

Chapter 1

*W*estward the Star of Empire Takes its Way

My Gran, Mildred Young, had one blue eye and one brown. This was not a matter of subtle shading; one eye was distinctly pale Viking blue and the other a deep, dark Celtic brown. This anomaly gave her a strange, somewhat disturbing appearance like a Picasso portrait. She herself was not at all embarrassed by the peculiarity. Indeed, she considered it a distinction. “To have eyes of different colours is a sign of great beauty,” she claimed.

Even as her hair turned grey and her blue eye and her brown dimmed, she continued to think of herself as an exceptionally attractive woman and felt it was only right that she should adorn herself in a manner appropriate to such beauty. She could not limit herself to only one piece of jewellery at a time. Rows of colourful brooches flashed across her ample bosom like military medals, and ropes of artificial pearls and glass beads clattered among them. She favoured garments of silk and velvet in rich colours: peacock blue, crimson, or purple. And she would never dream of leaving the house without topping off the ensemble with a magnificent hat, laden with artificial flowers or fruit, ribbons, veiling and feathers. As she was not tall – barely five feet – and stoutly built around a narrow waist in a pouter pigeon sort

of shape, it required confidence to carry off the look. Gran believed in her beauty.

“How nice you look, Gran!” always brought a regal smile in acknowledgement of the obvious.

“But how I wish you could have seen me when I was young,” she might say then with a sigh, “when my complexion was unblemished, and my hair was golden and hung to my waist. Then it was that my beauty caught admiring attention on all sides.”

She liked to tell the story of how as a young girl, she had once hurried through the streets of London, late, late at night. “My sister Lucy was ill with fever; my father was away; my mother could not leave Lucy’s side. I was the only one who could go to fetch the doctor, so I went. I ran through the dark and dangerous streets of London, a beautiful and defenseless girl with long blond hair rippling loose. I was only sixteen years of age, and all alone in the midnight city. The wonder was I wasn’t captured for the white slave trade or kidnapped, or worse. How I ran with my golden hair streaming behind me! I fetched the doctor.” She loved that image of her beauty shining through a dark and dangerous landscape, and so did all who heard her story.

But my story of Mildred begins later in her life, in 1907, when she was forty-seven and proprietor of a boarding house for professional gentlemen in the Hammersmith district of London. In her years of youth and beauty she had never imagined that her life would bring her to earning her own living, but so it had turned out.

She had been born into a family of writers, not the great writers of the Victorian era, but competent essayists and writers of popular sketches. She had had no formal education but she had acquired the arts and graces considered appropriate for young ladies of the time. She could paint pretty scenes in watercolours, though in truth she preferred to sketch dresses and hats. She excelled in needlework both plain and fancy. She learned to carry herself with dignity, to sit with a ramrod straight back, to converse politely in society. Because her family was not so very well off, she also learned to keep a sharp eye

on the servants and the tradespeople's bills, and when necessary, she could pitch in and help with household chores. Proud of her family's connection with the literary world, she was well read, attended the theatre and opera regularly, and spoke like a lady in a Jane Austen novel.

At seventeen, she married James Young, a clerk in the Office of Public Works, charged with monitoring the expenses of the royal household. He also held the post of external examiner in mathematics for Cambridge University. Mildred and James had five children. Whether or not theirs was a happy marriage is not known. One suspects it was not, for James had a reputation as a martinet with a fierce temper. Examination candidates, though grown men, were said to quake before him and his children were terrified of him.

At the early age of forty, James died of a heart attack, a victim perhaps of his own choleric temperament. He collapsed in a railway carriage on the way to an examination and was dead on arrival in Cambridge. (One likes to imagine the astonished relief of the examination candidate on hearing the sad news!)

Mildred was left in the classic sad story situation of the penniless widow with growing children to care for cast suddenly adrift in the harsh world. Fortunately, she was not the kind of woman to sink down spinelessly into genteel poverty. Instead, she turned the family home into a boarding house for single gentlemen: clerks in government offices, most of them. She learned to make substantial and tasty meals with cheap cuts of meat, lots of potatoes, and large, sweet, filling puddings. She became a careful shopper, finding the best prices among the local greengrocers and fishmongers. She supervised her two servant girls strictly and she stood for no nonsense from her gentlemen boarders. She managed well.

Mildred's children grew to adulthood. Her two sons found employment, her eldest daughter a suitable husband. Now there were only the two youngest daughters, Sarah and Charlotte, at home. Mildred had more rooms to let. The boarding house business was going well.

At that time a new boarder moved in, Tom Evans, a young Welshman working as a clerk in the post office. Mildred liked him at once for he was an aspiring poet, a literary scholar, and a professed admirer of the works of her no longer illustrious grandfather and father. Tom was handsome in a romantic, gypsy-like way, with wild, thick black hair and a swarthy complexion, and he had the Welsh gift for poetry and song and lively talk. Evenings, when he wasn't out singing or poeticizing with his Welsh friends or drinking with the Bohemians at the Café Royale, he would get up entertainments in Mildred's parlour: play readings, musical programmes, hymn sings, recitations. These cultural evenings brought Mildred to relive the happy days of her childhood when literary lions gathered for talk and readings in her grandfather's parlour.

