

*Laurie*  
*of the*  
*"Plainsman"*

**Hulbert Footner**

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* Laurie of the “Plainsman”

*Date of first publication:* 1910

*Author:* Hulbert Footner (1879-1944)

*Date first posted:* Feb. 20, 2022

*Date last updated:* Feb. 20, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220251

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# Laurie of the “Plainsman”

## LAURIE OF THE “PLAINSMAN”

### A STORY OF WESTERN CANADA

*By Hulbert Footner*

The *Plainsman* occupies the last store of the Carver Block, a one-story row of plate-glass fronts on A Street, east, ending at the railway tracks. The Carver Block, all of five years old, begins to wear an air of haggard antiquity in the brand new streets of Blackfoot: most of the paint has peeled off the towering cornice, and more than one jagged rent lets daylight through that apparently solid front. The curious thing about the buildings of Blackfoot, as of other Western towns, is that they seem to pass direct from the freshness of the trowel to the snuffiness of second-hand building materials. As to this particular store, it needs no sign to identify it as the home of a newspaper—the excessive griminess does that. A flannelette curtain, once a rich green, but more recently a bilious yellow, hangs across the back of the show window, which contains nothing but the accumulations of five years' dust and a framed card of job printing samples dating from the same era. Upon opening the door, the characteristic warm, pungent smell of printers' ink and fresh pulp paper greets the nostrils, lent individuality in this case by a rich undertone of ripening bananas—for part of the back premises is sublet to a wholesale fruiterer, who conducts his business via the rear alley. There is a little sanctum in one corner of the shop, and a counter crosses from that to the wall. Damaged and unsold copies of the *Plainsman* for a year back are heaped everywhere.

Frank Ardry, editor and proprietor, was doubled over the counter, with his chin in his palms. It was Saturday afternoon, and the staff had distributed itself in quest of amusement, except that the chunking of the monotype in the basement gave notice that Leonora Colpas, the typesetter, was still at work. Frank was a good-looking youth, with a round head, broad over the ears and smoothly thatched with black; and bright, sophisticated gray eyes.

His air of high and humorous assurance, brooking no opposition, was the *Plainsman's* chief asset. But just now his colors were hauled down.

It was not that the *Plainsman* was in any worse case than ordinary: the sword of bankruptcy had always hung suspended by a hair over that devil-may-care publication. Frank had secured it from the last proprietor in exchange for a polo pony, and was considered to have received the worst of the bargain. No, he had succeeded in paying his employees for the week; it was simply the “elevation” that ailed him. I should explain that the altitude of Blackfoot is held accountable for most that goes amiss there. Frank was blue—richly and luxuriously blue.

So intent was he on his gloomy thoughts that he did not see a small figure come in through the open doorway and approach the counter.

“Good afternoon,” she said.

Frank jerked his head up. His astonished and delighted eyes took in a small, slim girl who looked seventeen and was undoubtedly older. The most remarkable thing about her was the brave, friendly expression of her blue eyes. She plainly wished to ingratiate herself, but without abating any point of personal pride. The next remarkable thing was her hair, the quantity of it and its color—most like raw mahogany, but exactly like nothing else under the sun. This enframed a face cut with delicate certainty of outline, with a healthy, pale skin and lips fresher and sweeter than opening crimson petals. The vision was clad in close-fitting green, which became her rarely, and a crafty little hat of the same color.

To Frank the sight of her was like the unhoped-for granting of a secret prayer. He flushed to the roots of his hair.

“My name is Laurie Gray,” she said with an engaging candor—she had the cheerful, incisive voice of a schoolboy. “I’m looking for something to do. Can you give me any work on the paper?”

“Why, yes!” said Frank instantly, the possibility of refusing anything to one so pretty never occurring to him. Some time afterwards he added, “What can you do?”

“I never worked before,” she said, “but now I have to. My mother and I have come West to make our fortunes.”

