

PRAIRIE

the true story of a 19th century
Canadian pioneering family



P V Eyre-Walker

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An excerpt:

After the Herd Law was passed, the acres of crops rapidly increased and such a quantity of wheat and oats was produced, marketing became a problem until a branch railway – the Manitoba and North-Western – was run from Portage la Prairie, not very far from Winnipeg, up through the recently opened area to Yorkton over the border.

This single line was primarily to bring wheat out, and for years ran only one mixed passenger and goods train per week.

It passed through Millwood, but what was of more importance to the Doctor's family, to reach Millwood it passed the end of the Farlands Valley on a very high trestle bridge. This bridge was one hundred feet high in the centre, and a quarter of a mile long, with no railing – just the one railway track across it. It didn't occur to the Doctor that his children would try to walk across it until he heard them discussing it – having already been over! He explained the danger, and forbade them to ever go on it again.

No. 6 engine was the first to pass through, and when the Winnipeg 'express' began to run it arrived in Millwood at about nine o'clock on Saturday nights, so the children never saw it. Consequently if a 'special' passed – that is a long train of 'empties' going up for, or down with wheat – the whole school was turned out to watch it.

One hot August afternoon a 'special' pulled up in Millwood and a white-faced engineer got down. The Doctor happened to be in the village and as the long train drew out, the gang foreman came to him.

“The engineer has just reported he has killed two people on the trestle bridge. They were in the middle of the bridge when he came around the curve, and he couldn't possibly stop in time. I

have to go and investigate. Will you come too?"

So the gang foreman and the Doctor piled onto the hand-car and went back to the bridge.

To their relief there was no sign of blood on the bridge and no bodies to be found below it.

"That's peculiar," said the foreman. "If anyone was on the bridge they were bound to be killed as there is nothing to hold on to and no room to stand. He must have been dreaming!"

The Doctor hurried home, but to his relief his family was all accounted for.

Ernest and Ruby – now aged fourteen and eight – were the ramblers, and went down the valley each day for the cattle.

"Did any of you children see the 'special' go to Yorkton today?" their father asked.

"Yes," said Ernest, "Ruby and I did." Then he added hastily, "There must have been nearly one hundred empties.

The Doctor paused. Why didn't Ernest know exactly how many? They always counted them!

"I was in Millwood when the train came in," he said, "and the engineer reported he had seen two people on the bridge but he couldn't stop and they had been killed."

The family was horrified.

The Doctor continued, "I went with the gang to investigate, but we could find no trace of the people." A pause. "Ernest, where were you when you saw the train?"

Silence.

"Did you go onto the bridge?"

"Yes, father."

"Don't you remember I forbid you to do so?" the Doctor said sternly. "Tell me what happened."

"Well – Ruby and I hunted all over for the cattle and couldn't find them. We'd been across the valley once. Then we saw them lying in the scrub away on the other side. We were hot and tired. No trains were due – we listened – so we took the short cut."

There was a pause.

"Tell me what happened."

“Well, we were in the middle of the bridge when the train came tearing round the corner onto it! We had listened – we never heard it – and we never had time to run back.”

Again Ernest paused, and now he showed signs of the strain he had been under – of the panic he must have felt as the train rushed down upon them.

“How did you escape?” asked the Doctor.

“There was only one thing we could do – that was, get down and hang by our hands until the train passed over. So I let Ruby down, then I got down – I could just touch a crosspiece with my toe, but Ruby couldn't – she just hung by her hands! I never thought the bridge would sway and shake so much – I thought she would be shaken off!” The anxiety he felt showed in his voice.

“What happened then?” asked his father.

“Oh – once the train had gone,” Ernest replied with obvious relief, “I managed to climb up again, then I pulled Ruby up by her wrists and we went off the bridge.”

There was dead silence – the parents thinking of the acute danger the children had been in – saved by their own courage and presence of mind.

Finally the Doctor said, “I am so thankful you are safe – so grateful you were spared, I won't punish you this time. I think you have learned your lesson! But if ever you go on that bridge again – look out!”

To read the rest, buy the book!