

The Story that didn't come true

By LAWRENCE MOTT

Copyright, 1907, by the New York Herald Company—All Rights Reserved.

SPREAD out before her, clad in vells of purple wavering mists, the Manitoba wheat plains stretched away to great distances—one apparently endless solitude that was deep, silent and darkening fast in the twilight. The air was full of golden scent, those subtle fragrances which come after the ploughing burdened the atmosphere, mingled with the scent of early rosebuds that peered timidly from their green nests on the bushes about the house.

Clare Dale rested her cheek against a cool, white painted piazza post, her eyes wandering, travelling aimlessly over space of earth, and she sighed. Then, as a droning whisper at first that grew to sounds like those of bee's wings, a long line of glitters flashed across the horizon far away to the westward. It was the Transcontinental Express, eastward bound. She watched it out of sight, listened to the droning whisper fading into silence.

"Fred, dear Fred," she whispered, sitting down on the steps, a tiny night air moving her hair slightly. Thoughts, memories and waking dreams passed slowly. She remembered it all—when he first came from the East; when she first saw him, that night her father—old man Carew—had taken him on as helper in reaping time; how he had seemed to her then; how kind and tactful always, as her father's employe, he had been. And, incident by incident, she followed up the six years of days and weeks and months that lay between the beginning and now, taking the pleasure that only a woman can from little things that have gone into the vistas of a past. Men are men; they have everything in life, and they forget in the mad rush. But a woman remembers always. "And I'm so far beneath him," she whispered again.

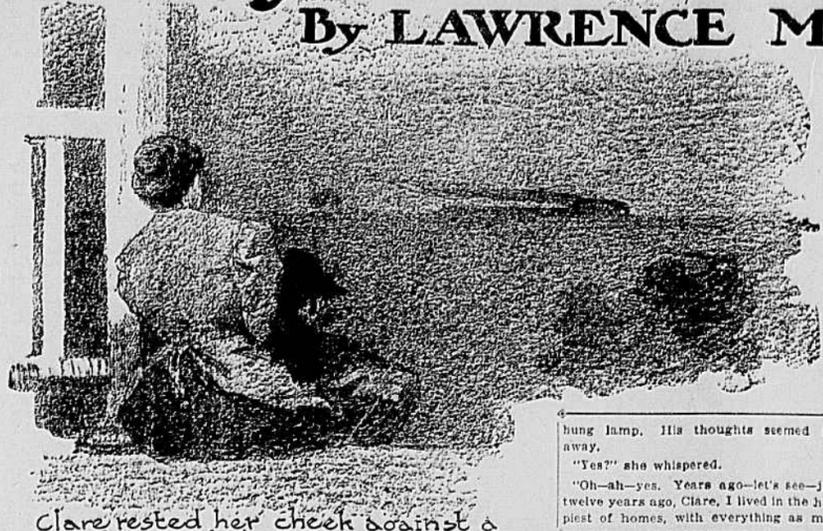
Frederick Dale, from the East, as he had at first described himself to old man Carew, was one of those rare characters among men who live apparently to help others and yet do nothing material for fellow creatures. He could not when he came West, for he was bitterly poor. Kind words, little acts of thoughtfulness, nursing a reaper that had cut himself badly, doing double work for a driver to save the man's pay, these and many other things Frederick Dale did; and in their doing he avoided thanks, seeming to take his reward from the fact that he had done them. Small wonder that he was loved by every one. Small wonder that after four years Carew sold him at easy payment an excellent wheat farm and fitted him out with reapers, horses and seed for the first sowing. At the end of that year he had asked Clare to marry him. She had known for a long time that he loved her, and she knew her own feelings only too well during those years of silence between them.

Sitting there in the soft chill of the gloom she could hear his words, as though they had been spoken but yesterday:—"Clare, dear, I have not been able to ask before, nor was it just that I should, but I think—there he had put his hand quietly on hers—"that we have understood each other for a long time." That was all, but those words had meant so much to her, were so full of meaning to her now, that the very tones of his voice rang in her brain. That was a year ago. Then the boy came, and she saw again the delight in his eyes; and the passionate tenderness with which he had first taken the bit of humanity in his arms.

