

## YOURS IS A LUCKY GIRL!

When he crinkled open the envelope delivered by Mr. Slobodnik's oxen the next week, Charles learned from Robin there was something for everyone in Lethbridge. It was just a matter of being single-minded enough to find it. Robin attested he knew of one place where any man could find what he wanted any night of the week, and if Charles had even a shred of desire to answer his inner needs, then he ought to come along.

At first Charles hesitated. A fence needed to be built. Then there was the question of water. And then he thought about his lonely life on the prairie. The old man's cynical jibes, the coyotes laughing as he bathed alone naked at night. As soon as Mr. Slobodnik's slow oxen could get him to Medicine Hat, Charles once again found himself aboard the train bound to the west. Molly would take up residence at the old man's place for a few days. Robin had bumped into Silas at the Post Office, and when Silas heard the plan, he'd agreed to accompany Robin right away on the route to fulfillment.

The train clattered toward Lethbridge, far faster than Mr. Slobodnik's ox team and at least twice as fast as his old horse Molly at a canter.

"I say," cried Robin. "Simply spiffing!"

Above the rocking and rattling of the coach, the three men examined six letters that Silas had received from Omaha in Nebraska. Two of them he had received only that morning, and the envelopes had bright-looking stamps on them.

"How'd you get them?"

"Medicine Hat News," replied Silas. "In the advertisements."

"What's her name?"

"Didn't she send a photo?"

Silas shook his head. "This one did." He pulled out a second envelope and handed it to Robin. "Don't pretty much, though."

"Mmmm."

"Perhaps not," agreed Charles, examining the flowing blue ink handwriting. "But she's apparently prepared to work."

*"...good at milking and hoeing and can drive a 4 in hand with the best. Can cook up fritters and corncakes from the flower and..."*

"Grammar leaves something to be desired."

"I'd be marryin' her, not 'er grandma," snapped Silas.

"You may have a point." Robin frowned. "But perhaps not as finished as one might prefer."

"Whaddya mean *finishing*?"

"What I mean is, do we know anything about the family? The name?"

"Deadnuts," said Silas, aiming his calloused finger at the bottom of the page. "Right down there. Ryan. Miss Nellie Ryan."

"Just as I feared," sniffed the Englishman and Earl-in-Waiting.

"Geewhittakers," exclaimed Silas. He sat back in the rattling seat. "How in jiggers can he tell?"

"Look at this one," cried Charles. He held up a photograph of a face with long, flowing black hair and a distant, wistful look. "She's got everything. Even sounds quite cultured. Listen, *"...as for my reading, I do enjoy Tennyson (though he does tend to go on) and Shelley, when he isn't too consumed."*

"And she's from Nebraska?"

"Sounds quite artistic to me," judged Charles. "I'd reply to her, if I were you."

"Artistical? It's fer a wife, ya half-wit, not a schoolmarm!"

Charles refolded the letter, and handed it back to Silas. All three of them stared at the baked flats rolling by.

In Lethbridge on Fifth Street, still dazed from the torrid journey, Charles strolled with his two friends among cowboys with broad hats, and swarthy miners with coal-stained faces and black moustaches, who spoke in German, Scandinavian, Hungarian, and Ruthenian. In short order, Charles laughed roughly and swore along with Robin and Silas and all the others. When they reached the edge of the coulee that descended sharply to the Belly River, Charles and his friends walked twice around Sick's Brewery. They watched in awe while foam-washed, wooden kegs rocked away on horse-drawn wagons, and they laughed again, and all three of them swore and spat and then swore again. Then they swaggered over to the Lethbridge Hotel, which had six storeys, and they sampled two or three pints. Along with Silas and Robin, Charles licked his lips, nodded wisely, and agreed the town had its good points.

"And what about the accommodations?" asked Charles, as they left the Hotel.

"All will be taken care of," replied Robin.

"Well, will this include meals?" Charles' stomach had been gurgling even before the frothy beer. His legs were weightless and he stumbled occasionally along the dirt street. A diet of cooked mice and muskrats clearly was insufficient for a young man of twenty-two years.

"Our hosts will arrange the food and lodging, along with everything else."

"Everything else?"

"You' asking too many questions!"

"It's an abbey, then?"

"Well, perhaps there are similarities."

"The Point" was one of several narrow tongues of land projecting between steep-sided coulees, far out into the Belly River valley. It was the longest such extension, and it reached out perilously until it finally gave out and plunged to the thicketed flats three hundred feet below. There were four houses strung out along this tongue of land.

The first was a massive, three-storey affair, painted gaudy mauve, with five or six windows along each floor. The next was nearly as large, and sported a canary yellow hue. The last two, situated where the land was barely wide enough to support the house straddling it, were painted similarly garish colours. The four brazen houses huddled together as if clinging to the edge of the precipice of the river valley.

