

True to the West

By Annie Sheppard Armstrong

TO the small Western town on the edge of the prairie two men "came in" together, with the same amount of capital—nothing. The skilled carpenter, James Brice, continued to make a living, as he had always done. The "free lance" Arthur Barton, with little education and no trade, from a little dickering and trading at first, built up a big business, acquiring as time went on, the chief handling of the coal, lumber, implements, and various kinds of insurance for the prosperous country around. One family had a workman's cottage, and, with only a fence between, the other had a fine residence, the largest in the place, but they remained on a friendly footing. Still, as time went on, the Barton children got much better opportunities, being sent away for higher education than the village afforded.

When they were all small and attended the one-roomed school, Maidie Brice and Bruce Barton were great friends. In every game the brown eyes of the boy seemed to seek out the answering blue ones of the girl, before the game was completely enjoyable. When they all went looking for flowers, as the snow-drifts melted in spring after the cold northern winter, if Bruce found the first crocus, he brought it to Maidie. This was as unexplainable and as involuntary in their childish minds as the attraction of the magnetic needle to the pole.

But when both passed out of the little school, one to stay at home, the other to go to the city, newer things occupied Bruce's mind. Maidie's mother had some boarders, and her time was pretty well employed helping at home. It was a humdrum life, but, being of an unselfish, sunny disposition she was happy.

Always when Bruce came home for his holidays and got settled down, his feet involuntarily sought the Brice porch, and an unexplainable peace stole over him as he talked enthusiastically to Maidie about his class work, his friends, amusements and even the girls he met, using the extravagant phraseology of his fellow students. Maidie, her red-brown head bent in the mornings over potato peeling or pea shelling, or, in the afternoons over sewing or mending, was always bright and responsive, her blue eyes showing every shade of feeling.

Thus the years fled away for Bruce and were away for Maidie, until one was 22 and nearly through law school, the other 19, and with no apparent change, only a more womanly look, but the same impulsive way.

That summer Mrs. Brice had a lady boarder, Lila Bain, a girl from a city "down east," who thought a summer vacation in the West would be a rest after her labors as a stenographer. She was distinctly disappointed in Alberta, expecting to see whooping cow-boys, interesting Indians—a few thousand feet of film, in fact, instead of a decorous little town with great stretches of wheat and oats surrounding it. There were cattle, it is true, but they seemed tame, not seeming to need a whooping cavalry regiment to guard them. The Indians were scattered and inoffensive. Failing the movie stuff Lila was enraged at the town for not being a Toronto or a Montreal, and criticized its limitations unmercifully.

Miss Bain was certainly a striking looking girl. She had a waxen white complexion, with not a bit of color, although she was healthy enough. Her hair and eyes were very dark. With this coloring she could wear almost anything, and certainly got herself up in a stunning way, not sparing the rouge if necessary to the color scheme.

After Bruce's arrival home for his holidays he strolled over for his morning's talk with Maidie. That little person was very busy ironing at the vine-draped end of the porch and Miss Bain sat picturesquely in the open. Introductions were given and Bruce found himself gazing at and being



A Bit of Manitoba Forest Reserved for City Pleasure Seekers.

entertained by this vision, in a white summer costume with red and black touches. Maidie was flushed and busy, scarcely had time to speak; Lila Bain, pale and cool, flashed her dark eyes and clever speeches and Bruce seemed enthralled. Having himself been in the city he was inclined to be a bit critical of the village and country 'round, and he seemed to enjoy her clever remarks. Her appeal to him from speaking eyes, as being a little "different" was flattering too.

In the afternoon Mrs. Brice and Maidie were out in nice porch dresses, as Maidie would never call her work done until her mother was through too. Miss Bain was in pale blue, in which she looked perfectly ethereal and aristocratic. Maidie, with her tan and red coloring looked pretty, but mundane. Lila was more caustic, if more languid, than in the forenoon.

"Mrs. Brice," she said, "you should let your daughter come East. It would be a revelation to her; she would learn so much."

"I believe it would," was the reply. "I know it did me good to come West, and it's the same distance."

Maidie looked at her mother in pained surprise at this evident "dig."

"Strike one," said Bruce, laughing. Said Miss Bain cleverly, "Oh, the mere going a certain distance is of no account; you could run 'round and 'round the house for hundreds of miles. It's what you see when you get there that I mean."

