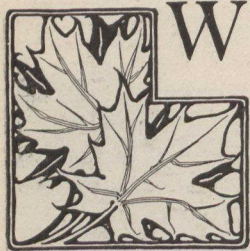


# THE REWARD OF MERIT

A Story of How Thanksgiving Day Proved True

By FLORA BALDWIN



WHEN Jack Lennox sat on his horse at six in the morning and sang "Come into the garden, Maud," most tunelessly, he did it with no thought that the selection was slightly inappropriate for several reasons. In the first place there wasn't a garden, there or anywhere else in this big new western town at the outside edge of the foothills, and the girl who appeared in answer to the melodious invitation was decidedly not the Maud of Tennyson's creation. She was instead a rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed girl dressed in a riding habit—divided skirts—and leading a saddled pony. But the man whose warbling caused her to appear seemed more than satisfied with the substitute, evidently labouring under the delusion that he was being offered "something just as good."

Down the street, quiet now, but that would presently hum with western life, across a few vacant lots, past back doors whose privacy was unprotected by any sort of a fence, out to the bridle path that followed a river which had not lost its mountain blue or its mountain swiftness in a hundred miles of rolling prairie, over the bridge and up the steep bank—that was the regular morning route, and the horses took it without question. There was always some uncertainty when the top was reached. A dozen trails led out from the bank across the Alberta prairie, little dark tracings on a surface of vivid green in summer and of the dull gold of ripened grass in the fall. But whichever path the riders chose for the swift gallop, there was always a moment's pause on the brow of the hill.

"Isn't it beautiful, Jack?" said Marion, softly.

"I hate a place that can't produce a tree," quoted he with a sly glance at his companion.

"It isn't right nice of you to remember the foolishness I talked as a fresh arrival!"

"I always remember what you say, and—"

"Well, you can forget *that*. I've been converted. If there were the big elms and beeches and oaks I sighed for at first, we could not see that whole winding length of river—how many miles of it can we see, Jack? That sheet of blue sky would be broken up into patches, and all this wide prairie would be screened off, so that we could see only a little, little way, instead of right out to the edge of the world where the winds are made."

He quoted again, "Those abominable winds," and then before she could interrupt, "You won't want to go back East again?"

There was the faintest sigh. "My work is back there, but, thank fortune, Jessie needs me yet, and I won't go back till the New Year anyway."

"Why not stay here?"

"It isn't good form to live on your brother-in-law, and when my sister is strong again they will not need me. But I hate to leave the kiddies—"

"Bother the kiddies! You needn't look shocked, Marion; they have bothered me a heap. Not a moonlight ride have we had all this summer, because you were doing multiplication questions and putting babies to bed!"

"But you—we—had every morning."

"I know, and mighty good mornings they were, too; but, hang it all, before breakfast is no time to propose to a girl!"

"To what?" in a startled tone; then, recovering herself, "I fail to see the necessity, night or morning."

"Then you must be blind. It's an absolute necessity if I am to survive." He laid a detaining hand on her bridle as she would have turned away to hide a crimson face. "I love you, little one, and I have never had a decent chance to tell you so. Don't go back East, dear; stay with me, and we will have a home under your beloved blue sky."

"Let's finish our ride, Jack."

"No, not till you answer me."

"I'm sorry," and genuine sorrow was in her voice, "but it's impossible."

"Some one else?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

"You just don't like me?"

"No, that isn't it. I do like you very much."

"But you don't love me?"

"Listen, dear." The tender little word sounded hopeful, and encouraged Jack to lay his hand on the brown one nearest him, but it was promptly

withdrawn. "I do like you, but I can't love you nor any man. I can't."

"Can't, Marion? Be frank with me for the sake of the liking. I'm not very clever, but I think I'm trustworthy."

"You're everything that is fine, and I'd trust you with my life, but I can't love you because—because it isn't in me. It is so hard to explain. Once when I was just a young girl I loved—yes, it was back East. I would cheerfully have died for him, but he came out here and forgot me. That is a common story, but it hurt me as much as if nothing had ever happened like it. I died, at least my heart did. No, I am aware that I do not look like a blighted being. Anyone who can eat and sleep and enjoy a joke as I do is not entitled to sympathy from the general public. Somebody says that the saddest thing in life is to retain the desire to love and to lose the power. I have lost the power."

"Marry me, little girl, and we'll risk it."

"No, that wouldn't be fair to you. But, oh, Jack, I'd give anything if I could! There wouldn't be a happier woman in the world than I. Can't you make me love you, Jack?"

The brown hands were held out to him in piteous appeal, and as he took them he said, "Please God, I'll make you."

It was time to go—to go down from the heights to the day's work, but before they moved away Jack said, "Marion, I am going to ask you to do something hard. Wait, don't answer till you hear. If ever you find that your feelings have changed will you come and tell me? That is a great deal to ask, you will say. I know it. But as long as you do not love me I do not want to risk losing you altogether by bothering you. A man could ask it only of the truest-hearted woman in the world."

As his hand left her rein she looked at him frankly and said, "Yes, Jack, I will."

