ONE OF OURS

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By

WILLA CATHER

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Table of Contents

About Author: *8*

Part 1 ..... *9*
Chapter 1 9
Chapter 2 16
Chapter 3 23
Chapter 4 29
Chapter 5 34
Chapter 6 38
Chapter 7 48
Chapter 8 53
Chapter 9 56
Chapter 10 59
Chapter 11 63
Chapter 12 66
Chapter 13 71
Chapter 14 77
Chapter 15 81
Chapter 16 86
Chapter 17 91
Chapter 18 95
Chapter 19 101

Part 2 ..... *110*
Chapter 1 110
Chapter 2 112
Chapter 3 119

Chapter 4 127
Chapter 5 136
Chapter 6 140
Chapter 7 145
Chapter 8 150
Chapter 9 154
Chapter 10 160
Chapter 11 168
Chapter 12 170

Part 3 ..... *181*
Chapter 1 181
Chapter 2 186
Chapter 3 189
Chapter 4 193
Chapter 5 197
Chapter 6 204
Chapter 7 208
Chapter 8 210
Chapter 9 215
Chapter 10 219
Chapter 11 225
Chapter 12 231
Chapter 13 234

Part 4 ..... *237*
Chapter 1 237
Chapter 2 240
Chapter 3 244
Chapter 4 253

Chapter 5..... 259
Chapter 6..... 261
Chapter 7..... 269
Chapter 8..... 275
Chapter 9..... 278

Part 5 284
Chapter 1..... 284
Chapter 2..... 289
Chapter 3..... 294
Chapter 4..... 298
Chapter 5..... 303
Chapter 6..... 308
Chapter 7..... 315
Chapter 8..... 320
Chapter 9..... 329
Chapter 10..... 334
Chapter 11..... 348
Chapter 12..... 354
Chapter 13..... 356
Chapter 14..... 362
Chapter 15..... 370
Chapter 16..... 374
Chapter 17..... 381
Chapter 18..... 388
Chapter 19..... 400

About Author:



Wilella Sibert Cather (1873 – 1947) is an eminent author from the United States. She is perhaps best known for her depictions of U.S. life in novels such as O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop.

Other Books of Willa Cather:

- *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)
- *Pioneers!* (1913)
- *My Ántonia* (1918)
- *One of Ours* (1923)
- *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)
- *The Song of the Lark* (1915)
- *The Professor's House* (1925)
- *The Troll Garden and Selected Stories* (1905)
- *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920)
- *Not Under Forty* (1936)

Part 1

On Lovely Creek

Chapter 1

Claude Wheeler opened his eyes before the sun was up and vigorously shook his younger brother, who lay in the other half of the same bed.

"Ralph, Ralph, get awake! Come down and help me wash the car."

"What for?"

"Why, aren't we going to the circus today?"

"Car's all right. Let me alone." The boy turned over and pulled the sheet up to his face, to shut out the light which was beginning to come through the curtainless windows.

Claude rose and dressed,—a simple operation which took very little time. He crept down two flights of stairs, feeling his way in the dusk, his red hair standing up in peaks, like a cock's comb. He went through the kitchen into the adjoining washroom, which held two porcelain stands with running water. Everybody had washed before going to bed, apparently, and the bowls were ringed with a dark sediment which the hard, alkaline water had not dissolved. Shutting the door on this disorder, he turned back to the kitchen, took Mahailey's tin basin, doused his face and head in cold water, and began to plaster down his wet hair.

Old Mahailey herself came in from the yard, with her apron full of corn-cobs to start a fire in the kitchen stove. She smiled at him in the foolish fond way she often had with him when they were alone.

"What air you gittin' up for a-ready, boy? You goin' to the circus before breakfast? Don't you make no noise, else you'll have 'em all down here before I git my fire a-goin'."

"All right, Mahailey." Claude caught up his cap and ran out of doors, down the hillside toward the barn. The sun popped up over the edge of the prairie like a broad, smiling face; the light poured across the close-cropped August pastures and the hilly, timbered windings of Lovely Creek, a clear little stream with a sand bottom, that curled and twisted playfully about through the south section of the big Wheeler ranch. It was a fine day to go to the circus at Frankfort, a fine day to do anything; the sort of day that must, somehow, turn out well.

Claude backed the little Ford car out of its shed, ran it up to the horse-tank, and began to throw water on the mud-crusted wheels and windshield. While he was at work the two hired men, Dan and Jerry, came shambling down the hill to feed the stock. Jerry was grumbling and swearing about something, but Claude wrung out his wet rags and, beyond a nod, paid no attention to them. Somehow his father always managed to have the roughest and dirtiest hired men in the country working for him. Claude had a grievance against Jerry just now, because of his treatment of one of the horses.

Molly was a faithful old mare, the mother of many colts; Claude and his younger brother had learned to ride on her. This man Jerry, taking her out to work one morning, let her step on a board with a nail sticking up in it. He pulled the nail out of her foot, said nothing to anybody, and drove her to the cultivator all day. Now she had been standing in her stall for weeks, patiently suffering, her body wretchedly thin, and her leg swollen until it looked like an elephant's. She would have to stand there, the veterinary said, until her hoof came off and she grew a new one, and she would always be stiff. Jerry had not been discharged, and he exhibited the poor animal as if she were a credit to him.

Mahailey came out on the hilltop and rang the breakfast bell. After the hired men went up to the house, Claude slipped into the

barn to see that Molly had got her share of oats. She was eating quietly, her head hanging, and her scaly, dead-looking foot lifted just a little from the ground. When he stroked her neck and talked to her she stopped grinding and gazed at him mournfully. She knew him, and wrinkled her nose and drew her upper lip back from her worn teeth, to show that she liked being petted. She let him touch her foot and examine her leg.

When Claude reached the kitchen, his mother was sitting at one end of the breakfast table, pouring weak coffee, his brother and Dan and Jerry were in their chairs, and Mahailey was baking griddle cakes at the stove. A moment later Mr. Wheeler came down the enclosed stairway and walked the length of the table to his own place. He was a very large man, taller and broader than any of his neighbours. He seldom wore a coat in summer, and his rumpled shirt bulged out carelessly over the belt of his trousers. His florid face was clean shaven, likely to be a trifle tobacco-stained about the mouth, and it was conspicuous both for good-nature and coarse humour, and for an imperturbable physical composure. Nobody in the county had ever seen Nat Wheeler flustered about anything, and nobody had ever heard him speak with complete seriousness. He kept up his easy-going, jocular affability even with his own family.

