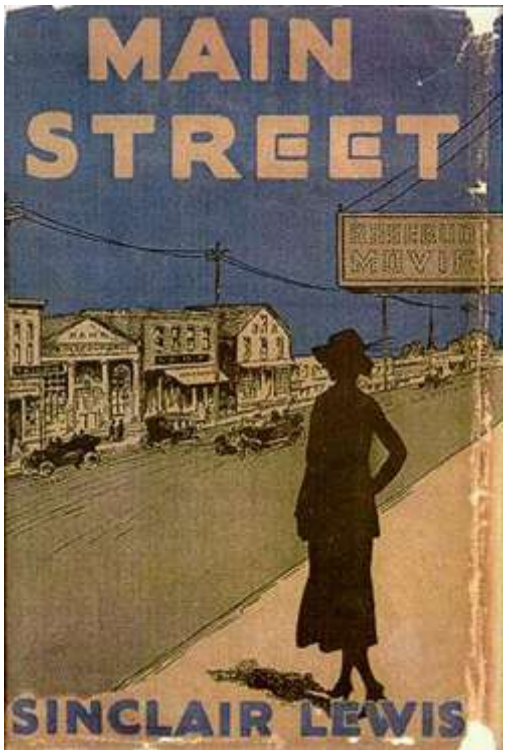


"*Oh, we're hopeless, we dissatisfied women!*"

SINCLAIR LEWIS
MAIN STREET
1920

CH. 36-39 ■ EXCERPTS ■ Carol leaves Gopher Prairie

Now an American classic, Sinclair Lewis's best-selling novel *Main Street* became the decade's statement of the city-town divide in America. Modeling his fictional Midwestern town on his real Minnesota home town, Lewis countered the cozy-and-virtuous image of the small town favored in countless novels with the conservative, complacent, and often self-righteous residents of Gopher Prairie. Yet through his central character, the educated and dream-driven Carol, he brought his readers a more nuanced view of the town, one that Carol gains only by leaving Gopher Prairie to work for two years in Washington, DC, before returning, we are led to believe, for good. In these excerpts, we enter as Carol explains her decision to leave Gopher Prairie while her devoted husband Will expresses chagrin and befuddlement. Why can't she be happy as his husband and her son's mother? What vision of modern womanhood does Carol hope to emulate? Does she know?

CHAPTER 36

. . .

"You're right. All I've done has been in line. I don't belong to Gopher Prairie. That isn't meant as a condemnation of Gopher Prairie, and it may be a condemnation of me. All right! I don't care! I don't belong here, and I'm going. I'm not asking permission anymore. I'm simply going."

He grunted. "Do you mind telling me, if it isn't too much trouble, how long you're going for?"

"I don't know. Perhaps for a year. Perhaps for a lifetime."

"I see. Well, of course, I'll be tickled to death to sell out my [medical] practice and go anywhere you say. Would you like to have me go with you to Paris and study art, maybe, and wear velveteen pants and a woman's bonnet, and live on spaghetti?"

"No, I think we can save you that trouble. You don't quite understand. I am going—I really am—and alone! I've got to find out what my work is—"

"Work? Work? Sure! That's the whole trouble with you! You haven't got enough work to do. If you had five kids and no hired girl, and had to help with the chores and separate the cream, like these farmers' wives, then you wouldn't be so discontented."

"I know. That's what most men—and women—like you *would* say. That's how they would explain all I am and all I want. And I shouldn't argue with them. These business men, from their crushing labors of sitting in an office seven hours a day, would calmly recommend that I have a dozen children. As it happens, I've done that sort of thing. There've been a good many times when we hadn't a maid, and I did all the housework, and cared for Hugh, and went to Red Cross, and did it all very efficiently. I'm a good cook and a good sweeper, and you don't dare say I'm not!"

"No-no, you're——"

"But was I more happy when I was drudging? I was not. I was just bedraggled and unhappy. It's work—but not my work. I could run an office or a library, or nurse and teach children. But solitary dishwashing isn't enough to satisfy me—or many other women. We're going to chuck it. We're going to wash 'em by machinery, and come out and play with you men in the offices and clubs and

politics you've cleverly kept for yourselves! Oh, we're hopeless, we dissatisfied women! Then why do you want to have us about the place, to fret you? So it's for your sake that I'm going!"

