A NOVEL OF THE GREAT PLAINS

THE LAND WAS OURS

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Prologue

TOWARD the end of his life, Dan's earliest memory came back clearer than ever.

He stood at the door of his family's sod house on the claim in Nebraska, looking down the slope, watching his father come across the creek and start up the hill. The slope was so steep and Dan so short that the wagon seemed to sink from sight; for several minutes Dan could only mark its progress by the sound of his father's voice as he urged Babe and Charlie up the slope. Then the horses' heads reappeared, and between them his father's head and shoulders, and then his hands holding the reins, and finally the whole outfit, legs and wagon and wheels and all. His father saw him across the farmyard and waved; Dan stepped out of the door and ran toward him.

"Pa, Pa. I saw you cross the creek!"

"Well, I saw you standing guard, looking out for your Ma." Henry Woods patted his son on the head. "Now, help me carry things into the house." He handed Dan the jug of molasses.

Dan turned toward the house, but it was gone. He looked back to his father, and he too had disappeared.

Chapter 1

Hall County, Nebraska, 1873

EUDORA slid out of bed in the cold half-light. Shivering, she dressed before doing anything else, putting on all she could under her nightgown, then quickly pulling on her remaining underclothes and dropping her dress over her head. The hard dirt floor felt like ice through her stockings, and she shoved her feet into her stiff shoes and fastened them. She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and went out to the privy.

The sun was not quite up yet, but the eastern horizon was brightening. In the farmyard the ground was bare, dry now but still rutted after the autumn rains. The buildings were all dirt-brown. The barn, like the house, was built of sod, but it was a dugout, set into the slope where the pasture began to rise. It had been their first home on the claim, so low-roofed that a tall man would have had trouble standing up inside.

The house also sat low, its back to the north as if anticipating winter. The door and one window were on the south side; a smaller second window was cut into the east end. The roof—rough pole rafters covered with brush, hay, and sod—slumped unevenly down over the top of the walls.

To the north, beyond the little cluster of buildings, the ground was carpeted with winter wheat, bright green against the dark earth. In the other direction, dry cornstalks and stubble still stood in the field that sloped down toward the patches of brush and trees along the creek.

Turning back toward the house, Eudora shivered again, not so much from this morning's chill as in anticipation of the cold months ahead.

She was just plain sick of it: sick of the wind that blew all the time, sick of the dank earth-smelling chill of the house, sick of the crowded little room where four people lived always all together with no privacy for anyone, surely not for a woman when she needed it.

She was sick of living in a dirty house. It smelled dirty, it looked dirty,

it *was* dirty. You couldn't keep it even halfway clean, no matter how you tried; the sod walls and roof produced showers of dust in dry weather, globs of mud when it rained. The windows were so small that you couldn't really see to clean properly anyway.

Not that there was anyone to clean for; Henry never seemed to notice how things looked. As for company, Eudora often went three months without seeing another woman.

There were other visitors, such as the rattlesnakes. You always had to watch out for them. Eudora hated them, despised them, feared them more than any other living thing. They turned up everywhere, indoors as well as out, sliding through joints in the walls or dropping from hiding places in the roof. She had killed her share. Henry had taught her to fire the revolver, but she never could make her hands stop shaking when she faced a rattler. So she used a long-handled hoe they kept sharpened and standing by the door just for snakes.

Everything the family owned and everything it did were crammed into a single room, twenty-four feet long and fourteen deep. They all slept at one end, parents and children separated by nothing but curtains. Seven-year-old Emma and five-year-old Dan slept together in a trundle that pulled out from under their parents' bed; soon they'd need separate beds, and then it would be even more crowded.

The other end of the room was the kitchen, with stove and wood box, table, dry-goods boxes for cupboards, two chairs and more boxes to sit on, a water bucket and a washtub. All this and more filled the edges of the room and pressed in toward its center. With the kitchen at one end and the beds at the other, there was little space left for the "parlor": two chairs, one small table, one lamp, all set on a worn rag rug.

Eudora's face felt like old leather from the wind that blew and blew to drive you crazy. Her hair was dull and dirty and starting to go gray, and where once she had been smooth and soft she was now rough and hardened.

Above all else, she was tired, bone tired, tired from the moment she got out of bed in the morning until she finally lay down at night. Henry worked even harder, but that didn't make her any less exhausted.

