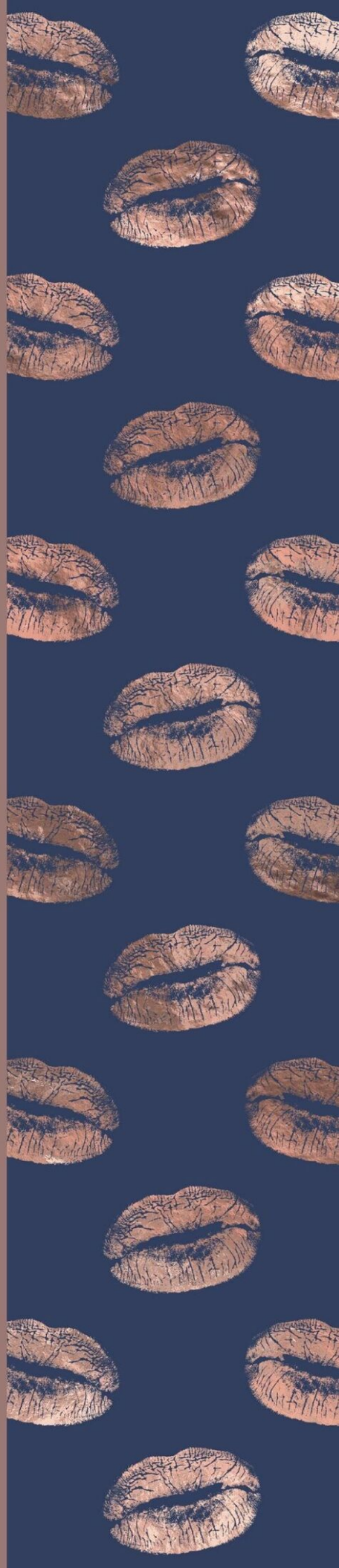
Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A PRAIRIE COURTSHIP

Harold Bindloss



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A Cold Welcome

It was falling dusk and the long emigrant train was clattering, close-packed with its load of somewhat frowsy humanity, through the last of the pine forest which rolls westward north of the Great Lakes toward the wide, bare levels of Manitoba, when Alison Leigh stood on the platform of a lurching car. A bitter wind eddied about her, for it was early in the Canadian spring, and there were still shattered fangs of ice in the slacker pools of the rivers. Now and then a shower of cinders that rattled upon the roof whirled down about her and the jolting brass rail to which she clung was unpleasantly greasy, but the air was, at least, gloriously fresh out there and she shrank from the vitiated atmosphere of the stove-heated car. She had learned during the past few years that it is not wise for a young woman who must earn her living to be fastidious, but one has to face a good many unpleasantnesses when traveling Colonist in a crowded train.

A gray sky without a break in it hung low above the ragged spires of the pines; the river the track skirted, and presently crossed upon a wooden bridge, shone in the gathering shadow with a wan, chill gleam; and the bare rocky ridges that flitted by now and then looked grim and forbidding. Indeed, it was

a singularly desolate landscape, with no touch of human life in it, and Alison shivered as she gazed at it with a somewhat heavy heart and weary eyes. Her head ached from want of sleep and several days of continuous jolting; she was physically worn out, and her courage was slipping away from her. She knew that she would need the latter, for she was beginning to realize that it was a rather hazardous undertaking for a delicately brought up girl of twenty-four to set out to seek her fortune in western Canada.

Leaning upon the greasy rails, she recalled the events which had led her to decide on this course, or, to be more accurate, which had forced it on her. Until three years ago, she had led a sheltered life, and then her father, dying suddenly, had left his affairs involved. This she knew now had been the fault of her aspiring mother, who had spent his by no means large income in an attempt to win a prominent position in second-rate smart society, and had succeeded to the extent of marrying her other daughter well. The latter, however, had displayed very little eagerness to offer financial assistance in the crisis which had followed her father's death.