As soon as he was seated, Mr. Wheeler reached for the two-pint sugar bowl and began to pour sugar into his coffee. Ralph asked him if he were going to the circus. Mr. Wheeler winked.

"I shouldn't wonder if I happened in town sometime before the elephants get away." He spoke very deliberately, with a State-of-Maine drawl, and his voice was smooth and agreeable. "You boys better start in early, though. You can take the wagon and the mules, and load in the cowhides. The butcher has agreed to take them."

Claude put down his knife. "Can't we have the car? I've washed it on purpose."

"And what about Dan and Jerry? They want to see the circus just as much as you do, and I want the hides should go in; they're

bringing a good price now. I don't mind about your washing the car; mud preserves the paint, they say, but it'll be all right this time, Claude."

The hired men haw-hawed and Ralph giggled. Claude's freckled face got very red. The pancake grew stiff and heavy in his mouth and was hard to swallow. His father knew he hated to drive the mules to town, and knew how he hated to go anywhere with Dan and Jerry. As for the hides, they were the skins of four steers that had perished in the blizzard last winter through the wanton carelessness of these same hired men, and the price they would bring would not half pay for the time his father had spent in stripping and curing them. They had lain in a shed loft all summer, and the wagon had been to town a dozen times. But today, when he wanted to go to Frankfort clean and care-free, he must take these stinking hides and two coarse-mouthed men, and drive a pair of mules that always brayed and balked and behaved ridiculously in a crowd. Probably his father had looked out of the window and seen him washing the car, and had put this up on him while he dressed. It was like his father's idea of a joke.

Mrs. Wheeler looked at Claude sympathetically, feeling that he was disappointed. Perhaps she, too, suspected a joke. She had learned that humour might wear almost any guise.

When Claude started for the barn after breakfast, she came running down the path, calling to him faintly,—hurrying always made her short of breath. Overtaking him, she looked up with solicitude, shading her eyes with her delicately formed hand. "If you want I should do up your linen coat, Claude, I can iron it while you're hitching," she said wistfully.

Claude stood kicking at a bunch of mottled feathers that had once been a young chicken. His shoulders were drawn high, his mother saw, and his figure suggested energy and determined self-control.

"You needn't mind, mother." He spoke rapidly, muttering his words. "I'd better wear my old clothes if I have to take the hides. They're greasy, and in the sun they'll smell worse than fertilizer."

"The men can handle the hides, I should think. Wouldn't you feel better in town to be dressed?" She was still blinking up at him.

"Don't bother about it. Put me out a clean coloured shirt, if you want to. That's all right."

He turned toward the barn, and his mother went slowly back the path up to the house. She was so plucky and so stooped, his dear mother! He guessed if she could stand having these men about, could cook and wash for them, he could drive them to town!

Half an hour after the wagon left, Nat Wheeler put on an alpaca coat and went off in the rattling buckboard in which, though he kept two automobiles, he still drove about the country. He said nothing to his wife; it was her business to guess whether or not he would be home for dinner. She and Mahailey could have a good time scrubbing and sweeping all day, with no men around to bother them.

There were few days in the year when Wheeler did not drive off somewhere; to an auction sale, or a political convention, or a meeting of the Farmers' Telephone directors;—to see how his neighbours were getting on with their work, if there was nothing else to look after. He preferred his buckboard to a car because it was light, went easily over heavy or rough roads, and was so rickety that he never felt he must suggest his wife's accompanying him. Besides he could see the country better when he didn't have to keep his mind on the road. He had come to this part of Nebraska when the Indians and the buffalo were still about, remembered the grasshopper year and the big cyclone, had watched the farms emerge one by one from the great rolling page where once only the wind wrote its story. He had encouraged new settlers to take up homesteads, urged on courtships, lent young fellows the money to marry on, seen families grow and prosper; until he felt a little as if all

this were his own enterprise. The changes, not only those the years made, but those the seasons made, were interesting to him.

People recognized Nat Wheeler and his cart a mile away. He sat massive and comfortable, weighing down one end of the slanting seat, his driving hand lying on his knee. Even his German neighbours, the Yoeders, who hated to stop work for a quarter of an hour on any account, were glad to see him coming. The merchants in the little towns about the county missed him if he didn't drop in once a week or so. He was active in politics; never ran for an office himself, but often took up the cause of a friend and conducted his campaign for him.

The French saying, "Joy of the street, sorrow of the home," was exemplified in Mr. Wheeler, though not at all in the French way. His own affairs were of secondary importance to him. In the early days he had homesteaded and bought and leased enough land to make him rich. Now he had only to rent it out to good farmers who liked to work—he didn't, and of that he made no secret. When he was at home, he usually sat upstairs in the living room, reading newspapers. He subscribed for a dozen or more—the list included a weekly devoted to scandal—and he was well informed about what was going on in the world. He had magnificent health, and illness in himself or in other people struck him as humorous. To be sure, he never suffered from anything more perplexing than toothache or boils, or an occasional bilious attack.

Wheeler gave liberally to churches and charities, was always ready to lend money or machinery to a neighbour who was short of anything. He liked to tease and shock diffident people, and had an inexhaustible supply of funny stories. Everybody marveled that he got on so well with his oldest son, Bayliss Wheeler. Not that Bayliss was exactly diffident, but he was a narrow gauge fellow, the sort of prudent young man one wouldn't expect Nat Wheeler to like.

Bayliss had a farm implement business in Frankfort, and though he was still under thirty he had made a very considerable financial success. Perhaps Wheeler was proud of his son's business acumen. At

any rate, he drove to town to see Bayliss several times a week, went to sales and stock exhibits with him, and sat about his store for hours at a stretch, joking with the farmers who came in. Wheeler had been a heavy drinker in his day, and was still a heavy feeder. Bayliss was thin and dyspeptic, and a virulent Prohibitionist; he would have liked to regulate everybody's diet by his own feeble constitution. Even Mrs. Wheeler, who took the men God had apportioned her for granted, wondered how Bayliss and his father could go off to conventions together and have a good time, since their ideas of what made a good time were so different.

Once every few years, Mr. Wheeler bought a new suit and a dozen stiff shirts and went back to Maine to visit his brothers and sisters, who were very quiet, conventional people. But he was always glad to get home to his old clothes, his big farm, his buckboard, and Bayliss.

Mrs. Wheeler had come out from Vermont to be Principal of the High School, when Frankfort was a frontier town and Nat Wheeler was a prosperous bachelor. He must have fancied her for the same reason he liked his son Bayliss, because she was so different. There was this to be said for Nat Wheeler, that he liked every sort of human creature; he liked good people and honest people, and he liked rascals and hypocrites almost to the point of loving them. If he heard that a neighbour had played a sharp trick or done something particularly mean, he was sure to drive over to see the man at once, as if he hadn't hitherto appreciated him.

