The REMITTANCE MAN: A TALE OF A PRODIGAL

W.A. Fraser

Table of Contents

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PART I

DEAN RUTHVEN, living in England, had a son, George. This would have been a very ordinary state of affairs in the ordinary course of events; but that George Ruthven was the son of a dean, or of any other great church dignitary, was most certainly a rather unbelievable fact. His life was about as uncanonized an affair as one of the way of Piccadilly civilization, and maintained by parental remittances.

Of course, George was consigned to some one—he and his ten thousand pounds that was to start him in cattle ranching; but that didn't matter—nothing matters in the West, for things must work out their own salvation there. Besides, what mattered it how the money was spent? It would go anyway: remittance men weren't expected to make money—they were there to spend it; sent by a Providence which answered the prayers of the men in waiting, the Old−timers.

So when the son of the Dean landed in Cargelly he was welcomed as a part of the manna shower, made free of the club, and colloquially branded the "Padre."

There was no Board of Trade in Cargelly—just a billiard table at the club. And the Padre's affairs were arranged as the affairs of the other remittance men had been, by the chiefs, sitting in solemn conclave about this substitute for a council board.

"A shoemaker should stick to his last," was a patent philosophy; the Padre herding cattle was a grotesque conception. What good would it do—the cattle would die of anthrax, or some other infernal thing that was always bothering, and the golden sovereigns he had brought would somehow be lost out on the dismal plain. It was the stupid calculation of a man sitting in London, this idea of Padre's proper sphere. What he knew all about was horses and racing—there was no doubt about that; he was jolly well full of the thing.

Of course, he would have to have a ranch and a shack; but that was easy: so many square miles of air, bottomed by a short−grassed plain. It didn't even have to be surveyed; it ran from Smythe's Ranch to Dick's Coulee—ambiguous, but wholly satisfactory for all requirements.

Then a shack was thrown together; the ark, battering−rammed into a square building, would have been an artistic villa by comparison.

The selection of the race−horses required more care. Several of the chaps had horses to sell; incidentally every racing man has a horse or two waiting for a buyer more eager than wise. However, in the end the Padre was fairly well stocked with horses.

Sport of Kings! but the gods had been kind to the dwellers in the wilderness when Dean Ruthven had been hypnotized into sending George the Wayward to the tents of Shem.

And while the direct offerings contributed in London went to the heathen in Africa and divers other places, the indirect, that was the Dean's by right of arrangement, helped clothe the heathen in Cargelly and educate his tenderfoot son in a knowledge of men's ways.

Of course, ten thousand pounds requires some accounting for if it be expended, and the Padre sent home a fairy tale that would have gained him a prize in any literary competition. The rolling prairie was handled with conventional skill; the invigorating atmosphere was treated artistically; the future of the cattle trade was culled from government blue books. His own ranch, "The Deanery," was touched upon with diplomatic modesty; it would not do for him to boast of his success at this early stage, he stated, but he had most assuredly stumbled upon a real good thing. He wrote this last statement quite inadvertently, for the good thing so prominent in his mind was Whirlwind, a Montana−bred four−year−old mare; but he allowed the statement to stand.

The Dean was delighted when he received this epistle; the Padre had stated at the club that his father would be.

The career of a racing man is always checkered, and the Padre had his ups and downs—a whole raft of downs.

But there was no doubt about his popularity, for he had just the sunniest nature that a man could possibly have. His friends did not despoil him through any sense of meanness; they simply felt that remittance money had been predestined for the good of the greatest number. Socialistic faith condoned all their acts of piracy.

Encouraged by his first literary effort, George drew such Utopian pen−pictures of his ranch life that the Dean began to long for a sight of the paradise which contained his son.

As the ten thousand pounds dwindled into as many pence the Padre waxed more eloquent; and in the end

something akin to a falling of the heavens occurred.

That night the Padre strode into the "Ranchers' Club" with the hoarfrost of an approaching domestic storm thick upon him.

"What do you suppose is up, you fellows?" he gasped.

"Not Whirlwind! Not gone wrong, has she?" queried one excitedly.

"Bah!" ejaculated the Padre; "do you think I'd make a fuss about that?"

"Let a man guess," commanded Major Lance. "Sunflower has gone back on the Padre." Sunflower was a girl—also in the story.

"Don't chaff," pleaded the Padre, petulantly. "This is serious business. The Guv'nor is coming out—by Jove!"

A silence, an unhealthy quiet, settled over the Council.

"He'll be here on the twenty−first," continued George, despondently.

"Thunder! the race meet is on the twenty−ninth."

"That's just it," lamented the Padre.

Whirlwind must start; if she didn't, the Winnipeg horse would clean them out.

The Padre thought ruefully of his glamourous account of the cattle ranch and the large herd of many cattle. Besides, the Dean was deuced inquisitive; that was his business, to investigate and lay bare the truth.

"I say, you fellows," cried the Padre, "I haven't got a hoof—not a split hoof, out at 'The Deanery.' What am I to do?"

The others had been thinking only of Whirlwind; this was a new problem.

"You surprise me," said the Major. "Will the Dean expect to see cattle on your ranch?" he queried, with solicitous sarcasm.

"Don't be inquisitive!" interrupted one. "Of course he will. What do you suppose he is coming here for—to play whist?"

The Padre stroked his mustache and looked grateful.

"Who's got any cattle?" queried the Major. "Here, Lancaster, you have."

"Oh, they're all mixed up with everybody else's on the range."

"All the better," retorted the Major. "Some of you fellows must round up a tidy bunch of a couple of hundred, and run them out to 'The Deanery' for Ruthven. His Guv'nor is coming out here to see something, and we can't give the country a black eye."

"Gad! I should say not," chipped in the owner of Pot Luck Ranch. "He'd go back and stop all emigration; then what would become of you chaps with no remittance Johnnies to batten off?"

"By Jove! You fellows are a good lot," declared the Padre; "that's a weight off my mind. I've been in no end of a blue funk ever since I got the pater's letter. About Whirlwind——"

"Yes, what about the mare?" they all cried in simultaneous anxiety.

"Well, the Guv'nor's death on gee−gees."

"Strange," muttered the Major, sarcastically.

"Don't be a flippant goat," snapped Ruthven. "He hates race−horses worse than—than——"

"Than the man in opposition," volunteered Pot Luck.

