

Bradley, with the result that we received orders to remain strictly on our own side of the creek.

'Though I know you haven't intentionally harmed anything of Olson's,' Mr. Bradley assured us. 'I told him you were a thoughtless pair, but you were honest, and I want him to see he's no better off with you away.'

That was what we wished also. We echoed the last clause with genuine sincerity, and were scarcely out of hearing before we began scheming for ways to make it come true.

'Old meddler!' Lafe growled, unjustifiably. He'd like to keep us shut up in the barn-yard.' Then he flushed a little. 'But I suppose he's got a right to play back,' he added, urged by a late-born sense of justice.

'But he hasn't any right to drag your father in,' I pointed out. 'We don't go finding fault to his wife,' and both of us seized eagerly upon this new reason for indignation.

We were beginning to find it rather difficult to keep up an active dislike for the newcomer. He was a quiet, hard-working man, somewhat past youth, and except for a slight lengthening of the sibilant sound in his speech, with no mark of foreign origin. Then, too, he was poor.

His poverty tugged at our sympathies more than once when we saw him dragging wearily home at the end of a day's work, or patching up his ancient farm machinery to fit it for fresh service. His house was in view from the edge of the creek, and most of the fields where he worked. After our prohibition we used to spend hours wandering up and down the creek bank, watching him and inciting each other to extraordinary revenges, which somehow never were brought to pass.

He noticed us one day and came smiling down to the creek bank. 'My fence is staying up nicely now, thank you!' he called across to us.

'But your ditch isn't staying open any better!' Lafe taunted back furiously.

We had found a point on our side of the stream from which we could float down brush against the opposite head-gate. By one impulse we sprang up to go to it. Then I halted.

'He'll know it's us for sure if it fills up to-day,' I suggested.

We were devoting ourselves to our supper that night when a speech from Mrs. Bradley caught our attention.

'I drove over to Mrs. Olson's to-day,' she remarked to her husband. 'She's going into town to-morrow. I told her Mr. Olson was to use our telephone any time he wanted to get word of her.'

'He's not going to stay with her, then?' Mr. Bradley questioned. 'I suppose he can't at this time of year.'

'He feels he can't. He's just going to take her in,' Mrs. Bradley sighed a little over the words, and fell into so serious a silence that Lafe's indignant interrogation went unspoken.

We observed the next day that no smoke rose from the Olson chimney, and for the three days of the owner's absence we turned our attention entirely away from the adjoining ranch. After our fashion we were honourable adversaries.

On the day of Olson's return, Mr. Bradley departed to his mountain ranch for the second cutting of alfalfa, and Lafe and I, left with the burden of the ranch chores on our shoulders, found ourselves at first pretty closely occupied. Olson was spending much time in his own single alfalfa-field, bordering the creek. He kept his riding horse picketed outside the field, and every evening, when work was finished, forded the stream and came up to telephone to his wife. Somehow his anxious face made us glad to use our added duties as an excuse for leaving him alone.

It was about ten days after his return that Mrs. Bradley came running out to the corral, where we were doing the morning milking.

'Lafe, get your horse and go for Mr. Olson!' she called through the bars. 'Tell him they want him. His wife's—worse.'

'Oh, send Gert!' Lafe protested; and then, with sudden inspiration, 'Pa won't let us go across the creek.'

Mrs. Bradley made no answer, but ten minutes later we saw Lafe's nine-year-old sister galloping up the slope which led to Olson's house.

I think neither of us wanted to observe the man's movements, but against our wills we slunk down to our point of vantage on the creek bank. From there we saw Olson run out to meet the messenger, saw him dash back into the stable, and almost at once emerge on horseback and disappear at a pace which meant a fresh horse or a breakdown before the thirty miles to town were covered.

'But he left his gates down and his fire burning,' I derided. 'He never thought of his stock.' But the jeering came hard, and we went back to our milking in silence.

Not for the world would we have acknowledged an interest in the deserted place, but all the same I was at the river bank a dozen times during the morning; and when, a little after noon, I saw a stranger ride in through the pasture and lead his horse to the sheds, I was conscious of distinct relief.

'Olson's sent somebody to stay on his ranch,' I ventured, indiscreetly.