All the residents of the house enjoyed the performances and were eager to participate. Mildred recited Tennyson, Tom read from the work of the new poets Stephens, Middleton or Davies, and the girls gave comic performances of Belloc's newly published *Cautionary Tales for Children*. Some evenings there were play readings: Mildred was Lady Macbeth, the girls were giggling witches and Tom was Macbeth. Mildred was Lady Bracknell and Sarah was Gwendolyn Fairfax. Some evenings Tom pounded out hymns on the cottage piano and everyone sang; or Sarah played while Tom and Charlotte sang a duet; Sarah and Tom sat side by side at the piano and played a duet and Charlotte danced. Once in a while the company might persuade Tom to read from his own work. His poems were in Welsh so none but the Welsh cousin who shared his room could understand a word, but Mildred said it sounded very nice anyway and Sarah and Charlotte agreed. "That is because Welsh is the language of Heaven itself," the cousin told them with a serious satisfaction.

One evening, after Tom had been living in the boarding house for a few months, he sat beside Mildred on the settee. They had just finished a reading of selections from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "May I have a word with you, in private?" Tom asked.

“Certainly.” Mildred’s heart began to beat quickly. He would ask then. She had thought he might, though she was, to be sure, more than ten years older than he, but still, you might say, in the prime of her beauty. She touched her hair, its rippling gold fading perhaps just a little. She willed the others to drink up their tea quickly and go. The boarders went off, one by one. There were only Sarah and Charlotte and Mildred and Tom left.

“Run along to bed now, girls; it’s late. Tom and I have a business matter to discuss,” Mildred said. Since the arts entertainments had begun, all the occupants of the house were on first name terms, a familiarity Mildred had never before allowed her boarders.

Charlotte wanted to linger to pester Tom with questions about a reading list he was preparing for her, but Sarah, the dear girl, dragged her off.

“Now?” Mildred turned towards Tom.

“Sarah,” Tom said without any introduction. “I love her. Have I your permission to court her?”

The tea cup in Mildred’s hand trembled in its saucer. She set it down on the small table beside her. “Sarah?” she said. And again, “Sarah.” Through her mind rushed a stream of images: Sarah sitting close to Tom on the piano bench, their hands crossing and recrossing each other playfully along the keyboard; Sarah playing an adoring Juliet to Tom’s Romeo; Sarah brushing against Tom as she reached to take his tea cup or pass him another slice of cake. Mildred should have paid closer attention, read the message in these signs. “Sarah is very young,” she managed to say.

The stream of images went on: Sarah trying to pronounce the words of some Welsh poem and Tom’s hands moulding her cheeks to the desirable shape for the double ‘ll’ sound; Sarah beside Tom when they all went walking on Hampstead Heath one fine afternoon – Sarah, who was no longer a child, but a nineteen-year-old beauty with ash blond hair and pale blue eyes. “She is too young.”

Tom was twenty-five, Mildred knew. That made him, when reckoned more carefully than she’d been inclined to do, twenty years

younger than she was, not ten. In his view she would be an old lady, a game old girl reciting poems from the last century, a mother of grown children, and far too old for him. She saw it now with perfect, painful clarity. What could she have been thinking of? Well, she hadn't thought; that was the problem. She had only felt and let her foolish feelings run riot over her common sense. Now it was quite clear: Sarah was the obvious magnet for Tom's affection. Charlotte was too young. She, Mildred, was too old. Tom had chosen wisely and well.

"Sarah is nineteen," Tom was saying, as if Mildred didn't know. "Old enough, surely. So beautiful." He blushed, and added, "In character, as well as in her person. I love her dearly and thanks to the promotion I have had, I am now in a position to support a wife."

Mildred took a deep breath. "And Sarah? Have you made your feelings known to her? Do you have reason to think that she reciprocates your affection?"

"I believe I can safely say she would be willing to be courted," Tom said with a knowing smile. "With your permission, Mildred."

"Then I grant you my permission," Mildred said with a self-control that cost her dearly.

She should have seen how it was. She should never have allowed herself those fanciful dreams of running her hands through Tom's thick black hair, of drowning in his deep dark eyes. She could only be thankful that those dreams had remained unspoken and, she was fairly certain, unsuspected by Tom or anyone else.

She might have wept a little in the privacy of her own bedroom that night, but by next morning she showed no signs of any disappointment she might have suffered. She had never spoken of the feelings she had cherished, she never would, nor would she allow herself even to think of them ever again. She would rejoice in her Sarah's happiness, and Tom's.

Fearing that Charlotte might also find Tom's choice disappointing, Mildred woke her youngest with a cup of tea and the bad news. As she had suspected it might, the revelation threw Charlotte into a

torrent of bewilderment, anger, jealousy, disappointment. "I thought he loved me too," she wept. "He does love me too."

"He does, indeed, but not in the way he loves Sarah," Mildred said. "Some day, when you are older, you too will experience the feelings those two have for each other. It is quite different from the affection you feel for him and he for you." It was hard on the poor girl. "Try to be happy for your sister," she urged. "It is her time now. Your turn will come when you find your own love."

"I have found my love," Charlotte wailed. "And he has chosen Sarah!"

"I think not, not yet, my dear," Mildred said, but Charlotte would not be comforted. Though the sisters had always been close, Charlotte now avoided Sarah as much as she could. She would no longer join in the musical evenings or the readings. She pretended to suffer from headaches and spent a lot of time in her room.

Mildred behaved correctly. She sewed wedding clothes and hemmed sheets and pillowcases and smiled at the happy couple whispering together on the sofa, stealing kisses when they thought she wasn't looking. She was happy for Sarah, although sometimes a look from Tom, or the way he laid a hand on her arm as he made a point in his impassioned talk of poetry, made her want to be as sulky and cross as Charlotte. She did not yield to the impulse. Self-discipline was one of the great Victorian virtues she was imbued with.