"Exactly—if possible," concurred George.

"Cable him you're dead, Padre," suggested a big giant from whose broad shoulders hung a silk−worked buckskin coat.

"That wouldn't stop him," said the Padre; "nothing will stop him—you don't know the Guv'nor, you fellows. When he gets an idea in his head you've simply got to sit tight and dodge the idea—that's all; I know him."

"Coming on the twenty−first," mused the Major; "and the races are on the twenty−ninth—a whole week; doubt if he'll stay that long."

"Hope not," ejaculated the son. "It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't have to ride the measly beast myself; she doesn't gallop well for anyone else. How the deuce am I to work her, with the Guv'nor about?"

"By George!" exclaimed Pot Luck; "if the Dean stays we must get Sunflower to help us out; she's clever—there's no doubt about that—just confide the whole business to her, and she'll keep him out of the way."

Then for days the Council in their spare moments prepared for the advent of Dean Ruthven. The Padre's ranch was stocked with cattle; the shack knocked into some sort of shape; empty bottles thrown into a little coulee; a

permanent staff of two servants put on; three or four cow−punchers hired to patrol the range; and an evanescent air of prosperity sprayed over the place.

All these details were arranged by the Council; the Padre was told off to the training of Whirlwind and the other equine marvels in his racing string.

The Sunflower, so named because she was just like one of the slender, bright, happy, delicate−leaved sunflowers of the prairie, would most certainly have done a great deal more than this for the Padre, because—because—well, never mind. Love is a compelling master. She was of good family, and lived with her brother, Colonel Sloan, who was Indian Agent on the Blood Reserve. The Colonel was not of the Council, and had an idea that his sister might do much better than marry George Ruthven.

As arranged in the calendar, the twenty−first came around in its proper place, and, according to a telegram received, the Dean would arrive by train that night, or, really, next morning, at two o'clock.

The Council passed a resolution, unanimously, that they would act as a bodyguard to the Padre upon the arrival of his father. The late hour was no bar to this, for, as a rule, Cargelly went to bed very early—in the morning.

Divers games of more or less scientific interest helped while away the time, and the Club steward had received orders to pass the word in time for them to reach the station before the arrival of Dean Ruthven's train.

George was arrayed in orthodox, more than orthodox, ranch costume. Beginning at the bottom, his feet were tight cramped in narrow, high−heeled, Mexican−spurred riding boots; brown leather chapps, long−fringed up the sides, spread their wide expanse from boot to hip; a belt, wide as a surcingle, acted as a conjunction between these and a flannel shirt, wide open on his sun−browned throat; buckskin coat, wide−brimmed cowboy hat, and a general air of serious business completed the disguise.

All the fellows approved of the get−up. It was the usual antithesis to Regent Street regalia; all the remittance men went in for it when they were young in their Western novitiate.

"It will be worth a thousand pounds to you, at least," the Major said.

"It will gladden your parent's heart," declared Pot Luck; "damned if you don't look as funny as Buffalo Bill."

Ruthven stalked across the hardwood floor of the billiard room proudly; his narrow−heeled boots jingled their old spurs until they clanked a victorious pæan. Everybody looked pleased.

"Touch him for two thousand guineas," hazarded Drake, who was in from his ranch at Stand Off; "hanged if I ever saw a better set−up cowpuncher than you are, Padre."

"Wish the Sunflower could see him now," muttered Pot Luck; "she'd giv him his congè."

"Train's on time, gentlemen," said the steward, at the billiard−room door; "she'll be here in five minutes."

As the Council trooped out the steward told the second steward that he "reckoned as 'ow the Goov'nor of the Territories was coming up from Regina. There'll be Gimmy−'ell to pay, too, if it's 'im, for 'e's a corker—an all−night bird." He didn't know it was a dean coming all the way from London to see his reformed son.

Ruthven walked up and down the station platform with less assurance than he had in the club billiard room. "I'll be in a bally hat," he confided to the Major, "if the Guv'nor finds out anything; and he's got eyes like a fluorescent lamp. At home he spoiled one of the best coups any man ever had, and said he was glad of it, too, though it broke me."

The blare eye of the express swayed drunkenly around a curve; giant wheels crunched from steel rails an unofficial announcement of Dean Ruthven's arrival. It startled the Padre—it was like a premonition of evil. A heavy−eyed porter struggled from the sleeper, dark, bulging objects clinging to him at every angle; behind came a slim, stoop−shouldered man in a heavy ulster.

"That's the Guv'nor," murmured Ruthven and, striding forward, took cheery possession of the Dean. It was an eye−opener to the ecclesiastical traveller, this reception of much multitude: also what a whole−souled grip these Westerners of stalwart frame were so prodigal of. They were introduced en masse—for the Western night wind was bleak—as George's fellow−ranchers.

Of course most of them really were ranchers of sorts; and almost every one had a brand—also of sorts. However, Dean Ruthven and his son marched at the head of a goodly company to the hotel. There, in the warm light, the Council were introduced individually, and pressed upon the pleased Dean a whole−souled invitation to spend a week or more at every ranch.

My! but the Dean was proud of his son. He attributed the inspiration that had induced him to send George to

Cargelly to the very highest authority. He told the Padre this in a moist voice he was so sure of it that Ruthven said not a word about Whirlwind or any other dispensation of his own arranging.

After his father had retired Ruthven joined the Council at their club, and the plan of campaign was more definitely traced on the map.

"We've omitted something," said the Major. "You've got three cow−punchers, Padre, but you'll need an overseer; it quite slipped my memory. They're great on the overseer business in the old land; I know them. One of you fellows will have to volunteer—it adds dignity to the profession."

Drake said he'd go, for he wasn't returning to Stand Off till after the Meet, anyway.

Next day the Dean, young Ruthven, and the newly evolved overseer drove out to "The Deanery," ten miles south. The Western air, made tonic by ozone which it had picked up in the Rockies, plain to view not fifty miles away, tingled the nerves of the London churchman and sweet−breathed his heart until the short−grassed prairie, flower−studded and bright sky−topped, full of its great measure of boundless rest and untortured calm, almost blotted out all other desirable places from the face of the earth. No wonder his son had reformed; in such surroundings a man must become a child of Nature, a simple doer of good deeds—become filled with a desire to benefit his fellow−men. He would take care that friends of his at home, two friends in particular, who also had sons of unblest restlessness, should know of this safe haven for the wayward craft.

