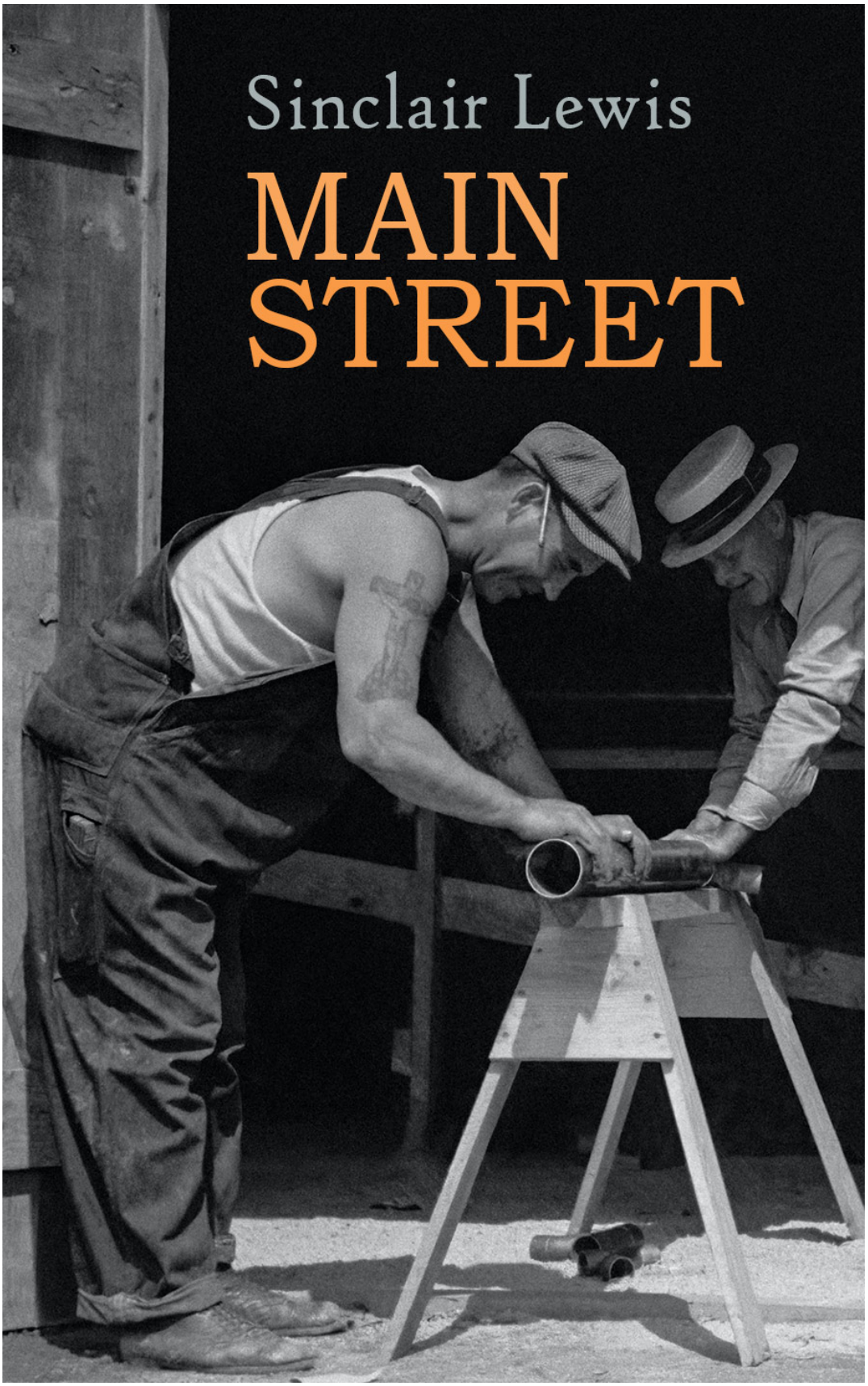
Sinclair Lewis

MAIN STREET



Sinclair Lewis

Main Street

e-artnow, 2022
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Table of Contents

This is America — a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.

The town is, in our tale, called “Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.” But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.

Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral.

Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

I

On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Nor was she thinking of squaws and portages, and the Yankee fur-traders whose shadows were all about her. She was meditating upon walnut fudge, the plays of Brieux, the reasons why heels run over, and the fact that the chemistry instructor had stared at the new coiffure which concealed her ears.

A breeze which had crossed a thousand miles of wheat-lands bellied her taffeta skirt in a line so graceful, so full of animation and moving beauty, that the heart of a chance watcher on the lower road tightened to wistfulness over her quality of suspended freedom. She lifted her arms, she leaned back against the wind, her skirt dipped and flared, a lock blew wild. A girl on a hilltop; credulous, plastic, young; drinking the air as she longed to drink life. The eternal aching comedy of expectant youth.

It is Carol Milford, fleeing for an hour from Blodgett College.

The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are deader now than Camelot; and a rebellious girl is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest.

