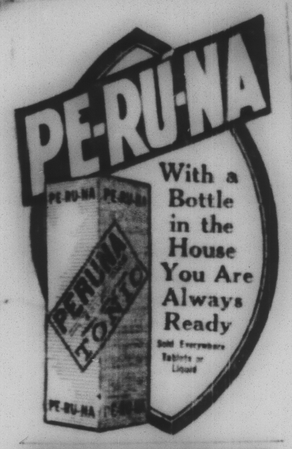

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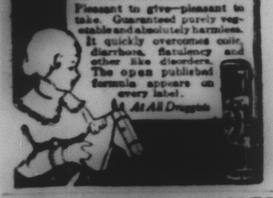

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THE PATTON COURIER

Neighbors

By ROBERT STEAD

Author of "The Cow Puncher," "The Homesteaders"

WNU Service

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THE HOMESTEADS

SYNOPSIS—Lured by his four-year-old playmate, Jean Lane, Frank Hall, aged six, ventures on the forbidden wall of a dam, in a small Ontario town. He falls into the water and is saved from possible death by clinging to Jean's outstretched arms. Next day Jean informs him that because of their adventure of the day before he is in duty bound to marry her. He agrees when they are "grownups." With Jean's brother John, also aged six, Frank begins school. Two years later they are joined by Jean and Frank's sister Marjorie. A little later Jean confides to Frank, in verse, her hope of some day becoming Mrs. Hall. He accepts the proposal. Frank is fourteen when his mother dies. The boys are eighteen when John's father is killed in an accident. Two years later Frank's father and John's mother are married. Dissatisfied with conditions and ambitious, the two boys make plans to go to Manitoba and "homestead," the girls agreeing to go with them. They set out. At Regina they meet Jake, who agrees to find them satisfactory homesteads.

CHAPTER III—Continued

—3—

Jake threw a querying stress on the word sisters, but it was against all nature to be offended at him. Had we resented his remark he would have laughed our seriousness out of court. But we decided to see some of the adjoining sections.

Sixteen appealed to Jack. We could have taken the west half, and so working together, we would have had a mile furrow. The gully also touched Sixteen, and would have given us the same advantages as Jake claimed for the section he had recommended. However, we found him very fixed in his preference for Fourteen and Twenty-two, and finally we accepted his arguments, and set out to make a more detailed survey of the land. The gully angled between the two quarters, taking scarce an acre off either of them. A jolly stream, brown with the grass of its banks, gurgled along its bed.

I knelt down to try the water; there was the taste of snow, but there was also the harder, sharper tone of spring water mingled with it.

"Runnin' water like that is worth a thousand dollars on any man's farm," Jake declared. "An' come up this way. Wait till I show you somethin'."

The "something" proved to be a widening in the valley, where was a considerable growth of small willows and poplars. "Fence posts and firewood," said Jake, "an' on railroad land, too, that won't be sold for years. You'll have 'em all cut down before then. That timber's worth another thousand or half that, anyway."

I thought of the great pine back on the old farm in Ontario, and the "timber" looked to me like gods and switches. None of it was tall enough to reach out of the little valley and show a green tip to the bald surface of the prairies. But we were not in Ontario now; we were in a land where even a three-inch tree was not to be despised.

"An' here's somethin' more," he said, setting an example for us by walking stealthily on his pudgy legs through the clumps of willows. At the other end of the wooded space we found a little pond opening out, and a score of wild ducks drowsing placidly on its smooth surface.

"An Englishman," Jake remarked, when we had turned back, "would take this farm fer the duck pond alone. They're the dangdest people ever was fer wantin' to kill somethin'. He don't care if his farm is all sand or wallows, as long as there's somethin' to shoot. The Englishman don't. But fer a Yankee it mus' be every acre wheat land. He don't care fer nothin but the long green." Jake paused as though to think over these national characteristics.

"Let's find a badger hole," he continued, and we had little trouble in locating one. "Now look at this. This hole goes down five, six, seven feet, maybe more, in the ground. Look what his nibs has kicked out. Fine, loamy, sandy soil, not too light an' not too sticky, all the way down. That goes plumb to kingdom come. Course, th' top is a little darker, on account o' the grass roots, but it's all soil. None o' yer down-east three inches o' muck an' a rock-bottom to that."

