

The Man From the Bitter Roots

An Outdoors Romance of a Battle for Fortune. By CAROLINE LOCKHART

CHAPTER I. The Ghost at the Banquet.

BRUCE BUILT was a taciturn, strong young fellow, who had fended for himself since early childhood. He hailed from the Bitter Roots, and for a year or more he had lived in the mountains of the Northwest with his chum, "Slim" Naudain, mining for gold, with ridiculously poor apparatus, in a region where he knew that good machinery would have enabled him to reap untold wealth.

Naudain was a querulous eccentric. The two partners quarrelled often, and with increasing ferocity. Slim at length, in a moment of homicidal mania, attacked Bruce with an axe. In the ensuing struggle, and through no fault of Bruce's, Naudain was killed.

In the pockets of the dead man Bruce found a letter written many years earlier by Naudain's little sister, Helen. Although Slim's death was due to no fault of his, yet Bruce sought to make amends by drawing up a document making Naudain's sister a joint owner in the gold claim.

Soon after this "Uncle Bill" Griswold, Bruce's friend, came to Bruce's cabin with an Eastern capitalist, T. Victor Sprudell, who had come to the Northwest on a big game hunt. Griswold had been hired as guide for him. Sprudell, in an early blizzard, they made their way to Bruce's cabin, but they had had to leave their Chinese cook, Toy, at their camp, as the Chinaman was too weak to travel.

Bruce volunteered to go back for the Chinaman, although, in that blizzard, the journey was almost certain death. Not could Griswold dissuade him. Before he went, Bruce made Sprudell promise to hunt up Naudain's sister, in the East, in case of Bruce's misadventure, and give her the deeds to the mine. Sprudell promised, but Bruce, distrusting the cold-eyed capitalist, had sought to make the matter sure by saying: "If you don't, I'll come back and haunt you."

Bruce did not come back. He had apparently died in the snow—he and the Chinaman. Long after the storm brought Toy into the nearest settlement—Ore City. Both were half dead when they reached the Hinds House there. And presently Bruce heard a rumor that Sprudell had sent a mining expert, named Dill, out to look over the ground.

As a matter of fact, Sprudell, feeling Bruce dead, had decided to keep the mine for himself, and had gone East to form a company to work it. On the way, he had consented to an interview for a "West newspaper" on his experiences in the blizzard. Miss Dunbar, a reporter who interviewed him, listened with respectful interest to his story, until he told of the death of "Slim" Naudain at Bruce's hands. Then her pretty face blanched with horror. For she was the "Helen" of the letter, Bruce's friend, Naudain's sister, Naudain's half sister.

Sprudell gave a banquet to flatter capitalists—a banquet at which he hoped to float his mining scheme. In the midst of the dinner, a waiter brought him word that Bruce Burt wished to speak with him.

Sprudell grew a curious, chafky white and stood quaking, as he tried to get going and turned quickly lest it be observed. Apologetically, to his guests: "One moment, if you please." Bruce remembered that Bruce Burt had said that he would come back and haunt him.

There was nothing of the wrath of phantoms, however, in the broad-shouldered figure in the broad-brimmed hat, which sprang forward with an approach with ominous intentness. With a faint semblance of cordiality Sprudell hastened forward with outstretched hand.

"I'm amazed! Astonished!" Bruce answered grimly, ignoring Sprudell's hand. "What about Naudain's sister? Her family? Do you know anything about them?" "Everything within my power, my friend—they're gone."

"Gone! You could not find them?" "Not a trace," Sprudell looked him squarely in the face. "You did your best?" "Yes, Burt, I did my best."

"Well, Bruce got up slowly, "I've got to go. I'll register at the hotel, and I'll be at this hotel, he said, so I'll see you in the morning and get the picture and the dust."

"In the evening, then, you'll excuse me, won't you? I have a little dinner on."

He lingered a moment to watch Bruce walk across the office and he noticed how he towered above the desk and shoulders above the clerk at the desk, and he saw also, how, in spite of his ill-fitting clothes so obviously ready-made, he commanded, without effort, the attention and admiration of which, in his heart, Sprudell knew that he himself had to pay and possess and scheme.

