
Free Air
Sinclair Lewis

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CHAPTER I

MISS BOLTWOOD OF BROOKLYN IS LOST IN THE MUD

WHEN the windshield was closed it became so filmed with rain that Claire fancied she was piloting a drowned car in dim spaces under the sea. When it was open, drops jabbed into her eyes and chilled her cheeks. She was excited and thoroughly miserable. She realized that these Minnesota country roads had no respect for her polite experience on Long Island parkways. She felt like a woman, not like a driver.

But the Gomez-Dep roadster had seventy horsepower, and sang songs. Since she had left Minneapolis nothing had passed her. Back yonder a truck had tried to crowd her, and she had dropped into a ditch, climbed a bank, returned to the road, and after that the truck was not. Now she was regarding a view more splendid than mountains above a garden by the sea—a stretch of good road. To her passenger, her father, Claire chanted:

"Heavenly! There's some gravel. We can make time. We'll hustle on to the next town and get dry."

"Yes. But don't mind me. You're doing very well," her father sighed.

Instantly, the dismay of it rushing at her, she saw the end of the patch of gravel. The road ahead was a wet black smear, criss-crossed with ruts. The car shot into a morass of prairie gumbo—which is mud mixed with tar, fly-paper, fish glue, and well-chewed, chocolate-covered caramels. When cattle get into gumbo, the farmers send for the stump-dynamite and try blasting.

It was her first really bad stretch of road. She was frightened. Then she was too appallingly busy to be frightened, or to be Miss Claire Boltwood, or to comfort her uneasy father. She had to drive. Her frail graceful arms put into it a vicious vigor that was genius.

When the wheels struck the slime, they slid, they wallowed. The car skidded. It was terrifyingly out of control. It began majestically to turn toward the ditch. She fought the steering wheel as though she were shadow-boxing, but the car kept contemptuously staggering till it was

sideways, straight across the road. Somehow, it was back again, eating into a rut, going ahead. She didn't know how she had done it, but she had got it back. She longed to take time to retrace her own cleverness in steering. She didn't. She kept going.

The car backfired, slowed. She yanked the gear from third into first. She sped up. The motor ran like a terrified pounding heart, while the car crept on by inches through filthy mud that stretched ahead of her without relief.

She was battling to hold the car in the principal rut. She snatched the windshield open, and concentrated on that left rut. She felt that she was keeping the wheel from climbing those high sides of the rut, those six-inch walls of mud, sparkling with tiny grits. Her mind snarled at her arms, "Let the ruts do the steering. You're just fighting against them." It worked. Once she let the wheels alone they comfortably followed the furrows, and for three seconds she had that delightful belief of every motorist after every mishap, "Now that this particular disagreeableness is over, I'll never, never have any trouble again!"

But suppose the engine overheated, ran out of water? Anxiety twanged at her nerves. And the deep distinctive ruts were changing to a complex pattern, like the rails in a city switchyard. She picked out the track of the one motor car that had been through here recently. It was marked with the swastika tread of the rear tires. That track was her friend; she knew and loved the driver of a car she had never seen in her life.

She was very tired. She wondered if she might not stop for a moment. Then she came to an upslope. The car faltered; felt indecisive beneath her. She jabbed down the accelerator. Her hands pushed at the steering wheel as though she were pushing the car. The engine picked up, sulkily kept going. To the eye, there was merely a rise in the rolling ground, but to her anxiety it was a mountain up which she—not the engine, but herself—pulled this bulky mass, till she had reached the top, and was safe again—for a second. Still there was no visible end of the mud.

In alarm she thought, "How long does it last? I can't keep this up. I—Oh!"

The guiding tread of the previous car was suddenly lost in a mass of heaving, bubble-scattered mud, like a batter of black dough. She fairly picked up the car, and flung it into that welter, through it, and back into the reappearing swastika-marked trail.

Her father spoke: "You're biting your lips. They'll bleed, if you don't look out. Better stop and rest."

"Can't! No bottom to this mud. Once stop and lose momentum—stuck for keeps!"

She had ten more minutes of it before she reached a combination of bridge and culvert, with a plank platform above a big tile drain. With this solid plank bottom, she could stop. Silence came roaring down as she turned the switch. The bubbling water in the radiator steamed about the cap. Claire was conscious of tautness of the cords of her neck in front; of a pain at the base of her brain. Her father glanced at her curiously. "I must be a wreck. I'm sure my hair is frightful," she thought, but forgot it as she looked at him. His face was unusually pale. In the tumult of activity he had been betrayed into letting the old despondent look blur his eyes and sag his mouth. "Must get on," she determined.

