

The Choice

By Francis J. Dickie

FAIRBURN, remittance man, idler and adventurer, lolled listlessly in a big chair in the hotel rotunda, smoking innumerable cigarettes and cursed fate, the slow mail service and his delayed money. The dusty street was deserted; it was fiercely hot and he was dry, but his pockets were empty. Though he lived high while his monthly remittance lasted, Fairburn, unlike his fellows, never bummed a drink or ran a bill. And he found it paid; the landlord was more courteous to him and then Fairburn still retained his pride. So he sat and scowled at the deadness about him and waited.

He had led just such a life for three years and now to-day he felt more bored than ever. Presently the conversation of two weather beaten plainsmen seated in nearby chairs caught his attention and he listened, for a minute to one man's words.

"Yes, Bill, I think it will pay in the end. I know there's nothin' doin' just now, but just you wait awhile till the people wake up to the fact of the possibilities of that country, then there'll be a rush and the railroads will come. Why, I wouldn't sell my little homestead for a thousand dollars, even if it is a hundred miles from nowhere. I tell you when you can get prairie land like that with woods near to hand you got a bonanza."

Fairburn desisted his listening and once more stared out of the window. Why could not he too get out somewhere and do something? At least it would be better than the empty existence he was now leading.

The idea was so new, so foreign to his easy-going nature that for the moment it took him aback, then his thoughts returned to it and he remained for a long time in a brown study and the delayed mail and his thirst were for the moment forgotten.

All during the long, early summer evening he sat on the upper verandah of his hotel and thought over the problem, finally deciding that it would be a change, which, if not satisfactory, still left him free to return back to his present mode of living. Passing the office on his way to breakfast the next morning the clerk handed him his long-looked-for letter, but instead of immediately cashing the draft which it contained and calling all hands to the bar, as had been his custom heretofore, he passed on into breakfast, still communing with himself upon this proposed change of life.

The evening train found him waiting at the railway station, his one suitcase, within which rested all his worldly goods, at his side. Late the next night he was in the city of the new west, the country beyond which he had heard the plainsmen talking so enthusiastically over in the hotel.

Rising early on the following day he walked out on the streets. Though new, the place had almost the polish of complete civilization, only the people belied the inference, for here and there stood tall silent Indians with all the habiliments of the wild, a trapper or two, dozens of freighters, and now and then a squaw.

There was a strange bustle, a sort of vague, stirring electricity in the air which to him, fresh from an older, deadlier city, was strangely exhilarating.

Two days later Fairburn rode out of town and struck the trail for the new land beyond. He rode one bronco and led two more well laden with supplies, but his remittance was almost gone. After all, he reflected, he had something to show for it this time, and he laughed a deep throaty laugh and felt happy, almost exultant.

As the town dropped from sight in a bend of the trail he broke into a song, his voice, loud, clear, care free. It was a glorious June day. Overhead the sun shone down with gradually increasing heat, on the grass the dew drops still glittered and the air was still, gloriously fresh, full of the odors of wide, wind-swept plains. Here and there a meadow piped and away off in the azure blue a prairie hawk hung on motionless wings.

All through the long day he rode ever

toward the setting sun and everywhere was the rolling prairie with here and there a stretch of bush, and over all the silence.

Gradually as the hours slipped by the rider fell strangely silent. The immensity and stillness awed him, and deep down in his heart a few vague seeds of doubt stirred.

ing a vast aurora. It was very still and cool. Down among the reeds of the creek a few frogs croaked and the crickets sung from the tall prairie grass. Only these sounds and the munching of the horses broke the stillness. "I reckon we'll camp here, old sport," he said aloud, addressing the saddle horse who stood nearby. Already he had fallen into the habit of those much alone of talking to himself or his dumb companions.

The bronco raised his head, and with a slow step, walked over and thrust his

Fairburn arose, spread his blankets, and with his saddle for a pillow, fell asleep.

The following days were busy ones for him. His facilities were so limited and his knowledge none of the best. But another week found him ensconced in a shack, crude, but weather proof. Game was abundant, and he lived well.

June drew into July and the heat of midsummer was over all. The expedition had been satisfactory the man reflected as he sat at the door and watched the sunset. Somehow he had fallen into this habit of sitting thus at evening. The glorious beauty of the declining sun and the gathering night shades filled him with strange, new feelings. There was a certain grand, pure sublimity in those piled-up clouds, and vague, new thoughts stirred within the man. Subtly Nature was casting her spell over him, unnoticed, but strangely powerful it was. Life before had held so little for him, but now as he sat at the door and gazed off at the rolling, illimitable plains, the desert goddess breathed in his ear and he forgot the distant world where men strove, fought and debauched. Here everything was peace, delicious repose.

The cooler days of autumn came. The air was strangely hazy, heavy with the smoky odors of late fall, and in the distance objects showed up distorted, strangely unreal. Now and then from overhead came the long echoing honk of migrating wild geese. And Fairburn, noting these signs of approaching winter, inventoried his stores and prepared a trip to town.

There would be a lot of mail, he rummaged, and a goodly wad of money in uncashed remittances waiting him. Before leaving town he had written home of his change of address, and rented a box at the post office, so as to avoid loss and delay of his mail.

A cold wind blew fine particles of sand into his eyes, and clouds were dull, cold red in the western horizon as he rode down the street of the city a week later. He felt no thrill at his return—somehow the lights and dwellings were almost distasteful after the days of blissful aloneness spent in the wilderness. He smiled oddly, at the thought of that little shack back in the wilderness; but yet it was home, more of home than anything he had ever had before.

"I guess it's because it's my own," he muttered.

He off-saddled Sport in the stable yard and turning him over to the hostler, strode into supper.

