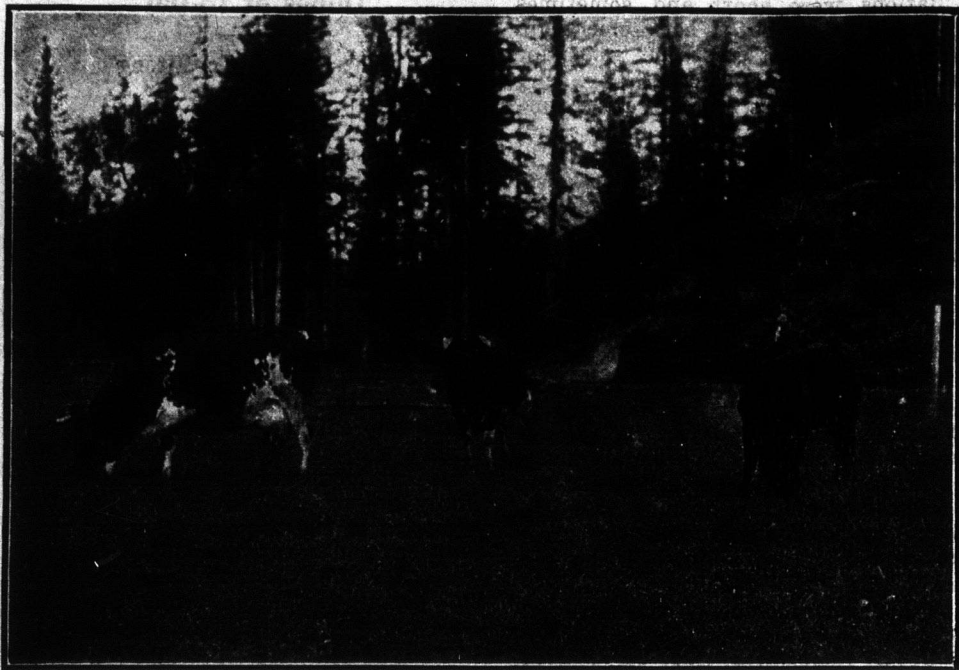




The British Columbia Climate seems to suit Cattle

The Toss of a Coin

Written for The Western Home Monthly. By E. G. Bayne

OPPORTUNITY knocks but once. After that you have to go after her.

It was this thought that kept thrusting itself forward in Stephen Long's mind, to the utter exclusion of other matters. Fate had thrown this splendid chance in his way most unexpectedly, as is the way of Fate, and, should he neglect it, and proceed with the business that had brought him west? Or, should he continue to follow the gleam—continue to trail this wonderful girl in the section ahead? She was the only woman that had ever caught and held his interest. He had basked in her shadow all the way from Montreal and now they were fast approaching Winnipeg where he must leave her. Some intangible charm about her—either in her manner or in her breezy, rose-and-tan beauty—had suggested the broad wind-swept plains of far Alberta and he knew that she was prairie-born and prairie-bred. She distilled a subtle essence of clean, clear ozone, of tender blue anemones, of wild June roses, and it did not require much imagination to picture her seated upon a bucking broncho loping over the plains in glad, wild freedom, pulling the beast to his haunches one moment and spurring him onward the next.

Winnipeg! Long made a reach for his club-bag and then stopped. He would toss a quarter! Heads, he would get off and proceed with business—tails he would stay on the train and follow her to hand's end.

Tails won!

For two whole days past the Gateway City, Stephen Long chafed and fumed in his section. Was there no one on board who would introduce him? Supposing she got off in the night while he was calmly snoring in his berth. Supposing—and then he remembered that he ought to notify his business people in Winnipeg of his—er—inability to see them for a week or so.

So he dashed off a telegram: "Hold the deal. Been taken suddenly ill, malignant malady. Will write."

