You Never Can Tell

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By Nellie McClung

It was at exactly half-past three in the afternoon of a hot June day that Mrs. Theodore Banks became smitten with the idea. Mrs. Banks often said afterwards she did not know how she came to be thinking about the Convention of the Arts and Crafts at all, although she is the Secretary. The idea was so compelling that Mrs. Banks rushed down town to tell Mr. Banks she felt she could not depend on the telephone.

"Ted," she cried, when she opened the door of the office, "I have an idea!"

Theodore raised his eyelids. Mrs. Banks was flushed and excited and looked well. Mrs. Banks was a handsome woman any time, and today her vivacity was quite genuine.

"You know the Convention of the Arts and Crafts, which begins on the twentieth?"

"I've heard of it, somewhere."

"Well, it just came to me, Teddy, what a perfectly heavenly thing it would be to invite that little Mrs. Dawson, who writes reviews for one of the papers here. You remember I told you about her. She is awfully clever and artistic and good looking, and lives away off from every place, and her husband is not her equal at all, perfectly illiterate, I heard—uncultured, anyway. What a perfect joy it would be to her to have her come, and meet with people who are her equals. She's an Ottawa girl originally, I believe, and she does write the most perfectly sweet and darling things—you remember, I've read them to you. Of course, she is probably very shabby and out of date in her clothes by this time, but it doesn't really matter what one wears, if one has heaps of brains. It is only dull women, really, who have to be so terribly careful about what they wear, and spend so much money that way!"

"Dull women!" Theodore murmured. "Oh! is that why? I never really knew."

She laughed at his look of enlightened surprise. When Mrs. Banks laughed there were three dimples plainly showing, which did not entirely discourage her merriment.

"And you know, Teddy, there is such a mystery about her marriage, she will really be quite an acquisition, and we'll have her on the programme."

"What mystery?" Mr. Banks asked.

"Oh, well, not mystery maybe, but we all suppose she's not happy—how could she be with so few of the real pleasures of life, and still she stays with it, and actually goes places with her husband, and seems to be keeping it up, and you know, Ted, she has either three or four children!"

"Is it as bad as that?" he asked solemnly.

"O Ted! you know well enough what I mean, don't be such an owl! Just think of how tied down and horrible it must be for her out there in that desolate Alberta, with no neighbors at all for miles, and then only impossible people. I should think it would drive her mad. I must try to get her on the programme, too. She will at least be interesting, on account of her personality. Most of our speakers are horribly prosy—at least to me, but of course I never listen. I just look to see what they've on and then go straight back to my own thinking. I just thought I'd ask your advice, Teddy dear, before I asked the committee and so now I'll go to see Mrs. Trenton, the President. So glad you approve, dear. And really, there will be a touch of romance in it, Ted, for Bruce Edwards knew her when she lived in Ottawa—it was he who told me so much about her. He simply raved about her to me. It seems he was quite mad about her once, and probably it was a lover's quarrel or something that drove her away to the West to forget, and now think of her meeting Bruce again! Isn't that a thriller?"

"If I thought Bruce Edwards had brains enough to care for any woman. I'd say it was not right to bring her here," said Mr. Banks; "but he hasn't!"

"Oh, of course," Mrs. Banks agreed, "he is quite over it now, no doubt. Things like that never last; but he'll be awfully nice to her, and give her a good time, and take her around. You know what Bruce is like—he's so romantic and cynical and such a perfect darling in his manners, always ready to open doors or pick up handkerchiefs!"

"I'm sure he would, if he needed the handkerchiefs," Theodore put in quietly.

"O, Ted! you're a funny bunny. You've never liked Bruce—and I know why—and it's perfectly horrid of you, just because he has always been particularly nice to me. He really can't help being dreamy and devoted to any woman he is with, if she's not a positive fright."

Mrs. Trenton, the President of the Arts and Crafts, received Mrs. Banks' suggestion cautiously. Mrs. Trenton always asked, "Is it right?" "Is it

wise?" "Is it expedient?" It was Mrs. Trenton's extreme cautiousness that had brought her the proud distinction of being the first President of the Arts and Crafts; where it was considered necessary to temper the impetuosity of the younger members, and besides, Mrs. Trenton never carried her doubts and fears too far. She raised all possible objections, mentioned all possible contingencies, but in the end allowed the younger members to carry the day, which they did, with a clear and shriven conscience, feeling that they had been very discreet and careful and deliberate.

