

— even if you do for a few years you'll have to leave it sometime, and there's nothing that goes to rack and ruin as quickly as a farm — even one like this.”

“Oh, Martin, don't think such thoughts,” she begged. “Your fever is coming up; I can see it.”

“What has it all been about, that's what I want to know,” he went on with quiet cynicism. “What have I been sweating about — nothing. What is anyone's life? No more than mine. We're all like a lot of hens in a backyard, scratching so many hours a day. Some scratch a little deeper than those who aren't so skilled or so strong. And when I stand off a little, it's all alike. The end is as blind and senseless as the beginning on this farm — drought and dust.”

Martin closed his eyes wearily and gave a deep sigh. To his wife's quickened ears, it was charged with lingering regret for frustrated plans and palpitant with his consciousness of life's evanescence and of the futility of his own success.

She waited patiently for him to continue his instructions, but the opiates had begun to take effect and Martin lapsed into sleep. Although he lived until the next morning, he never again regained full consciousness.

XI

THE DUST SETTLES

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ROSE'S grief was a surprise to herself; there was no blinking the fact that her life was going to be far more disrupted by Martin's death than it had been by Bill's. There were other differences. Where that loss had struck her numb, this quickened every sensibility, drove her into action; more than that, as she realized how much less there was to regret in the boy's life than in his father's, how much more he had got out of his few short years, the edge of the older, more precious sorrow, dulled. During quite long periods she would be so absorbed in her thoughts of Martin that Bill would not enter her mind. Was it possible, that this husband who with his own lips had confessed he had never loved her, had been a more integral part of herself than the son who had adored her? What was this bond that had roots deeper than love? Was it merely because they had grown so used to each other that she felt as if half of her had been torn away and buried, leaving her crippled and helpless? Probably it would have been different if Bill had

been living. Was it because when he had died, she still had had Martin, demanding, vital, to goad her on and give the semblance of a point to her life, and now she was left alone, adrift? She pondered over these questions, broodingly.

"I suppose you'll want to sell out, Rose," Nellie's husband, Bert Mall, big and cordial as Peter had been before him, suggested a day or two after the funeral. "I'll try to get you a buyer, or would you rather rent?"

"I haven't any plans yet, Bert," Mrs. Wade had evaded adroitly, "it's all happened so quickly. I have plenty of time and there are lots of things to be seen to." There had been that in her voice which had forbidden discussion, and it was a tone to which she was forced to have recourse more than once during the following days when it seemed to her that all her friends were in a conspiracy to persuade her to a hasty, ill-advised upheaval.

Nothing, she resolved, should push her from this farm or into final decisions until a year had passed. She must have something to which she could cling if it were nothing more than a familiar routine. Without that to sustain and support her, she felt she could never meet the responsibilities which had suddenly descended, with such a terrific impact, upon her shoulders.

In an inexplicable way, these new burdens, her black dress — the first silk one since the winter before Billy came — and the softening folds of her veil, all invested her with a new and touching majesty that seemed to set her a little apart from her neighbors.

Nellie had been frankly scandalized at the idea of mourning. "Nobody does that out here — exceptin' during the services," she had said sharply to her daughter-in-law when Rose had told her of the hasty trip she and her aunt had made to the largest town in the county. "Folks'll think it's funny and kind o' silly. You oughtn't to have encouraged it."

"Oh, Mother Mall, I didn't especially," the younger woman had protested. "She just said in that quiet, settled way she has, that she was going to — she thought it would be easier for her. And I believe it will, too," she added, feeling how pathetic it was that Aunt Rose had never looked half so well during Uncle Martin's life as she had since his death.

"Oh, well," Mall commented, "Rose always was sort of sentimental, but there's not many like her. She's right to take her time, too. It'll be six or eight months, anyway, before she can get things lined up. She's got a longer head than a body'd

think for. Look at the way she run that newspaper office when old Conroy died."

"That was nearly thirty years ago," commented his wife crisply, "and Rose's got so used to being bossed around by Martin that she'll find it ain't so easy to go ahead on her own."

With her usual shrewdness, Nellie had surmised the chief difficulty, but it dwindled in real importance because of the fact that Rose so frequently had the feeling that Martin merely had gone on a journey and would come home some day, expecting an exact accounting of her stewardship. His instructions were to her living instructions which must be carried out to the letter.

She had attended with conscientious promptness to checking the trouble that had brought about his death. "I promised Mr. Wade it should be the first thing," she had explained to Dr. Hurton. "You'll let it be the first thing, won't you?" Those were his very words. He depended on us, Doctor."