II

Blodgett College is on the edge of Minneapolis. It is a bulwark of sound religion. It is still combating the recent heresies of Voltaire, Darwin, and Robert Ingersoll. Pious families in Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, the Dakotas send their children thither, and Blodgett protects them from the wickedness of the universities. But it secretes friendly girls, young men who sing, and one lady instructress who really likes Milton and Carlyle. So the four years which Carol spent at Blodgett were not altogether wasted. The smallness of the school, the fewness of rivals, permitted her to experiment with her perilous versatility. She played tennis, gave chafing-dish parties, took a graduate seminar in the drama, went “twosing,” and joined half a dozen societies for the practise of the arts or the tense stalking of a thing called General Culture.

In her class there were two or three prettier girls, but none more eager. She was noticeable equally in the classroom grind and at dances, though out of the three hundred students of Blodgett, scores recited more accurately and dozens Bostoned more smoothly. Every cell of her body was alive — thin wrists, quince-blossom skin, ingenue eyes, black hair.

The other girls in her dormitory marveled at the slightness of her body when they saw her in sheer negligee, or darting out wet from a shower-bath. She seemed then but half as large as they had supposed; a fragile child who must be cloaked with understanding kindness. “Psychic,” the girls whispered, and “spiritual.” Yet so radioactive were her nerves, so adventurous her trust in rather vaguely conceived sweetness and light, that she was more energetic than any of the hulking young women who, with calves bulging in heavy-ribbed woolen stockings beneath decorous blue serge bloomers, thuddingly galloped across the floor of the “gym” in practise for the Blodgett Ladies' Basket-Ball Team.

Even when she was tired her dark eyes were observant. She did not yet know the immense ability of the world to be casually cruel and proudly dull, but if she should ever learn those dismaying powers, her eyes would never become sullen or heavy or rheumily amorous.

For all her enthusiasms, for all the fondness and the “crushes” which she inspired, Carol's acquaintances were shy of her. When she was most ardently singing hymns or planning deviltry she yet seemed gently aloof and critical. She was credulous, perhaps; a born hero-worshipper; yet she did question and examine unceasingly. Whatever she might become she would never be static.

Her versatility ensnared her. By turns she hoped to discover that she had an unusual voice, a talent for the piano, the ability to act, to write, to manage organizations. Always she was disappointed, but always she effervesced anew — over the Student Volunteers, who intended to become missionaries, over painting scenery for the dramatic club, over soliciting advertisements for the college magazine.

She was on the peak that Sunday afternoon when she played in chapel. Out of the dusk her violin took up the organ theme, and the candle-light revealed her in a straight golden frock, her arm arched to the bow, her lips serious. Every man fell in love then with religion and Carol.

Throughout Senior year she anxiously related all her experiments and partial successes to a career. Daily, on the library steps or in the hall of the Main Building, the co-eds talked of “What shall we do when we finish college?” Even the girls who knew that they were going to be married pretended to be considering important business positions; even they who knew that they would have to work hinted about fabulous suitors. As for Carol, she was an orphan; her only near relative was a vanilla-flavored sister married to an optician in St. Paul. She had used most of the money from

her father's estate. She was not in love — that is, not often, nor ever long at a time. She would earn her living.

But how she was to earn it, how she was to conquer the world — almost entirely for the world's own good — she did not see. Most of the girls who were not betrothed meant to be teachers. Of these there were two sorts: careless young women who admitted that they intended to leave the “beastly classroom and grubby children” the minute they had a chance to marry; and studious, sometimes bulbous-browed and pop-eyed maidens who at class prayer-meetings requested God to “guide their feet along the paths of greatest usefulness.” Neither sort tempted Carol. The former seemed insincere (a favorite word of hers at this era). The earnest virgins were, she fancied, as likely to do harm as to do good by their faith in the value of parsing Caesar.

At various times during Senior year Carol finally decided upon studying law, writing motion-picture scenarios, professional nursing, and marrying an unidentified hero.

Then she found a hobby in sociology.

The sociology instructor was new. He was married, and therefore taboo, but he had come from Boston, he had lived among poets and socialists and Jews and millionaire uplifters at the University Settlement in New York, and he had a beautiful white strong neck. He led a giggling class through the prisons, the charity bureaus, the employment agencies of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Trailing at the end of the line Carol was indignant at the prodding curiosity of the others, their manner of staring at the poor as at a Zoo. She felt herself a great liberator. She put her hand to her mouth, her forefinger and thumb quite painfully pinching her lower lip, and frowned, and enjoyed being aloof.

A classmate named Stewart Snyder, a competent bulky young man in a gray flannel shirt, a rusty black bow tie, and the green-and-purple class cap, grumbled to her as they walked behind the others in the muck of the South St. Paul

stockyards, “These college chumps make me tired. They're so top-lofty. They ought to of worked on the farm, the way I have. These workmen put it all over them.”

“I just love common workmen,” glowed Carol.

“Only you don't want to forget that common workmen don't think they're common!”