Mildred encouraged the young lovers to marry as soon as they liked. Both she and Charlotte would be much better off without Tom's presence in the house tempting their thoughts to stray where they should not go. Sarah and Tom married early in 1907.

And then Mildred announced her plan to emigrate to Canada.

She discussed with no one the reasons for the sudden departure. In truth, it wasn't just the marriage of Sarah and Tom that had brought her to the decision. Years ago her parents, her brother Percy, and younger sister Mae had gone to Canada. She had envied them the adventure. But she was a wife and mother by then, and travel to distant lands was out of the question for her. In her family's letters

she had read accounts of vast forests where deer and bear and wolves still roamed, of lakes as wide as seas, towering mountains, vast plains, busy new towns and cities, and a railroad that crossed the whole huge country. She had longed to go to Canada and see this new world for herself. And now she was free. Now she could go. In the streets of London she saw posters and red wagons advertising the new Dominion with pictures of bright maple leaves and fields of wheat. The slogan on the posters, “Westward the Star of Empire takes its way”, appealed to her. She made her way to the Canadian Emigration Offices on Charing Cross Road and booked passage for herself and Charlotte to Canada.

“Why?” her astonished family asked. With her business running smoothly and only one child left in her care, Mildred could sit back and enjoy her later years in comfort and security, they thought. Why ever would she want to strike out for a new country now?

She wanted to go because now with her children, all but one, married, independent and established in their own households, she could follow an old dream of her own and at the same time escape the pangs of a more recent dream that had failed. She didn’t care to discuss all this with her children. “I think it best,” she said.

“Why Canada?” Sarah asked.

“It is a land of cold winters and deep forests. I fear you will miss the cultural amenities of our London,” Tom said.

That is not what she would miss. “I have always wanted to go to Canada. We have family connections there.” Though her parents had returned to England, her brother and sister had remained in Canada and still sent reports of life on the frontier there, and another brother, blind from birth, was completing his education at a special school in Brantford. She would visit them and see the country for herself.

“But the rest of your family, your children, and a grandchild now as well, are here in England,” her son Took pointed out.

“Charlotte will travel with me.”

“I don’t want to go to Canada,” Charlotte protested at once. Charlotte was the delicate flower of the family, beautiful as Mildred

herself had been, with the same golden hair, though both her eyes were blue, a dreamy grey-blue the colour of an early summer dusk. Charlotte had been singled out by a rich aunt to receive a convent education in Belgium. She could speak French, and sing prettily and dance and paint charming watercolours and Tom had recently awakened her interest in the theatre arts, in which she showed considerable talent. She did not wish to waste these talents on lumberjacks and cowboys and red Indians in some remote colony.

Mildred did not care to argue with her children. "I am sure you will like Canada very much. And so shall I. We leave in a fortnight."

Charlotte continued to protest. She had hardly spent any time in London at all. She did not want to be separated again from her dear brothers and sisters. She did not want to leave her friends here. Tom was getting up a play and she was to have the starring role in it.

Charlotte was too young to know what was good for her. "There is a great deal to be done and time is short," Mildred told her. She had bought the tickets and given notice to her boarders and recommended other boarding houses and residential hotels to them. She had written letters to the Canadians of the family, advising them of her impending visits. Now she had to divide up her furniture among her married children. She had to run up smart travelling costumes with matching hats and a couple of light summer dresses as well for wear in the Canadian summer, which was said to be very warm. Charlotte could help with the sewing. She took some slight interest in this, which Mildred took to be a good sign.

All was settled: the leasehold sold, the lodgers gone, the furniture disposed of, the tickets in hand.

Tom accompanied the ladies to Euston Station to see them on to the boat train. He embraced first Charlotte, who wept and clung to his coat shamelessly, and then Mildred, who herself had to fight back tears as she received a first and last chaste kiss from the lips of her handsome, beguiling, and all too dangerous son-in-law.

Mildred would not allow herself to pine for what was past. On board ship she dressed in her most elegant new costumes. She enjoyed the delicious and ample dinners served in the dining saloon. She joined whist parties and gambled small sums of money and occasionally won. Charlotte, despite continued lamentations at her hard fate as an exile from all she held dear, did sometimes appear to find a few moments of pleasure in the evening dances and entertainments and occasionally she condescended to promenade the deck with some suitable young man.

But on the train journey that followed the sea crossing, Charlotte's complaints grew more bitter, with, Mildred had to admit, some justification. Hour after hour for a day and a night and another day the ladies sat in a swaying drafty coach, passing by woods and fields and very few towns, waiting to arrive at their first destination, Brantford Ontario and its School for the Blind. There were no entertainments to pass the time on the train as there had been on the boat. Charlotte was bored and cross, and even Mildred found the journey wearying.

At last they reached Brantford and the school, and found Bob waiting for them in a reception room. Tall and thin with a mop of bright red hair, he looked more like a growing boy than a man in his thirties. "Caaaaan it reaaally be you, Miiiiildred?" he greeted his sister and reached to touch her face to make sure. His voice was a screeching, high-pitched drone.

"It is I, and here is Charlotte with me."

"Chaaaarlooootte!" Bob searched the young woman's face with his fingers. "Beauuuuutiful, like her moooother."

Poor Bob, Mildred thought. How would he ever know such a thing? But it was gallant of him to say so. "You look well yourself, not a day older than when you left England," she told him.

"Aaaaand you as weellll," Bob assured her.

