



BY
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SYNOPSIS: Rancher Witham was in hard luck in the early days of the Canadian West. Two harvests had been frosted and his banker would take no further risks. Then comes Lance Courthorne, a cattle "rustler" and whiskey smuggler, with an offer of a hundred dollars if Witham will ride Courthorne's black charger down to Montana so as to throw the Police off Courthorne's trail. Witham, facing starvation, accepts.

Witham dons Courthorne's cap and coat and starts on his long ride. A trooper accosts him, but he refuses to stop. In the meantime Trooper Shannon is trapped by Courthorne, who has a grudge against him, and is shot. Trooper Payne takes up the chase and Courthorne, cornered, disappears through the thin ice of the river. Payne thinks it was Witham who went through the ice, and this mistake is the basis of subsequent events.

CHAPTER V.

Miss Barrington Comes Home.

THE long train was slackening speed and two whistles rang shrilly through the roar of wheels when Miss Barrington laid down the book with which she had beguiled her journey of fifteen hundred miles, and rose from her seat in a corner of the big first-class car. The car was sumptuously upholstered, and its decorations tastefully as well as lavish, but just then it held no other passenger, and Miss Barrington smiled curiously as she stood, swaying a little, in front of the mirror at one end of it, wrapping her furs about her. There was, however, a faint suggestion of regret in the smile, and the girl's eyes grew grave again, for the soft cushions, dainty curtains, gleaming gold and nickel, and equable temperature formed a part of the sheltered life she was about to leave behind her, and there would, she knew, be a difference in the future. Still, she laughed again as, drawing a little fur cap well down upon her broad forehead, she nodded at her own reflection.

"One cannot have everything, and you might have stayed there and revelled in civilization if you had liked," she said.

Crossing to the door of the portico she stood a moment with fingers on its handle, and once more looked about her. The car was very cosy, and Maud Barrington had all the average young woman's appreciation of the smoother side of life, although she had also the capacity, which is by no means so common, for extracting the most it had to give from the opposite one. Still, it was with a faint regret she prepared to complete what had been a deed of renunciation. Montreal, with its gaieties and luxuries, had not seemed so very far away while she was carried West amid all the comforts artizans who were also artists could provide for the traveller, but once that door closed behind her she would be cut adrift from it all, and left face to face with the simple, strenuous life of the prairie.

Maud Barrington had, however, made her mind up some weeks ago; and when the lock closed with a little clack that seemed to emphasize the fact that the door was shut, she had shaken the memories from her, and was quietly prepared to look forward instead of back. It also needed some little courage, for, as she stood with the furs fluttering about her on the lurching platform, the cold went through her like a knife, and the roofs of the little prairie town rose up above the willows the train was now crawling through. The odours that greeted her nostrils were the reverse of pleasant, and glancing down with the faintest shiver of disgust, her eyes rested on the litter of empty cans, discarded garments, and other even more unsightly things which are usually dumped in the handiest bluff by the citizens of a springing Western town. They have, for the most part, but little appreciation of the picturesque, and it would take a good deal to affect their health.

Then the dwarfed trees opened out, and flanked by the two huge wheat elevators and a great water tank, the prairie city stood revealed. It was crude and repellent, devoid of anything that could please the most lenient eye, for the bare frame houses rose, with their rough boarding weathered and cracked by frost and sun, hideous almost in their simplicity, from the white prairie. Paint was apparently an unknown luxury, and pavement there was none, though a rude platform straggled some distance above the ground down either side of the street, so that the citizens might not sink knee-deep in the mire of the spring thawing. Here and there a dilapidated waggon was drawn up in front of a store, but with a clanging of the big bell the locomotive rolled into the little station, and Maud Barrington looked down upon a group of silent men who had sauntered there to enjoy the one relaxation the desolate place afforded them.

There was very little in their appearance to attract the attention of a young woman of Miss Barrington's upbringing. They had grave, bronzed faces, and wore, for the most part, old fur coats stained here and there with soil. Nor were their mittens and moccasins in good repair, but there was a curious steadiness in their gaze which vaguely suggested the slow, stubborn courage that upheld them through the strenuous effort and grim self-denial of their toilsome lives. They were small wheat-growers who had driven in to purchase provisions or inquire the price of grain, and here and there a mittened hand was raised to a well-worn cap, for most of them recognized Miss Barrington of Silverdale Grange. She returned their greeting graciously, and then swung herself from the platform, with a smile in her eyes as a man came hastily and yet, as it were, with a certain deliberation in her direction.

