

WILD GEESE

By Martha Ostenso.

"You go up to the house," Erik went on heartily. "They give you coffee."

"No, thanks," Martin answered, clucking at the horse. "Got to go along." Erik's hospitality shamed him doubly.

He drove out of the farm yard, and Erik looked after him, seeing the fish pole and net in the back of the cart. The Icelander's face screwed into a half pitying, half ironical smile. But he did not wait to see whether Martin would take the main road or branch off below the willows to the road that went around the lake. There was in this Icelander family, a sort of grand faith in the honor of human kind.

Martin did not take the lake road. He thought with self-scathing here-to slip down below the willows and around the bend to the cove where he would not be seen by the Bjarnassons. Such had been Caleb's instructions—given in full belief that they would be obeyed. He would have to tell his father the truth when he arrived home. Caleb would be in a towering rage, which would express itself in a gentle sarcasm and later in a strange and sinisterly effective abuse of Amelia, that Martin never understood.

But he was glad that he had followed his own instincts not to violate the sentiment of the Icelanders. He had felt the hidden scorn of Caleb Gare in Erik's words. Now, perhaps, the Icelanders would have reason to think better of a Gare.

Amelia came out of the house as he was unharnessing the horse. Her face bore a shade of distress, and Martin guessed what she was looking forward to. There would be trouble somewhere—all under the surface. It would gather like a storm when the children were not around.

"You didn't get the fish?" she asked, looking into the back of the wagon.

"No," Martin answered shortly. "They're not fishing yet."

Amelia left him and went to the garden, where she counted the new tomatoes on the vines. They would not be ripe until late in August. The vines were still delicate and needed careful propping. Amelia stood on her chin, trying to think of something for supper to take the place of fish. Caleb had planned on having fish. Anything else, no matter how good, would not be fish. She would have to prepare something especially savory to lessen his disappointment. She would have new carrots and chicken—no, they had had chicken the Sunday before, and Caleb disapproved of killing them while they were laying so well that the eggs were preserved for the fall market—something else would have to do. Amelia pulled an apronful of new carrots, and went into the house to consider.

Caleb came home late that evening with whom he had arranged for a freshing crew. He had not intended that he would be late and supper was held over an hour. The omelet and bacon was cold, the potatoes soggy from being heated over. Judith had seized some food off the stove and had gone out. She had not returned.

In silence, everybody sat down to the table. Caleb's eye fell on the dishes before him. Without a word he began to serve the food.

"Did you get the crew for the first of September?" Amelia asked, after a long silence.

Caleb helped himself to butter and passed it to Lind before he answered. "Yes—yes," he said then, as if he had just recollected that she had spoken.

Characteristically, he made no reference to the absence of fish. Suddenly he threw a sharp glance around the table.

"Where's Jude?" he asked. "One of her calves is missing," Ellen put in for the sake of Amelia. "No doubt—no doubt," he mumbled, and went on eating as though there was no one else present.

After the meal, Dind went out and walked down the road to look for Judith. Ellen and Charlie had the milking to do.

"Got cold feet, eh? Fraid of a couple of dead ones like the rest of 'em," Caleb sneered at Martin. "You'll bring back another story before freeze-up, or—well do without meat. Think I've been keeping the lot of ye for nothin' all these years, while I've been breakin' my back to make a living out of this soil? A pack of good for nothings I've got for it!"

"The Bjarnassons ain't fishin' themselves, yet," Martin said in a low voice. "And I won't until they let us."

"Eh? You won't, er? We'll see if you won't!" Him!

He went out with his lantern chucking to himself. As he moved along the cow path in the pasture and across it to the flax field, he speculated upon some way of compelling Martin to fish when the cooler weather came. It was not altogether that he wanted the satisfaction of taking fish from the obdurate Bjarnasson; it was also that he must quell any rising independence in Martin. If he started at twenty to show a will of his own, at twenty-five there would be no holding him. He must think of something.

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Caleb walked in the approaching dusk like a thing that belonged infinitely to the earth, his broad, squat body leaning low over it. Presently his mind was far from the annoying trifles that symbolized his family. Before him glimmered the silver gray sheet of the flax—rich, beautiful, strong. All unto itself, complete, demanding everything, and in turn yielding everything—growth of the earth, the only thing on the earth worthy of respect, of homage.

North of it lay the muskeg, black and evil and potted with water-holes. Aronson ought to fence the rotten land now that it was his.