Mildred was pleased to see how Bob had profited from his stay at Brantford. He was able to show his visitors around the school and grounds. He walked confidently through rooms and corridors, avoiding furniture and obstacles, opened and closed doors, pointed out

trees he was especially fond of on the lawn, and introduced the ladies to teachers and pupils they met on their tour.

In a private interview with Mildred, the director praised Bob's skills: he had learned braille quickly and had become an avid reader. He had achieved a high level of independence in getting about and in looking after himself. Unfortunately he was not so apt a pupil in learning the trades taught at the school: chair caning, hammock weaving and piano tuning. He was clumsy with his hands and had no ear for tonal distinctions. There had been some hope that he might become a teacher of braille, but his manner of speech would be a torment to pupils in the classroom, the director feared. Unfortunately, there was no other work available for Bob. He must resign himself to living on his family's charity.

It would be hard for Bob to know himself excluded from useful employment despite all that he had learned, Mildred knew, but it could not be helped. Apparently he could not learn to speak with normal pace and intonation. Mildred's other brother in Canada, the Reverend Percival Young, had offered to take Bob into his home in Edmonton. Perhaps there he would find some useful tasks he could perform and some pleasures he could enjoy. Mildred and Charlotte would accompany Bob on the journey to Edmonton, and would look about with a view to settling in that city.

"Diiiiistances in Caaaanaada are considerable," Bob informed the ladies when they boarded the westbound train. They were appalled to learn that they would be on this train for two days and two nights. Bob didn't seem to mind. He ate his way contentedly through large meals in the dining car, or sat looking out the window at endless dark forests and snow-covered plains he could not see, while Mildred and Charlotte found the scenery dull and the coach drafty and dirty and wondered again and again if the next station mightn't be Edmonton.

Eventually they arrived, in the middle of a snow storm. "Snow! In April! Mildred exclaimed. "Dear me!" She took an instant dislike to Edmonton. The northern frontier had sounded exciting in letters and stories, but in actual experience Mildred found it cold and bleak and

uncomfortable. She soon knew she could never live here. She was sorry to leave Bob in such a place, but there was nothing else for it. He seemed to have settled in easily. In two weeks, Mildred and Charlotte were ready to move on. “Westward the Star of Empire takes its way.”

This time the journey was one of only a few hours, and more south than west to Pincher Creek in southern Alberta where Mildred’s sister Mae lived. Mae had, since her emigration to Canada, married a Swedish settler by the name of Helmer. It was a delight for Mildred to see her dear sister again, but she hardly knew what to make of her taciturn brother-in-law. She couldn’t help but think he was angry at the presence of two extra females in his household, although Mae assured her that Helmer was always rather silent, and a little shy because his English was not quite fluent. Mildred and Charlotte could stay as long as they wished. Mae was very glad of their company, and so was Helmer, even if he didn’t say so.

But they did not wish to stay long. Pincher Creek was even worse than Edmonton in Mildred’s estimation. Here the snow had yielded to a sticky, cold mud. The houses were small and mean and far apart and hardly anyone in town spoke English. People were mostly all as silent as Mae’s husband. Even Mae herself seemed to have lost the knack of lively conversation. The talkative and gay young woman Mildred remembered from earlier years had become a stout matron, slow of speech and seldom brought to laughter. Perhaps living in this hard new country made people harder, sterner, shaped them like the landscape itself. Mildred confided this theory to Charlotte as the two women prepared for bed in the cold, cramped bedroom they shared.

“No surprise there,” Charlotte agreed at once. “You’d be feeling quite grim too if you had to face a lifetime in this country. When are we going home?”

“We are not going home,” Mildred answered. “We have emigrated.”

Charlotte brushed her hair with short, angry strokes. “We should never have come,” she said. “Never. We were quite happy enough at home in England.”

They were not quite happy in England, Mildred knew. In any case, she would neither argue nor put up with defeatism. “We shall stay here with Mae for at least a week or two,” she said. “Mae is my sister and we have much to talk about.

She suggested a distraction that might amuse Charlotte. “Why don’t you try some sketching of the scenery?”

“Paint scenes of brown mud? I don’t think!” Charlotte flung herself into the bed and pulled the blankets over her head. She hadn’t wanted to come to Canada; she didn’t like the country, and she was not going to hide her displeasure at having been made to come. But Charlotte was young, she would adapt and come to love this strange new country, Mildred told herself as she unpinned her long, thick hair that had once been her crowning glory. Now it flashed with silver amid the gold in the pale glow of the oil lamp on the dresser. Yes, Charlotte would soon feel at home in Canada, but would Mildred herself? Change and adaptation do not come as easily to the old. For the first time, doubts about the wisdom of the venture crept into Mildred’s mind. Thus far she had been almost as disappointed in Canada as Charlotte was, though she would never admit that aloud. This country was too large, too raw, too close to the emptiness of the sky. One could be lonely here, as she guessed Mae was lonely among the silent Swedes and the vast fields and the endless railway. Her parents had not loved the country enough to remain long. Percy had stayed, but he had his vocation to spread the gospel that kept him here, and Mae had her silent, but kind, husband. What was there here for a middle-aged widow and a pretty, talented, eighteen-year-old girl who had hopes and dreams of love and a beautiful and happy life?

Mildred did not allow herself to think such discouraging thoughts for long. Perhaps, she told herself, their next place of call would have more appeal. They were to move on to Creston in southeastern British Columbia. There they were to stay with Mae’s daughter from her first marriage, Olive. Olive had married an English army officer after the Boer War and emigrated with him to this small town in the Kootenay

Mountains, close to the American border, and she seemed to be very happy there.