Thinking these things made her feel confused and guilty. Her life was no different from a lot of other women's, no harder. What was a wife for, anyway, but to help her husband? And Henry was a good husband, sober and loving and gentle; he never raised a hand to her, as so many did to their wives.

Henry Woods had looked so handsome the first time she saw him, that July morning in 1860, his blue eyes bright in the dim interior of her father's gristmill in southern Minnesota.

Now there's a man, she had thought, feeling the telltale thickness in

her throat. He was twenty-one and she was eighteen, and it was all over for both of them that first morning. They planned to be married the next summer; but then came the war, Henry enlisted in the First Minnesota Volunteers, and they decided to wait until his three months' service was over.

Three months turned into nearly three years, and when he did come home in late '63 he was on crutches. Still, he counted himself lucky: four out of every five men in his regiment had been killed or wounded in a desperate quarter-hour at Gettysburg, and Henry lay on the field for hours with a smashed leg before someone came for him. Through some miracle, the wound healed without the gangrene that killed so many others. Eudora helped him get over both his wound and his nightmares, and they were married that winter.

As an ex-soldier, Henry had a right to a free homestead. He couldn't find land that satisfied him close to home, so in 1866 he headed for Nebraska, where construction of the new transcontinental railroad was opening the country to settlement. It was a long, hard wagon ride for Eudora, pregnant with her first child.

They reached Grand Island, a booming railroad construction town, before Emma was born. That fall, while Eudora nursed her, Henry worked as a carpenter and went looking for the right piece of land.

He found it in early October, fifteen miles northwest of town, 160 acres of grassland sloping gently down to a creek that crossed its southern edge.

This is the place for me, Henry thought, dismounting and letting his horse drink. *That's something, a creek running this time of year. And there's a good stand of trees on the banks; looks like this is a year-round stream all right.*

He walked up the slope to a place where it flattened out in a kind of terrace.

Here's where we'll put the house. Dora can have her garden over there, handy to the kitchen. And the barn goes over there.

Henry stooped and picked up a handful of dirt. *Good soil, too.* He let it run through his fingers.

Rich soil, enough water, trees for firewood and fence posts, a protected place to put the house.

A man couldn't ask for more.

In the spring they moved to the claim, and for a little while life on their new farm was all they had hoped for, even if Eudora did have to live in a dugout until Henry got the sod house built. Their son Dan was born a year later, in the last week of April 1868.

But after that things never seemed to go quite right. It was like walking into the wind that blew all the time across these plains: you had to fight just to stay even, let alone go forward. Henry had known he'd have

to borrow to get started, but he figured he could pay off the loan in a year or two. He couldn't. Even though he harvested good crops, he owed more each year.

Henry kept hoping their luck would turn. Now, in the fall of '73, after five years, he still hoped. His wife did not.

"I know it's hard for you," he said one night as they got ready for bed. "You've been awful good. I think we'll do a sight better next year."

She'd heard that before. *He's at it again, fooling himself.*

He seemed to read her mind. "No, Dora, I really believe we'll turn the corner next year. Things are bound to get better."

She wanted to believe, but she no longer could.

"Henry, there's too many ifs."

"What do you mean?"

"If there's enough snow this winter and enough rain next summer. If there's no 'hoppers. If hail doesn't ruin the wheat. If frost doesn't spoil the corn. If a horse doesn't come up lame. If . . ."

"Dora, don't worry so much." He interrupted her, then put his arms around her. "It'll come all right."

She sighed. "I hope so. I just wish I was as sure as you are."

She's cranky tonight, Henry thought. *Maybe she's tired. She's tired a lot these days.*

A few minutes later, outside in the cold stillness, he stopped to admire the clear night. The harvest moon rode high in the southern sky, washing the countryside with silver from horizon to horizon.

By God, he thought, *it looks just like it did the first night I spent here after I found this place. I knew right away a man couldn't ask for anything better.*

And now it's really mine, final proof all filed and published, all legal, signed and sealed. Good land, good as any around here, and a good crop this year too.

We'll do even better next year, and then I can pay that loan off. And then I can buy that quarter-section on the east, and when I do, they'll have to stand back and give us room to trot.

He turned back toward the house.

If only Dora was happier. She hasn't smiled in six months. Maybe she'll cheer up if we get some neighbors in the spring.

In the spring. But first there was another winter. Henry Woods shivered, feeling the chill of the turning season.