Mark and Lind agreed to meet at the Sandbos' until the return of the Klovacs.

"School-ma'ms must toe the line," she laughed at Mark, "and I just couldn't stand a scene. That would finish me as far as earning my own living for the rest of the season is concerned."

"I would like that," Mark urged. "I really have a little money of my own, somewhere."

But Lind would not listen to him. She would stay conscientiously to the end of the term.

At the Sandbos' the chokecherry trees were bending over in wine-red arches. Sven picked Lind a tin-canful of them, and she and Mark ate them until their mouths were puckered and dry. Mrs. Sandbo enjoyed having the Teacher and her "boy" as she called Mark, around, and often served them with coffee and some trifle. At heart Mrs. Sandbo was sound, and as she became more used to Lind's visits, she did not ply her usual busy questions.

The Teacher walked with Mark to the edge of Latt's Slough, where they knelt and picked tiny, black snails off the reeds. Lind found little waxy water lilies growing there, but the mud was too soft at the edge of the swamp for her to reach out and get them.

"They would die right away after I got them, anyway," she said to Mark, stepping back to firm ground.

"Yes, and they would be mostly long slimy roots," he consoled her. They walked half a mile or so to a little sunny knoll at the edge of Gare's timber. Here they sat down, Lind spreading her pale, billowy dress out about her. In a little while Mark stretched himself out full length, shading his eyes with his hand and nibbling at a straw.

The grass below them leaned up the hill, like the smoothly combed hair of a person's head. Lind regarded it curiously. The air was strong with humming insects, poised like little black periods in the light. Occasionally a blue-bottle sailed majestically past, the tissue of its wings gathering in the sun. A droning bee blundered into a swarm of tiny, fidgeting gnats, disentangled itself and soared lazily on to a distant flower, unconscious of the excitement it had caused. Below them, a few feet away, stood the gray, pocked cone of an ant hill; up and down its slope the ants twinkled, providently absorbed. A tiny world of intense life.

"Mark," Lind said softly. "Every second something is going—going." "And coming, Lind," he told her. "I don't know. We can't stop the going—that's beyond our control. But we can stop the coming—we have the power to stop everything, in ourselves."

Mark would not be serious. He rolled over and put both his arms about her tightly, holding his head against her breast. "Don't, Lindy—don't. You saved me from all those gloomy contemplations. If anything happened now to take you away from me I don't know what I'd do. I was always so alone, Lind—beached on a desert island. You don't know how it was. I wasn't even sure of my own identity, sometimes." She kissed his hair and drew her fingers across the tanned skin

at the back of his neck. "It's never going to be like that any more," she whispered. She dropped her head against his and clung to him. "We are one entity now, my dearest."

Chapter XII.

On a late afternoon in July, before the maying began, the cattle on the swamp land to the north came hurrying home, bawling out their warning of the approaching storm. The herd farther away sought shelter with the horses under the bluffs. Close to the earth there was a pale, unnatural glow, like the reflection from a white fire. Higher up the air was slag-gray, hanging in sultry folds. The hot voice of the grasshoppers was the only sound abroad; it cut like little scissors in the grass.

Amelia, hoeing in the garden,

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draw the back of her hand across her wet forehead. The gray heat was overwhelming. She looked westward to the drab bank of cloud that had been building up for ten minutes or more. Now it was a gigantic untravelling of soot, widening out to the south and the north. It broke with lightning as Amelia looked at it.

Suddenly a greenish light shot up as if from below the horizon. It had the effect of hollowing out a luminous void between heaven and earth.

"Hall," said Caleb almost under his breath as he came out of the barn. He would not admit it aloud. It might pass over.

"Hall," said Amelia to herself, her hand going instinctively to her breast.

She looked around and saw Caleb approaching. He passed her without speaking, as if nothing unusual was about to happen.

Martin, who was building an extra pigpen for two new sows, threw his leg over the bar and herded all of the pigs into the shed. Then he turned the milch cows that had come home and were drinking at the trough, into the cattle yard. Lind, who had been reading, put aside her book at the sound of thunder. It had grown suddenly dark, and then suddenly light again. She spoke to Ellen, who was baking bread in the kitchen.

"Looks like a storm, doesn't it?" She stood in the doorway and looked out. Judith was running about in the sheep pasture, getting her sheep into the pen. Pete was circling about them, helping her.

(To Be Continued.)

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