Sitting beside his stalwart boy, he of the divers race−horses, the Dean thought these beautiful thoughts, and made a mental calculation that, speaking of sordid things, he would spare another five thousand pounds if his son's ranching business seemed to require it. By a remarkable telepathic coincidence, George the Padre was at that very moment wondering how much he might induce his father to advance. He was actually in somewhat of a financial hole; unless he managed to win the Ranchers' Cup at the forthcoming Meet, the hole would grow so deep that he would probably come out in China or some other place.

The prairie road, builded by nothing but the wheels that had fashioned its course, was as smooth as a boulevard, so they were at the ranch in less than two hours. The shack was not like anything the Dean had ever seen in England. Once he had seen a couple of goods carriages that had suffered in a run−off, and, somehow or other, this memory came back to him at sight of his son's residence. He had brought a bag of clothes, meaning to stay several days—but he didn't.

Ruthven and the overseer would ride their horses to where the herd was out on the range, and the Dean would drive the buckboard in which they had come. And there were cattle right enough—cattle all over the range, for the Council had done its work with great executive ability and indiscriminate selection. Probably no rancher had ever owned such a variety of brands; if the cattle could have been stood on end, one on top of the other, they would have constituted a fair obelisk, with a charming diversity of hieroglyphics. The Council had either forgotten all about this matter of brands, or trusted to the churchman's ignorance of mundane affairs.

The Dean was delighted; it was like handling the gold from a mine in which he had shares.

George and the overseer rode out to drive up the steers so that the Dean might sit in his buckboard and review them, much as a general has soldiers file past.

"There goes the Toreador's Delight," cried the man from Stand Off to George, as they galloped, pointing to a big short−horn bull. "Where in the name of the Chinook did he come from?"

"He belongs to the Gridiron Ranch," answered the Padre; "though personally he thinks he owns the whole prairie himself, for he's got a beastly temper. I hope he doesn't take umbrage at the Guv'nor's presence, and raid the buckboard."

"He won't bother him so long as he's in the buckboard; I shouldn't like to meet him afoot though. Any of them are bad enough when a man's set afoot; but this brute is worse than a Sioux Indian."

"Gad!" laughed George; "the fellows have rounded up every hoof within a hundred miles, I believe. I'm afraid they've overdone it. Instead of parting, the Guv'nor will want a dividend."

As George and his cowboys hustled up the laggard animals, Toreador's Delight sauntered nonchalantly up to where the Dean sat in his trap. As Drake had said, if Dean Ruthven had stuck to his ship the al fresco bull fight that presently matured would not have materialized; but the Dean was as inquisitive as an old hen, and, like the bait of an evil fate, on the bull's side was a diabolical−looking brand. It was the huge Gridiron of the Gridiron Ranch. More than that it was semi−raw, for they had lately acquired Toreador and thrown their brand on him. "A frightfully cruel thing," mused the Dean; "poor brute!"

Through his humane mind, also meddlesome, flashed divers schemes for marking cattle, quite superior to this barbarous method. "Poor old chap!" he murmured. The bull was eying him with a plaintive, hurt expression, that fairly went to the old man's heart. Swarms of fiendish flies, tormenting the cattle in a general way, assailed this tender brand−mark on the bull with fierce rivalry.

"It's a shame—poor old chap!" ejaculated the Dean, putting the reins down, picking up his umbrella, and descending from his chariot. Toreador's Delight eyed this departure with eager wistfulness; at least the old man thought so.

"Soh, bossy," called the Dean, in a soothing voice, as he walked over to old Toreador. The bull backed up a little; a man on foot was something new to him—a man on foot in a long, black coat and a high white collar was something utterly new. A horseman was part of the range—he could understand that; but this new something coming straight for him brought a light in his eye that Dean Ruthven should have been more familiar with than he was.

"Soh, bossy! don't be frightened—I won't hurt you," he assured the bull, edging around to drive the flies from his tender side.

Toreador answered nothing; he was simply waiting for the attack to begin—he was ready.

There! with a deft side−step and a brush of the umbrella the Dean had put the wicked torturing flies to flight.

As the brass−ringed end of the umbrella touched the seared bars on Toreador's side he gave a bellow of outraged surprise. That was where the attack was to be made, eh? With lowered head, in which fairly blazed two lurid, red−streaked eyes, he whisked about, and steadied himself for a charge.

Even as the flies had fled, so fled the Dean; he departed with extreme velocity. Light of frame and nimble of foot, he saved himself from the first rush, and made for the buckboard. Also did Toreador. It seemed something substantial to get at, this part of the thing that had stung him in the side.

As Dean Ruthven skipped behind the wheels the bull crashed into it; the horse, surmising that there was trouble in the air, diligently pattered over the plain, leaving one of the hind wheels strung on Toreador's horns. The Dean had thrown all his ecclesiastical dignity to the winds—even his coat, and was busily heading for the much−despised shack.

Toreador gathered up the coat with a frantic jab, and it nestled down over the spokes of the wheel he was carrying.

Fortunately for the humane parson his son had seen from a distance his attempt on the friendship of the bull. "My God—Drake!" he exclaimed, "the Guv'nor's afoot! Old Toreador will pin him sure as a gun!"

"Of all the stupid tricks—gallop, man!"

With quirt and spur the two lashed their broncos into a frenzy of speed. The prairie swirled dizzily under the reaching hoofs of their straining steeds. Would they be in time? The crash of the buckboard startled a muffled cry from George as he drove cruel, cutting rowels up his bronco's flank. Would he be in time?

On they galloped, neck and neck, throwing loose their lariats as they leaned far forward and coaxed their broncos to give the last ounce of speed that was in their strong limbs. Even the horses knew! How they galloped! The racing seat of young Ruthven helped his mount, and he drew away from the man from Stand Off.

When Toreador checked for an instant at the black coat, the horsemen were not a hundred yards away. The Dean was fleeing for his life. Now behind him thundered the maddened bull; fifty yards! thirty! twenty! What an interminable age it took to cut down the brute's lead.

Now Ruthven's bronco had his nose on Toreador's quarter, galloping as though he knew a life was at stake. His rider raised his right arm and swung the lasso. Would it go true? Would it hold? The bull's horns were low as he galloped—would the rope miss? If it did, by a hair's breadth, the Dean, who was almost under the huge nose, would surely be killed.