The really bad times began the next spring, just as Eudora was beginning to feel alive again after the long, dark months. March had been warmer than usual, and by the middle of the month the snow had gone. Henry got an early start on the field work, and by mid-April his oats were seeded and his wheat made a bright green carpet on the slopes north of the house. In

the northwest pasture the grass was already starting to grow. Sloughs and bottoms were alive with songbirds, and migrating ducks and cranes crowded the larger streams.

The storm began late on Easter afternoon with distant thunder followed by gentle spring showers. It was raining hard by the time they went to bed.

When Eudora woke the next morning, the light coming into the house seemed strangely dim. It took her a minute to realize that the windows were completely coated with snow. Startled, she hurried to the door and pulled it open—to find snow packed in a solid drift halfway up the doorframe. Big, wet flakes were still being driven across the farmyard by a northerly gale.

"Guess I won't get in much field work today." Henry had joined his wife at the door.

Eudora felt sick to her stomach. They had never had so much snow so late—*My God,* she thought, *it's halfway through April!*—and the prospect of going back to winter's confinement was almost more than she could stand.

Henry sensed her despair. "Dora, this won't be so bad. I'll dig us out today, and at this time of year the snow'll be gone in a week or less. It won't hurt the crops, and the animals are all right." He bent to work the morning cramp out of his bad leg. "It's a good thing I put 'em in the barn last night. I'd hate to be looking for 'em today."

He was wrong about the shoveling; it was Tuesday before they had all the paths finally cleared, even with all four of them working. But he was right about the snow going fast: in ten days it had all but disappeared, leaving only a few stubborn drifts—and a lot of water—in the low places. The young grain was undamaged.

Still, it was a hard couple of weeks, and Eudora couldn't get over the spooky way the storm had crept up on them while they slept. It seemed to her a bad omen.

She had reason to remember her foreboding one day in late June when she looked out the kitchen door and saw a peculiar white cloud blowing in from the west, shimmering like snow in the sunlight as it moved across the creek and into their cornfield. She had seen that before: the grasshoppers were back.

She called Emma to help her—Dan was out with his father, shocking oats—and they ran to the garden. Eudora thought they might save a few of the vegetables she was working so hard to raise.

No more than three or four minutes passed before Henry reached the farmyard, his boots making ghastly crunching sounds as they trampled the layers of 'hoppers now covering the ground. But by then the garden was simply gone, potato plants eaten clean off, empty holes where onions had

sat in the ground, everything consumed by the wave of struggling insects.

Down the slope to the south the cornfield was completely covered with the dark-bodied 'hoppers, thick as a swarm of bees, the sound of their feeding clearly audible as they stripped the cornstalks of everything edible. Another living, moving carpet crept across the fields to the north, eating the ripening wheat where it stood and clinging three deep to the oat shocks Henry and Dan had just stacked.

Less than an hour later, the 'hoppers left as suddenly as they had arrived. Henry and Eudora looked at the remains of their farm: where there had been a field of leafy green corn, there were now only bare, broken stalks. Raw earth was all that remained in the wheat field. In Eudora's garden, the only surviving plant was a single petunia, saved because she had covered it with an upended bucket that happened to be within reach. Every other green and growing thing was gone. Even leather harness and wooden tool handles had been chewed.

"Henry, what are we being punished for?" Eudora whispered. "What have we done?"

"We haven't done a damned thing, except work," her husband retorted angrily. He pulled himself up straight and pointed to the ravaged wheat. "I've always had bad luck with that stuff," he said. "I got shot in a wheat field. Maybe I should keep away from it."

Much to their surprise, the wheat field was at least partly green again two weeks later, putting out new growth under the stimulus of a couple of timely rains. It wouldn't make grain, but Henry thought it might make fall pasture. He salvaged what he could of the harvested oats, then replanted beans and turnips, hoping to get a crop before frost.

But then it quit raining and got hot. The temperature climbed into the nineties day after day, sucking all moisture from the earth, scorching the reborn wheat and the sprouting turnips, killing what little the 'hoppers had spared.

One day two wagons went by on the other side of the creek—heading east. One bore a crude sign painted on a torn sheet:

IN GOD WE TRUSTED
IN NEBRASKA WE BUSTED

"And that's about it," Henry told Eudora that night. "We're about busted, too. We'll have to buy food, and feed, and maybe kill the cattle so we won't have to feed 'em and so we'll have something to eat. Or sell 'em, if there's anyone left to buy. I don't know."