“You're right! I apologize!” Carol's brows lifted in the astonishment of emotion, in a glory of abasement. Her eyes mothered the world. Stewart Snyder peered at her. He rammed his large red fists into his pockets, he jerked them out, he resolutely got rid of them by clenching his hands behind him, and he stammered:

“I know. You *get* people. Most of these darn co-eds —— Say, Carol, you could do a lot for people.”

“Oh — oh well — you know — sympathy and everything — if you were — say you were a lawyer's wife. You'd understand his clients. I'm going to be a lawyer. I admit I fall down in sympathy sometimes. I get so dog-gone impatient with people that can't stand the gaff. You'd be good for a fellow that was too serious. Make him more — more — YOU know — sympathetic!”

His slightly pouting lips, his mastiff eyes, were begging her to beg him to go on. She fled from the steam-roller of his sentiment. She cried, “Oh, see those poor sheep — millions and millions of them.” She darted on.

Stewart was not interesting. He hadn't a shapely white neck, and he had never lived among celebrated reformers. She wanted, just now, to have a cell in a settlement-house, like a nun without the bother of a black robe, and be kind, and read Bernard Shaw, and enormously improve a horde of grateful poor.

The supplementary reading in sociology led her to a book on village-improvement — tree-planting, town pageants, girls' clubs. It had pictures of greens and garden-walls in France, New England, Pennsylvania. She had picked it up

carelessly, with a slight yawn which she patted down with her finger-tips as delicately as a cat.

She dipped into the book, lounging on her window-seat, with her slim, lisle-stockinged legs crossed, and her knees up under her chin. She stroked a satin pillow while she read. About her was the clothy exuberance of a Blodgett College room: cretonne-covered window-seat, photographs of girls, a carbon print of the Coliseum, a chafing-dish, and a dozen pillows embroidered or beaded or pyrographed. Shockingly out of place was a miniature of the Dancing Bacchante. It was the only trace of Carol in the room. She had inherited the rest from generations of girl students.

It was as a part of all this commonplaceness that she regarded the treatise on village-improvement. But she suddenly stopped fidgeting. She strode into the book. She had fled half-way through it before the three o'clock bell called her to the class in English history.

She sighed, “That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. I suppose I'd better become a teacher then, but — I won't be that kind of a teacher. I won't drone. Why should they have all the garden suburbs on Long Island? Nobody has done anything with the ugly towns here in the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I'll make 'em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street!”

Thus she triumphed through the class, which was a typical Blodgett contest between a dreary teacher and unwilling children of twenty, won by the teacher because his opponents had to answer his questions, while their treacherous queries he could counter by demanding, “Have you looked that up in the library? Well then, suppose you do!”

The history instructor was a retired minister. He was sarcastic today. He begged of sporting young Mr. Charley Holmberg, “Now Charles, would it interrupt your

undoubtedly fascinating pursuit of that malevolent fly if I were to ask you to tell us that you do not know anything about King John?” He spent three delightful minutes in assuring himself of the fact that no one exactly remembered the date of Magna Charta.

Carol did not hear him. She was completing the roof of a half-timbered town hall. She had found one man in the prairie village who did not appreciate her picture of winding streets and arcades, but she had assembled the town council and dramatically defeated him.

III

Though she was Minnesota-born Carol was not an intimate of the prairie villages. Her father, the smiling and shabby, the learned and teasingly kind, had come from Massachusetts, and through all her childhood he had been a judge in Mankato, which is not a prairie town, but in its garden-sheltered streets and aisles of elms is white and green New England reborn. Mankato lies between cliffs and the Minnesota River, hard by Traverse des Sioux, where the first settlers made treaties with the Indians, and the cattle-rustlers once came galloping before hell-for-leather posses.

As she climbed along the banks of the dark river Carol listened to its fables about the wide land of yellow waters and bleached buffalo bones to the West; the Southern levees and singing darkies and palm trees toward which it was forever mysteriously gliding; and she heard again the startled bells and thick puffing of high-stacked river steamers wrecked on sand-reefs sixty years ago. Along the decks she saw missionaries, gamblers in tall pot hats, and Dakota chiefs with scarlet blankets. . . . Far off whistles at night, round the river bend, plunking paddles reechoed by the pines, and a glow on black sliding waters.

Carol's family were self-sufficient in their inventive life, with Christmas a rite full of surprises and tenderness, and

“dressing-up parties” spontaneous and joyously absurd. The beasts in the Milford hearth-mythology were not the obscene Night Animals who jump out of closets and eat little girls, but beneficent and bright-eyed creatures — the tam htab, who is woolly and blue and lives in the bathroom, and runs rapidly to warm small feet; the ferruginous oil stove, who purrs and knows stories; and the skitamarigg, who will play with children before breakfast if they spring out of bed and close the window at the very first line of the song about puellas which father sings while shaving.

Judge Milford's pedagogical scheme was to let the children read whatever they pleased, and in his brown library Carol absorbed Balzac and Rabelais and Thoreau and Max Muller. He gravely taught them the letters on the backs of the encyclopedias, and when polite visitors asked about the mental progress of the “little ones,” they were horrified to hear the children earnestly repeating A-And, And-Aus, Aus-Bis, Bis-Cal, Cal-Cha.