"Of course a little thing like Hugh [their son] makes no difference!"

"Yes, all the difference. That's why I'm going to take him with me."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"You won't!"

Forlornly, "Uh—— Carrie, what the devil is it you want, anyway?"

But solitary dishwashing isn't enough to satisfy me —or many other women. We're going to chuck it. We're going to wash 'em by machinery, and come out and play with you men in the offices and clubs and politics you've cleverly kept for yourselves! Oh, we're hopeless, we dissatisfied women!

"Oh, conversation! No, it's much more than that. I think it's a greatness of life—a refusal to be content with even the healthiest mud."

"Don't you know that nobody ever solved a problem by running away from it?"

"Perhaps. Only I choose to make my own definition of 'running away.' I don't call—— Do you realize how big a world there is beyond this Gopher Prairie where you'd keep me all my life? It may be that some day I'll come back, but not till I can bring something more than I have now. And even if I am cowardly and run away—all right, call it cowardly, call me anything you want to! I've been ruled too long by fear of being called things. I'm going away to be quiet and think. I'm—I'm going! I have a right to my own life."

"So have I to mine!"

"Well?"

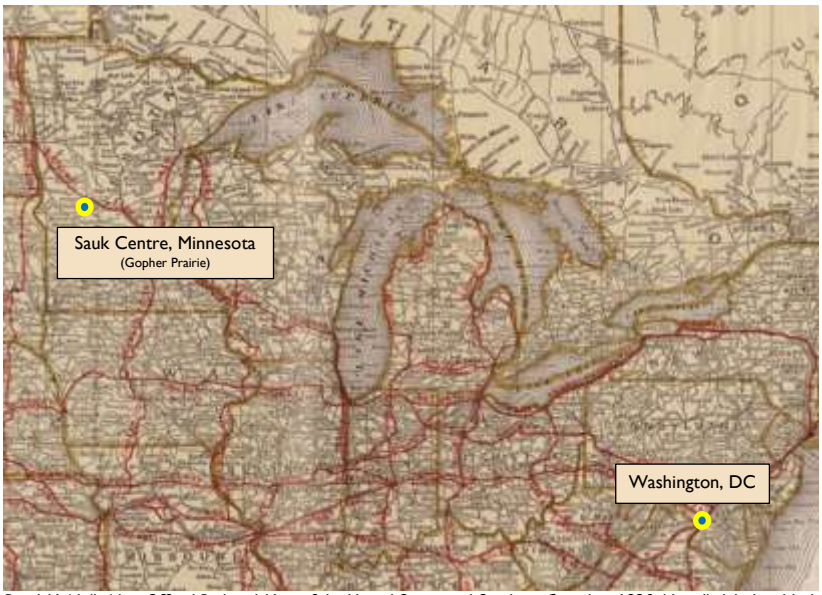
"I have a right to my life—and you're it, you're my life! You've made yourself so. I'm damned if I'll agree to all your freak notions, but I will say I've got to depend on you. Never thought of that complication, did you, in this 'off to Bohemia, and express yourself, and free love, and live your own life' stuff!"[1]

"You have a right to me if you can keep me. Can you?" He moved uneasily.

Minnesota Historical Society

Sauk Centre, Minnesota, postcard, ca. 1920

[1] Bohemia: referring to an unconventional "bohemian" lifestyle pursuing the arts, philosophy, politics, etc., usually in urban settings with like-minded people.



Rand McNally New Official Railroad Map of the United States and Southern Canada. , 1920 (detail); labels added.
Library of Congress

II

For a month they discussed it. They hurt each other very much, and sometimes they were close to weeping, and invariably he used banal [trite] phrases about her duties and she used phrases quite as banal about freedom, and through it all, her discovery that she really could get away from Main Street was as sweet as the discovery of love. Kennicott never consented definitely. At most he agreed to a public theory that she was "going to take a short trip and see what the East was like in wartime."

She set out for Washington in October—just before the war ended.

She had determined on Washington because it was less intimidating than the obvious New York, because she hoped to find streets in which Hugh could play, and because in the stress of warwork, with its demand for thousands of temporary clerks, she could be initiated into the world of offices.