When the time came to plan definitely for the disposal of the purebred herd, she went herself to Topeka to arrange details with Baker. She was constantly thinking: "Now, what would Martin say to this?" or "Would he approve of that?" And her conclusions were reached accordingly. The sale itself was an event that was discussed in Fallon

County for years afterwards. The hotel was crowded with out-of-town buyers. Enthused by the music from two bands, even the local people bid high, and through it all, Rose, vigilant, remembered everything Martin would have wanted remembered. She felt that even he would have been satisfied with the manner in which the whole transaction was handled, and with the financial results.

She began to take a new pleasure in everything, the nervous pleasure one takes when going through an experience for what may be the last time. The threshing — how often she had toiled and sweated over those three days of dinners and suppers for twenty-two men. Now she recalled, with an aching tightness about her heart, how delicious had been her relaxation, when, the dinner dishes washed, the table reset and the kitchen in scrupulous order with the last fly vanquished, she and Nellie had luxuriated in that exquisite sense of leisure that only women know who have passed triumphantly through a heavy morning's work and have everything ready for the evening. Later there had been the stroll down to the field in the shade of the waning afternoon, to find out what time the men would be in for supper; and the sheer delight of breathing in the pungent smell of the straw as it came flying from the funnel, looking, with the sinking sun

shining through it, like a million bees swarming from a hive, while the red-brown grain gushed, a lush stream, into the waiting wagon.

"It always makes me think of a ship sailing into port, Nellie," Rose had once exclaimed, "the crop coming in. It gives me a queer kind of giddiness, makes me feel like laughing and crying all at once," to which her sister-in-law had returned with more than her usual responsiveness: "Yes, it's the most excitin' time of the year, unless it's Christmas."

More nebulous were the memories of those early mornings when she had paused in the midst of getting breakfast to sniff in the clover-laden air and think how wonderful it would be if only she needn't stay in the hot, stuffy kitchen but could be free to call Bill and go picnicking or loaf deliciously under one of the big elms. Most precious of all — the evenings she and her boy had sat in the yard, with the cool south breeze blowing up from the pasture, the cows looking on placidly, the frogs fluting rhythmically in the pond, the birds chirping their good-night calls, and the dip and swell of the farm land pulling at them like a haunting tune, almost too lovely to be endured. Oh, there had been moments all the sweeter and more poignant because they had been so fleeting.

As she passed successfully through one whole

round of planting, harvesting and garnering of grain, she began to realize her own ability and to be tempted more and more seriously to remain on the farm. She understood it, and Martin would have liked her to run it. If it had not been for the problem of keeping dependable hired hands and the sight of the mine-tipple, which, towering on the adjoining farm, reminded her more and more constantly of Bill, she would not even have considered the offer of Gordon Hamilton, one of Fallon's leading business men, to buy her whole section.

"There's a bunch going into this deal, together, Rose," Bert Mall explained. "They want to run a new branch of their street car line straight through here and they're going to plat this quarter into streets and lots. The rest they'll split up into several farms and rent for the present. It's a speculation, of course, but the way the mines are moving north and west it's likely this'll be a thickly settled camp in another two or three years."

"But they only offer seventy-five an acre," Rose expostulated, "and it's worth more than that as farm land. There's none around here as fertile as Martin made this — and then, all the improvements!"

"They'll have to dispose of them second-hand. It's a pity they're in exactly the wrong spot. Well, of course, I'm not advising you, Rose," he added,

"but forty-five thousand ain't to be sneezed at, is it, when it comes in a lump and you own only the surface? You may wait a long while before you get another such bid. Seems to me you've worked hard enough. I'd think you'd want a rest."

In the end, Mrs. Wade capitulated to what, as Martin had foreseen so clearly, was sooner or later inevitable. She was a little stunned by the vast amount of available money now in her possession and at her disposal. "But it's all dust in my hands," she thought sadly. "What do I want of so much? It's going to be a terrible worry. I don't even know who to leave it to," and she sighed deeply, pressing her hands, with her old, characteristic gesture, to her heart. Everybody would approve, she supposed, if she left it to Rose and Frank — her niece and Martin's nephew — but she couldn't quite bring herself to welcome that idea — not yet. And anyway it might be better to divide it among more people, so that it would bring more happiness.

Her own needs were simple. The modest five-room house which she purchased was set on a pleasant paved street in Fallon and was obviously ample for her. She hoped that during part of each year she could rent the extra bed-room to some one, preferably a boy, like Bill, who was attending high school. There was a barn for her horse and the one

cow she would keep, a neat little chicken-house for the twenty-five hens that would more than supply her with eggs and summer fries, and a small garage for Martin's car. It would seem very strange, she thought, to have so few things to care for and she wondered how she would fill her time, she whose one problem always had been how to achieve snatches of leisure. She saw herself jogging on and on, gradually getting to be less able on her feet, a little more helpless, until she was one of those feeble old ladies who seem at the very antipodes of the busy mothers they have been in their prime. How could it be that she who had always been in such demand, so needed, so driven by real duties, should have become suddenly such a supernumerary, so footloose, and unattached?