In the end Mrs. Leigh was found a scantily paid appointment as secretary of a woman's club, while Alison was left to shift for herself, and it came as a shock to the girl to discover that her few capabilities were apparently of no practical use to anybody. She could paint and could play the violin indifferently well, but she had not the gift of imparting to others even the little she knew. A graceful manner and a nicely modulated voice appeared to possess no market value, and the unpalatable truth that nothing she had been taught was likely to prove more than a drawback in the struggle for existence was promptly forced on her.

She faced it with a certain courage, however, for her defects were the results of her upbringing and not inherent in her nature, and she forthwith

sought a remedy. In spite of her mother's protests, her sister's husband was induced to send her for a few months' training to a business school, and when she left the latter there followed a three-years' experience which was in some respects as painful as it was varied.

Her handwriting did not please the crabbed scientist who first engaged her as amanuensis. Her second employer favored her with personal compliments which were worse to bear than his predecessor's sarcastic censure; and she had afterward drifted from occupation to occupation, sinking on each occasion a little lower in the social scale. In the meanwhile her prosperous sister's manner became steadily chillier; her few influential friends appeared desirous of forgetting her; and at last she formed the desperate resolution of going out to Canada. Nobody, however, objected to this, and her brother-in-law, who was engaged in commerce, sent her a very small check with significant readiness, and by some means secured her a position as typist and stenographer in the service of a business firm in Winnipeg.

For the last three days she had lived on canned fruit and crackers in the train, not because she liked that diet, but because the charges at the dining-stations were beyond her means. She had now five dollars and a few cents in her little shabby purse. That, however, did not much trouble her, for she would reach Winnipeg on the morrow, and she supposed that she would begin her new duties immediately. She was wondering with some misgivings what her employers would be like, when a girl of about her own age appeared in the doorway of the vestibule.

"Aren't you coming in? It's getting late, and I'm almost asleep," she said.

Alison turned, and with inward repugnance followed her into the long car. It was brilliantly lighted by big oil lamps, and it was undoubtedly warm, for there was a stove in the vestibule, but the frowsy odors that greeted her were

almost overwhelming after the fresh night air. An aisle ran down the middle of the car, and already men and women and peevish children were retiring to rest. There was very little attempt at privacy, and a few wholly unabashed aliens were partially disrobing wherever they could find room for the operation. Some lay down upon boards pulled forward between two seats, some upon little platforms that let down by chains from the roof, and the car was filled with the complaining of tired children and a drowsy murmur of voices in many languages.

Alison sat down and glanced round at the passengers who had not yet retired. In one corner were three young Scandinavian girls, fresh-faced and tow-haired, of innocent and wholesome appearance, going out, as they had unblushingly informed her in broken English, to look for husbands among the prairie farmers. She was afterward to learn that such marriages not infrequently turned out well. Opposite them sat a young Englishman with a hollow face and chest, who could not stand his native climate, and had been married, so Alison had heard, to the delicate girl beside him the day before he sailed. They were going to Brandon on the prairie, and had not the faintest notion what they would do when they got there.

Close by were a group of big, blonde Lithuanians, hardened by toil, in odoriferous garments; a black-haired Pole; a Jewess whose beauty had run to fatness; and her greasy, ferret-eyed husband. Farther on a burly Englishman, who had evidently laid in alcoholic refreshment farther back down the line, was crooning a maudlin song. There was, however, an interruption presently, for a man's head was thrust out from behind a curtain which hung between the roof and one of the platforms above.

"Let up!" he said.

The song rose a little louder in response, and a voice with a western intonation broke in.

"Throw a boot at the hog!"

"No, sir," replied the man above; "he might keep it; and I guess they're most used to heaving bottles where he comes from."

The words were followed by a scuffling sound which seemed to indicate that the speaker was fumbling about the shelf for something, and then he added:

"This will have to do. Are you going to sleep down there, sonny?"

