

Cabin O'Wildwinds: The Story of a Montana Ranch

Installment One

Ada Melville Shaw

Illustrations by Irvin "Shorty" Shope

Note: While researching farm home designs and interiors in *The Farmer's Wife: The Magazine for Farm Women*, Drumlummon Institute board member Patty Dean came upon a marvelously literate first-person narrative written from the perspective of a woman homesteading alone near Billings, Montana. Ada Melville Shaw, writer and editor, suffragist, and author of the lyrics to the hymn, "All the Day" (ca. 1900; music by James M. Black), had staked a homestead claim in Yellowstone County in late 1915. Shaw would later serve as an editor at (and frequent contributor to) *The Farmer's Wife*, a popular magazine devoted, in Dean's words, to "providing a forum for farm women, actively soliciting their ideas, letters, and experiences, employing a crew of field editors who traveled across the United States, encountering and reporting on the farm woman in her many work roles." With paid subscriptions numbering more than one million, *The Farmer's Wife* brought Shaw's account of her homestead stay to its readers in several installments in 1931–1932. We reprint here the first installment, published in the February 1931 issue with illustrations by Montana artist Irvin "Shorty" Shope.

Cabin O'Wildwinds was the very appropriate name I gave to the tiny something-between-a-shack-and-a-house in which, when well past what is usually understood to be the prime of a woman's years, I



Clouds hung low and the greasewood flat was dressed in tones of black and gray. Far off I spied the cabin. Drawing by Irvin "Shorty" Shope. Reproduced by permission of Suzanne Shope & the Shope Family.

settled alone, a homesteader on semi-desert land with only the snow-crowned Rockies to relieve the flat stretches north, south, east and west of cactus, sage, and greasewood country, not a neighbor close by and stores very far away.

"But how did you ever come to do such a foolish—crazy—thing?"

This question has been thrust upon me times without number by very sane friends who never could have been persuaded into any such adventure. However, while preparing to take up the new life—a vivid chapter in my hitherto well-ordered, if not humdrum, existence, I felt—though I could not explain my feeling—that I was neither foolish nor crazy; now that I can look back upon it all, weighing

and measuring this with that of the total outcome, I know that the adventure was one of the richest and most lastingly valuable chapters of my now nearly seventy years of life.

There are those who tell us that, definitely and inevitably, we draw our experiences to us and therefore each of us alone is responsible for whatever of good or ill may overtake us. Be that as it may, this much I *know*: From tenderest years, even while yet the child of a great city, minus any acquaintance with untamed Nature, outside of books, I secretly yearned, dreaming and awake, and genuinely suffered, to escape from streets and houses and people—to be somewhere free and alone with sky, sun, moon, stars, clouds, winds, waters, rocks, and a Silence of which I knew nothing in experience, but of which my spirit seemed to have understanding.

This hidden, perhaps inherited “homesickness,” persisted in me through the years. The odor of rain-washed grass, the fingers of the wind upon my cheek, the soft beauty of a cloud against the blue, the mystery of a tree, would drive the yearning pain through my heart till the tears came, when, if not alone, I would be well scoffed at for a mood no one understood. Then, when half a century had slipped away and my feet still were strange to the delicious springiness of natural sod, a door of escape opened—a door that led away from cities and towns, away from everything with which I was familiar—to the untamed plains that thus far had been the haunt of wild life, then of herds of cattle and sheep, but now were to be invaded by homesteaders bringing with them their ploughs, their barbed wire, their families.

As it happened, this door of escape opened before me at a time when all other doors of egress from a rather bad aspect of my

temporal affairs had slammed shut in my face. So, as Ben King very simply puts it, since there was “nowhere to go but out,” out I went to “. . . *where the west begins* . . .

. . . *where the sage is plenty,*

(only mine happened to be greasewood which is to sage as cactus is to a cultivated rose!)

“. . . *where there ain't no subways,*

Nor no forty-story shacks,

Where they shy at automobiles,

Dudes, plug hats an' three-rail tracks;

Where the boys wear shapps for britches,

Flannel shirts an' Stetson felts . . .”

