

The City of Chances

A Story of Modern Winnipeg

By MABEL BURKHOLDER.

WHEN Miss Hilda Hurd awoke to the fact that she was in Winnipeg, she was frightened. Her scheme, now nearing its culmination, appalled her by its very boldness. Its inception was the result of an idle remark of that horrid Jack, who sneered at girls in general, and at Dundee girls in particular. How insufferable a good-looking young man can become, when he knows he is the only "eligible" among a bevy of flattering girls. It looked every Sunday as if he was taking the Ladies' College out for a walk, did it? He wouldn't have ventured that remark a few years ago, when all the embryo doctors, lawyers and professors with which Dundee had blessed the world, were hale school-boys in their native village. But since they were gone past recall, what was left to a girl of sense and spirit but to go and do likewise?

The scheme of leaving home, which had been conceived in the mind of Hilda Hurd as a mere vaporous dream for many a day, assumed definite shape when that fatal taunt of Jack set her heart devising mischief. From a study of statistics, she had arrived at the conclusion that the new, the broad, the progressive city of Winnipeg was pre-eminently the place where womankind ought to be at a premium. Men called it the "City of Chances." In other cities great chances come to a man once in his life; in Winnipeg, they knock at his door every three minutes, and if he doesn't take them, he is simply kicked out. She was fascinated, allured, by the throb of Western life, when sometimes its pulse shook the steady East. She was not, in those days, conceited enough to imagine that her frail hand could divert one of the "great chances" into her own channels. Still, it was not out of all reason to suppose that something lucky might happen to her in the great city of luck, where wondrous doings followed each other with startling rapidity. O for a romance to fling in the face of that self-sufficient Jack! Then, if he showed true repentance, she might forgive him; but his sin was black.

The very naughtiest part of Miss Hilda Hurd's scheme was her desire to install herself in a boarding-house, where she would have no rival femininity to contend with. Herein she expected to surmount difficulties, and was surprised to find that no difficulties existed. To her first timid inquiries at a much verandahed house on shady Balmoral Street, the landlady replied: "Yes, we have room, but I'm afraid you won't like it, Miss. You'd be the only lady among twenty men."

"Are they nice men?" ventured Miss Hilda.

"Very," answered Mrs. Strong, while with covert gaze she "sized up" every detail of the stranger's appearance, from her neatly shod feet to the snap of her reddish-brown eyes and hair. "Mostly business men from the uptown offices. Tain't as if you'd be the only case of the lone woman in Winnipeg," added the landlady, fancying the girl hesitated. "Every other boarding house on this street is just the same. Besides, you wouldn't feel lonesome with me and Auntie Perkins, who always stays by me."

"I'll stay, please," cried Hilda impulsively. "I'm so tired hunting—" The fib died on her lips, and as she followed the landlady to the second floor of the much-verandahed house an oppressive sense of excitement was suffocating her frightened little heart.

It was soon discovered in Mrs. Strong's dining-room that a new light had arisen, and hard-headed business men paused in the commercial rush, and put on their glasses to view the star.

What they saw was a demure little mouse of a girl, sitting between Auntie Perkins and the landlady, who revealed very little of her character at sight, but who looked as crisp and peppery as a ginger snap. Westerners are prepared to appreciate that sort.

Miss Hilda Hurd's observations (of far greater range and import) ran along in a disconnected series of ideas, something like this: "Who is this maniac next me, I wonder? He lowers his head, and fixes one with his

eyes, like a Highland bull about to make a charge. Inky fingers. Hum, he writes. I have it now—he is observing me.

"That midget at the end of the table must be the wealthy pork-packer Auntie Perkins told me of. His skin looks as full and shiny as one of his own pork sausages.

"Directly across is that telegraph-pole youth who carried my suit-case to my room last night. I like him. His eyes seem about a mile back in his head, but when you do reach their depths they glow like coals; but he's unfortunate in business—a mere clerk.

"Not so the opulent lord with whom he touches shoulders, who wears a trefoil patterned waistcoat, and reminds you generally of the clubs on a pack of cards. He has an automobile and a horse, a gun and a well-worn euchre deck; among them he manages to get a fat living, along with not a little sport."

Out West, when a woman does put in an appearance, the men put forth the same competitive energy to gain her affections, that they would use to gain the ear of a new buyer of their line of goods. Many were the unnecessary remarks addressed to the landlady's corner, and when the young lady rose to withdraw, at least a dozen of the boarders tried to lay their hands simultaneously on the knob, to relieve her of the necessity of opening the door. As she swept out, she was conscious of the breath of the poet in her ear intoning one of his own effusions.

"Should there be sterner tasks
Thou wouldst devise for me,
Command me, sweet, and I
Thy willing slave shall be."

"I'm scared to death," murmured the girl holding her hand over her heart. "How polite they are! And how horribly in earnest." Then she clasped her hands behind her head. "Yet this is life—life. And I rather like it."

Next morning, she awakened to the perception that a slip of paper was being pushed softly under her door, and curiosity demanded that she get up at once to see what the unknown had to say. As she surmised, it was a salutation from her poetical friend. She hastened to the window with it.

"A fairly fashioned flower
Of tender hue,
Was sown 'neath Eastern skies,
And there it grew.

But when the opening bloom
Had reached its best,
A wanton chance uptore,
And bore it West.

Beneath the alien sky,
The fragile thing
Fast wilting, scarcely dared
Its roots outfling.

Walking one day along
The busy mart,
I spied the drooping flower,
The withering heart.

And carried it forthwith,
Into my home;
Upon my silent hearth
I bade it bloom."

"What a pity that youth has to earn his living by running a typewriter," she mused as she twisted her hair, and stuck the verses in the corner of her mirror frame.

When she stepped out into the hall, whom should she encounter but the Mad Galloway himself, who hastened forward.