

THE EPIC OF A PRAIRIE FARM.

BY HAROLD BINDLOSS.



IT is necessary to know the Canadian prairie in all its varying moods before one learns to appreciate it as it deserves.

At first sight it is all, in Western parlance, a hard country, but a good one for the strong; for, unlike the languid tropics, the prairie improves as one views it closer. Instead of weakening under sweltering heat, or sinking into sensual idleness, its inhabitants develop the sterner attributes of untiring energy, endurance and resourcefulness, which are all required by the Western wheat-grower. Still, there is another and a softer side, and this was especially manifest at Fairmead.

Fairmead, in Assiniboia, deserved its name, and after the bare sweep of Manitoban plain there was a grateful softness about its swelling undulations and willow-groves shrouding deep ravines, while walling off the waste of prairie like a rampart, a thick bluff of wind-dwarfed birches stretched on either side. Here, for a few weeks in spring, it was possible to fancy one's self in England; then the resemblance faded and it was part of the Dominion again. The frost had vanished from the surface of the land, though it still lurked a foot or two beneath, while here and there a flush of green crept across the withered sod, when I visited Fairmead to assist in the spring ploughing. Two young Englishmen, of good up-bringing, owned it then, and as they were staking their all on the weather that season it was, said my partner, every one's clear duty to assist them. They had

invested in all some £400 in three hundred and twenty acres of virgin soil.

A rush of warm breeze from the Pacific, which had crossed the snow-barred Rocky Mountains unchilled, set the dry grasses rippling, and long wisps of cloud drove swiftly across the luminous blue. This, and the blackness of ashes among the burned stubble, was all that broke the harmonious colouring of white and gray. Not being a skilful teamster, I had brought oxen, and waited beside them while Hunter (my host) and his half-tamed horses reeled round and round together amid a tangle of harness, which they seemed determined he should not put on, until at last he conquered, and we were ready to begin. Then he leaned breathless for a moment on the plough-stilts, a typical son, by adoption, of the prairie.

The long skin coat and fur cap had been replaced by loose blue overalls and a broad felt hat, while the laughing face had been bronzed to the colour of coffee by the blink of snow under the clear winter sun. In spite of the coarse garments the pose was statuesque, for the swell of hardened muscles, the clear eyes and darkened skin told of perfect health; and when he hailed me to break the first clod the voice had an exultant ring. For several years this man had toiled far harder than any British field-labourer in the calling he had voluntarily chosen; but instead of adding coarseness the work had rather refined him.

I called to the oxen, and the big, slow-moving beasts settled their shoulders against the collar, as with a sharp crackling the half-burned stubble went down before the share.