There was a large, loafing dignity about Claude's father. He liked to provoke others to uncouth laughter, but he never laughed immoderately himself. In telling stories about him, people often tried to imitate his smooth, senatorial voice, robust but never loud. Even when he was hilariously delighted by anything,—as when poor Mahailey, undressing in the dark on a summer night, sat down on the sticky fly-paper,—he was not boisterous. He was a jolly, easy-going father, indeed, for a boy who was not thin-skinned.

Chapter 2

Claude and his mules rattled into Frankfort just as the calliope went screaming down Main street at the head of the circus parade. Getting rid of his disagreeable freight and his uncongenial companions as soon as possible, he elbowed his way along the crowded sidewalk, looking for some of the neighbour boys. Mr. Wheeler was standing on the Farmer's Bank corner, towering a head above the throng, chaffing with a little hunchback who was setting up a shell-game. To avoid his father, Claude turned and went in to his brother's store. The two big show windows were full of country children, their mothers standing behind them to watch the parade. Bayliss was seated in the little glass cage where he did his writing and bookkeeping. He nodded at Claude from his desk.

"Hello," said Claude, bustling in as if he were in a great hurry. "Have you seen Ernest Havel? I thought I might find him in here."

Bayliss swung round in his swivel chair to return a plough catalogue to the shelf. "What would he be in here for? Better look for him in the saloon." Nobody could put meaner insinuations into a slow, dry remark than Bayliss.

Claude's cheeks flamed with anger. As he turned away, he noticed something unusual about his brother's face, but he wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of asking him how he had got a black eye. Ernest Havel was a Bohemian, and he usually drank a glass of beer when he came to town; but he was sober and thoughtful beyond the wont of young men. From Bayliss' drawl one might have supposed that the boy was a drunken loafer.

At that very moment Claude saw his friend on the other side of the street, following the wagon of trained dogs that brought up the rear of the procession. He ran across, through a crowd of shouting youngsters, and caught Ernest by the arm.

"Hello, where are you off to?"

"I'm going to eat my lunch before show-time. I left my wagon out by the pumping station, on the creek. What about you?"

"I've got no program. Can I go along?"

Ernest smiled. "I expect. I've got enough lunch for two."

"Yes, I know. You always have. I'll join you later."

Claude would have liked to take Ernest to the hotel for dinner. He had more than enough money in his pockets; and his father was a rich farmer. In the Wheeler family a new thrasher or a new automobile was ordered without a question, but it was considered extravagant to go to a hotel for dinner. If his father or Bayliss heard that he had been there-and Bayliss heard everything they would say he was putting on airs, and would get back at him. He tried to excuse his cowardice to himself by saying that he was dirty and smelled of the hides; but in his heart he knew that he did not ask Ernest to go to the hotel with him because he had been so brought up that it would be difficult for him to do this simple thing. He made some purchases at the fruit stand and the cigar counter, and then hurried out along the dusty road toward the pumping station. Ernest's wagon was standing under the shade of some willow trees, on a little sandy bottom half enclosed by a loop of the creek which curved like a horseshoe. Claude threw himself on the sand beside the stream and wiped the dust from his hot face. He felt he had now closed the door on his disagreeable morning.

Ernest produced his lunch basket.

"I got a couple bottles of beer cooling in the creek," he said. "I knew you wouldn't want to go in a saloon."

"Oh, forget it!" Claude muttered, ripping the cover off a jar of pickles. He was nineteen years old, and he was afraid to go into a saloon, and his friend knew he was afraid.

After lunch, Claude took out a handful of good cigars he had bought at the drugstore. Ernest, who couldn't afford cigars, was

pleased. He lit one, and as he smoked he kept looking at it with an air of pride and turning it around between his fingers.

The horses stood with their heads over the wagon-box, munching their oats. The stream trickled by under the willow roots with a cool, persuasive sound. Claude and Ernest lay in the shade, their coats under their heads, talking very little. Occasionally a motor dashed along the road toward town, and a cloud of dust and a smell of gasoline blew in over the creek bottom; but for the most part the silence of the warm, lazy summer noon was undisturbed. Claude could usually forget his own vexations and chagrins when he was with Ernest. The Bohemian boy was never uncertain, was not pulled in two or three ways at once. He was simple and direct. He had a number of impersonal preoccupations; was interested in politics and history and in new inventions. Claude felt that his friend lived in an atmosphere of mental liberty to which he himself could never hope to attain. After he had talked with Ernest for awhile, the things that did not go right on the farm seemed less important. Claude's mother was almost as fond of Ernest as he was himself. When the two boys were going to high school, Ernest often came over in the evening to study with Claude, and while they worked at the long kitchen table Mrs. Wheeler brought her darning and sat near them, helping them with their Latin and algebra. Even old Mahailey was enlightened by their words of wisdom.

Mrs. Wheeler said she would never forget the night Ernest arrived from the Old Country. His brother, Joe Havel, had gone to Frankfort to meet him, and was to stop on the way home and leave some groceries for the Wheelers. The train from the east was late; it was ten o'clock that night when Mrs. Wheeler, waiting in the kitchen, heard Havel's wagon rumble across the little bridge over Lovely Creek. She opened the outside door, and presently Joe came in with a bucket of salt fish in one hand and a sack of flour on his shoulder. While he took the fish down to the cellar for her, another figure appeared in the doorway; a young boy, short, stooped, with a flat cap on his head and a great oilcloth valise, such as pedlars carry,

strapped to his back. He had fallen asleep in the wagon, and on waking and finding his brother gone, he had supposed they were at home and scrambled for his pack. He stood in the doorway, blinking his eyes at the light, looking astonished but eager to do whatever was required of him. What if one of her own boys, Mrs. Wheeler thought... . She went up to him and put her arm around him, laughing a little and saying in her quiet voice, just as if he could understand her, "Why, you're only a little boy after all, aren't you?"

Ernest said afterwards that it was his first welcome to this country, though he had travelled so far, and had been pushed and hauled and shouted at for so many days, he had lost count of them. That night he and Claude only shook hands and looked at each other suspiciously, but ever since they had been good friends.

After their picnic the two boys went to the circus in a happy frame of mind. In the animal tent they met big Leonard Dawson, the oldest son of one of the Wheelers' near neighbours, and the three sat together for the performance. Leonard said he had come to town alone in his car; wouldn't Claude ride out with him? Claude was glad enough to turn the mules over to Ralph, who didn't mind the hired men as much as he did.

