood up and scrutinized them gravely before grunting:

“Hm! All right, eh? Not touched. Well, sit down, girls. I’ve thot to tell you will make your hearts a wee bit heavy.”

Dr. McDermott opened his black bag and took out some pills and a large bottle of disinfectant, which he set on the steps. Angella, the baby in her arms, her brows slightly drawn, looked down at the lined face of the doctor, and saw he had brought bad news.

“Let’s go in,” she said. “You look as if a cup of tea won’t come amiss. Let me pass. I’ll make it at once.”

“You’ll hear me through first, and I’ve no time for tea. There’s a bit of sickness running about the country. ’Tis the same they’ve had in the old land. You’ll put this disinfectant about your place, and on your person, and in case—in case of certain symptoms, you’ll go straight to bed, and you’ll stay there till I tell you when to get up, and you’ll begin then to take

the pills I'm leaving. What's more, you'll send Jake at once for me."

There was a pause, as Nettie's eyes met Angella's.

"Needn't worry about me, doc," said Nettie. "I'm awfully healthy. You don't have to give me no pills."

The doctor glared at her furiously.

"That's the ignorant sort of talk I've been listening to all summer; but the very ones who boasted of their strength are the ones stricken."

"What are the symptoms?" interposed Angella.

"Symptoms? Fever, backache, headache, nose bleed, a tendency to sneeze, hot and cold flashes."

Angella's face paled, and her glance went furtively from Nettie to the baby.

"Are there many down?" she questioned with assumed casualness.

"Thousands, ma'am, in the city, and God knows how many in the country."

"What are they doing for help?"

"In the country they are doing without it—shifting for themselves."

Angella looked startled, and Nettie turned round, her slow gaze fixed upon the doctor's face.

"Who's taking care of them, then?" she asked.

“They’re takin’ care of themselves. They creep out of bed and crawl to each other, and some of ’em die before they can get back to their own beds. In most of the families that have it, they are all down at once.”

“Now, look here,” said Angella abruptly, “you’ve got to have some supper before you start off.”

“No time for supper. There’s nine in the Homan family down, including the help. I’m on my way now.”

He had snapped his bag closed. Nettie passed by him into the house. Angella paused at the door and caught him by the sleeve to detain him.

“Really, doctor, it won’t do you a bit of good to try and take care of people if you don’t take care of yourself first; you’ve got to eat. So you come right in. It won’t take me a minute to fix something for you.”

“No, can’t stop. I had a bite at noon, and will reach Homan’s in time for another sup.”

“Well, wait. A minute or two more or less won’t matter. I want to know about this. Can’t you get nurses from Calgary, and aren’t there any other doctors in the country?”

“There are three besides myself over my territory, but two of ’em’s down, and the other—” The doctor

scowled and muttered something about "white-livered coward."

"And nurses?"

"I tell you I've been unable to get *anyone*. The city nurses have their hands full in town, and they won't come up to the country. As for the women themselves—the farm women, those who are not down, have gone plumb crazy with fright. I've gone from ranch to ranch like a beggar, imploring help."

Nettie had come out again. She had changed from her overalls to the blue house dress that Mrs. Langdon had made for her and over this she had thrown a plaid shawl. The blue woolen tam that Angella had knitted for her was on her head, and she looked singularly young and sweet. A few articles of clothing were knotted in a neat bundle under her arm.

"Doc," she said, "I'm going with you."

There was a long pause. Dr. McDermott blinked up at her, scowled, grunted something under his breath, and cleared his throat loudly. Angella stood stiffly by the door, not attempting to move, and her arm tightened involuntarily about the baby.

"I'm awfully strong," went on Nettie, "and I ain't likely to ketch nothing, and it don't matter if I do, far

as that goes. It's up to me to help those that need me. You'll let me go, won't you, doc?"

"You're a good lass," muttered the doctor, "and you'll be a grand help to me."

At last Angella found her voice.

"Nettie, you're forgetting your—baby!" she said.

Nettie turned sharply round and the bundle fell from her hand.

"No, no, Angel, I've not forgotten him; but you'll be good to him, won't you? and he'll never miss me."

"Nettie Day, don't dare talk like that," said Angella savagely. "I won't let you go if you have any thought like that in your head."

But Nettie did not hear her. For the first time since her baby's birth she was holding it in her arms, and the feel of the little warm face against her own brought a pang to her heart that was both agony and joy. Motherhood seemed to have come to her in a sudden rush of feeling, and her face was as white as death when she at last gave her child back solemnly to Angel. The movement awakened the baby, and now its cry was more than she could bear. She clasped her hands over her ears, and rushed to the gate. Dr. McDermott picked up her bundle and followed.

CHAPTER XXVI

OF the thirty or forty men previously employed at the Bar Q, only two remained that winter—a Chinaman and Batt Leeson at the Bull Camp. The foothill ranch was completely deserted, and the Bull was left alone to look after his several thousand head of cattle.

When the plague reached the country regions, there was a general exodus from the ranches, for tales were rife of stricken men corralled like cattle in bunkhouses and barns and left to shift for themselves.

That winter the cattle in the foothills roamed the range like mavericks, rustling for their water and feed. But even then they were better off than the purebred stock at Barstairs, being hardy stuff bred to the range and the open fields, where they found ample feed. The pampered purebred cattle had always been used to care and nursing, having been practically raised by hand, and were accustomed to feed from troughs heaped up with food by the watchful attendants and hands. Now penned in narrow pastures and cattle sheds, where

the ground was bare as stone, they were irregularly left to the tender mercies of the half-dazed and always drunken Batt Leeson, and spasmodically fed and seldom watered.

Chum Lee, paralyzed with fear of the "black plague," which had cut down all of his "boys" at the Bull Camp, lived in terror that it would overtake him also. Chum Lee had no desire to die in the white man's land; he wanted to repose in peace under the sacred soil of his ancestors. He would have run away from the camp, but the barren country, with its vast blanket of snow, gave no hope of any refuge, and he feared Bull Langdon as though he were an evil spirit.