Her cool, cheerful frankness turned the point of sentimentality. Young Frank was compelled to be businesslike. It was soon decided that Laurie was to cover “locals,” meetings, sermons, and society. The glint of a fanatic

enthusiasm shone in her eyes as this fascinating program was unrolled in her hearing.

“I have dreamed of being a reporter,” she murmured.

It may be remarked that there was more danger in a conversation like this than in whole bucketfuls of sentiment. Quite so! The red head and the black unconsciously drew closer across the counter, and in smiles flying back and forth and in the kind, shining eyes, already there promised something a good deal tenderer than the customary relation between employer and employee.

They were interrupted by an ominous “’Hem!” from behind Frank’s back. He looked over his shoulder apprehensively. At the head of the basement steps stood Miss Colpas, the typesetter, in her lace coat and picture hat, the plumes of the latter seeming to bristle with indignation. Leonora was a veteran pioneer of the West; without undertaking to state just how old she was, I may say, well-seasoned. She was likewise westernly free of speech and uncommonly well able to take care of herself. Ordinarily she was amiable, and ruled the males of the *Plainsman*, including the proprietor, with a rough, bantering coquettishness; but just at present she was very much on her dignity, pale under her rouge, and with black eyes glittering dangerously.

“Pardon me if I intrude,” she drawled.

“Not at all,” said Frank uncomfortably. “This is Miss Gray, the new reporter,” he explained.

“Indeed, I was not aware!” said Miss Colpas grandly. She took a good fifteen seconds to look Laurie up and down. “Charmed!” she murmured as insultingly as she could, and made her way languidly to the street door. With her hand on the latch she turned. “I think you call for me at eight,” she said indifferently to Frank, and went her ways. The door must have slipped out of her hand, or something; the impact was terrific.

Laurie had been watching her with cool wonder. “Look here,” she said with her inimitable directness, “if I’m going to be here, I ought to know where I stand. What’s the matter with her?”

Laurie’s frankness demanded a return in kind. “You see,” Frank explained, “she and her brother are the only ones in town who can run the monotype, and she knows it. Besides——”

“Well?” prompted Laurie.

“She has money,” said Frank. “Made it speculating in real estate during the boom. She holds a chattel mortgage on the plant down-stairs.”

“H’m!” said Laurie.

“So I—er—take her about to the subscription dances to keep her in a good humor about the interest,” he blurted out.

Laurie took note of his rueful grin, and suddenly her face broke up like a sunny pool under a gust from the west. She cocked up her pretty chin and laughed a peal like a boy. Such delicious, heart-disquieting music had surely never been heard within those grimy precincts.

On her very first day Laurie made herself an important factor of the *Plainsman*. As she crossed the Estevan bridge on her way to work she witnessed an accident, brought about, it might have seemed, for the especial benefit of the fledgling reporter. The only automobile in town, property of one Mackinnon, a real-estate agent and unpopular, was to blame for the ruin of an immigrant farmer’s household goods. Laurie, warm with generous indignation, got half a column out of it. Womanlike, she discovered the owner’s vulnerable point, and turned her pen in the wound. The reason the automobile made so much noise, said Laurie, was because it was such a cheap machine.

Frank ran the story as it stood, and next morning all Blackfoot chuckled over it, with the possible exception of Mackinnon. The real-estate agent was a gross creature: little Laurie, passing his shop later in the day, was publicly insulted. On her return to the office, she casually mentioned what had occurred, and Frank, with a brightening eye, took his hat from its peg, and, commanding Laurie to keep the shop, sallied forth. Laurie promptly disobeyed him. Following at a discreet distance, note-book in hand, she missed not a detail of the brief and pointed discussion which ended in the fat real-estate agent rolling in the gutter. Laurie got a whole column out of that, and Blackfoot agreed that it was the best account of a scrap which had appeared in the local press. The paper was sold out in an hour, and the regular circulation jumped four hundred.