Leonard was a strapping brown fellow of twenty-five, with big hands and big feet, white teeth, and flashing eyes full of energy. He and his father and two brothers not only worked their own big farm, but rented a quarter section from Nat Wheeler. They were master farmers. If there was a dry summer and a failure, Leonard only laughed and stretched his long arms, and put in a bigger crop next year. Claude was always a little reserved with Leonard; he felt that the young man was rather contemptuous of the hap-hazard way in which things were done on the Wheeler place, and thought his going to college a waste of money. Leonard had not even gone through the Frankfort High School, and he was already a more successful man than Claude was ever likely to be. Leonard did think these things, but he was fond of Claude, all the same.

At sunset the car was speeding over a fine stretch of smooth road across the level country that lay between Frankfort and the rougher land along Lovely Creek. Leonard's attention was largely given up to admiring the faultless behaviour of his engine. Presently he chuckled to himself and turned to Claude.

"I wonder if you'd take it all right if I told you a joke on Bayliss?"

"I expect I would." Claude's tone was not at all eager.

"You saw Bayliss today? Notice anything queer about him, one eye a little off colour? Did he tell you how he got it?"

"No. I didn't ask him."

"Just as well. A lot of people did ask him, though, and he said he was hunting around his place for something in the dark and ran into a reaper. Well, I'm the reaper!"

Claude looked interested. "You mean to say Bayliss was in a fight?"

Leonard laughed. "Lord, no! Don't you know Bayliss? I went in there to pay a bill yesterday, and Susie Gray and another girl came in to sell tickets for the firemen's dinner. An advance man for this circus was hanging around, and he began talking a little smart,—nothing rough, but the way such fellows will. The girls handed it back to him, and sold him three tickets and shut him up. I couldn't see how Susie thought so quick what to say. The minute the girls went out Bayliss started knocking them; said all the country girls were getting too fresh and knew more than they ought to about managing sporty men and right there I reached out and handed him one. I hit harder than I meant to. I meant to slap him, not to give him a black eye. But you can't always regulate things, and I was hot all over. I waited for him to come back at me. I'm bigger than he is, and I wanted to give him satisfaction. Well, sir, he never moved a muscle! He stood there getting redder and redder, and his eyes watered. I don't say he cried, but his eyes watered. 'All right, Bayliss,' said I. 'Slow with your fists, if

that's your principle; but slow with your tongue, too,—especially when the parties mentioned aren't present.'"

"Bayliss will never get over that," was Claude's only comment.

"He don't have to!" Leonard threw up his head. "I'm a good customer; he can like it or lump it, till the price of binding twine goes down!"

For the next few minutes the driver was occupied with trying to get up a long, rough hill on high gear. Sometimes he could make that hill, and sometimes he couldn't, and he was not able to account for the difference. After he pulled the second lever with some disgust and let the car amble on as she would, he noticed that his companion was disconcerted.

"I'll tell you what, Leonard," Claude spoke in a strained voice, "I think the fair thing for you to do is to get out here by the road and give me a chance."

Leonard swung his steering wheel savagely to pass a wagon on the down side of the hill. "What the devil are you talking about, boy?"

"You think you've got our measure all right, but you ought to give me a chance first."

Leonard looked down in amazement at his own big brown hands, lying on the wheel. "You mortal fool kid, what would I be telling you all this for, if I didn't know you were another breed of cats? I never thought you got on too well with Bayliss yourself."

"I don't, but I won't have you thinking you can slap the men in my family whenever you feel like it." Claude knew that his explanation sounded foolish, and his voice, in spite of all he could do, was weak and angry.

Young Leonard Dawson saw he had hurt the boy's feelings. "Lord, Claude, I know you're a fighter. Bayliss never was. I went to school with him."

The ride ended amicably, but Claude wouldn't let Leonard take him home. He jumped out of the car with a curt goodnight, and ran across the dusky fields toward the light that shone from the house on the hill. At the little bridge over the creek, he stopped to get his breath and to be sure that he was outwardly composed before he went in to see his mother.

"Ran against a reaper in the dark!" he muttered aloud, clenching his fist.

Listening to the deep singing of the frogs, and to the distant barking of the dogs up at the house, he grew calmer. Nevertheless, he wondered why it was that one had sometimes to feel responsible for the behaviour of people whose natures were wholly antipathetic to one's own.

Chapter 3

The circus was on Saturday. The next morning Claude was standing at his dresser, shaving. His beard was already strong, a shade darker than his hair and not so red as his skin. His eyebrows and long lashes were a pale corn-colour—made his blue eyes seem lighter than they were, and, he thought, gave a look of shyness and weakness to the upper part of his face. He was exactly the sort of looking boy he didn't want to be. He especially hated his head,—so big that he had trouble in buying his hats, and uncompromisingly square in shape; a perfect block-head. His name was another source of humiliation. Claude: it was a "chump" name, like Elmer and Roy; a hayseed name trying to be fine. In country schools there was always a red-headed, warty-handed, runny-nosed little boy who was called Claude. His good physique he took for granted; smooth, muscular arms and legs, and strong shoulders, a farmer boy might be supposed to have. Unfortunately he had none of his father's physical repose, and his strength often asserted itself inharmoniously. The storms that went on in his mind sometimes made him rise, or sit down, or lift something, more violently than there was any apparent reason for his doing.

The household slept late on Sunday morning; even Mahailey did not get up until seven. The general signal for breakfast was the smell of doughnuts frying. This morning Ralph rolled out of bed at the last minute and callously put on his clean underwear without taking a bath. This cost him not one regret, though he took time to polish his new ox-blood shoes tenderly with a pocket handkerchief. He reached the table when all the others were half through breakfast, and made his peace by genially asking his mother if she didn't want him to drive her to church in the car.

"I'd like to go if I can get the work done in time," she said, doubtfully glancing at the clock.

"Can't Mahailey tend to things for you this morning?"

Mrs. Wheeler hesitated. "Everything but the separator, she can. But she can't fit all the parts together. It's a good deal of work, you know."

"Now, Mother," said Ralph good-humouredly, as he emptied the syrup pitcher over his cakes, "you're prejudiced. Nobody ever thinks of skimming milk now-a-days. Every up-to-date farmer uses a separator."

Mrs. Wheeler's pale eyes twinkled. "Mahailey and I will never be quite up-to-date, Ralph. We're old-fashioned, and I don't know but you'd better let us be. I could see the advantage of a separator if we milked half-a-dozen cows. It's a very ingenious machine. But it's a great deal more work to scald it and fit it together than it was to take care of the milk in the old way."

