MAIN STREET

The Story of Carol Kennicott

BY SINCLAIR LEWIS

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(Continued From Yesterday)

III

She remembered, and tried to forget, and remembered more sharply the vulgar detail of her husband's having observed the ancient customs of the land by chewing tobacco. She would have preferred a prettier vice—gambling or a mistress. For these she might have found a luxury of forgiveness. She could not remember any fascinating wicked hero of fiction who chewed tobacco. She asserted that it proved him to be a man of the bold free West. She tried to align him with the hairy-chested heroes of the motion-pictures. She curled on the couch, a pallid softness in the twilight, and fought herself, and lost the battle. Spitting did not identify him with rangers riding the buttes; it merely bound him to Gopher Prairie—to Nat Hicks the tailor and Bert Tybee the bartender.

"But he gave it up for me. Oh, what does it matter! We're all filthy in some things. I think of myself as so superior, but I do eat and digest. I do wash my dirty paws and scratch. I'm not a cool slim goddess on a column. There aren't any! He gave it up for me. He stands by me, believing that every one loves me. He's the Rock of Ages—in a storm of meanness that's driving me mad. . . . it will drive me mad."

All evening she sang Scotch ballads to Kennicott, and when she noticed that he was chewing an unlighted cigar she smiled maternally at his secret.

She could not escape asking (in the exact words and mental intonations which a thousand million women, dairy wenches and mischief-making queens, had used before her, and which a million million women will know hereafter), "What it all a horrible mistake, my marrying him?" She quieted the doubt—without answering it.

IV

Kennicott had taken her north to Lac-qui-Meurt, in the Big Woods. It was the entrance to a Chippewa Indian reservation, a sandy settlement among Norway pines on the shore of a huge snow-glaring lake. She had her first sight of his mother, except the glimpse at the wedding. Mrs. Kennicott had a hushed and delicate breeding which dignified her woodeny ever-scrubbed cottage with its worn hard cushions in heavy rockers. She had never lost the child's miraculous power of wonder. She asked questions about books and cities. She murmured:

"Will is a dear hard-working boy but he's inclined to be too serious, and you've taught him how to play. Last night I heard you both laughing about the old Indian basket-seller, and I just lay in bed and enjoyed your happiness."

Carol forgot her misery hunting in this solidarity of family life. She could depend upon them; she was not battling alone. Watching Mrs. Kennicott flit about the kitchen she was better able to translate Kennicott himself. He was matter-of-fact, yes, and incurably mature. He didn't really play; he let Carol play with him. But he had his mother's genius for trusting, her disdain for prying, her sure integrity.

From the two days at Lac-qui-Meurt Carol drew confidence in herself, and she returned to Gopher Prairie in a throbbing calm like those golden drugged seconds when, because he is for an instant free from pain, a sick man revels in living.

A bright hard winter day, the wind shrill, black and silver clouds booming across the sky, everything in panicky motion during the brief light. They struggled against the surf of wind, through deep snow. Kennicott was cheerful. He hailed Loren Wheeler, "Behave yourself while I been away?" The editor bellowed, "B' gosh you stayed so long that all your patients have got well!" and importantly took notes for the Dauntless about their journey. Jackson Elder cried, "Hey, folks! How's tricks up North?" Mrs. McGanum waved to them from her porch.

"They're glad to see us. We mean something here. These people are satisfied. Why can't I be? But can I sit back all my life and be satisfied with 'Hey, folks'? They want shouts on Main Street, and I want violins in a paneled room. Why ———?"

V

Vida Sherwin ran in after school a dozen times. She was tactful, torrentially anecdotal. She had scuttled about town and plucked compliments: Mrs. Dr. Westlake had pronounced Carol a "very sweet, bright, cultured young woman," and Brad Bemis, the tinsmith at Clark's Hardware Store, had declared that she was "easy to work for and awful easy to look at."

But Carol could not yet take her in. She resented this outsider's knowledge of her shame. Vida was not too long tolerant. She hinted, "You're a great brooder, child. Buck up now. The town's quit criticizing you, almost entirely. Come with me to the Thanatopsis club. They have some of the best papers, and current-events discussions—so interesting."

In Vida's demands Carol felt a compulsion, but she was too listless to obey.

It was Bea Sorenson who was really her confidante.

However charitable toward the lower classes she may have thought herself, Carol had been reared to assume that servants belong to a distinct and inferior species. But she discovered that Bea was extraordinarily like girls she had loved in college, and as a companion altogether superior to the young matrons of the Jolly Seventeen. Daily they became more frankly two girls playing at housework. Bea artlessly considered Carol the most beautiful and accomplished lady in the country; she was always shrieking, "My, dot's a swell hat!" or, "Ay think all dese ladies yoost die when dey see how elegant you do your hair!" But it was not the humbleness of a servant, nor the hypocrisy of a slave; it was the admiration of Freshman for Junior.

