

A Western Romance

Written for The Western Home Monthly By Miss A. McElreoy

COME on, Helen dear, and have something to eat," said tender-hearted Mrs. Greenway to her niece, who sat at the window looking out at the drizzling afternoon, with a face so sad and pained it made her aunt's heart ache.

"Don't think about it any more to-night; it will not seem so bad tomorrow."

"Oh, Auntie, I feel too blue for anything. It was bad enough to lose poor old dad; but that he should use me in this way at the last has just crushed me."

"It is hard; but don't try to understand it now, dear: the day is too gloomy for dwelling on such things."

"Why should he stipulate that I marry Mr. Thompson? When he was living he never said anything to me about him. He did speak several times a year or more ago about inviting him here, but for some reason he never came."

"Come on and have a cup of tea anyway; things will look brighter then. And besides," she added, "you have never seen Mr. Thompson. Wait till you have seen him."

"Oh, Auntie, don't talk so. You know I will never marry a man as a business proposition, never! What hurts me so is to think that my father should expect me to do so."

Helen Walter's father had just died, and the day our story opens, after the funeral was over, his will had been read, when, to the astonishment of all, it was found he had left the comfortable home in which he and his daughter had lived together for so many years, and all his estate, amounting to some thirty thousand dollars, to his daughter, but only on condition she marry a Mr. Thompson, of Detroit, a son of a very dear friend of his, within a year. If she did not marry this unknown Mr. Thompson she received three thousand dollars only, and the remainder of the estate went to a cousin in Toronto.

The contents of the will added to the sorrow over the loss of her father completely overwhelmed the poor girl; she could not understand why her father should have made such a condition; it was not at all like him. Mrs. Greenway, an aunt who had come to stay with her in her time of sorrow, having failed in every other attempt to cheer her, had decided to try a cup of tea.

The tea was a failure, and shortly after Helen slipped away to her room, where she sat long into the night puzzling to understand her father's strange action.

The next morning she was awakened by the cheery song of a robin perched on the tree just outside her window, and opened her eyes to find her room flooded with glorious sunshine. Rising, she looked out to find the whole scene pulsating with the inexpressible gladness of a bright spring morning. The raindrops, left on the branches and pavement since last night's showers, gleamed like so many diamonds.

The effect was magical. Immediately the dark, painful load that, in the drizzling gloom of yesterday, seemed crushing her beneath it, was lightened. In some intuitive way she saw that just as the darkness of yesterday was followed by the brightness of this morning, so too, in her own life, bright days should yet follow the dark ones, and with a mind freshened by the night's rest, she turned from the painful past to look forward and grasp the future.

"I've got my message," she thought, leaning out of the window to inhale the glorious morning air, her eyes brightening with a deep and noble purpose; "I'm going to be a woman and 'play the game,' as they say."

When she came down to the breakfast table her aunt was amazed and delighted to find her so cheerful. The sorrow was still there, but it was tempered by a living purpose. Mrs. Greenway did not yet understand.

"Isn't this an inspiring morning?" greeted Helen. "It must have been sent just for my benefit. At any rate it has made me see things differently to what I did yesterday. Do you know, I have just been thinking, why should I sit down in despair because I have not my father's money? I have a university education, youth and good health, with only the handicap of being a woman, and that is not a big handicap now, thanks to the brave women who have blazed the trail.

I'm going to get out and do for myself. Listening to that bright robin this morning, I determined to live bravely."

"I am so glad," answered her aunt, "but don't be in a hurry. I should be glad to have you come and stay with me as long as you wish."

In a very few days Helen Walters still further surprised her aunt by announcing her decision to go out to Alberta to teach. "Why should I not go?" she went on. "They say that is the young man's country; why should it not be the young woman's country, too? I read in our university paper that they are short of teachers, and am convinced that is my place."

Inside of two weeks Miss Walters was in Edmonton and called on the Department of Education.

"We are very glad to have you," said the Deputy Minister, "for we are short of teachers, and not many of those we have are as well qualified as you are, but," here he hesitated, "it is our practice to give Alberta trained teachers the first choice of close-in schools. Would you be willing to go back fifteen or twenty miles from a railway?"

"I have no reason to object; I am a perfect stranger here, so that all places are alike to me."

"There's a nice school twenty miles north of S—, in the Peace River country; would that be too far away?"

"That is north of here, in the new country we have been hearing so much about?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I think I should like to go there. We hear so much in Ontario about the world being in the making out here; I would like to get where that is being done," replied Helen, laughing.

The Deputy laughed also. "We can easily gratify that wish for you. The school I mention is right there. And it is a very good school, too. It is a new place; settlers have just gone in. Most of them are from the States, but some of them are from Ontario. The salary is seventy dollars a month, and the boarding place is one half mile from the school."

"When does it open?"

"Just as soon as we can send a teacher."

"How soon could you go?"

"Tomorrow."

"There is no train tomorrow, but there is one the next day—Thursday. I'll wire the Secretary, Mr. Johnston, to meet you at S—."

"Well, that's settled," thought Miss Walters, as she left the parliament buildings, "and I am going to this famous Peace River country. I am to begin where things are new."

The morning sun gleamed on the waters of the Saskatchewan river, glorified the university buildings in the distance, and made resplendent the huge pillar of smoke that climbed up from the engine of a long passenger train pulling cautiously over the High Level bridge with its load of landseekers for the north country.

"All the signs point north," mused Helen as she walked back to the Selkirk hotel.

At mid-forenoon on the following Friday the E.D. & B.C. passenger train pulled into a small station in the Peace River country. Miss Walters and a commercial traveller, with two big trunks, got off, and the train glided on. Although a number of the idly curious were lined up on the station platform to watch the train come in, there was no one there who appeared to expect anyone. The train vanished, the traveller hurried off to a store, a short distance away, facing the track and bearing a huge sign advising all to use Robin Hood flour, and the idlers scattered. The teacher was alone—a dainty, trim little figure rather out of keeping with the crude surroundings. Two large brown eyes gazed fearfully from under the brim of a smart little hat. The place was so small it did not seem to have even stopping accommodation. The store advocating Robin Hood flour, and a long, low building in front of which two men were busy with a tractor, and one or two smaller buildings, all of brand new lumber, made the town. Of course, up the track a distance, towered a huge elevator, but an elevator had no appeal to a lonely teacher from Hamilton.

After waiting some minutes she walked up to the station agent, who was dragging a bundle into the station house.

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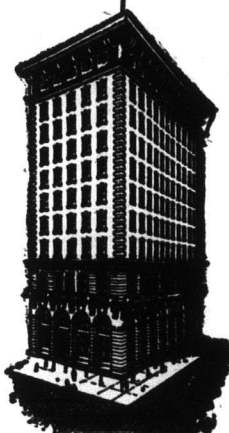
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