

Half an hour later, as Bill stood looking after Shock and rubbing his fingers, he said in soliloquy: "Well, I guess I'm gittin' old. What in thunder has got into me, anyway? How'd he git me on to that line? Say, what a bunco steerer he'd make! And with that face and them eyes of his! No, 'taint that. It's his blank honest talk. Hang if I know what it is, but he's got it! He's white, I swear! But blank him! he makes a fellow feel like a thief."

Bill went back to his lonely ranch with his lonely, miserable life, unconsciously trying to analyse his new emotions, some of which he would be glad to escape, and some he would be loath to lose. He stood at his door a moment, looking in upon the cheerless jumble of boxes and furniture, and then turning, he gazed across the sunny slopes to where he could see his bunch of cattle feeding, and with a sigh that came from the deepest spot in his heart, he said: "Yes, I guess he's right. It's a friend I need. That's what."

VII

THE OUTPOST

UPON a slight swell of prairie stood the Outpost manse of Big River, the sole and only building in the country representative of the great Church which lay behind it, and which, under able statesmanship, was seeking to hold the new West for things high and good. The Big River people were proud of their manse. The minister was proud of it, and with reason. It stood for courage, faith, and self-denial. To the Convener and Superintendent, in their hours of discouragement, this little building brought cheer and hope. For, while it stood there it kept touch between that new country and what was best and most characteristic in Canadian civilisation, and it was for this that they wrought and prayed. But, though to people and minister, Convener and Superintendent, the little manse meant so much, the bareness, the unloveliness, and, more than all, the utter loneliness of it smote Shock with a sense of depression. At first he could not explain to himself this feeling. It was only after he had consciously recognised the picture which had risen in contrast before his mind as the home of the Fairbanks, that he understood.

"I could never bring her to such a house as this," was his thought. "A woman would die here."

And, indeed, there was much to depress in the first look at the little board building that made a home for the McIntyres, set down on the treeless prairie with only a little wooden paling to defend it from the waste that gaped at it from every side. The contrast between this bare speck of human habitation and the cosy homes of his native Province, set each within its sheltering nest of orchard and garden, could hardly have been more complete. But as his eyes ran down the slope of the prairie and up over the hills to the jagged line of peaks at the horizon, he was conscious of a swift change of feeling. The mighty hills spoke to his heart.

"Yes, even here one might live contented," he said aloud, and he found himself picturing how the light from those great peaks would illumine the face that had grown so dear within the last few months.

"And my mother would like it too," he said, speaking once more aloud. So with better heart he turned from the trail to the little manse door. The moment he passed within the door all sense of depression was gone. Out of their bare little wooden house the McIntyres had made a home, a place of comfort and of rest. True, the walls were without plaster, brown paper with factory cotton tacked over it taking its place, but they were wind-proof, and besides were most convenient for hanging things on. The furniture, though chiefly interesting as an illustration of the evolution of the packing box, was none the less service-

able and comfortable. The floors were as yet uncarpeted, but now that April was come the carpets were hardly missed. Then, too, the few choice pictures upon the walls, the ingenious bookcase and the more ingenious plate- and cup-rack displaying honest delf and some bits of choice china, the draping curtains of muslin and cretonne, all spoke of cultivated minds and refined tastes. Staring wants there were, and many discrepancies and incongruities, but no vulgarities nor coarseness nor tawdriness. What they had was fitting. What was fitting but beyond their means these brave home-makers did without, and all things unfitting, however cheap, they scorned. And Shock, though he knew nothing of the genesis and evolution of this home and its furnishings, was sensible of its atmosphere of quiet comfort and refinement. The welcome of the McIntyres was radiant with good cheer and hearty hospitality.

It was partly the sea-rover in his blood, making impossible the familiar paths trodden bare of any experience that could stir the heart or thrill the imagination, but more that high ambition that dwells in noble youth, making it responsive to the call of duty where duty is difficult and dangerous, that sent David McIntyre out from his quiet country home in Nova Scotia to the far West. A brilliant course in Pictou Academy, that nursing mother of genius for that Province by the sea, a still more brilliant course in Dalhousie, and afterwards in Pine Hill, promised young McIntyre anything he might desire in the way of scholastic distinction. The remonstrance of one

of his professors, when he learned of the intention of his brilliant and most promising student to give his life to Western mission work, was characteristic of the attitude of almost the whole Canadian Church of that day.

"Oh, Mr. McIntyre!" said the Professor, "there is no need for such a man as you to go to the West."

Equally characteristic of the man was McIntyre's reply.

"But, Professor, someone must go; and besides that seems to me great work, and I'd like to have a hand in it."