Back and forth between the two ranches the Bull's great car tore like a Juggernaut of Fate. It did not in the least concern the cattleman that his men had died like flies, or that three-quarters of the country was down with the plague. What alarmed and incensed him was the fact that his cattle, the magnificent herd that he had built up from the three or four head rustled from the Indians, were roaming the range uncared-for and neglected. Many of them, drifting before a bitter blizzard, had perished in coulee and canyon, and worse still was the deterioration of the purebreds. The loss

of a single head of this stock meant several thousand dollars.

Nor was the Bull exclusively occupied with the loss of his cattle; he brooded unceasingly over Nettie Day, though the vision of her refused to leave his tortured mind and at the thought of the child she had borne he would rage up and down like a caged beast. The child had made her more than ever his, he gloated; yet how should he ever gain possession of her? He knew that the "Loring woman's" words had not been idle, and in imagination he saw the black walls of the penitentiary looming in the future. Nevertheless, he intended to have her; though the whole world might stand against him, he would get her back. He would bide his time, and his day would come—— The Loring woman would not always be on guard. His day would come.

Nettie was nursing the stricken farmers; the pariah and despised of the foothills was going from ranch to ranch caring for those who had condemned her. She had sat up for many nights soothing and ministering to their suffering; she had closed the eyes of their best beloved, and her tears had dropped upon the faces of their dead. In their hours of deepest anguish and

agony, they had clung to her cool, strong hands, as to an anchor.

The country people had reversed their opinion and judgment of Nettie Day; her past was forgotten; she was their Nettie now.

By the end of January the plague had reached its peak. Whole families had persisted and others were slowly creeping back to health and hope again. It would not be long, Dr. McDermott promised Nettie, before she would be free to return to her baby and her friend.

She began to count the days, and to scan the skies for that shadowy arch across the heavens that in Alberta precedes a "Chinook" and is the forerunner of mild weather, for Dr. McDermott was expected to come for her with the first Chinook. Nettie thought with ceaseless yearning of her baby; away from him, he had taken visible shape in her mind, and, at last able to overlook the horror of his paternity, she loved him with all the passion of her young warm heart. When the Chinook at last broke up the fierce cold Dr. McDermott kept his word, and on the day he was to come for her, Nettie walked on air. She was going home—to her baby!

When the doctor arrived, however, his face was grave, and his heart lay heavy within him. His labors were far from done. The Bow Claire Lumber Camp had succumbed to the plague, and nearly a hundred men were down.

Calgary had promised help, but its former promises had not proved reliable, and in all that vast country few would be found willing to go deep into the heart of the timber lands to nurse the lumber-jacks.

The doctor's Ford chugged to the back door of the Munson farmhouse, where Nettie had been nursing the last of her patients. She was there to meet him, her old plaid cape about her and the woolen tam upon her head. Her face was aglow, and her eyes shone as bright as stars; he had telephoned her to expect him by noon, and had told her to be ready and not keep him waiting.

Nettie had kissed the surviving three little Munsons and their mother, suddenly filled with passionate remorse for her past cruelty to the girl who had now saved their lives. She had shaken hands with the husky voiced father, who had simply and reverently begged God's blessing for her, and to hide her own tears, she had run from them and shut the door

between them. Now she was in the Ford, with the robes tucked comfortably about her; breathlessly she squeezed the arm of her old friend.

“Oh, doc, just to think, I’m goin’ home now—home to Angel and my baby! Oh, it’s just heaven to be here beside you and on our way.”

The “doc” had one of the new self-starters and there was no need of cranking this year. They buzzed down the road in the “tin Lizzie,” making a great racket and leaving in their wake a malodorous cloud of smoke. For some time they went along in silence, and gradually Nettie’s happy mood fell from her as she noted the gravity of the doctor’s face. She touched his arm timidly, though her heart began to misgive her.

“Can you really spare me now, doc?”

There was no answer from her old friend, and Nettie pressed his arm, repeating her question.

“Can you, doc?” And then, as still he did not answer: “Is any one else down now?”

“Nettie.” Dr. McDermott had slowed up. He tried to hide the anxiety in his face, for he did not intend to ask any further sacrifice of the girl, but he wanted

her to know the facts. "Nettie, the Bow Claire Lumber Camp is down."

"The Bow Claire!"

The color receded from her face, her hand went to her heart as her thoughts flew instantly to Cyril. Slowly she realized the meaning of the doctor's solemn words.

"Nearly a hundred men, Nettie, and not a soul to care for them."

There was a long pause, while Dr. McDermott looked steadily ahead. The car was pounding and sending out jets of steam from its lately frozen radiator.

"Doc," cried the girl suddenly, "this ain't the road to Bow Claire. Turn your car around!"

"A promise is a promise," said the doctor. "I promised I'd bring you home to your child, lass, and I'll keep my word if you say so."

"But I don't say so. I don't want to go home—yet. I shouldn't be happy—even with my baby. My place is where I am needed most, and you should know where that is, doc."

"Dear lass," said the doctor gently. "They're needing you sore at Bow Claire."

"Then turn your car around, doc, and don't you m-mind if I seem to be c-cryin'. It's just because—"

because I'm excited, and oh! I'm so g-glad of the chance—of the opportunity, doc, to go 'long with you to Bow Claire.”

Dr. McDermott blinked through his misty glasses. He swung his wheel sharply around, backed along the slippery, thawing ground, and went over a culvert into a snow bank on the side of the road.

There was a grinding cough of the engine, and it stopped dead. Again and again Dr. McDermott started the car, and back and forth it chugged in a vain effort to pull out of the slippery snow pit. From under a pile of produce and baggage, the doctor produced a snow shovel and began the process of “digging out,” making a road before and behind where the car might back and get a fair start onto the road again. As he shoveled the snow, digging under the car and all around it, they heard the honk of an approaching motorist and gradually Bull Langdon's huge touring car swung into sight. At the sound of the automobile horn, Dr. McDermott had straightened up, intending to ask for aid, but when he saw who it was he doggedly resumed his digging alone.