The Englishman paused to inform anybody who cared to listen that he would go to sleep when he wanted and that it would take a train-load of Canadians like the questioner, whose personal appearance he alluded to in vitriolic terms, to prevent him from singing when he desired; after which he resumed the maudlin ditty. Immediately there was a rustle of snapping leaves, as a volume of the detective literature that is commonly peddled on the trains went hurtling across the car. It struck the woodwork behind the singer with a vicious thud, and he stood up unsteadily.

"Now," he said, "I mean to show you what comes of insulting me."

He moved forward a pace or two, fell against a seat in an attempt to avoid a toddling child, and, grabbing at his disturber's platform, endeavored to clamber up to it. The chains rattled, and it seemed that the light boards were bodily coming down when he felt with one hand behind the curtain, part of which he rent from its fastenings. Then his hand reappeared clutching a stockinged foot, and a bronzed-faced man in shirt and trousers dropped from a neighboring resting-place.

"You get out!" thundered the Englishman. "Teach you to be civil when I've done with him. Gimme time, and I'll settle the lot of you, and the sausages"—

he presumably meant the Lithuanians—"afterward."

The man above contrived to kick him in the face with his unembarrassed foot, but he held on persistently to the other, and a general fracas appeared imminent when the conductor strode into the car. The latter had very little in common with the average English railway guard, for he was a sharp-tongued, domineering autocrat, like most of his kind.

"Now," he demanded, "what's this circus about?"

The Englishman informed him that he had been insulted, and firmly intended to wipe it out in blood. The conductor looked at him with a faint grim smile.

"Go right back to your berth, and sleep it off," he advised.

He stood still, collectedly resolute, clothed with authority, and the Englishman hesitated. He had doubtless pluck enough, and his blood was up, but he had also the innate, ingrained capacity for obedience to duly constituted power, which is not as a rule a characteristic of the Westerner. Then the conductor spoke again:

"Get a move on! I'll dump you off into the bush if you try to make trouble here."

It proved sufficient. The singer let the captive foot go and turned away; and when the conductor left, peace had settled down upon the clattering car. The little incident had, however, an unpleasant effect on Alison, for this was not the kind of thing to which she had been accustomed. It was a moment or two before she turned to her companion.

"I shall be very glad to get off the train to-morrow, Milly—and I suppose you will be quite as pleased," she said.

The girl blushed. She was young and pretty in a homely fashion, and had informed Alison, who had made her acquaintance on the steamer, that she was

to be married to a young Englishman on her arrival at Winnipeg.

"Yes," she replied; "Jim will be there waiting; I got a telegram at Montreal. It's four years since I've seen him."

The words were simple, but there was something in the speaker's voice and eyes which stirred Alison to half-conscious envy. It was not that marriage in the abstract had any attraction for her, for the thought of it rather jarred on her temperament, and it was, perhaps, not altogether astonishing that she had of late been brought into contact chiefly with the seamy side of the masculine character. Still, lonely and cast adrift as she was, she envied this girl who had somebody to take her troubles upon his shoulders and shelter her, and she was faintly stirred by her evident tenderness for the man.

"Four years!" she said reflectively. "It's a very long time."

"Oh," declared Milly, "it wouldn't matter if it had been a dozen now. He's the same—only a little handsomer in his last picture. Except for that, he hasn't changed a bit—I read you some of his letters on the steamer."

Alison could not help a smile. The girl's upbringing had clearly been very different from her own, and the extracts from Jim's letters had chiefly appealed to her sense of the ludicrous; but now she felt that his badly expressed devotion rang true, and her smile slowly faded. It must, she admitted, be something to know that through the four years, which had apparently been ones of constant stress and toil, the man's affection had never wavered, and that his every effort had been inspired by the thought that the result of it would bring his sweetheart in England so much nearer him, until at last, as the time grew rapidly shorter, he had, as he said, worked half the night to make the rude prairie homestead more fit for her.

"I suppose he wasn't rich when he went out?"

"No," replied Milly. "Jim had nothing until an uncle died and left him three or four hundred pounds. When he came and told me of it I made him go."

"You made him go?" exclaimed Alison, wondering.