Jake took a fresh chew of tobacco and looked out over the greenish-brown prairie.

"I have it figgered out like this," he went on, "an' my figgers is right: this land is worth more than any gold mine between heil an' Whoopup. When you take the gold out o' a mine you ain't got nothin' left, but you can take gold out o' this mine next year an' the year after, an' the year after fer ever an' ever, an' there's still as much there as when you started—if you farm it right."

Our inspection satisfied us in every particular. Jake explained, as we already knew, that we would have to build separate shacks on the two quarters, to comply with the law about sleeping on the land claimed. "But you can build one stable in the gully for the live stock," he added; "the government don' care where they sleep, jus' so's the homesteader himself is sufficiently uncomfortible."

We smiled over his interpretation of regulations which, as we knew, were necessary to prevent the wholesale blankketing of the free lands by people who had no intention of living on them.

"Now we better pick a second an' a third choice, jus' in case someone slips in ahead o' us on this," said Jake, and we spent the afternoon driving about and making fresh locations. Much of the land was already taken up, Jake told us, and although there were as yet no signs of settlement we would see a great change by fall.

We camped on Fourteen that night, and Jack and I were filled with plans for our shacks and our stable. The shacks would be up on the prairie level, on opposite sides of the gully, in full view of each other, and about a hundred yards apart. The stable would be in the gully, close to the road allowance, sheltered from the winds, and convenient to water. The crossing of the stream was passable, but would stand improvement.

Early in the morning we started back, and after three full days in the democrat we found ourselves one evening swinging up the now strangely familiar streets of Regina. The raw prairie city of 1904 already almost seemed like home. We were like travelers returning from strange lands to scenes of old recollections. We had been away just seven days, but in that time we had swung far out into the universe, we had drunk of the air of God's new creation; we had been strangely conscious of the company of our souls.

In the morning we went with Jake to the land office. Fourteen and Twenty-two in the township where we had decided to locate were still open, and we had no difficulty in filing our claims. We returned to the stable with Jake.

"What's the damage?" Jack demanded.

Jake expectorated profusely, spread his feet, and scratched his head. "Seven times seven is forty-nine—fifty dollars fer locatin' makes ninety-nine; I guess she's ninety-nine, boys; gosh darn it, we might have made it a hundred."

We paid him the ninety-nine and Jack threw in another. "Well, make it an even hundred," he said. "Come out and see us when you get a chance—we may have a bite of fried oysters for you."

"Oh, I'll be along. I'll be along," said Jake. "I'll blow out there often."

We shook hands with Jake and turned away with a strange feeling of cutting ourselves adrift, while had not known how quickly an attachment may grow on the prairies.

CHAPTER IV

If we thought we had finished with Jake it was evidence that we still had much to learn about our guide's business qualities. Jake had a follow-up peculiarly his own, and that afternoon he came steaming into our presence as we sat in the bare lounge room of the hotel, making a list of necessities on the back of an envelope.

"I been chasin' you fellows all over hellangone," he announced, with a profuse expectoration to facilitate speech. "I got a fistful o' luck fer you. Chap down at the stables—trouble o' some kind of other—wants to sell his horses, as pretty a team o' boys as ever switched a tail in flytime, an' I can put you next."

"That's good of you," said Jack, "but we've just figured that we can't afford horses. It's a case of horses and no cow, or oxen and a cow, and the vote at the moment stands unanimous for milk to our porridge, even at the risk of our characters. They tell us that even a good man sweats when he drives oxen."

"That's wrong," Jake corrected. "A good man don' drive oxen. He may be good before he drives them, but not while he drives them, nor immejut afterward. It's agin human nature. I've seen profanity on some o' the ox trails o' this country so thick it lay jus' like a fog on the prairie. Oxen has started more fellows on the wrong road than any other critturs—cept women."

"Well, we're going to take a chance with both," was Jack's answer. "You don't happen to have a hard up friend who would part with a yoke of oxen, for a consideration, do you?"

