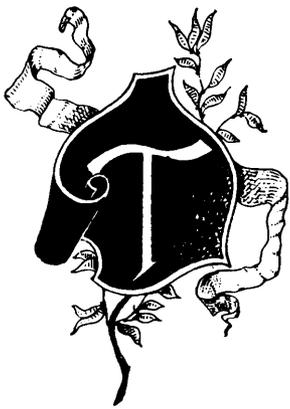




THE FORTUNES OF A MANITOBIAN

CHAPTER I.



HE blazing August sun beat from a cloudless sky, and the fields of grain sweeping from the railway track away over the rolling prairie to the hazy horizon seemed, to the spectators at the car window, to momentarily grow yellower in the fierce light. The South-western express was late, and the telegraph poles flew by with a rapidity that showed that the usual running speed of the train had been greatly increased. The first-class

passenger coach was well filled. A group of chattering school-marks returning from a teachers' convention; dressy drummers, who frequently departed for the second-class car, where smoking, card-playing and the telling of travellers' tales relieved the tedium of the journey; the Lord Bishop of the diocese, gray and worn with shepherding his sheep on the wide plains; the broad-shouldered, heavily built premier of the province going home to spend Sunday with his family; sportsmen, with their guns and jeggings, bound for the duck-shooting grounds, in anticipation of the season to open the following Monday,—these, with a few farmers and a machine agent or two, made up the passengers flying south-westwards.

Major Carruthers sat at an open window, listening idly to the chatter about crops and the harvest, that filled the car, and watching the shifting landscape flying from west to east. Far off he could see the white cottages of the Mennonite communities; near at hand the binders were cutting their way through the heavy wheat fields; now and then the express stopped for a moment at some hamlet, which, with its ungraded streets and houses of unpainted boards, looked as though it had but yesterday sprung up from the prairie sward. To Major Carruthers the whole scene was a most striking one. Here he was at the beginning of things. But yesterday the country had been a wilderness; he could see leagues of prairie untouched by the plow, lying bare and beautiful, and the faces of those about him were those of pioneers. It was a vivid contrast to India, which he had left scarcely six weeks before, on a furlough home for the first time in ten years.

"B—," cried the brakeman, and the Major, gathering his personal belongings together, passed out on the narrow platform that stretched beside the small frame station. But two or three were there to meet the train; one of them, a ruddy-faced young man of medium height, stepped forward and met the Major. They shook hands heartily and said the commonplace words of greeting,—the curiously impassive and undemonstrative meeting of Britons after years of absence. The Major's valise was taken from his hand, and the two passed through the station to where a broncho, attached to a democrat, was enjoying the grateful shade of the building.

A moment later they were speeding down the one street, along which the hamlet sprawled. A few small boys, playing at harvesting in the sand, and two or three men, in duck overalls, working beside the roaring smithy, were the only signs of animation.

"It's harvesting time, you see," said the Major's companion, "and no one comes into the village unless he has to, to have his machinery fixed, or to get binding twine. Wait until we get into the country and you will find a livelier state of things."

"How are Helen and the children?"

"Very well, indeed. Helen is very anxious to meet you again."

"It has been a long time since we last met. As nearly as I can remember the last time I saw her was at the Epsom races, when I introduced you to her; that was the year before I got my commission. When I went abroad I lost track of many of my old friends; a soldier campaigning from Zululand to Burmah has little time for correspondence. However, when, a few months ago, I wrote to Tom that I intended going home for a visit, by way of Japan and the Canadian Pacific steamers, he wrote me that cousin Helen was married to you, and that you were living in Manitoba. It was the first I had heard of you for a long time. Eight or nine years ago I heard from some source—read it in a stray newspaper, I think—that you had become immensely wealthy and owned a city, or something of that sort, out here."

"Yes," answered his companion, grimly, "I owned several cities,—that is, the site of them. We'll go duck-shooting over the ruins of some of them next week."

"'Boom-king,' I think they called you."

"Yes, that was the title I wore. The crown was only a tinsel one though, and has long since gone to rust. I have been an ordinary farmer for the past nine years."

"In the old days at Eton you would have been the last member of our 'set' that I would have picked out as likely to become a pioneer tiller of the soil. How did it come about?"