Claire was dainty of habit. She detested untwisted hair, ripped gloves, muddy shoes. Hesitant as a cat by a puddle, she stepped down on the bridge. Even on these planks, the mud was three inches thick. It squidged about her low, spatted shoes. "Eeh!" she squeaked.

She tiptoed to the tool-box and took out a folding canvas bucket. She edged down to the trickling stream below. She was miserably conscious of a pastoral scene all gone to mildew—cows beneath willows by the creek, milkweeds dripping, dried mullein weed stalks no longer dry. The bank of the stream was so slippery that she shot down two feet, and nearly went sprawling. Her knee did touch the bank, and the skirt of her gray sports-suit showed a smear of yellow earth.

In less than two miles the racing motor had used up so much water that she had to make four trips to the creek before she had filled the radiator. When she had climbed back on the running-board she glared down at spats and shoes turned into gray lumps. She was not tearful. She was angry.

"Idiot! Ought to have put on my rubbers. Well—too late now," she observed, as she started the engine.

She again followed the swastika tread. To avoid a hole in the road ahead, the unknown driver had swung over to the side of the road, and taken to the intensely black earth of the edge of an unfenced cornfield. Flashing at Claire came the sight of a deep, water-filled hole, scattered straw and brush, débris of a battlefield, which made her gaspingly realize that her swastikaed leader had been stuck and—

And instantly her own car was stuck.

She had had to put the car at that hole. It dropped, far down, and it stayed down. The engine stalled. She started it, but the back wheels spun merrily round and round, without traction. She did not make one inch. When she again killed the blatting motor, she let it stay dead. She peered at her father.

He was not a father, just now, but a passenger trying not to irritate the driver. He smiled in a waxy way, and said, "Hard luck! Well, you did the best you could. The other hole, there in the road, would have been just as bad. You're a fine driver, dolly."

Her smile was warm and real. "No. I'm a fool. You told me to put on chains. I didn't. I deserve it."

"Well, anyway, most men would be cussing. You acquire merit by not beating me. I believe that's done, in moments like this. If you'd like, I'll get out and crawl around in the mud, and play turtle for you."

"No. I'm quite all right. I did feel frightfully strong-minded as long as there was any use of it. It kept me going. But now I might just as well be cheerful, because we're stuck, and we're probably going to stay stuck for the rest of this care-free summer day."

The weariness of the long strain caught her, all at once. She slipped forward, sat huddled, her knees crossed under the edge of the steering wheel, her hands falling beside her, one of them making a faint brushing sound as it slid down the upholstery. Her eyes closed; as her head drooped farther, she fancied she could hear the vertebrae click in her tense neck.

Her father was silent, a misty figure in a lap-robe. The rain streaked the mica lights in the side-curtains. A distant train whistled desolately across the sodden fields. The inside of the car smelled musty. The quiet was like a blanket over the ears. Claire was in a hazy drowse. She felt that she could never drive again.

CHAPTER II

CLAIRE ESCAPES FROM RESPECTABILITY

CLAIRE BOLTWOOD lived on the Heights, Brooklyn. Persons from New York and other parts of the Middlewest have been known to believe that Brooklyn is somehow humorous. In newspaper jokes and vaudeville it is so presented that people who are willing to take their philosophy from those sources believe that the leading citizens of Brooklyn are all deacons, undertakers, and obstetricians. The fact is that North Washington Square, at its reddest and whitest and fanlightedest, Gramercy Park at its most ivied, are not so aristocratic as the section of Brooklyn called the Heights. Here preached Henry Ward Beecher. Here, in mansions like mausoleums, on the ridge above docks where the good ships came sailing in from Sourabaya and Singapore, ruled the lords of a thousand sails. And still is it a place of wealth too solid to emulate the nimble self-advertising of Fifth Avenue. Here dwell the fifth-generation possessors of blocks of foundries and shipyards. Here, in a big brick house of much dignity, much ugliness, and much conservatory, lived Claire Boltwood, with her widower father.

Henry B. Boltwood was vice-president of a firm dealing in railway supplies. He was neither wealthy nor at all poor. Every summer, despite Claire's delicate hints, they took the same cottage on the Jersey Coast, and Mr. Boltwood came down for Sunday. Claire had gone to a good school out of Philadelphia, on the Main Line. She was used to gracious leisure, attractive uselessness, nut-center chocolates, and a certain wonder as to why she was alive.

She wanted to travel, but her father could not get away. He consistently spent his days in overworking, and his evenings in wishing he hadn't overworked. He was attractive, fresh, pink-cheeked, white-mustached, and nerve-twitching with years of detail.