Jake scratched his tousled hair meditatively. "Come to think o' it, I believe I do," he said at length. "I jus' recommender a chap who was talkin' o' sellin' his oxen t'other day. As sleek a yoke as ever switched a tail in flytime; gentle an' strong an' speedy as a scairt rabbit. I reckon I could get you a special price on 'em, pre-tendin' it was meself that was buyin'."

"And a cow," I ventured. "Have you a cow on your bargain list?"

"Jake has everything on his bargain list that we may happen to need," said Jack. "Everything from a cow to a cookstove. It's all right, Jake; we don't mind your little graft so long as you play the game half fairly, and see that we get at least fifty cents' worth on the dollar. Buying on our own judgment we would probably get less than that."

So it was arranged that Jake was to be our purchasing agent, with a sort of gentleman's understanding that he might cheat us a little in consideration of his services in preventing other people from cheating us a great deal. The arrangement, I believe, worked out to our advantage. Jake undoubtedly bought our supplies for less than we could have bought them, even after providing his secret commissions. Moreover, he knew what was essential and what was not, and he saved us valuable time.

When at last our outfit was complete it presented a picturesque and somewhat pathetic turnout. On our wagon we had built a temporary box of boards, and on this were piled our trunks and personal effects, a plow, a stove, food supplies, a tent, a crate with hens and another with a young pig, while over all roosted, if I may use the term, the two girls. The cow we tied behind, while Jack and I walked as a sort of flank guard on either side of the oxen. These two phlegmatic creatures rejoiced in the names of Buck and Bright, and stoically pursued their destiny at a pace of two and a half miles an hour. Their resignation in adversity was sublime; in fact, we soon found it impossible to invent any adversity to which they were not resigned.

With such an outfit our progress was much slower than it had been with Jake and his "flyin' nats," but it was an experience of unbounded freedom and delight. The days held bright and warm, as it was still too early for the May rains, the nights were cold and starry, with a tang of frost toward morning, the dawns were a riot of color, and the sunsets indescribable.

At night we pitched the tent and made down blankets for the girls, but Jack and I slept under the stars. We were roughing it, but every muscle in our young bodies was vibrating with the tense new life of the open. When the girls called us to breakfast of fried bacon and potatoes and steaming coffee and milk from our traveling dairy we were more happy and more hungry than anything we had ever known to be possible.

Race Across the Prairies.

And the girls! We saw them growing browner every day, but with their sunburn they seemed to take on a strange new charm and competence. They treated the whole experience as a high adventure, and after cramped hours on the top of "the ark" they would race like wild things across the prairies, their hair flying in the breeze, and a vagrant wind tossing the skirts about their shapely limbs.

They had taken the precaution to provide themselves with sunbonnets, but the prairie sun is an impetuous lover, and their cheeks and lips showed the mark of his caresses. He was a rival who did not pique my jealousy, for in his embrace I saw the woman Jean bursting forth from the bud of girlhood in a beauty that kept my blood a-tingle.

There was just one note that bothered me. It was sounded a day or two after we left Regina in some covert remark which Marjorie made about Jean's Mounted Policeman. It seemed that while Jack and I had been away and hunting the girls, too, had been doing a little prospecting. Regina was the headquarters of the mounted police, and the fine figures of these young officers of the plains with their scarlet tunics and trim gold-ribbonned riding breeches and clanking spurs have turned more heads than Jean's before and since. It seems the girls were walking along a business street when they saw a young policeman coming at a short distance, and they happened to stop to admire something in a window while he approached. He also stopped to admire, and Marjorie said something—which Jean would not have done—and a conversation started up, and the policeman seemed to prefer Jean, perhaps because she had not spoken first. At any rate he saw them safely home, and dallied over his responsibility and the gate post until they said they must go in. He called the next night and wanted to take them to a "show," but they would not go, at any rate, Jean would not go.

"But you went walking with him," Marjorie challenged.

"He asked you, too," said Jean, her pretty face coloring. "You started with us, and then went back."