"Of course! There was no chance for him in England; I couldn't keep him, just to have him near me—always poor—and I knew that whatever he did in Canada he would be true to me. The poor boy had trouble. His first crop was frozen, and his plow oxen died—I think I told you he has a little farm three or four days' ride back from the railroad." The girl's face colored again. "I sold one or two things I had—a little gold watch and a locket—and sent him the money. I wouldn't tell him how I got it, but he said it saved him."

Alison sat silent for the next moment or two. She was touched by her companion's words and the tenderness in her eyes. Alison's upbringing had in some respects not been a good one, for she had been taught to shut her eyes to the realities of life, and to believe that the smooth things it had to offer were, though they must now and then be schemed for, hers by right. It was only the last three years that had given her comprehension and sympathy, and in spite of the clearer insight she had gained during that time, it seemed strange to her that this girl with her homely prettiness and still more homely speech and manners should be capable of such unfaltering fidelity to the man she had sent to Canada, and still more strange that she should ever have inspired him with a passion which had given him power to break down, or endurance patiently to undermine, the barriers that stood between them. Alison had yet to learn a good deal about the capacities of the English rank and file, which become most manifest where they are given free scope in a new and fertile field.

"Well," she said, conscious of the lameness of the speech, "I believe you will be happy."

Milly smiled compassionately, as though this expression of opinion was quite superfluous; and then with a tact which Alison had scarcely expected she changed the subject.

"I've talked too much about myself. You told me you had something to do when you got to Winnipeg?"

"Yes," was the answer; "I'm to begin at once as correspondent in a big hardware business."

"You have no friends there?"

"No," replied Alison; "I haven't a friend in Canada, except, perhaps, one who married a western wheat-grower two or three years ago, and I'm not sure that she would be pleased to see me. As it happens, my mother was once or twice, I am afraid, a little rude to her."

It was a rather inadequate description of the persecution of an inoffensive girl who had for a time been treated on a more or less friendly footing and made use of by a certain circle of suburban society interested in parochial philanthropy in which Mrs. Leigh had aspired to rule supreme. Florence Ashton had been tolerated, in spite of the fact that she earned her living, until an eloquent curate whose means were supposed to be ample happened to cast approving eyes on her, when pressure was judicially brought to bear. The girl had made a plucky fight, but the odds against her were overwhelmingly heavy, and the curate, it seemed, had not quite made up his mind. In any case, she was vanquished, and tactfully forced out of a guild which paid her a very small stipend for certain services; and eventually she married a Canadian who had come over on a brief visit to the old country. How Florence had managed it, Alison, who fancied that the phrase was in this case justifiable, did not exactly know, but she had reasons for believing that the girl had really liked the curate and would not readily forgive her mother.

"Well," said Milly, "if ever you want a friend you must come to Jim and me; and, after all, you may want one some day." She paused, and glanced at Alison critically. "Of course, so many girls have to work nowadays, but you don't look like it, somehow."

This was true. Although Alison's attire was a little faded and shabby, its fit was irreproachable, and nobody could have found fault with the color scheme. She possessed, without being unduly conscious of it, an artistic taste and a natural grace of carriage which enabled her to wear almost anything so that it became her. In addition to this, she was, besides being attractive in face and feature, endued with a certain tranquillity of manner which suggested to the discerning that she had once held her own in high places. It was deceptive to this extent that, after all, the places had been only very moderately elevated.

"I'm afraid that's rather a drawback than anything else," she said in reference to Milly's last observation. "But it's a little while since you told me that you were sleepy."

They climbed up to two adjoining shelves they drew down from the roof, and though this entailed a rather undignified scramble, Alison wished that her companion had refrained from a confused giggle. Then they closed the curtains they had hired, and lay down, to sleep if possible, on the very thin mattresses the railway company supplies to Colonist passengers for a consideration. An attempt at disrobing would not have been advisable, but, after all, a large proportion of the occupants of the car were probably more or less addicted to sleeping in their clothes.