Hugh was to go with her, despite the wails and rather extensive comments of Aunt Bessie.[2]

She wondered if she might not encounter Erik in the East, but it was a chance thought, soon forgotten.

III

The last thing she saw on the station platform was Kennicott, faithfully waving his hand, his face so full of uncomprehending loneliness that he could not smile but only twitch up his lips. She waved to him as long as she could, and when he was lost she wanted to leap from the vestibule and run back to him. She thought of a hundred tendernesses she had neglected.

She had her freedom, and it was empty. The moment was not the highest of her life, but the lowest and most desolate, which was altogether excellent, for instead of slipping downward she began to climb.

She sighed, "I couldn't do this if it weren't for Will's kindness, his giving me money." But a second after: "I wonder how many women would always stay home if they had the money?"

Hugh complained, "Notice me, mummy!" He was beside her on the red plush seat of the day-coach, a boy of three and a half. "I'm tired of playing train. Let's play something else. Let's go see Auntie Bogart."

"Oh, *no!* Do you really like Mrs. Bogart?"

"Yes. She gives me cookies and she tells me about the Dear Lord. You never tell me about the Dear Lord. Why don't you tell me about the Dear Lord? Auntie Bogart says I'm going to be a preacher. Can I be a preacher? Can I preach about the Dear Lord?"

"Oh, please wait till my generation has stopped rebelling before yours starts in!"

"What's a generation?"

"It's a ray in the illumination of the spirit."

"That's foolish." He was a serious and literal person, and rather humorless. She kissed his frown, and marveled:

"I am running away from my husband, after liking a Swedish ne'er-do-well and expressing immoral opinions, just as in a romantic story. And my own son reproves me because I haven't given him religious

[2] See Gopher Prairie residents list, p. 5.

__Gopher Prairie Residents__

Aunt Bessie: Will's aunt

Erik Valborg: Swedish tailor with whom Carol had a romantic friendship before his departure to Minneapolis and beyond

Auntie [Widow] Bogart: Kennicotts' gossipy neighbor

Vida Sherwin: "old maid" high school teacher

Sam Clark: school board president

Guy Pollock: lawyer

Dave & Maud Dyer: town pharmacist and his wife

Ezra & Ella Stowbody: bank president and his wife

Miles Bjornstam: Swedish farmer; supporter of progressive causes

Juanita Haydock: member of the Jolly Seventeen, Carol's women's circle

Cy Bogart: teenaged troublemaker

instruction. But the story doesn't go right. I'm neither groaning nor being dramatically saved. I keep on running away, and I enjoy it. I'm mad with joy over it. Gopher Prairie is lost back there in the dust and stubble, and I look forward."

She continued it to Hugh: "Darling, do you know what mother and you are going to find beyond the blue horizon rim?"

"What?" flatly.

We're going to find elephants with golden howdahs from which peep young maharanees with necklaces of rubies, and a dawn sea colored like the breast of a dove, and a white and green house filled with books and silver teases."

"And cookies?"

"Cookies? Oh, most decidedly cookies. We've had enough of bread and porridge. We'd get sick on too many cookies, but ever so much sicker on no cookies at all."

"That's foolish."

"It is, O male Kennicott!"

"Huh! " said Kennicott II, and went to sleep on her shoulder.

IV

The theory of the *Dauntless* regarding Carol's absence:[3]

> Mrs. Will Kennicott and son Hugh left on No. 24 on Saturday last for a stay of some months in Minneapolis, Chicago, New York, and Washington. Mrs. Kennicott confided to Ye Scribe that she will be connected with one of the multifarious [various] war activities now centering in the Nation's Capital for a brief period before returning. Her countless friends who appreciate her splendid labors with the local Red Cross realize how valuable she will be to any war board with which she chooses to become connected. Gopher Prairie thus adds another shining star to its service flag, and without wishing to knock any neighboring communities, we would like to know any town of anywheres near our size in the state that has such a sterling war record. Another reason why you'd better Watch Gopher Prairie Grow.
>
> * * *
>
> Mr. and Mrs. David Dyer, Mrs. Dyer's sister, Mrs. Jennie Dayborn of Jackrabbit, and Dr. Will Kennicott drove to Minniemashie on Tuesday for a delightful picnic.