If they found nothing to hold them in Creston, Mildred didn't quite know what she'd do. Move on to Victoria at the very outside edge of Canada? Return to England and set up another boarding house? In truth, she feared she hardly had enough money left for either of those schemes. She was disappointed and a little frightened as well. But she was not going to admit it. "I am sure we will both like Creston very much." Mildred climbed into the cold bed and blew out the oil lamp.

For the next week Mildred and Mae talked and talked about a past that didn't much interest Charlotte, who stared out the window and sighed. When Helmer wasn't at work, he sat silent in a corner smoking his pipe, and slowly reading a newspaper, pointing to each word. He was doing this to improve his English, Mae explained. On Saturday evening everyone got dressed up and neighbours arrived by foot and in wagons to meet the visitors from England. It was a subdued gathering. Hardly anyone knew enough English for a conversation and those who did hardly knew what to say. They ate cake and drank coffee. One red-faced young man engaged Charlotte in a brief conversation about the weather and then blurted out a marriage proposal. "No thank you," Charlotte answered politely and turned away. So did the young man. He hadn't really expected an acceptance. Charlotte didn't even know his name. She almost felt sorry for him. He probably didn't like being stuck in this forlorn place either.

Sunday morning they attended a church service in a hall above the general store in town. At least they heard English spoken there.

And then at last it was time to move on to Creston.

Helmer helped the ladies into the coach and stowed their bags on the luggage rack. As Mildred hardly felt on kissing terms with this brother-in-law, she shook his hand in farewell, but Charlotte offered her cheek for a kiss, either out of her naturally affectionate nature, or out of joy at the departure. Then Helmer hurried out to stand beside his wife on the platform. Mildred waved vigorously. "Do wave to

Mae,” she urged Charlotte. “She’ll miss you, you know. She says you remind her of her Olive.”

Mildred watched the two silent figures growing smaller on the bare platform. Only when they and the station had disappeared did she turn away. It was too sad to think that her sister lived in such a place with such a man, however kind he was inside his silence.

Charlotte removed her hat and gloves and settled back in her seat. “Another train journey,” she sighed.

“This one won’t be so very long,” Mildred answered.

“That’s what you said when we left Saint John. That’s what you said when we left Brantford. This country goes on and on. Forests and fields. Forest and fields. It never ends. We shall fetch up in China eventually, I expect.”

“Nonsense. I’ve spoken to the conductor. We arrive tomorrow morning, he says.” In the distance they could see a range of mountains on the skyline.

“Creston is situated in those mountains,” Mildred said. “I think we shall like it very well there.”

“Hmmm,” was all that Charlotte replied to that. But when the train puffed its way in among the mountains, she sat up and looked at the scenery with some interest. As they were carried deeper into the mountains, her admiration for the scenery increased. She and Mildred marvelled at the snow-covered peaks, the steepness of the wooded valleys, and the wild torrents of cascading streams as the train wound its hair-raising way over high trestle bridges, puffed up grades and ground down them, clung to ledges that dropped away into chasms far below. It was magnificent. “I do wish I had my sketchbook to hand.”

It was the first positive thing she’d said about Canada so far, and Mildred was pleased to hear it. “We’ll unpack your painting things the minute we arrive,” she said. “I expect we shall enjoy this visit very much. Olive writes that Creston is a delightful place. I believe you will find Olive a most congenial companion as well. She is a cheerful

soul and close to your own age. Mae says you are very much alike in manner.”

“I suppose Aunt Mae said Pincher Creek was delightful too,” Charlotte said, reverting to her poor opinion of Canada again. Yet only a moment later she was admiring the intense blue of the sky against the bright green of new-leafing trees.

In due time the conductor called out, “Creston! Creston is the next station stop.” Mildred and Charlotte adjusted their hats and straightened their wrinkled and soot-smudged travelling costumes. The conductor pulled their ticket stubs from the clip above the window and swung down their cases from the luggage rack. “This way out, ladies!”

On the station platform a tall man with a great deal of blond whiskers about his face strode towards the travellers and swept them up in hearty hug. “You must be Aunt Mildred. And Cousin Charlotte. How do you do? Welcome. Welcome.” This was Olive’s husband whose name was Robert George Lester William Sinclair Smith. People in Creston, Mildred soon learned, called him Alphabetical. He let go of Mildred and waved to the conductor. “Hello Rodney. How’s tricks?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned back to the ladies. “How was the journey? Terrible? But you’ve stood up to it well, I see. Olive is looking forward mightily to your visit. It’s because of her condition she isn’t here at the station, don’t you know? That’ll be your box?” He gestured towards a leather trunk being unloaded from the baggage car. “Hi there, Ed,” he called to a young man in a smart checked suit and a brown bowler. “Give a hand here.”

Ed and Alphabetical heaved the trunk into a high-wheeled wagon that stood beside the station, then Alphabetical linked his hands to form a step. “Up you go, ladies.” When they were settled, he pulled himself up and shook the reins over the team of well-matched blacks. “Walk on, lads!”

They drove along a muddy thoroughfare, lined with wooden storefronts, picking their way through tree stumps, throngs of people

afoot and on horseback, and the occasional pig or cow. At least there wasn't any snow on the ground.

"We'll have those stumps out by next winter," Alphabetical said. "And sidewalks put in. You wait and see. This is a go-ahead kind of place." He certainly was not afflicted with the silence of this country, Mildred had noticed straight away. He pointed out the sights, asked questions about the journey and didn't wait for answers. Mildred and Charlotte had only to sit and gaze around them.