"It won't be when you get used to it," Ralph assured her. He was the chief mechanic of the Wheeler farm, and when the farm implements and the automobiles did not give him enough to do, he went to town and bought machines for the house. As soon as Mahailey got used to a washing-machine or a churn, Ralph, to keep up with the bristling march of invention, brought home a still newer one. The mechanical dish-washer she had never been able to use, and patent flat-irons and oil-stoves drove her wild.

Claude told his mother to go upstairs and dress; he would scald the separator while Ralph got the car ready. He was still working at it when his brother came in from the garage to wash his hands.

"You really oughtn't to load mother up with things like this, Ralph," he exclaimed fretfully. "Did you ever try washing this damned thing yourself?"

"Of course I have. If Mrs. Dawson can manage it, I should think mother could."

"Mrs. Dawson is a younger woman. Anyhow, there's no point in trying to make machinists of Mahailey and mother."

Ralph lifted his eyebrows to excuse Claude's bluntness. "See here," he said persuasively, "don't you go encouraging her into thinking she can't change her ways. Mother's entitled to all the labour-saving devices we can get her."

Claude rattled the thirty-odd graduated metal funnels which he was trying to fit together in their proper sequence. "Well, if this is labour-saving"

The younger boy giggled and ran upstairs for his panama hat. He never quarrelled. Mrs. Wheeler sometimes said it was wonderful, how much Ralph would take from Claude.

After Ralph and his mother had gone off in the car, Mr. Wheeler drove to see his German neighbour, Gus Yoeder, who had just bought a blooded bull. Dan and Jerry were pitching horseshoes down behind the barn. Claude told Mahailey he was going to the cellar to put up the swinging shelf she had been wanting, so that the rats couldn't get at her vegetables.

"Thank you, Mr. Claude. I don't know what does make the rats so bad. The cats catches one most every day, too."

"I guess they come up from the barn. I've got a nice wide board down at the garage for your shelf." The cellar was cemented, cool and dry, with deep closets for canned fruit and flour and groceries, bins for coal and cobs, and a dark-room full of photographer's apparatus. Claude took his place at the carpenter's bench under one of the square windows. Mysterious objects stood about him in the grey twilight; electric batteries, old bicycles and typewriters, a machine for making cement fence-posts, a vulcanizer, a stereopticon with a broken lens. The mechanical toys Ralph could not operate successfully, as well as those he had got tired of, were stored away here. If they were left in the barn, Mr. Wheeler saw them too often, and sometimes, when they happened to be in his way, he made sarcastic comments. Claude had begged his mother to let him pile this lumber into a wagon and dump it into some washout hole along the creek; but Mrs. Wheeler said he must not think of

such a thing; it would hurt Ralph's feelings. Nearly every time Claude went into the cellar, he made a desperate resolve to clear the place out some day, reflecting bitterly that the money this wreckage cost would have put a boy through college decently.

While Claude was planing off the board he meant to suspend from the joists, Mahailey left her work and came down to watch him. She made some pretence of hunting for pickled onions, then seated herself upon a cracker box; close at hand there was a plush "spring-rocker" with one arm gone, but it wouldn't have been her idea of good manners to sit there. Her eyes had a kind of sleepy contentment in them as she followed Claude's motions. She watched him as if he were a baby playing. Her hands lay comfortably in her lap.

"Mr. Ernest ain't been over for a long time. He ain't mad about nothin', is he?"

"Oh, no! He's awful busy this summer. I saw him in town yesterday. We went to the circus together."

Mahailey smiled and nodded. "That's nice. I'm glad for you two boys to have a good time. Mr. Ernest's a nice boy; I always liked him first rate. He's a little feller, though. He ain't big like you, is he? I guess he ain't as tall as Mr. Ralph, even."

"Not quite," said Claude between strokes. "He's strong, though, and gets through a lot of work."

"Oh, I know! I know he is. I know he works hard. All them foreigners works hard, don't they, Mr. Claude? I reckon he liked the circus. Maybe they don't have circuses like our'n, over where he come from."

Claude began to tell her about the clown elephant and the trained dogs, and she sat listening to him with her pleased, foolish smile; there was something wise and far-seeing about her smile, too.

Mahailey had come to them long ago, when Claude was only a few months old. She had been brought West by a shiftless Virginia

family which went to pieces and scattered under the rigours of pioneer farm-life. When the mother of the family died, there was nowhere for Mahailey to go, and Mrs. Wheeler took her in. Mahailey had no one to take care of her, and Mrs. Wheeler had no one to help her with the work; it had turned out very well.

Mahailey had had a hard life in her young days, married to a savage mountaineer who often abused her and never provided for her. She could remember times when she sat in the cabin, beside an empty meal-barrel and a cold iron pot, waiting for "him" to bring home a squirrel he had shot or a chicken he had stolen. Too often he brought nothing but a jug of mountain whiskey and a pair of brutal fists. She thought herself well off now, never to have to beg for food or go off into the woods to gather firing, to be sure of a warm bed and shoes and decent clothes. Mahailey was one of eighteen children; most of them grew up lawless or half-witted, and two of her brothers, like her husband, ended their lives in jail. She had never been sent to school, and could not read or write. Claude, when he was a little boy, tried to teach her to read, but what she learned one night she had forgotten by the next. She could count, and tell the time of day by the clock, and she was very proud of knowing the alphabet and of being able to spell out letters on the flour sacks and coffee packages. "That's a big A." she would murmur, "and that there's a little a."

Mahailey was shrewd in her estimate of people, and Claude thought her judgment sound in a good many things. He knew she sensed all the shades of personal feeling, the accords and antipathies in the household, as keenly as he did, and he would have hated to lose her good opinion. She consulted him in all her little difficulties. If the leg of the kitchen table got wobbly, she knew he would put in new screws for her. When she broke a handle off her rolling pin, he put on another, and he fitted a haft to her favourite butcher-knife after every one else said it must be thrown away. These objects, after they had been mended, acquired a new value in her eyes, and she liked to work with them. When Claude helped her

lift or carry anything, he never avoided touching her, this she felt deeply. She suspected that Ralph was a little ashamed of her, and would prefer to have some brisk young thing about the kitchen.

On days like this, when other people were not about, Mahailey liked to talk to Claude about the things they did together when he was little; the Sundays when they used to wander along the creek, hunting for wild grapes and watching the red squirrels; or trailed across the high pastures to a wild-plum thicket at the north end of the Wheeler farm. Claude could remember warm spring days when the plum bushes were all in blossom and Mahailey used to lie down under them and sing to herself, as if the honey-heavy sweetness made her drowsy; songs without words, for the most part, though he recalled one mountain dirge which said over and over, "And they laid Jesse James in his grave."