Carol's mother died when she was nine. Her father retired from the judiciary when she was eleven, and took the family to Minneapolis. There he died, two years after. Her sister, a busy proper advisory soul, older than herself, had become a stranger to her even when they lived in the same house.

From those early brown and silver days and from her independence of relatives Carol retained a willingness to be different from brisk efficient book-ignoring people; an instinct to observe and wonder at their bustle even when she was taking part in it. But, she felt approvingly, as she discovered her career of town-planning, she was now roused to being brisk and efficient herself.

IV

In a month Carol's ambition had clouded. Her hesitancy about becoming a teacher had returned. She was not, she

worried, strong enough to endure the routine, and she could not picture herself standing before grinning children and pretending to be wise and decisive. But the desire for the creation of a beautiful town remained. When she encountered an item about small-town women's clubs or a photograph of a straggling Main Street, she was homesick for it, she felt robbed of her work.

It was the advice of the professor of English which led her to study professional library-work in a Chicago school. Her imagination carved and colored the new plan. She saw herself persuading children to read charming fairy tales, helping young men to find books on mechanics, being ever so courteous to old men who were hunting for newspapers — the light of the library, an authority on books, invited to dinners with poets and explorers, reading a paper to an association of distinguished scholars.

V

The last faculty reception before commencement. In five days they would be in the cyclone of final examinations.

The house of the president had been massed with palms suggestive of polite undertaking parlors, and in the library, a ten-foot room with a globe and the portraits of Whittier and Martha Washington, the student orchestra was playing “Carmen” and “Madame Butterfly.” Carol was dizzy with music and the emotions of parting. She saw the palms as a jungle, the pink-shaded electric globes as an opaline haze, and the eye-glassed faculty as Olympians. She was melancholy at sight of the mousey girls with whom she had “always intended to get acquainted,” and the half dozen young men who were ready to fall in love with her.

But it was Stewart Snyder whom she encouraged. He was so much manlier than the others; he was an even warm brown, like his new ready-made suit with its padded shoulders. She sat with him, and with two cups of coffee and

a chicken patty, upon a pile of presidential overshoes in the coat-closet under the stairs, and as the thin music seeped in, Stewart whispered:

“I can't stand it, this breaking up after four years! The happiest years of life.”

She believed it. “Oh, I know! To think that in just a few days we'll be parting, and we'll never see some of the bunch again!”

“Carol, you got to listen to me! You always duck when I try to talk seriously to you, but you got to listen to me. I'm going to be a big lawyer, maybe a judge, and I need you, and I'd protect you —— ”

His arm slid behind her shoulders. The insinuating music drained her independence. She said mournfully, “Would you take care of me?” She touched his hand. It was warm, solid.

“You bet I would! We'd have, Lord, we'd have bully times in Yankton, where I'm going to settle —— ”

“But I want to do something with life.”

“What's better than making a comfy home and bringing up some cute kids and knowing nice homey people?”

It was the immemorial male reply to the restless woman. Thus to the young Sappho spake the melon-venders; thus the captains to Zenobia; and in the damp cave over gnawed bones the hairy suitor thus protested to the woman advocate of matriarchy. In the dialect of Blodgett College but with the voice of Sappho was Carol's answer:

“Of course. I know. I suppose that's so. Honestly, I do love children. But there's lots of women that can do housework, but I — well, if you HAVE got a college education, you ought to use it for the world.”

“I know, but you can use it just as well in the home. And gee, Carol, just think of a bunch of us going out on an auto picnic, some nice spring evening.”

“Yes.”

“And sleigh-riding in winter, and going fishing —— ”

Blarrrrrrr! The orchestra had crashed into the “Soldiers' Chorus”; and she was protesting, “No! No! You're a dear, but I want to do things. I don't understand myself but I want — everything in the world! Maybe I can't sing or write, but I know I can be an influence in library work. Just suppose I encouraged some boy and he became a great artist! I will! I will do it! Stewart dear, I can't settle down to nothing but dish-washing!”

Two minutes later — two hectic minutes — they were disturbed by an embarrassed couple also seeking the idyllic seclusion of the overshoe-closet.

After graduation she never saw Stewart Snyder again. She wrote to him once a week — for one month.

VI

A year Carol spent in Chicago. Her study of library-cataloguing, recording, books of reference, was easy and not too somniferous. She reveled in the Art Institute, in symphonies and violin recitals and chamber music, in the theater and classic dancing. She almost gave up library work to become one of the young women who dance in cheese-cloth in the moonlight. She was taken to a certified Studio Party, with beer, cigarettes, bobbed hair, and a Russian Jewess who sang the Internationale. It cannot be reported that Carol had anything significant to say to the Bohemians. She was awkward with them, and felt ignorant, and she was shocked by the free manners which she had for years desired. But she heard and remembered discussions of Freud, Romain Rolland, syndicalism, the Confederation Generale du Travail, feminism vs. haremism, Chinese lyrics, nationalization of mines, Christian Science, and fishing in Ontario.