When a swain sets out to win a maiden's heart, deeds of "derring-do" seem to be always around the corner; not an opportunity in sight to make of himself a heroic figure in the eyes of the fair one. But for once the fates appeared to be kind. Jack was wise if he was in love, and by great effort kept up the old friendly companionship with its walks and rides, its books and music. He did not even blunder by too assiduous attentions to the young nephews of the girl he loved. But if heroism and self-sacrifice could relight the flame on the altar of the heart, Marion would speedily have been compelled to fulfil her promise. When the box factory took fire, it was he who gave the alarm and helped to bring out the terrified girls. He stopped the Senator's runaway horses on Main Street, and reassured the trembling old lady in the carriage behind them. He nursed his chum through a bad attack of fever and broke a "bad" broncho. It was only human that he secretly hoped that something might come of it, although he had done every one of them without any thought of reward. Which was just as well, as no reward seemed to be forthcoming.

In the West salaried workers observe holidays, and the owner works on such festive days as Thanksgiving and Citizens' Day. Especially does the young business man choose a holiday for straightening things up. Jack Lennox belonged to the last class, and so it happened that on this particular holiday he had refused to join a party in a gallop to Patterson's ranch, had lent his horse to one of the crowd and had gone to his office.

Two or three hours of steady work followed, and then his thoughts began to stray. The growing prosperity of the business was shown on the books, and the thought of what the money would buy led to longer thoughts of how he would like to spend it. Was there any hope that the profits would go into a home—a pretty bungalow upon the hill with Marion as its mistress? Not much hope, it would appear, but on the strength of the scanty supply he began to draw plans on blotter and pad. By the time he had settled where the fireplace would be, he was far away from the office in spirit.

"This is a healthy state of mind for a business man," he said at last, rousing himself and endeavouring to look scornful, but his eyes smiled and his lips refused to take on any but a tender expression. "I'll walk it off." But his steps were unconsciously turned to the short cuts that led to the bridle path and the bridge and the steep bank. At the top he stopped for a long look, then stepped out on a trail

that showed a black speck far ahead. It might be some one he knew and they could walk back together. So on he went, enjoying to the full the crisp air, the sun now losing its mid-day heat and beginning to strike the earth with slanting rays, and the atmosphere of freedom in the wide spaces unblotted except for a bungalow here and there, at which he looked with more than common interest.

The speck ahead grew larger and larger until it resolved itself into two forms, one large, the other small. They were coming slowly, very slowly, and as Jack got nearer he saw a squaw with a heavy bundle on her shoulders, and a little child by her side. Her steps were slow, not to keep pace with the child, but through sheer weakness and fatigue. The brown baby face was smeared with tears rubbed from red eyes with a dirty hand, but on the countenance of the woman sat dry-eyed despair. She had carried loads all her life; she would always have them to carry; tears were of no avail. So she trudged on with her load of baskets towards the edge of the hill above the town, occasionally giving a tug at the hand of her small, woe-begone companion.

The woman looked up as Jack's shadow fell across her path, but she couldn't feel any interest in the first person she had seen all that long, sunny day. The load was cruelly heavy, the child stumbling along impeded her progress and filled her with a fierce impatience, the fiercer because she loved her little son, and his fatigue lay as heavy upon her as her own. The white man was but a blur before her unseeing eyes.

Jack looked back after he had passed and pity smote him.

"By George! she looked just about all in, and so did the kid. What a life those poor beggars live! The noble red man may do well enough, but the women—any fellow with a grain of man in his make-up wouldn't let his wife haul a load like that—or any other woman. Now, what put that notion into my head? I can't undertake to tote bundles for all the tired squaws in Alberta."

But he looked back again, and because he had gone slowly through idleness and she had gone more slowly through exhaustion, the distance between them was very short. With a grimace at his weakness—he named it—and a shrug of the shoulders, he turned and covered the intervening space in short order.

His friendly face more than the intelligibility of his words made her understand as the fastenings were undone. She had no experience to help her comprehend, for no man, not even the husband who was once her lover, had borne a burden for her. He was fastidious enough to feel a qualm as he touched the greasy leather straps, and the shudder was external and prolonged before he grasped the dirty little hand of the papoose. The woman did not try to keep pace with his long strides, and was soon left behind.

Jack chuckled as he strode along. What would the boys—what would Marion think if she could see him now? The chuckle died a sudden death as, obedient to some impulse, he glanced around. He would soon have the question answered, for here came the whole riding party. They were not very near yet, but would catch him before he reached the edge of the hill. For a moment he seriously thought of dropping baskets and boy and veering off in another direction, then he stiffened and prepared for the worst.

On they came, a laughing, singing, chattering crowd, riding in a close group regardless of bridle-paths, and without thought for gopher holes. The horses could look out for those. They might have passed Jack without notice, for the bundle made a fair screen, if the sight of an Indian carrying a load and aiding a child while his squaw walked free, had not been a sight worth more than a casual glance. The leader turned as they passed, and in less than a moment the din was deafening.

"Good heavens!"

"Is this the way you spend a holiday?"

"You have good taste to choose this company in preference to ours."

"Didn't know you had gone into the transportation business!"

"Look at the youngster's hands!"

"Poor little kid, he looks almost dead. Is that his mother back there?"

There was no use trying to answer questions or make explanations to that clamouring mob of which