McCarter Margaret Hill

Winning the Wilderness

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Winning the Wilderness:

Содержание

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In all the story of the world of man,
Who blazed the way to greater, better things?
Who stopped the long migration of wild men,
And set the noble task of building human homes?
The learned recluse? The forum teacher?
The poet-singer? The soldier, voyager,
Or ruler? 'T was none of this proud line.
The man who digged the ground foretold the destiny
Of men. 'T was he made anchor for the heart;
Gave meaning to the hearthstone, and the birthplace,
And planted vine and figtree at the door.
He made e'en nations possible. Aye, when
With his stone axe he made a hoe, he carved,
Unwittingly, the scepter of the world.
The steps by which the multitudes have climbed
Were all rough-hewn by this base implement.
In its rude path have followed all the minor
Arts of men. Hark back along the centuries,
And hear its march across the continents.
From zone to zone, all 'round the bounteous world,
The man whose skill makes rich the barren field
And causes grass to grow, and flowers to blow,
And fruits to ripen, and grain turn to gold —
That man is King! Long live the King!

– Mrs. J. K. Hudson.

To

THAT FARMER FATHER AND MOTHER

WITH THEIR HANDS ON TODAY

BUT WITH THEIR EYES ON TOMORROW

WHO THROUGH LABOR
AND LONELINESS AND

HOPES LONG DEFERRED

HAVE WON A DESERT TO FRUITFULNESS

A WILDERNESS TO BEAUTY

FOREWORD

A reach of level prairie bounded only by the edge of the world – misty ravelings of heliotrope and amber, covered only by the arch of heaven – blue, beautiful and pitiless in its far fathomless spaces. To the southwest a triple fold of deeper purple on the horizon line – mere hint of commanding headlands thitherward. Across the face of the prairie streams wandering through shallow clefts, aimlessly, somewhere toward the southeast; their course secured by gentle swells breaking into sheer low bluffs on the side next to the water, or by groups of cottonwood trees and wild plum bushes along their right of way. And farther off the brown indefinite shadowings of half-tamed sand dunes. Aside from these things, a featureless landscape – just grassy ground down here and blue cloud-splashed sky up there.

The last Indian trail had disappeared. The hoofprints of cavalry horses had faded away. The price had been paid for the prairie – the costly measure of death and daring. But the prairie itself, in its loneliness and loveliness, was still unsubdued. Through the fury of the winter's blizzard, the glory of the springtime, the brown wastes of burning midsummer, the long autumn, with its soft sweet air, its opal skies, and the land a dream of splendor which the far mirage reflects and the wide horizon frames in a curtain of exquisite amethyst – through none of these was the prairie subdued. Only to the coming of that king whose

scepter is the hoe, did soul of the soil awake to life and promise. To him the wilderness gave up everything except its beauty and the sweep of the freedom-breathing winds that still inspire it.

PART ONE
THE FATHER

The old Antaean fable of strength renewed from the ground
Was a human truth for the ages; since the hour of the Eden-birth.
That man among men was strongest who stood with his feet on the earth!

– Sharlot M. Hall.

CHAPTER I
The Blessing of Asher

> Unless there be in the background a mother, no portrait of a man is complete.
> – Winston Churchill

The old Aydelot farm reached quite down to the little village of Cloverdale, from which it was separated by Clover Creek. But the Aydelot farmhouse stood a good half-mile away up the National pike road toward the Virginia state line. The farm consisted of two long narrow strips of ground, bordering the road on either side and walled about by forests hiding stagnant marshes in their black-shadowed depths. Francis Aydelot had taken up the land from the government before the townsite was thought of. Farming was not to his liking and his house had been an inn, doing a thriving business with travelers going out along that great National highway in ante-railway days. But when the village took root and grew into a little town, the village tavern absorbed the revenue from the traveling public, and Francis Aydelot had, perforce, to put his own hands to the plow and earn a living from the land. It was never a labor of love with him, however, and although he grew well-to-do in the tilling, he resented the touch of the soil as something degrading.

Cloverdale did not grow toward him, because, out of prejudice at its being, he would not sell one foot of his ground for town lot purposes. Nevertheless, since he was upright in all his dealings, the villagers grew proud of him, deferred to his judgment, quoted his opinions, and rated him generally the biggest asset of the community, with one exception. That exception was young Asher Aydelot, a pink-cheeked, gray-eyed boy, only son of the House of Aydelot and heir to all the long narrow acres from the wooded crest on the east to the clear waters of Clover Creek on the west. He was heir to more than these, however, if the heritage of ancestry counts for anything.

Jean Aydelot, the first of the name in America, driven from France by his family on account of his Huguenot beliefs, had settled in Virginia. He had quickly grasped the American ideals of freedom, the while he affiliated easily with the exclusive English Cavaliers. Something of the wanderlust in his blood, however, kept him from rooting too firmly at once. It happened that when a band of Quaker exiles had sought refuge in Virginia and was about to be driven out by the autocratic Cavaliers, young Aydelot, out of love for a Quaker girl, had championed their cause vehemently. And he was so influential in the settlement that he might have succeeded, but for one family – the wealthy and aristocratic Thaines. Through the son of this family the final expulsion of these Quakers was accomplished. The woman in the case was Mercy Pennington, a pretty Quakeress with whom young Jerome Thaine fell in love, promising protection to all her

people in return for her hand. When she refused his offer, the Thaines carried the day, and the Quakers again became exiles. Jean Aydelot followed them to Pennsylvania and married Mercy Pennington, who was promptly disowned by the Quaker Church for this marriage to one outside its membership.

In spite of all this heresy, however, the Aydelots became one of the leading families in the development of the colonies. Their descendants fell heir to the traits of their French-English forbears: freedom of belief, courage to follow a cause, a touch of the wanderlust, the mercurial French mind, and the steady poise of the followers of the Inward Light. A trace of bitterness had come down the years, however, with the family history; a feud-like resentment against the family of Jerome Thaine of Virginia.

Francis Aydelot had crossed the Alleghanies and settled in Ohio in frontier days. Here his life, like his narrow, woods-bound farm, was clean and open but narrowed by surroundings and lack of opportunity. What had made for freedom and reform in his ancestors, in him became prejudice and stubborn will. Mrs. Aydelot was a broad-minded woman. Something of vision was in her clear gray eyes. Love of beauty, respect for learning, and an almost statesman-like grasp of civic duty and the trend of national progress were hers, too.

From such ancestry came Asher Aydelot, the healthiest, happiest country boy that ever waked the echoes of the old Ohio woodlands, or dared the currents of her mad little rivers, or whistled fearlessly as he scampered down the dusty pike road in

the soft black summer nights.

Asher was just fifteen when the Civil War swept the nation off its feet. The Quaker spirit of Mercy Pennington made fighting repulsive to his father, but in Asher the old Huguenot courage of Jean Aydelot blazed forth, together with the rash partisanship of a young hot-blood whose life has been hemmed in too narrowly by forest walls. Almost before Cloverdale knew there was a war, the Third Ohio Regiment was on its way to the front. Among its bearded men was one beardless youth, a round-faced drummer boy of fifteen, the only child of the big farmhouse beside the National road. In company with him was his boyhood chum, Jim Shirley, son of the Cloverdale tavern keeper.

An April sun was slipping behind the treetops, and the twilight mists were already rising above the creek. Francis Aydelot and his wife sat on the veranda watching Asher in the glory of a military suit and brass buttons coming up the pike with springing step.

"How strong he is! I'm glad he is at home again," the mother was saying.

"Yes, he's here to stay at last. I have his plans all settled," Francis Aydelot declared.

"But, Francis, a man must make some plans for himself. Asher may not agree," Mrs. Aydelot spoke earnestly.

"How can our boy know as well as his father does what is best for him? He must agree, that's all. We have gone over this matter often enough together. I won't have any Jim Shirley in my family.

He's gone away and nobody knows where he is, just when his father needs him to take the care of the tavern off his hands."

"What made Jim go away from Cloverdale?" Mrs. Aydelot asked.

"Nobody seems to know exactly. He left just before his brother, Tank, married that Leigh girl up the Clover valley somewhere. But everything's settled for Asher. He will be marrying one of the Cloverdale girls pretty soon and stay right here in town. We'll take it up with him now. There's no use waiting."

"And yet I wish we might wait till he speaks of it himself. Remember, he's been doing his own thinking in the time he's been away," the mother insisted.

Just then, Asher reached the corner of the door yard. Catching sight of the two, he put his hands on the top of the paling fence, leaped lightly over it, and came across to the veranda, where he sat down on the top step.

"Just getting in from town? The place hasn't changed much, has it?" the father declared.

"No, not much," Asher replied absently, looking out with unseeing eyes at the lengthening woodland shadows, "a church or two more, some brick sidewalk, and a few stores and homes – just added on, not improved. I miss Jim Shirley everywhere. The older folks seem the same, but some of the girls are pushing baby-carriages and the boys are getting round-shouldered and droopy-jawed."

He drew himself up with military steadiness as he spoke.

"Well, you are glad to settle down anyhow," his father responded. "The old French spirit of roving and adventure has had its day with you, and now you will begin your life work."

"Yes, I'm done with fighting." Asher's lips tightened. "But what do you call my life work, father?"

It was the eighth April after the opening of the Civil War. Asher had just come home from two years of army service on the western plains. Few changes had come to the little community; but to the young man, who eight springtimes ago had gone out as a pink-cheeked drummer boy, the years had been full of changes. He was now twenty-three, straight as an Indian, lean and muscular as a veteran soldier. The fair, round cheeks of boyhood were brown and tinged with red-blooded health. There was something resolute and patient in the clear gray eyes, as if the mother's own far vision had crept into them. But the ready smile that had made the Cloverdale community love the boy broke as quickly now on the man's face, giving promise that his saving sense of humor and his good nature would be factors to reckon with in every combat.

Asher had staid in the ranks till the end of the war, had been wounded, captured, and imprisoned; had fought through a hospital fever and narrowly escaped death in the front of many battle lines. But he did not ask for a furlough, nor account his duty done till the war was ended. Just before that time, when he was sick in a Southern prison, a rebel girl had walked into his

life to stay forever. With his chum, Jim Shirley, he had chafed through two years in a little eastern college, the while bigger things seemed calling him to action. At the end of the second year, he broke away, and joining the regular army, began the hazardous life of a Plains scout.

Two years of fighting a foe from every way the winds blow, cold and hunger, storms and floods and desert heat, poisonous reptiles, poisoned arrows of Indians, and the deadly Asiatic cholera; sometimes with brave comrades, sometimes with brutal cowards, sometimes on scout duty, utterly and awfully alone; over miles on endless miles of grassy level prairies, among cruel canyons, in dreary sand lands where men die of thirst, monotonous and maddening in their barren, eternal sameness; and sometimes, between sunrises of superb grandeur, and sunsets of sublime glory, over a land of exquisite virgin loveliness – it is small wonder that the ruddy cheeks were bronze as an Indian's, that the roundness of boyhood had given place to the muscular strength of manhood, that the gray eyes should hold something of patience and endurance and of a vision larger than the Cloverdale neighborhood might understand.

When Asher had asked, "What do you call my life work, Father?" something impenetrable was in his direct gaze.

Francis Aydelot deliberated before replying. Then the decisive tone and firm set of the mouth told what resistance to his will might cost.

"It may not seem quite homelike at first, but you will soon find

a wife and that always settles a man. I can trust you to pick the best there is here. As to your work, it must be something fit for a gentleman, and that's not grubbing in the ground. Of course, this is Aydelot soil. It couldn't belong to anybody else. I never would sell a foot of it to Cloverdale to let the town build this way. I'd as soon sell to a Thaine from Virginia as I'd sell to that town."

He waved a hand toward the fields shut in by heavy woodlands, where the shadows were already black. After a moment he continued:

"Everything is settled for you, Asher. I've been pretty careful and lucky, too, in some ways. The men who didn't go to war had the big chances at money making, you know. While you were off fighting, I was improving the time here. I've done it fairly, though. I never dodged a law in my life, nor met a man into whose eyes I couldn't look squarely."

As he spoke, the blood left Asher's cheeks and his face grew gray under the tan.

"Father, do you think a man who fights for his country is to be accounted below the man who stays at home and makes money?"

"Well, he certainly can do more for his children than some of those who went to this war can do for their fathers," Francis Aydelot declared. "Suppose I was helpless and poor now, what could you do for me?"

There was no attempt at reply, and the father went on: "I have prepared your work for you. You must begin it at once. Years ago Cloverdale set up a hotel, a poor enough tavern even for those

days, but it robbed me of the patronage this house had before that time, and I had to go to farming. Every kind of drudgery I've had to do here. Cutting down forests, and draining swamps is a back-breaking business. I never could forgive the founders for stopping by Clover Creek, when they might have gone twenty miles further on where a town was needed and left me here. But that's all past now. I've improved the time. I have a good share of stock in the bank and I own the only hotel in Cloverdale. I closed with Shirley as soon as I heard you were coming home. Shirley's getting old, and since Jim has gone there's no one to help him and take his place later, so he sold at a very good figure. He had to sell for some reason, I believe. The Shirleys are having some family trouble that I don't understand nor care about. You've always been a sort of idol in the town anyhow. Now that you are to go into the Shirley House as proprietor I suppose Cloverdale will take it as a dispensation of Providence in their favor, and you can live like a gentleman."

"But, father, I've always liked the country best. Don't you remember how Jim Shirley was always out here instead of my going down town when we were boys?"

"You are only a boy, now, Asher, and this is all I'll hear to your doing. You ought to be thankful for having such a chance open to you. I have leased the farm for five years and you don't want to be a hired man at twenty dollars a month, I reckon. Of course, the farm will be yours some day, unless you take a notion to run off to Virginia and marry a Thaine."

The last words were said jokingly, but Asher's mother saw a sudden hardening of the lines of his face as he sat looking out at the darkening landscape.

There was only a faint glow in the west now. The fields toward Cloverdale were wrapped in twilight shadows. Behind the eastern treetops the red disk of the rising moon was half revealed. Asher Aydelot waited long before he spoke. At length, he turned toward his father with a certain stiffening of his form, and each felt a space widening gulf-wise between them.

"You stayed at home and grew rich, Father."

"Well?"

The father's voice cut like a steel edge. He saw only opposition to his will here, but the mother forecasted the end from that moment.

"Father, war gives us to see bigger things than hatred between two sections of the country. There is education in it, too. That is a part of the compensation. Once, when our regiment was captured and starving, the Fifty-fourth Virginia boys saved our lives by feeding us the best supper I ever tasted. And a Rebel girl – " he broke off suddenly.

"Well, what of all this? What are you trying to say?" queried the older man.

"I'm trying to show you that I cannot sit down here in the Shirley House and play mine host any more than I could – " hesitatingly – "marry a Cloverdale girl on demand. No Cloverdale girl would have me so. I've seen too much of the

country for such a position, Father. Let the men who staid at home do the little jobs."

He had not meant to say all this, but the stretch of boundless green prairies was before his eyes, the memory of heroic action where men utterly forget themselves was in his mind, making life in that little Ohio settlement seem only a boy's pastime, to be put away with other childish things. While night and day, in the battle clamor, in the little college class room, on boundless prairie billows, among lonely sand dunes – everywhere, he carried the memory of the gentle touch of the hand of a rebel girl, who had visited him when he was sick and in prison. And withal, he resented dictation, as all the Aydelots and Penningtons before him had done.