"Oh well," said Mrs. Brice, "I left the East to try to better myself as most

people do. Maidie is pretty well informed. She knows something about her own country, and wouldn't have a fit at seeing apples growing on trees instead of in the ground. She knows that a piece of land can have less than a quarter section in it and still be called a farm."

"Here is where I take a post-graduate course in debate," said Bruce, settling himself comfortably, his back against a post. "Go ahead now, East versus West."

"Oh no, don't," pleaded Maidie; it's too hot. I think every part of Canada must be lovely. We're all Canadians, aren't we?"

Lila said she had some letters to post, and Bruce strolled away with her down the street.

"That girl makes me tired, doesn't she you, Maidie?" asked Mrs. Brice, looking keenly at her daughter.

"Oh, I don't know, she's different, of course," said the girl reflectively.

After that, at the church fetes and little gatherings around the town, Bruce was never far from Miss Bain. But, as the two girls always went together, his absorption in the Eastern girl was not so apparent as it really was.

That summer the Barton's got an auto. Cars were just coming into general use at that time, and, as soon as the boy got the "hang" of running it he came over one afternoon to take the girls for a trip into the country.

Miss Bain jumped into the seat beside the driver and began an animated discourse on cars in general, and Maidie settled herself in the back seat at the

left, and grew absorbed in the country they were swiftly traversing.

It was early July. The rich green wheat fields lay under the blue sky. The grey green of the oat crops was a contrast. The poplar bluffs on the wild lands were green and full of singing, happy, nesting birds. The grassy trail was lined with wild roses, from which the scent came up with wistful, insistent sweetness. A coyote howled away off. The gophers squeaked and scuttled for their burrows as the car sped along. A meadow lark lifted his song from a fence post. A bunch of prairie chickens rose and whirled away "A-tuck-a-tuck-a-tuck" they said.

Bruce looked around absently once or twice, then said, unheeding Miss Bain's chatter, "Will you move over to the right, Maidie?"

"Why?" asked Maidie, from a reverie.

"I don't know—so I can see you, I suppose." Once more he was the boy carrying the first crocus to Maidie. Miss Bain's cleverness fell on deaf ears. The West was pleading with the Western born. Everything around was so beautiful, so typical, the things dreamed of and looked forward to one cold, biting winter after another. The brown eyes turned and met the blue ones, so true, so wistful, so big and solemn with rapture.

At length Maidie leaned forward, "Bruce, we have come about 25 miles. See, there's the other railroad. And it looks like rain. Hadn't we better go back?"

"I guess so," he said, "there's a good place to turn around up the trail a bit, it's rough here."

The farmers had been longing for rain, and now it was coming, and coming in a hurry. The sun went under a cloud. The wind sprang up, and with it came the rain in torrents. It was cold, too, as rains are in the north. The car had only the canopy up, so Bruce left it at the roadside and they ran for a shack not far away. And such drenched, dishevelled creatures were never seen as they when they reached there.

There was no one at home, but the door was not fastened, so they went in. It was a one-roomed bachelor's abode, and very disorderly. A red cook stove, a bunk with a couple of grey blankets on it, a table with some dirty dishes, a packing case nailed to the wall for a cupboard, two chairs, a box of coal, an array of boots, a rifle, etc., completed the contents.

Miss Bain was almost profane in her hysterical lamentations at the wet, cold and discomfort generally. The lovely crimps were out of her hair and it fell in strands over her cheeks on which the rouge was streaked. Her dark eyes showed their white wildly, and her dress was ruined.

Bruce was crushed and apologetic for he scarcely knew what.

But Maidie's spirits rose with the excitement of it. She laughed and dashed around in a house-wifely fervor, her blue eyes sparkling, her cheeks like roses, her hair in wet ringlets.

"Bruce, do make a fire," she ordered, "cut up that piece of board, and, see, there's coal in the box. Let me see what he's got here to eat—coffee, sugar, bacon, syrup, canned tomatoes—oh yes, lots; we'll get warm and dry and get a good supper. What fun!"

"Would you steal the man's stuff?" shrieked Miss Bain, her teeth chattering with cold.

"I'll leave him some money on the table," said Bruce, whittling away in a matter-of-fact manner. "That's common in this country."

"Yes, and I'll clean up his house for him," said Maidie gaily.

"I should think you'd have enough drudgery after your mother's boarders, without cleaning up any dirty bachelor's shack," sneered Miss Bain. Maidie did not hear this remark, but Bruce looked up balefully. Disillusionment was complete.

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