There was a change when Alison descended early in the morning, in order at least to dabble her hands and face in cold water, which would not have been possible a little later. Even first-class Pullman passengers have, as a rule, something to put up with if they desire to be clean, and Colonist travelers are

not expected to be endued with any particular sense of delicacy or seemliness. As a matter of fact, a good many of them have not the faintest idea of it. It was chiefly for this reason that Alison retired to the car platform after hasty ablutions, and, though it was very cold, she stayed there until the rest had risen.

The long train had run out of the forest in the night, and was now speeding over a vast white level which lay soft and quaggy in the sunshine, for the snow had lately gone. Here and there odd groves of birches went streaming by, but for the most part there were only leafless willow copses about the gleaming strips of water which she afterward learned were sloos. In between, the white waste ran back, bleached by the winter, to the far horizon. It looked strangely desolate, for there was scarcely a house on it, but, at least, the sun was shining, and it was the first brightness she had seen in the land of the clear skies.

Most of the passengers were partly dressed, for which she was thankful, when she went back into the car; and after one or two of them had kept her waiting she was at length permitted to set on the stove the tin kettle which was the joint property of herself and her companion. Then they made tea, and after eating the last of their crackers and emptying the fruit can, they set themselves to wait with as much patience as possible until the train reached Winnipeg.

The sun had disappeared, and a fine rain was falling when at last the long cars came clanking into the station amid the doleful tolling of the locomotive bell. Alison, stepping down from the platform, noticed a man in a long fur coat and a wide soft hat running toward the car. Then there was a cry and an outbreak of strained laughter, and she saw him lift her companion down and hold her unabashed in his arms. After that Milly seized her by the shoulder.

"This is Jim," she announced. "Miss Alison Leigh. I told her that if ever she wanted a home out here she was to come to us."

The man, who had a pleasant, bronzed face, laughed and held out his hand.

"If you're a friend of Milly's we'll take you now," he said. "She ought to have one bridesmaid, anyway. Come along and stay with her until you get used to the country."

Milly blushed and giggled, but it was evident that she seconded the invitation, and once more Alison was touched. The offer was frank and spontaneous, and she fancied that the man meant it. She explained, however, that she was beginning work on the morrow; and Jim, giving her his address, presently turned away with Milly.

After that Alison felt very desolate as she stood alone amid the swarm of frowsy aliens who poured out from the train. The station was cold and sloppy; everything was strange and unfamiliar. There was a new intonation in the voices she heard, and even the dress of the citizens who scurried by her was different in details from that to which she had been accustomed. In the meanwhile Jim and Milly had disappeared, and as she had been told that the railroad people would take care of her baggage until she produced her check, she decided to proceed at once to her employers' establishment and inform them of her arrival.

A man of whom she made inquiries gave her a few hasty directions, and walking out of the station she presently boarded a street-car and was carried through the city until she alighted in front of a big hardware store. Being sent to an office at the back of it she noticed that the smart clerk looked at her in a curious fashion when she asked for the manager by name.

"He's not here," he said. "Won't be back again."

Alison leaned against the counter with a sudden presage of disaster.

"How is that?" she asked.

“Company went under a few days ago. Creditors selling the stock up. I’m acting for the liquidator.”

Alison felt physically dizzy, but she contrived to ask another question or two, and then went out, utterly cast down and desperate, into the steadily falling rain. She was alone in the big western city, with very little money in her purse and no idea as to what she should do.

She stood still for several minutes until she remembered having heard that accommodation of an elementary kind was provided in buildings near the station where emigrants just arrived could live for a time, at least, free of charge, though they must provide their own food. As she knew that every cent was precious now, she turned back on foot along the miry street.

Two

Maverick Thorne

Alison slept soundly that night. The blow had been so heavy and unexpected that it had deadened her sensibility, and kindly nature had her way. Besides, the very hard berth she occupied was at least still, and she was not kept awake by the distressful vibration that had disturbed her in the Colonist car. Awakening refreshed in the morning, she sallied out to purchase provisions for the day, and was unpleasantly astonished at the cost of them. She had yet to learn that a dollar goes a very little way in a country where rents and wages are high.