Chapter 4

The time was approaching for Claude to go back to the struggling denominational college on the outskirts of the state capital, where he had already spent two dreary and unprofitable winters.

"Mother," he said one morning when he had an opportunity to speak to her alone, "I wish you would let me quit the Temple, and go to the State University."

She looked up from the mass of dough she was kneading.

"But why, Claude?"

"Well, I could learn more, for one thing. The professors at the Temple aren't much good. Most of them are just preachers who couldn't make a living at preaching."

The look of pain that always disarmed Claude came instantly into his mother's face. "Son, don't say such things. I can't believe but teachers are more interested in their students when they are concerned for their spiritual development, as well as the mental. Brother Weldon said many of the professors at the State University are not Christian men; they even boast of it, in some cases."

"Oh, I guess most of them are good men, all right; at any rate they know their subjects. These little pin-headed preachers like Weldon do a lot of harm, running about the country talking. He's sent around to pull in students for his own school. If he didn't get them he'd lose his job. I wish he'd never got me. Most of the fellows who flunk out at the State come to us, just as he did."

"But how can there be any serious study where they give so much time to athletics and frivolity? They pay their football coach a larger salary than their President. And those fraternity houses are places where boys learn all sorts of evil. I've heard that dreadful things go

on in them sometimes. Besides, it would take more money, and you couldn't live as cheaply as you do at the Chapins'."

Claude made no reply. He stood before her frowning and pulling at a calloused spot on the inside of his palm. Mrs. Wheeler looked at him wistfully. "I'm sure you must be able to study better in a quiet, serious atmosphere," she said.

He sighed and turned away. If his mother had been the least bit unctuous, like Brother Weldon, he could have told her many enlightening facts. But she was so trusting and childlike, so faithful by nature and so ignorant of life as he knew it, that it was hopeless to argue with her. He could shock her and make her fear the world even more than she did, but he could never make her understand.

His mother was old-fashioned. She thought dancing and card-playing dangerous pastimes—only rough people did such things when she was a girl in Vermont—and "worldliness" only another word for wickedness. According to her conception of education, one should learn, not think; and above all, one must not enquire. The history of the human race, as it lay behind one, was already explained; and so was its destiny, which lay before. The mind should remain obediently within the theological concept of history.

Nat Wheeler didn't care where his son went to school, but he, too, took it for granted that the religious institution was cheaper than the State University; and that because the students there looked shabbier they were less likely to become too knowing, and to be offensively intelligent at home. However, he referred the matter to Bayliss one day when he was in town.

"Claude's got some notion he wants to go to the State University this winter."

Bayliss at once assumed that wise, better-be-prepared-for-the-worst expression which had made him seem shrewd and seasoned from boyhood. "I don't see any point in changing unless he's got good reasons."

"Well, he thinks that bunch of parsons at the Temple don't make first-rate teachers."

"I expect they can teach Claude quite a bit yet. If he gets in with that fast football crowd at the State, there'll be no holding him." For some reason Bayliss detested football. "This athletic business is a good deal over-done. If Claude wants exercise, he might put in the fall wheat."

That night Mr. Wheeler brought the subject up at supper, questioned Claude, and tried to get at the cause of his discontent. His manner was jocular, as usual, and Claude hated any public discussion of his personal affairs. He was afraid of his father's humour when it got too near him.

Claude might have enjoyed the large and somewhat gross cartoons with which Mr. Wheeler enlivened daily life, had they been of any other authorship. But he unreasonably wanted his father to be the most dignified, as he was certainly the handsomest and most intelligent, man in the community. Moreover, Claude couldn't bear ridicule very well. He squirmed before he was hit; saw it coming, invited it. Mr. Wheeler had observed this trait in him when he was a little chap, called it false pride, and often purposely outraged his feelings to harden him, as he had hardened Claude's mother, who was afraid of everything but schoolbooks and prayer-meetings when he first married her. She was still more or less bewildered, but she had long ago got over any fear of him and any dread of living with him. She accepted everything about her husband as part of his rugged masculinity, and of that she was proud, in her quiet way.

Claude had never quite forgiven his father for some of his practical jokes. One warm spring day, when he was a boisterous little boy of five, playing in and out of the house, he heard his mother entreating Mr. Wheeler to go down to the orchard and pick the cherries from a tree that hung loaded. Claude remembered that she persisted rather complainingly, saying that the cherries were too high for her to reach, and that even if she had a ladder it would hurt her back. Mr. Wheeler was always annoyed if his wife referred to any

physical weakness, especially if she complained about her back. He got up and went out. After a while he returned. "All right now, Evangeline," he called cheerily as he passed through the kitchen. "Cherries won't give you any trouble. You and Claude can run along and pick 'em as easy as can be."

Mrs. Wheeler trustfully put on her sunbonnet, gave Claude a little pail and took a big one herself, and they went down the pasture hill to the orchard, fenced in on the low land by the creek. The ground had been ploughed that spring to make it hold moisture, and Claude was running happily along in one of the furrows, when he looked up and beheld a sight he could never forget. The beautiful, round-topped cherry tree, full of green leaves and red fruit,—his father had sawed it through! It lay on the ground beside its bleeding stump. With one scream Claude became a little demon. He threw away his tin pail, jumped about howling and kicking the loose earth with his copper-toed shoes, until his mother was much more concerned for him than for the tree.

"Son, son," she cried, "it's your father's tree. He has a perfect right to cut it down if he wants to. He's often said the trees were too thick in here. Maybe it will be better for the others."

"'Tain't so! He's a damn fool, damn fool!" Claude bellowed, still hopping and kicking, almost choking with rage and hate.

His mother dropped on her knees beside him. "Claude, stop! I'd rather have the whole orchard cut down than hear you say such things."

After she got him quieted they picked the cherries and went back to the house. Claude had promised her that he would say nothing, but his father must have noticed the little boy's angry eyes fixed upon him all through dinner, and his expression of scorn. Even then his flexible lips were only too well adapted to hold the picture of that feeling. For days afterward Claude went down to the orchard and watched the tree grow sicker, wilt and wither away. God would surely punish a man who could do that, he thought.

A violent temper and physical restlessness were the most conspicuous things about Claude when he was a little boy. Ralph was docile, and had a precocious sagacity for keeping out of trouble. Quiet in manner, he was fertile in devising mischief, and easily persuaded his older brother, who was always looking for something to do, to execute his plans. It was usually Claude who was caught red-handed. Sitting mild and contemplative on his quilt on the floor, Ralph would whisper to Claude that it might be amusing to climb up and take the clock from the shelf, or to operate the sewing-machine. When they were older, and played out of doors, he had only to insinuate that Claude was afraid, to make him try a frosted axe with his tongue, or jump from the shed roof.