Bull Langdon took in the situation at a glance, and the sight of Nettie cooled the fever that had possessed

him for days. She was visibly terrified at seeing him, and shrank back inside the Ford. The Bull observed her agitation with fierce delight and all the old feeling of domination over her came back to him. He got down from his car and examined the spot where the back wheel seemed to have wedged itself in.

“Stuck, are you?” he gloated.

“We’ll be out in a minute.”

“Not on your life you won’t. You’ll not pull out of that today.”

“Very well, if that’s what you think, suppose you haul us out.”

“Ain’t got a rope, and my engine won’t stand the gaff.”

Dr. McDermott’s wrathful stare met the Bull’s insolent smile. He turned his back upon him, and applied himself with savage energy to his work.

“Where you headed for?”

“None of your damned business.”

“It ain’t, heh?”

The Bull was now in high good humor. His hand rested upon the Ford, close to where Nettie was crouching behind the curtain. His bold eyes held hers fascinated with terror.

"Tell you what I'll do," he suggested after a moment's pause, "I'll take you aboard my car and pack you wherever you're goin'. You can 'phone the garage at Cochrane to send out and haul in your Lizzie."

Dr. McDermott could not see Nettie, but he could feel the silent, desperate appeal which her fear of the Bull prevented her crying aloud.

"No," he felt her imploring him. "No—never! I would rather stay here forever than go with him."

He looked the cattleman up and down with the same stare of cold contempt and reprobation as that which had caused Bull Langdon to quail before Angella Loring.

"We'll pull out without your help," said Dr. McDermott curtly. "Don't need you. Don't want you."

"Hmph!" chuckled the Bull. He cut a chunk of chewing tobacco, and bit calmly into it. He spat, and blinked his eyes at Nettie, then buttoning up his big beaver fur coat, he moved towards his car. Climbing aboard, he grinned down at the girl as he pushed the self-starter with his foot. The engine instantly responded with its soft purring and the great car glided along the road. A madness raged through the Bull as he drove; his pent-up passion of months was find-

ing an outlet at last. The faster the car flew, the greater was his sense of relief and elation, as he told himself he would find the car still stalled in the same spot at nightfall when he returned for the girl.

As soon as the Bull's car had disappeared from sight Nettie was out of the Ford.

"Oh, doc, he'll be back. I know he will."

"Let him. Nothin' to be afraid of. Feel in the pocket of the car—no, the other one. Give me that—"

Nettie passed the revolver to him, and the doctor thrust it into his hip pocket.

"Now, lass, can you give me a hand?"

Together they pushed with might and main upon the car; it went up a few paces, and slid back into the snow. Again they pushed, and this time, at the doctor's order, Nettie found and thrust under the wheel a stone that held it in place. The doctor then climbed aboard, and with Nettie pushing behind, the Ford snorted forward a few feet, slipped back, but jerked ahead again. There was a tremendous grinding noise, and the whirling wheel went over the side of the culvert; the car jumped forward. With a whoop of triumph, Dr. McDermott made room for Nettie and they were off again. With loud clanking the flivver flew

along those crazy roads, panted up incredibly steep and slippery grades, plunged into snow fields and on into the timber land, where only the narrow cattle trails made a path through the woods to the lumber camp. They "made the grade" in two and a half hours of hard riding, and pulled into the dead-still camp with a cheering honking of their horn.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE meeting with Nettie on the road doubled the Bull's determination to possess her again. The exhilaration of the chance encounter and the frustration of his plans when, returning, he found the little car gone, had roused his desire to a pitch of insanity. Everything else was forgotten; his cattle, his ranches, his great money losses, the impossibility of obtaining help, even the deterioration of his prized bulls at Barstairs—all these cares and anxieties ceased to exist in the overpowering passion that consumed him.

Bull Langdon was incapable of love in its finer sense, but in his blind and brutal way, he was madly in love with Nettie Day. His passion for the girl was like a fire that burned and raged within him, seeking an outlet where there was none and for the time being the man was like a maniac.

He thought of the girl ceaselessly, chortling with delight as he pictured her beauty, now sweeter than ever before in its young maturity. He had not noticed

a new quality of spirituality that suffering had added to her loveliness, a certain light that seemed to radiate from her; all he had seen was that the summer's work in the fields had reddened her cheeks and brightened her eyes, and that her lips were like a scarlet flame.

If he pictured Nettie as she had looked at him from her seat in the doctor's Ford with her wide frightened eyes, his mind went back also to those other days, when he had held the girl in his arms. Many a night as he tramped the floor of the empty ranch house, his half-crazed mind lived over and over the joy of those days when he had held her in his power—"like purebred stuff in the Squeezegate." She had been weak and docile then, a timid, terrified captive; but now there was a new expression in her face, a look that was like a shield—a warning guard that held him back and warned him that if trapped again she would struggle to the death. He told himself he had no desire to hurt her—he wanted only to have her back, where he believed she belonged by right; he would make her the second Mrs. Langdon. And at the thought of Nettie, at the Bar Q, reigning in the great ranch house, keeping the place clean and sweet as his first wife had done, the Bull threw out his arms and clinched them to him,

as if in fact the struggling girl were actually in their grasp, and he crooned words of savage tenderness to his vision, only to moan and whimper the next moment as he came back to reality again.

His desperation made him resourceful and cunning. He looked for Nettie Day at every farm and ranch in the foothills and in the adjoining prairie country. His car no longer tore along the roads from Bar Q to Barstairs, as he superintended the care of his demoralized herd. He had started now upon another hunt, and was running to earth a quarry whose price he set above all else.

His spying at the Loring ranch had revealed the fact that Nettie was not there, but, laying in wait for the unfortunate Jake, his son of an earlier passion, in due time he captured and tortured the half-breed. He had picked him up on the trail, racing bare-back upon some errand into the hills, and his questions as to the whereabouts of Nettie, accompanied by prods and kicks, had brought the stuttered information that she was "far way off on the hills. She at lumber camp. Everybody gone die on Bow Claire."

That was enough for the Bull. He knew now where the girl was, but the knowledge, instead of satisfying

and calming him, did the very reverse when he realized that Nettie and Cyril were once more together. That thought obsessed him, and filled his mind with murderous designs.