Returning to the emigrant quarters which were provided with a cooking-stove, she made a frugal breakfast, and then after a conversation with an official who gave her all the information in his power, she spent the day offering her services at stores and hotels and offices up and down the city. Nobody, however, seemed to want her. It was, she learned, a time of general bad trade, for the wheat harvest, on which that city largely depends, had failed the previous year.

Day followed day with much the same result, until Alison, who never looked back upon them afterward without a shiver, had at last parted with

most of her slender stock of garments to one of the Jew dealers who then occupied a row of rickety wooden shacks near the station at Winnipeg. He gave her remarkably little for them; and one night she sat down dejectedly in the emigrant quarters to grapple with the crisis. By and by a girl who had traveled in the same car and had spoken to her now and then sat down beside her.

"Nothing yet?" she asked.

"No," said Alison wearily; "I have heard of nothing that I could turn my hands to."

"Then," advised her companion, "you'll just have to do the same as the rest of us. You're almost as good-looking as I am." She lowered her voice a little. "I dare say you have noticed that those Norwegians have gone?"

Alison had noticed that, and also that two or three lean and wiry men with faces almost blackened by exposure to the frost had been hanging about the emigrant quarters for a day or two preceding the disappearance of the girls. The blood crept into her cheeks as she remembered it, but her companion laughed, somewhat harshly.

"Oh," she explained, "they're married and gone off to farm; but what I want to tell you is that I'm going to follow their example to-morrow. It's quite straight. We're to be married in the morning. He says he's got a nice house, and he looks as if he'd treat me decently." She laid her hand on Alison's arm, and seemed to hesitate. "A neighbor, another farmer, came in with him—and he hasn't found anybody yet."

Alison shrank from her, white in face now, with an almost intolerable sense of disgust, but in another moment or two the blood surged into her cheeks, and her companion made a half-ashamed gesture.

"Oh, well," she said, "I think you're foolish, but I won't say any more about it. Besides, I had only a minute or two. Charley's waiting in the street for me now."

She withdrew somewhat hastily, and Alison sat still, almost too troubled to be capable of indignation, forcing herself to think. One thing was becoming clear; she must escape from Winnipeg before the unpleasant suggestion was made to her again, perhaps by some man in person, and go on farther West. After all, she had one friend, the one her mother had persecuted, living somewhere within reach of a station which she had discovered was situated about three hundred miles down the line, and Florence might take her in, for a time at least. She decided to set out and try to find her the next day. Rising with sudden determination, she walked across to the station to make inquiries about the train, and as she reached it a man strode up to her. It was evident that he meant to speak, and as there was just then no official to whom she could appeal, she drew herself up and faced him resolutely. He was a young man, neatly dressed in store clothes, though he did not look like an inhabitant of the city, and he had what she could not help admitting was a pleasant expression.

"You're Miss Leigh," he said, taking off his wide gray hat, and his intonation betrayed him to be an Englishman.

"How did you learn my name?" Alison asked chillingly.

"I made inquiries," he confessed. "The fact is, I asked Miss Carstairs to get me an introduction, and to tell the truth I wasn't very much astonished when she said you wouldn't hear of it."

Alison recognized now that the man was the one her companion had alluded to as her prospective husband's neighbor, and for a moment she felt that she could have struck him. That feeling, however, passed. There was a hint

of deference in his attitude; he met the one indignant glance she flashed at him, which was somehow reassuring, and since she could not run away ignominiously she stood her ground.

"That's why I thought I'd make an attempt to plead my cause in person," he added.

"What do you want?" Alison asked in desperation, though she was quite aware that this was giving him a lead.

The man's gesture seemed to beseech her forbearance.

"I'm afraid it will sound rather alarming, but in the first place I'd better—clear the ground. The plain truth is that I want a wife."

"Oh," cried Alison, "how dare you say this to me!"