Claire's ambition had once been babies and a solid husband, but as various young males of the species appeared before her, sang their mating songs and preened their newly dry-cleaned plumage, she found that the trouble with solid young men was that they were solid. Though she liked to dance, the "dancing men" bored her. And she did not understand the district's quota of intellectuals very well; she was good at listening to symphony concerts, but she never had much luck in discussing the cleverness of the wood winds in taking up the main motif. It is history that she refused a master of arts with an old violin, a good taste in ties, and an income of eight thousand.

The only man who disturbed her was Geoffrey Saxton, known throughout the interwoven sets of Brooklyn Heights as "Jeff." Jeff Saxton was thirty-nine to Claire's twenty-three. He was clean and busy; he had no signs of vice or humor. Especially for Jeff must have been invented the symbolic morning coat, the unwrinkable gray trousers, and the moral rimless spectacles. He was a graduate of a nice college, and he had a nice tenor and a nice family and nice hands and he was nicely successful in New York copper dealing. When he was asked questions by people who were impertinent, clever, or poor, Jeff looked them over coldly before he answered, and often they felt so uncomfortable that he didn't have to answer.

The boys of Claire's own age, not long out of Yale and Princeton, doing well in business and jumping for their evening clothes daily at six-thirty, light o' loves and admirers of athletic heroes, these lads Claire found pleasant, but hard to tell apart. She didn't have to tell Jeff Saxton apart. He did his own telling. Jeff called—not too often. He sang—not too sentimentally. He took her father and herself to the theater—not too lavishly. He told Claire—in a voice not too serious—that she was his helmed Athena, his rose of all the world. He informed her of his substantial position—not too obviously. And he was so everlastingly, firmly, quietly, politely, immovably always there.

She watched the hulk of marriage drifting down on her frail speed-boat of aspiration, and steered in desperate circles.

Then her father got the nervous prostration he had richly earned. The doctor ordered rest. Claire took him in charge. He didn't want to travel. Certainly he didn't want the shore or the Adirondacks. As there was a branch of his company in Minneapolis, she lured him that far away.

Being rootedly of Brooklyn Heights, Claire didn't know much about the West. She thought that Milwaukee was the capital of Minnesota. She was not so uninformed as some of her friends, however. She had heard that in Dakota wheat was to be viewed in vast tracts—maybe a hundred acres.

Mr. Boltwood could not be coaxed to play with the people to whom his Minneapolis representative introduced him. He was overworking again, and perfectly happy. He was hoping to find something wrong with the branch house. Claire tried to tempt him out to the lakes. She failed. His nerve-fuse burnt out the second time, with much fireworks.

Claire had often managed her circle of girls, but it had never occurred to her to manage her executive father save by indirect and pretty teasing. Now, in conspiracy with the doctor, she bullied her father. He saw gray death waiting as alternative, and he was meek. He agreed to everything. He consented to drive with her across two thousand miles of plains and mountains to Seattle, to drop in for a call on their cousins, the Eugene Gilsons.

Back East they had a chauffeur and two cars—the limousine, and the Gomez-Deperdussin roadster, Claire's beloved. It would, she believed, be more of a change from everything that might whisper to Mr. Boltwood of the control of men, not to take a chauffeur. Her father never drove, but she could, she insisted. His easy agreeing was pathetic. He watched her with spaniel eyes. They had the Gomez roadster shipped to them from New York.

On a July morning, they started out of Minneapolis in a mist, and as it has been hinted, they stopped sixty miles northward, in a rain, also in much gumbo. Apparently their nearest approach to the Pacific Ocean would be this oceanically moist edge of a cornfield, between Schoenstrom and Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.

Claire roused from her damp doze and sighed, "Well, I must get busy and get the car out of this."

"Don't you think you'd better get somebody to help us?"

"But get who?"

"Whom!"

"No! It's just 'who,' when you're in the mud. No. One of the good things about an adventure like this is that I must do things for myself. I've always had people to do things for me. Maids and nice teachers and you, old darling! I suppose it's made me soft. Soft—I would like a soft

davenport and a novel and a pound of almond-brittle, and get all sick, and not feel so beastly virile as I do just now. But——"

She turned up the collar of her gray tweed coat, painfully climbed out—the muscles of her back racking—and examined the state of the rear wheels. They were buried to the axle; in front of them the mud bulked in solid, shiny blackness. She took out her jack and chains. It was too late. There was no room to get the jack under the axle. She remembered from the narratives of motoring friends that brush in mud gave a firmer surface for the wheels to climb upon.

She also remembered how jolly and agreeably heroic the accounts of their mishaps had sounded—a week after they were over.

