

# MAIN STREET

The Story of Carol Kennicott

By SINCLAIR LEWIS

She had regained a feeling of social virtue by telling Juanita Haydock "how daring her lawn looked with the Japanese lanterns" when she saw that Erik was stalking her. Though he was merely ambulating about with his hands in his pockets, though he did not peep at her, she knew he was calling her. She sidled away from Juanita. Erik hastened to her. She nodded coolly (she was proud of her coolness).

"Carol! I've got a wonderful chance! Don't know but what some ways it might be better than going East to take art. Myrtle Cass says—"

I dropped in to say howdy to Myrtle last evening, and had quite a long talk with her father, and he said he was hunting for a fellow to go to work in the flour mill and learn the whole business, and maybe become general manager. I know something about wheat from my farming, and I worked a couple of months in the flour mill at Curlew when I got sick of tailoring. What do you think? You said any work was artistic if it was done by an artist. And flour is so important. What do you think?"

"Wait! Wait!"

This sensitive boy would be very skilfully stamped into conformity by Lyman Cass and his sallow daughter; but did she detest the plan for this reason? "I must be honest. I mustn't tamper with his future to please my vanity." But she had no sure vision. She turned on him:

"How can I decide? It's up to you. Do you want to become a person like Lynn Cass, or do you want

to become a person like—yes, like me! Wait! Don't be flattering. Be honest. This is important."

"I know. I am a person like you now! I mean, I want to rebel."

"Yes. We're alike," gravely.

"Only I'm not sure I can put through my schemes. I really can't draw much. I guess I have a pretty fair taste in fabrics, but since I've known you I don't like to think about fussing with dress-designing. But as a miller, I'd have the means—books, piano, travel."

"I'm going to be frank and beastly. Don't you realize that it isn't just because her papa needs a bright young man in the mill that Myrtle is amiable to you? Can't you understand what she'll do to you when she has you, when she sends you to church and makes you become respectable?"

He glared at her. "I don't know. I suppose so."

"You are thoroughly unstable!"

"What if I am? Most fish out of water are! Don't talk like Mrs. Bogart! How can I be anything but 'unstable'—wandering from farm to tailor shop to books, no training, nothing but trying to make books talk to me! Probably I'll fall. Oh, I know it; probably I'm uneven. But I'm not unstable about this job in the mill—and Myrtle. I know what I want. I want you!"

"Please, please, please!"

"I do. I'm not a schoolboy any more. I want you. If I take Myrtle, it's to forget you."

"Please, please!"

"It's you that are unstable! You talk at things and play at things, but you're scared. Would I mind it if you and I went off to poverty, and I had to dig ditches? I would not! But you would. I think you would come to like me, but you won't admit it. I wouldn't have said this, but when you sneer at Myrtle and the mill—If I'm not to have good sensible things like those, do you think I'll be content with trying to become a damn dressmaker, after you? Are you fair? Are you?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Do you like me? Do you?"

"Yes—No! Please! I can't talk any more."

"Not here. Mrs. Haydock is looking at us."

"No, nor anywhere. O Erik, I am fond of you, but I'm afraid."

"What of?"

"Of them! Of my rulers—Gopher Prairie... My dear boy, we are talking very foolishly. I am a normal wife and a good mother, and you are—oh, a college freshman."

"You do like me! I'm going to make you love me!"

She looked at him once, recklessly, and walked away with a serene gait that was a disordered flight.

Kennicott grumbled on their way home, "You and this Valborg fellow seem quite chummy."

"Oh, we are. He's interested in Myrtle Cass, and I was telling him how nice she is."

In her room she marveled, "I have become a liar. I'm snarled with lies and foggy analyses and desires—I who was clear and sure."

She hurried into Kennicott's room, sat on the edge of his bed. He flapped a drowsy welcoming hand at her from the expanse of quilt and dented pillows.

"Will, I really think I ought to trot off to St. Paul or Chicago or some place."

"I thought we settled all that, few nights ago! Wait till we can have a real trip." He shook himself out of his drowsiness. "You might give me a good-night kiss."

She did—dutifully. He held her lips against his for an intolerable time. "Don't you like the old man any more?" He sat up and shyly fitted his palm about the slimmness of her waist.

"Of course. I like you very much indeed." Even to herself it sounded flat. She longed to be able to throw into her voice the facile passion of a light woman. She patted his cheek.

He sighed, "I'm sorry you're so tired. Seems like— But of course you aren't very strong."

"Yes... Then you don't think you're quite sure I ought to stay here in town?"

"I told you so! I certainly do!"

She crept back to her room, a small timorous figure in white.

"I can't face Will down—demand the right. He'd be obstinate. And I can't even go off and earn my living again. Out of the habit of it. He's driving me—I'm afraid of what he's driving me to. Afraid."

"That man in there, snoring in the state air, my husband? Could any ceremony make him my husband?"

"No. I don't want to hurt him. I want to love him. I can't, when I'm thinking of Erik. Am I too honest—a funny topsy-turvy honesty—the faithfulness of un-ith? I wish I had a more compartmental mind. Like men. I'm too monogamous—to ward Erik!—my child Erik, who needs me."

"Is an illicit affair like a gambling debt—demands stricter honor than the legitimate debt of matrimony, because it's not legally enforced?"

"That's nonsense! I don't care in the least for Erik! Not for any man. I want to be let alone, in a woman world—a world without Main Street, or politicians, or business men, or men with that sudden beastly hungry look, that glistening unfrank expression that wives know—"

"If Erik were here, if he would just sit quiet and kind and talk, I could be still, I could go to sleep."



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CHAPTER XXXI

Their night came unheralded. Kennicott was on a country call. It was cool but Carol huddled on the porch, rocking, meditating, repentant, and though she sighed, "I ought to go in and read—so many things to read—ought to go in," she remained. Suddenly Erik was coming, turning in, swinging open the screen door, touching her hand.

"Erik!"

"Saw your husband driving out of town. Couldn't stand it."

"Well—You mustn't stay more than five minutes."

"Couldn't stand not seeing you. Every day, towards evening, felt I had to see you—pictured you so clear. I've been good though, staying away, haven't I?"

"And you must go on being good."

"Why must I?"

"We better not stay here on the porch. The Howlands across the street are such window-peepers, and Mrs. Bogart—"

She did not look at him but she could divine his trepidation as he stumbled indoors. A moment ago the night had been coldly empty; now it was incalculable, hot, treacherous. But it is women who are the calm realists once they discard the fetishes of the premarital hunt. Carol was serene as she murmured, "Hungry? I have some little honey-colored cakes. You may have two, and then you must skip home."

"Take me up and let me see Hugh asleep."

"I don't believe—"

"Just a glimpse?"

"Well—"

She doubtfully led the way to the hall-room-nursery. Their heads close, Erik's curls pleasant as they touched her cheek, they looked in at

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