"Bright colours for an abbey," Charles observed cheerfully.

"On the Belly flats below, there are more houses, and the girls can move up only upon being proven worthy of the honour," explained Robin who had lived on two continents. "Or residents from the Point can be sent down to the Flats under certain circumstances."

Charles laughed. "Like Jacob's ladder."

"I think more like Dante's inferno."

Charles quietly concluded both Silas and Robin were talking in riddles that evening. Perhaps they had been homesteading too long.

It was the great bridge that held fascination for Charles. It filled him with wonder, and its sheer height made him shiver with awe. While Silas and Robin were sampling a few more quarts of beer from the nearby brewery, he crawled out on one of the fingers of land among the coulees and gazed at its beams and girders.

The setting sun was a great blazing ball, playing hide and seek among the roofs of the four houses of the Point. For a long time, shading his eyes with the palm of his hand, Charles stood at the edge of the coulee adjacent to the first of the houses, and marvelled. The Bridge was a fine skein mesh strung from a wire. It was a spider's web shrouding the vast river gorge. He could hear the wind moaning through its steel girders. He had been told that one end was, in fact, twenty-one feet higher than the other, but he could not remember which was which, so he squinted even more.

"Watcha waitin' fer, sweetie?"

"Lookin' fer sumbuddy?"

Charles spun around, but his eyes met only the red glare of the evening sun.

"Over here, sweetheart!"

He peered at the walls of the houses, brash even in the dazing red of sunset. He waved and retreated amid the lurid cries.

"See ya' tonight, sweetie," called another voice, as Charles picked his way along the path up to town.

Two hours after the sun set, Charles, Robin and Silas walked among a thickening multitude of parishioners, some headed toward the four houses, some returning from them.

"Do you think they'll mind us dropping in on them so late?" asked Charles, feeling the mounting excitement of the polyglot throng surging around them. "Should we not have sent them a telegram?"

Perhaps each of the Houses represented a different sect, Charles reasoned, one for Catholics, one for Methodists and so forth. And a moment later, this was made evident by Robin's guiding them directly past the first House and the second House, and approaching the

third and penultimate House. Somewhere in the darkness, he heard several tones of laughter, and the clucking of chickens.

Charles and his friends stood at the door, while two other pilgrims departed noisily. Then they entered to the warm greeting of the Matron. She led them through a pair of red, hanging curtains, into a large, dimly lit sitting room, crowded with plush red sofas and magazines strewn about. On the walls were ornate lamps, and china plates propped up delicately on rich oak bureaus. He could not help but notice a huge upright piano, strewn with books and sheet music.

The ladies all smiled, said little and looked at the clock on the mantle. Robin introduced himself as being a gentleman and Earl from England, and Silas announced himself as being native to Minnesota. Charles declared he was a farmer from Medicine Hat, formerly of Toronto. The Matron introduced the ladies in her charge. Charles was surprised at the flowery patterns of the ladies' dresses and the voluptuous shapes it gave their bodies. These were worlds apart from the sisters of Mary Mother of the World convent he'd seen cross the alley behind the Methodist Church in Toronto.

No time was wasted in coming to the sacraments, noted Charles, as a large decanter was produced from a locked cupboard and an amber fluid was poured into three tiny glasses. When he sampled it along with Robin and Silas, Charles' face contracted into prune-like creases, this drawing a chorus of giggles.

"I'm a Methodist," he explained.

"You're not a pastor are ya?" said Sister Gladys, who was sitting across from him.

"Not at this time," he answered carefully, not revealing his secret passion to be appointed as pastor for Dyke Springs.

"Oh my," said May, the Sister sitting beside Sister Gladys. She was very nervous and kept swinging her leg up and down.

Anglican, thought Charles. Or worse.

And then he witnessed the strangest thing. No sooner had they drained their communion goblets, than Robin said something about "everything having been taken care of." Then, nodding curtly at both Charles and Silas, he departed from the room. And all that without a word about where he was going and what he was about to do. Stranger still, Sister Maisie got up and left with him.

"Lethbridge is a remarkable town," Charles observed.

"We don't get to see it much anymore," remarked Sister Mildred.

"Only on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons," pouted Sister Gladys.

"Many convents have curfews," reflected Charles.

But not five minutes after Robin departed, Silas too got up to leave, and then it was Sister Nellie who followed. Laughing hilariously at something, their voices and footsteps could be heard disappearing upstairs. After the boom of a closing door, there was silence.

"I don't know much about your...rites," Charles admitted.

"Are you sure you're a farmer?" asked Sister Mildred.

