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Willa Cather

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WILLA CATHER

*The Song
of the Lark*

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To
ISABELLE McCLUNG

*On uplands,
At morning,
The world was young, the winds were free;
A garden fair,
In that blue desert air,
Its guest invited me to be.*

“It was a wond’rous lovely storm that drove me!”

LENAU’S “*Don Juan*”

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The Song of the Lark

PART I

Friends of Childhood

PART I

Friends of Childhood

I

DR. HOWARD ARCHIE had just come up from a game of pool with the Jewish clothier and two traveling men who happened to be staying overnight in Moonstone. His offices were in the Duke Block, over the drug store. Larry, the doctor's man, had lit the overhead light in the waiting-room and the double student's lamp on the desk in the study. The isinglass sides of the hard-coal burner were aglow, and the air in the study was so hot that as he came in the doctor opened the door into his little operating-room, where there was no stove. The waiting-room was carpeted and stiffly furnished, something like a country parlor. The study had worn, unpainted floors, but there was a look of winter comfort about it. The doctor's flat-top desk was large and well made; the papers were in orderly piles, under glass weights. Behind the stove a wide bookcase, with double glass doors, reached from the floor to the ceiling. It was filled with medical books of every thickness and color. On the top shelf stood a long row of thirty or forty volumes, bound all alike in dark mottled board covers, with imitation leather backs.

As the doctor in New England villages is proverbially old, so the doctor in small Colorado towns twenty-five years ago was generally young. Dr. Archie was barely thirty. He was

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tall, with massive shoulders which he held stiffly, and a large, well-shaped head. He was a distinguished-looking man, for that part of the world, at least. There was something individual in the way in which his reddish-brown hair, parted cleanly at the side, bushed over his high forehead. His nose was straight and thick, and his eyes were intelligent. He wore a curly, reddish mustache and an imperial, cut trimly, which made him look a little like the pictures of Napoleon III. His hands were large and well-kept, but ruggedly formed, and the backs were shaded with crinkly reddish hair. He wore a blue suit of woolly, wide-waled serge; the traveling men had known at a glance that it was made by a Denver tailor. The doctor was always well dressed.

Dr. Archie turned up the student's lamp and sat down in the swivel chair before his desk. He sat uneasily, beating a tattoo on his knees with his fingers, and looked about him as if he were bored. He glanced at his watch, then absently took from his pocket a bunch of small keys, selected one and looked at it. A contemptuous smile, barely perceptible, played on his lips, but his eyes remained meditative. Behind the door that led into the hall, under his buffalo-skin driving-coat, was a locked cupboard. This the doctor opened mechanically, kicking aside a pile of muddy overshoes. Inside, on the shelves, were whiskey glasses and decanters, lemons, sugar, and bitters. Hearing a step in the empty, echoing hall without, the doctor closed the cupboard again, snapping the Yale lock. The door of the waiting-room opened, a man entered and came on into the consulting-room.

"Good-evening, Mr. Kronborg," said the doctor carelessly. "Sit down."

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His visitor was a tall, loosely built man, with a thin brown beard, streaked with gray. He wore a frock coat, a broad-brimmed black hat, a white lawn necktie, and steel-rimmed spectacles. Altogether there was a pretentious and important air about him, as he lifted the skirts of his coat and sat down.

“Good-evening, doctor. Can you step around to the house with me? I think Mrs. Kronborg will need you this evening.” This was said with profound gravity and, curiously enough, with a slight embarrassment.

“Any hurry?” the doctor asked over his shoulder as he went into his operating-room.

Mr. Kronborg coughed behind his hand, and contracted his brows. His face threatened at every moment to break into a smile of foolish excitement. He controlled it only by calling upon his habitual pulpit manner. “Well, I think it would be as well to go immediately. Mrs. Kronborg will be more comfortable if you are there. She has been suffering for some time.”

The doctor came back and threw a black bag upon his desk. He wrote some instructions for his man on a prescription pad and then drew on his overcoat. “All ready,” he announced, putting out his lamp. Mr. Kronborg rose and they tramped through the empty hall and down the stairway to the street. The drug store below was dark, and the saloon next door was just closing. Every other light on Main Street was out.