Mrs. Banks introduced her subject by telling Mrs. Trenton that she had come to ask her advice, whereupon Mrs. Trenton laid aside the work she was doing, and signified her gracious willingness to be asked for counsel. When Mrs. Banks had carefully laid the matter before Mrs. Trenton, dwelling on the utter loneliness of the prairie woman's life, Mrs. Trenton called the Vice-President, Miss Hastings, who was an oil painter by profession, and a lady of large experience in matters of the heart. Mrs. Trenton asked Mrs. Banks to outline her plan again.

When she had finished, Mrs. Trenton asked, "Is it wise—is it kind? She has chosen her life, why bring her back? It will only fill her heart with vain repinings. This man, illiterate though he may be, is her lawful husband. She owes him a duty. Are we just to him?"

"Maybe she is perfectly happy," Miss Hastings said. "There is no accounting for love, and its vagaries. Perhaps to her, he is clothed in the rosy glow of romance, and all the inconveniences of her life are forgotten. I have read of it," she added in explanation when she noticed Mrs. Trenton's look of incredulity.

Mrs. Trenton sighed, a long sigh that undulated the black lace on her capacious bosom.

"It has been written—it will continue to be written, but today marriage needs to be aided, by modern—" She hesitated, and looked at Mrs. Banks for the word.

"Methods," Mrs. Banks supplied promptly. "Housemaids, cooks, autos, theatres, jewelry, and chocolates."

"You put it so aptly, my dear," Mrs. Trenton smiled, as she patted her pearl bracelet, Mr. Trenton's last offering on the hymeneal altar. "It requires—" She paused again. Mrs. Trenton's pauses were a very important asset in her conversation. "It requires—"

"Collateral," said Mrs. Banks.

Miss Hastings shook her head.

“I believe in marriage, all the same,” she said heroically.

“Now how shall we do it?” Mrs. Banks was anxious to get the preliminaries over. “You have decided to invite her, of course?”

Mrs. Trenton nodded. “I feel we have no choice in the matter,” she said slowly. “She is certainly a woman of artistic temperament; she must be, or she would succumb to the dreary prairie level. I have followed her career with interest, and predict great things for her. Have I not, Miss Hastings? We should not blame her, if in a moment of girlish romance she turned her back on the life which now is. We, as officers of the Arts and Crafts, must extend our fellowship to all who are worthy. This joining of our ranks may show her what she has lost by her girlish folly, but it is better for her to know life, and even feel regrets, than never to know.”

“Better have a scarlet thread run through the dull gray pattern of life, even if it makes the gray all the duller,” said Miss Hastings, who worked in oils.

And so it came about that an invitation was sent to Mrs. James Dawson, Auburn, Alberta, and in due time an acceptance was received.

From the time she alighted from the Pacific Express, a slight young woman in a very smart linen suit, she was a constant surprise to the Arts and Crafts. The principal cause of their surprise was that she seemed perfectly happy. There was not a shadow of regret in her clear gray eyes, nor any trace of drooping melancholy in her quick, business-like walk.

Naturally, the Arts and Crafts had made quite a feature of the Alberta author and poet who would attend the Convention. Several of the enthusiastic members, anxious to advertise effectively, had interviewed the newspaper reporters on the subject, with the result that long articles were published in the woman’s section of the city dailies, dealing principally with the loneliness of the life on an Alberta ranch. Kate Dawson was credited with a heroic spirit, that would have made her blush had she seen the flattering allusions. Robinson Crusoe on his lonely isle, before the advent of Friday, was not more isolated than she on her lonely Alberta ranch, according to the advance notices. Luckily, she had not seen any of these, nor ever dreamed she was the centre of so much attention, and so it was a very self-possessed and unconscious young woman in a simple white gown who came before the Arts and Crafts.

It was the first open night of the Convention, and the auditorium was crowded. The air was heavy with the perfume of many flowers, and pulsed with dreamy music. Mrs. Trenton, in billows of black lace, and glinting jet, presided with her usual graciousness. She introduced Mrs. Dawson, briefly.

Whatever the attitude of the audience was at first, they soon followed her with eager interest, as she told them, in her easy way, simple stories of the

people she knew so well, and so lovingly understood. There was no art in the telling, only a sweet naturalness, and an apparent honesty—the honesty of purpose that comes to people in lonely places. Her stories were all of that class that magazine editors call "homely, heart-interest stuff," not deep or clever, or problematical, the commonplace doings of common people, but it found an entrance into the hearts of men and women. They found themselves looking with her at broad sunlit spaces, where struggling hearts work out noble destinies, without any thought of heroism. They saw the moonlight, and its drifting shadows on the wheat, and smelled again the ripening grain at dawn. They heard the whirr of prairie chickens' wings, among the golden stubble, on the hillside, and the glamor of some old forgotten afternoon stole over them. Men and women, country-born, who had forgotten the voices of their youth, heard them calling now across the years, and heard them, too, with opened hearts and sudden tears. There was one pathetic story. She told them of the lonely prairie woman—the woman who wished she was back, the woman to whom the broad outlook and far horizon were terrible and full of fear. She told them how, at night, this lonely woman drew down the blinds and pinned them close to keep out the great white outside that stared at her through every chink with wide, pitiless eyes; the mocking voices that she heard behind her everywhere, day and night, whispering, mocking, plotting; and the awful shadows, black and terrible, that crouched behind her, just out of sight—never coming out in the open.