"I saw how the land lay, or the wind blew, or whatever it was. I had nothing to do at home, but I knew I would be busier there than out walking with you and your policeman."

"Marjorie! How can you—"

"And he told her he would call on her after we were settled."

"He did no such thing! He asked him whether we were going to settle, and I told him I didn't know, and he said he hoped he would be patrolling there. He's going to be sent out from barracks soon, and he said it would be safer for me—for us—if someone were patrolling our district."

"Not for you, dear," said Marjorie, meaningly, and there was a little sting in her words which brought me into action.

"I believe you're jealous, Marjorie," I said, in tones intended to be severe.

"And aren't you?" she retorted. "You ought to be."

The truth is, I was. Jean had always belonged to me so absolutely that I had never thought of the possibility of a rival. Even now I did not think of such a thing seriously. It was true that there was no engagement between us, unless the word of a man of six and a woman of four can be taken as binding, but I looked on Jean as mine, nevertheless, and I resented the action of the mounted policeman in seeking her acquaintance. I resented, too, the fact that she had gone walking with him, and I told her so at the first opportunity.

It came that afternoon. Jean said she was tired riding, and got down to walk on my side of the wagon. We trudged along for some distance in silence save for my occasional words of rebuke and exhortation to the oxen.

"You're cross at me," she said at length.

"I'm not." Why I said that I can't imagine. I was, and wanted her to know it.

"I didn't mean to offend you," she went on. "Marjorie was just a little bit—spiteful."

"I know she was." I agreed. "But you shouldn't have gone walking with him."

"Why?"

"He was a stranger. You didn't even know his name."

"I do now. It's Harold Brook. Besides, in this country you don't have to know people's names. You just speak anyway."

"Oh, do you?" I said sarcastically. "So I see."

"Don't be cross," she coaxed. "See, I can beat you to that badger hole. One—two—three—"

She was off like the wind. For a moment I hesitated, then joined in the race. But she had the much start, and besides she was almost a match for me. She reached the little mound first, and as she turned she lowered a little from her course, and I happened to plunge into her. To save herself from falling she seized me about the neck, and her hair brushed against my face.

We walked back slowly, arm in arm, and I had a sense of being very much of a brute. Jean had wound me around her little finger.

There are certain thrills of accomplishment, certain epochs of development, which come only once in a lifetime. One of these is when a young man writes his first check, or first turns his key in his own door, or first sees his name on an office signboard. But the greatest is when he first looks upon land he can call his own. True, this land was not yet ours, but it was pledged to us if we carried out our part of a very simple agreement, and already we had a proprietary interest in it. We showed it to the girls with the pride of a mother displaying her first born. We were desperately anxious that our choice should be justified.

We waited for their verdict, but neither spoke. "Well, what do you think of it?" Jack asked at length.

"It looks all right," said Marjorie. "I suppose it is as good as any. But I don't see how you are going to tell it from other people's land. It's all alike."

"What do you say, Jean?"

But Jean was looking at the sunset, where the Master Artist was splashing pastels of bronze and copper against a background of silver and champagne. "Wonderful, wonderful!" she murmured.

"Fourteen is Frank's and Twenty-two is mine," Jack explained. "We'll pitch the tent for the girls here, and Frank may do as he likes, but I'm going to cross the gully and sleep tonight under my own vine and fig tree, so to speak. My six months' residence begins tonight."

"Fig tree!" Marjorie exclaimed. "The trees around here are just about high enough to tickle your ear—when you're lying down."

"You haven't seen the trees yet," said Jack, knowingly. "Now, let's pitch camp."

We dragged the tent close to the brow of the gully and pitched it on the spot where we had planned that my shack should be. We also unloaded part of our equipment so that we could make use of it in the housekeeping operations. It was with great zest that we carried our cookstove to the door of the tent and strung up two or three lengths of pipe. In a few minutes Jack appeared from somewhere with an armful of wood, and as the darkness settled down we gathered about a fire on our own farms, for the first time in our lives.

And so we chattered on, saying nothing of moment, but feeling the great joy of possession welling in our hearts. It was a day and a night to be lived over many a time in memory. For the first time in our lives we were drinking of the wells of possession—the enchanted streams which draw men and women into the wilderness to live and die on the outposts of civilization.