"What do you propose to do?" his father asked.

"I don't know yet what I can do. I only know what I cannot do."

"And that is – ?"

"Just what I have said. I cannot be a tavern keeper here the rest of my days with nothing to do half of the time except to watch the men pitch horseshoes behind the blacksmith shop, and listen to the flies buzz in the windows on summer afternoons; and everything else so quiet and dead you don't know whether you are on the street or in the graveyard. If you'd ever crossed the Mississippi River you'd understand why."

"Well, I haven't, and I don't understand. But the only way to stop this roving is to make a home of your own. Will you tell me how you expect to support a Cloverdale girl when you marry

one?"

"I don't expect to marry one." The smile was winning, but the son's voice sounded dangerously like the father's.

"Why not?"

"Because when I marry it will be to a southern girl – " Asher hesitated a moment. When he went on, his voice was not as son to father, but as man to man.

"It all happened down in Virginia, when I was wounded and in prison. This little girl took care of me. Only a soldier really knows what a woman's hand means in sickness. But she did more. She risked everything, even her life, to get letters through the lines to you and to get me exchanged. I shiver yet when I think of her, disguised as a man in soldier's clothes, taking the chance she did for me. And, well, I left my heart down there. That's all."

"Why haven't you ever told us this before, Asher?" his father asked.

Asher stood up where the white moonlight fell full on his face. Somehow the old Huguenot defiance and the old Quaker endurance of his ancestors seemed all expressed in him.

"I wasn't twenty-one, then, and I have nothing yet to offer a girl by way of support," he said.

"Why, Asher!" Mrs. Aydelot exclaimed, "you have everything here."

"Not yet, mother," he replied. "And I haven't told you because her name is Virginia Thaine, and she is a descendant of Jerome Thaine. Are the Aydelots big enough to bury old hates?"

Francis Aydelot sat moveless as a statue. When at length he spoke, there was no misunderstanding his meaning.

"You have no means by which to earn a living. You will go down to town and take charge of the Shirley House at once, or go to work as a hired hand here. But remember this: from the day you marry a Thaine of Virginia you are no longer my son. Family ties, family honor, respect for your forefathers forbid it."

He rose without more words, and went into the house.

Then came the mother's part.

"Sit down, Asher," she said, and Asher dropped to his place on the step.

"We don't seem to see life through the same spectacles," he said calmly. "Am I wrong, mother? Nobody can choose my life for me, nor my wife, either. Didn't old grandfather, Jean Aydelot, leave his home in France, and didn't grandmother, Mercy Pennington, marry to suit her own choice?"

Even in the shadow, his mother noted the patient expression of the gray eyes looking up at her.

"Asher, it is Aydelot tradition to be determined and self-willed, and the bitterness against Jerome Thaine and his descendants has never left the blood – till now."

She stroked his hair lovingwise, as mothers will ever do.

"Do you suppose father will ever change?"

"I don't believe he will. We have talked of this many times, and he will listen to nothing else. He grows more set in his notions as we all do with years, unless – "

"Well, you don't, mother. Unless what?" Asher asked.

"Unless we think broadly as the years broaden out toward old age. But, Asher, what are your plans?"

"I'm afraid I have none yet. You know I was a farmer boy until I was fifteen, a soldier boy till I was nineteen, a college student for two years, and a Plains scout for two years more. Tell me, mother, what does all this fit me for? Not for a tavern in a town of less than a thousand people."

He sat waiting, his elbow resting on his knee, his chin supported by his closed hand.

"Asher, when you left school and went out West, I foresaw what has happened tonight," Mrs. Aydelot began. "I tried to prepare your father for it, but he would not listen, would not understand. He doesn't yet. He never will. But I do. You will not stay in Ohio always, because you do not fit in here now. Newer states keep calling you westward, westward. This was frontier when we came here in the thirties; we belong here. But, sooner or later, you will put your life into the building of the West. Something – the War or the Plains, or may be this Virginia Thaine, has left you too big for prejudice. You will go sometime where there is room to think and live as you believe."

"Mother, may I go? I dream of it night and day. I'm so cramped here. The woods are in my way. I can't see a mile. I want to see to the edge of the world, as I can on the prairies. A man can win a kingdom out there."

He was facing her now, his whole countenance aglow with

bright anticipation.

"There is only one way to win that kingdom," Mrs. Aydelot declared. "The man who takes hold of the plow-handles is the man who will really conquer the prairies. His scepter is not the rifle, but the hoe."

For all his life, Asher Aydelot never forgot his mother's face, nor the sound of her low prophetic words on that moonlit night on the shadowy veranda of his childhood home.

"You are right, mother. I don't want to fight any more. It must be the soil that is calling me back to the West, the big, big West! And I mean to go when the time comes. I hope it will come soon, and I know you will give me your blessing then."

His mother's hands were pressed lovingly upon his forehead, as he leaned against her knee.

"My blessing, and more than mine. The blessing of Moses to Asher of old, as well. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be. The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.'"

She bent over her boy, and pushing back the hair from his forehead, she kissed it reverently, nor dreamed in how many a bitter strife would the memory of this sacred hour come back to him, with the blessed note of victory.

The next morning Asher put on his working clothes and began the life of a hired man on his father's farm. The summer was long and hot, and in the late August the dread typhoid malaria swept up from the woods marshes. It was of virulent form and soon had

its way with Asher's father and mother.

When the will of Francis Aydelot was read in court, the inexorable will of a stubborn man, it declared that the Cloverdale Hotel, the bank stock, and the farm with all the appurtenances thereunto pertaining, should descend to Asher Aydelot, provided he should remain a resident of Ohio and should never be united in marriage to any descendant of Jerome Thaine of the State of Virginia. Failing in this, all the property, except a few hundred dollars in cash, should descend to one Jane Aydelot, of Philadelphia, and her heirs and assigns forever; provided these heirs were not the children of Virginia Thaine of the state of Virginia.

On the same day, Asher wrote to one Jane Aydelot, of Philadelphia, to come to Ohio and take possession of her property. Then he carefully sodded the two mounds in the graveyard, and planted old-fashioned sweet pinks upon them, and bidding good-by to the home of his boyhood, he turned his face hopefully to the West.

CHAPTER II
The Sign of the Sunflower

Little they knew what wealth untold
Lay hid where the desolate prairies rolled:
Who would have dared, with brush or pen,
As this land is now, to paint it then?

– Allerton.

The trail had left the woodland far to the eastward, and wound its way over broad prairie billows, past bluffy-banked streams, along crests of low watersheds, until at last it slid down into an open endlessness of the Lord's earth – just a vasty bigness of landstuff seemingly left over when geography-making was done. It was untamed stuff, too, whereon one man's marking was like to the track of foam in the wake of one ship in mid-ocean. Upon its face lay the trail, broad and barren of growth as the dusty old National pike road making its way across uplands and valleys of Ohio. But this was the only likeness. The pike was a gravel-built, upgraded highway, bordered by little rail-fenced fields and deep forests hiding malarial marshes in the lower places.

This trail, flat along the ungraded ground, tended in the direction of least resistance, generally toward the southwest. It was bounded by absence of landmarks, boulder or tree or

cliff. Along either side of it was a fringe of spindling sunflower stalks, with their blooms of gold marking two gleaming threads across the plains far toward the misty nothingness of the western horizon.

The mid-September day had been intensely hot, but the light air was beginning to flow a bit refreshingly out of the sky. A gray cloud-wave, creeping tide-like up from the southwest, was tempering the afternoon glare. In all the landscape the only object to hold the eye was a prairie schooner drawn by a team of hard-mouthed little Indian ponies, and followed by a free-limbed black mare of the Kentucky blue blood.

Asher Aydelot sat on the wagon seat holding the reins. Beside him was his wife, a young, girlish-looking woman with large dark eyes, abundant dark hair, a straight, aristocratic nose, and well-formed mouth and chin.

The two, coming in from the East on the evening before, had reached the end of the stage line, where Asher's team and wagon was waiting for them.

The outfit moved slowly. It had left Carey's Crossing at early dawn and had put twenty-five miles between itself and that last outpost of civilization.

"Why don't you let the horses trot down this hill slope, Asher?" The woman's voice had the soft accent of the South.

"Are you tired, Virgie?" Asher Aydelot looked earnestly down at his wife.

"Not a bit!" The bright smile and vigorous lift of the shoulders

were assuring.

"Then we won't hurry. We have several miles to go yet. It is a long day's run from Carey's to our claim. Wolf County is almost like a state. The Crossing hopes to become the county seat."

"Why do they call that place Carey's Crossing?" Mrs. Aydelot asked.

"It was a trading post once where the north and south trail crossed the main trail. Later it was a rallying place for cavalry. Now it's our postoffice," Asher explained.

"I mean, why call it Carey? I knew Careys back in Virginia."

"It is named for a young doctor, the only one in ten thousand miles, so far as I know."

"And his family?" Virginia asked.

"He's a bachelor, I believe. By the way, we aren't going down hill. We are on level ground."

Mrs. Aydelot leaned out beyond the wagon bows to take in the trail behind them.

"Why, we are right in a big saucer. All the land slopes to the center down there before us. Can't you see it?"

"No, I've seen it too often. It is just a trick of the plains – one of the many tricks for the eye out here. Look at the sunflowers, Virgie. Don't you love them?"

Virginia Aydelot nestled close to her husband's side and put one hand on his. It was a little hand, white and soft, the hand of a lady born of generations of gentility. The hand it rested on was big and hard and brown and very strong looking.

"I've always loved them since the day you sent me the little one in a letter," she said in a low voice, as if some one might overhear. "I thought you had forgotten me and the old war days. I wasn't very happy then." There was a quiver of the lip that hinted at the memory of intense sorrow. "I had gone up to the spring in that cool little glen in the mountain behind our home, you know, when a neighbor's servant boy, Bo Peep, Boanerges Peeperville, he named himself, came grinning round a big rock ledge with your letter. Just a crushed little sunflower and a sticky old card, the deuce of hearts. I knew it was from you, and I loved the sunflower for telling me so. Were you near here then? This land looks so peaceful and beautiful to me, and homelike somehow, as if we should find some neighbors just over the hill that you say isn't there."

"Neither the hill nor the neighbors, yet, although settlers will be coming soon. We won't be lonesome very long, I'm sure."

Asher shifted the reins to his other hand and held the little white fingers close.

"It wasn't anywhere near here. It was away off in the southwest corner of – nowhere. I was going to say a shorter word, for that's where we were. I took that card out of an old deck from the man nearest me. The Comanches had fixed him, so he didn't need it in his game any more. There were only two of us left, a big half-breed Cheyenne scout and myself. I picked the sunflower from the only stalk within a hundred miles of there. I guess it grew so far from everything just for me that day. Weak as I

was, I'll never forget how hopefully it seemed to look at me. The envelope was one mother had sent me, you remember. I told the Cheyenne how to start it to you from the fort. He left me there, wounded and alone – 'twas all he could do – while he went for help about a thousand miles away it must have seemed, even to an Indian. I thought it was my last message to you, dearie, for I never expected to be found alive; but I was, and when you wrote back, sending your letter to 'The Sign of the Sunflower,' Oh, little girl, the old trail blossom was glorified for me forever."

He broke off so suddenly that his wife looked up inquiringly.

"I was thinking of the cool spring and the rocks, and that shady glen, and the mountains, and the trees, and the well-kept mansion houses, and servants like Bo Peep to fetch and carry – and here – Virginia, why did you let me persuade you away from them? Everything was made ready for you there. The Lord didn't do anything for this country but go off and leave it to us."

"Yes, to us. Here is the sunflower and the new home in the new West and Asher Aydelot. And underfoot is the prairie sod that is ours, and overhead is heaven that kept watch over you for me, and over both of us for this. And I persuaded you to bring me here because I wanted to be with you always."

"You can face it all for me?" he asked.

"With you, you mean. Yes, for we'll stop at 'The Sign of the Sunflower' so long as we both shall live. How beautiful they are, these endless bands of gold, drawing us on and on across the plains. Asher, you forget that Virginia is not as it was before the

war. But we did keep inherited pride in the Thaine family, and the will to do as we pleased. You see what has pleased me."

"And it shall please me to make such a fortune out of this ground, and build such a home for you that by and by you will forget you ever were without the comforts you are giving up now," Asher declared, looking equal to the task. "Virgie," he added presently, "on the night my mother told me to come out West she gave me her blessing, and the blessing of the old Bible Asher also – 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.' I believe the blessing will stay with us; that the Eternal God will be our refuge in this new West and new home-building."

They rode awhile in silence. Then Asher said:

"Look yonder, Virginia, south of the trail. Just a faint yellow line."

"Is it another trail, or are you lost and beginning to see things?"

"No, I'm found," Asher replied. "We scattered those seeds ourselves; did it on Sundays when I was living on my claim, waiting till I could go back and bring you here. We blazed the way, marked it with gold, I'd better say; a line clear to Grass River. It leaves the real Sunflower Trail right here."

"Who were *we* in this planting?" Virginia asked.

"Oh, me and my first wife, Jim Shirley, and his shepherd dog, Pilot. Jim and I have done several things together besides that. We were boys together back in Cloverdale. We went to the war together to fight you obstreperous Rebels." There was a twinkle

in Asher's eyes now.

"Yes, but in the end who really won?" Virginia asked demurely.

"You did, of course – in my case. Jim went back to Cloverdale for awhile. Then he came out here. He's a fine fellow. Plants a few more seeds by the wayside than is good for him, maybe, but a friend to the last rollcall. He was quite a ladies' man once, and nobody knows but himself how much he would have loved a home. He has something of a story back of his coming West, but we never speak of that. He's our only neighbor now."

It was twilight when Asher and his wife slipped down over a low swell and reached their home. The afterglow of sunset was gorgeous in the west. The gray cloud-tide, now a purple sea, was rifted by billows of flame. Level mist-folds of pale violet lay along the prairie distances. In the southwest the horizon line was broken by a triple fold of deepest blue-black tones, the mark of headlands somewhere. Across the landscape a grassy outline marked the course of a stream that wandered dimly toward the darkening night shadows. The subdued tones of evening held all the scene, save where a group of tall sunflowers stood up to catch the last light of day full on their golden shields.

"We are here at last, Mrs. Aydelot. Welcome to our neighborhood!" Asher said bravely as the team halted.

Virginia sat still on the wagon seat, taking in the view of sunset sky and twilight prairie.

"This is our home," she murmured. "I'm glad we are here."

"I'm glad you are glad. I hope I haven't misrepresented it to you," her husband responded, turning away that he might not see her face just then.

It was a strange place to call home, especially to one whose years had been spent mainly in the pretty mountain-walled Virginia valleys where cool brooks babbled over pebbly beds or splashed down in crystal waterfalls; whose childhood home had been an old colonial house with driveways, and pillared verandas, and jessamine-wreathed windows; with soft carpets and cushioned chairs, and candelabra whose glittering pendants reflected the light in prismatic tintings; and everywhere the lazy ease of idle servants and unhurried lives.