It was a weird and gloomy picture, but she did not leave it so. She told of the new neighbor who came to live near the lonely woman; the human companionship which drove the mocking voices away forever; the coming of the spring, when the world awoke from its white sleep, and the thousand joyous living things that came into being at the touch of the good old sun!

At the reception after the programme many crowded around her, expressing their sincere appreciation of her work. Bruce Edwards fully enjoyed the distinction which his former acquaintance with her gave him, and it was with quite an air of proprietorship that he introduced to her his friends.

Mrs. Trenton, Mrs. Banks, and other members of the Arts and Crafts, at a distance discussed her with pride. She had made their open night a wonderful success—the papers would be full of it to-morrow.

"You can see now fitted she is for a life of culture," said Miss Hastings, the oil painter. "Her shapely white hands were made for silver spoons, and not for handling butter ladles. What a perfect joy it must be for her to associate with people who are her equals!"

"I wonder," said Mrs. Banks, "what her rancher would say if he saw his handsome wife now. So much admiration from an old lover is not good for the

peace of mind of even a serious minded author, and such a fascinating man as Bruce. Look how well they look together! I wonder if she is mentally comparing her big sunburned cattle man with Bruce, and thinking of what a different life she would have led if she had married him!"

"Do you suppose," said Mrs. Trenton, "that that was her own story that she told us? I think she must have felt it herself to be able to tell it so."

Just at that moment. Bruce Edwards was asking her the same question.

"Oh, no," she answered quickly, while an interested group drew near. "People never write their own sorrows; the broken heart does not sing, that's the sadness of it. If one can talk of their sorrows, they soon cease to be. It's because I have not had any sorrows of my own that I have seen and been able to tell of the tragedies of life."

"Isn't she the jolly best bluffer you ever heard?" one of the men remarked to another. "Just think of that beautiful creature, born for admiration, living ten miles from anywhere, on an Albertan ranch of all places, and saying she is happy. She could be a top notcher in any society in Canada. Why, Great Scott! any of us would have married that girl, and been glad to do it," and under the glow of this generous declaration Mr. Stanley Carruthers lit his cigarette and watched her with unconcealed admiration.

As the Arts and Crafts had predicted, the newspapers gave considerable space to their open meeting, and the Alberta author came in for a large share of the reporters' finest spasms. It was the chance of a lifetime—here was local color, human interest, romance, thrills! Good old phrases, clover scented, and rosy hued that had lain in cold storage for years, were brought out and used with conscious pride.

There was one paper which boldly hinted at what it called her "mesalliance" and drew a lurid picture of her domestic unhappiness "so bravely borne." All the gossip of the Convention was in it, intensified and exaggerated; conjectures set down as known truth; the idle chatter of idle women crystallized in print!

And, of this paper, a copy was sent by some unknown person to James Dawson, Auburn, Alberta.

The rain was falling at Auburn, Alberta, with the dreary insistence of unwelcome harvest rain. Just a quiet drizzle—plenty more where this came from; no haste; no waste. It soaked the fields, keeping green the grain which should be ripening in a clear sun. Kate Dawson had been gone a week, and it would still be a week before she came back. Just a week—seven days—Jim Dawson went over them in his mind as he drove the ten miles over the rain-soaked roads to Auburn to get his daily letter.

Every day she had written to him long letters, full of vital interest to him. He read them over and over again.

"Nobody really knows how well Kate can write, who has not seen her letters to me," he thought proudly. Absence had not made him fonder of his wife—for every day he lived was lived in devotion to her. The marvel of it all never left him—that such a woman as Kate Marks, who had spent her life in a city surrounded by cultured friends should be contented to live the lonely life of a rancher's wife.

He got his first disappointment when there was no letter for him. He told himself it was some unavoidable delay in the mails. Kate had written all right—there would be two letters for him to-morrow. Then he noticed the paper addressed to him in a strange hand. He opened it eagerly. A wavy ink line caught his eye.

"Western author delights large audience!"