Charles silently cursed his friends. There was nothing like this in the Methodist faith, and it left him alone with very little to talk about. How long would they be gone? Should he ask to take part in what was going on upstairs? No, he decided. He would politely decline. But he would have words with Robin after the service. As for Silas, Charles never thought of him as being the least bit pious.

"Would you care to go upstairs now?" asked the Matron, glancing at the clock. She nodded at Mildred, who raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"Thank you," said Charles. "But perhaps when I feel more comfortable with the form of your particular service..."

The matron bristled. "I offer only the very finest..."

"Oh, certainly," he replied, anxious not to wound her. "I'm just not sure I'd know what to say or do."

"You're not from the Police, are you?" asked Sister Mildred, after a brief silence. The Sisters spent some time whispering among themselves.

A heavy silence descended on the entire room.

"Hot in here tonight, isn't it," said Myrtle after she had taken off her wrap then unbuttoned her blouse, exposing a little bit too much of her bare left shoulder.

It came to him in waves, much like the waves that gradually end a long and deep slumber, bringing the sleeper gently to the reality of harsh day. First it caused him to tingle under the armpits. Seconds later, he broke into a sweat.

"Watsa matter, Charlie?" asked Myrtle, after releasing two more buttons. "Cat got yer tongue?"

He would get Robin, he resolved. And Silas as well. They could have told him, and he would have had an honest chance to refuse or accept their offer right at the beginning, before they even got on the train. He didn't know how just yet, but in due course, he would extract revenge.

Maisie, a solid woman with a bust that flowed like a cornucopia over the seams of her dress, examined her nails spread before her like a hand of whist, and said she spent her mornings

doing fancy stitchwork and that sometime, if the opportunity presented, she'd like to offer lessons. The slender Lillie, on the other hand, spent much of her time reading, and when she woke up, which was often as early as one or two hours before noon, she tended to her garden just below her window.

"Lillie's too serious," pouted Myrtle, shifting about in her chair, looking toward the lonely door, crossing and uncrossing her slender legs.

"What do you do to amuse yourself, then?" asked Charles, trying desperately to shift the conversation away from his utter foolishness for being drawn into this entire affair.

"I write letters," said Myrtle. "To America, and sometimes even as far away as England and France."

"I play the piano," gushed May. "If we're not too busy, Pearl and I play and sing right until morning."

No one asked Charles what he did in his spare time. Eyes flitted toward the door whenever there was the sound of footsteps. Skirts were pulled together each time there was a knock on the door, and faces were dabbed and hair patted. They kept looking at the clock. More strangers arrived, and they wasted no time before bolting upstairs with one of the girls.

"I... I'm bringing out my fiancé," Thomas blurted. He thought this would put things in a more elevated perspective.

"Don't you bring her out here," cried Lillie, patting him urgently on the knee. "It's tough out there on the land!"

"Too hard," said Maisie. "You go back and marry her, in..."

"Toronto," Charles answered, shrinking back into the sofa.

"She won't have any friends out there," attested Myrtle.

"But we'll have good neighbours..."

"Pfff!" said May. "Hunyaks, I suppose, and—"

"Now May," warned Maisie.

"Well, she won't have anything in common with them."

"I hope at least you have a respectable house for her to come to," said Maisie. "Not just one of those tar-and-paper sheds some of you bachelors build, with one room."

"Well, it's got rooms in it," Charles protested, trying to picture his sod-covered dugout in its full elegance.

"Oh, marvellous," said Lillie, brushing her long, chestnut hair back and gazing up at the ceiling. "It's a sod-house, isn't it."

"Poor thing," said Myrtle. "Sitting out there all alone on the prairie."

"She'll be old before her time," said Irma, from the other corner of the room. "You go back to Toronto and marry her there."

"But..."

"Think of poor Martha," cried Mildred. "Out there in her bare feet, and two little ones and all."

"Left us, to get married to some sodbuster two years ago," explained the Matron. "Took 'er away to Blackie or somewheres."

"Nothing but a tar paper shed," said Gladys, "Out there on the bald prairie, and not a soul she can talk to but to say good mornin'."

"Yer in a dugout, ain't you. Oh, she won't stay out here a minute!"

The silences in the room became longer. "My goodness," cried Pearl. She looked at the timepiece she had pulled out of her bodice. "It's nearly eleven o'clock!"

"You're not one of them T.M.R.S. people?" asked Maisie suddenly.

Charles shrugged his shoulders.

"Temperance and Moral Reform Society," she explained. "I'm sure they got 'em in the Hat, too."

"Mr. Gillespie's such a dear," cooed Myrtle. She turned to Charles. "Joe Gillespie's our Chief of Police."

"Mr. Gillespie did his very best," agreed Maisie, straightening her bodice.

"But we still have Sergeants Egan and Silliker to deal with."