The little sod house, nestled among sheltering sunflowers, stood on a slight rise of ground. It contained one room with two windows, one looking to the east and the other to the west, and a single door opening on the south. Above this door was a smooth pine board bearing the inscription, "Sunflower Inn," stained in rather artistic lettering. A low roof extending over the doorway gave semblance to a porch which some scorched vines had vainly tried to decorate. There was a rude seat made of a goods box beside the doorway. Behind the house rose the low crest of a prairie billow, hardly discernible on the level plains. Before it lay the endless prairie across which ran the now half-dry, grass-choked stream. A few stunted cottonwood trees followed its windings, and one little clump of wild plum bushes bristled in a draw leading down to the shallow place of the dry watercourse.

All else was distance and vastness void of life and utter loneliness.

Virginia Aydelot looked at the scene before her. Then she turned to her husband with a smile on her young face, saying again,

"I am glad I am here."

There is one chord that every woman's voice touches some time, no matter what her words may be. As Virginia spoke, Asher saw again the moonlight on the white pillars of the south veranda of the old Aydelot farmhouse, and his mother sitting in the shadows; and again he caught the tone of her voice saying,

"Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be."

He leaped from the wagon seat and put up his arms to help his wife to the ground.

"This is the end of the trail," he said gaily. "We have reached the inn with 'The Sign of the Sunflower.' See the signboard Jim has put up for us."

At that moment a big shepherd dog came bounding out of the weeds by the river and leaped toward them with joyous yelps; a light shone through the doorway, and a voice at once deep and pleasant to the ear, called out:

"Well, here you are, just as supper is ready. Present me to the bride, Asher, and then I'll take the stock off your hands."

"Mrs. Aydelot, this is Mr. James Shirley, at present the leading artistic house decorator as well as corn king of the Southwest. Allow me, Jim, to present my wife. You two ought to like each

other if each of you can stand me."

They shook hands cordially, and each took the other's measure at a glance. What Shirley saw was a small, well-dressed woman whose charm was a positive force. It was not merely that she was well-bred and genial of manner, nor that for many reasons she was pretty and would always be pretty, even with gray hair and wrinkles. There was something back of all this; something definite to build on; a self-reliance and unbreakable determination without the spirit that antagonizes.

"A thoroughbred," was Shirley's mental comment. "The manners of a lady and the will of a winner."

What Virginia saw was a big, broad-shouldered man, tanned to the very limit of brownness, painfully clean shaven, and grotesquely clean in dress; a white shirt, innocent of bluing in its laundry, a glistening celluloid collar, a black necktie (the last two features evidently just added to the toilet, and neither as yet set to their service), dark pantaloons and freshly blacked shoes. But it was Shirley's face that caught Virginia's eyes, for even with the tan it was a handsome face, with regular features, and blue eyes seeing life deeply rather than broadly. Just a hint of the artistic, however, took away from rather than added to the otherwise manly expression. Clearly, Jim Shirley was a man that men and women, too, must love if they cared for him at all.. And they couldn't help caring for him. He had too much of the quality of eternal interest.

"I'm glad to meet you, and I bid you welcome to your new

home, Mrs. Aydelot. The house is in order and supper is ready. I congratulate you, Asher," he said, as he turned away to take the ponies.

"You will come in and eat with us," Virginia said cordially.

"Not tonight. I must put this stock away and hurry home."

Asher opened his lips to repeat his wife's invitation, but something in Jim's face held the words, so he merely nodded a good-by as he led his wife into the sod cabin.

Two decades in Kansas saw hundreds of such cabins on the plains. The walls of this one were nearly two feet thick and smoothly plastered inside with a gypsum product, giving an ivory-yellow finish, smooth and hard as bone. There was no floor but the bare earth into which a nail could scarcely have been driven. The furniture was meager and plain. There was only one picture on the wall, the sweet face of Asher's mother. A bookshelf held a Bible with two or three other volumes, some newspapers and a magazine. Sundry surprising little devices showed the inventive skill of the home-builder, but it was all home-made and unpainted. It must have been the eyes of love that made this place seem homelike to these young people whose early environment had been so vastly different in everything!

Jim Shirley had a supper of fried ham, stewed wild plums, baked sweet potatoes, and hot coffee, with canned peaches and some hard little cookies. Surely the Lord meant men to be the cooks. Society started wrong in the kitchen, for the average man prepares a better meal with less of effort and worry than

the average or super-average woman will ever do. It was not the long ride alone, it was this appetizing food that made that first meal in the sod mansion one that these two remembered in days of different fortune. They remembered, too, the bunch of sunflowers that adorned the table that night. The vase was the empty peach can wrapped round with a piece of newspaper.

As they lingered at their meal, Asher glanced through the little west window and saw Jim Shirley sitting by the clump of tall sunflowers not far away watching them with the eager face of a lonely man. A big white-throated Scotch collie lay beside him, waiting patiently for his master to start for home.

"I am glad Jim has Pilot," Asher thought. "A dog is better than no company at all. I wish he had a wife. Poor lonely fellow!"

Half an hour later the two came outside to the seat by the doorway. The moon was filling the sky with its radiance. A chorus of crickets sang joyously in the short brown grass about the sunflowers. The cottonwoods along the river course gleamed like alabaster in the white night-splendor, and the prairie breeze sang its low crooning song of evening as it flowed gently over the land. "How beautiful the world is," Virginia said, as she caught the full radiance of the light on the prairie.

"Is this beautiful to you, Virgie?" Asher asked, as he drew her close to him. "I've seen these plains when they seemed just plain hell to me, full of every kind of danger: cholera, poison, cold, hunger, heat, hostile Indian, and awful loneliness. And yet, the very fascination of the thing called me back and hardened me to

it all. But why? What is there here on these Kansas prairies to hold me here and make me want to bring you here, too? Not a feature of this land is like the home country in Virginia. When the Lord gave Adam and Eve a tryout in the Garden of Eden, He gave them everything with which to start the world off right. Out here we doubt sometimes if there is any God west of the Missouri River. He didn't leave any timber for shelter, nor wood, nor coal for fuel, nor fruit, nor nuts, nor roots, nor water for the dry land. All there is of this piece of the Lord's leftovers is just the prairie down here, and the sky over it. And it's so big I wonder sometimes that there is even enough skystuff to cover it. And yet, it is beautiful and maddening in its hold, once it gets you. Why?"

"Maybe it is the very unconquerableness that cries out to the love of power in you. Maybe the Lord, who knew how easily Adam let Eden slip through his fingers, decided that on the other side of the world He would give a younger race of men, a fire-tried race in battle, the chance to make their own Eden. So He left the stuff here for such as you and me to picture out our own plan and then work to the pattern. It is the real land of promise. Everything waiting to be done here."

"And there's only one way to do it. I am sure of that," Asher replied. "Armies don't win, they terrorize and destroy. We whipped back the Indians out here; they'd come again, if they dared – but they never will," he added quickly, as he saw his wife's face whiten in the moonlight. "It's a struggle to win the soil, with loneliness and distance and a few thousand other things

to fight, beside. But I told you all this before I asked you to come out here."

"I wish I could have brought some property to you to help you, Asher, but you know how the Thaine estate was reduced."

"Yes, I helped the family to that," Asher replied.

"Well, I seem to have helped you to lose the Aydelot inheritance. We are starting neck and neck out here," Virginia cried, "and we'll win. I can see our plantation – ranch, you call it – now, with groves and a little lake and a big ranch house, and just acres of wheat and meadows, and red clover and fine stock and big barns, and you and me, the peers of a proud countryside when we have really conquered. 'Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree.' Isn't that the promise?"

"Oh, Virgie, any man could win a kingdom with a wife like you," Asher said tenderly. "Back in Ohio, when I grubbed the fence corners, I saw this country night and day, waiting for us here, and I wondered why the folks were willing to let the marshes down in the deep woods stagnate and breed malaria, and then fight the fever with calomel and quinine every summer, instead of opening the woodland and draining the swamps. Nevertheless, I've left enough money in the Cloverdale bank to take you back East and start up some little sort of a living there, if you find you cannot stay here. I couldn't bring you here and burn all the bridges. All you have to do is to say you want to go back, and you can go."

"You are very good, Asher." His wife's voice was low and soft. "But I don't want to go back. Not until we have failed here. And we shall not fail."

And together that night on the far unconquered plains of Kansas, with the moon shining down upon them, these two, so full of hope and courage, planned their future. In the cottonwood trees by the river sands a night bird twittered sleepily to its mate; the chirp of many crickets in the short grass below the sunflowers had dwindled to a mere note at intervals. The soft breeze caressed the two young faces, then wandered far and far across the lonely land, and in its long low-breathed call to the night there was a sigh of sadness.

CHAPTER III
The Will of the Wind

> Naught but the endless hills, dim and far and blue,
> And sighing wind, and sailing cloud, and nobody here but you.
>
> – *James W. Steele.*

The next day, and for many days following, the wind blew; fiercely and unceasingly it blew, carrying every movable thing before it. Whatever was tending in its direction, it helped over the ground amazingly. Whatever tried to move in the face of it had to fight for every inch of the way. It whipped all the gold from the sunflowers and threshed them mercilessly about. It snapped the slender stems of the big, bulgy-headed tumble-weeds and sent them tumbling over and over, mile after mile, until they were caught at last in some draw, like helpless living things, to swell the heap for some prairie fire to feed upon. It lifted the sand from the river bed and swept it in a prairie simoon up the slope, wrapping the little cabin in a cloud of gritty dust. The cottonwoods along the waterway moaned as if in pain and flung up their white arms in feeble protest. The wild plum bushes in the draw were almost buried by the wind-borne drift smothering the narrow crevice, while out on the plains the long lashing waves of bended grass

made the eyes burn with weariness. And the sun watched it all with unpitying stare, and the September heat was maddening. But it was cool inside the cabin. Sod houses shut out the summer warmth as they shed off the winter's cold.

Virginia Aydelot stood at the west window watching her husband trying to carry two full pails of water which the wind seemed bent on blowing broadcast along his path. He had been plowing a double fireguard around the premises that morning and his face and clothes were gray with dust. These days of unceasing winds seemed to Virginia to sap the last atom of her energy. But she was young and full of determination.

"Why did you put the well so far away, Asher?" she asked, as he came inside.

The open door gave the wind a new crevice to fill, and it slapped wrathfully at the buckets, splashing the contents on the floor.

"We have to put wells close to the water in this country. I put this one in before I built here. And if we have a well, we are so glad we don't try to move it. The wind might find it out and fill it up with sand while we were doing it. It's a jealous wind, this." Asher's smile lit up his dust-grimed face.

"I've tried all day to keep the dust off the table. I meant to do a washing this morning, but how could any garment stay on the line out there and not be whipped to shreds?"

"Virginia, did you ever do a washing before the war?" Asher asked through the towel. He was trying to scrub his face clean

with the least possible amount of water.

"Oh, that's ancient history. No, nor did I do anything else. I was too young. Did you ever try to till a whole section of land back in Ohio before the war?" Virginia asked laughingly.

Asher took the towel from his head to look at her.

"You are older than when I first knew you – the little lady of the old Jerome Thaine mansion home. But you haven't lost any of that girl's charms and you have gained some new ones with the years."

"Stop staring at me and tell me why you didn't put the house down by the well, then," Virginia demanded.

"I did pitch my tent there at first, but it is too near the river, and several things happened, beside," he replied.

"Is that a river, really?" she inquired. "It looks like a weed trail."

"Yes, it is very real when it elects to be. They call it Grass River because there's no grass in it – only sand and weeds – and they call it a river because there is seldom any water in it. But I've seen such lazy sand-foundered streams a mile wide and swift as sin. So I take no risk with precious property, even if I have to tote barrels of water and slop the parlor rug on windy days."

"Then, why didn't you put another door in the kitchen end of the house?" Virginia questioned.

"Two reasons, dearie. First, can you keep one door shut on days like this, even when there is no draught straight through the house?" he inquired.

"Yes, when I put a chair against it, and the table against the chair, and the bed against the table, and the cookstove to back up the bed. I see. Shortage of furniture."

"No, the effect on this cabin if the wind had a sweep through two weak places in the wall. I built this thing to stay till I get ready to go away from it, not for it to go off and leave me sitting here under the sky some stormy day. Of course, the real home, the old Colonial style of house, will stand higher up after awhile, embowered in trees, and the wind may play about its vine-covered verandas, and its stately front columns, but that comes later."

"All right, but what was the second reason for the one doorway? You said you had two?" Virginia broke in.

"Oh, did I? Well, the other reason is insignificant, but effective in its way. I had only one door and no lumber within three hundred miles to make another, and no money to buy lumber, anyhow."

"You should have married a fortune," his wife said demurely.

"I did." The smile on the lips did not match the look in the gray eyes. "My anxiety is that I shall not squander my possession, now I have it."

"You are squandering your dooryard by plowing out there in front of the house. Isn't there ground enough if the wind will be merciful, not to use up our lawn?" Virginia would not be serious.

"I have plowed a double fireguard, and I've burned off the grass between the two to put a wide band of protection about

us. I take no chances. Everything is master in the wilderness except man. When he has tamed all these things – prairie fire, storm and drouth, winds and lonely distances, why, there isn't any more wilderness. But it's tough work getting acclimated to these September breezes, I know."

Virginia did not reply at once. All day the scream of the wind had whipped upon her nerves until she wanted to scream herself. But it was not in the blood of the breed to give up easily. Something of the stubborn determination that had made the oldtime Thaines drive the Quakers from Virginia shone now in the dark eyes of this daughter of a well-bred house.

"It's all a matter of getting one's system and this September wind system to play the same tune," she said.

"Virginia, you look just as you did that day when you said you were going through the Rebel ranks in a man's dress to take a message for me to the Union officer of my command, although you ran the risk of being shot for a spy on either side of the lines. When I begged you not to do it, you only laughed at me. I thought then you were the bravest girl I ever saw. Now I know it."

"Well, I'll try not to get hysterical over the wind out here. It is a matter of time and adjustment. Let's adjust ourselves to dinner now."

Beyond her lightly spoken words Asher caught the undertone of courage, and he knew that a battle for supremacy was on, a struggle between physical outcry and mental poise.

After the meal, he said, "I must take my plow down to Shirley's

this afternoon. His is broken and I can mend it while he puts in his fireguard with mine. I don't mind the wind, but I won't ask you to face it clear down to Shirley's claim. I don't like to leave you here, either."

"I think I would rather stay indoors. What is there to be afraid of, anyhow?" Virginia asked.

"Nothing in the world but loneliness," her husband replied.

"Well, I must get used to that, you know. I can begin now," Virginia said lightly.

But for all her courage, she watched him drive away with a sob in her throat. In all the universe there was nothing save a glaring sunlight and an endless cringing of yellow, wind-threshed grass.

Asher Aydelot had come here with half a dozen other young fellows, all of whom took up claims along Grass River. Six months later Jim Shirley had come to the settlement with a like company who extended the free-holdings until it was seven miles by the winding of the river from Aydelot's claim on the northwest down the river to Shirley's claim on the southeast.

Eighteen months later only two men were left in the Grass River valley, Aydelot and Shirley. The shorter trail as the crow flies between their claims was marked by a golden thread of sunflowers. At the third bend of the winding stream a gentle ripple of ground rose high enough to hide the cabin lights from each other that otherwise might have given a neighborly comfort to the two lone settlers.

Shirley's cabin stood on a tiny swell of ground, mark of a one-

time island, set in a wide bend in the river that was itself a natural fireguard for most of the circle of the premises.