Creston was built on the lowest slope of Goat Mountain, set between ranges of mountains that rose to the east and to the west, purple-blue masses in the hazy blue-white sky. Below, the Kootenay River wound its way through a widening valley where grass rippled like a green sea.

"Beautiful!" Mildred said. "The mountains. The valley. So very beautiful."

"Yes, yes, the scenery is grand," Alphabetical agreed. "And just wait 'til we get this town going. Creston is going to be the centre of a vast fruit-growing region. We've got the soil for it. We've got the railway. We're working on the roads. We're seeing about getting telephone lines. We'll upgrade the hotels." He frowned as a couple of drunken men lurched out of the open door of a shabby wooden shack bearing a sign saying "Hotel and Bar" over its door. "We've got new businesses coming in. New settlers. New fruit ranches. We're a go-ahead place here, growing every season. It's a grand place, Creston."

"Indeed," Mildred murmured politely.

Olive, hugely pregnant, was waiting at the open front door of a white-washed frame house to welcome her visitors. "Here you are. Come in. Come in. How lovely to see you! I'll wet the tea while you wash up. Let me show you your room."

She bounded up a steep narrow staircase while Mildred tried to protest, "We'll find our own way. You must rest. In your condition..."

"Nonsense. I don't know why women make such a fuss of confinements. I've never felt better. Bring up that trunk, Bob," Olive shouted down to her husband.

Mildred was hoping for a bit of a rest, but Olive said, as she left them, "Hurry along now. I want to hear all about home before the party starts. I've told people to come at two."

"There is no need for a reception. You must not tire yourself," Mildred called after her. "In your condition..."

"Oh, baby will wait a day or two more, I expect," Olive shouted back. "Why miss a chance for a party?" Olive, it seemed, was as much of a go-getter as her husband.

Mildred had barely time to brush off her skirt and dab cold water on her face and hands before Olive was calling up, "Tea's ready! Do come. I'm dying to hear all your news."

The ladies enjoyed a cup of tea and thick roast beef sandwiches and Mildred was just starting in on an account of their journey when there was a rap on the door and without waiting for an answer to the knock, the first of the visitors walked in. "Mind you enjoy yourselves, you two!" Olive advised Mildred and Charlotte in a stage whisper as they hurried from the kitchen to the front room to greet the visitor. "You'll have your choice of beaux. Men outnumber women about ten to one here. The bachelors are all dying to look you both over."

Charlotte giggled and wondered if she would receive another sudden proposal such as she had had at Pincher Creek. Mildred tutted at the silliness of the very idea.

Olive introduced the first arrival, an eager young man by the name of Andy Talbot. He immediately took up a position beside Charlotte and started a conversation, but before long a half dozen more men were crowding in on him. Older men bowed politely to Mildred and asked her how she did, and how she was liking Creston so far. There were a few couples as well. Mildred shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Mallandaine and remembered she'd seen him at the station. She met the Rogers and the Frenches and then she began to forget names. The new postmaster, and the pastors of the Anglican and the Methodist Churches were there, and the shy schoolteacher who had not long ago arrived from Spokane Washington, and a courtly gentleman from Tennessee who was "considering prospects," and the bank manager

who was so excited when he had a chance to talk with the beautiful Charlotte that he spilled his tea and retired in confusion. Mildred answered questions about the state of “the old country” and nodded at invitations. “Come out and see our orchard.” “Let me drive you down to the flats.” “Do you play cards? You must come round for a game one evening soon.” “We must get up a picnic to the falls.” She guessed Charlotte was receiving as many invitations, probably more, and no doubt more sincerely intended. Some of the young men were close to elbowing each other aside in their eagerness to secure positions close to the young lady, or to urge tea or lemonade and cake upon her.

“Well, Mrs. Young, what do you think of our little town so far?” The question was delivered by an older man. Fred Little was his name, Mildred remembered. He sat in the most comfortable of the overstuffed chairs and Mildred had noticed that he was treated with great deference by all. Now the hubbub of general conversation quietened and everyone listened as Mildred answered politely that she found the town was most scenically situated and seemed to be a centre of great activity. She could not bring herself to say “a get up and go sort of place”.

Little seemed satisfied with her answer as a launch for his story of the town’s founding, a story he’d most certainly told before, and enjoyed telling again. “I staked the first claim in this township,” he began, “back in 1892 that was. I looked at this valley, saw the good soil and knew at once what a great place this could be. The railroad was a-building then, and I knew it was through this valley it would have to come. I could see a town here – houses, schools, stores, churches and people. I could see wheat growing on the flatlands and orchards on the benchlands. I could see market gardens, dairy farms. All we needed was that railroad to bring in supplies and settlers, and to ship out the fruit and grain we’d grow and the lumber we’d cut and the ore we’d dig out of these mountains.

“Well, in ‘98 the CPR survey team came through, just as I knew it must do, and I welcomed those boys with open arms, by golly, I did. Ed here can tell you all about that.”

He waved to Ed Mallandaine who took up the story seamlessly. “Yes I brought the survey team in. Fred told me his idea and I could see he was right. I liked the potential. I liked it so much that when I’d done the survey, I bought land and stayed on.”

“And here we are in the best town in the best province in the best country in the world,” the patriarch Little cut in. “Isn’t that so?” As a Londoner Mildred took a sceptical view of that assessment, but she nodded and said, “Indeed!” as if she agreed.