In the midst of his fury he reminded himself of Nettie's baby and a new idea, charged with possibilities, occurred to him. If he could not take the girl by force, there was one way by which she could be lured to Bar Q. He was amazed that he had not thought of it before. Human nature, he knew, was no different from cattle nature, where the young ones were concerned. The cattle mother would go, if necessary, through walls of fire and stone to reach her offspring, and what would keep Nettie Day from going to Bar Q, if she knew her baby was there? It was never necessary to throw the lariat upon the mother's neck; the roping of her child was always enough. Bull Langdon swung his car around.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TWO "green" hands were now at Bar Q. They had been sent out by the Government Employment office, and for several days before his search for Nettie had begun Bull Langdon had been trying to break them into the cattle "game." They were English, guileless, clean-cut youngsters of good family, who looked upon the foully swearing cowman as a pathological subject that both interested and amazed them.

Their knowledge of ranching or "rawnching," as they called it, was of the vaguest, but they were good riders and the life appealed to them as sportsmen.

One of the anomalies of the ranching population of Alberta is its tremendous variety of types. Here you will find a man who can neither read nor write, and his neighbor, often his chum, will be the son of an English lord, one of those odd derelicts that drift over from the Old Country and take so kindly to the ranch life that more often than not they return unwillingly to their homes. University men and agricultur-

ists experimenting with irrigation projects and intensive cultivation live side by side with business men and men from New York and other great cities in the States, who for diverse reasons have broken away from the cities, and gone in for farming on a big scale, raising the business of farming to the level of great enterprises rather than the slovenly and weary process it usually is. For the most part, however, the farming population of Alberta is made up of that solid, plodding type that have trekked out from eastern Canada or the midwestern states, tempted by the cheapness of the land and the richness of the soil. These are the backbone of the country and between these and the others are sandwiched colonies of peasants from Scandinavia and other parts of Europe.

It is with the hired man as with the owner. He may be an illiterate clod of the old type, or a fresh-faced college-bred son of a man of wealth, even of title, or again some chance wanderer, gone "broke" in the colony, and using up the remittance from home on drink and cards. Besides these there is also the type of English student and sportsman, who enjoys "roughing it" and hires out partly for experience and partly for a lark.

To this latter type the men at Bar Q belonged. They had come up largely to escape a city of gloom and plague, and were extremely anxious to remain at the great ranch. The Bull, intent on getting away, endeavored in a few days to teach them what he called the "A B C" of ranching. They demonstrated their ability to remain in the saddle eight or ten hours at a stretch, and to ride over thirty or forty miles without undue fatigue.

The Bull showed them "the ropes"; pointed out where certain cattle were to be gathered in; indicated the fields where they were to be driven, and promising to return "in a few days," as he rode off and left the "tenderfeet" in charge of the great ranch.

After his departure, the two young Englishmen rode over the place, marked the likely places for big game, took a "pot" or two at the yowling coyote on a hill; rode over the pleasant hills and pasture land, back to the comfortable bunkhouse, and decided that they had a "snap" and that "rawnching" was the life for them. It was a jolly sight better than hanging around a small city up to its neck in sickness. In the warm spell that followed soon after the departure of Bull Langdon, the Englishmen "rode the range" like hunt-

ers, and their methods of rounding up cattle, though weird, were highly effective. They raced and chased the cattle, galloping along at top speed, thrilled by the spectacle of the fleeing herd which they persistently and doggedly tried to overtake. The experienced cow-puncher lopes along leisurely behind or alongside a bunch of cattle, taking care not to hurry them, for to run cattle is to "knock the beef" off them. That spring the lean cattle of the Bar Q amazed even the least sophisticated ranch folk, and it is certain that the guileless Englishmen never dreamed they were to blame for the animals' emaciated condition.

When a cold spell followed the thaw, the Englishmen gaped at the thermometer, which was dropping rapidly towards thirty below zero, and retreated hastily into the warm bunkhouse, firmly convinced that no creature living could survive such a temperature. The rapid change from cold to warm and back to cold again is a peculiarity of the Alberta climate, but the Englishmen had thought that the Chinook was the first warmth of an early spring. The unexpectedly bitter weather alarmed and appalled them; they spent the day shut up in the house, piling huge logs into the great square wood stove, that spluttered and sent off an enor-

mous heat. They concocted toothsome dishes for their entertainment, for, like most Englishmen, they were expert hands at "batching" and camping, and knew how to cook. Their fare included such game as venison, moose, mountain goat and sheep, to say nothing of the small game, mallard duck, prairie chicken, partridge, grouse and quail which abounded in the wild woods of Bar Q, and the Englishmen had prudently "brought them down" while rounding up the cattle, not knowing that the shooting had contributed considerably to the flight of the terrified herd.

This game, expertly drawn to the ranch by horse sleds, was piled up frozen in the immense storeroom adjoining the bunkhouse, where they also found an ample supply of stores. It was certain that no matter how long the siege of Arctic cold might last, the hands of the Bar Q would survive starvation.

Shut in the bunkhouse, their days were by no means empty, for when not engaged in cooking or feeding the wood stove, they wrote articles on "ranching in the wild northwest," or indited epistles home to thrilled relatives, who received from their letters a vague notion that their dear boys were sojourning in polar regions. Sometimes they would find in the letters from their

English friends, whose knowledge of Canada was of the weirdest, warnings to be careful of the treacherous Esquimaux, and reminders to call, when they found time, upon some relative whose address was somewhere in their neighborhood, in Ontario or Nova Scotia. The ignorance abroad of the immense extent of the Canadian provinces was almost unbelievable. To all their folks at home the young Englishmen took delight in concocting thrilling romances in which they figured as big game hunters and fishermen, and through which they moved heroically, followed by bands of noble red men.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHILE Angella did her chores in the morning, Jake looked after Nettie's laughing, fair-haired baby. The breed adored the child, and the hours he spent playing with him were the happiest of his life. Angella had built a small "yard" for the baby to play in safely while Jake, on his hands and knees, would play "cat and dog" outside the railings, to the baby's unbounded delight.

