

A Voice from the Past

Written for The Western Home Monthly By C. D. Pogson

A REFRESHING June rain was saturating the fertile soil of Central Alberta. It beat lustily upon the roof of Andy McQueen's weather-beaten shack, trickled down the protruding stove pipe and sizzled on the rusty stove. In the shack Andy sat carelessly balancing himself on one leg of his chair as he delivered to his neighbor, Joe Spears, a somewhat heated tirade upon the particular follies of Kaiser Bill.

"At any rate," remarked Joe, as the invective reached an eloquent close, "if this rain continues for a spell longer it's bound to throttle the 'food shortage' cry to a great extent. Why, I shouldn't wonder but you'll be building a mansion this fall, ready for the reception of some fair helpmate."

"Mansion nothing," returned Andy. "When the fair lady comes, if she ever does, she'll come to this old domicile. Then we'll plan and build the mansion together."

"You don't mean to say that you'll bring a wife in here!" exclaimed Joe.

"Well—er—not exactly to this," smiled Andy, as his eye rested upon the greasy stove, the rusty pipes, and the unkempt bunk nailed to the wall, then wandered to the larder shelves in the opposite corner, littered with groceries, pots, pans, kettles and dishes, and finally fell upon an indiscriminating pile of clothing, boots and boxes beneath the bunk. "I suppose it might be cleaned up a little, and I could build a lean-to at the back. But what about yourself? You've got the mansion, where is the helpmate?"

"Oh, I'm all right," responded his friend. "Can't say that the helpmate idea appeals to me. Seems to me there's a good deal of hindrance connected with them. I prefer running my own show."

"Rubbish! You don't believe that hindrance twaddle. Just look at the women in this district. Think what they did before the war began, and what they have done since. You may as well confess. I think it's a case of 'sour grapes' with you. Were you ever in love?"

"Ye—s," reluctantly, "I suppose that's what you'd call it. But never again for me. She married the other chap."

"Oh, I say, that's too bad. Didn't trifle with you, surely?" inquired Andy as he noted the pained look on Joe's face. "No, no. It wasn't her fault. I—I never told her."

"What? You never told her!" yelled Andy, as he doubled up in his chair, convulsed with laughter.

"Well, you are the limit. Of course, it wasn't the lady's fault. But try again, Joe; there are plenty of good ones yet. And be sure you tell her next time."

"There'll be no next time, she was the only one. I wish I were in France with the other lads. But what's the use wishing? The doctors have turned me down twice—poor eyesight."

"Cheer up, old chap; we're helping to feed the army. I'd have passed if I'd been three inches taller. But I may as well tell you a bit of news. I'm expecting that a war widow will be keeping house for me this autumn."

"You don't say!"

"Yes, my cousin from down East. Her husband went over with the first contingent; was killed the first week he was in the trenches, left a widow and a three-year-old boy. He's a fine youngster, too; been a great comfort to his mother. I saw them last winter when I was down home."

"Oh, I say, Joe, here's a fine idea for 'doing your bit'; marry the widow and be a father to the boy. He needs your help, otherwise his mother will spoil him sure."

One sultry August day Andy called at Joe's home to return a borrowed hand-saw, and incidentally to impart the news that his cousin had arrived.

"I tell you, Joe," exclaimed he, gleefully, "she's turned the old shack inside out. You never saw such a change. I had to build a lean-to before she got here. You won't know the place now. Come over next Sunday, will you?"

"Thanks' awfully. Sorry I can't come next Sunday, but I'll try to call 'round the following one, if that will suit you."

"No trying about it, old chap. If you don't put in an appearance I'll come over and fetch you. See?"

Two or three mornings later Joe Spears hitched a fiery team of colts to his buggy, and started to town. As he reached the public road, a motor-cycle rushed by. The colts dashed down the road at a furious pace, but Spears gripped the reins firmly, and, bracing himself, was gradually gaining control of the excited animals. In crossing a rough grade, however, in front of Andy McQueen's house, one of the traces fell from the whiffletree. Instantly the pole dropped, striking an obstruction, and buggy and occupant were hurled violently into the ditch.

Andy, having witnessed the accident, was quickly on the spot. He found his friend lying in the bottom of the ditch, unconscious, with a nasty gash across his forehead. Speedily summoning his cousin, Mrs. Rose, he lifted Joe, and in a short time had him resting comfortably on a couch in the new "lean-to." The doctor was telephoned for, restoratives were applied, but all to no purpose.

Twenty minutes later the doctor's car rushed up to the door. Mrs. Rose retired to the living-room, where she took care to keep a supply of hot water and bandages, in case they should be required.

At length consciousness returned to Joe. His wounds were dressed, but the doctor, upon examination, pronounced imminent danger of the loss of eyesight. "At any rate," said he, "they must be bandaged for a couple of weeks until further developments."