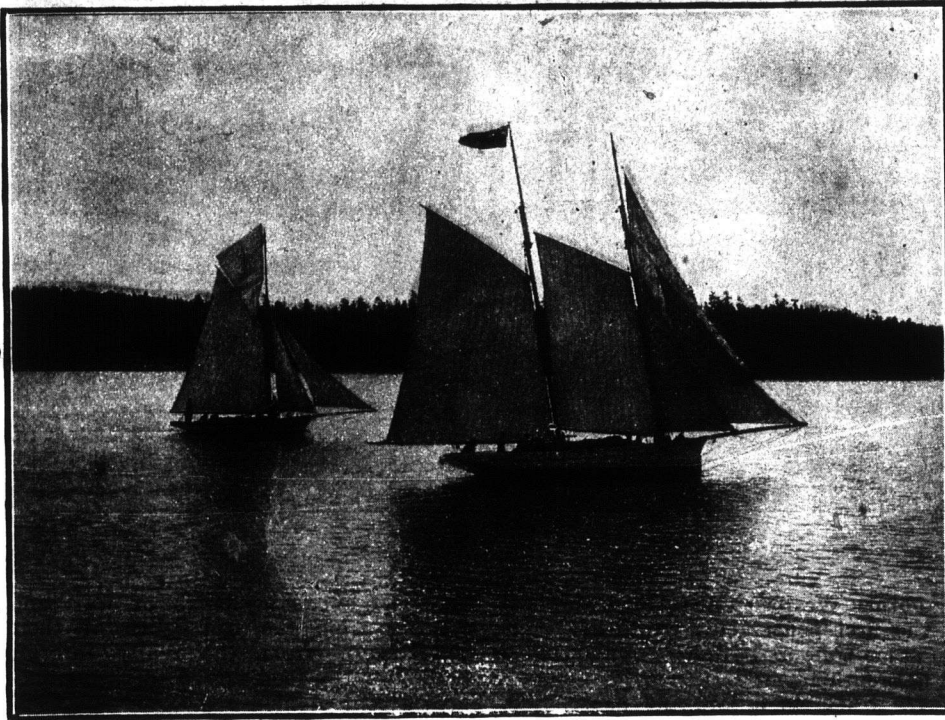
Which was quite true.

Meanwhile he had pursued every legitimate means to gain a look or a word from the girl. He had bribed porters to place him at her table in the diner. He had prayed fervently that she might drop her handkerchief or her handbag while he was passing her seat. He had entered into a conspiracy with the magazine-and-fruit boy to (accidentally) tip a bushel of papers in the aisle at her side, so that he—Long—might be privileged to spring forward and pick them up.

"And fifty cents if you'll let me kick you for carelessness," Long had said to the grinning boy, who pocketed the coin in advance.

But all these schemes had failed. The girl had not batted an eyelash

when Long had upset the catsup on the snowy linen in the diner, where he was seated opposite her at the same table. She was particularly retentive of handkerchief and handbag, and as for the big coup of all—why, she hadn't even turned her head when the avalanche of Bulletins and Leaders had cascaded



Yachting on lazy summer days

over the arm of her seat. Long had sprung nimbly enough to her aid but to all of his deferential and profuse apologies for the boy's clumsiness, she had returned only a cool, perfumery smile and had immediately resumed her reading.

Stung! She had never even noticed him, and here they were approaching Calgary. Long smiled ruefully as he thought of how his friends back east would guff him could they know of his infatuation.

"Old Steve in love at last!" he could hear Ed Winters say. For Long had successfully withstood the blandishments of the fair sex all his life, and he was now thirty and living in bachelor quarters in an apartment block, where it seemed probable that he would always remain, unless some unforeseen change in his business should demand his removal to another city.

They were still east of the Foothill City, when Long glanced up suddenly to find that the girl was preparing to quit her long journey. She had drawn on a natty brown jacket over her maize-colored silk blouse with its flowing red tie, and was busy buckling a refractory strap on her suitcase while the negro porter stood by, assiduously brushing and currying her down. Last of all, she clapped on a jaunty little sombrero over her sunny hair. As

she flashed a smile at the porter, that displayed a double row of white, even little teeth, Stephen longed to kick him.

