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# **The Preshus Child**

**McCahan Belle Travers**

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**Author: McCahan Belle Travers**

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# THE PRESHUS CHILD

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## CHAPTER I.

"I AM in favor of buying. I think in the long run it is bound to bring in a good return. I can't figure it any other way."

The speaker was a man of probably fifty-five years of age, and as he spoke his face was drawn into lines of concentration, and he gazed with a keen and penetrating look straight before him. It was a kind face, too. That could be seen at once as it relaxed slowly into its usual expression, as, tapping his note book with his pencil, he leaned back in his seat and looked from one to another of the three gentlemen who occupied the car with him, to note the effect of his words.

"But, Mr. Harlan," began a second gentleman, "owing to the condition of things, it may be some time before it brings in any return, and that must be taken into consideration."

"I know," replied the first speaker, "we should undoubtedly have to carry the venture for a while, but it will increase in value each year, and, in the end, I think it must pay."

An argument ensued dealing with questions of percentage, stocks, and shares, which we will let these dignitaries discuss among themselves, since these subjects are apt to bore the average man or woman who has only dipped gingerly into these mysteries in the fast receding school-

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days. In the meantime, let me hasten to explain that the gentlemen who are thus busily engaged are the officials of the B. M. & W. Railway Company, and their object in this trip through the South is the purchase of a small branch road.

You are right in guessing them successful business men. You might see that at a glance—well groomed, well attired, with an ease of manner which goes far to show the confidence felt in their positions. That immaculate gentleman sitting facing you is a man connected with affairs of state as well as real estate; the stout one on the right has a handle to his name which sounds well, looks well in print, and reflects a prominence on all he does and says; and over there, the one lounging down in his seat with his feet elevated, you must admit is the well-appearing gentleman of the shrewd New England type; and lastly, the strong, kindly, clear-cut face of the elderly gentleman, Mr. Harlan, whose opinion we have already heard.

Did I say lastly? No, not lastly, for sitting crosswise on the back of a seat is a small boy, seemingly between seven and eight years of age, riding at a furious pace his imaginary horse, if we are to judge from the way his boot-heels are dug into the velvet sides of the supposed animal.

"We stop here for breakfast," said the stout gentleman, as the engine, after various suppressed struggles, gave vent to its feelings in one prolonged shriek, and the train began to slow up for the station.

At the word breakfast the rider of the velvet horse abandoned his steed and, scrambling down as fast as his short legs would permit, announced himself as being quite ready to partake of that meal.

As our travelers descended the platform and walked forward to the day coach, their attention was attracted to

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a knot of persons gathered about the conductor, who was holding, with no small discomfiture, a bundle in his arms.

"What's the matter, Yates?" asked Mr. Harlan, approaching the group.

"There is Yankee inquisitiveness for you," observed the stout gentleman.

"A baby, been left on the train," responded Mr. Yates, the conductor, briefly.

"Well, don't hold it like it was dynamite, man." This from Mr. Harlan, with a soft chuckle. "Let me see the little fellow," he added, as with his great forefinger he poked aside the wrappings and peered down into the little face. "Humph!" he ejaculated with some zest, "a fine little fellow, a fine little fellow, and I venture to predict will—."

The prediction was here cut short by the "little fellow" himself, who, evidently feeling aggrieved at this personal mention, wrinkled up the small face and gave vent to its feelings in a series of plaintive wails. The baby's outburst seemed to arouse the listeners from their fit of amazement, and a hubbub of conversation sprang up in which questions, opinions and speculations were variously mingled. Some had heard a baby cry along in the early morning, of that they were sure; one man ventured so far as to say it must have been that same baby. Another, a woman, had seen a female with a bundle in her arms—she supposed now it must have been that same baby—enter the car quite early in the morning and sit down well up in the front end. She was sure, come to think of it, the bundle must have been the baby, the way the woman carried it. If she had dreamed of such a thing, she would have taken particular notice, as she usually did notice things, but, never dreaming a mother could be so unnatural as to leave



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her own child on a train (she couldn't, she was sure, leave one there or anywhere else for the matter of that, but on a train, of all places, so liable to a wreck), she hadn't paid the particular attention she could now wish.

Mr. Harlan listened with the utmost respect and attention, notwithstanding the amused twinkle in his grey eyes, waiting an opportunity when he might speak. He now began in that low, modulated tone which bespeaks the master in a scene where excitement reigns. "Do you stop here, madam?"

"I live here, sir," replied the woman, "and was just hurrying off, having been gone longer now than I expected when I left home—and know full well things have gone wrong—leaving children at home such a cause of worryment, and hearing someone say a baby was left was the reason I stopped—"

In the pause for breath Mr. Harlan interposed, "What I am about to ask, madam, is an imposition, I very much fear, but could you spare a few moments time, that is long enough to take this little fellow some place and feed him? I feel the necessity of appealing to you as the only woman, though I am most sorry to detain you. In the meantime, I will find out if there is any message concerning him at the station, or otherwise determine what shall be done."

