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# SALVAGE

BY J. OLIVIER CURWOOD

WITH A DRAWING BY GEORGE GIBBS

VAN GAFF, confidential agent of the Great Lakes Salvage Company, was on what he mentally described as the assignment of his life. He knew that if he succeeded in his present mission he would be regarded as one of the greatest salvage hustlers on the Lakes.

He had carefully laid his plans; in his mind he foresaw their culmination, and already he considered that he held within his grasp the fortune he had gone out to seek. In his wallet was a check which called for one hundred thousand dollars. Van Gaff was to spend that, if necessary. With it he was to purchase a treasure-ship which had been lost nearly a quarter of a century before, with half a million dollars in ingot-copper in her hold. He was to get her for a song if he could, and if necessary, he was to lie to conceal the fact that his company had discovered the vessel, deep-sunk in the edge of Georgian Bay. These were the instructions of the head men at Buffalo.

For an hour Van Gaff had been comfortably ensconced in one of the cabins of the Belle Isle, upbound for the "Soo." He smoked incessantly, and as he smoked he pictured the short and tragic history of the copper-ship. Of course he had all of the facts at his tongue's end. One stormy night the vessel had disappeared, and no man of her crew had lived to tell of the fate that had overtaken her. Then had come the unavailing search by the man who owned the ship and the red metal in her. That man, he had been told, was now living in comparative poverty at the "Soo." Perhaps Van Gaff could buy him out for a few thousands.

From the experience of earlier days Van Gaff knew that a hungry man, or

a man who is poor, will snatch at small things. He himself had done it in the days which had made him what some people called a misanthropist. He had been throttled, he had been held down by adversity until he was black in the face, and while he was down everything that he had ever cared for had gone out of his life.

Then he had made a titanic struggle and had risen like a man with the soul burned out of him. He had been successful; he had made money; but the love for men and women had gone out of him. He lived because his heart persisted in beating, not because he found especial pleasure in it, and he worked hard because work seemed to be the only thing left for him to do.

It was this way with Van Gaff now. The treasure-ship had worked up no enthusiasm in him; his mission had found him grimly unresponsive to the romance in it. To-night, as on most other nights, he was in what he called the rut. His loneliness was with him, illimitable as ever, and he sat and brooded as he had done a thousand times before, and something in him went back yearningly to the days before the rut existed for him, when he was like other people and enjoyed himself as they did. From his thoughts he was aroused by the ringing of a telephone hanging against the wall of the cabin. He answered it and recognized the captain's voice at the other end.

"Hello, Van Gaff, this is Cap'n Wilson," he heard. "I want you to come over and join us in a game of poker. There's a——"

"Much obliged, captain, but I'm feeling a little under the weather to-night," interrupted Van Gaff. "I——"

*Oliver Falkner*

"There's a girl!" cut in the captain. "She asked me to invite you over, and I don't see how you're going to get out of it. We're waiting for you."

The receiver at the other end went up with a bang and Van Gaff returned leisurely to his chair, a puzzled look in his face.

"What the——? A girl—poker——" he mused. The sullen dejection in his eyes was chased out by a gleam of humor. A vitally human spot in him had been touched. "Devilish funny," he smiled, lighting another cigar. "A girl—poker—in the captain's cabin!"

The idea tickled Van Gaff. "I wonder——" What he wondered he left unsaid, but there came into his face an expression of curiosity, of hesitancy, of doubt. "Guess I'll go," he chuckled. "Guess I'll see——" He laced his shoes, rearranged his tie, brushed his hair, and went on deck.

## II

JENNINGS, the first officer of the ship, opened the door when Van Gaff knocked, and over his shoulder the newcomer saw Captain Wilson laughing down into the face of a girl sitting at one end of the cabin table.

The salvage agent was only a casual critic of women. He observed that this one, sitting under the glow of an electric light, had a glistening crown of brown hair and that her eyes, as they encountered his own for a moment, were dark. There was nothing unusual about her, it seemed to Van Gaff. "She was pretty, but in a quiet sort of way, and mere prettiness had for a long time ceased to interest him.

"I thought you'd come, Van Gaff," said the captain, rising to shake hands. "It isn't often you have a chance to play poker with a pretty girl, eh?" He winked and laughed, Jennings joining in heartily. "Miss York," he cried, turning toward the girl, "this is Mr. Van Gaff, one of the swindlers attached to the Great Lakes Salvage Company. You'll like him!"