She went home, and that was the beginning and end of her Bohemian life.

The second cousin of Carol's sister's husband lived in Winnetka, and once invited her out to Sunday dinner. She walked back through Wilmette and Evanston, discovered new forms of suburban architecture, and remembered her desire to recreate villages. She decided that she would give up library work and, by a miracle whose nature was not very clearly revealed to her, turn a prairie town into Georgian houses and Japanese bungalows.

The next day in library class she had to read a theme on the use of the Cumulative Index, and she was taken so seriously in the discussion that she put off her career of town-planning — and in the autumn she was in the public library of St. Paul.

VII

Carol was not unhappy and she was not exhilarated, in the St. Paul Library. She slowly confessed that she was not visibly affecting lives. She did, at first, put into her contact with the patrons a willingness which should have moved worlds. But so few of these stolid worlds wanted to be moved. When she was in charge of the magazine room the readers did not ask for suggestions about elevated essays. They grunted, “Wanta find the Leather Goods Gazette for last February.” When she was giving out books the principal query was, “Can you tell me of a good, light, exciting love story to read? My husband's going away for a week.”

She was fond of the other librarians; proud of their aspirations. And by the chance of propinquity she read scores of books unnatural to her gay white littleness: volumes of anthropology with ditches of foot-notes filled with heaps of small dusty type, Parisian imagistes, Hindu recipes for curry, voyages to the Solomon Isles, theosophy with modern American improvements, treatises upon success in the real-estate business. She took walks, and was

sensible about shoes and diet. And never did she feel that she was living.

She went to dances and suppers at the houses of college acquaintances. Sometimes she one-stepped demurely; sometimes, in dread of life's slipping past, she turned into a bacchanal, her tender eyes excited, her throat tense, as she slid down the room.

During her three years of library work several men showed diligent interest in her — the treasurer of a fur-manufacturing firm, a teacher, a newspaper reporter, and a petty railroad official. None of them made her more than pause in thought. For months no male emerged from the mass. Then, at the Marburys', she met Dr. Will Kennicott.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

I

It was a frail and blue and lonely Carol who trotted to the flat of the Johnson Marburys for Sunday evening supper. Mrs. Marbury was a neighbor and friend of Carol's sister; Mr. Marbury a traveling representative of an insurance company. They made a specialty of sandwich-salad-coffee lap suppers, and they regarded Carol as their literary and artistic representative. She was the one who could be depended upon to appreciate the Caruso phonograph record, and the Chinese lantern which Mr. Marbury had brought back as his present from San Francisco. Carol found the Marburys admiring and therefore admirable.

This September Sunday evening she wore a net frock with a pale pink lining. A nap had soothed away the faint lines of tiredness beside her eyes. She was young, naive, stimulated by the coolness. She flung her coat at the chair in the hall of the flat, and exploded into the green-plush living-room. The familiar group were trying to be conversational. She saw Mr. Marbury, a woman teacher of gymnastics in a high school, a chief clerk from the Great Northern Railway offices, a young lawyer. But there was also a stranger, a thick tall man of thirty-six or -seven, with stolid brown hair, lips used to giving orders, eyes which followed everything good-naturedly, and clothes which you could never quite remember.

Mr. Marbury boomed, “Carol, come over here and meet Doc Kennicott — Dr. Will Kennicott of Gopher Prairie. He does all our insurance-examining up in that neck of the woods, and they do say he's some doctor!”

As she edged toward the stranger and murmured nothing in particular, Carol remembered that Gopher Prairie was a Minnesota wheat-prairie town of something over three thousand people.

“Pleased to meet you,” stated Dr. Kennicott. His hand was strong; the palm soft, but the back weathered, showing golden hairs against firm red skin.

He looked at her as though she was an agreeable discovery. She tugged her hand free and fluttered, “I must go out to the kitchen and help Mrs. Marbury.” She did not speak to him again till, after she had heated the rolls and passed the paper napkins, Mr. Marbury captured her with a loud, “Oh, quit fussing now. Come over here and sit down and tell us how's tricks.” He herded her to a sofa with Dr. Kennicott, who was rather vague about the eyes, rather drooping of bulky shoulder, as though he was wondering what he was expected to do next. As their host left them, Kennicott awoke:

“Marbury tells me you're a high mogul in the public library. I was surprised. Didn't hardly think you were old enough. I thought you were a girl, still in college maybe.”

“Oh, I'm dreadfully old. I expect to take to a lip-stick, and to find a gray hair any morning now.”

“Huh! You must be frightfully old — prob'ly too old to be my granddaughter, I guess!”

Thus in the Vale of Arcady nymph and satyr beguiled the hours; precisely thus, and not in honeyed pentameters, discoursed Elaine and the worn Sir Launcelot in the pleached alley.

“How do you like your work?” asked the doctor.

“It's pleasant, but sometimes I feel shut off from things — the steel stacks, and the everlasting cards smeared all over with red rubber stamps.”