"Madam," agreeing to this, took the bundle from the arms of the conductor in a twinkling, put the little clothes to rights, and with the baby resting in a curved place in her arm which seemed well adapted for such a purpose, walked rapidly away.

"Poor little chap, he will find it, with such a start as this, a tough old world to get on in," muttered Mr. Harlan, reflectively, adding as he turned to the small boy close at his side, "What shall we do with him, Harold?"

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"Give him to the woman," promptly responded that young gentleman, continuing in the same breath, "Where do we get breakfast?"

"Right here and now," said our friend with his characteristic chuckle, as he followed the disappearing crowd into the breakfast-room.

The meal being over, Mr. Harlan proceeded to make inquiries regarding the "little fellow" who so disturbed his thoughts. His friends were not surprised at the interest manifested. They had often before seen him turn aside from a business affair of importance to help a child in difficulty. His friends were not surprised, therefore, to see him, followed by Harold, leave the breakfast-room, and readily inferred he was busying himself in the baby's behalf.

Nothing could be ascertained by his questions, no message was waiting, there had been no distracted inquiries concerning the little stranger. "It is as I thought," he mused; "poor little foundling, deserted! I shall have to see he is taken care of, make some provision for him, or I shall not be able to go on."

He saw at this moment the woman who had undertaken the care of the baby appear at the end of the platform and look expectantly about, evidently anxious to be relieved of her charge.

"Bless us! It must have been some time! Now what is to be done? I haven't time to stop over here and see if this baby is well placed, and if I expect to get a wink of sleep to-night I can't go on without it."

"Is he all right now, madam?" he asked, as he hurriedly approached the woman.

"*She* is all right now, sir," replied the woman with the

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slightest touch of sarcasm in her tone, implying she wouldn't give much for his opinion concerning babies.

"*She!* Is it possible it is a girl?" and he looked with great concentration at the helpless infant. Then turning to the lad as to a much older companion, said, "Harold, this is not a gentleman, as we at first supposed, but a little lady. Now, what shall we do with her?"

"Well, then," replied the boy as he deftly shot a pebble at a tag on a trunk, "we'll have to keep her."

"I myself do not at present see any other way out of the difficulty," responded the grandfather softly, continuing in a low, pleasing voice as he turned to the woman, "I am imposing on you, madam, I am well aware, but I find myself at such a loss what to do that I must appeal to some one. Could you—you told me you reside here—could you suggest a good, reliable woman who might be prevailed upon to keep this baby for a few days until I can determine what can be done? She shall be well paid," he hurriedly added, using the best argument his experience had taught him.

"Well, sir"—catching her breath, which Mr. Harlan rightly interpreted as taking in wind for a fresh start, "if it was not that I am expecting a whole house full of com—and my back not being strong, besides, I try to do too much and *know* it—but I must have everything *just so* and I keep my children that neat the neighbors all say I am just wearing myself—though, as I tell them, there is a good deal in managing a person's work, and I make it a point to always look ahead— I dont know *what* in the world my husband *would* say — but anyway, I just believe I'll do this myself." She delivered the last very suddenly, as though she expected to surprise Mr. Harlan very much.

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"Hello, Harlan! haven't you disposed of that baby yet?" Looking up, the man accosted saw the gentlemen of his party, who had leisurely finished their breakfast, coming towards him.

"Well, you just step into the waiting-room there, and I will be with you in a moment," he said, addressing the woman.

"We pull out of here in a few minutes now," said another of the gentlemen as they joined him. "If you must have a finger in that pie can you not leave him with—"

"It is not a him," broke in Harold, speaking politely, "and grandfather and I have decided to keep her."

"Boys," began Mr. Harlan with a laugh of annoyance, "you know how I am about this sort of thing. I don't honestly believe I shall be able to go on with you unless I can make satisfactory provision for this little waif."

"What do you propose to do, Harlan?" asked the stout gentleman, who shall hereafter be known as Judge Wade.

"Why, I am afraid Harold is right; I shall have to keep her," Mr. Harlan replied.

"Oh, nonsense! you don't mean to say you think of keeping this baby? Why, what in the name of common sense will you do with her?"

"Very well put indeed, Judge. That is the question I have been asking myself, what *shall* I do with her?" was the good-natured reply.

"Take her down to Aunt Barbara's," said the small boy, nodding emphatically, "she'll keep her."

"But really, Harlan," remonstrated the Judge, "it will do us no good to go on without you; we want your opinion on this deal. Boys," turning to his companions, "you see this baby question has to be settled. Now, then, I am in