Among other things, Laurie was assigned to cover the meetings of the town council. Her first arrival in the dingy little chamber (which is in the loft of the police station) created something of a sensation. His Worship Mayor Pink (one of Blackfoot’s leading grocers) himself descended from his

throne to take her hand, and all the aldermen pulled down their waistcoats and strove to look aldermanic.

Laurie soberly disposed herself at the “press table” in the corner (it has only three legs and you must watch which end you sit at), and the usual mad torrent of eloquence was forthwith unloosed. Once a fortnight the aldermen are seized with this lust to orate, and nothing will stop them. Only Sam Puffer, the ex-cow-puncher, rarely spoke—but he spat most eloquently. There was one spectator, Hennery Haddie, Blackfoot’s eminent rag and bone merchant, who has run for alderman every year in the memory of man, without ever receiving a hundred votes, and who writes to the papers nearly every day. As a tax-payer, Hennery delivered a diatribe on the puddles in the main street, which was cut short only by Sam Puffer threatening to take him out and souse him therein.

Although she affected to be diligently taking notes, the proceedings were naturally quite incomprehensible to Laurie; but the reporter on the other paper, a pale youth of an evangelical turn, offered to write her story as well as his own. Laurie smiled her thanks and found herself free to smile at the aldermen one by one. The smile of a clever woman is a curious thing: the degree of promise gathered from it by the recipient is usually in inverse ratio with his intelligence. The aldermen hastened to write out their speeches for Laurie, and the city clerk made her a copy of the minutes; but Laurie thought most of Sam Puffer, who, abashed by her presence, only scowled at her sidewise from beneath his shaggy brows.

As time went on the slender, green-clad figure, intent upon business, became one of the familiar sights of Rowland Avenue. The six tall policemen were her sworn friends, and one or another invariably accompanied her when she was called out at night. Policemen are only human; there was not one of them but sometimes drew her aside to mention some little deed of heroism he had performed—hoping it would appear in next day’s paper. Laurie enjoyed alike the freedom of the banking offices and the jail. Every one wished her well, from the president of the Board of Trade down to the undertakers, who telephoned her when they had interesting corpses on view.

Her work was supposed to be done when the last of the local news was turned in at eleven o’clock each night, but how could Frank discourage her if she volunteered to stay another hour to help him read proof? They would sit side by side at the table in the rear of the little store, dark but for the single shaded globe hanging low over their heads. Laurie always had so much to say about the day’s experiences, her tongue fairly tumbled over

itself in her impatience to get it all out. Consider the feelings of the youthful editor as he watched the changing face of his very dear aide, and hung on the delicious tones of her merry, boyish voice. Need I say that the *Plainsman* was scandalously proof-read? There is more than one pointed story still in circulation concerning quaint misprints which escaped that precious pair of readers.

But as a result of this inspiring hour Frank would set to work each day with renewed courage to keep his crazy bark afloat. The whilom careless youth had now a definite and absorbing aim. Week by week the *Plainsman* was doing steadily better, but, unfortunately, the increased business only made the pinch of insufficient capital more keen. Leonora was the most troublesome feature of the problem. The mere sight of little Laurie was sufficient to rouse that weather-beaten virgin to a pitch of blind unreasonableness. Frank used his best powers of cajolery, but the tension was stretched little by little towards the breaking-point. There was six months' interest on the mortgage overdue.

At Laurie's third council meeting old Sam Puffer produced from his capacious pocket a box of candy, the Eastern kind, very expensive and very stale in Blackfoot, and silently laid it on the reporters' table. Laurie was immensely gratified. From the other aldermen there were audible murmurs of "graft," for Sam was a candidate for Mayor, and this was looked upon as an attempt to suborn the press. But there was nothing in that; for at the next meeting, when Sam Puffer turned up in a somewhat "elevated" condition as a result of too long a dalliance at the mahogany of the Royal Hotel, Laurie regretfully but relentlessly entered the fact in her account of the proceedings. Next day Sam came around to the office and shook hands with her. It did him good, he said, to meet a person with sand enough to call his friends down when they needed it.