Van Gaff flushed, but the girl did not seem to notice. She looked up at him and smiled, and that smile, he thought, was one of the sweetest he had ever seen.

"I'm afraid Captain Wilson may give you a bad opinion of me," he said. He seated himself, facing the girl, while the others placed themselves at opposite sides of the table. The first officer began sorting out little piles of colored chips, and while the captain dealt, Van Gaff repeated what he had said. The girl's only reply was another smile and the pressing of a pretty forefinger upon her lips.

"She doesn't like to talk to strangers," rumbled Jennings. "I think it's admirable!"

"Tush-h-h-h!" said the captain warningly.

Van Gaff felt the hot blood rushing into his face. He looked straight at the girl, and in her eyes there came a sudden shadow of perplexity. Her mouth formed itself into a red O and she shot a suspicious glance at the captain and then at Jennings. In a moment, catching up a small paper pad, she wrote a few words upon it and handed it to Van Gaff.

"Please don't think that I am rude," she had written. "Haven't they told you that I am deaf and dumb?"

For an instant Van Gaff's fingers closed tightly over the pad. In the rut he had learned to strike, and strike suddenly, and for that single instant he was filled with an intense desire to even up with the men beside him. He turned to the captain, who was smiling broadly. He could feel Jennings laughing silently on his other side. In another moment he would have responded to the spirit that was calling for physical action, but the girl had seen the flashlight struggle in his eyes; and now she reached out a hand and laid it gently upon his doubled fist. It was a touch that thrilled Van Gaff.

"I beg your pardon," he scribbled in his big, almost illegible hand. "I did not know."

The girl laughed over the table at him, and he wondered if he had exhibited bad taste in getting angry at an incident which was regarded by the others as a good joke.

"It's all my fault," apologized Captain Wilson, his good-humored face red with merriment. "Miss York thought I had told you. But it was too good

a chance, Van Gaff—too good—too good——”

The girl shot a warning glance at him as she picked up her cards. Van Gaff watched her intently. For a moment her long lashes lay almost upon her cheeks as she studied her hand, then her lips were pursed into that round, red O that was beginning to fascinate Van Gaff, and she pushed out a little pile of chips.

The salvage agent showed his interest. He realized that this girl, whom he had known but a few minutes, was tremendously appealing to him. Something in her reached out and set chords tingling in him which he thought had died forever in the days of the rut.

Twice during the first few minutes of the game he forgot the significance of her silence and spoke to her. Each time the girl replied with a smile which seemed filled with sadness to Van Gaff, and which made him curse himself inwardly for his forgetfulness. For a time he failed to notice that she was playing a splendid game, and when Jennings called his attention to this and he saw that she possessed two-thirds of the chips upon the table, the warmth that had begun to glow in his heart received a sudden chill. He had his opinion of women poker-players.

He wished to ask a question of the captain, but feared that the girl would understand. By the changing lights in her eyes and the color that would come and go in her face he at times thought she read what the others were saying by the movement of their lips. Once while looking hard at his cards he spoke in a low voice to the first officer, saying that Miss York reminded him of a young woman he had seen years before in a play. "But that girl was a professional gambler," he added, with a suggestive emphasis upon the last word.

When he looked across the table he saw that Miss York's face was flushed, and as the girl's eyes encountered his own there was a look in them which was almost accusing. Was it possible that she understood? He would be frank—and ask her. In black and white the question seemed impertinent and in bad taste, but he pushed the writing across to her and watched her closely while she read it.

"Sometimes a deaf-and-dumb person understands without hearing," she wrote equivocally.

A little later the girl nodded toward the cabin clock, signifying that it was time for her to retire. Before rising from the table she invited Van Gaff to escort her across the deck to her cabin, and when the two paused before her door she gave him one of her hands, smiling up into his face in a way that set the man's heart beating wildly.

At that moment the memory of his old life went out of him. He forgot the copper-ship, the big check, and the man at the "Soo." His lips burned with words which he crushed back.

After he had returned to his room he was sorry that he had not in some way let the girl know what was in his mind. He might have written in her tablet, he might have—— But he immediately reproached himself for allowing this second thought to come into his head.

It occurred to him then that perhaps he was making a fool of himself. A dozen times he asked himself why he should be so interested in this girl. He had known her less than two hours; she was deaf and dumb—and she played poker. These were things which would have fatally prejudiced Van Gaff a short time before. But now something had risen in revolt in his soul; he acknowledged to himself that a new interest had come into his life, and that he was experiencing sensations which were pleasing and which thrilled him with a desire to be near the girl again.