The house was snug as a squirrel's nest. Before it was a strip of white clover, as green and fresh looking as if it were on the banks of Clover Creek in Ohio. Above the door a plain board bore the one word, "Cloverdale."

Jim Shirley stood watching Asher coming down the trail against the wind, followed by the big shepherd dog, Pilot, who had bounded off to meet him.

"Hello! How did you get away on a day like this?" he called, as the team drew near.

"Why, you old granny!" Asher stopped here.

Both men had been on the Kansas plains long enough not to mind the wind. It flashed into Asher's mind that Jim was hoping to see his wife with him, and he measured anew the loneliness of the man's life.

"Most too rude for ladies just yet, although I didn't like to leave Virginia alone."

"What could possibly harm her? Your fireguard's done, double done; there's no water to drown in, no Indian to frighten, no wild beast to enter, no white man, in God knows how many hundred miles. Just nothing to be afraid of."

"Yes, that's it – just nothing. And it's enough to make even a braver woman afraid. It's the eternal vast nothingness, when the very silence cries out at you. It's the awful loneliness of the plains that makes the advance attack in this fight with the wilderness.

Don't we both know that?"

"I reckon we do, but we got over it, and so will Mrs. Aydelot."

"How do you know that?" Asher inquired eagerly. "I believe she could hardly keep back the tears till I got away."

"Then why didn't you get away sooner? I know she will get over it, because she's as good a woman as we are men, and we stood for it."

"Well, here's your plow. Better get your guard thrown up. I can smell smoke now. There's a prairie fire sweeping in on this wind somewhere. There's a storm brewing, too. Remember what a fight we had with fire a year ago?"

Asher was helping to put Jim's team in the harness.

"Yes, you saved your well and a few other little things. But you've got your grit, you darned Buckeye, to hold on and start again from the ashes. And now you have your wife here. You are lucky," Jim declared.

"Where's that broken plow of yours? Is it bolt or weld? Maybe I can mend it." Asher was casting about for tools.

"It's bolt. Everything is on the stable shelves," Jim called back against the wind, as he drove the plow deep in the black soil. "Be sure you put 'em back when you are through with 'em, too."

"Poor Jim!" Asher said to himself with a smile. "The artist in him makes him keep the place in order. He'd stop to hang up his coat and vest if he had to fight a mad bull. Poor judgment puts a good many tragedies into lives as well as stage villain types of crime."

And then Asher thought of Virginia, and wondered what she was doing through the long afternoon. He was whistling softly with a smile in his eyes as Jim Shirley made the tenth round of the premises and stopped opposite the stable door.

"Hey, Asher, come out and see the sky now," he called. "It's prairie fire and equinoctial storm combined."

Asher hurried out to see the dull southwest heavens shutting off the sunlight out of which raged a wind searing the sky to a dun gray.

"Don't stand there staring, you idiot. Why don't you get your plowing done?" he cried to Shirley.

Shirley began to loose the trace-chain from the plow.

"That strip is wide enough now," he declared. "I've got a clover guard, anyhow. I don't need to back-fire like my neighbors do."

As Asher untied his ponies and climbed into the wagon, Jim held their reins.

"Stop a minute. Let a single man offer you a word of advice, will you?" he asked.

"All right, I need advice," Asher smiled down on Jim's earnest face.

"Then heed it, too. No use to tell you to take care of your wife. You'll do that to a fault. But don't make any mistake about Mrs. Asher Aydelot. She went through Rebel and Union lines once to save your life. Don't doubt her strength to hold her own here as soon as the first fight is over. She is like that Kentucky thoroughbred of hers; she's got endurance as well as grace and

beauty."

"Bless you, Jim," Asher said, as he clasped Shirley's hand. "I wish you had a wife."

"Well, they are something of an anxiety, too. Hustle home ahead of the storm. I've always wished that bluff at the deep bend didn't hide us from each other's sight. I'd like to blast it out."

Asher Aydelot hurried northward ahead of the hot winds and deepening shadows of the coming storm. And all the time, in spite of Jim's comforting words, an anxiety grew and grew. The miles seemed endless, the heavens darkened, and the wind suddenly gave a gasp and died away, leaving a hot, blank stillness everywhere.

Meanwhile, Virginia, alone in the cabin, had fallen asleep from sheer nerve weariness. When she awoke, it was late in the afternoon. The screaming outside had ceased, but the whir and whine were still going on, and the blaring light was toned by the dust-filled air.

"I was only tired," Virginia said to herself. "Now I am rested, I don't mind the wind."

She went out to watch the trail for Asher's coming. He was not in sight, so she came inside again, but nothing there could interest her.

"I'll go out and wait awhile," she thought.

Tying a veil over her head, she shut the cabin door and sat down outside. The wind died suddenly away, the trail was lifeless, and all the plain cut by the trail as well. Then the solitude of the

thing took up the flight where the wind had left off.

"How can I ever stand this," Virginia cried, springing up. "But Asher stood it before I came, or even promised to come. No knight of the old chivalry days ever endured such hardships as the claimholders on these Kansas plains must endure. But it takes women to make homes. They can never, never win here without wives. I could go back to Virginia if I would." She shut her teeth tightly, and the small hands were clenched. "But I won't do it. I'll stay here with Asher Aydelot. Other men and women as eager as we are will come soon. We can wait, and some day, Oh, some day, we'll not miss what the Thaines lost by the war and the Aydelots lost by the Thaines, for we'll have a prince's holdings on these desolate plains!"

She stood with her hands clasped looking with far-seeing dark eyes down the long trail by the dry river bed, like a goddess of Conquest on a vast untamed prairie.

A sudden sweep of the wind aroused her, and the loneliness of the plains rose up again.

"I'll get Juno and follow the trail till I meet Asher. I can't get lost where there's nothing but space," she said aloud, as she hurried to the stable and led out the petted thoroughbred.

Horses are very human creatures, responding not only to the moods of their masters, but to the conditions that give these moods. The West was no kinder to the eastern-bred horse than to the eastern-bred man. All day Juno had plunged about the stable and pawed the hard earth floor in sheer nervousness. She

leaped out of doors now at Virginia's call, as eager for comfort as a homesick child.

"We'll chase off and meet Asher, darling."

Even the soft voice the mare had heard all her days did not entirely soothe her. As Virginia mounted the wind flung shut the stable door with a bang. Juno leaped as from a gunshot, and dashed away up the river to the northwest. Her rider tried in vain to change her course and quiet her spirit. The mare only surged madly forward, as if bent on outrunning the tantalizing, grinding wind. With the sense of freedom, and with the boundlessness of the plains, some old instinct of the unbridled days of bygone generations woke to life and power in her, and with the bit between her teeth, she swept away in unrestrained speed.

Virginia was a skilled horsewoman, and she had no fear for herself, so she held the reins and kept her place.

"I can go wherever you can, you foolish Juno," she cried, giving herself up to the exhilarating ride. "We'll stay together to the end of the race, and we will get it out of our systems once for all, and come back 'plains-broke.'"

Beyond a westward sweeping curve of the river's course the chase became a climb up a long slope that grew steeper and steeper, cutting off the view of the stream. Here Juno's speed slackened, then dropped into a steady canter, as she listened for a command to turn back.

"We'll go on to the edge of that bluff, lady, now we are here, and see what is across the river," Virginia said. "Then we will

hurry home to Asher and prairie hay."

When they came at last over a rough shale outcrop to the highest headland, the river bed lay between its base and a barren waste of sand dunes, with broad grassy regions beyond them spreading southward. The view from the bluff's top was magnificent. Virginia held Juno to the place and looked in wonder at the vast southwest on this strange September afternoon. Across a reach of level land, miles wide, a prairie fire was sweeping in the majesty of mastery. The lurid flames leaped skyward, while roll on surging roll of black smoke-waves, with folds of gray ashes smothering between, poured out along the horizon. Beyond the fire was the dark blue storm-cloud, banded across the front by the hail mark of coppery green.

Virginia sat enchanted by the grandeur of the scene. The veil had fallen from her head, and with white face and fascinated eyes, she watched the glowing fury, a graceful rider on a graceful black horse, on the crest of the lone headland outlined against the sky.

Suddenly the terror of it broke upon her. She was miles from the cabin with its double fireguard. Asher had said such fires could leap rivers. Between her and safety were many level banks where the sandy stream bed was narrow, and many grassy stretches where there was no water at all.

Distance, storm wind, fire and hail, all seemed ready to close down upon her, making her senses reel. One human being, alone before the wrath of Nature! In all the years that followed, she never forgot that scene. For in that moment a whisper came from

somewhere out of the void, “The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms,” and she clasped her hands in a wordless prayer.

The wind that had been cruel all day grew suddenly kind. A dead calm held the air in a hot stillness. Then with a whip and a whirl, it swung its course about and began to pour cool and strong out of the northwest.

“The wind is changing,” Virginia cried, as she felt its chill and saw the flame and smoke tower upward and bend back from the way. “It is blowing the fire to the east, to the southeast. But, will it catch Asher? Oh, you good Wind, blow south! blow south!” she pleaded, as she dashed down the long slope for the homeward race.

When Asher reached his claim, he looked in vain for Virginia’s face as he passed the cabin window. He hurried the ponies into the corral, and the wagon under the lean-to beside the stable, half conscious that something was missing inside. Then he hastened to the cabin, but Virginia was not there.

“She may be in the stable.” He half whispered the words in his anxiety.

The ponies in the corral were greedily eating their hay, but the black mare Juno was gone. As Asher turned toward the house, he caught the low roaring of the tempest and felt a rush of cool wind from somewhere. A huge storm-wave of yellow dust was rolling out of the southwest; beyond it the heavens were copper-green, and back of that, midnight darkness; while, borne onward by its

force, low waves of prairie fire were swept along the ground.

Down at the third bend of the river where long growths overhung the stream, the flames crossed easily. Even as Asher Aydelot watched the storm cloud, long tongues of fire came licking up the valley toward him, not a towering height, but a swift crawling destruction which he looked at with unseeing eyes, for his only thought was for Virginia.

"How could I have missed her if she started to meet me? Yet, where can she be now?" he groaned.

The hungry flames gnawed vainly about his broad fireguard, then wavered back and forth along the south prairie, while he watched them under the fascination the mastery of the elements can exert. He turned at last from the fire and storm to see Juno and her rider swinging down the northwest prairie, keeping close to the river line before the chill north wind.

"Oh, Virgie, Virgie," he cried, as she slipped from the saddle and he caught her in his arms. "I've lived a hundred years since I left you this afternoon. What made you run away?"

In the joy of her safe return, he forgot the fire.

"Why, don't you see the wind is from the north? And it is blowing everything south now? I saw it begin away up the river. Did that guard really keep off that thing I saw from the high bluff up yonder?"

"I put it there to do it, and I'd take the chances. Awful as it is, it can't do anything but burn, and there's nothing here to burn. If it hadn't been there, everything would have been gone and you

would have come back to a pile of ashes if the wind had left a pile."

"And you put your puny hands to the plow handles and say to that awful fury, 'So far, and no farther. This is my home.' You, one little human being!" Virginia's eyes were glowing with wonder at the miracle.

"Yes, with my puny hands. Me – a little man," Asher smiled quizzically, as he spread his broad brown hands before his face and drew himself up to his full six feet of height. "Only I say, 'our home.' But I was so scared about you, I forgot to notice the change in the wind. The fire is chasing to the south, and the hailstorm has veered off down that stream this side of those three headlands over there. The wind gives and the wind takes away. You can't plow a guard around it."

They sat down by the cabin door to watch the storm and flame blown far away in whirls of glaring light and surging cloud, until the rain at last drowned all the fury and washed it over the edge of the south horizon out of the world.

"Sometime we'll plant hedges and forest trees and checker the country with windbreaks until days like this will belong only to an old pioneer's memory," Asher said, as the storm swept wide away.

"Then, I'm glad I came early enough to see this. I'm getting 'plains-broke' along with Juno. Isn't it wonderful to be a real pioneer? Back in Virginia we were two centuries of generations away from the first settlers," Virginia exclaimed.

But Asher did not answer. He was thinking of Jim Shirley's declaration: "She's got endurance as well as grace and beauty."

CHAPTER IV
Distress Signals

> Also, we will make promise. So long as the Blood endures,
> I shall know that your will is mine; ye shall feel that my strength is yours.
>
> *– A Song of the English.*

Virginia Aydelot soon grew brown as a berry in the tanning prairie winds, and it seemed impossible that this strong young woman of the sod cabin, with her simple dress and her cheeks abloom, could have been the dainty child of the old Southern mansion house.

No other autumn had ever seemed quite so beautiful to the Aydelots as this, their first autumn together. Life was before them with its call to victory. Youth and health, exuberant spirits and love were theirs. Theirs, too, was the great boundless world of mists and mirages, of rainbow tinted grasses and opal heavens, where no two sunsets were ever the same. They could laugh at their poverty, believing in a time when Ease and Plenty would rule the land where now they must fight for the bare necessities of existence, picturing life not as it was then with its many hardships, but as it would be in a future day when the real world whose last outpost they had left almost fifty miles to

the eastward, should move toward them and help to people the prairies.

All the week days were full of duties, but every Sabbath morning found the three settlers of the valley making a prairie sanctuary of the Aydelot cabin. The elder Aydelots had not united with any church, but Asher and Jim, when they were only boys, had been converted at a Methodist revival in Cloverdale. It was an old-fashioned kind of religious leading, but it was strong enough to hold the two for all the years that followed. Virginia had been reared an Episcopalian, but the men out-voted her and declared that the Aydelot home was the Sunflower Inn for six days in the week, but on the seventh it was the "First Methodist Church of the Conference of the Prairies."

There was no levity in its service, however, and He who dwelleth not in temples made with men's hands blessed with his own benediction of peace and trust and courage the three who set up their altar to Him in this far-away place.

On Sabbath afternoons they explored the sand dunes and grassy levels up and down the river. Sometimes they rode northward to the main trail in hope of sighting some prairie schooner coming hitherward, but not once that season did the trail hold a human being for them.

October slipped into November with a gradual sharpening of the frosty air. Everything had been made as snug as possible for the winter. The corrals were enlarged for the stock. The houses and stables were thatched against the cold and storms; and fuel

and food were carefully stored. But November was almost passed before the end of the bright and sometimes even balmy days.

"We must have Jim up to the Sunflower Inn for Thanksgiving dinner. Might as well invite the whole neighborhood," Asher said one evening, as he helped Virginia with the supper dishes.

"I'm planning a real dinner, too," his wife declared, "just like old Mammy Diane used to cook. You couldn't tell it from hers if you'd ever eaten one of her spreads."

"I suppose it will taste about as near like one of Diane's meals as you will look like the cook that made her meals," Asher answered.

"Well, I'm getting along that way. Look at my tanned arms now. There's a regular dead line, a perfect fireguard at the elbow. And my muscles, Mammy Diane would say, 'is jus' monst'ous.'"

Virginia pushed back her sleeve to show the well-marked line where white above met tan below.

"Jim will think anything is better than eating alone out of his own grub box, and your dinner will be a feast," Asher said, opening the door to carry out the dish water. "What do you think of this?"

A gust of cold rain swished in as the door fell open.

"Our rain is here, at last. Maybe it will bring snow for Thanksgiving, and we could have a touch of New England here," Virginia said.