They made out the day's menus together. Tho they began with propriety, Carol sitting by the kitchen table and Bea at the sink or blacking the stove, the conference was likely to end with both of them by the table, while Bea gurgled over the ice-man's attempt to kiss her, or Carol admitted, "Everybody knows that the doctor is lots more clever than Dr. McGanum." When Carol came in from marketing, Bea plunged into the hall to take off her coat, rub her frosted hands, and ask, "Vos dere lots of folks uptown today?"

This was the welcome upon which Carol depended.

VI

Thru her weeks of cowering there was no change in her surface life. No one save Vida was aware of her agonizing. On her most despairing days she chatted to women on the street, in stores. But without the protection of Kennicott's presence she did not go to the Jolly Seventeen; she delivered herself to the judgment of the town only when she went shopping and on the ritualistic occasions of formal afternoon calls, when Mrs. Lyman Cass or Mrs. George Edwin Mott, with clean gloves and minute handkerchiefs and sealskin card-cases and countenances of frozen approbation, sat on the edges of chairs and inquired, "Do you find Gopher Prairie pleasing?" When they spent evenings of social profit-and-loss at the Haydocks' or the Dyers' she hid behind Kennicott, playing the simple bride.

Now she was unprotected. Kennicott had taken a patient to Rochester for an operation. He would be away for two or three days. She had not minded; she would loosen the matrimonial tension and be a fanciful girl for a time. But now that he was gone the house was listeningly empty. Bea was out this afternoon—presumably drinking coffee and talking about "fellows" with her cousin Tina. It was the day for the monthly supper and evening-bridge of the Jolly Seventeen, but Carol dared not go.

She sat alone.

CHAPTER X

I

The house was haunted, long before evening. Shadows slipped down the walls and waited behind every chair.

Did that door move?

No. She wouldn't go to the Jolly Seventeen. She hadn't energy enough to caper before them, to smile blandly at Juanita's rudeness. Not today. But she did want a party. Now! If some one would come in this afternoon, some one who liked her—Vida or Mrs. Sam Clark or old Mrs. Champ Perry or gentle Mrs. Dr. Westlake. Or Guy Pollock! She'd telephone——

No. That wouldn't be it. They must come of themselves.

Perhaps they would.

Why not?

She'd have tea ready, anyway. If they came—splendid. If not—what did she care? She wasn't going to yield to the village and let down; she was going to keep up a belief in the rite of tea, to which she had always looked forward as the symbol of a leisurely fine existence. And it would be just as much fun, even if it was so babyish, to have tea by herself and pretend that she was entertaining clever men. It would!

She turned the shining thought into action. She bustled to the kitchen, stoked the wood-range, sang Schumann while she boiled the kettle, warmed up raisin cookies on a newspaper spread on the rack in the oven. She scampered up-stairs to bring down her filmiest tea-cloth. She arranged a silver tray. She proudly carried it into the living-room and set it on the long cherry-wood table, pushing aside a hoop of embroidery, a volume of Conrad from the library, copies of the Saturday Evening Post, the Literary Digest, and Kennicott's National Geographic Magazine.

She moved the tray back and forth and regarded the effect. She shook her head. She busily unfolded the sewing-table, set it in the bay-window, patted the tea-cloth to smoothness, moved the tray. "Some time I'll have a mahogany tea-table," she said happily.

She had brought in two cups, two plates. For herself, a straight chair, but for the guest the big wing-chair, which she pantingly tugged to the table.

She had finished all the preparations she could think of. She sat and waited. She listened for the door-bell, the telephone. Her eagerness was stilled. Her hands drooped.

Surely Vida Sherwin would hear the summons.

She glanced thru the bay-window. Snow was sifting over the ridge of the Howland house like sprays of water from a hose. The wide yards across the street were gray with moving eddies. The black trees shivered. The roadway was gashed with ruts of ice.

She looked at the extra cup and plate. She looked at the wing-chair. It was so empty.

The tea was cold in the pot. With wearily dipping finger-tip she tested it. Yes. Quite cold. She couldn't wait any longer.

The cup across from her was icily clean, glisteningly empty.

Simply absurd to wait. She poured her own cup of tea. She sat and stared at it. What was it she was going to do now? Oh yes; how idiotic; take a lump of sugar.

She didn't want the beastly tea.