She waded down the road toward an old wood-lot. At first she tried to keep dry, but she gave it up, and there was pleasure in being defiantly dirty. She tramped straight through puddles; she wallowed in mud. In the wood-lot was long grass which soaked her stockings till her ankles felt itchy. Claire had never expected to be so very intimate with a brush-pile. She became so. As though she were a pioneer woman who had been toiling here for years, she came to know the brush stick by stick—the long valuable branch that she could never quite get out from under the others; the thorny bough that pricked her hands every time she tried to reach the curious bundle of switches.

Seven trips she made, carrying armfuls of twigs and solemnly dragging large boughs behind her. She patted them down in front of all four wheels. Her crisp hands looked like the paws of a three-year-old boy making a mud fort. Her nails hurt from the mud wedged beneath them. Her mud-caked shoes were heavy to lift. It was with exquisite self-approval that she sat on the running-board, scraped a car-load of lignite off her soles, climbed back into the car, punched the starter.

The car stirred, crept forward one inch, and settled back—one inch. The second time it heaved encouragingly but did not make quite so much headway. Then Claire did sob.

She rubbed her cheek against the comfortable, rough, heather-smelling shoulder of her father's coat, while he patted her and smiled, "Good girl! I better get out and help."

She sat straight, shook her head. "Nope. I'll do it. And I'm not going to insist on being heroic any longer. I'll get a farmer to pull us out."

As she let herself down into the ooze, she reflected that all farmers have hearts of gold, anatomical phenomena never found among the snobs and hirelings of New York. The nearest heart of gold was presumably beating warmly in the house a quarter of a mile ahead.

She came up a muddy lane to a muddy farmyard, with a muddy cur yapping at her wet legs, and geese hissing in a pool of purest mud serene. The house was small and rather old. It may have been painted once. The barn was large and new. It had been painted very much, and in a blinding red with white trimmings. There was no brass plate on the house, but on the barn, in huge white letters, was the legend, "Adolph Zolzac, 1913."

She climbed by log steps to a narrow frame back porch littered with parts of a broken cream-separator. She told herself that she was simple and friendly in going to the back door instead of the front, and it was with gaiety that she knocked on the ill-jointed screen door, which flapped dismally in response.

"*Ja?*" from within.

She rapped again.

"*Hinein!*"

She opened the door on a kitchen, the highlight of which was a table heaped with dishes of dumplings and salt pork. A shirt-sleeved man, all covered with mustache and calm, sat by the table, and he kept right on sitting as he inquired:

"Vell?"

"My car—my automobile—has been stuck in the mud. A bad driver, I'm afraid! I wonder if you would be so good as to——"

"I usually get t'ree dollars, but I dunno as I vant to do it for less than four. Today I ain'd feelin' very goot," grumbled the golden-hearted.

Claire was aware that a woman whom she had not noticed—so much smaller than the dumplings, so much less vigorous than the salt pork was she—was speaking: "*Aber*, papa, dot's a shame you sharge de poor young lady dot, when she drive by *sei* self. Vot she t'ink of de Sherman people?"

The farmer merely grunted. To Claire, "Yuh, four dollars. Dot's what I usually charge sometimes."

"Usually? Do you mean to say that you leave that hole there in the road right along—that people keep on trying to avoid it and get stuck as I was? Oh! If I were an official——"

"Vell, I dunno, I don't guess I run my place to suit you smart alecks——"

"Papa! How you talk on the young lady! Make shame!"

"—from the city. If you don't like it, you stay *bei* Mineapolis! I haul you out for t'ree dollars and a half. Everybody pay dot. Last mont' I make forty-five dollars. They vos all glad to pay. They say I help them fine. I don't see vot you're kickin' about! Oh, these vimmins!"

"It's blackmail! I wouldn't pay it, if it weren't for my father sitting waiting out there. But—go ahead. Hurry!"

She sat tapping her toe while Zolzac completed the stertorous task of hogging the dumplings, then stretched, yawned, scratched, and covered his merely dirty garments with overalls that were apparently woven of processed mud. When he had gone to the barn for his team, his wife came to Claire. On her drained face were the easy tears of the slave women.

"Oh, miss, I don't know vot I should do. My boys go on the public school, and they speak American just so goot as you. Oh, I vant man lets me luff America. But papa he says it is an *Unsinn*; you got the money, he says, nobody should care if you are American or Old Country people. I should vish I could ride once in an automobile! But—I am so 'shamed, so 'shamed that I must sit and see my *Mann* make this. Forty years I been married to him, and pretty soon I die——"

Claire patted her hand. There was nothing to say to tragedy that had outlived hope.