The other candidate for mayor was the smug Alderman Telfair, Sam's ancient enemy. He too sought to ingratiate himself with Laurie, but with this difference—that while old Sam was a real man, who admired Laurie for a pretty girl and respected her for a plucky one, Telfair was no more than a puff-ball, who saw in Laurie the means of getting his name before the public. Laurie perceived the difference very clearly.

The *Plainsman* supported Sam Puffer, of course, but in local politics a man is very often at a disadvantage with a puff-ball. Alderman Telfair was known to be a fool and strongly suspected of grafting; nevertheless he threatened to carry the election by the sheer weight of his protestations of morality. It is so difficult to oppose these platform moralists, without the

implication of championing the immoral! The only weapon the *Plainsman* had against Telfair was ridicule—which inflicts painful but seldom mortal injuries. The town chuckled, and Alderman Telfair writhed under its thrusts. Furious reprisals were threatened; the *Plainsman* merely laughed editorially and continued its course. Then one night there was a late conference in Alderman Telfair's office—men with a common grudge may be infallibly depended on to smell each other out. Mackinnon was there; also a heavily veiled lady wearing a lace coat and a picture hat.

A week later the blow fell. Frank was in Prince George, the provincial capital, lobbying for some of the government printing. Laurie had undertaken the responsibilities of editor-in-chief, with a heart swelling with pride, destined, alas, to be immediately dashed. Reaching the office after the morning session of the police court, she found Hennery Haddie in the editor's own chair, with his feet on another, and the sanctum odorous of one of the cigars manufactured, according to popular belief, from his stock-in-trade: *i.e.*, rags. Laurie's face reddened at the spectacle.

"Outside is the place to wait," she said sharply.

Hennery arose and puffed out his cheeks. He was a short, square man with a portentously serious eye, the carriage of the alderman he yearned to be, and the clothes of the rag and bone merchant he was. Hennery thought and spoke in purest journalese.

"It is my regretful duty to inform you, miss," he said, "that I have been denoted to take charge here——"

Laurie's face was a study in scorn. "Take charge!" she repeated.

"Owing, no doubt, to my well-known association with the press and public affairs," explained Hennery, with a smirk.

"What do you mean?" demanded Laurie.

"Bailiff appointed by the court at the suit of Alderman Telfair, Esquire"—

Laurie took her breath sharply.

—"Holder of a mortgage of eleven hundred dollars on the chattels of this here establishment, assigned by Leonora Colpas, Esquire—I mean, spinster."

Laurie knew all about the mortgage. Her heart seemed to shrivel in her breast, and for an instant she felt herself a small, small person alone in a vast and cruel world.

“My instructions being,” continued Hennery, “to allow the business to proceed in all ways as usual, only everything printed in the paper must be satisfactory to my principal.”

Laurie heard him but dully.

At this moment Miss Colpas ascended from the basement, ostensibly to ask about a word in her copy, but really to see how Laurie was taking the blow. She got small satisfaction from the acting editor: the mere sight of the other woman provided Laurie with a tonic. She lifted her head, took a long breath, and issued her instructions with perfect coolness. When Hennery went to lunch she locked herself in the sanctum and, dropping her head on the desk, cried it out like a girl. Then she sat up and, bending her pretty brows, thought it out like a man. By and by she seized paper and began to write, tearing off page after page, entirely oblivious to her surroundings and to the flight of time. Anon the tears came into her eyes, anon she frowned and then laughed outright. Laurie was putting “soul” into it. She concluded with a great sigh of relief, and, without stopping to read what she had written, folded the bulky package once across and, thrusting it into the bosom of her dress, reappeared in public.

All the afternoon she put things in train for the next day’s paper as if nothing had happened. She exerted herself to be agreeable to Hennery Haddie, who, worthy man, was not sufficiently astute to smell danger. Inflated by the importance of his duties, he felt an ever-recurring need of a fresh supply of bar-room hydrogen, and by evening there was a noticeable access of dignity in the bailiff, joined to an increased tendency to puff out his cheeks. Miss Colpas swept home as usual at five o’clock, and was succeeded at the monotype after supper by her brother. Hennery brought back some editorials from his “principal,” which Laurie, with a casual glance, sent down-stairs. Laurie herself took no time for supper.