A thought which was so strong, so like a conviction, that it turned him cold, flashed into his mind as he looked, if, by any whim of Fate, Helen Dunbar and Bruce Burt should meet, all the material advantages which he had to offer would not count a straw's weight with the girl reporter in whom he had gradually become interested and at last had determined to marry. But such a meeting was the most remote thing possible. There were nearer, braver to be crossed, and Sprudell was anxious to be rid of his guests that Bruce stepped out of the elevator the next morning. Sprudell greeted him effusively, and this time Bruce, though with an "Aha!" in his eyes, took his hand in a firm grip. From the first he had a feeling which grew stronger as the forenoon waned, that Sprudell was "riding herd on him," guarding him, watching him, changing acquaintances. It amused him, when he was sure of it, for he thought that it was due to Sprudell's fear lest he betray him in his role of hero, though it was not because of this which was not uncommonly great should know him better than that. When he had the young man cornered in his office at the "Four Works," he seemed distinctly relieved and his vigilance relaxed. He handed Bruce his own letter to Naudain's heirs and a roll of notes, saying with a smile which was unaccountably gracious considering that the money was his own:

"I suppose it won't make any difference to you that your gold dust has been taken on a different form."

"Way, no," Bruce answered. "It's

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By Maurice Kettner



of a thief I've ever known. I've read that amount in her eager hand, that has the man who saved your rotten life. We know you for the lying braggart that you are. You made yourself out a hero when you were a weakling and a coward."

"You're right—you tell the truth when you tell me with the fact that I have no money, no influence, perhaps too faint a smile, as you say, but brute strength; yet somehow, I'll beat you!" He stopped closer and looked deep into the infatuated eyes that had grown as hard as granite, reiterated: "Somehow I'm going to win!"

To say that Abe Cone and Mr. Herman Florsheim departed in haste, and power waiting for Bruce to go, that he might close the door.

"I heard him talk like that before," he shrilled a shoulder and looked Bruce up and down at his coat too tight across the chest, his sleeves, too short for his length of arm, at his clumsy miner's shoes, as though to emphasize the gulf which lay between Bruce's condition and his own. Then with his eyes bright with vindictiveness and his hateful smile of confidence upon his lips, he stood in his setting of affluence and power waiting for Bruce to go, that he might close the door.

CHAPTER II. Thorns—and a Few Roses.

HELEN DUNBAR was exercising that doubtful economy, walking to save care-fare, when she saw an acquaintance, Mae Smith, with her eyes fixed upon her in deadly purpose making a bee-line across the street.

"What's that?" she asked, looking at the woman who was making a bee-line across the street. "I've been over to the 'Claremont office,'" Mae Smith chattered. "Left some fashion notes for the Sunday good stuff—but I don't know whether you'll use 'em; that kid that's holding down McMenigley's job don't buy much space. He's got it in for me anyhow. I beat him on a convention story when he was a cub. I was just going down to your office."

"Yes? I'm on the way to the doctor's."

"You don't look well, that's a fact, Steve."

"Helen smiled faintly. 'I do feel miserable. Like every one else, I got a drudging at the Thanksgiving party.'"

"That's too bad," Mae Smith murmured absently. "What was a cold compared to the fact that she needed two dollars and a half? 'Say, I wonder if I could get a little loan for a few days? You know I bought this suit on the installment plan and I'm two weeks behind on it. The collector has come yesterday and said he'd have to take it back. I can't go around getting fashion notes in my kimono, and the milkman wouldn't leave a milk can if I held for the last time. I'm up against it and I thought maybe—'

"How would a stranger go about raising money here for a mining proposition?"

A quizzical expression came into the clerk's eyes and a faint smile played about his mouth. He looked Bruce over with some personal interest before he answered.

"If I was the stranger," he said dryly, "I'd get a piece of lead pipe and stand in an alleyway about 11:30 one of those dark nights. That's the only way I know to raise money for mining purposes in this town."

Bruce stepped back abruptly and his dark face reddened.

"Sorry I bothered you," he eyed the clerk steadily, "but I made a mistake in the way I sized you up."

"I apologize," he said frankly, "I haven't any business to get into what you are doing. But the fact is, the town's been worked to death with mining schemes. Nearly every one's been bitten to the point of hydrophobia, and I don't think you can raise a dollar without friends."

"I wouldn't say I had much show if that's the case," Bruce answered. "For I'm a long way off my range. I've never promised anything more important than a theatre party or a motor trip," the clerk vouchsafed, "but I should think some of the brokers who handle mining stocks would be the people to see. There's a good firm two doors above. I can give you the names of a few people who sometimes take 'flyers' on the side, but you won't ask for anything that isn't pretty strongly endorsed by some one they know. There's always the chance, though," he continued, looking Bruce over appreciatively, "that some one may take fancy to you personally. I've noticed that personality sometimes wins where facts and figures couldn't get a look in."