Adolph Zolzac clumped out to the highroad behind his vast, rolling-flanked horses—so much cleaner and better fed than his wisp of a wife. Claire followed him, and in her heart she committed murder and was glad of it. While Mr. Boltwood looked out with mild wonder at Claire's new friend, Zolzac hitched his team to the axle. It did not seem possible that two horses could pull out the car where seventy horsepower had fainted. But, easily, yawning and thinking about dinner, the horses drew the wheels up on the mud-bank, out of the hole and——

The harness broke, with a flying mess of straps and rope, and the car plumped with perfect exactness back into its bed.

CHAPTER III

A YOUNG MAN IN A RAINCOAT

"HUH! Such an auto! Look, it break my harness a'ready! Two dollar that cost you to mend it. De auto iss too heavy!" stormed Zolzac.

"All right! All right! Only for heaven's sake—go get another harness!" Claire shrieked.

"Fife-fifty dot will be, in all." Zolzac grinned.

Claire was standing in front of him. She was thinking of other drivers, poor people, in old cars, who had been at the mercy of this golden-hearted one. She stared past him, in the direction from which she had come. Another motor was in sight.

It was a tin beetle of a car; that agile, cheerful, rut-jumping model known as a "bug"; with a home-tacked, home-painted tin cowl and tail covering the stripped chassis of a little cheap Teal car. The lone driver wore an old black raincoat with an atrocious corduroy collar, and a new plaid cap in the Harry Lauder tartan. The bug skipped through mud where the Boltwoods' Gomez had slogged and rolled. Its pilot drove up behind her car, and leaped out. He trotted forward to Claire and Zolzac. His eyes were twenty-seven or eight, but his pink cheeks were twenty, and when he smiled—shyly, radiantly—he was no age at all, but eternal boy. Claire had a blurred impression that she had seen him before, some place along the road.

"Stuck?" he inquired, not very intelligently. "How much is Adolph charging you?"

"He wants three-fifty, and his harness broke, and he wants two dollars ——"

"Oh! So he's still working that old gag! I've heard all about Adolph. He keeps that harness for pulling out cars, and it always busts. The last time, though, he only charged six bits to get it mended. Now let me reason with him."

The young man turned with vicious quickness, and for the first time Claire heard pidgin German—German as it is spoken between Americans who have never learned it, and Germans who have forgotten it:

"*Schon sex* hundred times *Ich höre* all about the way you been doing autos, Zolzac, you *verfluchter Schweinhund*, and I'll set the sheriff on you

——"
"Dot ain'd true, maybe *einmal die Woche kommt* somebody and *Ich muss die Arbeit immer lassen und in die Regen ausgehen, und seh' mal* how *die* boots *sint mit* mud covered, two dollars it don't pay for *die* boots——"
"Now that's enough-plenty out of you, *seien die* boots *verdammt*, and *mach' dass du fort gehst*—muddy boots, hell!—put *mal ein* egg in *die* boots and beat it, *verleicht* maybe I'll by golly arrest you myself, *weiss du*! I'm a special deputy sheriff."
The young man stood stockily. He seemed to swell as his somewhat muddy hand was shaken directly at, under, and about the circumference of, Adolph Zolzac's hairy nose. The farmer was stronger, but he retreated. He took up the reins. He whined, "Don't I get nothing I break de harness?"
"Sure. You get ten—years! And you get out!"
From thirty yards up the road, Zolzac flung back, "You t'ink you're pretty damn smart!" That was his last serious reprisal.
Clumsily, as one not used to it, the young man lifted his cap to Claire, showing straight, wiry, rope-colored hair, brushed straight back from a rather fine forehead. "Gee, I was sorry to have to swear and holler like that, but it's all Adolph understands. Please don't think there's many of the folks around here like him. They say he's the meanest man in the county."
"I'm immensely grateful to you, but—do you know much about motors? How can I get out of this mud?"
She was surprised to see the youngster blush. His clear skin flooded. His engaging smile came again, and he hesitated, "Let me pull you out."
She looked from her hulking car to his mechanical flea.
He answered the look: "I can do it all right. I'm used to the gumbo—regular mud-hen. Just add my power to yours. Have you a tow-rope?"
"No. I never thought of bringing one."
"I'll get mine."
She walked with him back toward his bug. It lacked not only top and side-curtains, but even windshield and running-board. It was a toy—a card-board box on toothpick axles. Strapped to the bulging back was a wicker suitcase partly covered by tarpaulin. From the seat peered a little furry face.
"A cat?" she exclaimed, as he came up with a wire rope, extracted from the tin back.
"Yes. She's the captain of the boat. I'm just the engineer."
"What is her name?"
Before he answered the young man strode ahead to the front of her car, Claire obediently trotting after him. He stooped to look at her front axle. He raised his head, glanced at her, and he was blushing again.

