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Wild Youth, Volume 1.

Gilbert Parker

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WILD YOUTH

CHAPTER I

THE MAZARINES TAKE POSSESSION

From the beginning, Askatoon had had more character and idiosyncrasy than any other town in the West. Perhaps that was because many of its citizens had marked personality, while some were distinctly original—a few so original as to be almost bizarre. The general intelligence was high, and this made the place alert for the new observer. It slept with one eye open; it waked with both eyes wide—as wide as the windows of the world. The virtue of being bright and clever was a doctrine which had never been taught in Askatoon; it was as natural as eating and drinking. Nothing ever really shook the place out of a wholesome control and composure. Now and then, however, the flag of distress was hoisted, and everybody in the place—from Patsy Kernaghan, the casual, at one end of the scale, and the Young Doctor, so called because he was young-looking when he first came to the place, who represented Askatoon in the meridian of its intellect, at the other—had sudden paralysis. That was the outstanding feature of Askatoon. Some places made a noise and flung things about in times of distress; but Askatoon always stood still and fumbled with its collar-buttons, as though to get more air. When it was poignantly moved, it leaned against the wall of its common sense, abashed, but vigilant and careful.

That is what it did when Mr. and Mrs. Joel Mazarine arrived at Askatoon to take possession of Tralee, the ranch which Michael Turley, abandoning because he had an unavoidable engagement in another world, left to his next of kin, with a legacy to another kinsman a little farther off. The next of kin had proved to be Joel Mazarine, from one of those stern English counties on the borders of Quebec, where ancient tribal prejudices and religious hatreds give a necessary relief to hard-driven human nature.

Michael Turley had lived much to himself on his ranch, but that was because in his latter days he had developed a secret taste for spirituous liquors which he had no wish to share with others. With the assistance of a bad cook and a constant spleen caused by resentment against the intervention of his priest, good Father Roche, he finished his career with great haste and without either becoming a nuisance to his neighbours or ruining his property. The property was clear of mortgage or debt when he set out on his endless journey.

When the prophet-bearded, huge, swarthy-faced Joel Mazarine, with a beautiful young girl behind him, stepped from the West-bound train and was greeted by the Mayor, who was one of the executors of Michael Turley's will, a shiver passed through Askatoon, and for one instant animation was suspended; for the jungle-looking newcomer, motioning forward the young girl, said to the Mayor:

"Mayor, this is Mrs. Mazarine. Shake hands with the Mayor, Mrs. Mazarine."

Mazarine did not speak very loud, but as an animal senses the truth of a danger far off with an unshakable certainty, the crowd at the station seemed to know by instinct what he said.

"Hell—that old whale and her!" growled Jonas Billings, the keeper of the livery-stable.

At Mazarine's words the Young Doctor, a man of rare gifts, individuality and authority in the place, who had come to the station to see a patient off to the mountains by this train, drew in his breath sharply, as though a spirit of repugnance was in his heart. This happened during the first years of the Young Doctor's career at Askatoon, when he was still alive with human prejudices, although he had a nature well balanced and singularly just. The strife between his prejudices and his sense of justice was what made him always interesting in all the great prairie and foothill country of which Askatoon was the centre.

He had got his shock, indeed, before Mazarine had introduced his wife to the Mayor. Not for nothing had he studied the human mind in its relation to the human body, and the expression of that mind speaking through the body. The instant Joel Mazarine and his wife stepped out of the train, he knew they were what they were to each other. That was a real achievement in knowledge, because Mazarine was certainly sixty-five if he was a day, and his wife was a slim, willowy slip of a girl, not more than nineteen years of age, with the most wonderful Irish blue eyes and long dark lashes. There was nothing of the wife or woman about her, save something in the eyes, which seemed to belong to ages past and gone, something so solemnly wise, yet so painfully confused, that there flashed into the Young Doctor's mind at first glance of her the vision of a young bird caught from its thoughtless, sunbright journeyings, its reckless freedom of winged life, into the captivity of a cage.

She smiled, this child, as she shook hands with the Mayor, and it had the appeal of one who had learned the value of smiling—as though it answered many a question and took the place of words and the trials of the tongue. It was pitifully mechanical. As the Young Doctor saw, it was the smile of a captive in a strange un-comprehended world, more a dream than a reality.

"Mrs. Mazarine, welcome," said the Mayor after an abashed pause. "We're proud of this town, but we'll be prouder still, now you've come."