At five the guests began taking their leave. “So nice to have met you. Do come and see us soon,” they said in farewell. They shook hands and the young men held Charlotte’s as long as they dared.

On the following morning, having satisfied herself that Olive was unlikely to give birth within the next few hours, Mildred set off with Charlotte to explore the “best town in the best province in the best country”.

Though the streets were muddy, and the buildings of unpainted wood seemed to be set here and there at haphazard among stump grounds and piles of lumber, still Creston was beautiful. It was May. Through the settlement and the surrounding benchlands apple trees were coming into full bloom. Masses of palest pink petals glowed like bridal bouquets. Their sweet scent mingled with the raw, tangy smell of fresh cut pine and fir, the gunpowder smell of stumping powder, and the smoke of burning slash on land being cleared. Farther off the mountains ranged like battlemented walls to east and west, guarding the valley and the lush green plain below. The air seemed filled with the tension of new agricultural development mixing with the old west of forest, Indians, trappers and prospectors. On Canyon Street a bearded old-timer loaded up his packhorse with a grubstake getting ready to head up out into the wilderness. Lumberjacks and miners

caroused their pay away in one of the many noisy bars. A Siwash brave, with buckskin leggings and a store-bought shirt, his long black braids hanging down his back, engaged in horse trading on the corner by a hotel while his wife offered hand-made rush baskets for sale. Two ladies in long silk dresses, carrying dainty parasols, studied the window display at the general store. Mildred didn't recognize them from the party of the evening before. Were they ladies, she had to wonder, or those dance hall girls she'd heard about? A Chinese laundry man, his eyes downcast, scurried by with a heavy bundle of sheets from one of the hotels. Andy Talbot, the first visitor at the previous evening's gathering, dashed out of the livery stable and, uninvited, took up the post of guide and escort. The gentleman from Tennessee emerged from Hatfield's barber shop and pool hall, smoking a cigar, his soft leather riding boots polished to a perfect shine. He bowed and wished the ladies a pleasant morning and attached himself to the tour. At the blacksmith's a Mr. Compton joined them and then a Mr. Murdoch. Had the town been a large one they would soon have formed a parade, Mildred reflected. From this public spectacle Mrs. Rogers saved them by calling from her neatly fenced front garden to "come in, all of you and have a cup of coffee." Mr. Murdoch, Mr. Compton and the gentleman from Tennessee whose name no one seemed to know, regretfully cried off, having business to attend to. But Andy Talbot stayed with the ladies and before they finished their coffee Mildred and Charlotte had agreed to a drive out to Alice Siding to see the Talbot orchard on Friday afternoon and, at Mrs. Rogers' urging, to attend a whist party at the Mercantile Hall that same evening. "And a fortnight hence, there'll be the blossom ball," Andy said. "Everyone comes to that."

"I shall look forward to it," Charlotte answered with her prettiest smile.

After their coffee, nothing would do but that Mr. Talbot accompany the ladies back to the Sinclair Smith residence, choosing a most indirect way, Mildred noted, that involved walking down the hill and back up again when surely they could have simply followed Canyon

Street straight along. Charlotte seemed not to notice the detour. Along their way, they met other acquaintances from the evening before, who enquired after their health and urged them to drop in for a visit any time.

“Well, what do you think of Creston now?” Mr. Talbot wound up the tour at the Sinclair Smith door.

“I think it the prettiest town, in the prettiest province in all of Canada,” Mildred answered with a slight smile. “And the inhabitants are very friendly.” Mr. Talbot seemed pleased with her answer and bade the ladies farewell.

In the front room Olive was resting in the big armchair. Mildred saw the signs and at once took charge. She first helped Olive up to bed, then sent Charlotte to run back to Speers store for arrowroot and Bovril, tied on an apron, built up the kitchen fire and set to work making custards, beef tea, and arrowroot broth, as well as a more substantial dinner for Alphabetical himself when he should return from his business concerns in town.

Early the next morning Doc Henderson was sent for, and by that evening Olive was delivered of a fine healthy boy. The doctor said it was about the quickest and easiest first confinement he’d ever attended.

“My wife knows how to go about these things,” the proud new father boasted. “She’s a go-getter.”

Nevertheless, Mildred insisted Olive take at the very least ten days’ bed rest, and Olive was content to lie back against the pillows and admire her son, while Mildred ran the household.

Charlotte was excited about the new baby, but not so excited that she forgot the drive Mr. Andy Talbot had promised her and Mildred, and she reminded Mildred of the engagement on Friday morning while she cleared up the breakfast things. “We’ll have to postpone it. I can’t possibly leave Olive alone,” was Mildred’s response.

“It’s only for an hour or two. Olive will be all right. She’s fine. She says she is. And baby sleeps all the time anyway.”

But Mildred was a conscientious nurse, and she was in charge. “Next week, perhaps,” she told Charlotte, who was already dressed for the outing in primrose yellow muslin with pale blue trim, hidden now under one of Olive’s large aprons.

Charlotte said they couldn’t let Mr. Talbot down at such short notice. “He’ll be on his way here by now. Or,” she suggested with an innocent air, “perhaps he and I could go without you.”

“Unchaperoned! Never!”

Charlotte sulked and must have told Olive about her disappointment because, when Mildred brought up her lunch tray, Olive said young ladies in Creston were not so closely chaperoned as in London. “There’s no need for it, really. Everybody here knows what everybody else is up to. If Andy should so much as lay a finger on Charlotte – which he would never do; he’s a good fellow – he’d be run out of town in ten minutes and never dare show his face again. Charlotte will be perfectly safe with him.”