CHAPTER 37

I

She found employment in the Bureau of War Risk Insurance. Though the armistice with Germany was signed a few weeks after her coming to Washington, the work of the bureau continued.[4] She filed correspondence all day, then she dictated answers to letters of inquiry. It was an endurance of monotonous details, yet she asserted that she had found "real work."

Disillusions she did have. She discovered that in the afternoon, office routine stretches to the grave. She discovered that an office is as full of cliques and scandals as a Gopher Prairie. She discovered that most of the women in the government bureaus lived unhealthfully, dining on snatches in their crammed apartments. But she also discovered that business women may have friendships and enmities as frankly as men, and may revel in a bliss which no housewife attains—a free Sunday. It did not appear that the Great World needed her inspiration, but she felt that her letters, her contact with the anxieties of men and

[3] *Dauntless*: Gopher Prairie newspaper, in the social news section authored by "Ye Scribe."
[4] The armistice with Germany was signed November 11, 1918, ending World War One.

women all over the country, were a part of vast affairs, not confined to Main Street and a kitchen, but linked with Paris, Bangkok, Madrid.

She perceived that she could do office work without losing any of the putative [reputed] feminine virtue of domesticity; that cooking and cleaning, when divested of the fussing of an Aunt Bessie, take but a tenth of the time which, in a Gopher Prairie, it is but decent to devote to them.

Not to have to apologize for her thoughts to the Jolly Seventeen,[5] not to have to report to Kennicott at the end of the day all that she had done or might do, was a relief which made up for the office weariness. She felt that she was no longer one half of a marriage but the whole of a human being.

Washington gave her all the graciousness in which she had had faith: white columns seen across leafy parks, spacious avenues, twisty alleys. Daily she passed a dark square house with a hint of magnolias and a courtyard behind it, and a tall curtained second-story window through which a woman was always peering. The woman was mystery, romance, a story which told itself differently every day; now she was a murderess, now the neglected wife of an ambassador. It was mystery which Carol had most lacked in Gopher Prairie, where every house was open to view, where every person was but too easy to meet, where there were no secret gates opening upon moors over which one might walk by moss-deadened paths to strange high adventures in an ancient garden.

As she flitted up Sixteenth Street after a Kreisler recital,[6] given late in the afternoon for the government clerks, as the lamps kindled in spheres of soft fire, as the breeze flowed into the street, fresh as prairie winds and kindlier, as she glanced up the elm alley of Massachusetts Avenue, as she was rested by the integrity of the Scottish Rite Temple, she loved the city as she loved no one save Hugh. She

National Archives Washington, DC, ca. 1930

[5] Jolly Seventeen: Carol's women's group which held weekly bridge games and monthly dinner parties.
[6] *Friedrich "Fritz" Kreisler*: Austrian concert violinist who lived and performed in the United States.

encountered negro shanties turned into studios, with orange curtains and pots of mignonette [fragrant plant]; marble houses on New Hampshire Avenue, with butlers and limousines; and men who looked like fictional explorers and aviators. Her days were swift, and she knew that in her folly of running away she had found the courage to be wise.

She had a dispiriting first month of hunting lodgings in the crowded city. She had to roost in a hall room in a moldy mansion conducted by an indignant decayed gentlewoman, and leave Hugh to the care of a doubtful nurse. But later she made a home.

III

Her first acquaintances were the members of the Tincomb Methodist Church, a vast red-brick tabernacle. Vida Sherwin had given her a letter to an earnest woman with eyeglasses, plaid silk waist, and a belief in Bible Classes, who introduced her to the Pastor and the Nicer Members of Tincomb. Carol recognized in Washington as she had in California a transplanted and guarded Main Street. Two thirds of the church members had come from Gopher Prairies. The church was their society and their standard; they went to Sunday service, Sunday School, Epworth League, missionary lecture, church suppers, precisely as they had at home; they agreed that ambassadors and flippant newspapermen and infidel scientists of the bureaus were equally wicked and to be avoided; and by cleaving to Tincomb Church they kept their ideals from all contamination.