She was springing up. She was on the couch, sobbing.

II

She was thinking more sharply than she had for weeks.

She reverted to her resolution to change the town—awaken it, prod it, "reform" it. What if they were wolves instead of lambs? They'd eat her all the sooner if she was meek to them. Fight or be eaten. It was easier to change the town completely than to conciliate it! She could not take their point of view; it was a negative thing; an intellectual squalor; a swamp of prejudices and fears. She would have to make them take hers. She was not a Vincent de Paul, to govern and mold a people. What of that? The tiniest change in their distrust of beauty would be the beginning of the end; a seed to sprout and some day with thickening roots to crack their wall of mediocrity. If she could not, as she desired, do a great thing nobly and with laughter, yet, she need not be content with village nothingness. She would plant one seed in the blank wall.

Was she just? Was it merely a blank wall, this town which to three thousand and more people was the center of the universe? Hadn't she, returning from Lac-qui-Meurt, felt the heartiness of their greetings? No. The ten thousand Gopher Prairies had no monopoly of greetings and friendly hands. Sam Clark was no more loyal than girl librarians she knew in St. Paul, the people she had met in Chicago. And those others had so much that Gopher Prairie complacently lacked—the world of gaiety and adventure, of music and the integrity of bronze, of remembered mists from tropic isles and Paris nights and the walls of Bagdad, of industrial justice and a God who spake not in doggerel hymns.

One seed. Which seed it was did not matter. All knowledge and freedom were one. But she had delayed so long in finding that seed. Could she do something with this Thanatopsis club? Or should she make her house so charming that it would be an influence? She'd make Kennicott like poetry. That was it, for a beginning! She conceived so clear a picture of their bending over large fair pages by the fire (in a non-existent fireplace) that the spectral presences slipped away. Doors no longer moved; curtains were not creeping shadows but lovely dark masses in the dusk; and when Bea came home Carol was singing at the piano which she had not touched for many days.

Their supper was the feast of two girls. Carol was in the dining-room, in a frock of black satin edged with gold, and Bea, in blue gingham and an apron, dined in the kitchen; but the door was open between, and Carol was inquiring, "Did you see any ducks in Dahl's window?" and Bea chanting, "No, ma'am. Say, ve have a svell time, dis afternoon. Tina she have coffee and knackebrod, and her fella vos dere, and ve yoost laughed and laughed, and her fella say he vos president and he going to make me queen of Finland, and Ay stick a fedder in may hair and say Ay bane going to go to var—oh, ve vos so foolish and ve laugh so!"

When Carol sat at the piano again she did not think of her husband, but of the book-drugged hermit, Guy Pollock. She wished that Pollock would come calling.

"If a girl really kissed him, he'd creep out of his den and be human. If Will were as literate as Guy, or Gug were as executive as Will, I think I could endure even Gopher Prairie.

"It's so hard to mother Will. I could be maternal with Guy. Is that what I want, something to mother, a man or a baby or a town? I will have a baby. Some day. But to have him isolated here all his receptive years——

"And so to bed.

"Have I found my real level in Bea and kitchen-gossip?

"Oh, I do miss you, Will. But it will be pleasant to turn over in bed as often as I want to, without worrying about waking you up.

"Am I really this settled thing called a 'married woman'? I feel so unmarried tonight. So free. To think that there was once a Mrs. Kennicott who let herself worry over a town called Gopher Prairie when there was a whole world outside it!

"Of course Will is going to like poetry."

DOINGS OF THE DUFFS — *Just When She Wanted to Make a Hit* — *BY ALLMAN*

FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS — *Be Careful What You Say* — *BY BLOSSER*

EVERETT TRUE — *BY CONDO*

THE OLD HOME TOWN — *BY STANLEY*

ADVENTURES OF THE TWINS

by Clive Roberts Barton

ABOUT MR. WHALE

"Will you please tell us what to do with this?"

The cuttlefish did as he was told and squirted a lot of black ink into the bottle that Nick was holding.

"There, now!" said Cap'n Pennywinkle when it was full. "That ought to be enough to save three or four whales, altho we are only going to save one."

"Whales!" cried out Mr. Cuttlefish in alarm. "Did you say whales, Cap'n Pennywinkle?"

"Yes," answered the fairyman. "The sharks are planning to attack a nice big fellow and I want the twins to save him. Have you any objection?"

"I don't know whether I have or not," replied the cuttlefish. "It depends upon the whale."

"How so?"

