

CHAPTER 1 AH, THE PURE PRAIRIE AIR!

Clouds of prairie dust and smoke swirled into Charles Cleave's face as he peered out the train coach door and clambered down the metal stairs. Wagons clattered, horses whinnied, drivers shouted over the billowing clouds of sulphurous steam. The crashing of chests and boxes almost buried the cries of teamsters as they hailed their parties or greeted newcomers.

"Ah, the pure prairie air at last," choked Robin, as he followed Charles down the stairs and on to the steady wooden boards of the station platform. "Spiffing!"

A blast of steam issued from the whistle of the mighty locomotive, shrieking for all passengers to disembark and for new ones to board.

"Yes," gasped Charles. "Pure air and pure ideals." Only then did he discover his billfold was no longer in his rear pocket. "Wha...?" he gaped as the train creaked ahead.

"Can you find a ride?" Robin's bags were already loaded on a wagon by its muttering driver. "We shan't perhaps have a chance to meet again for some time."

"But how on earth...?"

"Can I take your cases, sir?" demanded a voice behind him. "The Athabasca Hotel, sir? The Assiniboia?"

He glanced back and waved his hand in agreement.

"Good luck, then," shouted Robin, now seated in the democrat. "Jolly good luck!"

"And good luck to you, Earl." Charles spun around, groped about his trouser pockets and those of his coat. "May the Lord guide your..." he mumbled, but the rest was drowned in the

impatient whistle of the locomotive.

Could Robin, fresh from Basingstoke in northeast Hampshire, have taken his billfold? He struggled to banish the thought. Surely an Earl, even an Earl-in-Waiting, would regard it as poor form to filch the wallet of a new acquaintance. But Robin was also an Anglican, and Reverend Eaton had warned him about Anglicans. Englishmen liked to drink gin and have mistresses. Anglicans even had alcohol in their communion wine.

No. Impossible.

Robin Mellanby-Higgs had made the long train journey less torturous with his accounts of England. Servants did everything--the gardening, the cooking and even a man who prepared drinks and set out clothes. How different from Charles' upbringing in a hard-working and worthy neighbourhood of Toronto. Charles had tried to follow Robin's explanation of the lineage by which he was to become an Earl, provided certain persons died. When Robin sketched a family tree on one of Canadian Pacific Railway's elegant dining-carriage napkins, Charles became lost somewhere between a duke and a marquee.

Shaking his head, still fumbling through his coat-tails, Charles turned to step on to the wagon. It was gone. He peered off into the crowd of milling people and bustling wagons. "Now, how in heaven did the driver know where I was going?"

He walked from the Medicine Hat station platform to the boards of the nearest sidewalk, having no idea where he should go after losing his money and all his belongings.

Unless Robin took his wallet, it could only have been the banker Mr. Ross, who was the other occupant of the train compartment. It had been Mr. Ross who boasted about land profits in Medicine Hat and somewhere called the Palliser Triangle. He'd referred to something called scrip. Charles didn't understand a word of his explanation but after many swigs from Mr. Ross' flask and an exchange of banknotes, Robin received a large sheaf of papers from the banker. At least the man claimed he was a banker.

"Where would the driver think to go with my cases and without me?" Charles enquired half an hour later at the Police Post. "And I'm particularly concerned the six dozen Testaments be returned."

The Royal Northwest Mounted Police officer laughed, his huge moustache bobbing up and down. "Testaments?" he barked, raising one bushy eyebrow. "You lugged seventy-two bibles to start a homestead in the West?"

"Yes sir."

"Did you happen to bring a shovel?" the policeman roared. "Or an axe?"

"A pump organ...although it's still on the way." Charles waved in the direction of the east.

This won only a wry smile from the officer and the advice he pick up a blanket and bar of soap at the nearest outfitters.

"That's the third since Monday," the officer muttered as Charles walked away, not a little dazed by the way business was conducted in this strange new territory.

It was a good thing he'd taken care to label all his bags and the massive sea trunk with his

forwarding address, he thought as he trudged up the enormous valley containing the mighty Saskatchewan River. He saw what he believed was the steeple of that destination, the Four Winds Mission and Agricultural College for Young Christian Men.

In another few minutes, he was at the top of the vast ravine and he gazed on four stark and dilapidated buildings. It seemed the eight years of donations sent to the Mission from Reverend Eaton and his Toronto congregation were being used to aid the poor and the sick, not merely sunk into care of its maintenance.

As he arrived at the Mission gatepost, Charles' thoughts turned to the interview with Reverend Eaton after Sunday service in the first week of March. Eaton explained he had written a quick note to his colleague in Medicine Hat.

"If you are determined to conclude your engineering studies and establish in the new West," his mentor had advised, "it sounds as if commencing with six weeks at Reverend Small's Four Winds Mission and Agriculture College for Young Christian Men might be an ideal preparation."

He continued reading from the return letter from Reverend Small:

"Why not send the boy out here to establish himself as a landowner? The pure air and open sky will reconstitute him. If he is as quick and diligent as you say, it will not be long before he will be prepared for farming his own land, while of course spreading the Gospel. Our government is giving away entire quarter-sections of land, no less than 160 acres, for a mere ten dollars! Now, there is the minor matter of some tuition fees as well as lodging expenses which

would need to be defrayed if..."

He scanned the remaining passages of the letter and murmured, "*...if you could wire the sum at your earliest convenience. May the Lord bless you for your Mission's most recent endowment, used to place first mortar of the shelter for the homeless...*"

Eaton had struck on the very heart of the thing, thought Charles. He could now turn his scientific creativity and determination to tame the prairie. It couldn't be a more arduous task than designing and building a portable pump organ.

"If anyone can break the prairie sod," Eaton concluded, "it is an intrepid young man like you."

Intrepid! Braced with these recollections, Charles strode to the door of the Four Winds Mission, grabbed the faded brass knocker and brought it down against the door. He brushed back his hair, inspected his trousers and coat buttons, and stared back across the front yard. The front gate needed some work, he observed.

After a minute, he tried again.

A shadow moved across the tiny slit of a window above the knocker.

Charles grinned and called a greeting, straining himself up on his stiff new shoes.

"Who's there?" a muffled voice asked.

"Charles Cleave."

"Who?"

"Toronto First Methodist Church. The Reverend Eaton."

"The Divil have ye!" the voice railed.

"The contributions for the altar," he yelled. "The Testaments."

"We'll not be needin' any."

"It is...I. Charles Cleave." He wiped the palms of his hands on his pants.

The door inched open. A pair of bloodshot eyes peeked out.

"Whaddy want?"

"Cleave, sir. I've come to..."

"Who?"

He strained up to the open crack. "Charles Cleave, sir."

"He's not here."

"The shelter," he cried. "The shelter for the homeless!"

"We got some already. Git ye hither!"

"No," he persisted. "The money."

The door opened another crack. "Money?"

"Yes, sir. Money. The money from Reverend Eaton."

The door creaked open further.

As his eyes adapted to the dark, Charles saw before him a withered figure with a leathery face, and soon two piercing eyes cut through the dim light allowed in by the colossal door.

"The girl will attend to your luggage," the shadow stated before dissolving from the room.

Ah, The Pure Prairie Air!

Without taking his eyes from the disappearing form, Charles reached down to pick up his luggage and then remembered hadn't any.