But in her well of happiness there was one drop that tainted her waters of mental peace. She was just old man Carew's girl, while he—ah, he was clever, educated, everything. Once, and once only, she had been at the station across the prairie with him on their ponies, when the express came in. She had seen him talking with men that got out of a beautiful car, the last one on the train. He had asked her to come, but she was frightened and slipped away in the crowd. He seemed hurt afterward, but never reproached her. She remembered telling him that she was afraid. Since then he had been even more kind and devoted. Often she saddled Fawn in the evening when he was on the fields—the grand little mare he had given her on her last birthday—and loped over the furrows to where two rigid lines of steel came as one out of the West and disappeared as one in the East. There she would wait until the express roared by, the ground shaking beneath her. She thought in this way to get glimpses of "his people." Twenty years old, born and bred on the prairie, she was young and crude in everything but her love for him. She felt that she was crude, she knew that she was ignorant, and it saddened her to realize that she could not appreciate the things he did, the way he talked, the books he read. Only a girl of Nature's own, with nothing but her love and her life.

He had talked to her in the long winter evenings when the snow struck viciously against the windows and the wind tugged at the house, told her of strange lands across the ocean where he had been. He read to her from books that he called Shakespeare and George Eliot and Dickens. She enjoyed them so; and he tried to explain the characters to her, but she could not understand.

Sometimes when he was away she peeped into these books and read along slowly; the effort lost the effect for her and she closed them sadly. That she was beautiful she knew, because he had told her so, but she didn't care. To make herself what he was, to be like him, was the great cry of her soul. She got spelling books and a copy book and worked hard, so hard that her eyes ached and her temples throbbled. Then one night—she remembered the surprise—he was tired and could not write to Winnipeg.



Clare rested her cheek against a cool white painted piazza post.

"Tell me," she had said, and he detested to her. His words came strong. "Dear girl, all this work for me?" "Yes, and my life for you," she had answered. From then on she learned rapidly, and they read together every evening when the Chinese servant had gone to bed.

All these minute details of their life came to her to-night, each bringing its wee fragrant breath of pleasure that moved ever so gently through the long arches of memory and down the great aisles of the past.

"Plat-a-plat, Plat-a-plat," she jumped up at the sound of a horse's feet. "He's coming," running in the house. "Lao! Lao!" she called.

"Tlomen, Missy Tlaren!" The little Chinaman popped from the kitchen. "Mr. Dale is coming—supper ready?" "Ailee Peadee—fine!"

She ran out again. Yes—her lips trembled—yes, he was coming. She heard him dismount, heard his words to the stable boy.

"Dearest girl!" "My own!" "Well, well, well!"—he shook himself—"pretty late, honey, but I had to arrange about the steam reaper, and the wires are all busy to-day for some reason; so sorry. How's the lad?"

In answer she opened a door in the hallway quietly; they tiptoed in. A shaded night lamp gave out its warm glow from the corner of the room. In the faint light they leaned over a tiny crib, she on one side, he on the other. No sound save for the almost imperceptible breathing of the child. One little hand was on the covert; it grasped a white rattle. The man touched it gently. "My boy, my boy," he whispered.

"Mine!" she whispered back. He looked up at her, with a world of sweetness and strength in his eyes.

"Ours!" They crept out. "I'll run up and take off these dusty things," he laughed. "Go on with supper, I shan't be long!"

She carved the broiled chicken carefully, as she had learned to do by watching him, and plucked out his choice bits—a wing and a "drum stick." Every least comfort that she could put in his path she sought; finding them here and there, she always placed them where he would see with the least trouble.

He bounded in then, full of life, teeming with health, a magnificent specimen of man. "Now then, Honey—" he kissed her—"what have you for a hungry being? Ah, chicken? You never forget what I like, do you? Dearest!" They moved apart guiltily when Lao burst in, for they were not long enough married to be hardened!

"The 'Chink' seemed not to notice, but he saw, and was delighted in his quaint Oriental way. The also eyes of jet black fairly glistened.

"Beggee muchee sorree int'lupt!" He deposited a plate of toast and some baked potatoes on the table. The man and the girl laughed.

"Go to bed Lao, quick!" "Light away, Misses Dale's, light away! Nightee, nightee!" "Good night," they answered.

"Sweetheart, have you been lonely?" "Sur— of course," she caught herself. "I'm always lonely without you." He waved a kiss to her and ate heartily.

"It's been a hard, long day," he said, as he sipped his coffee and lighted a pipe; "but, puff—puff—puff—puff, I've sold the Wheeler land for \$3,000."

"Six thousand dollars?" She was aghast at the greatness of their gain. "Yes—here," he pulled a long case from his inner waistcoat pocket—"there it is!" He counted the money out on the white cloth in bills of \$50.