On either side of the road and at the outer edge of the board sidewalk, the snow had been shoveled into breast-works. The town looked small and black, flattened down in the snow, muffled and all but extinguished. Overhead the

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stars shone gloriously. It was impossible not to notice them. The air was so clear that the white sand hills to the east of Moonstone gleamed softly. Following the Reverend Mr. Kronborg along the narrow walk, past the little dark, sleeping houses, the doctor looked up at the flashing night and whistled softly. It did seem that people were stupider than they need be; as if on a night like this there ought to be something better to do than to sleep nine hours, or to assist Mrs. Kronborg in functions which she could have performed so admirably unaided. He wished he had gone down to Denver to hear Fay Templeton sing “See-Saw.” Then he remembered that he had a personal interest in this family, after all. They turned into another street and saw before them lighted windows; a low story-and-a-half house, with a wing built on at the right and a kitchen addition at the back, everything a little on the slant—roofs, windows, and doors. As they approached the gate, Peter Kronborg’s pace grew brisker. His nervous, ministerial cough annoyed the doctor. “Exactly as if he were going to give out a text,” he thought. He drew off his glove and felt in his vest pocket. “Have a troche, Kronborg,” he said, producing some. “Sent me for samples. Very good for a rough throat.”

“Ah, thank you, thank you. I was in something of a hurry. I neglected to put on my overshoes. Here we are, doctor.” Kronborg opened his front door—seemed delighted to be at home again.

The front hall was dark and cold; the hatrack was hung with an astonishing number of children’s hats and caps and cloaks. They were even piled on the table beneath the hatrack. Under the table was a heap of rubbers and overshoes. While the doctor hung up his coat and hat, Peter Kron-

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borg opened the door into the living-room. A glare of light greeted them, and a rush of hot, stale air, smelling of warming flannels.

At three o'clock in the morning Dr. Archie was in the parlor putting on his cuffs and coat—there was no spare bedroom in that house. Peter Kronborg's seventh child, a boy, was being soothed and cosseted by his aunt, Mrs. Kronborg was asleep, and the doctor was going home. But he wanted first to speak to Kronborg, who, coatless and flut-tery, was pouring coal into the kitchen stove. As the doctor crossed the dining-room he paused and listened. From one of the wing rooms, off to the left, he heard rapid, distressed breathing. He went to the kitchen door.

"One of the children sick in there?" he asked, nodding toward the partition.

Kronborg hung up the stove-lifter and dusted his fingers. "It must be Thea. I meant to ask you to look at her. She has a croupy cold. But in my excitement—Mrs. Kronborg is doing finely, eh, doctor? Not many of your patients with such a constitution, I expect."

"Oh, yes. She's a fine mother." The doctor took up the lamp from the kitchen table and unceremoniously went into the wing room. Two chubby little boys were asleep in a double bed, with the coverlids over their noses and their feet drawn up. In a single bed, next to theirs, lay a little girl of eleven, wide awake, two yellow braids sticking up on the pillow behind her. Her face was scarlet and her eyes were blazing.

The doctor shut the door behind him. "Feel pretty sick, Thea?" he asked as he took out his thermometer. "Why did n't you call somebody?"

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She looked at him with greedy affection. "I thought you were here," she spoke between quick breaths. "There is a new baby, is n't there? Which?"

"Which?" repeated the doctor.

"Brother or sister?"

He smiled and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Brother," he said, taking her hand. "Open."

"Good. Brothers are better," she murmured as he put the glass tube under her tongue.

"Now, be still, I want to count." Dr. Archie reached for her hand and took out his watch. When he put her hand back under the quilt he went over to one of the windows — they were both tight shut — and lifted it a little way. He reached up and ran his hand along the cold, unpapered wall. "Keep under the covers; I'll come back to you in a moment," he said, bending over the glass lamp with his thermometer. He winked at her from the door before he shut it.

Peter Kronborg was sitting in his wife's room, holding the bundle which contained his son. His air of cheerful importance, his beard and glasses, even his shirt-sleeves, annoyed the doctor. He beckoned Kronborg into the living-room and said sternly: —

"You've got a very sick child in there. Why did n't you call me before? It's pneumonia, and she must have been sick for several days. Put the baby down somewhere, please, and help me make up the bed-lounge here in the parlor. She's got to be in a warm room, and she's got to be quiet. You must keep the other children out. Here, this thing opens up, I see," swinging back the top of the carpet lounge. "We can lift her mattress and carry her in just as she is. I don't want to disturb her more than is necessary."