But when it came to that, wasn't Fallon full of others in the same circumstances? It was not an uncommon lot. There was Mrs. McMurray. Rose remembered over what a jolly household she had reigned before she, too, had lost her husband and three children instead of just one, like Billy. Two of them had been grown and married. Now she was living in a little cottage, all alone, doing sewing and nursing, yet always so brave and cheerful; not only that, but interested, really interested in living. And Mrs. Nelson. Her children were living and married

and happy, but she had given up her home, sold it — the pretty place with the hospitable yard that used to seem to be fairly spilling over with wholesome, boisterous boys and chatty, beribboned little girls. She was rooming with a family, taking her meals at a restaurant, keeping up her zest in tomorrow by running a shop. She thought of how her friend, Mrs. Robinson, gracious, democratic woman of wide sympathies that she was, had lived alone after David Robinson's death, taking his place as president of the bank, during the years her only daughter, Janet, had been off at college and later travelling around the country "on the stage" — of all things for a daughter of Fallon. When hadn't the town been full of these widowed, elderly women made childless alike by life and by death? What others had met successfully, she could also, she told herself sternly, and still the old Rose, still struggling toward happiness, she tried to think with a little enthusiasm of her new life, of the things she would do for others. One recreation she would be able to enjoy to her heart's content when she moved into town — the movies. They would tide her over, she felt gratefully. When she was too lonely, she would go to them and shed her own troubles and problems by absorption in those of others. She who had been married for years and had borne two children with-

out ever having had the joy of one overwhelming kiss, would find romance at last, for an hour, as she identified herself with the charming heroines of the films.

She was to surrender the farm and the crops as they stood in June, but as there was to be no new immediate tenant in her old house it was easily arranged that she could continue in it until the cottage in Fallon would be empty in September.

Meanwhile, preparations were begun for the new car line which would pass where the big dairy barn was standing. As the latter went down, board by board, it seemed to Mrs. Wade that this structure which, in the building, had been the sign and symbol of her surrender and heartbreak, now in its destruction, typified Martin's life. It was as if Martin, himself, were being torn limb from limb. All that he had built would soon be dust. The sound of the cement breaking under the heavy sledges, was almost more than she could bear. It was a relief to have the smaller buildings dragged bodily to other parts of the farm.

Only once before in her memory had there been such a summer and such a drought. The corn leaves burned to a crisp brown, the ground cracked and broke into cakes and dust piled high in thick, velvety folds on weeds and grass. It seemed too

strange for words to see others harvest the wheat and to know that the usual crop could not be put in.

Rose was thankful when her last evening came. Most of her furniture had been moved in the morning, her boxes had left in the afternoon, and the last little accessories were now piled in the car. As, hand on the wheel, she paused a moment before starting, she was conscious of a choking sensation. It was over, finished — she, the last of Martin, was leaving it, for good. Before her rolled the quarter section, except for the little box-house, as bare of fences and buildings as when the Wades had first camped on it in their prairie schooner. With what strange prophetic vision had Martin foreseen so clearly that all the construction of his life would crumble. Would Jacob and Sarah Wade have had the courage to make all their sacrifices, she wondered, if they had known that she and she alone, daughter of a Patrick and Norah Conroy, whom they had never seen, would some day stand there profiting by it all? She thought of the mortgages in the bank and the bonds, of the easier life she seemed to be entering. How strange that she whom Grandfather and Grandmother Wade had not even known, she whom Martin had never loved, should be the one to reap the real benefits from their planning, and that the

farm itself, for which her husband had been willing to sacrifice Billy and herself, should be utterly destroyed. A sudden breeze caught up some of the dust and whirling it around let it fall. "Martin's life," thought Rose, "it was like a handful of dust thrown into God's face and blown back again by the wind to the ground."

THE END

Characters

Martin

Rose (Roseweed), wife

Billy, son

Rose of Sharon, niece

Nellie, sister

Parents of Martin

Characterization

Martin, 34

1. Lacks sensitivity to others
2. Abrought of emotion
3. Emotion not expressed
4. Work made excessive demands
5. Has drive, determination
6. Self taught; intelligent
7. Self-centered.

Rose

1. Emotional
2. Affectionate

Cruelty to animals

11

17

67

Farm life

129

145

208

214

251