"Good boy!" shrieked Drake, as the lariat sang in its tense strength and the noose slipped tight and strong over Toreador's horns. "Swish!" went the other rope; and the two broncos, thrown on their haunches, fairly skidded over the smooth grass plain, carried by the impetuous rush of the huge bull.

But Toreador was stopped; and the Dean, with blanched face, tumbled in a heap, twenty feet off.

"You're not hurt, Guv'nor?" called the son, as he and Drake, sitting well back in their saddles, held the snorting Toreador tight−lashed in subjection.

"No, thank Providence!—and you also, boy; just shaken up a bit—that's all."

"Well, you'd better walk on to the shack, if you can manage it, and we'll give this brute a run that'll cure him for a day or two."

It was most decidedly a close shave; it also most effectually cured the Dean of any lurking desire to spend a few days in the seclusion of a quiet ranch.

"Your father will want to leave soon, sure, after this," confided Drake.

"By Jove! we were just in time," muttered the Padre.

After the Toreador had been galloped, quirt−lashed and bronco−hustled until his tongue lolled like a wet rag, the two horsemen cantered to the shack. The Dean had had enough inspection for one day; also he was too much battered about to sit a saddle to Cargelly; and, as has been said, Toreador had thrown the buckboard slightly out of gear.

If the churchman had been proud of his son before over the huge herd of borrowed cattle, he now fairly worshipped him because of his manly rescue. He dwelt at great length upon the hard life his dear boy must be leading—of course this was quite true, literally, but the Dean meant a totally different hard life—a hard life of exposure, riding the ranges, roping cattle, and all the rest of it.

But the Padre had not picked up the roping business as a working exercise; he had taken to it as part of the racing game, so that he might compete in the annual sport.

Next morning they jogged back to Cargelly. The Padre was wondering whether his father would decide to leave that night or next day. The Dean set his mind at rest on this point by observing: "George, at first I meant to spend but a couple of days with you, but—but—well, never mind—you'll be pleased to know that I have changed my mind——"

"He's going to−night," thought the Padre.

"I shall stop at least a week—I can manage it," and the Dean laid a hand tenderly on his son's arm.

The Padre groaned inwardly.

That night, after the Dean had gone to bed, the Council took up all these many matters, and discussed them diplomatically. The saving of the old gentleman's life would, of course, bring funds to the Padre; also the stocking of the ranch had been most successfully managed. If it weren't for the race meeting there could be no harm in the Dean's staying with them; but how in the world were they to keep him out of the way long enough to try Whirlwind with the new horse, Gray Bird, that Ruthven had just got up from Montana? In fact, what were they to do with him on race day itself?

"We could manage the trial," said Major Lance.

"But I've got to be there myself," pleaded the Padre, "and I can't leave the Guv'nor."

"Do any of you fellows know a church—say ten or twenty miles out?" queried the Major.

"There's one at Bow River Crossing," answered Drake.

"That'll do," declared the officer; "you can work it. Get the clergyman there to invite the Dean to some sort of a tea−fight—read a lecture to young men on the evils of amateur sport, or something of that sort."

"What about me?" broke in the Padre.

"You won't have to go," retorted Lance; "one of the fellows will slip out in the morning and start a fire in the grass on your ranch and gallop back in time to nail you for that business—see?"

"And have the trial that day?" queried Pot Luck.

"Yes."

"Jupiter! but who'll attend the lecture?" asked Drake of Stand Off. "I want to see the trial."

"So you may, Dick," assured the Major; "but the other fellows from the Crossing needn't bother."

It was a brilliant idea, worthy of the Council. It was arranged Thursday night. Friday and also Saturday the Dean clung to his son with appalling persistence; where the Padre went his father went; to the club—everywhere.

A gloom settled down over the Council; billiards, even, were a thing of the past. The cry "Here they come!" rang through the ranchers' retreat at least a dozen times a day. Magazines, and papers, and books, that heretofore had only served as ornament, were constantly lying at everybody's elbow. The Dean thought them the most studious lot of men he had ever met; they were always reading.

Friday afternoon the Dean said he would have a nap at the hotel. George hurried down to the club, and the Council were soon deep in an intricate puzzle over some red, white, and blue ivory chips. In the middle of it a steward opened the door and announced: "A reverend gentleman a−lookin' for Mr. Ruthven!" At his shoulder was

the Dean.

George sprang to his feet. Luckily the Major was playing. "I assure you, Mr. Ruthven," he said, addressing the Padre, and seemingly quite oblivious of the Deans entrance; "I assure you that you need not grab up the cards in that way, and try to stop the gentlemen from playing, for we are not breaking the rules of the club at all; this is not gambling—it's a new game called 'Stock the Ranch.' It's purely scientific, similar to the German military game. These counters represent steers, and its study is a great help to young ranchers."

"I'm glad to hear that," gasped young Ruthven, with a sigh of relief, "because—because—as butler—I mean, as a director of this club——"

Just then he caught sight of his father, and welcomed him with eager effusion—so glad he had come down, and all the rest of it!

Major Lance had saved the day.

That night the Dean gave his son a check for two thousand pounds. He had diplomatically drawn from the young hopeful the information that such a sum would be most acceptable; in fact, that it was sorely needed. All the previous money had gone in ranch and stock. Of course, in reality a certain amount of it had gone in stock—racing stock. The Dean could see himself that a more commodious shack was desirable; also fencing; in fact, the utter absence of fences had rather mystified the churchman.

Saturday the Padre had a queer jumble of remarks for the Major.

"Look here, old man," he said, "the Guv'nor's too good a sort to humbug—I'm going to chuck it after the Meet."

"If it goes how?" queried Major Lance.

"Whichever way it goes. The Guv'nor's given me two thousand sov's to buy wire fences and things——"

"And you're going to put it on Whirlwind," interrupted the Major; "I know."

"No, I'm not, nor on Gray Bird."

"Why not?" queried the Major; "it's yours. Put it all on and make a killing."

"It isn't mine to bet with. What I have up already I must race for, but I'm not going to humbug the Guv'nor any more. If things go wrong over this race I'm going to slip away—chuck the whole business after the Guv'nor's gone."

"And if things go right?"