Eudora had already thought all that, and more. The children suffered even in an easy winter, always cold and shut up and lonesome, not getting enough good food to eat. This next winter would be worse—much worse.

Still, she couldn't be the one to say it.

"Henry, you'll have to decide."

He looked at her. She looked back at him, saying nothing. He got up and went out into the hot summer night.

Henry's younger brother really decided for them. Two years earlier, Benjamin Woods had moved to Dakota Territory and opened a dry-goods store in a little place called Falls City, just west of the Minnesota border. His letter reached them in early August.

Dear Brother Henry,

It has been hot here this past week. But there has been some rain and we escaped the worst hoppers last month. We hear of bad hoppers in Nebraska. I pray you are spared. I continue vy busy here, This store is more than I can manage myself so I must find help soon, if you get busted in Neb why not come here? You can partner me, there is enough trade to support us both.
There is a school here now. This is a booming place.

Ever your affec brother,
Benj. Woods

Henry brought the letter home from town and handed it to Eudora without saying anything. When she finished reading it she hardly dared breathe, let alone speak, but his voice was even.

"We'll leave as soon as I can settle things. I wrote Ben while I was in town. Saved a trip. There's no use putting it off any longer. We'd best get there and get settled before winter."

He stopped speaking and turned away abruptly. Eudora reached out to touch him, then was in his arms.

"Ah, Dora, don't." He touched the tears on her cheek. "It'll come all right."

He took it hard. On the trip from Nebraska across the dried-out plains, he hardly spoke. Late one morning they topped a rise and saw Falls City, tucked into a great bend of the river. Eudora and the children looked ahead eagerly at their new home, but Henry looked back at the plains they had crossed.

"It just doesn't feel right, moving to town," he said. "I'm a farmer. All I ever wanted was my own farm. Now I'll spend the rest of my life in a store."

Chapter 2

Washington, March 1875

CLEMENT LOUNSBERRY walked from the dining room into the lobby of Willard's Hotel. It was barely eight in the morning, but the room was already full of men, voices, and cigar smoke.

Damnation, he thought, *I've only been in Washington one night and I already feel surrounded. There's just too many people. Well, why not? Bees swarm to honey, and there's plenty of honey in this town.*

He picked his way through the lobby and out onto Pennsylvania Avenue. The sun was well up over the Capitol, its first light reflecting off the storefronts and windows along the great avenue. The warmth of this late March morning was a pleasant change from the winter Lounsberry had left behind on the northern plains.

He was the editor of the only newspaper in Bismarck, the biggest town in the northern half of Dakota Territory. He had come to Washington to see Moses Armstrong, the Dakota delegate in Congress, and to deliver a message.

The farmers are in trouble, worse trouble than any time since the first settlers went West after the war. They're in trouble all over the plains, in Dakota and Minnesota and Nebraska and Iowa and Kansas. It's grasshoppers and drought and hard winters and debt.

And this time, the government has got to help.

Lounsberry had spent enough time around politicians—he'd been stationed in Washington when he was the youngest colonel in the Union army—to know that few if any in the capital would want to hear it.

Most of 'em wouldn't know a grasshopper from a green frog. And those that would are too busy stealing to pay any attention to people in trouble.

He wasn't even sure about Armstrong.

Mose Armstrong's a good man and I think he's honest. He understands.

But he don't cut much ice, being a Democrat—and not having a vote in the House because Dakota's not a state yet.

Lounsberry strode up the long slope to the Capitol. Armstrong was waiting for him on the steps leading to the House of Representatives, right where he'd said he'd be.

"Mose, how are you?"

"Why, Colonel, I'm well, I reckon. You look first-rate."

"Well, it makes a fellow's juices flow to get away from winter into this tropical climate. No wonder you wanted a second term."

"Oh, the weather's nice this time of year, but you wouldn't want to visit me in July."

Lounsberry laughed. "I know it gets hot. I was in these parts with McClellan the summer of '62."

The two men talked as easily as if they had last seen each other just the night before. In fact it had been six months earlier, when Lounsberry was starting his weekly newspaper in Bismarck and Armstrong was seeking his second term as Dakota's territorial delegate in Congress. Now the thirty-year-old newspaperman and the forty-year-old congressman amiably picked each other's brains for the latest news in both places.

"Seems like it's been a mean session of Congress," Lounsberry said.

"There's an awful lot of stealing going on around here."

Lounsberry grinned. "I guess that's Washington. They get by with things here that we never could in the rest of the country."