He had grown into a beautiful child, with his mother's fair skin and blue eyes, and his blonde hair curled in tiny ringlets all over his small, round head. He was the soul of good humor, and though not robust, his health was rapidly improving.

Life had assumed a new meaning for the woman recluse and the change was reflected in her expression. The defiant look was almost gone from the bright eyes, the lips were no longer bitterly compressed; with a faint color in her cheeks, and her soft gray hair curling about her face, Angella Loring was almost beau-

tiful, as she held the baby close in her arms, and murmured foolish endearments over it.

By the time she finished her milking and chores in the early morning, the baby would be awake, and as soon as she came into the house, he would set up a loud demand for bath and food. Before either Jake or Angella breakfasted, he must first be cared for. Satisfied, rosy and clean, he would then be put in his "yard," to tumble happily about among his favorite "toys," the clothes pins and empty thread spools, which he rolled around the yard in high glee, or sucked and chewed upon with relish.

One morning in March Angella's chores took longer than usual. As hard as she pumped, the water froze before it could fall from the spout, and the barn was full of stock, which had come up from the frozen pastures to the shelter of the sheds. There were twenty or thirty head waiting hungrily for their share of the feed and water, which was generally reserved for the special milking stock and weak stuff interned in the barn. Angella worked hard and valiantly, driving back the greedy steers, and rescuing a half frozen calf, which barely escaped death under the scampering heels.

Upon examining the little creature, she saw that if

its life was to be saved she would have to take it to some warmer place than the barn. Throwing together a rough sled made out of a couple of boards, she managed to shove it underneath the motionless animal, and pull the litter with a lariat over the frozen ground to the house.

Jake did not answer her calls to open the door and she had to push it open herself, letting in an icy gust of wind. She tugged and pulled at the sled till it slid into the kitchen, and at last deposited the calf in front of the roaring fire. Breathing heavily from the exertion and holding her sides, she leaned against the table, and suddenly caught sight of Jake lying face downward on the floor. Her first thought was that it was an attack of his periodical convulsions, but a moment later she saw the empty "yard" as well. Her senses reeled; it seemed as though the whole room began to swim around her, as slowly her knees gave way, and for the first time in her life Angella Loring fainted. But it was only for a moment; she came back to consciousness almost at once and crawled on her knees to where Jake, now moaning and moving his head, still lay stretched upon the floor. His contorted face was horribly bruised and deathly pale, and when he opened

his eyes the blood ran out of them. She saw then that Jake had been struck down and beaten.

“Him! Him!” gibbered the breed.

“Jake, what has happened? Where’s the baby? Oh-h!”

“Bobby—all—a—gone. Him—the Bull take a baby! Him gone away.”

Again the universe began to spin about her, but she refused to faint a second time. Feeling her way to the door, Angella Loring went out again into the bitter cold to the barn, where the mare with her new colt whinnied as she slipped the stock saddle across its back. She trapped the colt in an adjoining stall, and then as she got on the mare’s back, she whispered:

“Go quickly, Daisy, or you’ll not get back to your baby soon.”

There was a long snorting whinny from Daisy—a cry of protest at being taken from her colt—indig- nantly answered by the little one.

The nearest telephone was five miles from Angella’s ranch, and when she rode into the farm yard, in spite of the intense cold, the mare was sweating from her wild race across the country. The astonished farmer who led Angella to the ’phone—it was the first time

she had been known to step inside any of their houses—stayed by the door and listened with pricked-up ears as the excited woman called Dr. McDermott at Springbank. By a merciful chance he was there, and a few moments later the farmer was helping his strange visitor to a seat, and calling loudly to his wife for help. For again Angella Loring had fainted. Her first question when she opened her eyes and looked up at her neighbors' faces was:

“Has he come? Has Dr. McDermott come?”

And when they replied that he had not, she wrung her hands and broke into weak tears.

CHAPTER XXX

THE unexpected return of the "Governor," as the Englishmen had named Bull Langdon, was an exciting event in their hitherto pleasant lives. He arrived late on a March afternoon, the snort of his engine and the honk of his horn arousing the "hands" from a siesta, where, stretched before a raging wood fire, they drowsily smoked and read.

They dressed leisurely in warm fur coats and overshoes, before answering his impatient summons, and sauntering out in their own good time, smiled good-humoredly at the shouting cowman.

"Here, you! Take this in. Ain't no fire to the house. Want it thawed out."

The first of the Englishmen, whose long name need not appear here—"Bo" is what Bull Langdon called him—took the bundle in his hands and then almost dropped it, for something moved inside it, and a sound that was like a suffocated moan arose from its mysterious depths.

"My word! The thing's alive, d'you know," ex-

claimed the startled Englishman. "Hang it all, man, I believe it's a baby."

"Take it to the bunkhouse," roared the Bull, backing into the garage. "Thaw it out."

Gingerly carried into the bunkhouse by the amazed "Bo" and deposited upon the cot that he himself had but recently reposed upon, the baby continued its low, moaning cries. Both the little bare feet had kicked out from the sheepskin coat, and were frozen stiff. One minute fist stuck out of the coat, and there was a great swelling on the forehead, where he had fallen off the seat of the car to the floor. Its whole body, in fact, was bruised from the cruel bumping of that long mad ride from Yankee Valley, a distance of thirty-five miles.

"Cutie," the name sneeringly imposed upon the other Englishman by Bull Langdon, because of his natty dress and his monocle, now stuck that despised piece of glass in his right eye, and surveyed the child with amazement. Its cries were growing fainter, and a kind of frozen rigor was creeping over it.

"Well, what're you gapin' at?" Bull Langdon was glowering in the doorway.

"Where in the world did you pick the little beggar up?" inquired "Bo."

"It ain't none o' your business," was the surly retort. "He's here, and he's here to stay. He's mine, and he's got my brand on him."

"You don't mean to say that you brand babies in this country! Never heard of such a thing! It's damned inhuman, I should say."