Receiving an invitation to be the companion of a woman friend, who, with money in her purse, had gone a-pioneering for health's and wealth's sake, into territory newly released for agricultural purposes, I burned my city bridges behind me and struck trail from a Chicago boarding house for the Unknown, never dreaming how far afield the trail would lead. For Fate evidently did not propose to let me off with a mere timid nibble at the edge of the cake I had so long cried for—ah, no! Very cleverly, most relentlessly, she set a thorn here and a lure there until she at last drove me out of a comfortable environment in which I had thought to rest for a time, to take up and live upon a quarter-section homestead of my own.

And that is how it all began!

When I was planning to put on paper, at least a part of my experiences covering six years on the plains, I wrote to a teacher friend who had spent one summer vacation with me in Cabin O'Wildwinds and asked her, “What shall I tell and what shall I leave out?” Her answer came back promptly:



“Good evenin’!” he pipeth. “I come over to see could I git to haul water for you?”
Drawing by Irvin “Shorty” Shope. Reproduced by permission of Suzanne Shope
& the Shope Family.

“Write about the triple rainbow arching above the snow-capped mountains.

“The dreadful hailstorm when the little rabbit and the meadow lark sat close together in the shelter of the log and looked each other squarely in the eye.

“The terrifying approach of the storm which sent us to the root cellar for safety.

“The snake at the doorstep which we killed with a hoe and a rake.

“The longing for the fleshpots of Egypt that Sunday afternoon when, succumbing to the heat, we lay on the bed and took turns building menus of delicacies we should ‘order’ when we returned to

civilization—as I recall, a most unbalanced ration.

“The frightful hailstorm in the night that sounded like machine-gun firing and which peeled the weathered gray from the exposed sides of the house so that next morning it shone yellow in the sun like new lumber. Your fright at my illness (for A. was almost overcome with the shock of the impact of that unearthly—hellish—bombardment on our frail walls) and that fiery dose of Jamaica ginger you forced me to drink, which not only had ginger in it but something even more potent which no loyal druggist now will sell—without a prescription!

“The trips past the wheat field to Lizzie’s home protected from the hordes of mosquitoes by raincoats, gloves and mosquito netting veils (and the thermometer running up to three figures).

“The always wonderful snow crests west and north and south, which your field glass brought so near and of which we never tired.

“The long days of writing, while we sat back to back in the hot little cabin and let genius—and the sun—blaze.

“The strange desert-island feeling when (mail still reaching me but semi-occasionally) we wondered, scarcely daring to trust ourselves to think whether there was War or would be War—here at home.

“The nights when we had to sit in the dark to keep the mosquitoes out—the thin ones that could be in nowise deterred by your good screens—blood-thirsty, persistent villains. (And one night when I, at least, exhausted for sleep, went to bed in full regalia of straw hat overdraped with netting so as to save my face during a hoped-for period of unconsciousness!)

“The long, lovely, peaceful days when nothing hurried, nothing worried, nothing interfered with friendly interchange of thoughts about things ‘in heaven above, in earth beneath and in the waters

under the earth’—and—then—some!

“The last day, when from the Optimist’s quaint old surrey we looked back with tear-dimmed eyes at little Cabin O’Wildwinds that for you had spelled rest, shelter and home scarcely noticing, for tears, the thick cloud of mosquitoes that hummed along in our wake as we were carried away toward the new chapters in our lives.

“And, of course, you *might* tell how we took our *weekly* bath in the washtub in the little kitchen, using more or less water as the case might be—if you thought it would interest the reading public—and it might!—who knows?” (If this friend had visited me during the *regime* of the vinegar barrel there could scarcely have been even the semblance of a *weekly* bath!)

So wrote my guest of a few weeks who had not wintered and summered, alone, in the Cabin she so dearly loved. But if I, who knew the environment, year in, year out, and had intimately wrestled to conquer its problems and its pains, had imbibed its delights and learned deep and sacred lessons at the book it held before me, were to set down all or half that there is to tell, no publisher would so much as look at my voluminous manuscript! So I shall try to sketch in here and there the outstanding features of an experience which I would not spare from my life for bags of gold.

The day I left my friend’s home near the little new town of Nesterville, and “hit out” for my homestead miles across the level country, is graven deeply in memory—a picture of light and shade, of laughter and tears, of fear and high courage. I had engaged a fellow-homesteader to haul me and mine out to the waiting Cabin, up whose brick chimney no smoke had yet felt its way and to whose door no friendly trail was as yet beaten out on the virgin sod; my

beautiful, intelligent shepherd-collie, Lassie; my winsome and no less intelligent little black cat, Betsy Bobbett; a huge vinegar cask for water, since I had no well and no money to sink in the gamble for one; my trunk, filled mainly with books; a few simple and essential furnishings such as bed, stove, etc.; a three-month’s supply of food, all canned or packaged.