"I'm also going to chuck something then—the racing game; but I stay—sabe? Stay and buy steers. And I'm going to cut you fellows. I don't mind playing up with the boys—I've done a lot of it—but when a fellow's got to lie out of everything it isn't good enough. When I saw the Guv'nor down in front of that locoed bull, and all my fault, too, having that mixed lot on the range, it set me thinking, and I'm just getting some clear light in on that operation."

"Well, well," exclaimed the Major, impatiently; "perhaps you're right. But you're not going to bungle the race for the Ranch Plate, are you?"

"No, I've got to win that; and we've got to have the trial, too. But I'll tell you what it is, the Dean will have a mighty slim gang at his lecture."

"Well," queried the Major, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Stock the meeting for him; hire some cowboys and fellows to go, just as you chaps ran cattle in on the range."

Major Lance whistled. "By Jove! Padre, you're turning out quite a diplomat."

This was a good idea; and the two men of resource went out into the highways and byways and gathered about as unstudious a lot of attendants for the meeting as had ever entered the portals of any place of worship. They were paid to attend, also were given cayuses to ride out.

Monday was a day of many things; a day of divers interests. The prairie fire that had been planned for the Padre's ranch conflagrated duly on time, and the Dean had to sacrifice the pleasure of his son's attendance at the lecture.

As Ruthven had feared, the regular ranchers from the Crossing District, members of the Council, and otherwise, shirked the talk, and headed for the race course, leaving their seats to the motley gang of paid hirelings.

Seven people cannot be said to constitute a very large audience, but there sat just that number facing Dean Ruthven in the little church at Bow River Crossing.

The Dean was a man of acute sense, in religious matters at any rate, and he tempered the wind to the short lamb—that is, having a short audience, he gave them a short sermon; and, somehow feeling by intuition their moderate attainments, gave them what was really a straight talk.

Red Mike—one of the hirelings—had gone to the church in considerable trepidation, for he had heard much of the solemnity of such functions. The Dean's sensible talk pleased him so much that, when the clergyman was leaving, Mike felt it necessary to say a few words of thankful congratulation. Holding out a big paw, handy in the arts of bronco−busting and liquor−handling, he said to him "Hanged if I don't like you, Parson."

Dean Ruthven was flattered, naturally; this homage of the uncouth cowboy was gratifying. He stammered a deprecating remonstrance, claiming that he had done so little to merit the other's good opinion.

"Yes, you have, Parson," Mike assured him. "You're all right; you've asked me straight why I like you so much, an' I'll give it to you straight back. I was a bit shifty of ministers, havin' heard as how they pumped it into a fellow to beat the band, but to−day you've monkeyed less with religion than anybody I mos' ever heard speak on the subject—that's what!"

While all this was going on the men who were supposed to be fighting fire were busy over on Cargelly race course trying Whirlwind and the new Montana horse, Gray Bird.

PART II

EVEN as the advent of Red Mike had come as a slight surprise to the Parson, so also the laborers on the race course received a shock, for Gray Bird beat Whirlwind most decisively.

He must be a wonder, they all knew. Now, most assuredly, they would beat the horse from Regina, and the mare from Edmonton, and the two cracks that were coming up from Winnipeg. Even Whirlwind could do it, they thought, but here was a much greater. What in the world would the Council do with all the money they would loot from the foreign Philistines?—that is, if a Damoclesian sword which hung over their necks did not fall. The sword was Dean Ruthven, and the falling of the sword would be his discovery of his son's racing game and the stopping of it.

"He'd stop everything!" declared the Padre. "Didn't I tell you that he forced me in England to give up one of the greatest certainties any man ever had, when I could have won twenty thousand quid over it?"

George was much dissatisfied with the trial, in a way; but he had ridden the mare himself, and she seemed trying all right enough. But the fact of the matter was that, owing to his father's presence, Whirlwind had been thrown out of work considerably; George hadn't been able to ride her regularly. Also his father's mishap, and the many other things, had slightly unstrung his usual good nerve, so he had ridden the mare with an impatient eagerness born of the last few days of nervous strain.

At any rate he determined to ride Gray Bird in the race, and trust Whirlwind to somebody else.

So far as the money was concerned it would not matter which won, for they would both start as his entry.

But he would give the mare every chance. She was a nervous, high−strung beast, as sensitive as an antelope, and the Padre devised a clever scheme. He would send her out to his ranch and keep her there until race day; then she might be led in quietly, and start in a sweet temper. In his town stables, near the course, surrounded by other horses, and tortured by the bustle of a race preparation, Whirlwind would fret, and go to the post in an erratic humor. She could have her working gallops out at the ranch in the meantime.

Later this idea worked itself out with variations.

Upon Dean Ruthven's return to the Cargelly Hotel, and as he was passing through the office, a young clerk, of an intellect such as fate always seizes upon when she wishes to curdle the milk, called the reverend gentleman's attention and handed him two missives. One was a letter, the other a carelessly folded note decorated with the terse superscription: "Padre Ruthven."

The Dean carried them to his room. The letter was of no moment—an invitation from a brother ecclesiast; the note was of a more complex nature, involving much deliberation and three distinct perusals. This is what it contained:

Dear Old Padre: Have just come back from the Blood Reserve. If you can slip away from the Guv'nor you'd better go out; Sunflower wants her Hiawatha. Go out to buy hay for all those cattle on your ranch. DICK. As Dean Ruthven thought it over carefully it appeared quite as bad an affair as the rush of old Toreador. He was clever enough to see through it at once. Sunflower was an Indian girl, evidently of the Blood tribe, and she wanted to see her Hiawatha, his son George. Also George was to slip away on a clumsy excuse of buying hay. Dick was a man of fruitful resource, without doubt, but his grim joke of addressing the note "Padre" Ruthven had been a most providential piece of humor, for it had discovered to the father this most terrible state of affairs.

His son, the pride of his heart, and just when he was doing so well, too, to take up with a squaw! This was one of the very things he had feared slightly; he had read much of squaw men—men who had married Indian women; it meant their utter ruin.

He folded up the note slowly, deliberately, and threw it on the table with a sigh. For an hour he sat with his head on his arm, crouched in a broken heap, trying to shut out this terrible vision of a squaw siren. He was roused by the energetic tramp of his son's footstep at the door.

"Good−evening, sir," cried George, cheerfully, as he entered; "you got back safely?"