“That may very well be, but there is indiscreet talk as well as indiscreet action. Your vigilant citizens can hardly monitor conversation, I believe.” Mildred took baby Sonny from Olive’s arms and rocked him gently.

Olive reached for the lunch tray. “Andy’s a gentleman. You can trust to that. But if it will make you feel better, I daresay Mrs. Hunt would enjoy a run out to Alice Siding. Tell Charlotte to run over and ask her.

“Now, don’t you think I could go ahead with a bit of cherry pie or something a little more substantial than custard for dessert?”

“You need the milk in it,” Mildred said, but she allowed Charlotte to go off in Mr. Talbot’s buggy with Mrs. Hunt as chaperone.

Over the next two weeks Mildred ran the Sinclair Smith household with the efficiency she’d learned in her Hammersmith boarding house. She saw to the laundry and cooked substantial meals. She soon realized that it was best to provide extra at each meal as Alphabetical was likely to bring home a new settler or a prospective businessman. Often the two kingpins of the town, Fred Little and Mr. Mallandaine

would drop by to discuss some new business plan and stay for dinner or tea.

The cleaning up Mildred left to Charlotte who did it in a slapdash sort of way, but no one complained. Cleaning had never been Mildred's forte; she found she couldn't take the same interest in it as she took in cooking or sewing. It didn't matter. Olive was so besotted with the baby and its care that she didn't notice the odd dust bunny or stained tea cup, and Alphabetical, like most men, paid no attention to the state of the household as long as meals were served regularly and his wife and child and guests were happy.

Charlotte practised dance steps as she swept or mopped, sang as she washed dishes and always found time to go out walking or for a carriage drive or a sketching party with the young people of town, properly chaperoned if the party consisted of only one young man and herself. As Mildred had predicted, Charlotte and Olive became good friends. Charlotte doted over the new baby almost as much as Olive herself. Olive teased endlessly about the conquests Charlotte was making among the young bachelors in town, and Charlotte blushed and protested and giggled and got Olive to tell her all the gossip about each of them. Not once since they'd arrived in Creston had Charlotte asked when they would be going home to England. Mildred noted all this and was pleased.

By the time of the blossom ball, Olive was ready to step out into Creston society again. She consulted with Mildred about a dress to wear. She held a blue silk gown in front of herself at the bedroom mirror. "Do you think you could let this out enough so that I could fit into it?"

"Surely you're not thinking of going to that dance!" Mildred said, but she took the gown Olive was holding and began to examine the seams.

"Everybody goes to the blossom ball. I couldn't miss it."

Mildred thought it inadvisable, but she could see that Olive was bent on going as Charlotte was. "I suppose I could get you three good inches at the waist." She sat by the window and set to work picking out stitches. "My velvet opera cloak would go very well with this. You must wear it."

"You'll wear it yourself surely," Olive said.

"I shall not. I shall be right here watching over little Sonny," Mildred said.

"Nonsense. Everybody goes to the Blossom Ball. We'll take Sonny in the picnic basket."

"An infant barely two weeks old ... You can't..." Mildred began, then stopped herself. People did things differently here. As a visitor, it was not her place to give orders. Sonny would be comfortable enough in the picnic basket, she supposed. And if she went too, she could keep a sharp eye on him. "Very well," she said.

Mildred anticipated a decorous and dull evening during which she would sit on the sidelines, sipping fruit punch and watching Sonny in his basket. Nevertheless she took care to dress suitably for the occasion in her best yellow satin with the black lace overskirt. She wore her amethyst necklace on a modest décolletage and pinned three of her favourite brooches to the bodice. She borrowed a black lace shawl from Olive in exchange for the fur-trimmed opera cloak which she insisted the young woman wear because of her still delicate condition.

She and Olive had barely found a safe, warm place in the hall for Sonny and his basket when, to her surprise, Fred Little approached, bowed and asked her for the honour of a dance. She discovered that although she might be an old woman in some men's eyes, she was not at all too old to enjoy the glide and whirl of a waltz. Alphabetical claimed her for the next dance, and then Mr. Speers. Even that brash young man Andy Talbot asked her to dance. He held her firmly and led with such mastery that she felt herself able to swirl ever more quickly and gracefully. For a moment she remembered her son-in-law Tom and wondered what it would have been like to dance with him. But he was Welsh and the music he loved was too sad for dancing.

When the dance was over, Andy saw her back to her place and swept Charlotte away into a lively polka.

Sonny slept peacefully in his picnic basket.

Olive was dancing too many dances and too vigorously in Mildred's opinion, but then she herself was being asked to dance far more often than any middle-aged woman had a right to expect, and she was enjoying it too.

Charlotte of course danced every dance. Mildred watched her laughing with her new friends, flirting with the bachelors, graciously allowing herself to be trotted around the floor by some of the old-timers, helping to serve the sandwiches and cakes, speaking to people whose names and likes and dislikes she seemed to be familiar with already. In only a few short weeks she had found her place in this small town society, and appeared to be happy in it. She was on the way to forgetting her English past, and looking forward to the future, like a true go-ahead Crestonite. It was a quick transformation. Only the other day, there had come a letter from Tom, and Charlotte had glanced through it quickly before dashing off to help decorate the hall for tonight's dance. Mildred read the letter more slowly and more carefully, but she too was happier now. She'd had some few moments of doubt since leaving England, but now she knew she had done the right thing. She and Charlotte would do very well in Creston, she was sure.