It was anything but a “nice” day. Clouds hung low and the greasewood flat was dressed in tones of black and gray—a grim challenge to the tenderfoot and a very lame foot at that! While still far off I spied the Cabin, its new lumber shining against the dun background, looking very much like a carelessly abandoned pill-box which the wind would one day toss out of its path. But it was *mine!*

With high heart beats I climbed stiffly down from the wagon, my driver looking at the house with a wise eye.

“So you’re goin’ to try to make it here alone? *Some guts* fer a woman, I’ll say! An’ you ain’t so young neither!”

With feelings I cannot even now reveal, I put my new key in my new door and slowly turned the new knob. I was very sentimental about it—should have liked some sort of ceremony. I looked in—I had not seen the place since the first stringers had been laid above the sod. And this is what greeted me: floors strewn deeply with shavings and other builder’s litter, egg shells, bacon rinds, empty tomato cans, sardine cans, fruit cans, tobacco quids, meat bones, discarded rags. A mess where I had visualized a clean waitingness; stale odors where there should have been the clean breath of pine. I think Madam Fate snickered in her sleeve. Did she think I’d weep? For once, she was disappointed.

My mover and I worked hard and fast and before darkness settled down, a stove was up, the water barrel was filled from a

neighboring well, lamps were filled with oil, bed ready to make, boxes of food opened, coffee simmering, bacon sliced and waiting for the pan. *How I loved it all!* Then my first companion at the first meal in the new home drove off, and I watched him disappear in the thick gloom which was fast settling on the land, swallowing me up. The only sign of other human habitation was a distant log barn and beside it a dreary-looking squat hut built of stone; there, I learned, sometimes stayed over night a homesteader who earned his bread—since his land had turned out to be non-arable—by hauling logs from the far distant foothills. Aside from this, empty, treeless, lightless, pathless gloom stretched away to the encircling horizon. And the rain came down.

As a matter of fact—a fact I seriously understood later on in my mad career—that rain was a life-saver to the homesteaders on the new land, that semi-arid territory on which they had cast their lot. But that night, in my ignorance, I hated it, for I had but the narrow personal outlook—what was it doing to *me!* After all, it is that same narrow personal outlook that is the seat of most of our miseries. A year later, rain, no matter what passing personal misery it inflicted, was matter for the deepest thankfulness and joy. So we learn—so the soul is trained!

But *then*, I shivered away from the chill of the elements, shut the doors and locked them, albeit there was no one to lock out, looked around and whispered to the crass ignorance of me, *fool! fool! fool!* I did not like the voice of that coyote “singing in the rain!” I did not like the unshaded windows beyond which lay black, impenetrable gloom! I did not like the discomfort, the strangeness, the silence! I did not like to think that no matter what might be my need, there was no human help within call! I did not like to face

the untried future! In fact, for a bad ten minutes I did not like any of it and had there been way of escape . . . But there was none—yes, there was!—a flour sack of mail picked up en route from town to homestead. Two or three books sent by knowing friends, magazines, newspapers, letters—a fat package of them. After all, I was not wholly cut off!

Clasping the material evidences of friendship and love to my heart, I proceeded to indulge in what women understand as the relief of “a good cry.” Then I dried my eyes and began to read, and as I read these messages from here and there, one even from across the sea, my courage returned. After all, this was going to be all right! I was just tired. Blow wind, out there on the flat! I’ll give you fields of grain to blow over, in time. And who really fears darkness—the merciful veil of night? There is a light that never goes out—the light of love! I finished my letters and the wee Cabin was filled with a glory that surely must have shone out through its windows to the farthest rim of the world. For love was with me and where love is, all is. Oh, it was going to be—it *must* be great! great! great!

I sat thinking. The fire burned out. The damp chill crept through the thin wooden walls. Utter weariness took hold of me. I must go to bed. I looked around—*bed?* At that first slight move away from my letters and the friendly lamp, the happier spell broke. Primitive fear and utter loneliness again swept over me. Lie down in that unprotected place? Sleep—with those windows staring at me like the dark eyes of some monster waiting to pounce? . . . Many nights of many weathers and moods I spent in Cabin O’Wildwinds but that first night remains in a class of its own. What says Millay?