Jim Dawson's face glowed with pride. "My girl," he murmured happily. "I knew it!" He wanted to be alone when he read it and folding it hastily, put it in his pocket, and did not look at it again until he was on the way home.

The rain still fell drearily and spattered the page as he read. His heart beat fast with pride as he read the flattering words. His girl had made good, you bet.

Suddenly he started, almost crushing the paper in his hands, and every bit of color went from his face. What's this—"unhappily married,"—"borne with heroic cheerfulness." He read it through to the end.

He stopped his horses and looked around. He did not know himself what thought was in his mind. Jim Dawson had always been able to settle his disputes, without difficulty, or delay. There was something to be done now. . . . The muscles swelled in his arms. . . . Surely something could be done. . . .

Then the wanton cruelty, the utter brutality of the printed page came home to him. . . . there was no way . . . . no answer. Strange to say, he felt no resentment for himself—even the paragraph about the old lover, with its hidden and sinister meaning, angered him only in its relation to her. Why shouldn't the man admire her, if he was an old lover? Kate must have had dozens of men in love with her—why shouldn't any man admire her?

So he talked and reasoned with himself, trying to keep the cruel hint of the words out of his heart.

Everyone in his household was asleep when he reached home. He stabled his team with the help of his lantern, and then, going into the comfortable kitchen, he found the lunch the housekeeper had left for him. He thought of the

many, merry meals he and Kate had had on this same kitchen table, but now it seemed a poor, cold thing to sit down and eat alone, and in silence.

With his customary thoughtfulness, he cleared away the lunch before going to his room. Then, lamp in hand, he went, as he and Kate had always done, to the children's room, and looked long and lovingly at his boy and girl asleep in their cots—the boy so like himself with his broad forehead and brown curls. He bent over him and kissed him tenderly—Kate's boy.

Then he turned to the little girl, so like her mother, with her tangle of red curls on the pillow. Picking her up in his arms, he carried her to his room, and put her in his own bed.

"Mother isn't putting up a bluff on us, is she, dearie?" he whispered as he kissed the soft little cheek beside his own. "Mother loves us, surely . . . . it is pretty rough on us if she doesn't. . . . and it's rougher still on mother . . . ."

The child stirred in her sleep, and her arms tightened around his neck. "I love my mother—and my daddy," she murmured drowsily.

All night long, Jim Dawson lay wide-eyed, staring into the darkness, with his little sleeping girl in his arms, not doubting his wife for a moment, but wondering. . . . all night long. . . . wondering!

The next evening Jim did not go for his mail, but one of the neighbors driving by volunteered to get it for him.

It was nearly midnight when the sound of wheels roused him from his reverie. He opened the door, and in the square of light, the horses stopped.

"Hello, Jim! Is that you?" called the neighbor. "I've got something for you."

Jim came out bareheaded. He tried to thank the neighbor for his kindness, but his throat was dry with suppressed excitement. Kate had written!

The buggy was still in the shadow, and he could not see its occupants.

"I have a letter for you, Jim," said his friend, with a suspicious twinkle in his voice; "a big one, registered, and special delivery—a right nice letter, I should say."

Then her voice rang out from the darkness: "Come, Jim, and help me out." Commonplace words, too but to Jim Dawson they were sweeter than the chiming of silver bells. . . .

An hour later, they still sat over their late supper on the kitchen table. She had told him many things.

"I just got lonely, Jim; plain straight homesick for you and the children. I could not stay out the week. The people were kind to me, and said nice things

about my work. I was glad to hear and see things, of course. Bruce Edwards was there—you know I've told you about Bruce. He took me around quite a bit, and was nice enough, only I couldn't lose him—you know that kind, Jim, always saying tiresome, plastery sort of things. He thinks that women like to be fussed over all the time. The women I met dress beautifully and all talk the same, and at once. Everything is 'perfectly sweet and darling' to them—they are clever women, all right, and were kind to me, and all that, but oh, Jim, they are not for mine; and the men I met while I was away all looked small and poor and trifling to me, because I have been looking for the last ten years at one who is big and brown and useful. I compared them all with you, and they measured up badly, Jim. Do you know what it would feel like to live on pop corn and chocolates for two weeks, and try to make a meal of them—what do you think you would be hungry for?"

Jim Dawson watched his wife, his eyes aglow with love and pride. Not until she repeated her question did he answer her.

"I think perhaps, a slice of brown bread would be what was wanted," he answered, smiling. The glamor of her presence was upon him.

Then she came over to him and drew his face close to hers. "Please pass the brown bread!" she said.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *You Never Can Tell* by Nellie McClung]