"Don't matter what you say or think. I want that kid thawed out. Give 'im something to eat. He's cold and hungry, but he's healthy young stuff and 'll pull through. Kids ain't no different to cattle. Feed 'em and keep 'em warm. That's all they need. He's bawlin' now for feed. You got something handy?"

"Nothing but a bite of cold venison. Hardly the stuff for a baby."

"He ain't no baby. He's a yearling. Here!"

He had torn a strip of the venison from the piece, and had thrust it into the child's hand. The tiny fingers closed feebly about the meat and then feebly unclosed. The bright eyes, so like his mother's, opened in one wide, blind stare, then the white lids came down over them, closing the light out forever.

"Gone to sleep," grunted the cowman. "Keep the fire goin'. Thaw him out and feed him. That's the stuff. He'll come round. He's good stuff. I'm off for

the timber. Be back soon. You ain't much good neither of you at tendin' to cattle. So I'll give you a nurse maid's job. Let the cattle rustle for themselves. You concentrate on—". He indicated with a jerk of his thumb Nettie's child, now quite still where it lay.

Alone, the two Englishmen continued to look at each other, astonished out of speech.

"Well, I'm hanged," said "Bo" at last, "absolutely hanged. What's to do?"

"Carn't say any more than you can. Blessed if I know the first thing about a baby."

"Cutie" was looking down sentimentally now at the small blonde head.

"It's awfully quiet, isn't it? Doesn't seem—" He touched the tiny hand. It was cold as ice, and all of a sudden the two men looking down on that little frozen thing realized the truth.

"By Jove!" whispered the one. "The little beggar's dead, d'you know."

Their eyes met apprehensively.

"What's to do?"

"Gad, I wish I knew."

"It's a dashed serious matter."

"Rather!"

“I’ll plug over to the house and telephone. Where’d he say he was going?—er to timber something. I wonder what his telephone number might be.”

“Try Information. She should know.”

But Information knew of no timber number, but when the stuttering Englishman made clear to her that there was a dead baby at Bar Q, she connected him swiftly with the Provincial Police Station at Cochrane, and a voice at that end promised after a series of impatient questions to “look into it,” and “Bo” hung up.

The charm of “rawnching” was over for the Englishmen. All the rest of that afternoon they sat in somber silence in the bunkhouse, carefully averting their eyes from the small covered head. They had no heart for their usual evening meal, but contented themselves with strong tea and smoking steadily upon their pipes.

It was nearly dark when the sound of a motor along the road was heard, and then the labored panting of the engine as it made the steep grade to the ranch. The two young men hoped the police had come, not knowing that the solitary mounty who had been despatched upon the case was coming by horse twenty-eight miles

from the ranch, and could not arrive for several hours. When the Englishmen opened the door of the bunkhouse, they were surprised to see a woman running swiftly ahead of the fur-coated doctor, whose acquaintance they had already made.

Their first thought was that Angella was the mother, and indeed she might well have been as she threw herself down beside Nettie's baby, and burst into uncontrolled, despairing sobs over the little dead body.

CHAPTER XXXI

CHUM LEE packed everything he possessed in the world in his capacious bamboo bag, slipping in between the articles of clothing bottles and pipes and boxes filled with redolent odors. He muttered and chattered frantically to himself as he packed, and his hands shook as if with ague. He tied and knotted a stout rope about the bag and, trembling and shivering, put on his old sheepskin coat, muskrat cap and fur mittens. Hoisting the bag upon his back, Chum Lee hastened on panic-winged feet away from the camp at Barstairs.

He had awakened from a long doze, in which he dreamed of summer seas, green as jade, of colorful sampans, alive with moving, friendly faces; of a girl's face, oval and soft, with gentle almond eyes, and a smile like a caress, whose hair was black and smooth as the wing of a teal, and decked with bridal flowers. That fair vision of his home and the young wife he had left in China vanished into the cruel mists of memory. He awoke to intense cold, the bleakness of death

itself in the one-room bunkhouse. With a sob, the Chinaman crept out of bed, scurried across the room, only to find the fire was out, then staggered to the woodbox. On his way back to the stove, his arms loaded, he stumbled across something that lay upon the floor in his path. A loud cry escaped the Chinaman. The wood dropped from his shivering arms and clattered down upon the Bar Q "hand." Batt Leeson lay upon his back, where he had rolled out of his bunk overnight. His mouth and eyes were wide open, but did not move or flicker, for Batt was in his last long sleep.

The sight of the dead man, the last of the "boys" to succumb to the "black plague," was too much for the overwrought and drug-weakened Chinaman. Even the terrors of the zero weather were less appalling to face than what was inside that shack. Between his chattering teeth, Chum Lee sent up frantic appeals to the gods of his ancestors to lift the dreaded curse which had befallen the land in which he had sojourned too long.

As he went out of the gate, the long-drawn savage roar of hungry bulls followed him and, turning back upon a sudden resolution, Chum Lee shoved the bars

along the sliding doors. He would perform a last act of charity and win the favor of the gods. The famished brutes within would come up presently against the loosened door, and find themselves free from the prison where they had been confined for days.

That day, bellowing and moaning their unceasing demands for feed and water, the bulls crashed against the doors, as the Chinaman had foreseen, and they gave. The animals crossed a barrier of logs, and with heads lifted, they sniffed along the corrals and found the bars which the Chinaman had left down, and strayed out into the lower pasture. The gate stood wide open to the highway, and the vast country stretched beyond, unspeakably desolate under its mantle of deep snow. Out into the world, in search of that which had been denied them in their luxurious and costly sheds, went the famous Hereford bulls.

Pampered and petted, used to being fed almost by hand, and knowing no range save the sweet home pastures, how were they likely to fare in the wilderness? Now the merciless cold of the implacable winter smote them to the bone, and the unbroken expanse of frozen snow rose four feet deep in mounds and hillocks on all sides of them.

There were no nibblings. Streams and rivers were frozen hard. The wretched cattle swept along the road huddled together before a blinding wind out of the hill country, forerunner of a coming Chinook, but with its first blast intensifying the cold and lashing the last ounce of strength out of the lost and famished cattle.