They welcomed Carol, asked about her husband, gave her advice regarding colic in babies, passed her the gingerbread and scalloped potatoes at church suppers, and in general made her very unhappy and lonely, so that she wondered if she might not enlist in the militant suffrage organization and be allowed to go to jail.

Always she was to perceive in Washington (as doubtless she would have perceived in New York or London) a thick streak of Main Street. The cautious dullness of a Gopher Prairie appeared in boarding houses where ladylike bureau-clerks gossiped to polite young army officers about the movies; a thousand Sam Clarks and a few Widow Bogarts were to be identified in the Sunday motor procession, in theater parties, and at the dinners of State Societies, to which the emigrés from Texas or Michigan surged that they might confirm themselves in the faith that their several Gopher Prairies were notoriously "a whole lot peppier and chummier than this stuck-up East."

But she found a Washington which did not cleave to Main Street.

Guy Pollock wrote to a cousin, a temporary army captain, a confiding and buoyant lad who took Carol to tea dances, and laughed, as she had always wanted someone to laugh, about nothing in particular. The captain introduced her to the secretary of a congressman, a cynical young widow with many acquaintances in the navy. Through her Carol met commanders and majors, newspapermen, chemists and geographers and fiscal experts from the bureaus, and a teacher who was a familiar of the militant suffrage headquarters. The teacher took her to headquarters. Carol never became a prominent suffragist. Indeed her only recognized position was as an able addresser of envelopes. But she was casually adopted by this family of friendly women who, when they were not being mobbed or arrested, took dancing lessons or went picnicking up the Chesapeake Canal or talked about the politics of the American Federation of Labor.

With the congressman's secretary and the teacher Carol leased a small flat [apartment]. Here she found home, her own place and her own people. She had, though it absorbed most of her salary, an excellent nurse [nanny] for Hugh. She herself put him to bed and played with him on holidays. There were walks with him, there were motionless evenings of reading, but chiefly Washington was associated with people, scores of them, sitting about the flat, talking, talking, talking, not always wisely but always excitedly. It was not at all the "artist's studio" of which, because of its persistence in fiction, she had dreamed. Most of them were in offices all day, and thought more in card catalogues or statistics than in mass and color. But they played, very simply, and they saw no reason why anything which exists cannot also be acknowledged.

She was sometimes shocked quite as she had shocked Gopher Prairie by these girls with their cigarettes and elfish knowledge. When they were most eager about Soviets or canoeing, she listened,

longed to have some special learning which would distinguish her, and sighed that her adventure had come so late. Kennicott and Main Street had drained her self-reliance; the presence of Hugh made her feel temporary. Some day—oh, she'd have to take him back to open fields and the right to climb about haylofts.

But the fact that she could never be eminent among these scoffing enthusiasts did not keep her from being proud of them, from defending them in imaginary conversations with Kennicott, who grunted (she could hear his voice), "They're simply a bunch of wild impractical theorists sittin' round chewing the rag," and "I haven't got the time to chase after a lot of these fool fads; I'm too busy putting aside a stake for our old age."

Most of the men who came to the flat, whether they were army officers or radicals who hated the army, had the easy gentleness, the acceptance of women without embarrassed banter, for which she had longed in Gopher Prairie. Yet they seemed to be as efficient as the Sam Clarks. She concluded that it was because they were of secure reputation, not hemmed in by the fire of provincial jealousies. Kennicott had asserted that the villager's lack of courtesy is due to his poverty. "We're no millionaire dudes," he boasted. Yet these army and navy men, these bureau experts, and organizers of multitudinous leagues, were cheerful on three or four thousand a year, while Kennicott had, outside of his land speculations, six thousand or more, and Sam had eight.

Nor could she upon inquiry learn that many of this reckless race died in the poorhouse. That institution is reserved for men like Kennicott who, after devoting fifty years to "putting aside a stake," incontinently invest the stake in spurious oil stocks.[7]

IV

She was encouraged to believe that she had not been abnormal in viewing Gopher Prairie as unduly tedious and slatternly. She found the same faith not only in girls escaped from domesticity but also in demure old ladies who, tragically deprived of esteemed husbands and huge old houses, yet managed to make a very comfortable thing of it by living in small flats and having time to read.