The girl-wife smiled again. At the same time it was as though she glanced apprehensively out of the corner of her eye at the old man by her side, as she said:

"Thank you. There seems to be plenty of room for us out here, so we needn't get in each other's way.... I've never been on the prairie before," she added.

The Young Doctor realized that her reply had meanings which would escape the understanding of the Mayor, and her apprehensive glance had told him of the gruesome jealousy of this old man at her side. The Mayor's polite words had caused the long, clean-shaven upper lip of the old man with the look of a debauched prophet, to lengthen surlily; and he noticed that a wide, flat foot in a

big knee-boot, inside trousers too short, tapped the ground impatiently.

"We must be getting on to Tralee," said a voice that seemed to force its way through bronchial obstructions. "Come, Mrs. Mazarine."

He laid a big, flat, tropical hand, which gave the impression of being splayed, on the girl's shoulder. The gallant words of the Mayor—a chivalrous mountain man—had set dark elements working. As the new master of Tralee stepped forward, the Young Doctor could not help noticing how large and hairy were the ears that stood far out from the devilish head. It was a huge, steel-twisted, primitive man, who somehow gave the impression of a gorilla. The face was repulsive in its combination of surly smugness, as shown by the long upper lip, by a repellent darkness round the small, furtive eyes, by a hardness in the huge, bearded jaw, and by a mouth of primary animalism.

The Mayor caught sight of the Young Doctor, and he stopped the incongruous pair as they moved to the station doorway, the girl in front, as though driven.

"Mr. Mazarine, you've got to know the man who counts for more in Askatoon than anybody else; Doctor, you've got to know Mr. Mazarine," said the generous Mayor.

Repugnance was in full possession of the Young Doctor, but he was scientific and he was philosophic, if nothing else. He shook hands with Mazarine deliberately. If he could prevent it, there should be, where he was concerned, no jealousy, such as Mazarine had shown towards the Mayor, in connection with this helpless, exquisite creature in the grip of hard fate. Shaking hands with the girl with only a friendly politeness in his glance, he felt a sudden eager, clinging clasp of her fingers. It was like lightning, and gone like lightning, as was the look that flashed between them. Somehow the girl instinctively felt the nature of the man, and in spirit flew to him for protection. No one saw the swift look, and in it there was nothing which spoke of youth or heart, of the feeling of man for woman or woman for man; but only the longing for help on the girl's part, undefined as it was. On the man's part there was a soul whose gift and duty were healing. As the two passed on, the Young

Doctor looked around him at the exclaiming crowd, for few had left the station when the train rolled out. Curiosity was an obsession with the people of Askatoon.

"Well, I never!" said round-faced Mrs. Skinner, with huge hips and gray curls. "Did you ever see the like?"

"I call it a shame," declared an indignant young woman, gripping tighter the hand of her little child, the daughter of a young butcher of twenty- three years of age.

"Poor lamb!" another motherly voice said.

"She ought to be ashamed of herself – money, I suppose," sneered Ellen Banner, a sour-faced shopkeeper's daughter, who had taught in Sunday school for twenty years and was still single.

"Beauty and the beast," remarked the Young Doctor to himself, as he saw the two drive away, Patsy Kernaghan running beside the wagon, evidently trying to make friends with the mastodon of Tra-lee.

CHAPTER II

"MY NAME IS LOUISE"

Askatoon never included the Mazarines in its social scheme. Certainly Tralee was some distance from the town, but, apart from that, the new-comers remained incongruous, alien and alone. The handsome, inanimate girl-wife never appeared by herself in the streets of Askatoon, but always in the company of her morose husband, whose only human association seemed to be his membership in the Methodist body so prominent in the town. Every Sunday morning he tied his pair of bay horses with the covered buggy to the hitching-post in the church-shed and marched his wife to the very front seat in the Meeting House, having taken possession of it on his first visit, as though it had no other claimants. Subsequently he held it in almost solitary control, because other members of the congregation, feeling his repugnance to companionship, gave him the isolation he wished. As a rule he and his wife left the building before the last hymn was sung, so avoiding conversation. Now and again he stayed to a prayer-meeting and, doing so, invariably "led in prayer," to a very limited chorus of "Amens." For in spite of the position which Tralee conferred on its owner, there was a natural shrinking from "that wild boar," as outspoken Sister Skinner called him in the presence of the puzzled and troubled Minister.