"Did you get on all right?" asked the father, schooling his voice with an effort.

"Oh, yes; it was a great trial—I mean," said George, checking himself suddenly as he remembered that his mission that day was supposed to be one of fire−fighting; "I mean, the fire nearly beat us; it was a great trial to all the fellows—there was a high wind."

"There's a note on the table, evidently for you," said the father, indicating with his hand the terrible missive. "The clerk gave it to me, and I brought it up."

"Excuse me, sir," and the Padre read Dick's brilliant literary effort. He read it twice, watching the Dean furtively from the corner of his eye. He was wondering if his father had read the note. Why, in the name of fate, had his bronco−headed friend, Dick, addressed it "Padre" Ruthven? The Dean gave no sign; perhaps he hadn't read it; but George felt that he must prepare for that eventuality, so he said: "It's about some hay out on the Blood Reserve that I can buy for my cattle. The Indians put up hay, you know, for all the ranchers. My friend mentions a girl's name, and I fancy her brother's got the hay to sell. She interprets, you know—especially if her brother's away."

It was a floundering sort of diplomacy, this jumble of the Padre's; but when a man is suddenly thrown into deep water he doesn't always swim his very best; besides, there was a great chance that his father had not read the note.

The clergyman gave no sign—he preserved a silence as undemonstrative as the famed reticence of Dean Maitland; but next morning, when his son galloped off to purchase the apocryphal hay, he thought out a line of action which he conceived would straighten this tangle without scandal.

He rather startled the son on his return by declaring that he meant to spend two or three days out at his ranch. The news was almost too good for belief. Now the Race Meet could go on; surely the gods had clasped the Padre to their hearts.

"I wish to look more closely into this ranch life," declared the Dean.

"The cattle will be scattered now, I'm afraid," said the Padre; "the fire has driven them out on to other ranges."

"All the better," answered his father, "for I shall be in no danger from short−tempered bulls; I really want a quiet rest."

Before George and his father started for the ranch the Council learned of this happy turn of affairs. The Padre did not have to make any excuses to get back to the important business on hand, for the Dean was equally anxious to get rid of him—he had some business of his own to look into. So the Padre, after seeing that his father was particularly comfortable, and leaving instructions that the whole business of the temporary ranch staff was to be the making of the reverend gentleman's stay pleasant, so that he might abide contentedly with them, returned to town, and prepared for his big coup with Gray Bird on the morrow, Wednesday.

Dean Ruthven was full of the great undertaking he had in hand. He had determined to go quietly to the Blood Reserve, find this Indian girl, Sunflower, and use his moral influence to have her break off the unhappy alliance with his son. He would even pay her a large sum of money.

What he would do with the son afterward he could not determine; first, the cruel infatuation must be disrupted.

The Padre had said in leaving that he would gallop out in the morning to see his sire.

That night the Council were as men who had escaped an avalanche. Diligently they prepared for the financial collapse of all who believed not in young Ruthven's ability to win the Ranch Plate.

The Council knew that Gray Bird would surely win; even Whirlwind might win in spite of her poor showing in the trial; at any rate the Padre had them both entered—they would both start, and the money that would come to their coffers would be like a great remittance from the old land.

Now Wednesday morning, which was race day, the Dean, full of his project, casually learned from one of the ranchmen that the Blood Reserve was close by—a matter of four miles, with a good trail.

The son came out early; solicitously took extra precautions for the comfort of his respected parent; spent a little time in the stable, and went back to town with the cheerful information that his father had no intention of visiting Cargelly that day.

When the cowboys rode out on to the range, the Dean, in lieu of his own clerical frock, slipped on a corduroy coat belonging to his son, went quietly to the stable, and saddled a dark−brown mare he discovered there; it was Whirlwind, but Dean Ruthven knew nothing of her racing life.

He had some difficulty over saddles, rejecting a heavy, Mexican, bronco−busting affair with disdain—it was like putting an easy−chair on a horse—as cumbersome. There was nothing else but an English−made saddle, looking suspiciously light; but it would do for an easy canter of four miles The Dean had ridden much in his young days, and his gentle seat and light hands pleased the nervous Whirlwind; she was like a lamb with him.

"What a lovely beast!" he muttered.

At the Blood Reserve he found a group of red−painted buildings; he had expected only Indian lodges, not knowing anything of an Agency. It was a distinct relief. If they contained white people, by diplomacy he could possibly gain much help.

Whirlwind had been there before, so she took her rider to Colonel Sloan's door as straight as fate might have desired.

Hospitality made everything easy; besides, the Dean first of all was evidently a gentleman. "Just a little call," the reverend gentleman explained.

Whirlwind was stabled, and in the evolution of events many things came to light. The visitor was Dean Ruthven; Colonel Sloan was the intimate friend of the Dean's most intimate friend in London; ten minutes' conversation developed that; also the invitation to luncheon which followed was eagerly accepted.

The Colonel's sister, Marion, who was the Sunflower—only, of course, the Dean knew it not— charmed him as she did all others; he almost forgot his mission in the pleasant surroundings.

He and Colonel Sloan pulled together as though they had been friends all their lives. Into the clergyman's mind came the light of a cheerful prospect. Providence had surely sent him straight to the Agent; this firm−mannered gentleman would help him, he knew. If the Indian maid, Sunflower, were obdurate and refused to listen to reason, no doubt the Colonel with his authority could send her to some other reserve—Kamchatka, or any far−distant place.

So, as soon as the pleasant−voiced Marion had withdrawn from the room, Dean Ruthven in hesitating policy broached the subject.

"My dear Colonel Sloan," he commenced; "may I—may I—ask you to help me in a matter which is giving me great uneasiness—a most delicate subject, I assure you?"

"With all my heart, my dear sir," answered the gallant Colonel; "I am at your service—you may command me."

"Well—to tell you the truth—my son, George, has, I fear, contracted an unfortunate alliance. No doubt it's one of those reckless infatuations which young men are prone to, and probably he hasn't any serious intentions; but in that case it is, if possible, even worse—quite dishonorable; I assure you, my dear Colonel, I consider it dishonorable on his part."

Colonel Sloan was listening with well−bred interest, passing his hand leisurely down the back of a fox terrier that had jumped on his knee. He felt flattered by the confidence of this church dignitary; also he knew young Ruthven fairly well by reputation.

