

THE WILDCATTERS

A Tale of the Cobalt Country.

S. A. White

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BOOK TWO.

CHAPTER XII.

BETERIC'S words came true. Next morning Carl was in the grip of the fever, and the draughts the voyageur brewed only partly checked it. He grew worse and Beteric saw there was but one thing to do and that was to take him out the way he himself had come in from the settlement. If he waited, Carl would die. He could not be left alone, while the voyageur went for the settlement's doctor since it was a two days' journey each way. Beteric must take him out, and as quickly as possible! Perhaps in all the tales that the north people tell, there is none so striking in its heroism and true-heartedness as the story of how the voyageur brought out, single-handed, a sick man from lone Nipissing to Carvelle. He paddled all day and all the long night. On the portage he had to make double trips, carrying Carl over first and then going back for his canoe and packs. It was a Herculean task, but Beteric never stopped, and, instead of making a two days' trip, he reached Carvelle in a little over a day and a night. His sturdy race recall his deed daily and many a hunter and trapper will sit up half the night to tell you of Beteric, the voyageur. He reached Carvelle just in time. Had he taken the days only for paddling, the doctor of the settlement said Carl would have been past hope. As it was, his condition was precarious.

At the time Beteric arrived, the Theodore party was about to leave. Whitmore was dead and they were taking his body away. Their departure was set for the afternoon of that day. Beteric had come in the morning. After attending Carl, the doctor sought Rita to say farewell. He had become infatuated with her beauty and wanted to see her in the hope of extracting a promise for a future renewal of their intercourse. This, to his satisfaction, he got. Then he apologized for hastening away and mentioned his new patient.

"A bad case of fever!" he said. "I cannot be long absent. Some prospector who got caught up in the wilds! The voyageur brought him down single-handed. By George! it was a plucky thing."

"Ah!" Rita murmured. "I have heard that these river-voyagers are so brave. A prospector, you said. Do you know his name?"

"Upon my soul, I don't. The case needed such prompt attention that I forgot to make enquiries. Le Prince, the voyageur called him. He will know his name."

"What?" Rita screamed. "What did he call him?"

"The Prince!—but why?"

"Quick!" she exhorted. "Take me to him. There can be only one Prince. Man, don't stand!"

She seized him by the sleeve and dragged him through the door. "Where, where?" she panted.

They sped breathlessly to Doctor Basil's house. Rita's fears were realized and she ran to the sick man's bed with a low cry, but the doctor led her into another room.

"He must not be disturbed," he said. "You must make no noise."

"Oh! save him," Rita hysterically pleaded. "He must not die. Do you hear? He must not."

"I shall do all in my power. His condition is critical, but I feel confident I can save him. But why are you so excited? Do you know him?"

"Know him? Yes—the best man that ever breathed!"

"Ah!" Basil exclaimed in a tone of suspense. "He is something to you."

"No," she cried quickly, "his faith is plighted to someone else. Save him for her sake. Man, do your best!"

Basil's fear subsided at the knowledge that Carl's word was given to someone dear to him. The sudden suspicion that this man would stand between him and the girl he loved vanished and he threw his whole heart and soul into fighting the monster of darkness away from the weak frame in his room. The Theodore party left, but Rita, to Doctor Basil's intense delight, would not go with them. She remained to act as nurse on the case of the sick prospector. She assured her father that it was a matter of life and death and that there was no one but herself competent to take such a delicate duty. It must not be left to the French-Canadian women. Colonel Theodore could not stay himself as he had to go with Whitmore's body to clear up the circumstances of his death to his friends, but Mrs. Forbes, an elderly widow of the party, agreed to remain with Rita.

So the girl watched the flickering flame of Carl's life day and night, snatching a few hours' sleep now and then, but always attentive, gentle and tender in ministering to his needs. If Beteric was the first angel of mercy who succoured Carl in his helplessness, Rita was the second. Doctor Basil marvelled at her aptitude, at the cool, scientific way in which she did his bidding and at the softness and silence of her touch and movements. She was all perception and intuition. She was full of repose and sweet sympathy. No one could know from her face that such a tumult of fear, hope, doubt, disappointment and unfulfilled love was raging in her soul. The hidden fire, burning so fiercely, never once showed on the surface. She was the calm, sweet, loving angel of mercy at a sick man's bedside, and Basil's love grew a hundredfold as he saw what a woman she was in this new and hitherto unrevealed phase of her life.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE power of death, clutching at the weak strands of an enfeebled human life, is mighty; but the saving force of science, impelled by the fire of great love, is mighty too. Death clutched hard at Carl Glover's frame, but two were at his bedside who fought with unflagging energy. The woman fought with unceasing persistence for what she loved; the man strove beneath the eyes of her he adored for the guerdon of her approbation. It was a conflict of spirit against spirit, magnetism against magnetism, and a hard, long fight it was. Yet the woman and man won over the monster of death. Slowly they nursed him back, step by step, till recovery was certain. Then one night Rita told Doctor Basil what she intended to do.

"He is past all danger?" she asked him that night.

"Yes," he said warmly, "and I think it is due to you. Had I been alone, I don't know if it would have been this way."

"I may go for two or three days? I shall not be any longer than I can help."

"Yes, but why do you wish to go and then return? Can you not wait till he is able to be up and about?"

"He must not know who nursed him," she replied. "So far, he could not know for the darkened room and your forbiddance of his speaking at all. But in a little we cannot keep that from him. He will have light and speech and then he will discover who has been with him."

"But why this strange proceeding?" Basil asked.

"Listen!" Rita said. "Doctor Basil, I once brought a great sin into this man's life, a great sorrow to him and to another who is dear to him. Now I go to atone for my wrong. He despised himself so that he went without a word to her, thinking she would never forgive. He will never go to her. I know his spirit and he will never go. As soon as he is sufficiently well, he will lose himself as before. I must bring her here. If she has a woman's heart, she will forgive and come."

Stepping to Carl's shaded couch she bent over him. "Doctor Basil," she said softly, "you will witness this as a chaste kiss."

Stooping, she pressed her lips tenderly and reverently to his brow.

"For a time, perhaps for the only time in my life, I have been an angel of mercy," Rita went on. "It has changed me. I am a different woman. Being so close to death has shown me what a soul is really worth. The soul we have fought for here I was nigh to shattering one time. Now is my atonement."

Rita left at once and the space of another full day found her at the little hamlet by the Humber. Without delay she sought the Thurston home. The month for decision Jasper had given Jean was shortening with horrible rapidity and as the days flew by her agony increased. Her father and mother had begged her not to sacrifice herself for them. They would go, would leave the old place and make their way in the world somewhere else. Mrs. Halycon had pleaded with her, too, advising her not to make the sacrifice and offering them a home with herself and Clive. When Clive returned, the mother said, he would take the mortgage over from Jasper, but Jean knew Jasper would not relinquish his hold. She could not hear of going to the Halycon's even until Clive came, and she had steeled her heart to give up all her happiness for the sake of her parents. Every day she fought the battle afresh. Each night the thought of it lurked in her dreams. A thousand times she made the resolve and

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