"Oh, they're really lumps o' sugar, deep down."

"Chief Joe had to pay us a call in...when was it? April? May?" began Maisie.

"*Landladies and girls are forbidden to appear on the streets of Lethbridge except on Tuesdays and Fridays between two and five o'clock in the afternoons,*" recited Myrtle, staring up at the ceiling.

"You're not allowed to go into town except two days a week?"

"Poor Chief Joe," sighed Lillie.

"It's really the booze they're after," declared Maisie. "Not us."

"Well then, why did Reverend Prosser say only last Thursday, *Drive them from the city!*"

"Not flowing with Christian forgiveness, I say."

"And Reverend Perry," Lillie reminded them. "Asking those poor aldermen to help *us unfortunate women toward leading of a pure and virtuous life*. It puts them in such a tight spot."

"Told them he had it on good word from the Salvation Army we're beyond redemption."

"Beyond redemption?" huffed Charles. "Nobody is beyond redemption, not even..."

"Our Mayor, Mr. Adams, is asking us to paint the houses on the Point more *subdued colours*," put in Myrtle. She went into a pile of newspapers and magazines on the table, among a mass of cigar trays and glasses, and pulled out the article.

"*And a policeman placed on patrol there*," quoted Lillie verbatim.

"I hope it's Egan," said Maisie. "Mr. Egan's a dear man."

"And Sgt. Silliker, too," said Lillie. "And Chief Joe."

"We've helped them too, though," said Maisie. "When Mr. Harris had bowel cancer, Pearl's house alone contributed fifteen dollars."

"Yes, and when the Howard's burned down and their family was put out on the streets, all four houses raised thirty-five dollars."

"That's most charitable," said Charles, relieved the controversy had moved away from his own engagements and conflicts.

"I think they're a most ungrateful lot," declared Myrtle. "After all we've done for them."

"And hippacrits," insisted Maisie. "When I think of that one alderman who was here last week and the week before..."

"And that Reverend last year," sighed Lillie, scratching her left leg for a moment.

"Though I suppose Mary Magdalene was one of us, wasn't she?"

"Who...who plays the piano?" Charles asked.

Lillie and Myrtle squealed with delight. Only a moment later, the flighty Lillie swept her frail figure over to the grand piano. She sat down, and after she flushed through pages of a well-thumbed songbook, the strains of *Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny, Oh!* burst out. One by one, the hosts and their guest gathered around the now booming piano.

Then Maisie cleared her throat, and began the opening aria of *La Traviata*.

"Ah, Verdi," cried Charles, and *La Traviata* broke forth on the piano.

Several more guests arrived, peered curiously into the sitting room, and gaped in bewilderment at the musicians. Mildred and Iris broke away, following a glance from May. They shrugged, joined their male visitors, and departed reluctantly upstairs.

"Your turn, sweetheart," said Lillie, closing the song sheet and swishing off the chair.

"I do so love a sensitive man," declared May as Charles opened with Robert Schumann's *Traumerei*.

"It gets passed on to the children," whispered Daisy.

More visitors arrived, entering noisily and then, hushed by the girls, were whisked quickly upstairs.

It was when he played one of his own songs, *By the Evening Starlight*, which he composed just before his journey west, that the girls nearly passed out with excitement.

"You wrote a song?"

"Girls, we have a real composer tonight."

"Never had one of them before."

"Better'n a Reverend or alderman any day of the week!"

"Do you know *A Mighty Fortress*?"

When Robin and Silas descended to the main room, it was throbbing with the lofty chords of Luther's great hymn.

"Wotthehell?" bleated Silas, peering through slit eyes into the room of jubilant praise.

"S'wounds!" Robin blinked. "You back already?"

"We're just started," cried Charles over the giggling and singing.

He kept his two tired friends there, listening to sacred songs for another hour. And for another half hour he forced them to listen to his own hymns and preludes.

When he and Robin and Silas stumbled from the verandah of the house on the Point, Charles could still hear the inmates' cries.

"You go back to Toronto and marry her right away now, you hear?"

"Let these other ruffians stay here and slave in the mud and pigshit."

"Yours is a lucky girl!"

"I love a man who plays Schumann and the rest of the romantics."

"It's so hard to find a good man!"

Soon all Charles could hear was the swish of their feet in the now moist grass.

"What's all this then?" asked Robin in the darkness.

"What've you got wot we don't?" wondered Silas. "And who's this shoe-man?"

"Now, what on earth made them fancy *you* so?"

"We... finished early," replied Charles, shrugging his shoulders carelessly. "And everyone was happy."

"Blimey," murmured Robin.

"Geewhittakers," said Silas.

One by one the lights on the Point blinked out, and the three men trudged up the steep path, lit by moonlight into the righteous part of town.

