



GREAT souls by instinct to each other turn,
Demand alliance, and in friendship burn.—Addison.

Winning the Wilderness

(Continued from last week.)

TIMES are getting worse every day," one man observed. "No rain since the tenth of May, and the prettiest stand of wheat I ever saw, burned to a half-yield or less before cutting time. I'd counted on wheat for my living this year."

"It's the same if you'd had corn, Bennington, Jim Shirley observed. "I was polishing my crown for a Corn King Festival this fall. I don't believe I'll harvest fifteen bushels to the acre."

"Fifteen bushels!" another neighbor exclaimed. "Fifteen ears to the row a section long would encourage me. Darley Chambers told me when I took up my claim, if I'd plant a grove or two, that in three years the trees would be so big that rainfall would be abundant. You all know my catpaws woods is a wonder," he added with a wink.

Darley Chambers himself had just come down the trail and was entering the door.

"Well, come over our way if you are on the hunt for prosperity," Todd Stewart interposed. "Grass River isn't living up to its name any better than our creek; isn't any fuller of weeds than our brook is of shale. I did lose the trail in your river this morning, though. The weeds are nearly up to the pony's flanks. Think of the fertility of a river bed that will grow weeds three feet high and ten shades more yellow green than the dead grass on the bank. If there's a drop of water in our creek for twenty miles, I'd go get it and have Brother Gaines analyze it to make sure it wasn't resin."

"You do well to see the humor of the situation, Stewart," Pryor Gaines began, with the cheery tone of a man who believes in hope.

"I don't see that that helps any," Bennington, the first speaker, broke in dolefully. "Joking isn't going to give us feed and clothes and fuel till crop time comes again—if it ever does."

"I'm not suffering for extra clothes.

What I wear now is a burden," Todd Stewart declared.

"Well, gentlemen," Darley Chambers took the floor. "What are you going to do? That's what brought me here to-day. I knowed I'd find you all here. When I sent one of my fellows into this blasted Sahara, I was honest. I thought Grass River was a real stream, not a weed patch and a stone out-crop. I'd seen water in it, as I can prove by Aydelot. Remember, when we met down by the bend here, one winter day."

"Yes, I remember," Asher replied. "Well, I just come by there and there ain't a drop of water in that deep bend, no more'n in my hat." Chambers plumped his hat down on the floor with the words. "And the creek, on Stewart's testimony, is a blasted fissure in the earth."

"I always said when that bend went dry I'd leave the country, but I can't," Jim Shirley said doggedly.

"Why not?" Chambers inquired. "Because I can't throw away the only property I have the world, and I haven't the means to get away, let alone start up anywhere else."

"We're all in the same boat," Bennington declared.

"Same boat, every fellow rocking it, too, and no water to drown in if we fall out. We're in the queerest streak of luck yet developed," Todd Stewart observed.

"Let's take a vote, then, and see how many of us really have no visible means of support and couldn't walk out of here at all. Let's have a show of hands," Jim Shirley proposed.

"How did you decide?" Chambers asked, as the hands dropped.

His eyes were on Asher Aydelot, who had not voted.

"Didn't you see? Everybody, except Asher there, is nailed fast to the gumbo," Stewart declared.

Darley Chambers looked Asher Aydelot straight in the eyes, and his body could have said that pity or dislike or surprise controlled the man's

mind, for something of all three were in that look. Then he said:

"Gentlemen, I know your condition just as well as you do. You're in a losing game, and it's stay and starve, or—but they ain't no 'or.' Now, I'll advance money tomorrow on every claim held here and take it and assume the mortgage. Not that they are worth it. Oh, Lord, no. I'll be landlocked, and it's out of kindness to you that I'm willing to stretch them feelers I represent in the East. But I'll take chances. I'll help each fellow of you to get away for a reasonable price on your claim. It's a humanitarian move, but I may be able to lump it off for range land in a few years for about what it costs to pay taxes. But, gents, I got some of you in and I'm no scallawag when it comes to helpin' you out. Think it over, and I'll be down this way in two weeks. I've got to go now. It's too infernal hot to keep alive here. I know what there's two sundown stalks up on the trail that's fully two feet tall. I've got to have shade. Good-day." And Chambers was gone.