The usual hardships of country boyhood were not enough for Claude; he imposed physical tests and penances upon himself. Whenever he burned his finger, he followed Mahailey's advice and held his hand close to the stove to "draw out the fire." One year he went to school all winter in his jacket, to make himself tough. His mother would button him up in his overcoat and put his dinner-pail in his hand and start him off. As soon as he got out of sight of the house, he pulled off his coat, rolled it under his arm, and scudded along the edge of the frozen fields, arriving at the frame schoolhouse panting and shivering, but very well pleased with himself.

Chapter 5

Claude waited for his elders to change their mind about where he should go to school; but no one seemed much concerned, not even his mother.

Two years ago, the young man whom Mrs. Wheeler called "Brother Weldon" had come out from Lincoln, preaching in little towns and country churches, and recruiting students for the institution at which he taught in the winter. He had convinced Mrs. Wheeler that his college was the safest possible place for a boy who was leaving home for the first time.

Claude's mother was not discriminating about preachers. She believed them all chosen and sanctified, and was never happier than when she had one in the house to cook for and wait upon. She made young Mr. Weldon so comfortable that he remained under her roof for several weeks, occupying the spare room, where he spent the mornings in study and meditation. He appeared regularly at mealtime to ask a blessing upon the food and to sit with devout, downcast eyes while the chicken was being dismembered. His top-shaped head hung a little to one side, the thin hair was parted precisely over his high forehead and brushed in little ripples. He was soft spoken and apologetic in manner and took up as little room as possible. His meekness amused Mr. Wheeler, who liked to ply him with food and never failed to ask him gravely "what part of the chicken he would prefer," in order to hear him murmur, "A little of the white meat, if you please," while he drew his elbows close, as if he were adroitly sliding over a dangerous place. In the afternoon Brother Weldon usually put on a fresh lawn necktie and a hard, glistening straw hat which left a red streak across his forehead, tucked his Bible under his arm, and went out to make calls. If he went far, Ralph took him in the automobile.

Claude disliked this young man from the moment he first met him, and could scarcely answer him civilly. Mrs. Wheeler, always absent-minded, and now absorbed in her cherishing care of the visitor, did not notice Claude's scornful silences until Mahailey, whom such things never escaped, whispered to her over the stove one day: "Mr. Claude, he don't like the preacher. He just ain't got no use fur him, but don't you let on."

As a result of Brother Weldon's sojourn at the farm, Claude was sent to the Temple College. Claude had come to believe that the things and people he most disliked were the ones that were to shape his destiny.

When the second week of September came round, he threw a few clothes and books into his trunk and said good-bye to his mother and Mahailey. Ralph took him into Frankfort to catch the train for Lincoln. After settling himself in the dirty day-coach, Claude fell to meditating upon his prospects. There was a Pullman car on the train, but to take a Pullman for a daylight journey was one of the things a Wheeler did not do.

Claude knew that he was going back to the wrong school, that he was wasting both time and money. He sneered at himself for his lack of spirit. If he had to do with strangers, he told himself, he could take up his case and fight for it. He could not assert himself against his father or mother, but he could be bold enough with the rest of the world. Yet, if this were true, why did he continue to live with the tiresome Chapins? The Chapin household consisted of a brother and sister. Edward Chapin was a man of twenty-six, with an old, wasted face,—and he was still going to school, studying for the ministry. His sister Annabelle kept house for him; that is to say, she did whatever housework was done. The brother supported himself and his sister by getting odd jobs from churches and religious societies; he "supplied" the pulpit when a minister was ill, did secretarial work for the college and the Young Men's Christian Association. Claude's weekly payment for room and board, though a small sum, was very necessary to their comfort.

Chapin had been going to the Temple College for four years, and it would probably take him two years more to complete the course. He conned his book on trolley-cars, or while he waited by the track on windy corners, and studied far into the night. His natural stupidity must have been something quite out of the ordinary; after years of reverential study, he could not read the Greek Testament without a lexicon and grammar at his elbow. He gave a great deal of time to the practice of elocution and oratory. At certain hours their frail domicile—it had been thinly built for the academic poor and sat upon concrete blocks in lieu of a foundation—re-echoed with his hoarse, overstrained voice, declaiming his own orations or those of Wendell Phillips.

Annabelle Chapin was one of Claude's classmates. She was not as dull as her brother; she could learn a conjugation and recognize the forms when she met with them again. But she was a gushing, silly girl, who found almost everything in their grubby life too good to be true; and she was, unfortunately, sentimental about Claude. Annabelle chanted her lessons over and over to herself while she cooked and scrubbed. She was one of those people who can make the finest things seem tame and flat merely by alluding to them. Last winter she had recited the odes of Horace about the house—it was exactly her notion of the student-like thing to do—until Claude feared he would always associate that poet with the heaviness of hurriedly prepared luncheons.

Mrs. Wheeler liked to feel that Claude was assisting this worthy pair in their struggle for an education; but he had long ago decided that since neither of the Chapins got anything out of their efforts but a kind of messy inefficiency, the struggle might better have been relinquished in the beginning. He took care of his own room; kept it bare and habitable, free from Annabelle's attentions and decorations. But the flimsy pretences of light-housekeeping were very distasteful to him. He was born with a love of order, just as he was born with red hair. It was a personal attribute.

The boy felt bitterly about the way in which he had been brought up, and about his hair and his freckles and his awkwardness. When he went to the theatre in Lincoln, he took a seat in the gallery, because he knew that he looked like a green country boy. His clothes were never right. He bought collars that were too high and neckties that were too bright, and hid them away in his trunk. His one experiment with a tailor was unsuccessful. The tailor saw at once that his stammering client didn't know what he wanted, so he persuaded him that as the season was spring he needed light checked trousers and a blue serge coat and vest. When Claude wore his new clothes to St. Paul's church on Sunday morning, the eyes of every one he met followed his smart legs down the street. For the next week he observed the legs of old men and young, and decided there wasn't another pair of checked pants in Lincoln. He hung his new clothes up in his closet and never put them on again, though Annabelle Chapin watched for them wistfully. Nevertheless, Claude thought he could recognize a well-dressed man when he saw one. He even thought he could recognize a well-dressed woman. If an attractive woman got into the street car when he was on his way to or from Temple Place, he was distracted between the desire to look at her and the wish to seem indifferent.