“Don't you get sick of the city?”

“St. Paul? Why, don't you like it? I don't know of any lovelier view than when you stand on Summit Avenue and

look across Lower Town to the Mississippi cliffs and the upland farms beyond.”

“I know but —— Of course I've spent nine years around the Twin Cities — took my B.A. and M.D. over at the U., and had my internship in a hospital in Minneapolis, but still, oh well, you don't get to know folks here, way you do up home. I feel I've got something to say about running Gopher Prairie, but you take it in a big city of two-three hundred thousand, and I'm just one flea on the dog's back. And then I like country driving, and the hunting in the fall. Do you know Gopher Prairie at all?”

“No, but I hear it's a very nice town.”

“Nice? Say honestly —— Of course I may be prejudiced, but I've seen an awful lot of towns — one time I went to Atlantic City for the American Medical Association meeting, and I spent practically a week in New York! But I never saw a town that had such up-and-coming people as Gopher Prairie. Bresnahan — you know — the famous auto manufacturer — he comes from Gopher Prairie. Born and brought up there! And it's a darn pretty town. Lots of fine maples and box-elders, and there's two of the dandiest lakes you ever saw, right near town! And we've got seven miles of cement walks already, and building more every day! Course a lot of these towns still put up with plank walks, but not for us, you bet!”

“Really?”

(Why was she thinking of Stewart Snyder?)

“Gopher Prairie is going to have a great future. Some of the best dairy and wheat land in the state right near there — some of it selling right now at one-fifty an acre, and I bet it will go up to two and a quarter in ten years!”

“Is —— Do you like your profession?”

“Nothing like it. Keeps you out, and yet you have a chance to loaf in the office for a change.”

“I don't mean that way. I mean — it's such an opportunity for sympathy.”

Dr. Kennicott launched into a heavy, “Oh, these Dutch farmers don't want sympathy. All they need is a bath and a good dose of salts.”

Carol must have flinched, for instantly he was urging, “What I mean is — I don't want you to think I'm one of these old salts-and-quinine peddlers, but I mean: so many of my patients are husky farmers that I suppose I get kind of case-hardened.”

“It seems to me that a doctor could transform a whole community, if he wanted to — if he saw it. He's usually the only man in the neighborhood who has any scientific training, isn't he?”

“Yes, that's so, but I guess most of us get rusty. We land in a rut of obstetrics and typhoid and busted legs. What we need is women like you to jump on us. It'd be you that would transform the town.”

“No, I couldn't. Too flighty. I did used to think about doing just that, curiously enough, but I seem to have drifted away from the idea. Oh, I'm a fine one to be lecturing you!”

“No! You're just the one. You have ideas without having lost feminine charm. Say! Don't you think there's a lot of these women that go out for all these movements and so on that sacrifice —— ”

After his remarks upon suffrage he abruptly questioned her about herself. His kindliness and the firmness of his personality enveloped her and she accepted him as one who had a right to know what she thought and wore and ate and read. He was positive. He had grown from a sketched-in stranger to a friend, whose gossip was important news. She noticed the healthy solidity of his chest. His nose, which had seemed irregular and large, was suddenly virile.

She was jarred out of this serious sweetness when Marbury bounced over to them and with horrible publicity yammered, “Say, what do you two think you're doing? Telling fortunes or making love? Let me warn you that the

doc is a frisky bacheldore, Carol. Come on now, folks, shake a leg. Let's have some stunts or a dance or something."

She did not have another word with Dr. Kennicott until their parting:

"Been a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Milford. May I see you some time when I come down again? I'm here quite often — taking patients to hospitals for majors, and so on."

"Why —— "

"What's your address?"

"You can ask Mr. Marbury next time you come down — if you really want to know!"

"Want to know? Say, you wait!"

II

Of the love-making of Carol and Will Kennicott there is nothing to be told which may not be heard on every summer evening, on every shadowy block.

They were biology and mystery; their speech was slang phrases and flares of poetry; their silences were contentment, or shaky crises when his arm took her shoulder. All the beauty of youth, first discovered when it is passing — and all the commonplaceness of a well-to-do unmarried man encountering a pretty girl at the time when she is slightly weary of her employment and sees no glory ahead nor any man she is glad to serve.

They liked each other honestly — they were both honest. She was disappointed by his devotion to making money, but she was sure that he did not lie to patients, and that he did keep up with the medical magazines. What aroused her to something more than liking was his boyishness when they went tramping.

They walked from St. Paul down the river to Mendota, Kennicott more elastic-seeming in a cap and a soft crepe shirt, Carol youthful in a tam-o'-shanter of mole velvet, a blue serge suit with an absurdly and agreeably broad turn-

down linen collar, and frivolous ankles above athletic shoes. The High Bridge crosses the Mississippi, mounting from low banks to a palisade of cliffs. Far down beneath it on the St. Paul side, upon mud flats, is a wild settlement of chicken-infested gardens and shanties patched together from discarded sign-boards, sheets of corrugated iron, and planks fished out of the river. Carol leaned over the rail of the bridge to look down at this Yang-tse village; in delicious imaginary fear she shrieked that she was dizzy with the height; and it was an extremely human satisfaction to have a strong male snatch her back to safety, instead of having a logical woman teacher or librarian sniff, “Well, if you're scared, why don't you get away from the rail, then?”