At the post office an hour later he ran quickly through the four-months' accumulation of mail which contained four drafts, a couple of letters from far-away pals with whom he kept up an intermittent correspondence, and some old land papers.

As he walked back to the hotel a faint lonesomeness gripped him. The noise, the hurrying, unheeding people awoke within him an acute longing to be away again.

Entering the hotel, he entrusted the drafts to the clerk for safekeeping and strode into the bar, where a nondescript gathering of freighters and townsmen jostled each other. Then a little of the old life gripped him. It was almost five months since he had tasted liquor. With a sudden thirst upon him he walked to the bar and called to the crowd in the same old manner of past days. Someone else treated and Fairburn felt his pulse leap. The blood mounted to his face. Drink followed drink till everything became hazy and he forgot.

The sun was shining full in his face when he awoke. His head throbbed painfully and his tongue was thick and furry. Unlike other occasions, however, he felt a fierce disgust at himself. Rising slowly he staggered over to the water pitcher and quenched his thirst. A cold bath refreshed himself slightly, but the unwonted episode had left him sick and weak, and all day he lay around dully apathetic.

"Lucky for me I didn't have much cash on me," he mused, "or I'd be going yet, and then perhaps I wouldn't want to go back."

But Fairburn was wise and remained sober for the rest of his stay. Morning two days later found him hitting the trail. This time, aided by his accumulated drafts, he was able to take a wagon and team. The saddle horse leading behind.

A New Year's Message to Readers of The Western Home Monthly

From Major General Steele, Commanding Canadian Troops, Shorncliffe

Through the medium of the issue of "The Western Home Monthly," it has been asked that I send a short message to the Canadian West.

At the outbreak of the present great struggle in Europe, the sons of the Mother Country in the Dominions Overseas came forward to take their part in the great struggle for Liberty, Honor and Right, and it can be said that Canada "comes first" in this respect. If there had ever been any doubt that patriotism had been lacking in Canada, such a suspicion was soon to be cast away forever. Men from the far north, the far west and the east of Canada flocked to the colors.

The Canadians of to-day have perpetrated the example of loyalty and devotion to their country which their fathers before them showed, as a reference to Canadian history will prove. Whilst Canadians are a peaceful people and are not impregnated with any system of militarism, they, as their fathers of old, are natural soldiers. This will be appreciated when it is observed that the antecedents of the present manhood of Canada, which is now giving its best for the Cause of Empire, were men who had mostly served in war either on land or sea in the cause of their country, also when it is remembered that Canada is a comparatively young country in the process of advancement and expansion, and that her sons are wrestling and fighting with nature for those material gifts which she is so chary of bestowing and which she only bestows on those who fight and work for them. In passing, it might be remarked that this wrestling with nature inculcates in the Canadian qualities which prove of inestimable value to him as a soldier on the field of battle and has helped him greatly in attaining to the proud position of equality with any body of fighting troops from whatever land. Therefore, when in August, 1914, war was declared against Germany, the men of Canada were eager and anxious, as they always have been, to come forward and do their part in the fight for integrity and right. Civilian garb rapidly disappeared and the citizens of Canada left railway, workshop or office in overwhelming numbers to fight for Liberty, Home and Country. It was wonderful the way in which the men rapidly "fell into line," and although it is only natural, army discipline at first was strange to them, or the majority of them, they very soon became equal to the best soldiers of the Empire. It would take page after page to describe fairly the wonderful deeds of the Canadians in France. We have sustained many casualties, it is true, and many have answered the last roll call in this great fight for Freedom and Liberty, but Canada is ready for greater sacrifices in the great cause of the Empire.

It would be unfair to discriminate between one part of Canada and another, but, without prejudice, congratulations must be given to Western Canada. Progressive and prosperous Western Canada did not forget to come forward and their gallant actions in the field have proved their worth.

We are in the throes of a great struggle, the greatest that has ever befallen Great Britain, but I feel confident that victory, and a splendid victory, will be ours. The keenness of all our men and their splendid spirit is a proof of the ultimate realization of this truth.

This war has been responsible for many changes, but it must be stated here that a greater understanding now exists between Britain and the Overseas Dominions than ever before. The feeling of Loyalty and National Unity has forever been cemented between Canadians and the people of the Old Country.

The Militia in the West had made great strides during the six years prior to the outbreak of war, and when the call to arms came, the citizens and rural soldiers of the Western Provinces were ready to respond. With the first Canadian Division, over seven thousand men from Military District No. 10 were included, all of whom had secured a good military foundation through the military schools at Winnipeg and the annual camps at Sevell, Manitoba.

The one great governing determination of all our men is to fight on until a sure and final victory has been secured, and on which will be established a firm and lasting peace, founded on the highest ideals of humanity and of the British race. The British Empire will come through these grave and critical times purged by the fire of war, stronger, nobler than ever before, and in this great work Canada will have played a most glorious part and her soldiers proved most worthy sons of a great empire.

But cool, still dawn, found him once more content—immeasurably so.

For five long, dreamy days he rode, unhurried but steadily always straight in the same direction. On the fifth night he camped by a little stream back of which a stretch of timber lay; balsam, spruce and poplar.

And after supper, as he lay on the long, green grass smoking, his head resting on his saddle, a great peace was on him.

In the west the clouds hung purple, red, gold and white, the last rays of the setting sun striking through them, mak-

cool nose into the man's face. They had become great friends in these last few days. The man reached up his arm and stroked the down-held muzzle. The horse remained a minute submitting to the caresses, then resumed his grazing.

Gradually the light died out and the western sky faded to a dull saffron hue. The night birds began to call, and over the man stole a strange content. The air lost its warmth and the falling dew damped the grass; one by one the stars broke forth, and over the prairie lay a faint dim light.

Knocking the ashes from his pipe,