"Her name is Vere de Vere!" he confessed. Then he fled back to his bug. He drove it in front of the Gomez-Dep. The hole in the road itself was as deep as the one on the edge of the cornfield, where she was stuck, but he charged it. She was fascinated by his skill. Where she would for a tenth of a second have hesitated while choosing the best course, he hurled the bug straight at the hole, plunged through with sheets of glassy black water arching on either side, then viciously twisted the car to the right, to the left, and straight again, as he followed the tracks with the solidest bottoms.

Strapped above the tiny angle-iron step which replaced his running-board was an old spade. He dug channels in front of the four wheels of her car, so that they might go up inclines, instead of pushing against the straight walls of mud they had thrown up. On these inclines he strewed the brush she had brought, halting to ask, with head alertly lifted from his stooped huddle in the mud, "Did you have to get this brush yourself?"

"Yes. Horrid wet!"

He merely shook his head in commiseration.

He fastened the tow-rope to the rear axle of his car, to the front of hers. "Now will you be ready to put on all your power as I begin to pull?" he said casually, rather respectfully.

When the struggling bug had pulled the wire rope taut, she opened the throttle. The rope trembled. Her car seemed to draw sullenly back. Then it came out—out—really out, which is the most joyous sensation any motorist shall ever know. In excitement over actually moving again, as fast as any healthy young snail, she drove on, on, the young man ahead grinning back at her. Nor did she stop, nor he, till both cars were safe on merely thick mud, a quarter of a mile away.

She switched off the power—and suddenly she was in a whirlwind of dizzy sickening tiredness. Even in her abandonment to exhaustion she noticed that the young man did not stare at her but, keeping his back to her, removed the tow-rope, and stowed it away in his bug. She wondered whether it was tact or yokelish indifference.

Her father spoke for the first time since the Galahad of the tin bug had come: "How much do you think we ought to give this fellow?"

Now of all the cosmic problems yet unsolved, not cancer nor the future of poverty are the flustering questions, but these twain: Which is worse, not to wear evening clothes at a party at which you find every one else dressed, or to come in evening clothes to a house where, it proves, they are never worn? And: Which is worse, not to tip when a tip has been expected; or to tip, when the tip is an insult?

In discomfort of spirit and wetness of ankles Claire shuddered, "Oh dear, I don't believe he expects us to pay him. He seems like an awfully independent person. Maybe we'd offend him if we offered——"
"The only reasonable thing to be offended at in this vale of tears is not being offered money!"
"Just the same—— Oh dear, I'm so tired. But good little Claire will climb out and be diplomatic."
She pinched her forehead, to hold in her cracking brain, and wabbled out into new scenes of mud and wetness, but she came up to the young man with the most rain-washed and careless of smiles. "Won't you come back and meet my father? He's terribly grateful to you—as I am. And may we—— You've worked so hard, and about saved our lives. May I pay you for that labor? We're really much indebted——"
"Oh, it wasn't anything. Tickled to death if I could help you."
He heartily shook hands with her father, and he droned, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Uh."
"Boltwood."
"Mr. Boltwood. My name is Milt—Milton Daggett. See you have a New York license on your car. We don't see but mighty few of those through here. Glad I could help you."
"Ah yes, Mr. Daggett." Mr. Boltwood was uninterestedly fumbling in his money pocket. Behind Milt Daggett, Claire shook her head wildly, rattling her hands as though she were playing castanets. Mr. Boltwood shrugged. He did not understand. His relations with young men in cheap raincoats were entirely monetary. They did something for you, and you paid them—preferably not too much—and they ceased to be. Whereas Milt Daggett respectfully but stolidly continued to be, and Mr. Henry Boltwood's own daughter was halting the march of affairs by asking irrelevant questions:
"Didn't we see you back in—what was that village we came through back about twelve miles?"
"Schoenstrom?" suggested Milt.
"Yes, I think that was it. Didn't we pass you or something? We stopped at a garage there, to change a tire."
"I don't think so. I was in town, though, this morning. Say, uh, did you and your father grab any eats——"
"A——"
"I mean, did you get dinner there?"
"No. I wish we had!"
"Well say, I didn't either, and—I'd be awfully glad if you folks would have something to eat with me now."
Claire tried to give him a smile, but the best she could do was to lend him one. She could not associate interesting food with Milt and his mud-slobbered, tin-covered, dun-painted Teal bug. He seemed satisfied with

her dubious grimace. By his suggestion they drove ahead to a spot where the cars could be parked on firm grass beneath oaks. On the way, Mr. Boltwood lifted his voice in dismay. His touch of nervous prostration had not made him queer or violent; he retained a touching faith in good food.

"We might find some good little hotel and have some chops and just some mushrooms and peas," insisted the man from Brooklyn Heights.