Andy told his friend that the runaway colts would be cared for, and that he would bring Joe's stock over to his pasture until their owner was himself able to attend to them.

As the days slipped by, the patient recovered more rapidly than his benefactors had dared to hope. Mrs. Rose, in her motherly way, proved to be a capable nurse; while Andy, after his day's work was done, did all in his power to make the evenings pleasant; and last but not least, Willie Rose amused the invalid very much by his quaint, old-fashioned conversation and ideas.

One afternoon Joe found himself listening intently to a story which his nurse was reading aloud to her little son in the adjoining room. It was not so much the story itself, as the rendering, which gripped and held his attention.

"Where have I heard that voice before?" was the question uppermost in his mind. Long after the story was concluded the patient sought in his memory for a clue. Suddenly light dawned upon him. Ah, now he remembered.

Through the long vista of years he once more found himself in the little old Ontario school house. He heard again the soft voice of Lucy Gray reading aloud, heard the teacher's words of commendation, saw again Lucy's quick look of sympathy and kindness as some of his thoughtless classmates giggled aloud at his own blundering reading of the same passage.

Then his thoughts hastened on, on to the teen age, and still onward. Once more he was in the old red school-house, but now it was to take part in the debating society's program. Again he heard the voice of Lucy reading selections, heard her applauded and encored. Often she had been his companion to and from the debates. How he had loved her. But—he had never told her so.

In a few more days the bandages were removed from Joe's eyes.

"Your vision is saved at any rate," said the doctor as he took his departure. "You may get up now as soon as you wish."

"We are all so pleased," said Mrs.

Rose, stepping to the bedside with outstretched hand.

Joe gave one startled glance at his nurse. "Thank you. But I didn't expect to find you here."

"Meaning whom?" smilingly inquired Mrs. Rose.

"Lucy Gray. Oh—I beg your pardon. You are now Mrs.—?"

"Rose," brokenly.

"Yes, I remember now. You were married in Toronto. And so you are Andy's cousin? He has told me of your great loss. I am very sorry," murmured Joe, as he saw a tear splash on the white coverlet.

On the following day Mrs. Rose went to call upon a neighbor, leaving Joe seated by the fireside in a large rocking chair. As the convalescent's gaze wandered about the living room, a faint smile flitted across his pale face. Mentally he compared it with the same room under Andy's rather haphazard regime. The one-time greasy stove now shone until his face was reflected on its polished surface. The rusty pipes had received a coating of pipe enamel; Andy's bunk was hung up to the wall, and a curtain of softest green draped over it; the larder shelves were hidden by dainty scrim, while a cupboard for cooking utensils had been built underneath. The table wore a covering of white oilcloth, surmounted now by a cover matching in shade the other draperies in the room. In the centre of the table rested a small white centrepiece, and on this a delicate maiden-hair fern. Papers, magazines and books were neatly arranged upon shelves, instead of lying in promiscuous heaps about the room.

"The touch of a woman's hand," murmured Joe, as he reached for a book and tried to interest himself in its contents.

Presently the door flew open, and Willie burst into the room, a large sheaf of golden-rod in his arms.

"Mother! Mother! Look what I've brought you," cried the delighted child. "Why, where's mother?"

"Your mother has gone to visit Mrs. Brown," explained Spears. "But what are you going to do with that armful? Do you often bring flowers to your mother?"

"Course I do," replied the boy as he carefully placed his treasures in a basin of water. "I'm looking after mother now," continued he, sidling up to Joe's chair. "When daddy went to the war he told me to take good care of mother. She calls me her right-hand man. I'm all she's got now, cause," wistfully, "daddy won't come back to us no more, the Germans killed him. Oh, I wish they hadn't; daddy was so nice, 'n' big, 'n' strong. He wasn't afraid to go 'n' fight for mother 'n' me, 'n' the little Belgians. He wrote big long letters to us when he went away. Mother used to read 'em to me. Then one day a big yellow letter came to mother, 'n' when she opened it she cried 'n' cried, 'n' didn't read it to me."

"When we went to bed that night mother cried some more 'n' kissed me a lot. When I waked up in the night she was crying, so I just put my arm 'round her neck, and hugged her tight, tight and told her not to be afraid, 'cause I would look after her 'till daddy comed home. Then mother called me 'her brave boy,' and said I was the only sweetheart she had now, 'cause a big, bad German had killed poor daddy, and daddy would never come back. Say, if I was big enough, I'd go 'n' fight that German. I'd—I'd," desperately "Why don't you go?"

"They wouldn't have me, Willie," replied the man bitterly.

"Oh, well, maybe you could help me look after mother till I get a big man?"

"Maybe," answered Joe, a far-away look in his eyes.

In another fortnight Spears was once more domiciled in his own home. But a

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