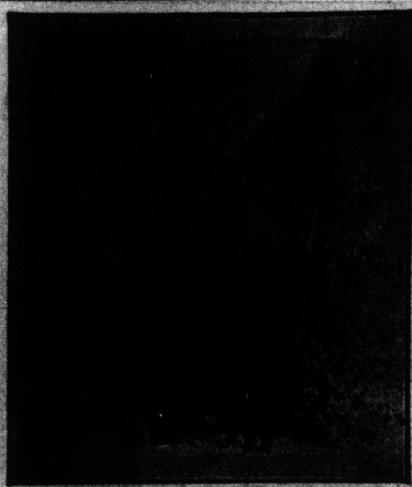




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just at present she was very much on her dignity, pale under her rouge, and with black eyes glittering dangerously. "Pardon me if I intrude," she drawled. "Not at all," said Frank uncomfortably. "This is Miss Gray, the new reporter," he explained.

"Indeed, I was not aware!" said Miss Colpas grandly. She took a good fifteen seconds to look Laurie up and down. "Charmed!" she murmured as insultingly as she could, and made her way languidly to the street door. With her hand on the latch she turned. "I think

you call for me at eight," she said differently to Frank, and went her ways. The door must have slipped out of her hand, or something; the impact was terrific.

Laurie had been watching her with cool wonder. "Look here," she said with her inimitable directness, "if I'm going to be here, I ought to know where I stand. What's the matter with her?"

Laurie's frankness demanded a return in kind. "You see," Frank explained, "she and her brother are the only ones in town who can run the monotype, and

she knows it. Besides—"

"Well?" prompted Laurie.

"She has money," said Frank. "Made it speculating in real estate during the boom. She holds a chattel mortgage on the plant downstairs."

"H'm!" said Laurie.

"So I—er—take her about to the subscription dances to keep her in a good humor about the interest," he blurted out.

Laurie took note of his rueful grin, and suddenly her face broke up like a sunny pool under a gust from the west. She cocked up her pretty chin and laughed a peal like a boy. Such delicious, heart-disquieting music had surely never been heard within those grimy precincts.

On her very first day Laurie made herself an important factor of the Plainsman. As she crossed the Estevan bridge on her way to work she witnessed an accident, brought about, it might have seemed, for the especial benefit of the fledgling reporter. The only automobile in town, property of one Mackinnon, a real-estate agent and unpopular, was to blame for the ruin of an immigrant farmer's household goods. Laurie, warm with generous indignation, got half a column out of it. Womanlike, she discovered the owner's vulnerable point, and turned her pen in the wound. The reason the automobile made so much noise, said Laurie, was because it was such a cheap machine.

Frank ran the story as it stood, and next morning all Blackfoot chuckled over it, with the possible exception of Mackinnon. The real estate agent was a gross creature: little Laurie passing his shop later in the day, was publicly insulted. On her return to the office, she casually mentioned what had occurred, and Frank, with a brightening eye, took his hat from its peg, and, commanding Laurie to keep the shop, sallied forth. Laurie promptly disobeyed him. Following at a discreet distance, notebook in hand, she missed not a detail of the brief and pointed discussion which ended in the fat real estate agent rolling in the gutter. Laurie got a whole column out of that, and Blackfoot agreed that it was the best account of a scrap which had appeared in the local press. The paper was sold out in an hour, and the regular circulation jumped four hundred.

Among other things, Laurie was assigned to cover the meetings of the town council. Her first arrival in the dingy little chamber (which is in the loft of the police station) created something of a sensation. His Worship Mayor Pink (one of Blackfoot's leading grocers) himself descended from his throne to take her hand, and all the aldermen pulled down their waistcoats and strove to look aldermanic.

Laurie soberly disposed herself at the "press table" in the corner (it has only three legs and you must watch which end you sit at), and the usual mad torrent of eloquence was forthwith unloosed. Once a fortnight the aldermen are seized with this lust to orate, and nothing will stop them. Only Sam Puffer, ex-cow-puncher, rarely spoke—but he spat most eloquently. There was one spectator, Henny Haddie, Blackfoot's eminent rag and bone merchant, who has run for alderman every year in the memory of man, without ever receiving a hundred votes, and who writes to the papers nearly every day. As a taxpayer, Henny delivered a diatribe on the puddles in the main street, which was cut short only by Sam Puffer threatening to take him out and souse him therein.

Although she affected to be diligently taking notes, the proceedings were naturally quite incomprehensible to Laurie; but the reporter on the other paper, a pale youth of an evangelical turn, offered to write her story as well as his own. Laurie smiled her thanks and found herself free to smile at the aldermen one by one. The smile of a clever woman is a curious thing: the degree of promise gathered from it by the recipient is usually in inverse ratio with his intelligence. The alderman hastened to write out their speeches for Laurie, and the city clerk made her a copy of the minutes; but Laurie thought most of Sam Puffer, who, abashed by her presence, only scowled at her sideways beneath his shaggy brows.

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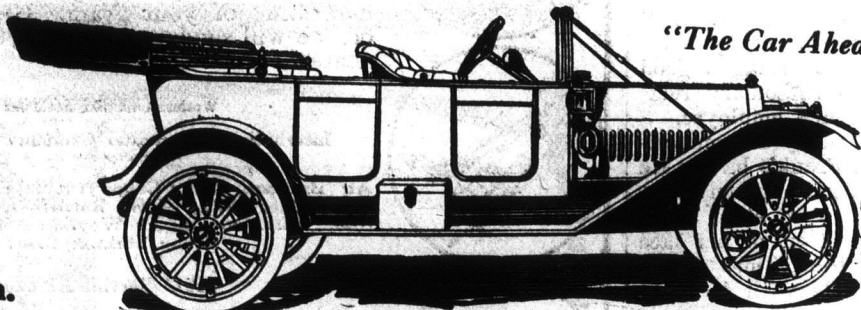
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