### III

WHEN he awoke in the morning his first thought was of the girl. For an hour he lingered over his breakfast, hoping that she would join him. He talked of her to the captain, who told him simply that Miss York lived at the "Soo" and that her father and he were old chums, but that he had not seen much of the girl and, consequently, knew little of her.

Beyond this information Captain Wilson was so reticent that Van Gaff was made to feel the impertinence of his questions. A little later he went to his cabin and through his window watched for the girl's appearance on



deck. When she came from her room he hurried out to meet her.

"I've been watching for you all the morning!" he cried. "I——" He caught himself, the girl laughing at his forgetfulness. Her face was so filled with sweetness that Van Gaff's confusion was banished in an instant.

He led her deep into the midship and leaned with her over the rail of the vessel with the nearest eyes two hundred feet away. He pointed out the beauties of the lake to her, and she understood him and mutely thanked him with her eyes; he made two trips to his cabin to bring cushions and chairs, and then for an hour he sat beside her and fell deeper and deeper in love with her. As he watched the beautiful color in her face, the changing lights in her eyes, and the pouting expressions of her red mouth, Van Gaff knew that everything that had been in his life had now given place to this girl. The thought of her great affliction only added to his passion. It brought her nearer to him, for in a way they were both unfortunate; it made him feel that there existed between them something which made up for the briefness of their acquaintanceship. He wrote this for his companion, and she asked him to explain. It was a big thing for Van Gaff to do. It called for the old, long story of the man in the rut. But he penciled it, bit by bit, and the girl urged him on to the end.

When he had done he wrote under the last words: "I am going to tell you something now which may make you angry. In one night I learned to love you—and I never loved another living creature in my life—except a dog."

In a moment the color left the girl's cheeks, and when she raised her eyes slowly to Van Gaff's her face was as white as the little flower at her throat. The man's whole soul shone in his eyes, and it seemed to him as though his heart for the moment had ceased to beat. An arm's distance away was the only salvation the earth seemed to hold for him. This girl had dragged him from his old life—she could hold him from it forever. Without her he knew that he would fall again, deeper than before, and he half stretched out his arms, his lips forming words of entreaty.

The girl seemed almost on the point of speaking. Her lips trembled, she seemed struggling to give sound to the words she wished to say, and Van Gaff leaned eagerly toward her as though he expected to hear her voice. In the face of his ardor she lowered her eyes and wrote in her tablet.

"You would not have said that if you had known more about me," he read. "I have accepted your friendship, I am allowing you to tell me that you love me, and yet—would you still say that you loved me if you knew that I had deceived you—deceived you so shamefully that I am afraid to tell you how?"

"Yes! Yes!" cried Van Gaff. He wrote the words heavily. His eyes glowed and his face was filled with a white, tense earnestness. "Deception has been a part of my life," he added. "Sometimes deception is necessary, as it has been with me; then it is not a sin, but just. That is my eleventh commandment, and by obeying it I have made the world give me the little that I would not otherwise have had. At this moment I am obeying it." He was thinking of the copper-ship and the man at the "Soo."