HE was elderly, but held himself erect, while his furs, which were good, fitted him in a fashion which suggested a uniform. He also wore boots which reached half-way to the knee, and were presumably lined to resist the prairie cold, which few men at that season would do, and scarcely a speck of dust marred their lustrous exterior, while as much of his face as was visible beneath the great fur cap was lean and commanding. Its salient features were the keen and somewhat imperious grey eyes and long, straight nose, while something in the squareness of the man's shoulders and his pose set him apart from the prairie farmers and suggested the cavalry officer. He was, in fact, Colonel Barrington, founder and autocratic ruler of the English community of Silverdale, and had been awaiting his niece somewhat impatiently. Colonel Barrington was invariably punctual, and resented the fact that the train had come in an hour later than it should have done.

"So you have come back to us. We have been longing for you, my dear," he said. "I don't know what we should have done had they kept you in Montreal altogether."

"Yes," she said, "I have come back. It was very pleasant in the city, and they were all kind to me; but I think, henceforward, I would sooner stay with you on the prairie."

Colonel Barrington patted the hand he drew through his arm, and there was a very kindly smile in his eyes as they left the station and crossed the tract towards a little, and by no means very comfortable, wooden hotel. He stopped outside it.

"I want to see the horses put in and

get our mail," he said. "Mrs. Jasper expects you, and will have tea ready."

He disappeared behind the wooden building, and his niece standing a moment on the veranda watched the long train roll away down the faint blur of track that ran west to the farthest verge of the great white wilderness. Then with a little impatient gesture she went into the hotel.

"That is another leaf turned down, and there is no use in looking back; but I wonder what is written on the rest," she said.

Twenty minutes later she watched Colonel Barrington cross the street with a bundle of letters in his hand. She fancied that his step was slower than it had been, and that he seemed a trifle preoccupied and embarrassed; but he spoke with quiet kindness when he handed her into the waiting sleigh, and the girl's spirits rose as they swung smoothly northwards behind two fast horses across the prairie. It stretched away before her, ridged here and there with a dusty birch bluff or willow grove under a vault of crystalline blue. The sun that had no heat in it struck a silvery glitter from the snow, and the trail swept back to the horizon a sinuous blue-grey smear, while the keen, dry cold and sense of swift motion set the girl's blood stirring. After all, it seemed to her, there were worse lives than those the Western farmers led on the great levels under the frost and sun.

Colonel Barrington watched her with a little gleam of approval in his eyes. "You are not sorry to come back to this and Silverdale?"

"No," said the girl, with a little laugh. "At least, I shall not be sorry to return to Silverdale. It has a charm of its own, for while one is occasionally glad to get away from it, one is even more pleased to come home again. It is a somewhat purposeless life our friends are leading yonder in the cities. I, of course, mean the women."

Barrington nodded. "And some of the men! Well, we have room here for the many who are going to the devil in the old country for the lack of something worth while to do; though I am afraid there is considerably less prospect than I once fancied there would be of their making money."

His niece noticed the gravity in his face, and sat thoughtfully silent for several minutes, while, with the snow hissing beneath it, the sleigh nipped into and swung out of a hollow.

COLONEL BARRINGTON had founded the Silverdale settlement ten years earlier, and gathered about him other men with a grievance who had once served their nation, and the younger sons of English gentlemen who had no inclination for commerce, and found that lack of brains and capital debarred them from either a political or military career. He had settled them on the land, and taught them to farm, while, for the community had prospered at first when Western wheat was dear, it had taken ten years to bring home to him the fact that men who dined ceremoniously each evening and spent at least a third of their time in games and sport, could not well compete with the grim bushmen from Ontario, or the lean Dakota ploughmen, who ate their meals in ten minutes and toiled at least twelve hours every day.

Colonel Barrington was slow to believe that the race he sprang from could be equalled and much less beaten at anything, while his respect for and scrupulous observance of insular traditions had cost him a good deal, and left him a poorer man than he had been when

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