"No, it's not just here," Armstrong responded. "It's the same all over. Everyone wants to get his bit on everything that comes along." He changed the subject. "What brings you here?"

Lounsberry got right to it. "What I really want to find out is what you folks are going to do for the farmers. They're in bad shape, you know. The grasshoppers ate 'em right down to the ground last summer, almost all over Minnesota and Nebraska, and most of Dakota and Kansas too."

"I saw what they did in the Territory last year." Armstrong fell silent for a moment. "But the government's not going to do anything for those people. You know, people here don't see the plains the way we do."

"What do you mean?"

"There's two kinds in Congress. Half of 'em think the plains are nothing but a big desert, all sand and scrub—just something you have to cross to get to California and Oregon. 'The Great American Desert,' they call it. They figure no one should try to live there, let alone farm it."

"And the other half?"

"They think just the opposite, that the plains are no different from what they know in the East: good land, enough rain every year, a long growing season, plenty of trees and ground water and rivers that run year 'round."

Lounsberry snorted. "Well, they're *both* wrong. It's no desert, but it's

different from the East: you can't make a crop every year the way you can here. The weather's harder, it gets hotter and colder too. There's no pattern to it and no forgiveness in it."

"You and I know that. But people here don't, and they don't care, either. They figure that's just the way it is—farmers have always had some good years and some hard ones, some good luck and some bad, and always will."

"They don't use that rule on the railroads or the bankers, do they? They stuff money into their pockets every year, no matter what." Lounsberry was suddenly hot. "Mose, it's much worse this time. They were pretty deep in debt already, and then we had drought, and then the 'hoppers ate what little was left. Someone's got to help."

"Then you and your farmers had best talk to your governor. There's no help from here."

Lounsberry bristled. "Hell's fire! You know the Territory's got no money except what comes from Washington. And the states don't have anything but small change, either. What the farmers really need is more dollars in circulation, and that's up to you people down here."

"Well, this Congress and this president ain't going to do a thing for 'em. They reckon the government already did enough by giving 'em their land for nothing."

"That was little enough to do for men who soldiered. And anyway the speculators and the railroads got a lot more free land than farmers did. And it was the best land, closest to their tracks, so they could sell it for a fat price, while the homesteaders had to go into the back country and pick up the leavings."

"I know, you're right, Colonel." Armstrong shrugged. "I've tried to tell 'em if they don't play square with the farmers, they'll walk out of the Republican party. But most of 'em don't believe me, and those that do don't care."

"Well, the farmers don't care anymore which party wins, they don't think there's a damned bit of difference. You know, a farmer'd rather do anything than ask for charity, but they have to have help this time. And it has to come from here."

The two men went inside the Capitol. The corridors were already crowded, despite the early hour.

"My God, Mose." Lounsberry put his mouth close to Armstrong's ear, unconsciously mimicking the style of the conversations around them. "What's all this about?"

Armstrong smiled knowingly. "Why, this is just an ordinary morning in the place where the people rule."

Lounsberry looked at the freshly shaven faces, well-fitted and expensive clothes, soft hands, gold watch chains stretched across white waist-

coats: all the outward signs of comfort and privilege. Armstrong identified some of them.

"There's the Pennsylvania Railroad; probably just keeping an eye on his people. . . . That tall fellow works for the mine owners, he's trying to get the silver purchase restored, and he likely will. . . . Over there, that's Jay Gould's man, wonder why he's up here, maybe watching the . . . Say!" Armstrong spoke aloud in his surprise. "There's Jim McLaughlin. You know him?"

Lounsberry did know James McLaughlin. He was the government agent for the Sioux Indians at Devil's Lake in northeastern Dakota, an honest man in a notoriously corrupt bureau. They pushed toward him.

"Jim, you're a sight for sore eyes in this place."

"Colonel! So are you! Hello, Mose." McLaughlin smiled under his ample mustache. "I was hoping I'd find you. Have you got time to see me today?"

"Always, Jim. Why don't you give me a little while to look at my mail and I'll meet you here? We can talk a bit then." He looked at Lounsberry. "You be here too, Colonel. I owe you some more time, and I'll get you into the gallery so you can watch us at work."

He winked and slipped away through the crowded hall. The two visitors went outside.

"I haven't seen you in, well, must be six months," McLaughlin said. "Your paper going well?"