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Kronborg was all concern immediately. The two men took up the mattress and carried the sick child into the parlor. "I'll have to go down to my office to get some medicine, Kronborg. The drug store won't be open. Keep the covers on her. I won't be gone long. Shake down the stove and put on a little coal, but not too much; so it'll catch quickly, I mean. Find an old sheet for me, and put it there to warm."

The doctor caught his coat and hurried out into the dark street. Nobody was stirring yet, and the cold was bitter. He was tired and hungry and in no mild humor. "The idea!" he muttered; "to be such an ass at his age, about the seventh! And to feel no responsibility about the little girl. Silly old goat! The baby would have got into the world somehow; they always do. But a nice little girl like that — she's worth the whole litter. Where she ever got it from —" He turned into the Duke Block and ran up the stairs to his office.

Thea Kronborg, meanwhile, was wondering why she happened to be in the parlor, where nobody but company — usually visiting preachers — ever slept. She had moments of stupor when she did not see anything, and moments of excitement when she felt that something unusual and pleasant was about to happen, when she saw everything clearly in the red light from the isinglass sides of the hard-coal burner — the nickel trimmings on the stove itself, the pictures on the wall, which she thought very beautiful, the flowers on the Brussels carpet, Czerny's "Daily Studies" which stood open on the upright piano. She forgot, for the time being, all about the new baby.

When she heard the front door open, it occurred to her that the pleasant thing which was going to happen was Dr. Archie himself. He came in and warmed his hands at the

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stove. As he turned to her, she threw herself wearily toward him, half out of her bed. She would have tumbled to the floor had he not caught her. He gave her some medicine and went to the kitchen for something he needed. She drowsed and lost the sense of his being there. When she opened her eyes again, he was kneeling before the stove, spreading something dark and sticky on a white cloth, with a big spoon; batter, perhaps. Presently she felt him taking off her nightgown. He wrapped the hot plaster about her chest. There seemed to be straps which he pinned over her shoulders. Then he took out a thread and needle and began to sew her up in it. That, she felt, was too strange; she must be dreaming anyhow, so she succumbed to her drowsiness.

Thea had been moaning with every breath since the doctor came back, but she did not know it. She did not realize that she was suffering pain. When she was conscious at all, she seemed to be separated from her body; to be perched on top of the piano, or on the hanging lamp, watching the doctor sew her up. It was perplexing and unsatisfactory, like dreaming. She wished she could waken up and see what was going on.

The doctor thanked God that he had persuaded Peter Kronborg to keep out of the way. He could do better by the child if he had her to himself. He had no children of his own. His marriage was a very unhappy one. As he lifted and undressed Thea, he thought to himself what a beautiful thing a little girl's body was,—like a flower. It was so neatly and delicately fashioned, so soft, and so milky white. Thea must have got her hair and her silky skin from her mother. She was a little Swede, through and through. Dr. Archie could not help thinking how he would cherish a little creature like

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this if she were his. Her hands, so little and hot, so clever, too,—he glanced at the open exercise book on the piano. When he had stitched up the flaxseed jacket, he wiped it neatly about the edges, where the paste had worked out on the skin. He put on her the clean nightgown he had warmed before the fire, and tucked the blankets about her. As he pushed back the hair that had fuzzed down over her eyebrows, he felt her head thoughtfully with the tips of his fingers. No, he could n't say that it was different from any other child's head, though he believed that there was something very different about her. He looked intently at her wide, flushed face, freckled nose, fierce little mouth, and her delicate, tender chin—the one soft touch in her hard little Scandinavian face, as if some fairy godmother had caressed her there and left a cryptic promise. Her brows were usually drawn together defiantly, but never when she was with Dr. Archie. Her affection for him was prettier than most of the things that went to make up the doctor's life in Moonstone.

The windows grew gray. He heard a tramping on the attic floor, on the back stairs, then cries: "Give me my shirt!" "Where's my other stocking?"

"I'll have to stay till they get off to school," he reflected, "or they'll be in here tormenting her, the whole lot of them."