They drifted blindly before the wind, driven against fence lines and trapped in coulee and gulch. Great white flakes began to fall like fairy birds drifting in the dazzling sunlight; like millions of feathers they fell upon the huddled herd, burying them under a mighty mound.

The only survivor of all that noble herd was the bull once known as "Prince Perfection Bar Q the IV," of whom the great specialist had predicted that he would startle the purebred world. Facing the west wind like a gladiator, the Prince turned from his fellows, and defiantly trod his way through the storm to where the outline of the hill country loomed up with its promise of shelter and food. Sniffing along the road allowances, pausing only to bellow his immense complaint, the massive brute pressed on his way.

CHAPTER XXXII

THERE was a celebration at Bow Claire. Lanterns hung from rafters and eaves to give the place an air of festivity. Across the back of the big lumber camp, where the fifty-five men who had pulled through were now convalescent, bunting and bright Indian blankets were hung.

Now that the last of the men had been pronounced out of danger, the lumber-jacks, with the connivance of the doctor and an Indian, had smuggled into the camp the provisions for the intended festival.

When Nettie came from the foreman's house that evening, to make her nightly rounds of her emergency camp hospital, the surprise party awaiting her almost frightened her. A dozen accordions all struck up at the same moment; mouth organs joined in; Jim Crow, the only darky in the camp, grinning from ear to ear, was twanging a real banjo, and Mutt, a giant Russian, with a voice like a great bell, led all hands in a deafening cheer for Nettie, a cheer that, in spite

of their weakness, the men kept up for a long time.

Astonished and moved beyond speech, Nettie looked at her "boys," and smiled her thanks, though the tears ran down her cheeks. But the ceremonies were by no means over with the cheering and singing. Thin and pale, his eyes dark with a look of tragedy that wrung the girl's heart, Cyril Stanley stepped forward, a bouquet of flowers in his hands.

He alone in all the camp had been unable to find the courage to speak to Nettie. Those flowers, ragged from their journey on horseback, had cost the Bow Claire Camp more than the bouquet of a prima donna, and were intended to speak a message to the girl that the men lacked eloquence to say. Cyril had begged for the privilege of being the one to present the flowers. He came slowly forward, daring to look Nettie steadily in the face for the first time, and put out the hand that held the flowers; but the words he had planned to speak died on his lips. He could not even whisper her name.

She took the flowers from him and looked deep into his eyes. While the camp looked on in bewildered silence, the two estranged lovers gazed at one another for a long moment and when it had passed it had taken with it

all the doubt and misunderstanding that had clouded Cyril Stanley's mind. Something within him seemed to burst, breaking down all the dikes of hatred he had built up in bitterness against her. He knew, as he looked into Nettie Day's clear eyes, that he loved her still beyond anything else on earth, and that he could have sworn by the living God above them that she could do, and had done, no wrong; that her heart was clean and pure and unstained.

Suddenly a sharp sound broke upon the hush that had fallen so strangely in the camp. The crisp metallic ring of a horse's hoofs sounded outside, and slowly the girl, her flowers still in her arms, turned as pale as death.

His chin thrust out, his big knotted hands swinging like a prize fighter's, half drunk with alcohol and mad desire, Bull Langdon burst into the camp. His glance swept that circle of feeble, motionless men, then turned to transfix the unhappy girl, whose flowers now lay where they had fallen to the floor. Before a word was said the truth flashed like a miracle over Cyril Stanley's mind. Now Nettie Day would never need to say one word in explanation to her lover. A flood of memories rushed over the boy, shaking him to his depths

as he realized the damnable crime that had been wrought against the girl he loved, and which death alone could now wipe out.

“So here y’are,” cried the cattleman, towering above the cowering Nettie. “You come along home with me, gell. Your baby—and *mine*, gell, is at Bar Q. He’s needin’ you more’n this bunch of bos.”

An inarticulate cry broke from Cyril’s throat as he leaped fairly into the face of Bull Langdon. Staggered by the unexpected onslaught, and then seeing who it was that had attacked him, his lips drawn back like a gorilla’s, Bull Langdon, with a sweep of his arm, felled the boy to the ground. He tried vainly to rise, but, weakened by his recent long illness, he had hardly struggled to his knees before the cattleman sent him spinning to the floor again.

A low murmuring passed over the crowd of lumbermen, a hoarse cursing protest, that grew in volume and fury as the Bull laid his hand on Nettie Day. It burst like a tidal wave when the frenzied girl broke from his grasp and fled through the open door.

The Bull found himself surrounded by a mob of mad men, cursing and weeping because of their weakness and inability to pull down the man they longed to

kill, they leaped and struck at him. With his back to the wall he struck out right and left with his mighty fists, sending one man after another staggering to the floor, meanwhile edging craftily nearer and nearer to the door through which Nettie Day had fled.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was a still, cold night. Nettie Day rushed blindly on horseback through the pathless dead timber lands. With amazing presence of mind she had mounted the Bull's own mare, which he had left standing outside the camp. On and on she urged the great animal, heedless of snow-laden brush and boughs that snapped back and lashed her as she rode.

The dense woods lay wrapped in a vast silence. Not a twig stirred on the frost-bowed trees. No living foot seemed to move within the depths of the forest. All that she heard, if indeed she heard anything, as she fled like the wind through the timber land, was the crunch of her horse's hoofs on the frozen snow. On and on, indifferent to the piercing cold; intent on one purpose only, to reach Bar Q and get her baby before the Bull could overtake her.

The mare was built on big, slim lines. Of thoroughbred racing stock by her sire, she was the foal of a Percheron mare, and therefore swift as well as strong. She carried the girl throughout that night without

once stopping, all of the twenty miles to the Bar Q.

Dawn was breaking over the still sleeping land, and a great shadowy arch spread like a rainbow across the sky, the long-prayed-for symbol of Chinook weather. Before the day was half gone a wind would blow like a bugle call from the mountains, and, racing with the sun, would send its warm breath over the land. But Nettie Day was blind to the omen of spring. Cramped and cold from her long ride, with a speechless terror tearing at her heartstrings, she fell rather than dismounted from her horse, and staggered toward the house, at the door of which Angella Loring stood, with empty arms.