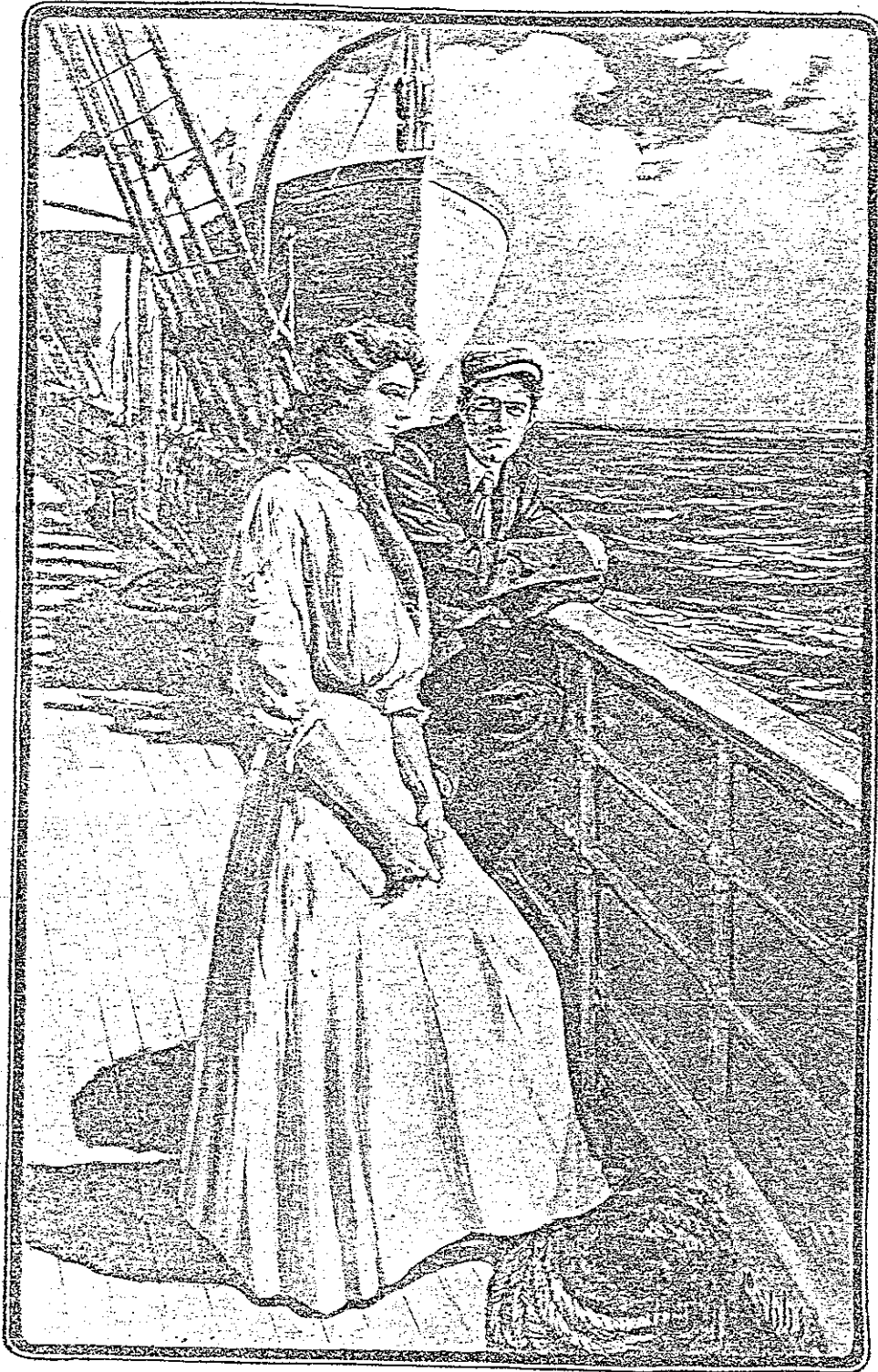
"Are you deceiving me?" wrote the girl. There was a look in her eyes which filled Van Gaff with an almost irresistible desire to take her in his arms.

In a moment he had launched himself into the story of the copper-ship. Briefly, strongly, he described wherein his deception lay, and the girl read while he wrote, her face so near his own that at times he could feel her hair blowing against his cheek. Before he had done she drew back, and when Van Gaff looked up she was standing, her eyes big and staring, as though she had been frightened.

"I must think over what you have said," she wrote when he had returned the tablet. "I must go to my cabin. You may see me again—soon." She gave him her hand, and Van Gaff held it for a moment between both of his own.

He made no attempt to detain her after that. He watched her as she walked into the forward deck, and when she entered her cabin he saw that she paused for a moment to look back at

*in color*



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him. For the first remembered time in his life Van Gaff was happy. In the beginning he had steeled himself against disappointment. He had feared that the girl would regard his attentions and words as impertinent, if not insulting. But she had accepted both, and there was something in her way of receiving them that made his heart throb with hope.

He loved her with the sincerity of a man in whom the great passion was burning for the first time, and he did not go beyond this fact. Only in a vague sort of way did he wonder how she had deceived him. He believed that he had guessed something of her secret the night before, and he felt assured that the captain could explain everything to him if he so desired. But he did not care for explanations now. The girl had become a part of his life, a part vitally necessary to his future, and nothing could keep him from loving her.

Anxiously he awaited her reappearance. But the girl's dinner was served in her cabin, and as hour after hour passed and she did not come on deck Van Gaff's suspense became acute. Late in the afternoon he received a note in which she said that she was suffering from a headache, and that she was sorry she could not see him until the next day.