From the cliffs across the river Carol and Kennicott looked back at St. Paul on its hills; an imperial sweep from the dome of the cathedral to the dome of the state capitol.

The river road led past rocky field slopes, deep glens, woods flamboyant now with September, to Mendota, white walls and a spire among trees beneath a hill, old-world in its placid ease. And for this fresh land, the place is ancient. Here is the bold stone house which General Sibley, the king of fur-traders, built in 1835, with plaster of river mud, and ropes of twisted grass for laths. It has an air of centuries. In its solid rooms Carol and Kennicott found prints from other days which the house had seen — tail-coats of robin's-egg blue, clumsy Red River carts laden with luxurious furs, whiskered Union soldiers in slant forage caps and rattling sabers.

It suggested to them a common American past, and it was memorable because they had discovered it together. They talked more trustingly, more personally, as they trudged on. They crossed the Minnesota River in a rowboat ferry. They climbed the hill to the round stone tower of Fort Snelling. They saw the junction of the Mississippi and the Minnesota, and recalled the men who had come here eighty

years ago — Maine lumbermen, York traders, soldiers from the Maryland hills.

“It's a good country, and I'm proud of it. Let's make it all that those old boys dreamed about,” the unsentimental Kennicott was moved to vow.

“Let's!”

“Come on. Come to Gopher Prairie. Show us. Make the town — well — make it artistic. It's mighty pretty, but I'll admit we aren't any too darn artistic. Probably the lumber-yard isn't as scrumptious as all these Greek temples. But go to it! Make us change!”

“I would like to. Some day!”

“Now! You'd love Gopher Prairie. We've been doing a lot with lawns and gardening the past few years, and it's so homey — the big trees and —— And the best people on earth. And keen. I bet Luke Dawson —— ”

Carol but half listened to the names. She could not fancy their ever becoming important to her.

“I bet Luke Dawson has got more money than most of the swells on Summit Avenue; and Miss Sherwin in the high school is a regular wonder — reads Latin like I do English; and Sam Clark, the hardware man, he's a corker — not a better man in the state to go hunting with; and if you want culture, besides Vida Sherwin there's Reverend Warren, the Congregational preacher, and Professor Mott, the superintendent of schools, and Guy Pollock, the lawyer — they say he writes regular poetry and — and Raymie Wutherspoon, he's not such an awful boob when you get to KNOW him, and he sings swell. And —— And there's plenty of others. Lym Cass. Only of course none of them have your finesse, you might call it. But they don't make 'em any more appreciative and so on. Come on! We're ready for you to boss us!”

They sat on the bank below the parapet of the old fort, hidden from observation. He circled her shoulder with his arm. Relaxed after the walk, a chill nipping her throat,

conscious of his warmth and power, she leaned gratefully against him.

“You know I'm in love with you, Carol!”

She did not answer, but she touched the back of his hand with an exploring finger.

“You say I'm so darn materialistic. How can I help it, unless I have you to stir me up?”

She did not answer. She could not think.

“You say a doctor could cure a town the way he does a person. Well, you cure the town of whatever ails it, if anything does, and I'll be your surgical kit.”

She did not follow his words, only the burring resoluteness of them.

She was shocked, thrilled, as he kissed her cheek and cried, “There's no use saying things and saying things and saying things. Don't my arms talk to you — now?”

“Oh, please, please!” She wondered if she ought to be angry, but it was a drifting thought, and she discovered that she was crying.

Then they were sitting six inches apart, pretending that they had never been nearer, while she tried to be impersonal:

“I would like to — would like to see Gopher Prairie.”

“Trust me! Here she is! Brought some snapshots down to show you.”

Her cheek near his sleeve, she studied a dozen village pictures. They were streaky; she saw only trees, shrubbery, a porch indistinct in leafy shadows. But she exclaimed over the lakes: dark water reflecting wooded bluffs, a flight of ducks, a fisherman in shirt sleeves and a wide straw hat, holding up a string of croppies. One winter picture of the edge of Plover Lake had the air of an etching: lustrous slide of ice, snow in the crevices of a boggy bank, the mound of a muskrat house, reeds in thin black lines, arches of frosty grasses. It was an impression of cool clear vigor.

“How'd it be to skate there for a couple of hours, or go zinging along on a fast ice-boat, and skip back home for coffee and some hot wienies?” he demanded.

“It might be — fun.”

“But here's the picture. Here's where you come in.”

A photograph of a forest clearing: pathetic new furrows straggling among stumps, a clumsy log cabin chinked with mud and roofed with hay. In front of it a sagging woman with tight-drawn hair, and a baby bedraggled, smeary, glorious-eyed.