Meanwhile another kind of drama had taken place in the timber land. Bloody and battered from his fight with the lumber-jacks and loggers, Bull Langdon sought the trail. In those deep woods, so still and silent, with the spell of the night upon them, in spite of the deep silence, there was a feeling of live, wild things hidden in bush and coolie, crouching and peering through the snow-laden brush.

He knew the country well, and had almost as keen a sense of smell as the cattle themselves. He had boasted that he could "sniff his way" anywhere through

the foothill country, and that his long years of night riding had given him a cat's eyes. Where the dense forests broke here and there, the clearings were as bright as day in the moonlight.

It was twelve miles to Morley, an Indian trading post on the edge of the Stony Indian Reserve, and the Bull calculated that by turning off the main trail and following an old cattle path, he could cut the distance down a third.

The white moon behind moving clouds lighted his way one moment and plunged him in darkness the next. The cattle trail went in a wavering line toward a valley that ran along the Ghost River, where lay the summer range of the foothill cattle.

If the woods were still and dark, the valley, flooded with moonlight, looked like a great pool on whose farther bank dark forms were vaguely moving. These were the stray cattle that had escaped the fall roundup, and found shelter from the inclement weather in the seclusion of this deep valley, protected by the hills on one side, and the rapidly flowing Ghost on the other.

The first impulse of a cattleman upon spotting stray cattle on the range is to ride close enough to

them to read the brand upon their ribs; no easy matter at night, but the Bull was used to this. He was halfway across the valley when a certain restless stirring made him aware that he had been seen. Range cattle will move blindly before a man on a horse, but it is a reckless man who will risk himself near range cattle afoot. The roar of one of the leaders sent the cowman cautiously back into the shelter of the brush. He was unprepared to meet a stampede, but he marked the place to which the cattle had strayed, and made a mental note to round them up in a few days.

He was now but four miles from Morley, still traveling along the edges of the woods, when suddenly a low moaning call, growing ever in volume and power, until it swelled into a mighty roar that shook the bristling branches of the trees, smote the still night, and reverberated in the surrounding hills.

The cattleman stood stock-still, his head lifted and his face strained upward, his ears alert to catch the sound again. For he well knew that great far-reaching bellow which had once swelled his breast with pride; it was the furious challenge of the champion bull. Somewhere, close at hand, but hidden in those dense woods, Prince Perfection Bar Q the IV was at large.

The sound was not repeated and Bull Langdon came at last out of the sheltering woods. A wide field that flanked on one side the Banff Highway lay before him, on the other side of which were the fenced lands of the Indian Reserve.

As he moved through the thick woods, pausing every now and then to listen for treading hoofs behind him or for a breath of that low, menacing murmur that preceded the terrible roar, the cattleman's overwrought fancy had pictured the bull upon his trail, nor was it premonition that held him, but the fearful certainty that the savage animal was following close upon his tracks.

Bull Langdon considered the open space of the field and reckoned up his chances of making a swift dash across to the road, and across the road to the line of Indian fencing. A certain safety from his pursuer. For an instant he hesitated, then with lowered head, like one of his own blindly driven cattle, the cowman sped across the field. Not, however, swiftly enough for the Hereford bull that had trailed him.

On the edge of the timber land, Prince Perfection Bar Q the IV stood in a proud and questioning attitude with his stern eyes fixed upon the moving speck

before him. Slowly he marked his prey, then his head dropped, and with a lumbering gait, yet incredibly swift, he made straight for his quarry. The cowman, his back to the oncoming bull, intent only on reaching the shelter of the barbed wire fences on the south side of the Banff Highway before it was too late, did not dare look round, as like a missile released from a colossal catapult the great bull shot across the field. Sideways and still on the run, with his lowered head swinging from side to side, he drove his horns clear through the cowman's ribs. There was a horrible rending sound, and suddenly Bull Langdon was tossed into the air to fall to earth like a stone. Again and again the savage bull gored and tossed him until he was rent into pieces.

A master vengeance was in that act of justice, though no torture of Bull Langdon's body could atone for the torture he had inflicted upon Nettie Day's soul.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

“**H**EAR me, lass,” said Dr. McDermott, his hands resting upon the bent shoulders of Angella Loring. “In the old land, I was a stable lad and you the grand young lady of the manor house; my father was your father’s groom, and all the McDermotts before me served the Lorings; but here in Alberta we’re naught but mon and woman, and as mon to woman, lass, I’m asking you to be my wife.”

She answered without words, laying her hands in his, but as he looked into her eyes, the doctor saw all the shadows of the sad years fade away like ghosts before the dawn, and love like the sunlight of the land of their adoption had taken their place.

“It’s a puir rough sort of man you’re getting,” said the doctor huskily, but she laid her hands upon his lips and answered:

“Dr. McDermott, I’ll be getting the salt of the earth!”

Hat twisting in his hands, outside the barn Cyril waited for Nettie. As she came out, a pail of milk in either hand, he gently took them from her and set them upon the ground. He had learned that speech by heart—the speech he was going to say to Nettie, but now as they looked into one another’s eyes, no words were needed. As instinctively as life itself, they moved to each other. Nothing on earth now mattered save that they were in each other’s arms.

In the house, hand in hand, they faced their friends, and immersed in their own joy noted not that the doctor’s arm was about Angela’s shoulders.

“Nettie and I are going to get married in the summer,” said Cyril simply.

“Why wait for the summer?” rumbled their doctor friend. “Angel and I are going to Calgary tonight. Come with us.”

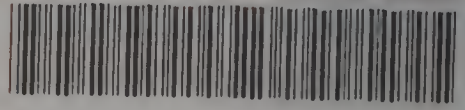
“ ’Twill take a month or two to rebuild the home again,” said Cyril wistfully.

“Why build again,” said Angella, softly. “There’s *this* house for you, Cyril. It’s our wedding gift to you

and Nettie. I'll be going—" She smiled and blushed like a girl, but finished the words bravely—"to my husband's house," she said.

THE END

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