*“He whose soul is flat—
The sky will cave in on him by and by.”*

Well, what of soul was mine was flat indeed, prone, and all the demons of self-pity were prancing on it. It had neither strength nor desire to

*“... split the sky in two
And let the face of God shine through.”*

So I lay awake, tense, numb with cold, quivering and afraid. Lassie, who liked the new home just then no better than I did, took advantage of my state of mind and leaped upon the bed, tucking her wet nose into my neck for comfort. As for Betsey Bobbett, who was half-mad with hatred of the “strange garret,” had not once permitted me to detach her from my person and now lay upon my shoulder with all of her claws hooked anywhere they might happen to be. “And the rain beat upon that house!” The weather god pulled out all the stops of his vast organ and the winds of the universe made their music through them. There had been one coyote singing when the lamp was lighted—now there was an army of them; or was this vast plain the gehanna of lost souls wailing for their sins? Every now and then, Lassie would raise her head, the hair lifting along her spine, and with a deep-throated growl seemed to be warning Something to keep off. And there I lay whispering to my flat soul, *fool! fool! fool!*

But morning came—morning *always* comes! There was much to do. I was at length a sure-enough pioneer.

“But what did you *get* out of it, after all? Not money—you are not the money-getting type. What *did* you get out of it?” my loyal but disgusted friends have asked me.

Fortunately for most of us in this world of uncertain and

uneven distributions, there are solid values quite apart from money. What did I get out of it? Much, every way—more than I can convey in words. It was an investment of spiritual capital, the interest from which has never ceased to accrue.

Then and there I began to lose a certain helplessness and *neshtness*, to use a graphic word of my old grandmother’s, bred of city life and a desk job. Then and there I began to work out the truth of the paradox that *it is possible for one to do what is to be done whether one can do it or not!* In other words, I began to discover within myself, power, strength, ability, which I should never have known existed in me but for the tremendous situations of need which uncovered them to me. Then and there I began the search within myself for that mental and spiritual equipment which I had to have if I were to go through with the Adventure; patience, perseverance, endurance, courage, initiative, humor, uncomplainingness, optimism, dauntlessness, inventiveness.

There was no bakeshop within reach and I must have bread! To have bread, I must have money for flour, yeast, salt, water—for even water had to be hauled and paid for; I must find someone to haul the flour and the water to my door and pay for the service; I must find someone else who would go to the timber, bring logs to me at so much per haul and then find another someone else with time from his own acres who would cut the logs up for my stove; I must know how to build a bread fire; I must learn how to make the bread and, while I was learning, eat with more or less relish my own sorry experiments. No use making a fuss about it—fussing only intensified matters.

On many a winter morning, when I reluctantly turned back the covers, the thermometer beside my bed registered 10°—15°—20° below zero, for I had neither fuel nor stove which would “keep” fire

all night. As the dry air shrunk the boards of my walls and made incursions in my poorly built roof, cracks came and the snow drifted in and sometimes lay on my bed covers. There was no one to shake down the stove or turn on the steam! Whether I liked it or not the fire had to be built, the ice in the barrel broken, the bread fished out of the foot of the bed where, securely wrapped up, I had kept it unfrozen with the warmth from my feet. The frozen bacon had to be chopped out for the pan, the frozen eggs (when there *were* eggs!) had to be cooked in the best way for edibility—and I had to discover that way for myself. I drank my coffee clear because one thing I never did attain was a liking for frozen canned milk.

The winds that whirled across the unbroken miles shook the Cabin till sometimes I stood ready to fly for the open. When I set out to walk to the nearest neighbor's and range cattle bunched between me and my goal, it was my job to find out how to go ahead just the same. If a rattle snake gave me "good hunting!" as I passed by, still it was my job to know what to do and how to do it.

There were long lonely nights and long lonely days—and Sunday, had I permitted, would have been the worst of all. There was mental poise to sustain, inward calm to attain and preserve, fear to be turned away, laughter to be put in the room of tears, cheer to be substituted for gloom, hope to be drummed into line in place of despair. These things *had* to be done unless one were to be ignominiously beaten and no real woman wants that to happen.