"But it only cost us \$1,000." "True, dear, but with the improvements and drains that I have put on, it is well worth the price. Now, you see, I can pay off the whole of your dad's last payment for our home; isn't that fine?" She moved round the table to him.

"You are so—" she hesitated for words. "So what?" "Oh, so everything!" He lifted her hands to his lips.

"And you are so true, so beautiful, dear." She bent her head shyly. "You always say that way Fred, but me, I—" she knelt by his chair—"somehow I am 'shamed before you."

"Clare, dear, you mustn't say those things, promise that you will not do so again!" The girl shook her head quickly. "I think of 'em just the same."



She got on her knees and crept to Fred's side.

"Why?" He took her face between his hands. "Because you're educated—a gent—oh, Fred, why don't you tell me, why haven't you ever told me about your—home—out East?" She slurred over the word "home" very gently. Dale turned away, his clean chiselled face sombre. He breathed deeply, throwing his head back, compressing his lips in a rigid line. She saw the change.

"There, now I've asked too much." And tears gathered in the big gray eyes. "No, you haven't, Clare, listen." While he lighted his pipe again she drew up a footstool and sat on it at his knees.

Peace and quiet in the little room that was lit by the soft beams of a low

that life, health and youth give. It was one long joy of travel, of ease, of luxurious study. I used to write—once.

"Write what?" The girl's eyes were absorbed with interest. "So-called novels, and stories, and—" "Like Mr. Dickens' books?"

"Hardly, dear." He smiled sadly—"but it was my delight to create beings under my pen; to see them grow, their pleasures, and—finally—their great happiness. I wrote a story about a man who came out West, when I was fifteen years old—just as I have done,—and who married a girl—just as I have done." She nestled closer to him. "But that is as far as the truth of my tale goes, because the hero

honestly, I wonder if you ever realize that? I hope always that you will see, even though our lives are separated, that I left it all because I could not stand the taint. Possibly I was a coward to have done so, but freedom, in a new world, even though it be a lonely one, is better than the other. I am lonely for you, lonely for your love, lonely for your advice; but I cannot go back now. One letter from you in months, dear; that's all I have to bind me to your physical presence. Yet you know where I am. You!"

The girl could not choke a sob. He awoke from his dream speech instantly. "Why, my little girl, my Clare!" He drew her toward him, smoothing the masses of hair that tumbled over her forehead. "Cry—"

"That's right, partner. Now just let me

relieve yer of that wallet yer have in yer vest!" Dale backed slowly round the table toward a desk that loomed in the corner.

"Hate to lose it, don't ye, but I'm dead broke and goster git it. I've bin watchin yer all afternoon!"

Dale caught the girl's eyes. She understood and, as the masked figure approached her husband, she leaned forward and slipped her hand under the tablecloth.

Crang! A window pane smithered as the bullet entered from the outside. She sank to the floor.

The masked man turned his head for just an instant, but it was enough. Dale got his long Colt from the desk. Then it was Bang! Bang! Crang! Bang! till the atmosphere was thick with powder fumes that hung, nauseatingly apart. The lamp was shot out by the gun outside.

"God, I'm hit!" Dale muttered as his left arm refused duty. In the darkness he

ing? What for, dear? I didn't mean to keep you waiting for my story so long. I didn't, honey. Now, let's see. I stopped when I came to the end of my first story. That was when I—"

She stood up quickly. "You've told me everything, boy, and I've thought it over a more times than I can count. Now I know."

"Know what?" He too rose. "Know that you're longing for your mother and your father; know that I ain't no it wife for you; know that you might a been a fine story writer an' had lots of money an' things!"

"Who told you?" He took her hands firmly—aye, a bit roughly. She looked at him in awe. "You just said it all—there," pointing to his chair.

"Clare, you are mad, girl—dreaming!" "Am I?" she laughed bitterly. "Then how comes it that you said," and she repeated almost word for word his whispered thoughts.

He gathered himself rapidly. "Sweetheart, it was I, then, who dreamt. You know how I love you, dear! There is no more truth in those dream words than in my first story of the robbers." She made one step toward him.

"Hands up, quietly!" Dale looked toward the doorway. Two cold and steady 4's shone round and vicious. The girl closed her eyes.

"Sit down, honey," Dale ordered, as his hands went over his head. She obeyed.

"Dick, Dick, I' Mountera be comin'; mind yerself!" Then the sound of horses' feet on the earth. Rat-a-plat, rat-a-plat, till it died away.

Dale heard the jingling of spurs, the rattle of carbines and the hard breathing of horses as the Royal Northwest Mounted Police swept by.

