

Laurie of the "Plainsman."

A Story of Western Canada by Hulbert Footner.

THE Plainsman occupies the last store of the Carver Block, a one-story row of plate-glass fronts on A Street, east, ending at the railway tracks. The Carver Block, all of five years old, begins to wear an air of haggard antiquity in the brand new streets of Blackfoot: most of the paint has peeled off the towering cornice, and more than one jagged rent lets daylight through that apparently solid front. The curious thing about the buildings of Blackfoot, as of other Western towns, is that they seem to pass direct from the freshness of the trowel to the snuffiness of second-hand building materials. As to this particular store, it needs no sign to identify it as the home of a newspaper—the excessive griminess does that. A flannellette curtain, once a rich green, but more recently a bilious yellow, hangs across the back of the show window, which contains nothing but the accumulations of five years' dust and a framed card of job printing samples dating from the same era. Upon opening the door, the characteristic warm, pungent smell of printer's ink and fresh pulp paper greets the nostrils, lent individuality in this case by a rich undertone of ripening bananas—for part of the back premises is sublet to a wholesale fruiterer, who conducts his business via the rear alley. There is a little sanctum in one corner of the shop, and a counter crosses from that to the wall. Damaged and unsold copies of the Plainsman for a year back are heaped everywhere.

Frank Ardry, editor and proprietor, was doubled over the counter, with his chin in his palms. It was Saturday afternoon, and the staff had distributed itself in quest of amusement, except that the chunking of the monotype in

the basement gave notice that Leonora Colpas, the typesetter, was still at work. Frank was a good-looking youth, with a round head, broad over the ears and smoothly thatched with black; and bright, sophisticated gray eyes. His air of high and humorous assurance, brooking no opposition, was the Plainsman's chief asset. But just now his colors were hauled down.

It was not that the Plainsman was in any worse case than ordinary: the sword of bankruptcy had always hung suspended by a hair over that devil-may-care publication. Frank had secured it from the last proprietor in exchange for a polo pony, and was considered to have received the worst of the bargain. No, he had succeeded in paying his employees for the week; it was simply the "elevation" that ailed him. I should explain that the altitude of Blackfoot is held accountable for most that goes amiss there. Frank was blue, richly and luxuriously blue.

So intent was he on his gloomy thoughts that he did not see a small figure come in through the open doorway and approach the counter.

"Good afternoon," she said.

Frank jerked his head up. His astonished and delighted eyes took in a small, slim girl who looked seventeen and was undoubtedly older. The most remarkable thing about her was the brave, friendly expression of her blue eyes. She plainly wished to ingratiate herself, but without abating any point of personal pride. The next remarkable thing was her hair, the quantity of it and its color—most like raw mahogany, but exactly like nothing else under the sun. This enframed a face cut with delicate certainty of outline, with a healthy, pale skin and lips fresher and sweeter than opening crimson petals. The vision was clad in a close-fitting green gown which became her rarely, and a crafty little hat of the same color.

To Frank the sight of her was like the unlooked-for granting of a secret prayer. He flushed to the roots of his hair.

"My name is Laurie Gray, she said with an engaging candor—she had the cheerful, incisive voice of a schoolboy. "I'm looking for something to do. Can you give me any work on the paper?"

"Why, yes!" said Frank instantly, the possibility of refusing anything to one so pretty never occurring to me. Some time afterwards he added, "What can you do?"

"I never worked before," she said, "but now I have to. My mother and I have come West to make our fortunes."

Her cool, cheerful frankness turned the point of sentimentality. Young Frank was compelled to be businesslike. It was soon decided that Laurie was to cover "locals," meetings, sermons and society. The glint of a fanatic enthusiasm shone in her eyes as this fascinating program was unrolled in her hearing.

"I have dreamed of being a reporter," she murmured.

It may be remarked that there was more danger in a conversation like this than in whole bucketfuls of sentiment. Quite so! The red head and the black unconsciously drew closer across the counter, and in smites flying back and forth and in the kind, shining eyes, already there promised something a good deal tenderer than the customary relation between employer and employee.

They were interrupted by an ominous "Hem!" from behind Frank's back. He looked over his shoulder apprehensively. At the head of the basement steps stood Miss Colpas, the typesetter, in her lace coat and picture hat, the plumes of the latter seeming to bristle with indignation. Leonora was a veterean pioneer of the West; without undertaking to state just how old she was, I may say, well-seasoned. She was likewise westernly free of speech and uncommonly well able to take care of herself. Ordinarily she was amiable, and ruled the males of the Plainsman, including the proprietor, with a rough, bantering coquettishness; but



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