"Well," he answered quietly, "the fact that I expected you to look at it in that way was one of the things that influenced me. A self-respecting girl with any delicacy of feeling would naturally resent it; but I'm not sure yet that it's altogether an insult I'm offering you. Let me own that I've been here some little time, and that I've spent a good deal of it in watching you." He raised his hand as he saw the indignation in her eyes. "Give me a minute or two, and then if you think it justified you can be angry. I want to say just this. We live in a pretty primitive fashion on our hundred-and-sixty-acre holdings out on the prairie, and conventions don't count for much with us. What is more to the purpose, we are forced to make some irregular venture of this kind if we think of marrying. Now, I have a comparatively decent place about two hundred miles from here, and my wife would not have to work as hard as you would certainly have to do in a hotel or store. That's to begin with. To go on, I don't think I've ever been unkind to any one or any thing, and, though it must seem a horrible piece of assurance, I said the day I saw you get out of the train that

you were the girl for me. I would do what I could, everything I could, to make things smooth for you."

Alison felt that, strange as it seemed, she could believe him. The man did not look as if he would be unkind to any one. What was more, he was apparently a man of some education.

"Now," he added, "what I should like to do is this. I'd find you quarters in a decent boarding-house, and just call and take you round to show you the city for an hour or two each afternoon. I'd try to satisfy you as to—we'll say my mode of life and character, and you could, perhaps, form some idea of me. I don't want to form any idea of you—I've done that already. Then if my offer appears as repugnant as I'm afraid it does now, I'd try to take my dismissal in good part; and I think I could find you a post in a creamery on the prairie, if you would care for it."

He broke off, and Alison wondered at herself while he stood watching her anxiously. Her anger and disgust had gone. She could see the ludicrous aspect of the situation, but that was not her clearest impression, for she felt that this most unconventional stranger was, after all, a man one could have confidence in. Still, she had not the least intention of marrying him.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "What you suggest is, however, quite out of the question."

The man's face fell, and she felt, extraordinary as it seemed, almost sorry that she had been compelled to hurt him; but once more he took off his soft hat.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I must accept that, and—though I don't know if it's a compliment—I shall go back alone. There's just another matter. If you have any knowledge of business I could have you made clerk at the creamery."

Urgent as her need was, Alison would not entertain the proposal. She felt that it would be equally impossible to accept a favor from or to live near him.

"No," she replied; "it is generous of you, but I am going West to-morrow."

The man, saying nothing further, turned away, and she thought of him long afterward with a feeling of half-amused good-will. It was the first offer of marriage she had ever had, made in a deserted, half-lighted station by a man to whom she had never spoken until that evening. She was to learn, however, that the strangeness of any event naturally depends very largely on what one has been accustomed to, and that one meets with many things which at least appear remarkable when one ventures out of the beaten track.

She went on with the west-bound train the next afternoon, and early in the morning alighted at a wayside station which consisted of one wooden shanty and a big water-tank. A cluster of little frame houses stood beneath the huge bulk of two grain elevators beyond the unfenced track, which ran straight as the crow flies across a bare, white waste of prairie. As the train sped out along this and grew smaller and smaller Alison stood forlornly beside the half-empty trunk which contained the remnant of her few possessions. She had then just two dollars in her pocket. It was a raw, cold morning, for spring was unusually late that year, and a bitter wind swept across the desolate waste. In a minute or two the station-agent came out of the shanty and looked at her with obvious curiosity.

"I guess you've got off at the right place?" he said in a manner which made the words seem less of a statement than an inquiry.

Alison asked him if he knew a Mr. Hunter who lived near Graham's Bluff, and how it was possible to reach his homestead.

"I know Hunter, but the Bluff is quite a way from here," the man replied. "The boys drive in now and then, and a freighter goes through with a wagon

about once a fortnight."

He saw the girl's face fall, and added, as though something had suddenly struck him:

"There's a man in the settlement who said he was going that way to-day or to-morrow, and it's quite likely that he'd drive you over. Guess you had better ask for Maverick Thorne at the hotel."