Silence again. "Say, Misser Dale, bossie p'lecman gone catches, catches; gettee up!" He got to his feet slowly. The Chinaman struck a match.

"Clare, my darling!" The girl opened her eyes, blinking as Lao set the chimneyless wicks of the lamp aflame.

"You're hurt, boy?" "And you, sweetheart?"

Tiny drops of red crept from her shoulder and side, oozing through the mangle, they dragged their way to her finger tips.

"Only a touch, Fred." She sat up. He, overcome with the pain in his chest and arm, fainted.

She and the Chinaman looked at each other while the room slowly became dense with the sooty tones of the lamp flaring in the breeze that came through the broken panes.

The girl thought hard, then—"Saddle Fawn, ride for the doctor; hurry, Lao!" Her voice was trembly and she put her hand on the table to support herself.

"All right, Missy; Lao go quickie!" She heard him tearing about the kitchen; he reappeared in a ragged coat, his pigtail tied around his neck, and an old pair of high boots.

"Me go, bye!" The room moved about her; she got on her knees and crept to Fred's side. Having but one useful arm, she made long work of pulling his coat and shirt apart. Sometimes she could see his face, sometimes it was vague and blurred, so great was her pain and dizziness.

"I must help him!" She clenched her jaws and struggled on. Then she could not fight against the agony and lay down beside him, her face on his arm.

"Freddy, boy, Freddy!" she whispered. "I can't help ye, I can't, an' I guess your love is finished for me. Your story didn't come true, 'cause I can't nurse ye an' live happy ever after." A long pause, her breath coming in little, hard gasps. She felt for his face with her one good hand and caressed it with passionate tenderness. "Fred, I'm sufferin' bad, but I don't care, 'cept for our boy, I—" He moved restlessly, lifted his head.

"What happened, Clare?" He looked around the room. "I'm here." The tiny whisper came to his wandering senses as from a great distance.

"Don't worry about me, darling. I'm all right. Where were you when the fight was on?"

"He's forgotten everythin' 'cause o' his hurt," she muttered. "I ain't goin' to fret him." He groaned and his head fell back. "A drop of whiskey, please." The girl took a deep breath, tensioned her muscles to act and stood up.

"I must—I must!" Always with the thought of him, she kept the side of her dress that was bloodstained away from his sight and poured the whiskey with her left hand. She reached it to his lips and he drank it all.

"Thanks so much, dearest!" His eyes closed. "You see, honey, ha!" he chuckled brokenly, "my story has come true; robbers—you'll nurse me—we'll live—isn't it funny? Kiss the boy for me to-night, and don't tell him Dad's hurt, will you?"

"No." Her head was on his arm again. "Sent for doctor?" "Yes."

"The money's safe? It's for you and the lad."

"Ye-es." She felt herself getting weaker; realized that her wits were flying. "Freddy—you'll always love—the boy—our—boy?"

"Of course, we'll love him together."

A spasm of pain passed through her. "I can't tell him," she breathed, and continued with difficulty. "If you hadn't married me you wouldn't have got hurt out here, an' you'd be with your mother now."

"Dear Mother! But, honey, she'll realize before it's too late how much I love you, and everything will be right again."

She put her hand to her side and felt the hot spurs. "You're not sorry you married me, Freddy?"

"Sorry? Sweetheart—I'm so glad, so thankful, because I've been a better—man since. You have taught me unselfishness—yes—everything that is good in the—the-world. I'm weak, dear. As for—more—whiskey—till—the doctor comes, please?"

She tried bravely to get up. No use. "You'll—love—an—watch—over—the-boy?"

"What?" He couldn't hear her words. Everything was dark and quiet to her. She felt herself as if drifting—drifting in a cool peace. No pain, nothing but her love for him, and that made her so happy. She tried to repeat, but her lips, somehow, would not obey.

"Say—you—love—me." He got his face to hers with effort.

"Ah! Don't worry, dear." She pushed her face weakly nearer to him and was still.

The night wind, growing stronger from the east blew the flames of the lamp powerfully till they lit a black stain on the brass support. The bitter taste of powder was yet noticeable.

"I won't worry, darling, go to sleep—on—my—arm. I've writ—ten a—letter,—she'll come—and—we'll—go home—together—with—our—boy!" With half shut eyes she looked at her beside him. "Poor—little—girl, she's worn—out taking care of—me. Fun—ny my tale—can't—be—true—thought—funny—"

He breathed deeply then and slept from pure weariness and pain.