The speaker continued: "Yesterday, quite by accident, or, perhaps it was the finger of Providence, I discovered the existence of this intrigue."

Maid Marion came into the room at this juncture, and the Colonel, skilled in resourceful diplomacy, gave her a commission that required her considerable absence. When she had gone the Dean proceeded:

"This is a matter that possibly concerns someone in your charge, Colonel—the girl, I mean."

The Colonel started visibly, but tipped the fox terrier from his knee to conceal his confusion.

"You, no doubt, will have an influence over her," said the Dean, with futile imbecility, "so I shall confide in you to the utmost extent."

The Colonel coughed and lighted a cigar. What in the world was coming!

"Now, I think it must be broken off at all costs," declared his tormentor; "at all costs; in fact, I am prepared to pay a large sum of money, if necessary, to prevent this misalliance."

"Quite so!" interjected Colonel Sloan, in a dry voice.

"For, you see, it would never do; would it, Colonel?"

"I think not," answered the Agent.

"No, it would break his mother's heart. Fancy taking a girl of that sort home to England—if his intentions were really honorable, which I fear they are not. I know I should feel the disgrace very keenly."

"Everybody would!" declared the Colonel, emphatically.

"Quite true. I have no doubt you know the girl I refer to, for, as I have said, she is in your charge. "

"Possibly," commented the Colonel, dryly; "you haven't mentioned the young lady's name."

"She's not exactly a lady," corrected the Dean; "I refer to a girl known as 'Sunflower.'"

The Colonel sprang to his feet with an exclamation horrible in the ears of a conscientious churchman.

"What do you mean, you hound? Have you come here to insult my sister through me—and over your profligate son?"

The Dean was also on his feet, the light of a dreadful fright in his watery gray eyes.

"Insult you, my dear sir—your sister—what is all this—what are you talking about?"

"Yes, my sister, Sunflower—Marion."

The stricken Dean moaned. "I understood that Sunflower was an Indian girl—a squaw; at least, I thought she was. This puts an entirely different face on the matter—please forgive me—I—I—oh, what shall I say? Forgive me—I will explain."

The explanation was tortuous, broken, full of deep humiliation, contrite repentance, and in all the misery of it a glorious sense of relief that his son had not taken up with a squaw, but was evidently in love with this beautiful girl of good family. Peace finally reigned, for the Colonel was a man of much sense, and felt not like humiliating this churchman who was so thoroughly in earnest over his son's welfare.

"I am so glad I came, in spite of the terrible blunder I made," wept the Dean. "I do hope that—that—we shall understand each other better—I may say, be closer united. Your sister has quite won my heart, and I hope she has George's also."

At that moment a stranger knocked at the door. When admitted he explained that he had come for the brown mare the Dean had ridden. She was wanted in Cargelly.

"Impossible!" declared Dean Ruthven. "How am I to get back to the ranch? In fact, I think I shall go into Cargelly now"—and he turned and smiled on Colonel Sloan. Yes, that was his best plan—he would ride the mare into Cargelly.

But the messenger was obdurate.

"All right," declared the Dean, blithely; "I'll ride into Cargelly on her—I'm most anxious to get in at once;" he nodded pleasantly at the Agent, as an indication that he meant to do something of interest to him.

"She's got to be led in, sir," objected the man; "Padre Ruthven had her entered in a race to start at——"

"Heavens! a race!" gasped the Dean; "my son racing!"

Also the stranger got a shock; he didn't know that the clerical purloiner of Whirlwind was Padre Ruthven's father. He should have been better schooled when he was sent for the mare.

"Excuse me, my dear sir," the Dean said to his host; "I must stop this race. I'll take the mare there myself," he added fiercely to the newcomer.

Into the saddle clambered the Dean; eagerly he galloped for Cargelly; at his side loped the messenger. From time to time he consulted his watch; would he be in time to stop it? For, as they sped, the man explained, idiotically enough, that the son was riding Gray Bird in the race, and that he was to have ridden Whirlwind himself.

With easy swing the thoroughbred mare loped over the smooth prairie trail. If it had not been for the cayuse galloping laboriously beside her she would have gone faster.

"There's plenty of time, Guv'nor," cried his companion; "don't knock the mare about." He had an idea that, perhaps, he would yet outwit the Dean and secure Whirlwind for the race. He even thought of throwing his lariat over the churchman and pulling him out of the saddle. But he gave up this idea; many things might happen; the mare might get away; even the Dean might break his neck.

Four miles off the square, unadorned houses of Cargelly rose on the level prairie like huge packing−boxes. A motley multitude of twisting figures could be seen to the right; that was the race−course—even the Dean surmised that.

Would he be in time? His watch told him that it was twenty minutes to four.

As they drew nearer the brown mare pricked her ears wistfully; the scent of a speed battle came to her nostrils, and she rattled the snaffle−bit restlessly against her white teeth. Straight for the race mob galloped the Dean; close at his heels loped the cayuse. Swifter glided the prairie under the two horsemen, for Whirlwind was warming to the race taint that was in the air.

"What time—is it—Guv'nor?" panted the man at Dean Ruthven's elbow.

"Two—minutes to four," he gasped in answer.

"They're at—the—post," pumped the other as the wind drove into his set teeth. He could see a dozen

horsemen grouped near a man with a red flag, straight in front of them.

Now it happened that the starting−post for this race, which was one and a quarter miles, was at the point where their trail cut through the course.

Young Ruthven was one of the horsemen. He was in a rage. What had become of Whirlwind? He had sent his man, Ned Haslam, a good rider, too, out for her—Ned was to have ridden Whirlwind; next to the Padre himself, she would gallop better for Haslam than anyone else.

He thought that, perhaps, Ned might have her at the post waiting, for there was no weighing out to be done—the race terms being for gentlemen riders, catchweights over one hundred and forty pounds. He had not declared her a non−starter, and his two horses were coupled in the betting. But neither Haslam nor Whirlwind was at the post.

As Gray Bird swerved away from the starter's flag, and swung around on his hind feet, young Ruthven caught sight of the two horsemen.

"Hold on for a minute," he cried eagerly to the starter; "here comes Whirlwind at last; I think Ned is on her back, too. She'll be under your orders in another minute and can start."

One of the Winnipeg riders uttered an objection.

"She'll have all the worse of it," retorted the Padre, "for her idiotic rider has got tangled up in some delay, and has had to gallop the mare."