"Oh, I don't suppose the country hotels are really so awfully good," she speculated. "And look—that nice funny boy. We couldn't hurt his feelings. He's having so much fun out of being a Good Samaritan."

From the mysterious rounded back of his car Milt Daggett drew a tiny stove, to be heated by a can of solidified alcohol, a frying pan that was rather large for dolls but rather small for square-fingered hands, a jar of bacon, eggs in a bag, a coffee pot, a can of condensed milk, and a litter of unsorted tin plates and china cups. While, by his request, Claire scoured the plates and cups, he made bacon and eggs and coffee, the little stove in the bottom of his car sheltered by the cook's bending over it. The smell of food made Claire forgiving toward the fact that she was wet through; that the rain continued to drizzle down her neck.

He lifted his hand and demanded, "Take your shoes off!"

"Uh?"

He gulped. He stammered, "I mean—I mean your shoes are soaked through. If you'll sit in the car, I'll put your shoes up by the engine. It's pretty well heated from racing it in the mud. You can get your stockings dry under the cowl."

She was amused by the elaborateness with which he didn't glance at her while she took off her low shoes and slipped her quite too thin black stockings under the protecting tin cowl. She reflected, "He has such a nice, awkward gentleness. But such bad taste! They're really quite good ankles. Apparently ankles are not done, in Teal bug circles. His sisters don't even have limbs. But do fairies have sisters? He is a fairy. When I'm out of the mud he'll turn his raincoat into a pair of lordly white wings, and vanish. But what will become of the cat?"

Thus her tired brain, like a squirrel in a revolving cage, while she sat primly and scraped at a clot of rust on a tin plate and watched him put on the bacon and eggs. Wondering if cats were used for this purpose in the Daggett family, she put soaked, unhappy Vere de Vere on her feet, to her own great comfort and the cat's delight. It was an open car, and the

rain still rained, and a strange young man was a foot from her tending the not very crackly fire, but rarely had Claire felt so domestic.
Milt was apparently struggling to say something. After several bobs of his head he ventured, "You're so wet! I'd like for you to take my raincoat."
"No! Really! I'm already soaked through. You keep dry."
He was unhappy about it. He plucked at a button of the coat. She turned him from the subject. "I hope Lady Vere de Vere is getting warm, too."
"Seems to be. She's kind of demanding. She wanted a little car of her own, but I didn't think she could keep up with me, not on a long hike."
"A little car? With her paws on the tiny wheel? Oh—sweet! Are you going far, Mr. Daggett?"
"Yes, quite a ways. To Seattle, Washington."
"Oh, really? Extraordinary. We're going there, too."
"Honest? You driving all the way? Oh, no, of course your father——"
"No, he doesn't drive. By the way, I hope he isn't too miserable back there."
"I'll be darned. Both of us going to Seattle. That's what they call a coincidence, isn't it! Hope I'll see you on the road, some time. But I don't suppose I will. Once you're out of the mud, your Gomez will simply lose my Teal."
"Not necessarily. You're the better driver. And I shall take it easy. Are you going to stay long in Seattle?" It was not merely a polite dinner-payment question. She wondered; she could not place this fresh-cheeked, unworldly young man so far from his home.
"Why, I kind of hope—— Government railroad, Alaska. I'm going to try to get in on that, somehow. I've never been out of Minnesota in my life, but there's couple mountains and oceans and things I thought I'd like to see, so I just put my suitcase and Vere de Vere in the machine, and started out. I burn distillate instead of gas, so it doesn't cost much. If I ever happen to have five whole dollars, why, I might go on to Japan!"
"That would be jolly."
"Though I s'pose I'd have to eat—what is it?—pickled fish? There's a woman from near my town went to the Orient as a missionary. From what she says, I guess all you need in Japan to make a house is a bottle of mucilage and a couple of old newspapers and some two-by-fours. And you can have the house on a purple mountain, with cherry trees down below, and——" He put his clenched hand to his lips. His head was bowed. "And the ocean! Lord! The ocean! And we'll see it at Seattle. Bay, anyway. And steamers there—just come from India! Huh! Getting pretty darn poetic here! Eggs are done."
The young man did not again wander into visions. He was all briskness as he served her bacon and eggs, took a plate of them to Mr. Boltwood in

the Gomez, gouged into his own. Having herself scoured the tin plates, Claire was not repulsed by their naked tinniness; and the coffee in the broken-handled china cup was tolerable. Milt drank from the top of a vacuum bottle. He was silent. Immediately after the lunch he stowed the things away. Claire expected a drawn-out, tact-demanding farewell, but he climbed into his bug, said "Good-by, Miss Boltwood. Good luck!" and was gone.

The rainy road was bleakly empty without him.