The pelting rain and deepening chill made the little home a very snug nest that night. There was only one stove to warm

the house, but they kept up a fiction of parlor and dining room, kitchen and bed chamber. Even the library was there, although it encroached dreadfully on the parlor, bedroom and kitchen, all three, for it consisted of space enough for two chairs, one footstool, and a tiny lamp-stand, beside which they spent their evenings.

"Who's likely to drop in tonight, and what's the program for the evening: charades, music, readings, dancing, cribbage, or political speeches?" Asher inquired.

They had invented all sorts of pastimes, with make-believe audiences, such as little children create for their plays. For these two were children in a big child world. The wilderness is never grown up. It is Nature's little one waiting to be led on and disciplined to mature uses. Asher and Virginia had already peopled the valley with imaginary settlers, each one of a certain type, and they adapted their pastime to the particular neighbors whom they chose to invite for the evening. How little the helpless folk in the city, bored with their own dullness, and dependent on others for amusement – how little could such as these cope with the loneliness of the home on the plains, or comprehend the resourcefulness of the home-makers there!

"Oh, let's just spend the evening alone. It's too stormy for the Arnolds and Archibalds beyond the Deep Bend, and the Spoopendykes have relatives from the East and the Gilliwigs are all down with colds."

Virginia had tucked herself down in the one rocking chair,

with her feet on the footstool.

"It's such a nice night to be to ourselves. Watch the rain washing that west window. It's getting worse. I always think of Jim on nights like this."

"So do I," Asher said, as he sat down in the armed chair he had made for himself of cottonwood limbs with a gunny sack seat. "He's all alone with his dog these dark nights, and loneliness cuts to the heart of a man like Jim. I'm glad I have you, Virginia. I couldn't do without you now. The rain is getting heavier every minute. Sounds like it was thumping on the door. Listen to that wind!"

"Tell me about Jim, Asher. What made him come out here anyhow?" Virginia asked.

"I don't know all the story. Jim has never seemed to want to tell me, and I've never cared to ask him," Asher replied. "When we were away together at school, he was in love with one of the prettiest girls that Ohio ever grew. She lived in the country up the valley from Cloverdale. Her name was Alice Leigh, and she was a whole cut above the neighborhood. Jim said she was an artist, could do wonderful things with a brush and she was just wild to go somewhere and take lessons.

"Jim was planning always how to give her the opportunity to do it, but her mother, who owned a lot of land for that country and could afford to send Alice away to study, couldn't see any dollar sign in it, so she kept her daughter on the farm."

Asher paused and looked at Virginia. His own happiness made

his voice tremble as he went on.

"He has a brother Tank. I suppose his real name is Thaddeus, or Tantalus, or something like it; I never knew, and I never liked him well enough to ask. Tank was a black-eyed little runt whom none of the boys liked, a grasping cuss, younger than Jim, and as selfish as Jim is kind.

"Just before I came West to scout the Indians off the map, Jim came back to school one time so unlike himself that I made him tell me what was the matter. It was Tank, he said, who was making trouble for him up in the Leigh neighborhood, and he was so grieved and unhappy, I wouldn't ask any more about it. I left for the West soon after that. When I went back to Cloverdale, Tank Shirley had married Alice Leigh and her mother's farm, and Jim had left the country. I ran on to him by accident up at Carey's Crossing when I came West again, but I've never heard him say a word about the matter, and, of course, I don't mention it, although I believe it would do Jim good if he could bring himself to tell me about it. He's never been quite the same since. He has a little tendency to lung trouble, which the plains air is taking out of him, but he's had a bad attack of pneumonia, and it's an old enemy of his, as it always is to a man of his physique. He's a good worker, but lacks judgment to make his work count. Doesn't really seem to have much to work for. But he's a friend to the last ditch. Just hear the rain!"

"It seems to be knocking against the door again," Virginia said, "and how the wind does howl! Poor Jim!"

"Listen to that! Sounds like something loose against the window. There's something out there." Asher started up with the words.

Something white had seemed to splash up against the window and drop back again. It splashed up a second time, and fell again. Asher hurried to the door, and as he opened it, Pilot, the big white-throated dog from the Shirley claim, came bounding in, so wet and shaggy he seemed to bring all the storm in with him.

"Why, Pilot, what's the news?" Asher asked. "Jim's sent him, Virgie. He's done this trick often."

Pilot slipped to the warm stove and shook a whole shower out of his long, wet hair, while Asher carefully untied a little leather bag fastened to the collar under the dog's throat.

"You brave fellow. You've come all the way in the rain to bring me this."

He held up a little metal box from which he took a bit of paper. Bending close to the lamp, he read the message it contained.

"Something is wrong, Virginia. He says, 'I need you.' What's the matter with Jim, Pilot? Come here and get up in the chair!"

The dog whimpered and sat still.

"Come out here, then! Come on, I tell you!" Asher started as if to open the door, but the dog did not move.

"He's not out of doors, and he isn't sitting up in a chair. Tell me, now, Pilot, exactly where Jim is! Jim, mind you!"

The dog looked at him with watchful eyes.

"Where's Jim? Poor Jim!" Asher repeated, and Pilot, with a

sorrowful yelp, stretched himself at full length beside the stove.

"Jim's sick, then?"

Pilot wagged his tail understandingly.

"Virgie, Jim needs me. I must go to him." Asher looked at his wife.

"If Jim needs you, you'll need me," she replied.

"And we'll both need Pilot. So we'll keep all the human beings together," Asher said, as he helped his wife to fasten her heavy cloak and tie a long old-fashioned nubia about her head.

Then they went out into the darkness and the chilling rain, as neighbor to neighbor, answering this cry for help.

Pilot ran far ahead of them and was waiting with a dog's welcome when they reached Shirley's cabin. But the master, lying where he caught the chill draught from the open door, was rigid with cold. A sudden attack of pneumonia had left him helpless. And tonight, Pilot, doing a dog's best, did not understand the danger of leaving doors open, and of joyously shaking his wet fur down on the sick man to whom help was coming none too soon.

"Hello, Jim! We're all here, doctor, nurse, cook, and hired man, and the little dog under the wagon," Asher said cheerily, bending over Jim's bunk. "That pup pretty nearly killed you with kindness, didn't he?"

Jim smiled wanly, then looked blankly away and lay very still.

The plains frontier had no use for the one talent folk. People must know how to take care of life there. Asher's first memory of Virginia was when she bent over him, fighting the fever in a

prison hospital. He knew her talent for helping, and he had fairly estimated her quick ingenuity for this sod house emergency. But a new vision of the plains life came to her as she watched him, gentle-handed, swift, but unhurried, never giving an inch to the enemy in fighting with death for the life of Jim Shirley.

"He's safe from that congestion," Asher said when the morning broke. "But his fever will come on now."

"Where did you learn to do all these things for sick people?" Virginia asked.

"Partly from a hospital nurse I had in the war. Also, it's a part of the game here. I learned a few things fighting the cholera in sixty-seven. We must look everything on the frontier squarely in the face, danger and death along with the rest, just as we have to do everywhere else, only we have to depend on each other more here. Hold on there, Jim!"

Asher sprang toward Shirley, who was sitting upright, staring wildly at the two. Then a struggle began, for the sick man, crazed with delirium, was bent on driving his helpers from the cabin. When he lay back exhausted at length, Asher turned to his wife.

"One of us must go to Carey's Crossing for a doctor. You can't hold Jim. It's all I can do to hold him. But it's a long way to Carey's. Can you go?"

"I'll try," Virginia replied. And Asher remembered what Jim had said on the windy September day: "She's as good a woman as we are men."

"You must take Pilot with you and leave him at home. You

can't get lost, for you know the way up to the main trail, and that runs straight to the Crossing. Dr. Carey knows Jim, and he will come if he can, I am sure. He pulled Jim back once a year or two ago when the pneumonia had him. Heaven keep you safe, you brave little soul. Jim may turn the trick for us some day."

He kissed her good-by and watched her gallop away on her errand of mercy.

"The men will have all the credit by and by for settling this country. Little glory will come to their wives," he thought. "And yet, the women make anchor for every hearthstone, and share in every deed of daring and every test of endurance. God make me worthy of such a wife!"

Virginia Aydelot had spoken truly when she declared that the war had left the Thaines little except inherited pride and the will to do as they pleased. Inherited tendencies take varying turns. What had made a reformer of old Jean Aydelot made a narrow bigot of his descendant, Francis. What had made a proud, exclusive autocrat of Jerome Thaine, in Virginia Thaine developed into a pride of conquest for the good of others. It was this pride and the Thaine will to do as she pleased in defiance of the prairie perils that sent her now on this errand of mercy for a neighbor in need. And she took little measure of the reality of the journey. But she was prudent enough to stop at the Sunflower Inn and make ready for it. She slipped on a warm jacket under her heavy cloak, and put on her thickest gloves and overshoes. She wound a long red scarf about her neck and swathed her head

in the gray nubia. Then she mounted her horse for her long, hard ride.

The little sod house with all its plainness seemed very cosy as she took leave of it, and the woman instinct for home made its outcry in her when she turned her face resolutely from its sheltering warmth and felt the force of the north wind whipping mercilessly upon her. But she steeled herself to meet the cold, and her spirits rose with the effort.

"You are a mean little wind. Not half as big as the September zephyrs. Do your worst, you can't scare me," she cried, tucking her head down against its biting breath.

Upon the main trail the snow that had fallen after midnight deepened in the lower places as the wind whirled it from the prairie swells. It was not smooth traveling, although the direction of the trail was clear enough at first.

Virginia's heart bounded hopefully as Juno covered mile after mile with that persistent, steady canter that means everything good for a long ride. But the open plains were bitterly cold and the wind grew fiercer as the hours passed. High spirits and hope began to give place to determination and endurance. Virginia shut her teeth in a dogged resolve not to give up. Indeed, she dared not give up. She must go on. A life depended on her now, and two lives might be forfeited if she let this unending wind chill her to forgetfulness.

And so, alone in a white cruelty of solitary land, bounded only by the gray cruelty of the sky, with a dimming trail before her

under a deeper snowfall, and with long miles behind her, she struggled on.

She tried to think of everything cheerful and good. She tried to find comfort in the help she would take to Jim. Truly, she was not nearly so cold now and she was very weary and a wee bit sleepy. A tendency to droop in the saddle was overcoming her. She roused herself quickly, and with a jerk at the reins plunged forward at a gallop.

"It will take the stupor out of me," she cried.

Then the reins drooped and the fight with the numbing cold began again.

"I wonder how far along I am. I must be nearly there. I remember we lost sight of Carey's Crossing soon after we left last September. Some swell of ground cut us off quickly – and I've never seen a human being since then, except Asher and Jim Shirley and Pilot," she added.

"The snow is so much heavier right here. It varies so. I've passed half a dozen changes, but this is the deepest yet. I'm sure I can see the town beyond this slope ahead. Why! where's the trail, anyhow?"

It was nearing mid-afternoon. Neither horse nor rider had had food nor water, save once when Juno drank at a crossing. Virginia sat still, conscious suddenly that she has missed the trail somewhere.

"It isn't far, I know. Could I have left it when I took that gallop?" she asked herself.

She was wide awake now, for the reality of the situation was upon her, and she searched madly for some sign of the trail. In that level prairie sea there was no sign to show where the trail might lie. The gray sky was pitiless still, and with no guiding ray of sunshine the points of the compass failed, and the brave woman lost all sense of direction.

"I won't give up," she said at last, despairingly, "but we may as well rest a little before we try again."

She had dropped down a decided slope and hurried to a group of low bushes in a narrow draw. While the wind was sliding the snow endlessly back and forth on the higher ground, the bushes were moveless. Slipping to the ground beside them, she stamped her feet and swung her arms until the blood began to warm her chilled body.

"It is so much warmer here. But what next? Oh, dear Father, help me, help me!" she cried in the depth of her need.

And again the same clear whisper that had spoken to her on the headland when she watched the September prairie fire, a voice from out of the vast immensity of the Universe, came to her soul with its calm strength.

"The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

How many a time in the days of winning the wilderness did the blessed promise come to the pioneer women who braved the frontier to build the homes of a conquering nation.

"I can't try that blind game again for awhile," Virginia said

to herself. “I’ll run up a distress signal; maybe somewhere help is coming to me. I know now how Jim felt all alone with only a dog’s instinct to depend on. I’m glad I’ve tried to help him, even if I have failed.”

She unwound the long red scarf from her neck and bound her nubia closer about her throat. Then bending the tallest bush that she could reach she fastened the bright fabric to its upper limbs and let it swing to its place again. The scarf spread a little in the breeze and hung above her, a dumb signal of distress where help was not.

The minutes dragged by like hours to Virginia, trying vainly to decide on what to do next. The fury of a Plains blizzard would have quickly overcome her, but this was a lingering fight against cold and a pathless solitude. Suddenly the memory of one lonely Sabbath day came to her, and how Asher, always resourceful, had said:

“When you are afraid, pray; but when you are lonely, sing.”

She had prayed, and comfort had come with the prayer. She could sing for comfort, if for nothing else. Somebody might hear. And so she sang. The song heard sometimes in the little prayer meeting in some country church; sometimes by sick beds when the end of days is drawing near; sometimes in hours of shipwreck, above the roar of billows on wide, stormy seas; and sometimes on battlefields when mangled forms lie waiting the burial trench and the mournful drumbeat of the last Dead March – the same song rose now on the lonely prairie winds sweeping

out across the hidden trails and bleak open plains.

Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer to thee,
E'en though it be a cross
That raiseth me.
Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer to thee.

CHAPTER V
A Plainsman of the Old School

I have eaten your bread and salt,
I have drunk your water and wine;
The deaths ye died I have watched beside,
And the lives ye led were mine.

– Kipling.

The little postoffice at Carey's Crossing in Wolf County was full of men waiting for the mail due at noon. Mail came thrice a week now, and business on the frontier was looking brighter. The postoffice was only one feature of the room it occupied. Drugs, hardware, horse-feed, groceries, and notions each had claims of their own, while beside the United States Mail Department was an inksplashed desk holding a hotel register, likewise inksplashed. Beyond the storeroom was a long, narrow dining room on one side and a few little cell-like rooms on the other with a crack of a hall between them leading back to the kitchen, the whole structure, only one story high, having more vertical boards than horizontal in its making. But the lettering over the front door bore the brave information that this was the Post Office, the General Merchandise Store, and the Jacobs House, all in one.

The rain of the night had shifted to a light snow that whiffed about in little white pellets, adding nothing to the land in the way of moisture, or beauty, or protection from cold. Just a chill fraying out of the rain's end that matched the bitterness of the wind's long sweep from out of the vast northwest. A gray sky was clamped down over all, so dull and monotonous, it seemed that no rainbow tint could ever again brighten the world.

"The stage is late again," observed one of the men.

"Always is when you want her particular." This from a large man who held the door open long enough to stare up the open street for the sign of the coming stage and to let in a surge of cold air at the same time.

"Well, shut the door, Champers. The stage doesn't come inside. It stops at Hans Wyker's saloon first, anyhow," one of the men behind a counter declared.

"If you'd open a bar here you'd do some business and run that Wyker fellow out. Steward, you and Jacobs are too danged satisfied with yourselves. We need some business spirit in this town if we want to get the county seat here," Champers declared.

"That may help your real estate, but it's not my kind of business, and no bar is going into this tavern," Jacobs replied, leaning his elbow against the back of Stewart, who was bending over the desk.