"I'll wait," said the starter; "line up, and get ready."

There could be no technical objection.

The Padre beckoned with his whip for Whirlwind's rider to come to the post; the Dean answered with a shout when he recognized his son.

"Back there—line up!" called the starter. "Whirlwind must start as soon as she gets in the bunch—I can't wait."

Nobody recognized the Dean in his tight−buttoned corduroy coat—not even his son; for they were busy trying for the best of the start.

"Hold on!" called the Dean, as he swung on to the course from the trail.

"Go to the devil!" yelled the starter; "I've no time to let you breathe your horse!"

Even if the starter had wished to delay matters the Dean would not have been of the party, for Whirlwind, trained to the quick start, keen for the strife that had been of all her life, rushed through the eager straining horses, carrying them with her.

"Go!" yelled the starter, dropping his flag as they flashed by him all in a bunch.

Down went the second flag! It was a start—a beautiful start!

As the Dean flashed by his son the Padre recognized him. Great Cæsar! Had the Guv'nor gone mad! It was like a nightmare; he rode as one in a dream. But in front of him was the terrible tangibility of his clerical father riding in a wicked horse−race. Of course the Guv'nor was crazy, but—and he took a pull at Gray Bird's head—he couldn't afford to throw away the race on that account.

At his flank raced the mare from Edmonton; behind, half a length, thundered the two from Winnipeg. Past the crude grand−stand on the first round they swung in this order. Whirlwind had the lead and she meant to keep it; that had always been her idea of a race. Speed she had in plenty; but when horses were in front they threw fierce−cutting sand in her face, and the snapping of the rider's shirts in the wind and the cracking of their whips bothered her.

How she liked the jockey on her back! His strong pull on the bit steadied her around the curves; firm−braced in the saddle he sat quiet—just as a jockey should, she reasoned.

In the Dean's face was the horror of a lifetime compressed into a tiny tablet. With set teeth and braced knees he pulled strong at the mad brute's head. "She's running away with me," he muttered; "I shall be disgraced for life!"

Hard on the right rein he tugged as Whirlwind hugged the circling rail on the left. If he could only pull her off the course!

"That's right," whispered the mare; "steady me a bit wide." Out of her large, wise eye she watched the horses behind. Ha, ha! such sport! They would never catch her.

"Good old girl!" muttered the Padre, as the strong, brown quarters in front of him gathered and straightened

with the easy motion of a steam piston. Now the broad hoofs scattered the gravel back in their faces; truly she was a picture.

He eased Gray Bird back after they passed the stand on the first round. The Regina horse slipped into his place at the mare's heels. On his right pounded a big bay from Winnipeg; half a length back was the gray mare from Edmonton running under a strong wrap.

Madly the grand−stand cheered as Whirlwind, still in the lead, swung into the straight. "Who is the jockey?" someone asked. "Thought Ned Haslam was to ride for the Padre—that's not Ned."

"He's a mighty good jockey, though—whoever he is," another answered.

A quarter of a mile from the finish the Winnipeg horse, Cyclone, far−reaching in his big stride, was lapped on Whirlwind's quarter. The Padre saw this; that was what he was lying back for—to see things, and put them right. Into the flank of Gray Bird he drove a spur, and the Montana horse, quivering with the strain of his giant muscles, pushed past the white−faced chestnut that was running him neck and neck, and crept up until his long, sloping shoulder touched the huge thigh of the Winnipeg Cyclone.

Never had such a race been seen in Cargelly. The stand watchers rose to their feet—stood on their very toes in excitement. Would the mare last out—the gallant little Whirlwind? Surely she would, for her jockey, sitting with set face, riding with superb judgment, had not moved on her; not once had he raised his whip. Surely he knew that his mount had plenty in hand, or he would have urged her with whip and spur.

"Cyclone will win!" said a Winnipeg man, his voice tense with excitement.

"I'll lay you a thousand the mare beats him!" said Major Lance huskily.

"Done!" cried Winnipeg.

Cyclone's big nose was at Whirlwind's shoulder now, and they were a furlong from the finish.

"If my rider sits tight," murmured the mare, "that brute will never catch me."

The Dean sat tight—there was nothing else in it for him; a false move on the tiring mare, well he knew, might throw her under the feet of the galloping horses. All the evil that could come to him, all the disgrace, had materialized at the start; therefore he sat tight and waited.

The Padre pushed Gray Bird still farther up, fairly lifting him at every jump. He could not win, he felt convinced, but a little bustle at the side of Cyclone might juggle his stride a bit.

Ah! what a race it was home to the finish post! The big horse, strong galloping, lashed and cut with whip and spur, strained and far−stretched his strong muscles to overtake the smooth−gliding little brown mare but a neck in front. Even the neck lead shortened, and still the grim figure on her back swerved her not a hair's breadth from her stride. Now it was a head, just a small brown head in front. There was only silence in the grandstand; no noise in the air at all—nothing but the muffled roar of hoofs pounding the turf, and the sharp crack of a quirt on Cyclone's ribs.

Only the Judge, sighting straight across the two finish posts, knew whether a bay or brown nose had caught his eye first. In the stand a babel of voices was yelling: "Cyclone wins! Whirlwind's got it!"

Then, after a little waiting hush, number five went up. That was Whirlwind's number.

The Padre galloped on and overtook the mare.

He threw himself from Gray Bird's back. Back he led Whirlwind. "Sit here for a minute, father, and rest," he said, lifting the old man down; and in a trice he had the saddle on the back of the seat. It was the weighing scales. And the weight was sufficient—two pounds over the hundred and forty.

Eagerly the men who had amassed sudden wealth gathered about this new rider the Padre had unearthed from somewhere. What a clever trick of the Padre's it had been, to be sure. Nobody but Major Lance recognized the man in the corduroy coat. The Padre fought them off, and carried his father from the course, leaving the care of the horses and all the rest of it to the Major and others of the Council.

There was an aftermath of reproach and exhortation and remorse on the part of the Dean, and contrition on the part of the Padre, and the assurance of an undoubted reformation. Willingly he promised to race no more, and where are there fathers without forgiveness in their hearts? There was not one in Cargelly anyway, because, at the end of all things the Dean knew, because he performed the ceremony himself, that Marion, the Sunflower, would guard his son's moral interests as only a good wife can.