It was the necessity, the difficulty, and the promise of the work that summoned young McIntyre from all the openings, vacancies, positions, and appointments his friends were so eagerly waving before his eyes and set him among the foot-hills in the far front as the first settled minister of Big River, the pride of his Convener's heart, the friend and shepherd of the scattered farmers and ranchers of the district. Once only did he come near to regretting his choice, and then not for his own sake, but for the sake of the young girl whom he had learned to love and whose love he had gained during his student days. Would she leave home and friends and the social circle of which she was the brightest ornament for all that he could offer? He had often written to her, picturing in the radiant colours of his own Western sky the glory of prairie, foot-hill, and mountain, the greatness and promise of the new land, and the worth of the work he was trying to do. But his two years

of missionary experience had made him feel the hardship, the isolation, the meagreness, of the life which she would have to share with him. The sunset colours were still there, but they were laid upon ragged rock, lonely hill, and wind-swept, empty prairie. It took him days of hard riding and harder thinking to give final form to the last paragraph of his letter:

"I have tried faithfully to picture my life and work. Can you brave all this? Should I ask you to do it? My work, I feel, lies here, and it's worth a man's life. But whether you will share it, it is for you to decide. If you feel you cannot, believe me, I shall not blame you, but shall love and honour you as before. But though it break my heart I cannot go back from what I see to be my work. I belong to you, but first I belong to Him who is both your Master and mine."

In due time her answer came. He carried her letter out to a favourite haunt of his in a sunny coolie where an old creek-bed was marked by straggling willows, and there, throwing himself down upon the sloping grass, he read her message.

"I know, dear, how much that last sentence of yours cost you, and my answer is that were your duty less to you, you would be less to me. How could I honour and love a man who, for the sake of a girl or for any sake, would turn back from his work? Besides, you have taught me too well to love your glorious West,

and you cannot daunt me now by any such sombre picture as you drew for me in your last letter. No sir. The West for me! And you should be ashamed—and this I shall make you properly repent—ashamed to force me to the unmaidenly course of insisting upon going out to you, ‘rounding you up into a corral’—that is the correct phrase, is it not?—and noosing, no, roping you there.”

When he looked up from the letter the landscape was blurred for a time. But soon he wondered at the new splendour of the day, the sweetness of the air, the mellow music of the meadow-lark. A new glory was upon sky and earth and a new rapture in his heart.

“Wonderful!” he exclaimed. “Dear little soul! She doesn’t know, and yet, even if she did, I believe it would make no difference.”

Experience proved that he had rightly estimated her. For a year and a half she had stood by her husband’s side, making sunshine for him that no clouds could dim nor blizzards blow out. It was this that threw into her husband’s tone as he said, “My wife, Mr. Macgregor,” the tenderness and pride. It made Shock’s heart quiver, for there came to him the picture of a tall girl with wonderful dark grey eyes that looked straight into his while she said, “You know I will not forget.” It was this that made him hold the little woman’s hand till she wondered at him, but with a woman’s divining she read his story in the deep blue eyes, alight now with the memory of love.

“That light is not for me,” she said to herself, and

welcomed him with a welcome of one who had been so recently and, indeed, was still a lover.

The interval between supper and bed-time was spent in eager talk over Shock’s field. A rough map, showing trails, streams, sloughs, coolies, and some of the larger ranches lay before them on the table.

“This is The Fort,” said McIntyre, putting his finger upon a dot on the left side of the map. “Twenty-five miles west and south is Loon Lake, the centre of your field, where it is best that you should live, if you can; and then further away up toward the Pass they tell me there is a queer kind of ungodly settlement—ranchers, freighters, whisky-runners, cattle thieves, miners, almost anything you can name. You’ll have to do some exploration work there.”

“Prospecting, eh?” said Shock.

“Exactly. Prospecting is the word,” said McIntyre. “The Fort end of your field won’t be bad in one way. You’ll find the people quite civilised. Indeed, The Fort is quite the social centre for the whole district. Afternoon teas, hunts, tennis, card-parties, and dancing parties make life one gay whirl for them. Mind you, I’m not saying a word against them. In this country anything clean in the way of sport ought to be encouraged, but unfortunately there is a broad, bad streak running through that crowd, and what with poker, gambling, bad whisky, and that sort of thing, the place is at times a perfect hell.”

“Whisky? What about the Police? I have heard them well spoken of,” said Shock.

“And rightly so. They are a fine body of men,

with exceptions. But this infernal permit system makes it almost impossible to enforce the law, and where the Inspector is a soak, you can easily understand that the whole business of law enforcement is a farce. Almost all the Police, however, in this country are straight fellows. There's Sergeant Crisp, now—there is not money enough in the Territories to buy him. Why, he was offered six hundred dollars not long ago to be busy at the other end of the town when the freighters came in one night. But not he. He was on duty, with the result that some half dozen kegs of whisky failed to reach their intended destination. But there's a bad streak in the crowd, and the mischief of it is that the Inspector and his wife set the pace for all the young fellows of the ranches about. And when whisky gets a-flowing there are things done that it is a shame to speak of. But they won't bother you much. They belong mostly to Father Mike."

"Father Mike, a Roman Catholic?"

"No, Anglican. A very decent fellow. Have not seen much of him. His people doubtless regard me as a blooming dissenter, dontcherknow. But he is no such snob. He goes in for all their fun—hunts, teas, dances, card-parties, and all the rest of it."

"What, gambling?" asked Shock, aghast.