Stewart and Jacobs were young men, the former a finely built, fair-haired Scotchman from whom good nature, good health, and good morals fairly radiated; not the kind of man to become

a leader, but rather to belong to the substantial following of a leader.

Jacobs was short, and slender, and dark – unmistakably of Jewish blood – with a keen black eye, quick motions, and the general air of a shrewd business man, letting no dollar escape him. He had also the air of a gentleman. Nobody in Carey's Crossing had ever heard him swear – the language of the frontier always – nor seen him drink, nor had taken a parcel from his store that had been tied up with soiled fingers.

The Jacobs House register might be splashed with ink, but the ledger records of the business concern were a joy to the eye.

At Stewart's words Champers shut the door with a slam and blustered toward the stove, crowding smaller men out of their places before it.

"I am glad I don't have to run other men's affairs – "he began, when the rear door flew open and a slender young Negro hurried in with the announcement:

"De stage done sighted approachin' from de east, gen'lemen. Hit's done comin' into town right now."

"All right, Bo Peep; take care of the team," Stewart responded, and a general re-swarming of the crowd followed.

Just before the stage – a covered wagon drawn by two Indian ponies – reached the Jacobs House a young man crossed the street and entered the door. Some men are born with a presence that other men must recognize everywhere. To this man's quiet, "Hello, gentlemen," the crowd responded, almost to a man:

"Good morning, Doctor."

"Hello, Carey."

"Hello, Doc."

Each man felt the wish to be recognized by such greeting, and a place was given him at once. Only Champers, the big man, turned away with a scowl.

"Always gets the best of everything, even to the first chance to get his mail," he muttered under his breath.

But the mail was soon of secondary interest to the dealer in real estate. Letters were of less importance to him than strangers, and a stranger had registered at the desk and was waiting while Stewart called out the mail in the postoffice department. Champers leaned over the shoulders of shorter men to read the entry in a cramped little hand, the plain name, "Thomas Smith, Wilmington, Delaware." Then he looked at the man and drew his own conclusions.

Dr. Carey was standing beside the letter counter when Todd Stewart read out, "'Mr. James Shirley,'" and, with a little scrutiny – "'Southwest of Carey's Crossing.' Anybody here know Mr. James Shirley?"

The stranger made a hasty step forward, but Dr. Carey had already taken the letter.

"I'll take care of that for you, Stewart," he said quietly. And turning, he looked into the eyes of the stranger.

It was but a glance, and the latter stepped aside.

Men formed quick judgments on the frontier. As Carey passed

the register he read the latest entry there, and like Champers he too drew his own conclusions. At the door he turned and said to Jacobs.

"Tell Bo Peep to have your best horse ready by one o'clock for a long ride."

"All right, Doctor," Jacobs responded.

Half an hour later the Jacobs House dining room was crowded for the midday meal. By natural selection men fell into their places. Stewart and Jacobs, with Dr. Carey and Pryor Gaines, the young minister school teacher, had a table to themselves. The other patrons sat at the long board, while the little side table for two was filled today with Champers, the real estate man, and the latest arrival, Mr. Thomas Smith, of Wilmington, Delaware.

"Who's the man with the dark mustache up there?" Thomas Smith asked.

"Doc Carey," Champers replied with a scowl.

"You don't seem to need him?" There was a double meaning in the query, and Champers caught both.

"No ways," he responded.

"Has some influence here?" the stranger asserted rather than questioned.

"A lot. Has the whole town under hoodoo. It's named for him. He has all the doctoring he can do and won't half charge, so's no other doctor'll come here. That's no way to build up a town. He'd get up at one o'clock in the morning to doctor a widder's cow. Now, sure he would, when he knows even a dead cow'd make

business for the butcher to render up into grease and the cattle dealer to sell another cow."

"Not your style of a man then?" the stranger observed.

"Oh, pshaw, no, but, as I say, he's got the whole country hoodoo'd. Notice how everybody give him right of way to get his mail first? Why him? And hear him order the best horse? I'll bet a tree claim in hades right now that he's off somewhere to doctor some son of a gun out of cussed good will."

"Who is this James Shirley whose mail he seems to look after?"

There was a half-tone lowering of the voice as Smith pronounced the name, which was not lost on Champers, whose business was to catch men at all corners.

"Jim Shirley lives out in one of the rich valleys west. Him and a fellow named Aydelot have some big notions of things out there. I don't know the doc's claim to control his mail, but nobody here would deny Carey any danged thing he wanted." Champers twisted his face in disgust.

"You are in the real estate business here?" Thomas Smith asked after a pause, as if the subject fell into entirely new lines.

"Yes," Champers answered absently with eyes alert on the opposite wall.

"I'd like to see you later, Mr. – "

"Champers – Darley Champers," and the dealer in land shoved a soiled card across the table. "Come in any time. This cold snap will soon be over and I can show you no end of land

worth a gold mine any time you are ready. But make it soon. Land's goin' faster here'n you Delaware fellers think, and" – in a lower voice – "Doc Carey's drivin' over it all the time, and that Jew of a Jacobs ain't in business here on account of no lung trouble, and his hatred of saloons is somethin' pisen."

They finished their meal in silence, for they had come to an understanding. The afternoon was too short and cold for real estate business to be brisk, and nobody in Carey's Crossing noted that the front window of Darley Champer's little office was covered with a newspaper blind all the rest of that day, nor did anybody pay attention to the whereabouts of the stranger – Mr. Thomas Smith, of Wilmington, Delaware – during this same time. Nobody, except John Jacobs, of the Jacobs House, who gained his knowledge mostly by instinct; never, at least, by rude inquiry. He had been up on the roof helping Bo Peep to fasten the sign over the door which the wind had torn loose. From this place he could see above the newspaper screen of the window across the street that Champers and Smith were in a tremendously earnest consultation. He would have thought nothing of it had not Champers chanced to sight him on the roof and immediately readjusted the newspaper blind to prevent observation.

"I'll offer to sell Darley a window shade cheap tomorrow and see how he bites," and the little Jewish merchant smiled shrewdly at the thought.

Out on the trail that day the snow lay deeper to the westward, hiding the wagon ruts. The dead sunflower stalks made only

a faint black edging along the white monotony of the way and sometimes on bleak swells there were no markings at all. Some distance from Carey's Crossing a much heavier snowfall, covering a wide swath, under which the trails were entirely lost, had wandered in zigzag lines down from the northwest.

In the early afternoon Dr. Horace Carey had started west on the surest horse in the Stewart-Jacobs livery stable, taking his old-fashioned saddle-bags with him through force of habit, and by mid-afternoon was floundering in the edge of this deeper snowfall.

Nature must have meant Horace Carey for the plains. He was of medium height, compactly built, without an ounce of unnecessary weight. The well-rounded form took away all hint of spareness, while it did not destroy the promise of endurance. His heavy, dark hair and dark gray eyes, his straight nose and firm mouth under a dark mustache, and his well-set chin made up an attractive but not handsome face. The magnetism of his personality was not in manly beauty. It was an inborn gift and would have characterized him in any condition in life. There was about him a genial dignity that made men look up to him and a willingness to serve that made selfishness seem mean. He could not have been thirty, although he had been on the plains for five years. The West was people by young men. It's need for daring spirits found less response in men of maturer life. But the West had most need for humane men. The bully, the dare-devil, the brutal, and the selfish were refuse before the force that swept

the frontier onward; but they were never elements in real state building. Before such men as Carey they lost power.

The doctor rode away toward the west, bowing his head before the strong wind that he knew too well to fear, yet wondering as he rode if he had done wisely to dare the deepening snow of the buried trail.

"I might have waited a day, anyhow," he thought. "It's a devil of a ride over to Jim Shirley's, and we got only the tag ends of that storm down at the Crossing from the looks of this. However, I may as well keep at it now."

He surged on for a few miles without any signs of an open trail appearing. Then he dropped to a slow canter.

"I'd better get this worry straightened and my mind untangled if I am to have any comfort on this ride," he said aloud, as was his wont to do when out in the open alone. "Everything happens to a man who gives too much leeway to that indefinite inside guide saying, 'Do this! Let that alone!' And yet that guide hasn't failed me when I've listened to it."

He let the pony have the rein as he looked ahead with unseeing eyes.

"What made me take this day? First, everybody is well enough to be left for two or three days, good time for a vacation, and Stewart can take care of emergencies always. Second, I promised Jim I'd see that his letters got to him straightway. Third, yes, third, something said, 'Go now!' But here's the other side. Why go on the heels of a snowstorm? Why not keep Jim's letter a

day or two? It's in my hands. And why mistrust a man who calls himself innocent 'Thomas Smith?' That's it. He's too innocent. There's no place on these wide Kansas prairies for that man Thomas Smith. He'd better get back to his home and his real name at once."

The doctor smiled at the thought, then he frowned at the cold wind and the shifting snows above the trail.

"You are a fool – a stack of fools, Dr. Horace Carey, to beat out of town miles on miles on a fool's errand over a lost trail, trusting your instinct that never lost you a direction yet, and all because of an inward call to an unrevealed duty. Some other day will do as well. And here's where I may as well cut off these notions of being led by inside signals. What should make me sight danger in a man I never saw before, and who will probably go out on the stage tomorrow morning? Oh, well, the Lord made us as we are. He knows why."

He wheeled the pony about and began to trot toward Carey's Crossing. Suddenly he halted.

"Let me see. I'm not twenty miles along, though I've come at a good rate. I believe I'll cut across northwest and hit some of the settlers up on Big Wolf Creek for the night. Lucky I've no wife to worry about me."

A wave of sadness swept over the man's face – just a sweep of sorrow that left no mark. He turned abruptly from the trail and struck in a definite direction across the snow-covered prairie. Presently his path veered to the north, then to northwest.

"I know an ugly little creek running into Big Wolf that's the dickens to cross. I'll run clear round it, even if it takes longer. After all, I'm doing just what I said I wouldn't do. I don't know why I didn't go on, nor why I am tacking off up here. Something tells me to do it, and I'll do it."

But however changeable of mind he seemed to himself, Dr. Carey was a man who formed his judgments so quickly and acted upon them so promptly that he seemed most stable to other men. He rode forward now to a land wave that dropped on one side to a creek, a quarter of a mile away, where black shrubbery marked the water line. A long swell of wind swung down the valley, whirling the snow in eddies before it. As the doctor's eye followed them, he suddenly noted a red scarf lift above the tallest clumps of bushes and flutter out to its full length, then drop again as the wind swell passed.

"There's nobody in fifteen miles of here. I reckon that scarf blew there and caught some time this fall when somebody was going out on the trail. Mighty human looking thing, though. It seemed waving a signal to me. But I must hurry on."

He hastened at a gallop up the ridge away from the creek, his mind still on that red scarf flung about by the winter wind.

"It was a strange thing," he thought, "but every human token is startling out here. What's that now?"

The doctor had a plainsman's ear as well as a plainsman's eye. As he listened, through the wail of the wind borne along the distance, he caught the words of a song, low and pleading like a

plaintive cry for help:

> Though, like the wanderer,
> The sun gone down,
> Darkness be over me,
> My rest a stone —
> Yet in my dreams I'd be
> Nearer, my God, to thee,
> Nearer to thee.

It was a woman's voice and Carey faced about to listen. He knew it came from the bushes below the red scarf. So he changed his course and hurried around a bend in the stream to the other side of the brush where Virginia Aydelot stood beside Juno.

"I'm afraid there isn't even a stone to rest on here, Madam. Can I be of any service to you?" he said, lifting his hand toward his cap in semi-military salute.

Virginia stood looking at the stranger with a half-comprehending gaze. She had been less than an hour beside the bushes, but it had seemed to her like many hours. And the terrifying certainty of a night alone on the prairie made the sudden presence of a human being unreal to her.

"I beg your pardon; I am Dr. Carey, of Carey's Crossing, and I was striking across the prairie to the Big Wolf settlement when I saw your scarf and heard your singing. I took them both to be distress signals and came over to see if you needed me."

One had only to listen to Dr. Carey's voice to understand why

Darley Champers should accuse him of laying a charm on the whole settlement.

Virginia recovered herself quickly, saying with a wan smile:

"You came just in time, Doctor. I am lost and need help. I was going to you, anyhow."

Each one's face was so muffled against the wind that the eyes and lips and a bit of the cheeks alone were visible.

"Not a bad-looking woman for all the Kansas tan," the doctor thought. "She has a voice like a true Virginian and fine eyes and teeth. But any woman who bundles up for a horseback ride across the plains on a day like this isn't out for a beauty show contest. I've seen eyes like that before, though, and as to her voice – "

"I am Mrs. Asher Aydelot from the Grass River Valley," Virginia went on. "There are only three settlers out there now, Mr. Shirley and my husband and myself. Mr. Shirley is very sick with pneumonia, and Mr. Aydelot could not leave him, so I started to Carey's Crossing to see if you could come to him. I missed the trail somewhere. I was trying to help, but I failed, you see."

The doctor was looking at her with a puzzled expression which she thought was born of his sympathy. To the mention of her failing he responded quickly:

"No, Mrs. Aydelot, you succeeded. I had started to Shirley's myself on personal business, and I was letting some whim turn me aside. If you had kept the trail we should have missed each other, for I was on my way to Big Wolf Creek, a good distance

away, and your leaving the trail and wandering down here was providential for Shirley. Shall I show you on to the Crossing?"

"Oh, no, Doctor, if you will only come back with me. I don't want to go on," Virginia insisted.

"You are a regular westerner, Mrs. Aydelot," Carey declared. "But you haven't been out here long. I heard of your passing through our town late last summer. I was up on Big Wolf then and failed to see you. I know something of your husband, but I have never met him."

He helped her to mount her horse and together they sought the trail and followed it westward in the face of the wind.

Near midnight down in Jim Shirley's cabin Asher Aydelot turned from a lull in the sick man's ravings to see Dr. Horace Carey entering the door with a pair of saddle bags in his hand.

"Hello, sir! Aydelot? I'm Carey, the doctor."

Then as his quick eye took in the haggard face of the man before him, he said cheerily:

"Everything fit as a fiddle up your way. I left your cabin snug and warm as a prairie dog's hole, and your wife is sound asleep by this time, with a big dog on guard. Yes, I understand," he added, as Asher silently gripped his hand. "You've died a thousand deaths today. Forget it, and give me a hand here. My own are too stiff, and I must get these wet boots off. I always go at my work dry shod."

He had pulled a pair of heavy shoes from the saddle bags, and was removing his outer coat and sundry scarfs, warming

his hands between whiles and seemingly unconscious of the sick man's presence.

"You are wet to the knees. You dared the short trail and the strange fords of rivers on a night so dark as this," Asher declared as he helped Carey to put off his wrappings.

"It's a doctor's business to forget himself when he sees a distress signal." Then Carey added quietly: "Tell me about Shirley. What have you been doing for him?"

He was beside Jim's bunk now and his presence seemed to fill the whole cabin with its subtle strength.

"You know your business, doctor; I'm a farmer," Asher said, as he watched this frontier physician moving deftly about his work.

"Well, if you mean to farm so far from pill bags you have done well to follow my trade a little, as you seem to have done with Shirley," Carey asserted, as he noted the evidences of careful nursing.

"Oh, Virginia – Mrs. Aydelot – helped me," Asher assured him. "She's a nurse by instinct."

"What did you call your wife?" the doctor inquired.