Claude is on his way back to Lincoln, with a fairly liberal allowance which does not contribute much to his comfort or pleasure. He has no friends or instructors whom he can regard with admiration, though the need to admire is just now uppermost in his nature. He is convinced that the people who might mean something to him will always misjudge him and pass him by. He is not so much afraid of loneliness as he is of accepting cheap substitutes; of making excuses to himself for a teacher who flatters him, of waking up some morning to find himself admiring a girl merely because she is accessible. He has a dread of easy compromises, and he is terribly afraid of being fooled.

Chapter 6

Three months later, on a grey December day, Claude was seated in the passenger coach of an accommodation freight train, going home for the holidays. He had a pile of books on the seat beside him and was reading, when the train stopped with a jerk that sent the volumes tumbling to the floor. He picked them up and looked at his watch. It was noon. The freight would lie here for an hour or more, until the east-bound passenger went by. Claude left the car and walked slowly up the platform toward the station. A bundle of little spruce trees had been flung off near the freight office, and sent a smell of Christmas into the cold air. A few drays stood about, the horses blanketed. The steam from the locomotive made a spreading, deep-violet stain as it curled up against the grey sky.

Claude went into a restaurant across the street and ordered an oyster stew. The proprietress, a plump little German woman with a frizzed bang, always remembered him from trip to trip. While he was eating his oysters she told him that she had just finished roasting a chicken with sweet potatoes, and if he liked he could have the first brown cut off the breast before the train-men came in for dinner. Asking her to bring it along, he waited, sitting on a stool, his boots on the lead-pipe foot-rest, his elbows on the shiny brown counter, staring at a pyramid of tough looking bun-sandwiches under a glass globe.

"I been lookin' for you every day," said Mrs. Voigt when she brought his plate. "I put plenty good gravy on dem sweet pertaters, ja."

"Thank you. You must be popular with your boarders."

She giggled. "Ja, all de train men is friends mit me. Sometimes dey bring me a liddle Schweizerkase from one of dem big saloons in

Omaha what de Cherman beobles batronize. I ain't got no boys mein own self, so I got to fix up liddle tings for dem boys, eh?"

She stood nursing her stumpy hands under her apron, watching every mouthful he ate so eagerly that she might have been tasting it herself. The train crew trooped in, shouting to her and asking what there was for dinner, and she ran about like an excited little hen, chuckling and cackling. Claude wondered whether working-men were as nice as that to old women the world over. He didn't believe so. He liked to think that such geniality was common only in what he broadly called "the West." He bought a big cigar, and strolled up and down the platform, enjoying the fresh air until the passenger whistled in.

After his freight train got under steam he did not open his books again, but sat looking out at the grey homesteads as they unrolled before him, with their stripped, dry cornfields, and the great ploughed stretches where the winter wheat was asleep. A starry sprinkling of snow lay like hoar-frost along the crumbly ridges between the furrows.

Claude believed he knew almost every farm between Frankfort and Lincoln, he had made the journey so often, on fast trains and slow. He went home for all the holidays, and had been again and again called back on various pretexts; when his mother was sick, when Ralph overturned the car and broke his shoulder, when his father was kicked by a vicious stallion. It was not a Wheeler custom to employ a nurse; if any one in the household was ill, it was understood that some member of the family would act in that capacity.

Claude was reflecting upon the fact that he had never gone home before in such good spirits. Two fortunate things had happened to him since he went over this road three months ago.

As soon as he reached Lincoln in September, he had matriculated at the State University for special work in European History. The year before he had heard the head of the department lecture for some

charity, and resolved that even if he were not allowed to change his college, he would manage to study under that man. The course Claude selected was one upon which a student could put as much time as he chose. It was based upon the reading of historical sources, and the Professor was notoriously greedy for full notebooks. Claude's were of the fullest. He worked early and late at the University Library, often got his supper in town and went back to read until closing hour. For the first time he was studying a subject which seemed to him vital, which had to do with events and ideas, instead of with lexicons and grammars. How often he had wished for Ernest during the lectures! He could see Ernest drinking them up, agreeing or dissenting in his independent way. The class was very large, and the Professor spoke without notes,—he talked rapidly, as if he were addressing his equals, with none of the coaxing persuasiveness to which Temple students were accustomed. His lectures were condensed like a legal brief, but there was a kind of dry fervour in his voice, and when he occasionally interrupted his exposition with purely personal comment, it seemed valuable and important.

Claude usually came out from these lectures with the feeling that the world was full of stimulating things, and that one was fortunate to be alive and to be able to find out about them. His reading that autumn actually made the future look brighter to him; seemed to promise him something. One of his chief difficulties had always been that he could not make himself believe in the importance of making money or spending it. If that were all, then life was not worth the trouble.

The second good thing that had befallen him was that he had got to know some people he liked. This came about accidentally, after a football game between the Temple eleven and the State University team—merely a practice game for the latter. Claude was playing half-back with the Temple. Toward the close of the first quarter, he followed his interference safely around the right end, dodged a tackle which threatened to end the play, and broke loose for a

ninety yard run down the field for a touchdown. He brought his eleven off with a good showing. The State men congratulated him warmly, and their coach went so far as to hint that if he ever wanted to make a change, there would be a place for him on the University team.

Claude had a proud moment, but even while Coach Ballinger was talking to him, the Temple students rushed howling from the grandstand, and Annabelle Chapin, ridiculous in a sport suit of her own construction, bedecked with the Temple colours and blowing a child's horn, positively threw herself upon his neck. He disengaged himself, not very gently, and stalked grimly away to the dressing shed... . What was the use, if you were always with the wrong crowd?

Julius Erlich, who played quarter on the State team, took him aside and said affably: "Come home to supper with me tonight, Wheeler, and meet my mother. Come along with us and dress in the Armory. You have your clothes in your suitcase, haven't you?"

"They're hardly clothes to go visiting in," Claude replied doubtfully.

"Oh, that doesn't matter! We're all boys at home. Mother wouldn't mind if you came in your track things."

Claude consented before he had time to frighten himself by imagining difficulties. The Erlich boy often sat next him in the history class, and they had several times talked together. Hitherto Claude had felt that he "couldn't make Erlich out," but this afternoon, while they dressed after their shower, they became good friends, all in a few minutes. Claude was perhaps less tied-up in mind and body than usual. He was so astonished at finding himself on easy, confidential terms with Erlich that he scarcely gave a thought to his second-day shirt and his collar with a broken edge,—wretched economies he had been trained to observe.

They had not walked more than two blocks from the Armory when Julius turned in at a rambling wooden house with an unfenced, terraced lawn. He led Claude around to the wing, and through a