This was always a time of pained confusion for the girl-wife. She had never "got religion," and there was something startling to her undeveloped nature in the thunderous apostrophes, in terms of the oldest part of the Old Testament, used by her tyrant when he wrestled with the Lord in prayer.

These were perhaps the only times when her face was the mirror of her confused, vague and troubled youth. Captive in a world bounded by a man's will, she simply did not begin to understand this strange and overpowering creature who had taken possession of her body, mind and soul. She trembled and hesitated before every cave of mystery which her daily life with him opened darkly to

her abashed eyes. She felt herself going round and round and round in a circle, not forlorn enough to rebel or break away, but dazed and wondering and shrinking. She was like one robbed of will, made mechanical by a stern conformity to imposed rules of life and conduct. There were women in Askatoon who were sorry for her and made efforts to get near her; but whether it was the Methodist Minister or his wife, or the most voluble sister of the prayer-meeting, none got beyond the threshold of Tralee, as it were.

The girl-wife abashed them. She was as one who automatically spoke as she was told to speak, did what she was told to do. Yet she always smiled at the visitors when they came, or when she saw them and others at the Meeting House. It was, however, not a smile for an individual, whoever that individual might chance to be. It was only the kindness of her nature expressing itself. Talking seemed like the exercise of a foreign language to her, but her smiling was free and unconstrained, and it belonged to all, without selection.

The Young Doctor, looking at her one day as she sat in a buggy while her monster-man was inside the chemist's shop, said to himself:

"Sterilized! Absolutely, shamefully sterilized! But suppose she wakes up suddenly out of that dream between life and death—what will happen?"

He remembered that curious, sudden, delicate catch of his palm on the day when they first shook hands at the railway-station, and to him it was like the flutter of life in a thing which seemed dead. How often he had noticed it in man and animal on the verge of extinction! He had not mistaken that fluttering appeal of her fingers. He was young enough to translate it into flattering terms of emotion, but he did not do so. He was fancy-free himself, and the time would come when he would do a tremendous thing where a woman was concerned, a woman in something the same position as this poor girl; but that shaking, thrilling thing was still far off from him. For this child he only felt the healer's desire to heal.

He was one of those men who never force an issue; he never put forward the hands of the clock. He felt that sooner or later Louise Mazarine—he did not yet know her Christian name—would com-

mand his help, as so many had done in that prairie country, and not necessarily for relief of physical pain or the curing of disease. He had helped as many men and women mentally and morally as physically; the spirit of healing was behind everything he did. His world recognized it, and that was why he was never known by his name in all the district—he was only admiringly called "The Young Doctor."

He had never been to Tralee since the Mazarines had arrived, though he had passed it often and had sometimes seen Louise in the garden with her dog, her black cat and her bright canary. The combination of the cat and the canary did not seem incongruous where she was concerned; it was as though something in her passionless self neutralized even the antagonisms of natural history. She had made the gloomy black cat and the light-hearted canary to be friends. Perhaps that came from an everlasting patience which her life had bred in her; perhaps it was the powerful gift of one in touch with the remote, primitive things.

The Young Doctor had also seen her in the paddock with the horses, bare-headed, lithe and so girlishly slim, with none of the unmistakable if elusive lines belonging to the maturity which marriage brings. He had taken off his hat to her in the distance, but she had never waved a hand in reply. She only stood and gazed at him, and her look followed him long after he passed by. He knew well that in the gaze was nothing of the interest which a woman feels in a man; it was the look of one chained to a rock, who sees a Samaritan in the cheerless distance.

In the daily round of her life she was always busy; not restlessly, but constantly, and always silently, busy. She was even more silent than her laconic half-breed hired woman, Rada. There was no talk with her gloating husband which was not monosyllabic. Her canary sang, but no music ever broke from her own lips. She murmured over her lovely yellow companion; she kissed it, pleaded with it for more song, but the only music at her own lips was the occasional music of her voice; and it had a colourless quality which, though gentle, had none of the eloquence and warmth of youth.

In form and feature she was one made for emotion and demonstration, and the passionate play of the innocent enterprises of wild

youth; but there was nothing of that in her. Gray age had drunk her life and had given her nothing in return—neither companionship nor sympathy nor understanding; only the hunger of a coarse manhood. Her obedience to the supreme will of her jealous jailer gave no ground for scolding or reproach, and that saved her much. She was even quietly cheerful, but it was only the pale reflection of a lost youth which would have been buoyant and gallant, gay and glad, had it been given the natural thing in the natural world.