"Virginia – from her own state. Pretty sick man here." Asher said this as Dr. Carey suddenly bent over Shirley with stern eyes and tightening lips. But the eyes grew tender when Jim looked up into his face.

"You're all right, Shirley. You must go to sleep now."

And Shirley, who in his delirium had fought his neighbor all day, became as obedient as a child, as a very sick child, that night

under Horace Carey's hand.

The next morning Virginia Aydelot was not able to rise from her bed, and for many days she could do nothing more than to sit in the rocking chair by the windows and absorb sunshine.

On the fourth day after Carey had reached Shirley's Asher went down the river in the early afternoon to find how Jim's case was progressing, leaving his wife comfortably tucked up in the rocking chair by the west window. The snow was gone and the early December day was as crisp and beautiful as an Indian summer day in a colder climate. Virginia sat watching the shadows of the clouds flow along the ground and the prairie hues changing with the angle of the afternoon sunlight. Suddenly a sound of ponies' feet outside was followed by a loud rap on the door.

"Come in!" Virginia called. "Lie down, Pilot!"

Pilot did not obey, but sat up alert before his mistress as Darley Champers' bulk filled the doorway.

"Excuse me, Madam," the real estate dealer said, lifting his hat, "Me and my friend, Mr. Smith out there, are looking up a claim for a friend of ours somewhere out in the Grass River settlement. Can you tell me who owns the last claim taken up down the river, and how far it is from here?"

"Mr. Shirley's claim is a few miles down the river, if you go by the short trail and ford at the bends, but much longer if you go around by the long trail," Virginia explained.

"Is it occupied?" Champers put the question in a careless tone.

Pilot's bristles, that had fallen at the sound of Virginia's voice, rose again with the query. It is well to be wary of one whom a dog distrusts. But the woman's instinct in Virginia responded little to the dog's uneasiness, and she replied courteously:

"Yes, Mr. Shirley is there, very sick."

"Um, who have I the honor of addressing now?" Champers asked awkwardly, as if to change the subject.

"Mrs. Asher Aydelot."

"Well, now, I've heard of Aydelot. Where is your man today? I'd like to meet him, Mrs. A."

It was the man's way of being friendly, but even a duller-fibred man than Champers would have understood Mrs. Aydelot's tone as she said:

"You will find him at Shirley's, or on the way. Only the long trail winds around some bluffs, and you might pass each other without knowing it."

"How many men in this settlement now?" Champers asked.

"Only two," Virginia replied, patting Pilot's head involuntarily.

"Only two! That's sixteen more'n'll ever make it go here," Darley Champers declared. "Excuse me for saying it, Mrs. Aydelot, but I've been pretty much over Kansas, and this is the poorest show for settlement the Lord ever left out of doors. I've always heard this valley was full of claims you simply couldn't give away, but my friend, who has no end of money and influence fur developin' the country, wanted me to look over the ground

along the Grass River, It's dead desolation, that's all; no show on earth in fifty year out here, and in fifty year we won't none of us care for more'n six feet of ground anywhere. I'm sorry for you, Madam. You must be awfully lonely here, but you'll be gettin' away soon, I hope. I must be off. Thank you, Madam, for the information. Good day," and he left the cabin abruptly.

The sunshine grew pallid and the prairies lay dull and endless. The loneliness of solitude hung with a dead heaviness and hope beat at the lowest ebb for Virginia Aydelot, trying bravely to deny his charge against the future of the land she had struggled so to dream into fruitfulness. She was only a woman, strong to love and brave to endure, but neither by nature nor heritage shrewd to read the tricks of selfish trade. And she believed that while Asher and Jim Shirley were hopeful dreamers like herself, here was an ill-mannered but unprejudiced man who saw the situation as they could not see it.

"That woman and her fool dog were half afraid of me at first. They don't know that women aren't in my line. I'd never harm a one of 'em."

"They're in my line always. Was she good looking? I never pass a pretty woman," Thomas Smith said smoothly.

"Don't be a danged fool, Smith. I might cut a man's throat to some extent, if it would help my business any, but I'd cut it more'n some if he forgets his manners round a woman. We're a coarse, grasping lot out here fur as property goes, and we ain't got drawing-room manners, but it takes your smug little easterners

to be the real dirty devils. Come on."

And Thomas Smith knew that the big, coarse-grained man was sincere.

"Yonder's Aydelot now. Want to see him?" Darley Champers declared, sighting Asher down the short trail beyond the deep bend.

"I've no business with him, and he's the man I don't want to see," Thomas Smith said hastily. "I'll ride on out of sight round this bend and wait for you. It's a good place when you don't want to be seen."

"Depends on how much of a plainsman Aydelot is. He ought to have sighted both of us half a mile back," Champers declared.

But Smith hurried away and was soon behind the low bluff at the deep bend. Asher Aydelot had seen the two before they saw him, and he saw them part company and only one come on to meet him.

"You're Aydelot from the claim up the river, I s'pose. I'm just out lookin' at the country. Not much to it but looks," Champers declared as the two met at the deep bend.

"Yes, sir; my name is Aydelot," Asher replied, deciding at once that this stranger was not to be accepted on sight, a judgment based not on a woman's instinct but on a man's experience.

"Any of these claims ever been entered?" Champers asked.

"Yes, sir; most of them," Asher responded.

"I see. Couldn't make it out here. I s'pose you'll get out next.

Hard place to take root. Most too far away, and land's a little thin, I see," the real estate dealer remarked carelessly.

"Yes, it's pretty well out," Asher assented.

"The river ever get low here?" was the next query.

"Not often, in the winter," Asher replied.

"Most too uncertain for water power, though, and the railroad ain't comin' this way at all. I must be gettin' on. One man's too few to be travelin' so fur from civilization."

"Come up to the cabin for the night," Asher said, with a plainsman's courtesy.

"Thank you, no. Hope to see you again nearer to the Lord's ground; losin' game here. Good-by."

Asher did not look like a disappointed man when he reached the Sunflower Inn.

"Best news in the world," he declared when Virginia related what had happened in the cabin that afternoon. "A man who goes prospecting around the Kansas prairies doesn't discourage the poor cuss he pities; he tries to encourage the wretch to hold on to land he wouldn't have himself. Listen to me, Virgie. That man has his eye on Grass River right now. I know his breed."

Meanwhile the early dusk found Champers and Smith approaching Shirley's premises.

"I don't know about Aydelot," Champers declared as they lariated their ponies beyond the corral. "He's one of the clear-eyed fellows who sees a good thing about as soon as you sight it yourself, and then he turns clam and leach and you won't move

him nor get nothin' out of him, and that's all there is to it."

"Yes, I know that. I mean, you say he does?" Smith seemed too preoccupied to follow his own words, but Champers followed Smith shrewdly enough.

They made a hasty but careful examination of the premises, keeping wide of the cabin where the sick man lay.

"He's got three horses in there. He's well fixed," Champers declared, peering into the stable, where it was too dark to discover that the third horse was Dr. Carey's. "Let's hike off for some deserted shack for the night and get an early start for the Crossing in the morning. Easy trick, this, gettin' in and out of here unseen. And it's one of the best claims on Grass River."

"Couldn't we slip into the cabin?" Smith asked in a half whisper. "If he's too sick" – Something in the man's face made it look diabolical in the fading twilight, and he seemed about to start toward the house.

"Now, see here, Mr. Smith," Champers said with slow sternness. "What'd I say back there about women? Neither we ain't man-slaughterers out here, though your *Police Gazette* and your dime novels paint us that way. There's more murderers per capiter to a single street in New York than in the whole state of Kansas, right now. If it's land and money, we're after it, tooth an' toenail, but forget the thing in your mind this minute or you an' me parts company right here, an' you can hoof it back to Carey's Crossing or Wilmington, Delaware."

Smith made no reply and they mounted their ponies and

galloped away.

And all the while Dr. Horace Carey, inside the unlighted cabin, had watched their movements with grim curiosity, even to the hesitating, half-expressed intention of entering the dwelling.

"Champers would pull up another man's stakes and drive them into his own ground if he wanted them, but that Thomas Smith would drive them through the other fellow's body if nobody else was around," was the doctor's mental comment as he went outside and watched the course of the two men till the twilight gathered them in.

When the turning point came to the sick man, the up-climb was marvelous, as his powers of recoil asserted themselves.

"It is just a matter of self-control and good spirits now, Shirley, and you have both," Dr. Carey said, as he sat by his patient on the ninth day.

"You staid the game out, Carey," Shirley said with an undertone of hopelessness behind his smile. "What possessed you to happen in, anyhow?"

"I was possessed not to come and turned back after I'd started. If I hadn't met Mrs. Aydelot coming after me I'd have rampsed off up on Big Wolf Creek for a week, maybe, and missed your case entirely."

"And likewise my big fee," Jim interrupted. "Some men are born lucky. And so Mrs. Aydelot went after you. Asher's a fortunate man to have a wife like Virginia, although he had to give up an inheritance for her."

"How was that?" Carey asked, glad to see the hopeless look leaving Jim's eyes.

"Oh, it's a pretty long story for a sick man. The mere facts are that Asher Aydelot was to have bank stock, a good paying hotel, and a splendid big farm if he'd promise never to marry any descendant of Jerome Thaine, of Virginia. Asher hiked out West and enlisted in the cavalry and did United States scout duty for two years, hoping to forget Virginia Thaine, who is a descendant of this Jerome Thaine. But it wasn't any use. Distance don't count, you know, in cases like that."

"Yes, I know."

Shirley was too sick to notice Dr. Carey's face, and he did not remember afterward how low and hard those three words sounded.

"It seems Virginia had pulled Asher through a fever in a Rebel hospital, and we all love our nurses." Jim patted the doctor's knee as he said this. "And when the father's will was read out against ever, ever, ever his son marrying a Thaine, Asher promptly said that the whole inheritance, bank stock, hotel, and farm, might go where – the old man Aydelot had already gone – maybe. Anyhow, he married Virginia Thaine and she was game to come out here and pioneer on a Grass River claim. Strange what a woman will do for love, isn't it? And to go on a forty-mile ride to save a worthless pup's life! That's me. Think of the daughter of one of those old Virginia homes up to a trick like that?"

"You've talked enough now."

Shirley looked up in surprise at this stern command, but Dr. Carey had gone to the other side of the cabin and sat staring out at the river running bank-full at the base of the little slope.

When he turned to his patient again, the old tender look was in his eyes. Men loved Jim Shirley if they cared for him at all. And now the pathetic hopelessness of Jim's face cut deep as Carey studied it.

"I say, Shirley, did you ever know a man back East named Thomas Smith?" he asked.

"No. Strange name, that! Where'd you run onto it? Smith! Smith! How do you spell it?" Jim replied indifferently.

"With a spoonful of quinine in epsom salts, taken raw, if you don't pay attention. Now listen to me." The doctor's tone was as cheery as ever.

"Well, don't make it necessary for me to tell you when you've talked enough."

In spite of the joking words, there was a listless hopelessness in Shirley's voice, matching the dull, listless eyes. And Horace Carey rose to the situation at once.

"A stranger named Thomas Smith came to the Crossing the day I came down here. Rather a small man, with close-set, dark eyes; signed his name in a cramped, left-handed writing. I noticed his right hand seemed a little stiff, sort of paralyzed at the wrist. But here's the funny thing. He made me uneasy, and he made me think of you. Could you identify him? He looked as much like you as I look like that young darkey, Bo Peep, up

at the Jacobs House."

"None of my belongings. You are a delicate plant to be so sensitive to strangers." Jim sighed from mental weariness more than from physical weakness.

"I was sensitive, and when I heard Stewart call out your name in the mail and saw this man step up as if to take the letter, I took it. And if you'll take a brace and decide it's worth while you can have it. It's addressed in a woman's handwriting, not a Thomas Smith style of pinching letters out of a penholder and squeezing them off the pen point. Lie down there, man!"

For Jim was sitting up, listening intently. With trembling fingers he took the letter and read it eagerly. Then he looked at Carey with eyes in which listlessness had given place to determination.

"Doctor, I was ready to throw up the game five minutes ago. Now I'll do anything to get back to strength and work."

"You don't seem very joyous, however," the doctor responded.

"Joy don't belong to me. We parted company some years ago. But life is mine."

"And duty?"

"Yes, and duty. Say, Doctor, if you'd ever cared all there was in you to care for one woman, and then had to give her up, you'd know how I feel. And if, then, a sort of service opened up before you, you'd know how I welcome this."

Jim's face, white from his illness, was wonderfully handsome now, and he looked at his friend with that eager longing for

sympathy men of his mould need deeply. Horace Carey stood up beside the bed and, looking down with a face where intense feeling and self-control were manifest, said in a low voice:

"I have cared. I have had to give up, and I know what service means."

CHAPTER VI
When the Grasshopper Was a Burden

> Although the figtree shall not blossom, neither
> shall fruit be in the vines, the labor of the olive shall
> fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock
> shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no
> herd in the stalls:
> Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.
>
> – *HABAKKUK.*

While Jim Shirley was getting back to health, he and his physician had many long talks regarding the West and its future; its products and its people. There was only one topic in which Horace Carey was but intermittently interested, namely, Jim's neighbors – the Aydelots. At least, it seemed so to Jim, who had loved Asher from boyhood, and had taken Virginia on sight and paid homage to her for all the years that followed. Jim accepted the doctor's manner at first as a mere personal trait, but, having nothing to do except to lie and think, he grew curiously annoyed over it.

"I wish you'd tell me what ails you?" he blurted out one evening, as the two sat together in the twilight.

"About what?" the doctor inquired. "If I knew, I might even

risk my own medicine to get over it."

"Don't joke, Horace Carey, not with a frail invalid. I've tried all day to talk to you about my neighbors and you turn the subject away as if it was of no consequence, and now, tonight, you settle down and say, 'Tell me about the Aydelots.' Why do you want to hear in the dark what you won't listen to in the daylight?"

"Oh, you are a sick man, Jim, or you wouldn't be so silly," the doctor replied, "but to please you, I'll tell you the truth. I'm homesick."

"Yes?"

"And this Mrs. Aydelot was a Virginia woman."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm a true son of Virginia, and I thought it might make me happy to hear about somebody from – "

"You are a magnificent liar," Jim broke in.

"Evidently it's better to have you talk about your neighbors than your medical advisor tonight," Carey retorted.

"Oh, I won't say a word more," Jim declared.

"More Ananias magnificence! Do you suppose the Aydelots will be down before we go away?" the doctor asked.

"We?"

"Yes, I am going to take you with me, or give you a quieting powder when I leave here. On your own declaration you'd do anything to get back to strength and work. Now, the only way to get well, with or without a physician, is to get well. And you'll never do that by using up a little more strength every day than

you store up the night before. Men haven't sense enough to be invalids. Nothing else is such a menace to human life as the will of the man who owns that life. You'll obey my will for a month or two."

"You are a – doctor, Carey. No, the Aydelots won't be down before we go away, because Virginia has been sick ever since that awful trip to Carey's Crossing," Jim said sadly.

"Why haven't you told me?" Carey's voice was hardly audible.

"Because Asher just told me today, and because you took no interest in them."

"Sickness is a doctor's interest, always," Carey replied in a stern voice. And then the two sat in silence while the night shadows darkened the little cabin.