"What do you say?" The question seemed to come from all at once.

"Let Pryor Gaines speak first. He's our preacher," Asher said with a smile.

Pryor Gaines was a small, fair-faced man, a scholar, a dreamer, too, maybe. By birth or accident, he had suffered from a deformity. He limped when he walked, and his left hand had less than normal efficiency. On his face the pathos of the large will and the limited power was written over by the ready smile, the mark of abundant good will toward men.

"I am out of the race," he said calmly. "I'm as poor as any of you, of course, and I must stay here anyhow. Dr. Carey tells me, I came West on account of heart action and some pulmonary convulsions. I cannot choose where I shall go, even if I had the means to carry out my choice. But my necessities need not influence anyone," he added with a smile. "I can live without you, if I have to."

"How about you?" Stewart said, turning to Asher. "You take no risk at all in leaving, so you'll go first, I suppose."

All this time the settlers' wives sat listening to the considerations that meant so much to them. They wore civil dresses, and not one of them had on a hat. But their sunbonnets were clean and stiffly starched, and while they were humbly clad, there was not a stupid face among them; neither was there a commonplace stupid. Their homes and home devices for improvement, the last reading in the all too few papers that came their way, the memories of books and lectures and college life of other days, and the hope of the future, were among the things of which they spoke.

Virginia Aydelot was no longer the pretty pink and white girl-bride who had come to the West three years before. Her face and arms were brown as a gypsy's, but her hair, rumpled

by the white sunbonnet she had worn, was abundant, and her dark eyes and the outlines of her face had not changed. She would always be handsome without regard to age or locality. Nor had the harshness of the wilderness made harsh the soft Southern tongue that was her heritage.

At Stewart's words, Asher glanced at his wife, and he knew from her eyes what her choice would be.

"When I was a boy on the old farm at Cloverdale, Ohio, my mother's advice was as useful to me as my father's," Swift through Asher's mind ran the memory of that moonlit April night on his father's verandah five years before. "Out here it is our wives who bear the heaviest burdens. Let us have their thoughts on the situation."

"That's right," Jim Shirley exclaimed. "Mrs. Aydelot, you are first in point of time in this settlement. What do you say?"

"It's a big responsibility, Mrs. Aydelot," Bennington, who had not smiled hitherto, said with a twinkle in his eye.

"As goes Asher Aydelot, so goes Grass River," Todd Stewart declared. "You speak for him, Mrs. Aydelot, and tell us what to do."

"I cannot tell you what to do. I can speak only for the Aydelots," Virginia said. "When we came West Asher told me he had left one bridge not burned. He had put aside enough money to take us back to Ohio and to start a new life, on small dimensions, of course, back East, whenever we found the prairie too hostile. They've often been rough, never worse than now, but"—her eyes were bright with the unconquerable will to do as she pleased, true heritage of the Thaines of old—"but I'm not ready to go yet." Jim Shirley clapped his hands, but Pryor Gaines spoke earnestly. "There is no failure in a land where the women will to win. By them the heart-strings stand or crumble to dust. The Plains are master now. They must be servant some day."

"Amen!" responded Asher Aydelot, and the Sabbath service ended.

Two weeks later Darley Chambers came again to the barren valley and met the settlers in the sod school-house. Not a cloud had yet scarred the heavens, not a dewdrop had glistened in the morning sunlight. Clearly August was outranking July as king of a season of glaring light and withering heat. The settlers drooped listlessly on the backless seats, and the barefoot children did not even try to recite the golden text.

"I'd like to speak to you, Aydelot," Chambers said at the door, as the school service ended.

The two men sought the shady side of the cabin and dropped on the ground.

"I'm going to be plain, now, and you mustn't misunderstand me for a minute."

(Continued on page 18.)



The attractive display of cakes, bread, pastry, preserves and flowers, as shown in the girl's section of the School Fair at Selby, in Lennox Co., Ont., last fall.