There came a day, however, when the long, unchanging routine, gray with prison grayness, was broken; when the round of household duties and the prison discipline were interrupted. It was as sudden as a storm in the tropics, as final and as fateful as birth or death. That day she was taken suddenly and acutely ill. It was only a temporary malady, an agonizing pain which had its origin in a sudden chill. This chill was due, as the Young Doctor knew when he came, to a vitality which did not renew itself, which got nothing from the life to which it was sealed, which for some reason could not absorb energy from the stinging, vital life of the prairie world in the June-time.

In her sudden anguish, and in the absence of Joel Mazarine, she sent for the Young Doctor. That in itself was courageous, because it was impossible to tell what view the master of Tralee would take of her action, ill though she was. She was not supposed to exercise her will. If Joel Mazarine had been at home, he would have sent for wheezy, decrepit old Doctor Gensing, whose practice the Young Doctor had completely absorbed over a series of years.

But the Young Doctor came. Rada, the half-breed woman, had undressed Louise and put her to bed; and he found her white as snow at the end of a paroxysm of pain, her long eyelashes lying on a cheek as smooth as a piece of Satsuma ware which has had the loving polish of ten thousand friendly fingers over innumerable years. When he came and stood beside her bed, she put out her hand slowly towards him. As he took it in his firm, reassuring grasp, he felt the same fluttering appeal which had marked their handclasp on the day of their first meeting at the railway-station. Looking at the huge bed and the rancher-farmer's coarse clothes hanging on pegs, the big greased boots against the wall, a sudden savage feeling of

disgust and anger took hold of him; but the spirit of healing at once emerged, and he concentrated himself upon the duty before him.

For a whole hour he worked with her, and at length subdued the convulsions of pain which distorted the beautiful face and made the childlike body writhe. He had a resentment against the crime which had been committed. Marriage had not made her into a woman; it had driven her back into an arrested youth. It was as though she ought to have worn short skirts and her hair in a long braid down her back. Hers was the body of a young boy. When she was free from pain, and the colour had come back to her cheeks a little, she smiled at him, and was about to put out her hand as a child might to a brother or a father, when suddenly a shadow stole into her eyes and crept across her face, and she drew her clenched hand close to her body. Still, she tried to smile at him.

His quiet, impersonal, though friendly look soothed her.

"Am I very sick?" she asked.

He shook his head and smiled. "You'll be all right to-morrow, I hope."

"That's too bad. I would like to be so sick that I couldn't think of anything else. My father used to say that the world was only the size of four walls to a sick person."

"I can't promise you so small a world," remarked the Young Doctor with a kind smile, his arm resting on the side of the bed, his chair drawn alongside. "You will have to face the whole universe to-morrow, same as ever."

She looked perplexed, and then said to him: "I used to think it was a beautiful world, and they try to make me think it is yet; but it isn't."

"Who try to make you?" he asked.

"Oh, my bird Richard, and Nigger the black cat, and Jumbo, the dog," she replied.

Her eyes closed, then opened strangely wide upon him in an eager, staring appeal.

"Don't you want to know about me?" she asked. "I want to tell you—
I want to tell you. I'm tired of telling it all over to myself."

The Young Doctor did not want to know. As a doctor he did not want to know.

"Not now," he said firmly. "Tell me when I come again."

A look of pain came into her face. "But who can tell when you'll come again!" she pleaded.

"When I will things to be, they generally happen," he answered in a commonplace tone. "You are my patient now, and I must keep an eye on you. So I'll come."

Again, with an almost spasmodical movement towards him, she said:

"I must tell you. I wanted to tell you the first day I saw you. You seemed the same kind of man my father was. My name's Louise. It was my mother made me do it. There was a mortgage—I was only sixteen. It's three years ago. He said to my mother he'd tear up the mortgage if I married him. That's why I'm here with him—Mrs. Mazarine. But my name's Louise."

"Yes, yes, I know," the Young Doctor answered soothingly. "But you must not talk of it now. I understand perfectly. Tell me all about it another time."

"You don't think I should have—" She paused.

"Of course. I tell you I understand. Now you must be quiet. Drink this." He got up and poured some liquid into a glass.

At that moment there was a noise below in the hall. "That's my husband," the girl-wife said, and the old wan captive-look came into her face.

"That's all right," replied the Young Doctor. "He'll find you better."

At that moment the half-breed woman entered the room. "He's here," she said, and came towards the bed.