As soon as Shirley was able to ride, he went up to Carey's Crossing for a two months' stay, and the Aydelots were left far away from the edge of civilization. A heavy snowfall buried all the trails and the world, the happy, busy world, forgot these two holding their claim on the grim wilderness frontier.

In after years they often talked of the old pioneer days, but of this one winter they spoke but rarely.

"We lived alone with each other and God," Virginia said once. "He walked beside us on the prairie and made our little sod house His sanctuary. Those were consecrated days to Asher and me, like the stormy days of our first love in the old war times, and the first hours of our baby's life. We were young and full of hope and belief in the future, and we loved each other. But we had

need to have shoes of iron and brass, as Moses promised Asher of old. It was a hard, hard way, but it was His way. I am glad we walked through it all. It made the soil of Kansas sacred to us two forevermore."

One March day spring came up the Grass River Valley with a glory all its own, and sky and headland and low level prairie were baptized with a new life. A month later a half-dozen prairie schooners moved out on the old sunflower-bordered trail. Then following down the Grass River trail, the schooner folk saw that the land, which Darley Champers had denounced, was very good. And for Asher and Virginia Aydelot, the days of lonely solitude were ended.

But the prairie had no gifts to bestow. It yielded slowly to its possessors only after they had paid out time and energy and hope and undying faith in its possibilities. The little sum of money per acre turned over to the Government represented the very least of the cost. There were no forests to lay waste here, nor marshes to be drained. Instead, forests must be grown and waters conserved. What Francis Aydelot with the Clover Valley community had struggled to overcome on the Ohio frontier, his son, Asher, with other settlers now strove to develop in Kansas. But these were young men, many of them graduates, either in the North or the South, from a four years' course in the University of the Civil War. No hardship of the plains could be worse than the things they had already endured. These men who held the plow handles were State builders and they knew it. Into the State must be

builded schools and churches, roads and bridges, growing timber and perpetual water reservoirs; while fields of grain and orchard fruitage, and the product of flock and herd must be multiplied as the sinews of life and larger opportunity. For all these things the Kansas plains offered to Asher Aydelot and his little company of neighbors only land below, crossed by a grass-choked river, and sky overhead, crossed but rarely by blessed rain-dropping clouds. And yet the less the wilderness voluntarily gave up, the more these farmer folk were determined to win from it. Truly, they had need not only for large endurance in the present, but for large vision of a future victory, and they had both.

The weight of pioneer hardship, however, fell heaviest on the women of whom Virginia Aydelot was a type. Into the crucible out of which a state is moulded, she cast her youth and strength and beauty; her love of luxury, her need for common comforts, her joy in the cultured appointments of society. She had a genius for music, trained in the best schools of the East. And sometimes in the lonely days, she marked her only table with a bit of charcoal to the likeness of a keyboard. Then she set her music against her clean dishpan and dumbly fingered the melodies she had loved, hoping her hands might not lose all their cunning in these years of home-making on the plains.

The spring of the memorable year of 1874 opened auspiciously. The peach trees on the Aydelot and Shirley claims bloomed for the first time; more sod had been turned for wheat and corn; gardens and truck patches were planted; cattle were

grazing beyond the sand dunes across the river, while the young cottonwood and catalpa groves, less than three feet high it is true, began to make great splotches of darker green on the prairie, promising cool forest shade in coming years. Mail went west on the main trail three times a week. The world was coming nearer to the Grass River settlement which, in spite of his doleful view once, Darley Champers was helping to fill up to the profit of the real estate business.

Carey's Crossing, having given up all hope of becoming a county seat, had faded from the face of the earth. The new county seat of Wolf County was confidently expected to be pitched at Wykerton, up in the Big Wolf Creek settlement, where one Hans Wyker, former saloon-keeper of Carey's Crossing, was building up a brewery for the downfall of the community. Dr. Carey was taking an extended medical course in the East, whither Bo Peep had followed him. Darley Champers was hovering like a hawk between Wykerton and the Grass River settlement. Todd Stewart had taken a claim, while John Jacobs, temporarily in the East, was busy planting the seeds for a new town which no Wyker brewery should despoil.

All lovely was this springtime of 1874. Midsummer had another story to tell. A story of a wrathful sun in a rainless sky above a parched land, swept for days together by the searing south winds. In all the prairie there was no spot of vivid green, no oasis in the desert of tawny grasses and stunted brown cornstalks, and bare, hot stubble wherefrom even the poor crop of straw had

been chaffless and mean.

On a Sabbath morning in late July, the little Grass River schoolhouse was crowded, for Sabbath school was the event of the week. It did not take a multitude to crowd the sod-built temple of learning. Even with the infant class out of doors in the shade, the class inside filled the space. The minister school-teacher, Pryor Gaines, called it the "old folks' class," although there was not a person over thirty-five years of age in the whole settlement.

Asher Aydelot was the superintendent, and Virginia took care of the infant class. Jim Shirley led the singing, and Pryor Gaines taught the "old folks." He was the same minister school-teacher who had sat at the table with Dr. Carey and Todd Stewart and John Jacobs on the day that Thomas Smith ate his first meal at the Jacobs House. With the passing of Carey's Crossing, he had taken a homestead claim on Grass River.

This morning the lesson was short, and the children, finding the heat of the shade outside unbearable, were sitting on the earth floor beside their parents. Nobody seemed ready to go home.

"Times are getting worse every day," one man observed. "No rain since the tenth of May, and the prettiest stand of wheat I ever saw, burned to a half-yield or less before cutting time. I'd counted on wheat for my living this year."

"It's the same if you'd had corn, Bennington," Jim Shirley observed. "I was polishing my crown for a Corn King Festival this fall. I don't believe I'll harvest fifteen bushels to the acre."

"Fifteen bushels!" another neighbor exclaimed. "Fifteen ears to the row a section long would encourage me, Darley Champers told me when I took up my claim, if I'd plant a grove or two, that in three years the trees would be so big that rainfall would be abundant. You all know my catalpa woods is a wonder," he added with a wink.

Darley Champers himself had just come down the trail and was entering the door.

"Well, come over our way if you are on the hunt for prosperity," Todd Stewart interposed. "Grass River isn't living up to its name any better than our creek; isn't any fuller of weeds than our brook is of – shale. I did lose the trail in your river this morning, though. The weeds are nearly up to the pony's flanks. Think of the fertility of a river bed that will grow weeds three feet high and two shades more yellow green than the dead grass on the bank. If there's a drop of water in our creek for twenty miles, I'd go get it and have Brother Gaines analyze it to make sure it wasn't resin."

"You do well to see the humor of the situation, Stewart," Pryor Gaines began, with the cheery tone of a man who believes in hope.

"I don't see that that helps any," Bennington, the first speaker, broke in dolefully. "Joking isn't going to give us food and clothes and fuel till crop time comes again – if it ever does."

"I'm not suffering for extra clothes. What I wear now is a burden," Todd Stewart declared.

"Well, gentlemen." Darley Champers took the floor. "What are you going to do? That's what brought me here today. I knowed I'd find you all here. When I sent some of you fellows into this blasted Sahara, I was honest. I thought Grass River was a real stream, not a weed patch and a stone outcrop. I'd seen water in it, as I can prove by Aydelot. Remember, when we met down by the bend here, one winter day?"

"Yes, I remember," Asher replied.

"Well, I just come by there and there ain't a drop of water in that deep bend, no more'n in my hat." Champers plumped his hat down on the floor with the words. "And the creek, on Stewart's testimony, is a blasted fissure in the earth."

"I always said when that bend went dry, I'd leave the country, but I can't," Jim Shirley said doggedly.

"Why not?" Champers inquired.

"Because I can't throw away the only property I have in the world, and I haven't the means to get away, let alone start up anywhere else."

"We're all in the same boat," Bennington declared.

"Same boat, every fellow rocking it, too, and no water to drown in if we fall out. We're in the queerest streak of luck yet developed," Todd Stewart observed.

"Let's take a vote, then, and see how many of us really have no visible means of support and couldn't walk out of here at all. Let's have a show of hands," Jim Shirley proposed.

"How did you decide?" Champers asked, as the hands

dropped.

His eyes were on Asher Aydelot, who had not voted.

"Didn't you see? Everybody, except Asher there, is nailed fast to the gumbo," Stewart declared.

Darley Champers looked Asher Aydelot straight in the eyes, and nobody could have said that pity or dislike or surprise controlled the man's mind, for something of all three were in that look. Then he said:

"Gentlemen, I know your condition just as well as you do. You're in a losing game, and it's stay and starve, or – but they ain't no 'or.' Now, I'll advance money tomorrow on every claim held here and take it and assume the mortgage. Not that they are worth it. Oh, Lord, no. I'll be land-logged, and it's out of kindness to you that I'm willin' to stretch them fellers I represent in the East. But I'll take chances. I'll help each feller of you to get away for a reasonable price on your claim. It's a humanitarian move, but I may be able to lump it off for range land in a few years for about what it costs to pay taxes. But, gents, I got some of you in and I'm no scallawag when it comes to helpin' you out. Think it over, and I'll be down this way in two weeks. I've got to go now. It's too infernal hot to keep alive here. I know where there's two sunflower stalks up on the trail that's fully two feet tall. I've got to have shade. Goodday." And Champers was gone.

"What do you say?" The question seemed to come from all at once.

"Let Pryor Gaines speak first. He's our preacher," Asher said

with a smile.

Pryor Gaines was a small, fair-faced man, a scholar, a dreamer, too, maybe. By birth or accident, he had suffered from a deformity. He limped when he walked, and his left hand had less than normal efficiency. On his face the pathos of the large will and the limited power was written over by the ready smile, the mark of abundant good will toward men.

"I am out of the race," he said calmly. "I'm as poor as any of you, of course, and I must stay here anyhow, Dr. Carey tells me. I came West on account of heart action and some pulmonary necessities. I cannot choose where I shall go, even if I had the means to carry out my choice. But my necessities need not influence anyone," he added with a smile. "I can live without you, if I have to."

"How about you?" Stewart said, turning to Asher. "You take no risk at all in leaving, so you'll go first, I suppose?"

All this time the settlers' wives sat listening to the considerations that meant so much to them. They wore calico dresses, and not one of them had on a hat. But their sunbonnets were clean and stiffly starched, and, while they were humbly clad, there was not a stupid face among them; neither was their conversation stupid. Their homes and home devices for improvement, the last reading in the all too few papers that came their way, the memories of books and lectures and college life of other days, and the hope of the future, were among the things of which they spoke.

Virginia Aydelot was no longer the pretty pink and white girl-bride who had come to the West three years before. Her face and arms were brown as a gypsy's, but her hair, rumpled by the white sunbonnet she had worn, was abundant, and her dark eyes and the outlines of her face had not changed. She would always be handsome without regard to age or locality. Nor had the harshness of the wilderness made harsh the soft Southern tongue that was her heritage.

At Stewart's words, Asher glanced at his wife, and he knew from her eyes what her choice would be.

"When I was a boy on the old farm back at Cloverdale, Ohio, my mother's advice was as useful to me as my father's." Swift through Asher's mind ran the memory of that moonlit April night on his father's veranda five years before. "Out here it is our wives who bear the heaviest burdens. Let us have their thoughts on the situation."

"That's right," Jim Shirley exclaimed. "Mrs. Aydelot, you are first in point of time in this settlement. What do you say?"

"It's a big responsibility, Mrs. Aydelot," Bennington, who had not smiled hitherto, said with a twinkle in his eye.

"As goes Asher Aydelot, so goes Grass River," Todd Stewart declared. "You speak for him, Mrs. Aydelot, and tell us what to do."

"I cannot tell *you* what to do. I can speak only for the Aydelots," Virginia said. "When we came West Asher told me he had left one bridge not burned. He had put aside enough money to

take us back to Ohio and to start a new life, on small dimensions, of course, back East, whenever we found the prairies too hostile. They've often been rough, never worse than now, but" – her eyes were bright with the unconquerable will to do as she pleased, true heritage of the Thaines of old – "but I'm not ready to go yet."

Jim Shirley clapped his hands, but Pryor Gaines spoke earnestly. "There is no failure in a land where the women will to win. By them the hearthstones stand or crumble to dust. The Plains are master now. They must be servant some day."

"Amen!" responded Asher Aydelot, and the Sabbath service ended.

Two weeks later Darley Champers came again to the barren valley and met the settlers in the sod schoolhouse. Not a cloud had yet scarred the heavens, not a dewdrop had glistened in the morning sunlight. Clearly, August was outranking July as king of a season of glaring light and withering heat. The settlers drooped listlessly on the backless seats, and the barefoot children did not even try to recite the golden text.

"I'd like to speak to you, Aydelot," Champers said at the door, as the school service ended.

The two men sought the shady side of the cabin and dropped on the ground.

"I'm goin' to be plain, now, and you mustn't misunderstand me for a minute," Champers declared. The blusterer is rarely tactful.

"All right."

Champers seemed to take the cheery tone as a personal

matter.

"Two weeks ago, I understand you and Mrs. Aydelot headed off these poor devils from their one chance of escape. Now, you know danged well you *don't* intend to stay here a minute longer'n it'll take to kite out of this in the fall. And you are sacrificing human lives by persuadin' these folks to hold onto this land they just can't keep, nor make a livin' on, under five years and pay the interest till their mortgages expire. And I've just this to say:" Champers spoke persuasively. "I'm not a shark. I'm humane. If you'll help me to get these poor settlers out of Grass River Valley, I'm willing to pay you a good commission on every single claim and take no commission at all on yours. It will help you a lot toward makin' a bigger start back East. Don't listen to your woman now; listen to me, for I'm givin' you the chance of your life, robbin' myself to do it, too. But" – his tone changed abruptly – "if you figger you can take your danged rainy-day bank account out'n the Cloverdale bank and grab onto this land, you leave yourself, and hold onto it while you stay East a few years, and then sneak back here and get rich off their loss, I tell you now, you can't do it. And if you don't use your influence right now to get 'em to sell out to my company, you're going to regret it. Don't ask how I know. I *know*. I warn you once for all. You go in there and help the men decide right now – I'll buy at a reasonable figger, you understand – and you're goin' to help make 'em sell to save their fool skins from starvation and their wives and their little ones, or you're going to rue the day you drove into Kansas.

What do you say? What are you goin' to do?"

The man's voice was full of menace, and he looked at Asher Aydelot with the determination of one who will not be thwarted.

Asher looked back at him with clear gray eyes that saw deeper than the threatening words. A half smile hovered about his lips as he replied.

"So that's your game, Darley Champers. If I'll help you to get hold of this land, you'll pay the settlers more than the claims are worth and you'll pay me more than they are worth. A pretty good price for worthless ground."

"Well, look at the landscape and tell me what you see." Darley Champers flung his hand out toward the sweep of brown prairie with the dry river bed and the brazen sands beyond it. Lean cattle stood disconsolately in the shadeless open, while the cultivated fields were a mass of yellow clods about the starveling crops.

Asher did not heed the interruption.

"You declare that I'll leave here as soon as I can get away, and that I'm brutal to use my influence to keep the settlers here; that I am working a trick *you* have worked out already for me, to get the land myself because it is valuable; you, in your humane love for your fellowmen, you threaten me with all unknown calamities if I refuse your demand. And then you ask me what I have to say, what I am going to do, and, with fine gestures, what I see?"

"Well?" Champers queried urgently.

The plains life made men patient and deliberate of speech, and Asher did not hasten his words for all the bluster.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.