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CALGARY, Alta.

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The Girl in the Red Sweater

By H. C. Haddon

Thomas Edison, or Billy Sunday, or one of those literary guys says in one of their poems that Truth is stranger than Fiction. Whichever one of them that said so, he was most certainly right; nor would he have been wrong if he had added that Love is stronger than either of them. Having got so far I may as well go on and tell you the rest—and this is both a love story and also a true one.

The whole thing started as a joke, and as such it remained to the rest of the boys in the bunch—but the Kid let me in on the ground floor, and you can take it from me that this is the inside story of the Girl in the Red Sweater.

I was working for the Circle Bar at the time it happened, which isn't so very long ago. The ranch house, as you probably know is only about ten miles from town—and if you know the ranch house you won't need me to tell you the name of the town. In any case there are dozens just like it scattered through the Western provinces.

Well, five or six of us had been in to town one evening to a travelling show given by some play actors. I forget now how many of us went in, but I know the Kid and myself and Baldy Harris and Slim Linton were there. I think Poker Davis and Red Oliver went along too, but in any case it doesn't matter. The only reason I mentioned it was because Baldy—but this isn't Baldy's story. The show was pretty punk, but you can't expect anything else, and after three months of bucking bronchos and kicking steers you're glad enough to have a change for one evening, even if it is only imitation Shakespeare.

They held the show in a big hall that was used for dances when town was feeling good, and instead of regular theatre seats like you've been used to, they just had rough benches strung out for us to sit on. About three rows from

us sat the Girl in the Red Sweater; that isn't her name, but it will do. I had been in to town quite a few times during the two years that I had been working for the old Circle Bar, but this was the first time that I had seen her.

She was a sweet little girl and I just wish I could describe her to you, but I can't. My hands are more at home with a branding iron than with a pen—and anyway it wants a professional hot air artist for the job, and not a poor cow-puncher like myself. She was only a little girl—about five feet three I should guess, but so neat and slim that you felt like loving her at once. She had great big blue eyes that looked right into yours, and her hair was all broken up into little wavy curls that used to hang round her ears and drop down over her forehead—but you know how it is!

That's all that happened. The Kid may have spoken to her, but I didn't see him do it, and I don't think that he did.

Right here I ought to stop and tell you about the Kid. He was about the healthiest kid that I have ever met. In his stockings feet he would stand six feet three, and he was built in proportion. No thin overgrown fellow that's run to height instead of filling out, but two hundred pounds of good Canadian manhood.

You couldn't help liking him, he was so wholesome and healthy, and his good humour was so infectious that you just had to laugh when he laughed—which was pretty often.

The only thing about him was that he was young—not more than twenty-three, I should think. And of course at that age a man is liable to be sentimental. That's just how it was with the Kid. After the show was over he took his round of drinks with the rest of us, but beside a brief "Here's how" or "Good luck" not another word could we get out of him.

That in itself was suspicious, for the Kid was—well, the Kid.

Presently Slim asked him some point about the show, and I'll eat my cayuse if the Kid could tell him. So then the boys got joshing him, and just in fun I said to him: "It seemed to me, Son, that you paid more attention to that little girl in the red sweater than you did to the show."

If you have ever seen a big six footer blush to the very roots of his hair you'll understand how comical the Kid looked. It was no use his denying it, for his blush gave him away, and once they had him on a string the rest of the boys gave the poor Kid no rest.

For the next two or three days we were all pretty well fed up with red sweaters, and if the Kid had been anyone else but the big good natured baby that he was there would have been some sore heads round the Circle Bar.

Probably the whole thing would have died down from lack of nourishment but that Poker Davis had one of his brilliant ideas. The joke looked so good that everybody boosted for it, and the result was that the bunch fixed up a letter for the poor Kid. As far as I can remember it went something like this:

"Dear Mr. Evans" (that's the Kid when he's got his Sunday suit on) "I saw you at the show the other night, and you looked across in my direction so often that I hoped you would come and speak to me.

"I will be outside the Post Office on Monday evening at half past seven, and if you care to meet me there I will be very pleased to see you. I shall be wearing the same red sweater that I wore at the show, so you will have no trouble in recognising me, and I do so hope you will be there."

And after her name (oh! we found out who she was all-right!) was one solitary little cross. Which stands for—well, you know!

Well, to carry the joke through properly I got the foreman's wife to copy out this letter, and Baldy Harris mailed

it. He was going in to town that day, or he would probably have forgotten it, the same as he did the parson's letter over at Clearwater—but this isn't Baldy's story.

The Kid got this letter on Friday morning, and after he had read it he just looked kind of funny for a minute or two, as if he didn't quite understand, and then put it away in the pocket of his shirt, and never said a word to anyone about it.

So far the joke seemed to be on us, because none of us could say anything to the Kid, or show any curiosity lest he should wonder how much we knew about the letter, and so grow suspicious.

So we had to control our curiosity as best we might, for the Kid certainly showed no inclination to take us into his confidence, nor did some very discreet questioning by Slim add anything to our stock of knowledge.

But Monday came at last, as Mondays always will if you wait long enough for them, though it was not until the eleventh hour that we knew that our joke was successful, and that a sentimental bait was going to give the Kid a barren ride of twenty miles.

I had been riding after strays all day, and it was nearly supper time when I got back to the ranch. As I got near the bunk house Red came out with his hand over his mouth, and his face all broken up with laughter.

When he saw me his mirth increased, and in a hoarse stage whisper he said: "He's shaving!"

"Who?" I asked, not thinking for the moment.

"Why, the Kid," he said "and he's all dressed-up like a picture!"

Then I laughed too, because the joke seemed so good. After all it does seem comical to make a man ride twenty miles just for a fool letter—and the Kid was so sentimental that we could have doubled the distance with safety. And so, in the early evening the Kid rode away on his black horse to keep his date with the lady that had written to him.