## IV

THE salvage agent was up early the following morning. He had not noticed that the ship's engines had ceased to throb beneath his feet, and when he came on deck and saw that the vessel was lying motionless in the smooth sea, he was greatly surprised. The captain called down to him from the pilot-house.

"Guess we've fractured a shaft, Mr. Van Gaff." He pointed in disgust, and Van Gaff, following his arm, saw an indistinct haze of smoke a dozen miles away. "That's the 'Soo,'" explained the master, with a significant shrug of his shoulders. "It'll cost us a good lump to get towed in—and it'll take us a day!"

A sudden thrill of joy shot through Van Gaff. This delay was what he wanted. Every minute of it would be precious to him. His happiness shone in his face as he ascended the pilot-house

stair and asked the captain if he had heard how Miss York was. For an instant the friendliness went out of Mr. Wilson's face.

"Do you see that bit of smoke?" he asked, pointing toward the distant city. "That's our launch, and Miss York is in it. She said that it was necessary for her to get to the 'Soo' without delay, and I sent her on. I have my suspicions—that you——" He paused, fumbled in one of his pockets, and handed Van Gaff a letter. "She left that for you!" he ended gruffly.

Van Gaff seized upon it like an animal and tore it open. It began:

DEAR MR. VAN GAFF:

I know that you will think me very, very wicked when you have read this, but I hope that you will forgive me. I told you last night that I had deceived you, but since then I have deceived you again and in a way that will do you great injury—financially.

In the first place, I am neither deaf nor dumb. Please do not blame Captain Wilson. I told him, the night that we played cards, that I was going to have a little fun at your expense, and I got his word of honor that he would not betray me, for I did not expect that I would see you again after that evening.

But I was foolish enough to encourage you, and the following day—well, when you declared that you loved me, something urged me to play my part a little longer.

Before we parted yesterday morning I would have revealed myself—but you spoke of a long-lost vessel, a copper-ship, which went down years ago. Those words sealed my lips. You told me how and where your company found it, and the name of its owner, and by the time you read this I will be on my way to that owner.

Before you arrive at the "Soo" the copper-ship will be mine. I almost despise myself for betraying your confidence in this way. But you have taught me an eleventh commandment—and I am obeying it to the letter.

Sincerely yours,

ELIZABETH YORK.

When Van Gaff turned toward Captain Wilson again his face was as hard as stone. Something rushed back over him like a flood, and he knew that the mask had fallen from him and that he was no longer a fool, but Van Gaff once more—the old Van Gaff, with perhaps



a deeper and darker place waiting for him at the bottom of the rut. What little hope there had been in him was now mangled.

He had not only betrayed himself, but his employers as well. He had allowed an adventuress to hook and strangle him. But still—his heart throbbed as if it would burst when he thought of her. Whatever she was, she had brought him back into good, wholesome life for a few short hours—and he loved her! He would always love her for that. But now the old spirit in him called for action.

"Captain Wilson," he said, "it is also necessary that I should get to the 'Soo'—without delay. Over there is a yacht that will take me in. Will you signal for her?" As he spoke he handed the other the open letter. "That will explain why!" he added.

The captain read, and when he had done he rumbled out an oath that could be heard amidships.

"She's a trump!" he shouted. His face became red with excitement. Running into the pilot-house, he leveled a pair of glasses at the distant launch, then sent a signal down into the engine-room.

"I'll call the yacht for you," he cried. "I'll call it—because you can't catch up with her! She'll beat you—easy! If I thought she wouldn't I'd hold you here till doomsday! But she'll beat you—she'll get there first—she'll—"

The roar of the freighter's whistle interrupted him. In an unbroken signal that clouded the aft deck with steam it called until the yacht swung bow on and bore down within hailing distance. In response to the captain's invitation it ran alongside, and Van Gaff swung himself down into it. There were two young women and a man in the boat. Before any of them had expressed their surprise at his action, he had accosted the latter, who was staring at him in blank astonishment from the stern.

"I beg your pardon," he said, lifting his hat in acknowledgment of the presence of women. "We've broken down. It's important that I should reach the 'Soo' without a moment's delay. I will give you five hundred dollars if you get me there within three-quarters of an hour,

and I'll give you a bonus of one hundred dollars for every five minutes you save under that time."