But she also learned that by comparison Gopher Prairie was a model of daring color, clever planning, and frenzied intellectuality. From her teacher-housemate she had a sardonic description of a Middlewestern railroad-division town, of the same size as Gopher Prairie but devoid of lawns and trees, a town where the tracks sprawled along the cinder-scabbed Main Street, and the railroad shops, dripping soot from eaves and doorway, rolled out smoke in greasy coils.

Other towns she came to know by anecdote: a prairie village where the wind blew all day long, and the mud was two feet thick in spring, and in summer the flying sand scarred newpainted houses and dust covered the few flowers set out in pots. New England mill-towns with the hands living in rows of cottages like blocks of lava. A rich farming-center in New Jersey, off the railroad, furiously pious, ruled by old men, unbelievably ignorant old men, sitting about the grocery talking of James G. Blaine. A Southern town, full of the magnolias and white columns which Carol had accepted as proof of romance, but hating the negroes, obsequious to the Old Families. A Western mining-settlement like a tumor. A booming semi-city with parks and clever architects, visited by famous pianists and unctuous lecturers, but irritable from a struggle between union labor and the manufacturers' association, so that in even the gayest of the new houses there was a ceaseless and intimidating heresy-hunt.

The chart which plots Carol's progress is not easy to read. The lines are broken and uncertain of direction; often instead of rising they sink in wavering scrawls; and the colors are watery blue and pink and the dim gray of rubbed pencil marks. A few lines are traceable.

Unhappy women are given to protecting their sensitiveness by cynical gossip, by whining, by high-church and new-thought religions, or by a fog of vagueness. Carol had hidden in none of these refuges from reality, but she, who was tender and merry, had been made timorous [timid] by Gopher Prairie. Even her flight had been but the temporary courage of panic. The thing she gained in Washington was not information about office systems and labor unions but renewed courage, that amiable contempt called

[7] In the 1910s, many Americans invested in risky and fraudulent stocks marketed by petroleum companies.

poise. Her glimpse of tasks involving millions of people and a score of nations reduced Main Street from bloated importance to its actual pettiness. She could never again be quite so awed by the power with which she herself had endowed the Vidas and Blaussers and Bogarts.

From her work and from her association with women who had organized suffrage associations in hostile cities, or had defended political prisoners, she caught something of an impersonal attitude; saw that she had been as touchily personal as Maud Dyer.

And why, she began to ask, did she rage at individuals? Not individuals but institutions are the enemies, and they most afflict the disciples who the most generously serve them. They insinuate their tyranny under a hundred guises and pompous names, such as Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race; and the only defense against them, Carol beheld, is unembittered laughter.

. . .

After a year, Will visits Carol in Washington. She takes him sightseeing, introduces him to her friends, and together they visit Savannah and Charleston for two weeks. They discuss their relationship with no clear decision. "Shall I go back to Gopher Prairie with you?" she asks. "Decide for me. I'm tired of deciding and undeciding." "No," Will responds. "You've got to do your own deciding. . . . I want you to be satisfied when you get there."

CHAPTER 38

. . .

VIII

She was in Washington; Kennicott was in Gopher Prairie, writing as dryly as ever about waterpipes and goose-hunting and Mrs. Fageros's mastoid.[8]

She was talking at dinner to a generalissima of suffrage.[9] Should she return?

The leader spoke wearily:

"My dear, I'm perfectly selfish. I can't quite visualize the needs of your husband, and it seems to me that your baby will do quite as well in the schools here as in your barracks at home."

"Then you think I'd better not go back?" Carol sounded disappointed.

"It's more difficult than that. When I say that I'm selfish I mean that the only thing I consider about women is whether they're likely to prove useful in building up real political power for women. And you? Shall I be frank? Remember when I say 'you' I don't mean you alone. I'm thinking of thousands of women who come to Washington and New York and Chicago every year, dissatisfied at home and seeking a sign in the heavens—women of all sorts, from timid mothers of fifty in cotton gloves, to girls just out of Vassar who organize strikes in their own fathers' factories! All of you are more or less useful to me, but only a few of you can take my place, because I have one virtue (only one): I have given up father and mother and children for the love of God.

"Here's the test for you: Do you come to 'conquer the East,' as people say, or do you come to conquer yourself?