"It is somewhat of a long story, and later on, when I have you comfortably situated at home, I'll tell you how I became a farmer, and how the daughter of your proud old knightly uncle became a farmer's wife. Meanwhile, look at that,—a sight which cannot be seen outside of Manitoba."

They had turned the summit of a ridge, and before them lay the Pembina valley. The land sloped gently down for three or four miles to the river; beyond the stream it rose more precipitously into tree-crowned bluffs. The valley ran east and west; the sun was dipping toward the horizon, and the river wound, like a band of molten gold, through the groves of oak and elm that marked its course. Wheat fields lay yellow in the sun as far as the eye could see, and as the pony whisked them rapidly along the smooth prairie trail they could hear, on every farm, the garrulous reapers at work. Men were following the machines, building heavy sheaves into stooks. Comfortable looking farm-houses overlooked the valley from the uplands or nestled in the woods, near the stream.

"All that," said the farmer, sweeping his hand east and west toward both extremities of the valley, "was a wilderness nine years ago. There was but a handful of us then. Here we are at my farm. This is my best field of wheat."

The Major saw a vast field of grain stretching away until it was lost over a swell in the prairie. The yellow heads were of so uniform a height that the field gave the impression of a floor that could be walked over. As they stopped to survey it the whirr of binders was heard, and looking across the corner they could just see the horses' heads above the grain. They halted, and the Major saw binder after binder,

until he had counted eight, slowly round the corner, and going down the other side, catching the grain with a roar and spitting it out again in the form of sheaves.

"That field," said the farmer, proudly, "is just four miles around, and it will take those reapers ten days to cut it. As it stands the grain is worth \$15,000."

A mile farther on another huge field was reached; here the binders had done their work, and the yellow stubble was dotted with stooks. Beyond a broad green belt stretched down the slope and across the peat almost to the river.

"That," said the farmer, "is the only cloud in my sky. It is late grain, and I expect it will be frosted before it matures."

"And what if it is frosted?"

"It is clear that you haven't been in Manitoba over forty-eight hours or you wouldn't ask me that question. A frost means anywhere from ten to thirty cents a bushel less for the wheat so damaged."

The pony had been whirling them down the slope at a rapid rate, and soon drew up before a collection of buildings on a low bluff, beneath which the Pembina ran. To the left lay neat and commodious stables; across the trail, and almost on the edge of the bluff, stood the house. It was a low, two-story structure, with flanking wings that had evidently been built recently; a broad verandah ran along its east side, and up its posts clambered wild cucumber and morning glory vines. Many gables, some of them with quaint fretwork, gave the house a sort of Swiss chalet appearance, while with its low roof, broad expanse, deep windows and general air of solidity, it resembled the colonial mansions of the older states. A lawn, too new to be velvety, and broken here and there by beds of flowers, stretched in front of the house to a rustic fence, along which a double row of soft maples were making a brave attempt to grow. To the right of the lawn lay the garden, and an aermotor, its arms lazily flopping in the light breeze, was pumping water, which was finding its way to the lawn through three sprays.

The pony had not stopped before a young woman opened the door and came down the walk, preceded by a sunny-haired little toddler, who shouted her welcome to her papa.

The Major jumped from the carriage, greeted the young woman warmly, and picking up the little girl, who seemed rather inclined to resent the familiarity, passed into the house while the host was turning the pony loose.

Two hours later these two men were sitting, comfortably smoking their pipes, in a little room, which served as an office and a library; a window looked west along the pleasant valley, on which the deep shadows of the twilight were falling, mingling the water-stretches, the yellow grain-fields, the marsh hay-lands and the scrubby bluff into a vague and momentarily darkening landscape.

"Well, Barton," said the Major, "you are very comfortable here. You have been spending the last few years much more profitably than I have been. I can only show a few honourable scars and a well-developed weakness for malarial fevers. But, then, had I turned farmer I would have lacked the 'start' you got, and there is a good deal in that, you know."

"I began here with scarcely a shilling. But I promised that I would tell you the story of my turning farmer and becoming a benedict, and while Helen is getting the babies to sleep I can tell it to you. There is a touch of romance in it. Here it is:—