He seated himself opposite the man at the engine, pulled out his wallet, then looked at his watch. "Please don't waste a second," he urged, as he counted out a number of bills. "I'm going to pay you three hundred in advance—I'll give you the rest when I see that you have won."

The little boat was edging away from the steel wall of the ship. Her engine kicked up a billow of foam behind, and as the craft shot out with her nose pointed toward the distant city, Van Gaff handed over the bank-notes. Then he leaned against the cushioned rail and silently watched their progress.

Thirty minutes later he gave four fifty-dollar bills to the man at the engine. Ten minutes after that, as the yacht glided with dangerous speed up to one of the low wharves of the town, he handed him two others, and while the craft was still in motion clambered ashore. He knew that to hunt for a cab would mean delay, so he hailed a delivery-wagon, climbed in beside the driver, and, thrusting a bill into his hand, told him to make the run of his life to an address which he gave him.

A few minutes later the salvage agent was hurrying along a winding cinder-path that led to an old-fashioned white house set in the midst of a small grove. As he ascended the weather-beaten steps to the front door he caught a glimpse of a gray-haired man through an open window, and he felt assured that this was the man he had come to see. A moment after he had knocked an elderly woman came to the door, received his card, and ushered him into a small reception-room.

Van Gaff was filled with hope. It seemed evident to him that he had beaten Miss York. He knew that the girl had landed at least half an hour ahead of him, but it was possible that something had delayed her after she had reached the city. The quiet, unexcited aspect of the man he had seen and the equally calm demeanor of the woman, whom he took to be his wife, convinced him that the couple had not yet been approached on the subject of the copper-ship.

But he knew that there would be no time in which to bargain, for the girl might come in at any moment. He would offer fifty thousand dollars at once. If there was a sign of hesitation on the part of the copper-ship's owner he would increase the offer, but in a way that would not create suspicion. He had figured this out, when light footsteps sounded in the hall, and a moment later Miss Elizabeth York stood in the doorway!

The girl wore the costume in which he had seen her aboard ship. There was a smile upon her lips, the sweet, soft smile that had made a fool of Van Gaff, and she advanced toward him, her hand outstretched.

"Won't you please congratulate me, Mr. Van Gaff?" she asked. A rich color suffused her face and her eyes glowed with a light that Van Gaff had never seen in them before. "Please——"

Van Gaff had not taken her hand. He knew that he was beaten.

"You have ruined me," he said coldly

"And consequently you think that I am very wicked," smiled the girl. "But I'm not. I've just been obeying your eleventh commandment, and by doing it I have kept your company from stealing a fortune. It was stealing, wasn't it?"

Van Gaff's face flushed under the accusation.

"And now—do you like me any less—because—I've done a good deed?"

The girl came a step nearer. Her lip quivered, her eyes seemed almost ready to fill with tears, and suddenly Van Gaff reached out and caught her in his arms. For a moment the girl allowed him to hold her there, and turned the round, red O of her mouth up for him to kiss. As she struggled to draw herself away the man whispered, "But you said the copper-ship would be yours?"

"And it is mine, you goose!" cried the girl as she freed herself. "My name is not York. It is——"

Suddenly she turned toward the door. "Papa—mama," she called, "will you please come in? I want to introduce you to—a friend."

#### THE CALL OF THE WIND

THE wind comes whimpering out of the west,  
*(Oh, wind of the west, so free!)*  
 With the scent of the plains on its heaving breast.  
*(Oh, plains that I no more see!)*  
 It cries through the smoky and roaring town  
 Of the tossing grass and the hillsides brown  
 Where the cattle graze as the sun goes down.  
*(Oh, sun on the prairie sea!)*

And this is the call that the west wind sings,  
*(Oh, call of the wind, have done!)*  
 That the worth of life is the joy it brings.  
*(Oh, joy that is never won!)*  
 That the stainless sky and the virgin sod  
 Hold richer wealth—of the peace of God—  
 Than the streets where the weary toilers plod.  
*(Oh, streets that the soul would shun!)*

But, wind of the west, in vain thy voice;  
*(Oh, why must the voice be vain?)*  
 If joy were all, 'twere an easy choice.  
*(Oh, choice that is fraught with pain!)*  
 The road of life is a hard, hard way,  
 And yet, if we hold to the path it may  
 Lead back to the land of dreams some day.  
*(Yes, back to the plains again!)*

Joseph Mills Hanson