"Now or never!" he gritted between his own teeth. He hauled down his grip from the seat upon which his feet had lately rested and began hastily jamming his loose belongings into it. Then he resurrected his club-bag, his gold-handled umbrella and his hat and strode down the aisle just as the train creaked and groaned down to the full stop. By his countenance none could have guessed the doubts and fears that were now assailing him. He must dig up a plausible excuse for dogging her to her native haunts, for by a quick glance out of the window he saw that the place was only an elevator hamlet, containing perhaps a dozen buildings.

"Rosehill," he read in white letters on the side of the small station.

It had been named in a spirit of contradiction, for May though it was, there was nary a flower, and the land was as flat as a board. There wasn't even a respectable ant-hill in sight though away off to the westward rose the first undulating line of foothills, dim and shadowy against the skyline. "Hello Dad!" cried the girl, flinging herself into the arms of a bearded old fellow in chaps and a stetson hat.

"Well, well, Jessie! Have a good time? How d'you leave the folks in the horses and ride away. He watched back ride!"

The pair drifted away to the rear of the little depot where they conferred with the agent for a few moments. Then Long saw them mount two sad-

place was for sale, but that he had not yet been able to get a high enough price. Now if—

"I think I'll send a telegram east," said Long, placing his luggage down and drawing out his fountain pen.

"Certainly, sir. Step this way."

"And I'll take a little walk up around the village while I'm waiting for the answer. Have you a good general store—and can I get a horse for hire?"

"Surely, Sir."

Long returned to the station within an hour, riding a sorrel mare. Shortly afterward a boy from the one store of the little village came ambling up, his arms full of bundles of various sizes, which Long distributed evenly into two packages and then tied pack-saddle style to the horse.

"Here's your answer, sir."

The agent came out of the telegraph-office and handed Long a yellow paper. It was Ed Winters' reply.

"Certainly. Go right out. Shack empty. Loaf and invite your soul all summer if you like."

But Ed had forgotten to give directions for reaching this ranch of his. There was nothing for it but to get the information from the agent.

"Winters? To be sure, sir. His place is twelve mile west an' turn down the coulee to your left, due south fer a mile or so, it's right alongside o' ole Norton's ranch."

"Norton?"

"Uh-huh. The ole chap what rid away with his da'ter. Perhaps you noticed 'em? Purty gal—"

So her name was Norton!

"You can't miss it," the other went on. "Twelve mile west an—"

But Stephen Long, with a muttered word of thanks, had vaulted into the saddle and was off.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when the rider first glimpsed the little gray shack rising up out of the dun coulee, like a barnacle on the side of a man-o'-war. He was as hungry as a hunter and mighty glad to find that the place boasted a low flat stove in good working order. In less time than it takes to tell about it, he had a fire lighted and had drawn a bucket of water from the well nearby. Then he cooked his supper, threw off his collar, and sat down to his meal. Later he opened one of the parcels and drew out a stetson, hat and a pair of overalls, the which articles he donned at once, to see whether or not they were a good fit.

"If I've to do my own chores I'll have to dress the part," he told himself, as he balanced a pocket-mirror on the sill of the window and gazed at himself—or at as much of himself as the size of the mirror permitted.

He was still occupied thus, when approaching hoofbeats fell upon his ear. Going to the door he beheld, riding up the trail from the south, a girl on horseback. The gathering dusk all but obscured her form, but he made out that she was bareheaded and was riding astride.

Suddenly her voice rang out:

"Hello!"

"Hello!" returned Long, struck with the clear tones, while his heart skipped a couple of beats.

It was the girl—the girl! Only this morning he had heard the same voice requesting the porter to shut her window.

"So you've come," she said, reining in her horse, a few yards away.

This was a poser. She had noticed him then—had expected him to follow her.

"Dad says he rather thought you'd be here to-night. So I told him I'd run up on Belle and see. He'll be glad."

Her father would be glad!

Before he could find voice to ask tickled over his—Long's—arrival, the girl went on with a laugh:

"We're starting on the round-up tomorrow, and I'm going along. We're late this spring, but it's because men are so hard to get. So I told Dad I'd help out in the chuck-wagon, and of course now you're here—"

"But"—began Long, his face hot in the darkness.

"When did you get here?"

"Just this afternoon I—"