Alison thanked him and, crossing the track, made for the rude frame building he indicated. Her thin boots were very muddy before she reached it, for there was no semblance of a street and the space between the houses and elevators was torn up and deeply rutted by wagon wheels. She now understood why a high plank sidewalk usually ran, as she had noticed, along the front of the buildings in the smaller prairie towns.

It was with a good deal of diffidence that she walked into the hotel and entered a long and very barely furnished room which just then was occupied by a group of men.

Several of them wore ordinary city clothes and were, she supposed, clerks or storekeepers in the little town; but the rest had weather-darkened faces and their garments were flecked with sun-dried mire and stained with soil, while the dilapidated skin coats thrown down here and there evidently belonged to them. Some were just finishing breakfast and the others stood lighting their pipes about a big rusty stove. The place reeked of the smell of cooking and tobacco smoke, and looked very comfortless with its uncovered walls and roughly boarded floor. There was, however, no bar in it, and it was consoling to see a very neat maid gathering up the plates.

"Is Mr. Maverick Thorne here just now?" she asked the girl.

She was unpleasantly conscious that the men had gazed at her with some astonishment when she walked in, and it was clear that they had heard her

inquiry, because several of them smiled.

"Quit talking, Mavy. Here's a lady asking for you," said one, and a man who had been surrounded by a laughing group moved toward her.

She glanced at him apprehensively, for after her recent experience she was signally shy of seeking a favor from any of his kind. He was a tall man, bronzed and somewhat lean, as most of the inhabitants of the prairie seemed to be, and the state of his attire was not calculated to impress a stranger in his favor. His long boots were caked with mire and the fur was coming off the battered cap he held in one hand; his blue duck trousers were rent at one knee and a very old jacket hung over his coarse blue shirt. Still, his face was reassuring and he had whimsical brown eyes.

"Mr. Thorne?" she said.

The man made her a respectful inclination, which was not what she had expected.

"At your command," he replied.

She stood silent a moment or two, hesitating, and he watched her unobtrusively. He saw a jaded girl in a badly creased and somewhat shabby dress who nevertheless had an air of refinement about her which he immediately recognized. Her face was delicately pretty and cleanly cut, though it was weary and a little anxious then, and she had fine hazel eyes. Still, the red-lipped mouth was somehow determined and there was a hint of decision of character in the way she looked at him from under straight-drawn brows. Her hair, as much as he could see of it, was neither brown nor golden, but of a shade between, and he decided that the contrast between the warm color in her cheeks and the creamy whiteness of the rest of her face was a little more marked than usual, as indeed it was, for Alison was troubled with a very natural embarrassment just then.

"I want to go to Graham's Bluff," she said. "The man at the station told me that you were driving there."

He did not answer immediately, and she awaited his reply in tense anxiety. It was evident that she could not stay where she was, even if she had been possessed of the means to pay for such rude accommodation as the place provided, which was not the case. In the meanwhile it occurred to the man that she looked very forlorn in the big, bare room, and something in her expression appealed to him. He was, as it happened, a compassionate person.

"Well," he replied, "I could take you, though as I've a round to make it will be quite a long drive. I had thought of starting this afternoon, but we had perhaps better get off in the next hour or so."

He turned to the girl who was gathering up the plates.

"Won't you try to get this lady some breakfast, Kristine?"

The girl said that she would see what she could do, but Alison was not aware until afterward that it was only due to the fact that the man was a favorite in the place that food was presently set before her. The average Westerner gets through his breakfast in about ten minutes; and as a rule the traveler who arrives at a prairie hotel a few minutes after a meal is over must wait with what patience he can command until the next is ready.

In any case, Alison was astonished when porridge and maple syrup, a thin hard steak and a great bowl of potatoes, besides strong green tea and a dish of desiccated apricots stewed down to pulp, were laid in front of her. It was most unlike an English breakfast, but she was to learn that there is very little difference between any of the three daily meals served in that country. Its inhabitants, who rise for the most part at sunup, do not require to be tempted by dainties, which is fortunate, since they could not by any means obtain them, and in a land where the liquor prohibition laws are generally applied and men