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LOCKWOOD'S CHOICE.

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Francis Lockwood was disappointed with the old country before he had spent a month in England. He had forgotten so much, and the longed for leisure palled upon him. He came of a stubborn, and somewhat reckless, British stock, and a love of the soil he sprang from was born in him as well as certain less desirable instincts, but eight years' grim struggle on the wide plains of the West had set their stamp on him. Now he could count his cattle and horses by the hundred head, and his younger son's portion lay trebled in a Canadian bank. Still, so far his holiday had been a failure, and he remembered how when he waited in high spirits in a Western station for the Atlantic express his shrewd grey-haired partner of Caledonian extraction said:

"Idleness is not for such as ye, and ye'll be wearying for the plains before three months are over. Ye have given your best to the prairie, and the prairie has prospered ye—but choose weel, Frank, if ye bring a wife back with ye."

The partner was right, for the things the bronzed rancher had dreamed of in the scorching dust of alkali and stinging winter drifts lost their attractiveness now he could touch and handle them, while he was uneasily conscious that a certain taint in his blood held in check by the life of effort under the open heaven was manifesting its presence. So one morning he thrust aside the whisky and soda untasted in a London club.

"I've had enough of this and wi'l go up and see Harry's new place in the North," he said to a relative. "Unlimited loating isn't good for me, and there'll be fresh air up there among the fells any way."

He went, taking with him a trout rod, rook rifle, and sundry garments packed in a big fishing creel, for he had acquired primitive ideas on the subject of necessaries in the West, and astonished the worthy master of a little station in the North Country by insisting on carrying them fifteen miles to his brother's house. Henry Lockwood, the stockbroker, had rented sporting rights and a lodge where he entertained company floaters, and others, at certain seasons.

"There's a train from the junction this afternoon, and it's only four miles from the station to the lodge. You can't never walk there with these things," said the railway official; and Lockwood answered: "I'm not quite a cripple, nor as feeble as I look. A hundred miles isn't a long walk in my country."

Then the station master said solemnly: "Well, may I be danged!" as he watched the stalwart Colonial brush through the heather up the face of a hill.

It was a fortnight later when the latter sat with his brother one evening outside the lodge. There was a table between them with glasses upon it, and a woman's voice singing an Italian love song came out with the soft light of shaded candles through an open French window. It was a good voice, and Francis listened dreamily as he looked down on one of the fairest prospects in England. Great peaks rose blackly solemn against the last glimmer of afterglow, white mists filled the valley, and a tarn reflected the first starlight in a hollow below, for the hush of a summer nightfall lay heavy upon the land. The brothers were alike, and yet unlike, Henry, pale and portly, Francis, hard and lean and brown, and the former glancing at the rancher through the blue cigar smoke, said:—

"Made up your mind yet, Frank? No! —well isn't it time you did? That cattle raising business is interesting as an experience, but you can't contemplate remaining what your Western friends entitle a 'cow puncher' all the rest of your life. Sell it off, and join me; I could do with a little more capital, and there's profit enough for two. Then you could marry Eveline, and, when old Croskie dies, raise prize pigs or bullocks over here if you wantel to. It's an open secret that you won't get a penny of his money otherwise."

"Aren't you taking too much for granted?" asked Francis. "Suppose for instance Eveline wouldn't marry me?" and the stock-broker's eyes twinkled as he answered, "Then she's a much less shrewd young lady than she's supposed to be. Most men would call her handsome, and you were sweethearts once, you know. Reasonably well off, accomplished—and what more do you want?"

Francis did not answer. Indeed, he hardly knew, but by a trick of fancy his thoughts wandered to the afternoon he first tramped across the moorland into the valley. In one place a broad riband of amber-tinted water glanced athwart a shallow, and he lay watching it froth among moss-flecked boulders until there was a clatter of hoofs on shingle and he saw a slight but very shapely figure swaying on the back of a pony which objected to the ford. Francis, who rose, and after a struggle led the beast through, noticed in doing so that the fair rider's eyes were clear and honest, as well as blue. They smiled upon him bewitchingly, and the little hand that rested on the bridle was well formed if the wrist was red. He decided it was the surroundings which had impressed him, the tarn sleeping lineless in the shadow of the crag, blue peaks, and song of sliding water, but now it seemed there was more in the picture they formed a background for—the winsome, halfshy face of his companion.

The music ceased, and Francis felt guilty when the singer greeted them as she moved across the terrace. Eveline was certainly handsome, but not in the least shy. She was also tall and dark, and carried herself in a manner that suggested an imperious disposition.

"Well?" repeated Henry. "What more could any man desire?" But Francis avoided the question. He had dwelt among a fearless people who, in spite of sundry eccentricities, cherished a respect for womanhood, and he hardly considered it becoming. So he replied to the former query.

