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A Rough Diamond

Written for The Western Home Monthly by E. Charles Cuming

"WELL, anyhow I don't believe he'll ever make out in all his life, boys, for he's a real wrong 'un."

Thus was summed up the character of the worst fellow in all the Prairie district for miles around. Dick Tempest had earned his reputation by a long series of misdemeanors ever since he had made his advent some two years before. Like many fellows, he had come out from the Old Country where he had been a working man, who through long periods of unemployment had begun to lose the vital interest in life and things. He had migrated to the West just in time to save himself from an absolute and overwhelming ruin. His homestead upon which he had settled, adjoined the one upon which the present discussion was taking place, and was an advertisement of his slothful habits. Weeds were everywhere galore. His breaking was badly done, and his buildings were already in a bad state of repair. Yet there were those who thought they saw in him the promise of large heartedness. There are a large number of men whom one meets on the Prairies, whose good nature causes them to go wrong and whose generosity is often the first step on the road downward.

The speaker was Sam Vistune, a Swede and the neighbor of Tempest. He had come into the district about the same time and his farm was the antithesis of the one already described. For some reason Sam had always been somewhat unkindly in his criticism of Dick and hard words had frequently passed between them as a result. He with his English training had failed to understand the somewhat rough treatment by Vistune to his wife and had quietly remonstrated with him. Mrs. Vistune was one of those quiet insignificant women to whom life is little more than one long drudgery, even without the unkindness that such men heap upon them. The chivalry of his British origin was roused often, as he heard the harsh words and saw the woman doing duties around the farm, which to say the least were outside the feminine sphere. The fact that he had dared to interfere had been the means of dispute between these two men and every time they met the estrangement grew worse.

There was, however, one person in the Vistune home for whom Dick had a real affection. They had a small baby girl of some three years. How this affection started no one ever knew much less Dick himself, but that it was there was a fact that was indisputable. She seemed to be the veritable angel in his life, for whenever he came into her presence it was as though some subtle influence was upon him, restraining the vile words he would otherwise use, and he would sober himself when she was near. There was never a trip to town without some candies or a little trinket would find its way into his possession until it became a joke that the "bachelor" bought toys for the kid he hadn't got. Xmas always meant a doll and several nights would be spent studying the catalogue in that department only to be followed by an order to "Eaton's" a few days afterward. His trip to town at this time of the year, meant an extra present for the kid, which was invariably purchased first to avoid the money being spent in other ways and thus render the purchase impossible.

Everyone was agreed upon one point, namely, that Dick was a good fellow away from the drink, but drink was his foe and perhaps no one knew it better than he.

Sometime before the story opens Vistune had made a move which had made the break between these men more complete. Coming home one night and seeing the baby playing with the latest toy from town, which had been left during the day, he smashed it up and sent it down to the neighbor's shack with the request that the thing be stopped. In his pharisaical mood, he had endeav-

ored to tell him of his unfitness to associate with the innocent child, a fact that no one knew better than Dick himself. Instead of giving him what most men would have judged his deserts, Dick quietly withdrew, but with a heart that was torn and lacerated. Now the star had gone from his heart he would go into the very depths and before long he was well on the way to carrying out his determination. It was not long however before the tables would be completely turned and the influence was not only to be restored but the bachelor's shack was to become almost a paradise.

It happened two weeks after the discussion already referred to. The winter had well set in and the signs which every Westerner learns to read forecasted some bad weather within the next few hours. Some ten inches of fine snow had already fallen and the huge sundog at sundown had foretold a bad and stormy night to follow. As he looked out from his door after the lonely supper, Dick noticed the wind was rising and a fine snow falling fast. The temperature was well below zero.

"Thank goodness I am not out on such a night," he commented as he piled more coal on to the bachelor's stove, now almost red hot.

"I pity any guy coming from town in this blizzard, it means a certain freezing if he's lost!"

With this he sat musing over the events of the day and to dream of the future. The information had come to him that little Dolly Vistune was awfully sick, and he had felt just as though his own child was in danger. Oh! how he had wished to go and see the kid and to see if anything he could do would help to ease the small sufferer. Then he soliloquised concerning his own ambitions, and began to remember that he too had hoped to have some day, a curly headed bairn, but now that seemed afar off and impossible.

"Hello! What's that? Some one coming? Gee-whizz they must have had a pretty urgent call to be out in this!" All this was addressed to his dog who hearing the approach of sleigh bells had announced the same with a bark. Dick immediately sprang to the door and with ears and eyes strained tried to locate the possible visitor.

"No, it was merely a fancy, no one could be out in this surely?" But again the bells sounded and this time somewhat nearer. Making his way, with the lantern he always kept in readiness, he went out to try and attract the wayfarer and to help him if possible on his way. He noticed especially the terrific bite of the north-western wind upon which was being carried one of the worst blizzards he could remember. Vigorously he shook his lantern, but with a hopelessness that its feeble light could penetrate such a storm. The bells however again caught his ear and thus he redoubled his efforts. As he glanced to Vistune's shack he noticed its light entirely shut out, and immediately there came the thought of kindness concerning his little friend. By this time the sleigh was drawing nearer and somehow his signal had been seen.

"Hello there! Who are you eh? A pretty night to be out in old boy!"

All this was addressed to someone whom as yet he could not see, but which had none the less cordiality in the welcome which is characteristic of the Western people. One feels that it must be the fellowship of danger which makes such cordiality possible.

When the sleigh drew to a standstill, however, there jumped out a man who lived but a few farms off from Dick. Jim Owens had been up to Vistunes and had delayed his departure until he found himself almost storm-bound, and had thus missed his trail somewhat, in his attempt to make for home.

"Well, old man, you'd better put the team in for the night rather than chance it home in this," said Dick.

"No thanks, kid, I must hike it if I can," was the reply. "I've just been up

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