"It's so much more complicated than any of you know—so much more complicated than I knew when I put on Ground Grippers[10] and started out to reform the world. The final complication in 'conquering Washington' or 'conquering New York' is that the conquerors must beyond all things not conquer! It must have been so easy in the good old days when authors dreamed only of selling a hundred thousand volumes, and sculptors of being feted [honored with receptions] in big houses, and even the Uplifters like me had a simple-hearted ambition to be elected to important offices and invited to go round lecturing. But we meddlers have upset everything. Now the one thing that is disgraceful to any of us is obvious success. The Uplifter who is very popular with wealthy patrons can be pretty sure that he has softened his philosophy to please them, and the author who is making lots of money—poor things, I've heard 'em apologizing for it to the shabby bitter-enders; I've seen 'em ashamed of the sleek luggage they got from movie rights.

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[8] *Mastoid*: part of the skull temporal bone, located just behind the ear. Inflammation of the mastoid was a common affliction before the introduction of antibiotics.
[9] *Generalissima of suffrage*, i.e., a major leader of the suffrage movement [generalissimo/generalissima: leader (m/f): Spanish]
[10] *Ground Grippers*: non-skid pads for shoes, i.e., unfeminine working gear.

"Do you want to sacrifice yourself in such a topsy-turvy world, where popularity makes you unpopular with the people you love, and the only failure is cheap success, and the only individualist is the person who gives up all his individualism to serve a jolly ungrateful proletariat which thumbs its nose at him?"[11]

Carol smiled ingratiatingly, to indicate that she was indeed one who desired to sacrifice, but she sighed, "I don't know; I'm afraid I'm not heroic. I certainly wasn't out home. Why didn't I do big effective——"

"Not a matter of heroism. Matter of endurance. Your Middle West is double-Puritan—prairie Puritan on top of New England Puritan; bluff frontiersman on the surface, but in its heart it still has the ideal of Plymouth Rock in a sleet storm. There's one attack you can make on it, perhaps the only kind that accomplishes much anywhere: you can keep on looking at one thing after another in your home and church and bank, and ask why it is, and who first laid down the law that it had to be that way. If enough of us do this impolitely enough, then we'll become civilized in merely twenty thousand years or so, instead of having to wait the two hundred thousand years that my cynical anthropologist friends allow. . . . Easy, pleasant, lucrative homework for wives: asking people to define their jobs. That's the most dangerous doctrine I know!" [Ellipsis in original]

Carol was meditating, "I will go back! I will go on asking questions. I've always done it, and always failed at it, and it's all I can do. I'm going to ask Ezra Stowbody why he's opposed to the nationalization of railroads, and ask Dave Dyer why a druggist always is pleased when he's called 'doctor,' and maybe ask Mrs. Bogart why she wears a widow's veil that looks like a dead crow."

The woman leader straightened. "And you have one thing. You have a baby to hug. That's my temptation. I dream of babies—of a baby—and I sneak around parks to see them playing. (The children in Dupont Circle are like a poppy garden.) And the antis [anti-suffragists] call me 'unsexed'!"

Carol was thinking, in panic, "Oughtn't Hugh to have country air? I won't let him become a yokel. I can guide him away from street-corner loafing. . . . I think I can."

On her way home: "Now that I've made a precedent, joined the union and gone out on one strike and learned personal solidarity, I won't be so afraid. Will won't always be resisting my running away. Some day I really will go to Europe with him . . . or without him.

"I've lived with people who are not afraid to go to jail. I could invite a Miles Bjornstam to dinner without being afraid of the Haydocks . . . I think I could.

"I'll take back the sound of Yvette Guilbert's songs and Elman's violin.[12] They'll be only the lovelier against the thrumming of crickets in the stubble on an autumn day.

"I can laugh now and be serene . . . I think I can."

Though she should return, she said, she would not be utterly defeated. She was glad of her rebellion. The prairie was no longer empty land in the sunglare; it was the living tawny beast which she had fought and made beautiful by fighting; and in the village streets were shadows of her desires and the sound of her marching and the seeds of mystery and greatness.