At nine o’clock the proofs for the first side came up-stairs. By this time the bailiff and the acting editor, sitting side by side at the table under the shaded electric light, were apparently on terms of perfect amity. With an innocent air Laurie volunteered to read the proofs aloud, and lifted a voice of monotony calculated to lull Argus himself. Hennery tipped his chair back, his eyes closed, and his head drooped lower and lower. Before Laurie reached the bottom of the first galley he emitted a round and convincing snore. By the very look of Hennery you would know him for a hearty sleeper, not to speak of his potatoes during the afternoon.

Instantly Laurie, all excitement, scampered down the basement stairs. Besides Colpas, a weak youth, completely under the dominion of his sister, Higden, the printer, and Peake, who made up the forms, were at work. Into the ears of these two she whispered, and a wide, delighted smile slowly overspread each grimy face; they violently nodded their heads and followed her up-stairs. Laurie unlocked the door into the quarters of the fruit company. Peake grasped the back of Hennery's chair, Higden took the front legs, and the unconscious bailiff was tenderly lifted and carried up the four steps into the dark loft. Inside, there were several great bins reaching to the roof, such as are used for the storage of vegetables. These were made of stout palings, with narrow interstices to allow the passage of air. One of these cages was empty and the door stood open.

Hennery woke up as they set him down, and struggled to his feet. But the cage door was already closed and the hasp secured with a stout wooden pin. Hennery's fat hand would not pass between the bars. He seized the door of his cage and shook it exactly like that animal from which we are said to derive our descent; his cries were piteous, but quite in vain. Laurie sent him a cigar to soothe his outraged feelings, and after a while he ceased his lamentations.

Meanwhile the packet of copy was produced from Laurie's bosom and sent down-stairs. As she expected, young Colpas presently came up two steps at a time and, without looking at her, darted out through the street door. Laurie spent an anxious five minutes—if they had stayed away she would have been utterly defeated, but she was counting on the motive power of curiosity, and the end justified her: the Colpases, brother and sister, entered the office, the lady plumed, rouged, and grim. She had some sheets of Laurie's copy in her hand. Laurie stood up, and they faced each other, the little one and the old-timer.

“What is this?” demanded Leonora stridently.

“The leading article for to-morrow,” said Laurie mildly.

“Not if I know it!” said the older woman viciously.

Laurie was patient. “Have you read it?” she asked.

“The first page is enough!” said Leonora, violently rattling the sheets. “Alderman Telfair is my friend!”

“Please read it,” said Laurie.

Miss Colpas held the copy under the light. Laurie watched her narrowly. As she turned over the pages, first her lip uncurled, then her black eyes

softened a very little; she paused and bit her lip and frowned. Finally she threw the papers pettishly on the table, her arms dropped indecisively, she avoided Laurie's eye.

"I know very well it all rests with you," said Laurie. "If you and your brother won't set it up, of course there'll be no *Plainsman* to-morrow—nor ever again!" She paused for a moment to let this sink in. "No one blames you for selling your mortgage," she continued with a reasonable air. "That was simply business. But selling it doesn't bind you to help old Telfair with his dirty work, does it? You are never the one to knife an old friend when his back is turned!"

Frankness was little Laurie's disconcerting weapon. Certainly the devil was in it if man or woman could resist her when she looked like that!

Leonora was in a wretched state of indecision. "Where's the bailiff?" she muttered.

"We put him in a potato bin," said Laurie calmly.

Leonora snorted briefly: Hennery was no favorite of hers.

"I wrote this for to-morrow's paper, too," said Laurie, taking up another page or two of copy from the table and handing it over. "And I borrowed your new photograph from Peake this afternoon, and had a cut made to run with it."