It did not seem possible that Claire's body could be nagged into going on any longer. Her muscles were relaxed, her nerves frayed. But the moment the Gomez started, she discovered that magic change which every long-distance motorist knows. Instantly she was alert, seemingly able to drive forever. The pilot's instinct ruled her; gave her tireless eyes and sturdy hands. Surely she had never been weary; never would be, so long as it was hers to keep the car going.

She had driven perhaps six miles when she reached a hamlet called St. Klopstock. On the bedraggled mud-and-shanty main street a man was loading crushed rock into a truck. By him was a large person in a prosperous raincoat, who stepped out, held up his hand. Claire stopped.

"You the young lady that got stuck in that hole by Adolph Zolzac's?"

"Yes. And Mr. Zolzac wasn't very nice about it."

"He's going to be just elegant about it, now, and there ain't going to be any more hole. I think Adolph has been keeping it muddy—throwing in soft dirt—and he made a good and plenty lot out of pulling out tourists. Bill and I are going down right now and fill it up with stone. Milt Daggett come through here—he's got a nerve, that fellow, but I did have to laugh—he says to me, 'Barney——' This was just now. He hasn't more than just drove out of town. He said to me, 'Barney,' he says, 'you're the richest man in this township, and the banker, and you got a big car y'self, and you think you're one whale of a political boss,' he says, 'and yet you let that Zolzac maintain a private ocean, against the peace and damn horrible inconvenience of the Commonwealth of Minnesota——' He's got a great line of talk, that fellow. He told me how you got stuck—made me so ashamed—I been to New York myself—and right away I got Bill, and we're going down and hold a donation and surprise party on Adolph and fill that hole."

"But won't Adolph dig it out again?"

The banker was puffy, but his eyes were of stone. From the truck he took a shotgun. He drawled, "In that case, the surprise party will include an elegant wake."
"But how did—— Who is this extraordinary Milt Daggett?"
"Him? Oh, nobody 'specially. He's just a fellow down here at Schoenstrom. But we all know him. Goes to all the dances, thirty miles around. Thing about him is: if he sees something wrong, he picks out some poor fellow like me, and says what he thinks."
Claire drove on. She was aware that she was looking for Milt's bug. It was not in sight.
"Father," she exclaimed, "do you realize that this lad didn't tell us he was going to have the hole filled? Just did it. He frightens me. I'm afraid that when we reach Gopher Prairie for the night, we'll find he has engaged for us the suite that Prince Collars and Cuffs once slept in."
"Hhhhmm," yawned her father.
"Curious young man. He said, 'Pleased to meet you.'"
"Huuuuhhm! Fresh air makes me so sleepy."
"And—— Fooled you! Got through that mudhole, anyway! And he said —— Look! Fields stretch out so here, and not a tree except the willow-groves round those farmhouses. And he said 'Gee' so many times, and 'dinner' for the noon meal. And his nails—— No, I suppose he really is just a farm youngster."
Mr. Boltwood did not answer. His machine-finish smile indicated an enormous lack of interest in young men in Teal bugs.

CHAPTER IV

A ROOM WITHOUT

GOPHER PRAIRIE has all of five thousand people. Its commercial club asserts that it has at least a thousand more population and an infinitely better band than the ridiculously envious neighboring town of Joralemon. But there were few signs that a suite had been engaged for the Boltwoods, or that Prince Collars and Cuffs had on his royal tour of America spent much time in Gopher Prairie. Claire reached it somewhat before seven. She gaped at it in a hazy way. Though this was her first prairie town for a considerable stay, she could not pump up interest.

The state of mind of the touring motorist entering a strange place at night is as peculiar and definite as that of a prospector. It is compounded of gratitude at having got safely in; of perception of a new town, yet with all eagerness about new things dulled by weariness; of hope that there is going to be a good hotel, but small expectation—and absolutely no probability—that there really will be one.

Claire had only a blotched impression of peaked wooden buildings and squatty brick stores with faded awnings; of a red grain elevator and a crouching station and a lumberyard; then of the hopelessly muddy road leading on again into the country. She felt that if she didn't stop at once, she would miss the town entirely. The driving-instinct sustained her, made her take corners sharply, spot a garage, send the Gomez whirling in on the cement floor.

The garage attendant looked at her and yawned.

"Where do you want the car?" Claire asked sharply.

"Oh, stick it in that stall," grunted the man, and turned his back.

Claire glowered at him. She thought of a good line about rudeness. But—oh, she was too tired to fuss. She tried to run the car into the empty stall, which was not a stall, but a space, like a missing tooth, between two cars, and so narrow that she was afraid of crumpling the lordly fenders of the Gomez. She ran down the floor, returned with a flourish,