"Your ways might not suit me, or your friends understand my own, and I should be longing for the wind and sun. Besides, you know what there is in all of us—and out there we drink green tea. I've got scared of myself lately, and know that while I'm safe working your kind of life wouldn't be good for me. It wouldn't be a fair deal to Eveline, you see!"

Henry Lockwood laughed. "There's a strain of the blood in Eveline, and she knows the Lockwood ways." "Why all this delicacy? Wine and horses and gambling have done for a good many of us, but if one must go to the devil it's judicious to get his highest price. But here's Maud coming to talk to you. Hadn't you better brace yourself?"

There was wild blood in both of them but it had hitherto driven Francis into bold enterprise instead of reckless living and with a sharp snapping the glass splintered under his hand. "A very neat trick!" said Henry. "Not many men in the county could accomplish it, and I dare say you are right, but they raise extravagant devils where you come from!"

Mrs Lockwood seated herself beside Francis and chatted charmingly. It was all done very gracefully, but he understood that in her opinion his distant kinswoman with an eye to certain property might take him into the bargain and Francis suffered from an unpleasant sense of constraint in Eveline's presence during the rest of the evening, which was quite unnecessary. Next morning he casually enquired concerning the antecedents of Miss Beatrice Ainslie, the lady of the ford, and the answer pleased him.

"She's old Fawcett's niece," it ran. "Ainslie was ambitious and brought up his daughters well, while when he died ruined by experimenting on his land, Fawcett took the two girls in. They're out at five winter and summer, and as clever at butter-making and poultry as they're pretty."

Francis remembered that Fawcett, who wrested a bare living from a moorland farm, had asked him to inspect his cattle, and that in his adopted country those who combined clear-sighted enterprise with industrial skill formed the aristocracy. So he rode over to Fawcett's, found he had much more in common with the shrewd North Country farmer than the city speculators who formed his brother's guests, and returned —many times. It was pleasant to sit in the cool stone-flagged summer room looking down upon the moor and discuss the subjects he best understood, especially when Beatrice and her sister, sunny-faced and dainty in garments wrought by their own fingers, joined them. Francis said all this was soothing, and Henry, when he heard of the visits, described him as a perverse idiot.

At last one afternoon when dingy thunder clouds rolling down from the high peaks darkened all the moor, Francis found only Miss Jenny Ainslie at the farm, and that damsel said with a mischievous smile:—

"I am alone, but mother will come in presently. She enjoys talking to you. But—she rode out early this morning over the pass to town."

Mrs Ainslie came in, and, as she enjoyed talking to anybody, Lockwood spent an unpleasant half-hour listening abstractedly and worrying about the weather before he could escape, while when Jenny Ainslie watched him swing with hurried strides across the moor she smiled again, significantly. There had been abundant rain that season, and when Francis floundered through the ford the peat-stained water frothed high above his knee. Then the rough track that wound through a breadth of bog trembled under his feet, and the wild cotton tufts showed up lividly against the deepening gloom. His watch told him it was barely six o'clock, but the light was fading, and a scarred hillside vanished suddenly into a haze of rain. Then there was a roll of thunder, blue fire streaked the bog, and while long reverberations filled all the hollows of the hills, the rain came down in solid rods bewildering his vision.

Still, all this was nothing to the sea of sulphureous flame which floods the western prairie, and he pressed on the faster, feeling with his feet for solid ground until when he breasted up a hillside the track became a river, and he was alike deafened and partly blinded. There was a roar of gravel sliding down steep screes, the crash of a boulder loosed from the heights above, and heather slope and bog were blotted out by thrashing rain amid great salvoes of celestial artillery. Lockwood, however, had passed that way before, and with the instincts of one used to pathless wastes climbed to the pass, where a faint cry reached him through the deluge, and he found Beatrice drenched and shivering struggling with a frightened pony in the partial shelter of a crag. The beast had been purchased from the smoother levels of Lancashire. She stretched out her hands appealingly, saying, "I am so glad you came. I can hardly hold the pony, and he has twice tried to bolt with me."

There was no time for ceremony, and Lockwood lifted her into the saddle as he answered, "I came to look for you, and you will be safe with me. We must hurry before the floods come down."

The beast knew its master, but as they turned homewards together, down over the slippery out-crop and across the quaking bog, speech was impossible. The deluge beat into their faces, and thunder rolled in great vibrations from peak to peak above. Lockwood was glad and sorry when they reached the ford, for though the journey was nearly done all sign of guiding boulder and the islet in the centre had gone. There was only a mad rush of dark brown water, and, on the further side, a narrow breadth of moorland melting into thick obscurity.

"It looks nasty," he said. "I would not let you cross but that it would be almost impossible to find a way back to shelter through the pass. But if you will sit still and trust me there can't be much real danger."

"I can trust you," said Beatrice, "implicitly."