Cuttle Cuttlefish shivered. "Why, if it's the sperm whale, the big one with sharp teeth, he's just waiting for a chance to make a dinner off me. Of course, if it's Mr. Whale-the-Whale, I don't mind, for he hasn't any teeth, and his throat is too small to swallow so much as a herring, living on the tiniest sorts of things. But those others! Ugh! They could swallow a church, altho they never do, preferring cuttlefish."

Before the Cap'n could answer, Mr. Cuttlefish swam disgustedly away. As the fairyman said, the Wigglefin people were a queer lot anyway. It was always a case of dog eat dog, or fish eat fish (which was the same thing) and he was going to save Mr. Whale if he could.

Nick held up his bottle of ink curiously. "Will you please tell us what to do with this?" he asked.

"It's very simple," answered the fairyman. "Cuttlefish ink is the blackest in the world. When the sharks come too near to Mr. Whale, take the cork out of your bottle and pour the ink into the sea."

(To Be Continued)

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Star Seattle Story Book

By Mabel Cleland

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BUFFALO ON THE PLAINS

"The fathers and mothers of the party," grandmother continued, "grew grave with alarm at the warning of the scouts.

"The few families who had left the great Barlow train and followed the California guide and his three sons felt unprotected and alone.

"The children huddled together near their mothers and an air of danger was everywhere.

"'We shall have to make camp at once,' cried the leader, 'and do what we can for the protection of the women and children.'

"So working as fast as they could, they swung the wagons into a large circle with the helpless mothers and their little ones inside. To the strong wagons, the oxen were chained with their yokes still on their necks. They could hear the dull roar of the beating hoofs and dust rose in clouds.

"The men finished their work, and springing on their horses, drove after the scouts straight toward the oncoming herd.

"Shouting and firing their guns, they hoped to turn the buffalo from their path so that the little band of settlers could escape the trampling hoofs.

"'God help us!' said Ben's mother, 'look at the oxen. It looks as if they would destroy us, even if we escape the buffalo.'

"The oxen, indeed, were like mad things, pawing the earth, sniffing and bellowing, straining at their chains, frantic with the desire to join that herd of free, wild creatures so like themselves.

"But the buffalo turned. Just when it seemed as if nothing could change their course, they swerved, passed the train only a quarter of a mile away. Three thousand or more, there were in the herd.

"The settlers dared not go on that day; the men took care of the fresh buffalo meat they had taken, and the 15 oxen, still wearing their yokes, were turned loose to graze.

"In the morning, when the train moved on, they crossed the trail of the herd of buffalo and the oxen went wild again."

(To Be Continued)

WHEN A WOMAN TELLS

By RUTH AGNES ABELING

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CHAPTER LXXII—JOHN AMES' REASON RETURNS

The undertaker had reached home before me and when I arrived the body of Philip Ames lay in the little darkened parlor.

The man who in life had always been the center of a laughing throng, was alone now. And as I looked at him I wondered if there could be such a thing as loneliness for him—if he missed, now, the laughter of those so-called friends.

As I reached the head of the stairs, Lila met me.

"I have been waiting for you," she said. "How did Kate—his wife—take it?"

"She didn't cry," I said, rather foolishly.

"That is like her; she wouldn't," Lila said.

"How is Mr. Ames?" I asked. "And have there been any calls for me?"

For, in spite of the thousand and one things there were to occupy my mind, the thought of Tom and the hope that he might call was always lingering somewhere in the back of my consciousness.

"There weren't any calls—and there isn't anything new to say about John. He stays just the same."

I was glad to be alone in my room. And for a long time I sat by the window looking out on the garden below and trying to think things out.

Very likely, I thought, with Lila Ames' change of her mode of living, she would find a secretary an entirely unnecessary thing. I should have to find something else to do. I was wondering vaguely about this when my attention was attracted by movement in the rose garden just below.

I looked, trying to separate the darkness from the outlines of what seemed to be human figures. Gradually the figures came out more plainly and I recognized the lines of Grace Cameron's suit. There was a man with her—Tom!

I turned from the window, knowing better than ever what a lonely stretch lay ahead of me.

I was up early the next morning. But someone had been downstairs before me, for the curtains were all up and the house opened, with the exception of the little front parlor.

In a minute I knew who had been around before me. John Ames, a dazed look on his face, entered the dusky little room.

"Good morning," I said to him softly. I was standing near the coffin of his brother.

Should I send him out, should I contrive to get him away before he saw? I started toward him. But too late!

John Ames made a quick movement. He had the silent face between both of his hands.

"Phil!" I heard him cry. "Phil."

He seemed to be staggering. I caught him just as he seemed about to fall. John Ames looked at me a second and then called me by name. His reason had returned.

(To Be Continued)

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