“Those are the kind of folks I practise among, good share of the time. Nels Erdstrom, fine clean young Svenska. He'll have a corking farm in ten years, but now —— I operated his wife on a kitchen table, with my driver giving the anesthetic. Look at that scared baby! Needs some woman with hands like yours. Waiting for you! Just look at that baby's eyes, look how he's begging —— ”

“Don't! They hurt me. Oh, it would be sweet to help him — so sweet.”

As his arms moved toward her she answered all her doubts with “Sweet, so sweet.”

CHAPTER III

Table of Contents

I

Under the rolling clouds of the prairie a moving mass of steel. An irritable clank and rattle beneath a prolonged roar. The sharp scent of oranges cutting the soggy smell of unbathed people and ancient baggage.

Towns as planless as a scattering of pasteboard boxes on an attic floor. The stretch of faded gold stubble broken only by clumps of willows encircling white houses and red barns.

No. 7, the way train, grumbling through Minnesota, imperceptibly climbing the giant tableland that slopes in a thousand-mile rise from hot Mississippi bottoms to the Rockies.

It is September, hot, very dusty.

There is no smug Pullman attached to the train, and the day coaches of the East are replaced by free chair cars, with each seat cut into two adjustable plush chairs, the head-rests covered with doubtful linen towels. Halfway down the car is a semi-partition of carved oak columns, but the aisle is of bare, splintery, grease-blackened wood. There is no porter, no pillows, no provision for beds, but all today and all tonight they will ride in this long steel box-farmers with perpetually tired wives and children who seem all to be of the same age; workmen going to new jobs; traveling salesmen with derbies and freshly shined shoes.

They are parched and cramped, the lines of their hands filled with grime; they go to sleep curled in distorted attitudes, heads against the window-panes or propped on rolled coats on seat-arms, and legs thrust into the aisle. They do not read; apparently they do not think. They wait.

An early-wrinkled, young-old mother, moving as though her joints were dry, opens a suit-case in which are seen creased blouses, a pair of slippers worn through at the toes, a bottle of patent medicine, a tin cup, a paper-covered book about dreams which the news-butcher has coaxed her into buying. She brings out a graham cracker which she feeds to a baby lying flat on a seat and wailing hopelessly. Most of the crumbs drop on the red plush of the seat, and the woman sighs and tries to brush them away, but they leap up impishly and fall back on the plush.

A soiled man and woman munch sandwiches and throw the crusts on the floor. A large brick-colored Norwegian takes off his shoes, grunts in relief, and props his feet in their thick gray socks against the seat in front of him.

An old woman whose toothless mouth shuts like a mud-turtle's, and whose hair is not so much white as yellow like moldy linen, with bands of pink skull apparent between the tresses, anxiously lifts her bag, opens it, peers in, closes it, puts it under the seat, and hastily picks it up and opens it and hides it all over again. The bag is full of treasures and of memories: a leather buckle, an ancient band-concert program, scraps of ribbon, lace, satin. In the aisle beside her is an extremely indignant parrakeet in a cage.

Two facing seats, overflowing with a Slovene iron-miner's family, are littered with shoes, dolls, whisky bottles, bundles wrapped in newspapers, a sewing bag. The oldest boy takes a mouth-organ out of his coat pocket, wipes the tobacco crumbs off, and plays “Marching through Georgia” till every head in the car begins to ache.

The news-butcher comes through selling chocolate bars and lemon drops. A girl-child ceaselessly trots down to the water-cooler and back to her seat. The stiff paper envelope which she uses for cup drips in the aisle as she goes, and on each trip she stumbles over the feet of a carpenter, who grunts, “Ouch! Look out!”

The dust-caked doors are open, and from the smoking-car drifts back a visible blue line of stinging tobacco smoke, and with it a crackle of laughter over the story which the young man in the bright blue suit and lavender tie and light yellow shoes has just told to the squat man in garage overalls.

The smell grows constantly thicker, more stale.

II

To each of the passengers his seat was his temporary home, and most of the passengers were slatternly housekeepers. But one seat looked clean and deceptively cool. In it were an obviously prosperous man and a black-haired, fine-skinned girl whose pumps rested on an immaculate horsehide bag.

They were Dr. Will Kennicott and his bride, Carol.

They had been married at the end of a year of conversational courtship, and they were on their way to Gopher Prairie after a wedding journey in the Colorado mountains.

The hordes of the way-train were not altogether new to Carol. She had seen them on trips from St. Paul to Chicago. But now that they had become her own people, to bathe and encourage and adorn, she had an acute and uncomfortable interest in them. They distressed her. They were so stolid. She had always maintained that there is no American peasantry, and she sought now to defend her faith by seeing imagination and enterprise in the young Swedish farmers, and in a traveling man working over his order-blanks. But the older people, Yankees as well as Norwegians, Germans, Finns, Canucks, had settled into submission to poverty. They were peasants, she groaned.

“Isn't there any way of waking them up? What would happen if they understood scientific agriculture?” she begged of Kennicott, her hand groping for his.