"That lets me out again, I've no silver tongue. I've talked with too few people to have much fluency."

The clerk did not contradict him, though he was thinking that Bruce could thank his personality for the time he was giving him and the pains he was taking to help him.

"Here," handing Bruce a hastily written list, "you needn't bother me, but if you don't go into anything that isn't pretty strongly endorsed by some one they know, there's always the chance, though," he continued, looking Bruce over appreciatively, "that some one may take fancy to you personally. I've noticed that personality sometimes wins where facts and figures couldn't get a look in."

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emotion which he seemed to entertain for the opportunity given him was gratitude, and his refusal to be interested amounted to a curt dismissal.

The second interview, during which Bruce was cross-examined by a cold-eyed gentleman with a cool, imperious voice, closed behind him with a realization with tolerable clearness his total unpreparedness. What engineer of recognized standing had reported upon the ground? None! To what extent, then, had the building been sampled? How many test-pits had been sunk, and how far to bed-rock? What was the yardage? What were the certified accounts, and his engineer's estimate for hydro-electric installation? What transportation facilities?

Bruce, still dazed by the onslaught, had turned and looked at the door which closed behind him with a brilliancy which seemed to say "Good riddance," and muttered, thinking of the clerk's one sanguine suggestion: "Brace yourself! I might as well be a heptapod!"

"Day after day he plodded, his dark face set in grim lines of purpose, following up clues leading to possible information which he had gathered there, and always with the one result. What credentials had he? To what past successes could he point? None? Ah, good day."

One morning Bruce opened his eyes and the conviction that he had leaped into his mind as though it had been waiting like a cat at a mouse hole to pounce upon him the instant of his return to consciousness. "You have failed. You have got to give up! You are done!" The words pounded into his brain affected him like hammer blows over the heart.

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He could see himself leading his horse and carriage to the door, his blacking and the tatters of his coat bobbing through the rapids with the blackened coffee-pot, the frying pan, and large cans lying in the bottom, while Sprudell, with his bewitching womanish smile, watched his ignominious departure. Bruce drew his sleeve across his damp forehead. If there was any one thing which could lead him to further action it was this picture.

He arose and dressed slowly. Bruce had known fatigue, the weakness of youth, but never anything so debilitating, heavy-footed depression which comes from intense despondency and hopelessness.

His finances had gone down he had no money left, until he had been eaten permanently on the top floor of the hotel where the hall carpets and furniture were given their first try-out before going into the discard.

The only thing which stopped him from going further was the roof. He had no means of leaving what the original colors in his rug had been rays by an inch or two from the wall, and every brass handle on the drawers of his dresser came out at the touch. The lone faucet of cold water had become a hot steam, and he stood on a chair each time he raised the split green shade. When he wiped his face he felt through the shade a hot, red glow, and he never got over a feeling of surprise at meeting his hands in the middle, and the patched sheets on his bed looked like city plots laid out in squares.

He came to the door of his room, and the suggestion of a knock, decay, down-at-the-heel poverty, added to his depression. He never had any such feelings about his rough hair, filled with cedar boughs and his pipe table as he had about this iron bed, with its scratched enamel and tin lining, which developed nobody into thinking them brass, for the wobbly dresser that he swore at heartily each time he turned back a linearal trying to claw a drawer open.

Bruce had vowed that so long as a stone remained unturned he would stay and turn it, but he had run out of stones. Three untried addresses were left in his left hand, and he looked at them as he ate his frugal breakfast, questioning as to which was nearest.

"If I'd eaten as much beef as I have ever since I came to this town," he meditated as he dragged his unwilling feet up the street, "I'd be a 'shipper' in prime A1 condition. I've a notion I won't put much weight since it became the quiet article of my diet. If thirty days of quiet will start a man what will six weeks of crack do to him? I doubt, if I will ever entirely give up my self-respect back unless," he added with the glimmer of a smile, "I go around with a lick some of them before I leave."

"I suppose," his thoughts ran on, "that it's a part of the scheme of fate that a person must eat his share of beef before he gets in a position to make some one else eat it, but I don't know." "I've a notion," with a wry face, "I've a notion I won't put much weight since it became the quiet article of my diet. If thirty days of quiet will start a man what will six weeks of crack do to him? I doubt, if I will ever entirely give up my self-respect back unless," he added with the glimmer of a smile, "I go around with a lick some of them before I leave."

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(To Be Continued.)