Miss Colpas read an eloquent half-column appreciation of herself and her services to the *Plainsman*; "great personal popularity" and "unswerving loyalty" figured largely. The cut lay on the table; Leonora distinguished the lines of the beloved picture hat and lace coat, and in her mind's eye she could not help but see it at the head of a column.

"Would you really run that?" she said incredulously.

"Just as it stands," said Laurie—"unless you want to add something."

Leonora looked at her oddly. "You're just twisting me round your finger!" she grumbled.

"No," said Laurie, honestly enough. "It's not me, really. You see, I *knew* you had a good heart!"

The old girl's wrinkles worked curiously. She suddenly caught Laurie by her two arms above the elbows and gave her a sharp little squeeze. "Laurie Gray, I've been an everlasting fool!" she said. Then, turning furiously to her brother, she shouted, "You Colpas! What are you gaping at? Get back to

work, boy!” She commenced tearing off her gloves. “Here, I’ll take the machine myself, and you set up by hand!”

On his way back from Prince George next morning, Frank Ardry bought a copy of the *Plainsman* when it was brought aboard the train at White Deer station. He opened it with an amused and tender smile at the recollection of the seriousness with which little Laurie had undertaken the role of editor—and then he gasped. Clear across the top of the paper spread this amazing announcement in the largest type they owned:

DASTARDLY PLOT TO MUZZLE THE PLAINSMAN  
LAID BARE

And underneath, in type a little smaller, this:

ARE THE CITIZENS OF BLACKFOOT  
GOING TO SEE FAIR PLAY DONE?

He skimmed through the story with anxious eyes and a beating heart; then he read it carefully and considered; then he read it a third time—and laughed. “Oh, marvelous Laurie!” was his thought. Her strength as always lay in her frankness: here was the whole story, Telfair, Mackinnon, and the unfortunate Henny Haddie, rendered in faithful, if somewhat heightened, colors. The automobile incident was rehearsed, the midnight meeting painted in strongly, the cowardly waiting of the conspirators until they had only a woman to deal with pointed out. She was compelled to boggle the truth a little as to Leonora’s part, but what she could not say honestly she left unsaid—a privilege of special pleaders. Written straight from her generous young heart, the story could not help but be convincing—irresistible. It concluded with an eloquent and dignified appeal for funds in the cause of free speech. Mayor Pink was named as the repository.

Four times in the two blocks between the station and the *Plainsman* office Frank was clapped on the back and congratulated. The office itself was crowded, not with mere idlers, but solid men, members of the board of trade, a bank manager. Laurie was in the centre, perfectly self-possessed—only her lip trembled as Frank came in the door. In the sanctum Mayor Pink was entering checks in a note-book. By noon they had the *Plainsman* reorganized. Frank was elected president, and Laurie was put on the board of directors. Sufficient cash was subscribed to pay off all indebtedness and start the regenerated paper with a safe working capital.

Late that night, when the last friend and well-wisher had gone Home to bed, Frank and Laurie adjourned to Mat Runyon's for a bite, as they often did before he took her home. Laurie, perched on a round stool, with her ridiculously small feet swinging free, was munching a cheese sandwich with perfect composure. Frank for his part could only look at her and murmur:

“Laurie! Laurie! How wonderful you are!”

She turned a frowning brow in his direction. “Oh, stuff!” she said inelegantly. “Be sensible! Pals don't carry on that way.”

“Hang the pal game!” said Frank energetically. “You've got to marry me now, that's what!”

The sandwich was on its way to Laurie's mouth as he spoke. It completed its journey, and the white teeth met through it without a tremor. Laurie chewed and swallowed the bite before she spoke.

“Would I keep my job?” she inquired casually.

“For life!” said Frank.

“Oh, very well, then!” she said coolly. “I don't mind!”

But for all her cool airs, in the swift, veiled glance she vouchsafed him Frank saw that which made his breast rise with wonder and delight.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Laurie of the "Plainsman"* by Hulbert Footner]