

THE WILDCATTERS

A Tale of the Cobalt Country.

By S. A. White

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BOOK TWO.

CHAPTER II.

THE ranch life on Bar K, of which life he was a part, was indeed, as Kirby had said it would be, a revelation to Carl. He learned the life, the men and the country as they lived and moved. He found that cowboys were human, feeling, whole-hearted fellows, and not swashbuckling pirates of land type. They were rough, of a truth, and they were engaged in hazardous work. They took their lives in their hands many times in a season, but the brave hearts bred by the sun of open plain and singing wind of foothill were the tenderest in comradeship he had ever known. Carl saw the strength of the iron arms as they roped a breaking steer or subdued a fiery broncho, and he saw the softness of the same arms as they soothed the pain from some sick comrade's frame.

These knights of the plains were giants in body and heart, great, fearless men, who had their faults as all have, but who, in having them, touched the human heart and claimed its worship. The name of the Deity fell over freely from their lips, but that was because in the large, free life as roamers across mighty stretches of God's unbroken gardens they came so close to Him. They knew His presence and power, not in fine points of ecclesiastical controversy, but in the scorching blight of summer drought, in tempest blasts through bending cottonwoods and in the lurid lightning's gaze upon the rain-soaked prairie breadth. The glittering mirage was the mirror of His splendor and subtlety. Grim canyon depths were to them His awe-inspiring unfathomability. The winter mountain-storms showed this awful strength. The Chinook wind was God's sweetest mercy!

Among them Carl could have been almost happy had it not been for the thought of Jean, which stabbed him with a sickening pang at times. The work, the rush, the excitement and danger made him forget all else but her, for he put his heart into it, as he always did, no matter upon what he was engaged.

Of course he had it all to learn. It was all new, rough and hard, but Carl went in with such vim, courage and staying power, taking knocks and hardships without a murmur, that admiration for the plucky tenderfoot grew among the cattlemen. There would come a time very shortly, they told themselves, when the tenderfoot would make even the old hands look to their honours. Possessed of indomitable spirit and trained athletic muscles, Carl was no mean figure where strength told. Besides, he was of quickest perception and readiest resource. What he lacked in experience was made up for in a measure by skill and brain work. He learned it all little by little from sticking to the back of a bucking pony to poking dizzy files of broad-backed cattle up the chutes to waiting cars at the shipping depots. Carl learned to eat and sleep in the saddle when necessary. He learned to lasso, to corral, to brand, to camp and cook and to do everything needful in a cattleman's life. He loved the life in its hazardous and strenuous trend.

The spirit of the plain was in him as the days passed. The plunge of his horse was a joy to him, and the feel of heaving sides between his knees came to be a second nature. His slouching sombrero fitted as never Eastern headgear had. The knotted kerchief round his neck was more manly than any linen in vogue. The nerves of his fingers greeted the braided rein and heavy quirt as if they had never known a different touch. The real living hours of the days on the long divides were equalled only by the nights in tented camps before the red coals' glow. Carl grew to it all like a son of the ranch. He forgot what he would forget except when a sunny-haired, blue-eyed girl came in dream form to him. Then the old remorse welled up again and he cursed his weakness of the past. Out here on the vast, lone prairie, he seemed so strong and so scornful of all that was other than clean and white.

CHAPTER III.

BLAND went down into the Humber country as soon as possible after he had parted from his old comrade. There he related everything to Clive Halycon as Carl bade him do.

Clive gasped in amazement. "He is gone?" was his

helpless question.

"Gone!" Jerry said. "I tried to show him he was wrong. He should have come to her. He thought she would never wish to see his face again. He would die first—that is what he said—'die first rather than come to her.'"

One evening when Clive found Jean alone he told her. She listened without a word, without a sob till he had finished. Then Jean rose and Clive read her eyes aright and went.

With weak steps the girl sought her room, and there the floodgates of grief gave way. She threw herself upon the bed and wept in paroxysms of sorrow, praying to heaven for strength and guidance.

In that chamber, where the roof-gables held their panes to the west, a light could have been seen all the long night hours if anyone of the peacefully sleeping countryside had been abroad. Inside was such a struggle, wrestling and prayer as perhaps but one had known before. That one was Carl in the night when he had fought the demon of play.

When the moon lay low on the horizon she stood with her tears, looking out through the silvered glass, and the victory was in her grasp, the victory of a woman's heart.

"Carl, Carl," she murmured in broken accents. "It is much but I can forgive. For the sake of my love and yours I can forgive. Carl, Carl, if you had only come!"

Then in the course of another day she went to Clive.

"Clive," she said. "You will find him?"

Halycon took her hands in both of his and promised.

"I will find him, Jean," he declared, "if anyone can. I shall say you still care and want him. Is that all?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Tell him it is all my life. Oh! Clive, he must come. You will make him. If his pride or shame refuses you must find a way to bring him. Can you do it?"

"I will," Clive promised. "I will find him and he shall come back."

CHAPTER IV.

LEAVING his farm in care of the men, Clive went at once. It seemed likely to him that Carl had gone somewhere in the great West. On inquiring at North Bay, where Glover was known to the agents, he found this suggestion to be correct. His friend had purchased a ticket for Winnipeg, and he was only a week or so behind him. Clive followed immediately, but he had entered on a vain chase. He traced him to the great Western city and there he lost the trail and by no effort however great did he again regain it. He searched systematically in all the cities and towns on or near the lines of railroad even out to the Coast, but it was of no use. He inquired everywhere that he thought a man of Carl's attainments might be drawn. It was all to no avail. The eagerness and earnestness of the search was inspired by the thought of how much it meant to Jean Thurston and the promise he had made. He searched and searched, travelled and travelled, sparing no expense to achieve his end, yet he got no trace of Carl. From many ranchers who happened to be in the towns through which he passed Clive procured the names of the men they employed. It might just be a chance that his comrade has drifted to one of the ranges. At Rockeley, he met Darcy, who gave him the names of his own men and those of Doan's, whose ranch was near his. Among these latter names was the one, Charles Hooper, but it conveyed no recognition to Clive.

Thus it went on. He met all sorts of people in all sorts of places, and asked the same question thousands of times. In those wanderings an event took place in his life which changed everything for him. He met—the woman! Clive, who had never known what some term that grand passion, and who had told Carl that he should never care in that way for anyone, had met his fate at last.

It was in Banff that he came upon her, a girl from the East, and a native of Ottawa. She had spent the summer in Banff and had not as then returned home. From the first he was keenly attached and he lingered and lingered there. His mission of search gave him an excuse, and the month's absence upon which he had calculated stretched out into three. Then came a rude awakening, the announcement of her intending departure. Spurred by the thought Clive risked all and told her of his love in that dreamy heaven-spot of Western Canada. That

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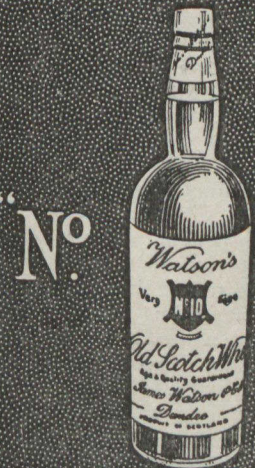
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