"Yup. I'm just here for a few days. I'll be back in Bismarck next week, and none too soon, either. You can't run a newspaper by telegraph."

"No more than you can an Indian reservation," McLaughlin agreed. "But at least I know things will stay pretty quiet when there's snow on the ground and it's way below zero."

"That's what they need here—a blizzard, to slow down the stealing."

"Nothing slows *that* down. Some of the things I've heard would curl your whiskers."

Lounsberry was intrigued. "If you're not busy, let's have supper tonight," he suggested. "Come by Willard's at seven."

"I'll be there."

The lobby of Willard's was even more crowded at seven in the evening than it had been twelve hours earlier. "And every one of 'em wants something," McLaughlin said.

Lounsberry inspected the crowd of officeholders and office seekers, lobbyists and congressmen, businessmen and journalists, loafers and hangers-on.

"Well, we don't, so let's get out of here before we suffocate," he said. "Even your Indians wouldn't smoke such vile stuff."

They crossed the black-and-white marble floor, avoiding the brown

splashes around the numerous spittoons. Outside, it was surprisingly cold; the day's warmth had gone with the sunset, a reminder that real spring was still a few weeks away.

"How did you get along with Armstrong?" Lounsberry asked.

"Not so well."

"Neither did I. I was trying to find out what they're going to do to help the farmers who got busted last summer. Mose says no one around here gives a damn."

"Well, that's about how I came out with him, too. You know there's a lot of talk about opening up the Black Hills to settlement."

"It's bound to happen."

"Well, I'm trying to get the government to play square with my Indians—for once." McLaughlin paused. "We signed a treaty giving the Sioux the Black Hills forever."

"What did Mose say?"

"The people who sent him here want the Hills, so he wants the Hills, and never mind the treaties."

"Look, Jim, there's timber there, and gold too."

They went into Wormley's Hotel, where the dining room was quiet and the food good.

"If we take the Hills, it would be the worst broken promise of all," McLaughlin said.

"Why?"

"Because that's their best hunting ground, and it's a sacred place for them, too."

"Jim, we have got to open up the Hills," Lounsberry, leaning across the table, spoke as the Dakota boomer he really was. "It's the only way we'll ever get railroads built across the southern part of the territory, and without railroads, we'll never get people to settle those lands."

McLaughlin pointed a finger across the table.

"Every Indian treaty has been made for the benefit of the white man, and every single one has been broken as soon as it inconvenienced the white man." It was his turn to be angry. "If the Sioux had any sense they wouldn't bother the settlers—they'd come down here and attack the Capitol."

"They don't have any sense. They kill women and babies."

"Hell's fire, I don't defend that. But the fact is that every Indian war has been caused by lying or cheating or stealing by whites."

Lounsberry shook his head. "I don't believe things are as bad as people say."

"I'll tell you how bad it is," McLaughlin said. "You know General Dodge, the man who built the Union Pacific?"

"Grenville Dodge? Sure. Didn't he go into Congress?"

"Only for one term, until he found something better. Now he's getting rich off the Indians."

"How's he doing that?"

"He had lots of friends in the government, from army days and from the railroad money he spread around. They gave him the contracts to supply food to the Indian reservations."

"Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Not if they'd put 'em out for bids. But there wasn't any bidding. He helped his friends in the government, and they returned the favor, just handed him the contracts. He's collected a million and a half already."

Lounsberry was startled at the amount. "How do you know that?"

"I still have a few friends here. Dodge got about a hundred and eighty thousand in '71, and more than half a million in '72. Then last year he collected over eight hundred thousand dollars."

McLaughlin chuckled at Lounsberry's look. "That's not all. Dodge applied for a veteran's pension last year, and now he's drawing thirty dollars a month."

"You either have to laugh or cry," Lounsberry said. "Thirty dollars a month is more to a Dakota farmer than that whole million and a half is to Dodge. They're breaking their backs to raise barely enough to eat, and they can't get a dime from people down here who get rich on other people's money."

McLaughlin finished his soup. "It all fits, doesn't it? Congress gives the railroads money, and a lot of free land, too, which they sell to farmers. In return, the railroads give congressmen free stock in their construction companies."

"So the congressmen give away public money and public land, and get back private boodle for themselves." Lounsberry picked up the tale. "The railroads make money selling land to farmers, then they make more money hauling what the farmers raise. And the farmers work like niggers—and get nothing but deeper in debt."

They fell silent as the waiter brought their dinner.