IX

Her active hatred of Gopher Prairie had run out. She saw it now as a toiling new settlement. With sympathy she remembered Kennicott's defense of its citizens as "a lot of pretty good folks, working hard and trying to bring up their families the best they can." She recalled tenderly the young awkwardness of Main Street and the makeshifts of the little brown cottages; she pitied their shabbiness and isolation; had compassion for their assertion of culture, even as expressed in Thanatopsis papers,[13] for their pretense of greatness, even as trumpeted in "boosting."[14] She saw Main Street in the dusty prairie sunset, a line of frontier shanties with solemn lonely people waiting for her, solemn and lonely as an old man who has outlived his friends. She remembered that Kennicott and Sam Clark had listened to her songs, and she wanted to run to them and sing.

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[11] *Proletariat*: the working class; those whose income derives from their labor (Marxism); i.e. the average American who distrusts reform or artistic fervor.
[12] French and Russian performers whose recordings were popular in the U.S.
[13] *Thanatopsis*: women's study club in Gopher Prairie.
[14] Referring to town and city "boosterism," marked by self-congratulatory promotion.

"At last," she rejoiced, "I've come to a fairer attitude toward the town. I can love it, now."

She was, perhaps, rather proud of herself for having acquired so much tolerance.

"At last," she rejoiced, "I've come to a fairer attitude toward the town. I can love it, now."

She was, perhaps, rather proud of herself for having acquired so much tolerance.

She awoke at three in the morning, after a dream of being tortured by Ella Stowbody and the Widow Bogart.

"I've been making the town a myth. This is how people keep up the tradition of the perfect home town, the happy boyhood, the brilliant college friends. We forget so. I've been forgetting that Main Street doesn't think it's in the least lonely and pitiful. It thinks it's God's Own Country. It isn't waiting for me. It doesn't care."

But the next evening she again saw Gopher Prairie as her home, waiting for her in the sunset, rimmed round with splendor.

She did not return for five months more; five months crammed with greedy accumulation of sounds and colors to take back for the long still days.

She had spent nearly two years in Washington.

When she departed for Gopher Prairie, in June, her second baby was stirring within her.

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CHAPTER 39

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II

She had left a city which sat up nights to talk of universal transition, of European revolution, guild socialism, free verse.[15] She had fancied that all the world was changing.

She found that it was not.

In Gopher Prairie the only ardent new topics were prohibition, the place in Minneapolis where you could get whisky at thirteen dollars a quart, recipes for home-made beer, the "high cost of living," the presidential election, Clark's new car, and not very novel foibles of Cy Bogart. Their problems were exactly what they had been two years ago, what they had been twenty years ago, and what they would be for twenty years to come. With the world a possible volcano, the husbandmen were plowing at the base of the mountain. A volcano does occasionally drop a river of lava on even the best of agriculturists, to their astonishment and considerable injury, but their cousins inherit the farms and a year or two later go back to the plowing.

She was unable to rhapsodize much over the seven new bungalows and the two garages which Kennicott had made to seem so important. Her intensest thought about them was, "Oh yes, they're all right I suppose." The change which she did heed was the erection of the school building, with its cheerful brick walls, broad windows, gymnasium, classrooms for agriculture and cooking. It indicated Vida's triumph, and it stirred her to activity—any activity. She went to Vida with a jaunty, "I think I shall work for you. And I'll begin at the bottom."

She did. She relieved the attendant at the restroom for an hour a day. Her only innovation was painting the pine table a black and orange rather shocking to the Thanatopsis. She talked to the farmwives and soothed their babies and was happy.

Thinking of them she did not think of the ugliness of Main Street as she hurried along it to the chatter of the Jolly Seventeen.

She wore her eyeglasses on the street now. She was beginning to ask Kennicott and Juanita if she didn't look young, much younger than thirty-three. The eyeglasses pinched her nose. She considered spectacles. They would make her seem older, and hopelessly settled. No! She would not wear spectacles yet. But she tried on a pair at Kennicott's office. They really were much more comfortable.

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[15] Topics of discussion more welcome, Lewis implies, in Washington, DC, than in Gopher Prairie. *Universal transition*: from gold to paper money. *European revolution*: postwar communist revolutions. *Guild socialism*: British workers' movement for labor control of industry. *Free verse*: controversial modern poetic form.