'Any of our business?' Lafe scorched me into silence. 'He could, easy enough. Plenty of Norwegians along the creek.'

Apparently the new man was for household service only; that is, he may have milked the cows and fed the chickens and attended to turning out and gathering in the stock, but his industry did not extend as far as the hay-field. Lafe commented on the fact a day or two after his arrival.

'They're going to lose their second crop over there,' he pointed out. 'You'd think Olson'd get back and 'tend to it.'

'Of course his wife's sick,' I excused him. 'Serve him right, anyway,' I hastened to cover up my weakness.

By another day there was no question as to the need of immediate cutting if the alfalfa were to yield a good grade of hay. From end to end of the field the feathery purple blossoms waved above the green. I was less at home than Lafe in ranch matters, but even I could see that the strength needed in the stalk was rapidly being spent upon flowers. Secretly each of us sent many anxious glances along the road by which Olson must return.

When he had been gone a week, Lafe, staring at the brilliant field, suddenly announced his intention.

'I'm going to cut it!' he declared, and at once flung round to forestall my protest. 'I suppose you think it's all right to let good hay spoil, but I tell you it isn't only Olson it hurts. If that hay's spoilt, there's that much less hay in the valley, and everybody's cattle—'

'How'll you cut it? Your father's got the mowers,' I interposed, practically.

'Olson's mowers here. Come on, let's get a start on it.'

With Lafe to decide was to act—especially when his father was absent. Our own chores were but half done, but in twenty minutes we were hitching our horse outside Olson's wagon-shed.

The man in charge came up from the calf-pen as we finished harnessing, and stood about watching us. He was a boy only a year or two older than Lafe, and a Norwegian in good earnest, without a word of English to his credit. He did not object to our taking out the mower, but when we turned it in the direction of the hay-field, he suddenly became vocal with protests.

'I expect Olson told him to look out for us,' Lafe interpreted. He swung his whip in a wide circle.

'It's all right!' he shouted back. 'Good work! Amigo!'

The Spanish word did not seem to clear the mazes of the Norwegian mind to any extent. The boy followed, calling out after us until Lafe whipped up the horse and left him breathless in the background.

The field was fairly level and the cutting not hard work. Lafe rode the first swath, I the second, and so on, and at the end of every row we stopped to exchange comments on our progress.

We had covered perhaps a quarter of the field when suddenly we heard behind us a sound like the explosion of many little, closed buckets of boiling water. We turned, and Olson was standing at the gate, just dismounted, watching us. His mouth was open and his face brick-red.

'What—what—' he began, stammering.

Lafe faced him in the strength of conscious virtue.

'We're cutting your hay for you. You let it stand so long it'd been spoiled by the end of the week.'

He picked up a stalk, on which the blossom was already beginning to brown, and banded it to the owner. Olson took it. He crumbled the top between his fingers for a moment. Then the power of speech came to him.

'You were cutting my hay, were you? And I was raising alfalfa for seed.'

He picked up his horse's bridle and started out of the field. We followed—slowly. We were nearly at the sheds before anyone of us spoke. Then, 'I—I should think you would be mad!' Lafe gulped forth.

'Was it your father sent you?' the owner asked, without turning his head.

'He's up the creek. We just saw your hay was going to spoil, and we knew your wife—is she better?' Lafe thought to ask.

'Much better,' said Olson. He turned round toward us, beginning to smile.

'I cannot stay angry to-day. Tell your mother it is a boy.'

'A—boy!' we gasped, in concert. Then Lafe rose superbly to the situation.

'Say, call him after me!' he begged. 'I don't mind if he is a Norwegian.'

This time there was no doubt about Olson's smile; it was almost a grin. 'But he is named already,' he explained. 'We call him for my father, who came to Minnesota before the war, and was killed at Chattanooga.'

It was not till we were in bed and in the dark that any comment on the day's events occurred to us. Then Lafe spoke from under the quilts:

'Jim, did anybody in your family get killed in the war?'

'No,' I admitted. 'My father hadn't come from Scotland then.'

'And my grandfather was up in Canada. Say, I guess Olson stays on that place. I guess he can call himself an American just about whenever he likes.'