We had finished supper, and the gray gloom of twilight was crowding slowly up from the east when a sharp, whistling rustle almost above us brought the girls to their feet with a start.

"What was that?" Jean exclaimed. "It was almost like a bullet."

"Nay, nay," said Jack, indulging in a very sorry joke. "It is a duckler."

"A duckler? What duckler?"

"That, my dear sister, was the whistle from the wing of a wild duck, darting into the darkness at a couple of hundred miles an hour. He had just got his eye on you."

"More likely on the gun," said Jean, for we had included a cheap shotgun among the articles considered indispensable. "Wait until Frank gets after him."

I was greatly flattered by Jean's wholly unwarranted confidence in my marksmanship and eager to justify it at the earliest moment.

"No time like the present," said I, picking up the gun and filling my pocket with cartridges. "Besides, we have a surprise to show you."

So we started out in the gathering darkness, I going first as became the bearer of the gun, Jean at my heels, Jack and Marjorie a little in the rear. Down the steep edge of the gully we worked, and then along by the margin of the brown snow water which rippled happily over beds of bending grass.

At a short distance we came to the spot where the valley broadened out and the little grove of trees had found its place of shelter from Chinook winds in winter and prairie fires in spring and fall. The air was full of the sweet scent of bursting willow buds and balm-o'-Gilead, and as we picked our steps as noiselessly as we could the slightly stirring limbs above us wrought their dark tracery against the blue and starry heaven.

"Oh, Frank! You never told me of this! How wonderful!"

"Wait until you see the pond," I whispered, as one who keeps the best to the last. "We did not select Fourteen and Twenty-two without a reason."

There was no path between the slim, close-growing trunks of poplar and balm, and we had to make progress as best we could. Jack and Marjorie had fallen considerably behind.

Then, suddenly, the still waters of the pond burst upon our view and at the same moment, as though the very heavens conspired to set the stage to the best advantage, a blood-red moon sent its first pinion of light sweeping down from the northeast and splashing burnt-orange and ochre across the slightly ruffled surface of the pond. We stood for a time as mortals transfixed, watching the great red globe drawing swiftly into the blue above, until its light painted Jean's face and mine. In the moonlight her fine features were wonderful, irresistible.

We were brought to earth by a flutter and splashing in the water. Two ducks, sweeping swiftly down out of the darkness, alighted not a dozen yards in front of us, and directly in the line of light. I drew my gun to my shoulder, and even as I did so their murmured grumblings, sibilant almost as the lisp of water on a gravelly shore, came to our ears, and they began to swim slowly about in graceful little circles. There was even a motion about the head of the male, as he brought it close to that of his mate, that was surely nothing short of a caress.

"Don't, Frank, don't; you mustn't!" Jean exclaimed suddenly.

Her arms darted out in front of me, seized the barrel of the gun and drew it swiftly to one side. I had been taking a most deliberate aim, to justify the high opinion already referred to, but at Jean's sudden interference I pressed the trigger, or, as I always claimed, it pulled itself against my finger, and went off. There was a loud report, and the sound of shot harmlessly lashing the water.

"Did you get him—did you get him?" shouted Marjorie and Jack, rushing down upon us.

"No, I didn't get him," I explained. "I didn't even try to get him. I just wanted to see how far the gun would carry."

"I wouldn't let him," said Jean. "It would have been a just a horrible thing to shoot one of those poor creatures, the very first night we were here! How beautiful they were, and how—how loving!" She said the last word with a bashful, failing inflection that was wonderful to hear.

"It's much more horrible to have no wild duck—duckler I mean—for tomorrow's dinner," said Jack.

"And those cartridges cost over so much; what is it?—three or four cents each," Marjorie remonstrated. "Well, let's go back."

We returned to our camp and started to make ready for the night. But Jack, true to his promise, gathered up his blankets, waded the cold stream, and slept under the stars of Twenty-two. We had begun our "period of residence."

Setting up housekeeping under these conditions would seem to be the wildest sort of an adventure. What next?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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