"No, no. I understand he rakes them fore and aft for their gambling and that sort of thing. But they don't mind it much. They swear by him, for he is really a fine fellow. In sickness or in trouble

Father Mike is on the spot. But as to influencing their lives, I fear Father Mike is no great force."

"Why do you have a mission there at all?" enquired Shock.

"Simply because the Superintendent considers The Fort a strong strategic point, and there are a lot of young fellows and a few families there who are not of Father Mike's flock and who could never be persuaded to attend his church. It doesn't take much, you know, to keep a man from going to church in this country, so the Superintendent's policy is to remove all possible excuses and barriers and to make it easy for men to give themselves a chance. Our principal man at The Fort is Macfarren, a kind of lawyer, land-agent, registrar, or something of that sort. Has cattle too, on a ranch. A very clever fellow, but the old story—whisky. Too bad. He's a brother of Rev. Dr. Macfarren."

"What? Dr. Macfarren of Toronto?"

"Yes. And he might be almost anything in this country. I'll give you a letter to him. He will show you about and give you all information."

"And is he in the Church?" Shock's face was a study. McIntyre laughed long and loud.

"Why, my dear fellow, we're glad to get hold of any kind of half-decent chap that is willing to help in any way. We use him as usher, manager, choir-master, sexton. In short, we put him any place where he will stick."

Shock drew a long breath. The situation was becoming complicated to him.

"About Loon Lake," continued McIntyre, "I can't tell you much. By all odds the most interesting figure there is the old Prospector, as he is called. You have heard about him?"

Shock bowed.

"No one knows him, though he has been there for many years. His daughter, I understand, has just come out from England to him. Then, there's Andy Hepburn, who runs a store, a shrewd, canny little Scot. I have no doubt he will help you. But you'll know more about the place in a week than I could tell you if I talked all night, and that I must not do, for you must be tired."

When he finished Shock sat silent with his eyes upon the map. He was once more conscious of a kind of terror of these unknown places and people. How could he get at them? What place was there for him and his mission in that wild, reckless life of theirs? What had he to bring them. Only a Tale? In the face of that vigorous, strenuous life it seemed at that moment to Shock almost ridiculous in its inadequacy. Against him and his Story were arraigned the great human passions—greed of gold, lust of pleasure in its most sensuous forms, and that wild spirit of independence of all restraint by law of God or man. He was still looking at the map when Mr. McIntyre said:

"We will take the books, as they say in my country."

"Ay, and in mine," said Shock, coming out of his dream with a start.

Mrs. McIntyre laid the Bible on the table. Her husband opened the Book and read that great Psalm of the wilderness, "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place," and so on to the last cry of frail and fading humanity after the enduring and imperishable, "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish thou the work of our hands upon us: yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

As he listened to the vivid words that carried with them the very scent and silence of the hungry wilderness, there fell upon Shock's ears the long howl and staccato bark of the prairie wolf. That lonely voice of the wild West round them struck Shock's heart with a chill of fear, but following hard upon the fear came the memory of the abiding dwelling place for all desert pilgrims, and in place of his terror a great quietness fell upon his spirit. The gaunt spectre of the hungry wilderness vanished before the kindly presence of a great Companionship that made even the unknown West seem safe and familiar as one's own home. The quick change of feeling filled Shock's heart to overflowing, so that when Mr. McIntyre, closing the Book, said, "You will lead us in prayer, Mr. Macgregor," Shock could only shake his head in voiceless refusal.

"You go on, David," said his wife, who had been watching Shock's face.

As Shock lay that night upon his bed of buffalo skins in the corner, listening to the weird sounds of the night without, he knew that for the present at least that haunting terror of the unknown and that

disturbing sense of his own insufficiency would not trouble him. That dwelling place, quiet and secure, of the McIntyre's home in the midst of the wide waste about was to him for many a day a symbol of that other safe dwelling place for all pilgrims through earth's wilderness.

"Poor chap," said McIntyre to his wife when they had retired for the night, "I'm afraid he'll find it hard work, especially at The Fort. He is rather in the rough, you know."

"He has beautiful honest eyes," said his wife, "and I like him."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do," she replied emphatically.

"Then," said her husband, "in spite of all appearances he's all right."

THE OLD PROSPECTOR

LOON LAKE lay in the afternoon sunlight, shimmering in its glory of prismatic colours, on one side reflecting the rocks and the pines that lined the shore and the great peaks that stood further back, and the other lapping the grasses and reeds that edged its waters and joined it to the prairie. A gentle breeze now and then breathed across the lake, breaking into myriad fragments the glassy surface that lay like sheets of polished multi-coloured metal of gold and bronze and silver, purple and green and blue.

A young girl of about sixteen years, riding a cayuse along the lake shore, suddenly reined in her pony and sat gazing upon the scene.

"After all," she said aloud, "it is a lovely spot, and if only father could have stayed, I wouldn't mind."

Her tone was one of discontent. Her face was not beautiful, and its plainness was increased by a kind of sullen gloom that had become its habit. After gazing across the lake for some minutes she turned her horse and cantered toward a little cluster of buildings of all sizes and shapes that huddled about the