So fate and I reasoned together. Had I not always yearned to be free from certain shackles and restraints of city living? Face to face with Nature? Well, here you are; now live up to the game! And there was a bit of mockery on the Old Dame's face. But she was right. I *was*

free! Free to rave to heart's surfeit over star or snow crystal, wild flower or rainbow, racing clouds, snowy peaks, miles and miles and miles of clean land, moon rises, star rises, sunrises, moon sets, sunsets, silence. Twice a day only the distant whistle of a steam engine broke the quiet. There was no one to protest or scoff when I got up in the middle of the night to stand on my porch and view the midnight skies. Or, feeling chilled to the bone, hours before dawn, to brew coffee and fry bacon and then with the dog, out of doors to watch the morning star lift the sun over the horizon while the mountain shoulders, draped in dusky velvet, ermine trimmed, glimmered against the purple night sky of the west.

For half a century, life—that is to say the organized, standardized manner of living prescribed by civilization—had not been any too kind to me. I had felt bruised, starved, deprived, cheated, but could not shake loose. But now here I was—free—a homesteader, a pioneer. I could work in my own way, play in my own way, learn the secrets of nature, do without what I could not get, enjoy what I had, read, think, shout, sing, pray, laugh, weep, without let or hindrance. I was independently alone with Nature, had all the absolute necessities of life—with one exception. Water! The cup of freedom was at my lips, but the cup was dry. For the barrel my mover had filled would soon be empty and I did not know where to get more. And even the bravest, the patientest, the most inventive, cannot do without water.

Across a stretch of very rough land lay the homestead of a lone man whom I shall call *A. Q.*, a one-time country school teacher from a far eastern state. He had a well but as he was very seldom at home, his cattle ran loose on the place (and it was going to take me some time to lose my fear of cows) and, as my lame feet and city-flaccid

muscles could not possibly manage the carriage of pails full or even partly full of water, that supply was practically out of reach. And I *had* to have water!

One morning, scanning the distant road through my good field glasses, I saw some men evidently at road work. I set out through the hot sun to interview them. *I had to have water!* I found a group of five, all busy with shovels and picks. They did not greet me enthusiastically—I suppose I looked as if I needed something and in that country at that time everyone needed something and it did not pay to be dependent. Moreover, lone women homesteaders were a nuisance.

However, I stated my need. Apparently none of them had time or strength to spare. I made it very plain that I would pay—anything—for hauled water. Grim indifference. I felt as if they shouted at me: “What did *you* come to this country for? If you can’t take care of yourself, you should have stayed back where you belonged!” One of them said: “There’s a woman two miles up the road has a horse—she hauls her own water. Ain’t you got no horse?”

I—a street-car habitué—a horse!

I shook my head and was turning away when the least-attractive looking one of the company straightened up from his work and regarded me severely.

“I’ll fotch yuh a bar’l fust thing in the mornin,” he said, “but that’s all I kin do. Got enough of me own. Old woman, she keeps at me mornin’, noon *an’* night about her damned bar’l. How in time she gits away with so much water, beats me—must drink it or water this here cactus with it or somethin’! I’ll be around early. You be up—I ain’t got no time to waste on no wimmen homesteaders!”

I swallowed my feelings—water is water—turned about for the long trail home, and with some long, long thoughts dipped a cupful of warm fluid out of my vinegar cask, sipped it and shuddered.

The next morning, at dawn, appeared my recalcitrant knight with a water barrel in his wagon, his well-fed horse trotting vigorously, the priceless fluid slopping out at every jolt. Gruffly he disclaimed my offers of help in transporting it pailful by pailful from his barrel to mine, and when he had finished and I handed him a silver dollar with words of genuine thanks, he glared at me as if he would like to kill me, pitched the coin across the room to my bed, let out an oath, leaped to his wagon, shouted to his horses and was gone.

But *water is water!* I drank. It was “sweet” water—heaven’s own gift. I filled the animals’ dish. I took a bath. I washed up a collection of dishes. I reveled otherwise until some of the fearful dryness in me seemed assuaged. Then I put the problem away for a day or so. Sufficient unto the day is the moisture thereof!

But, as the days passed, unlike the widow’s curse, my supply grew fearfully less. I had not neglected a single opportunity of interviewing such people as I chanced to meet, but no help came.

One evening I was preparing my supper of canned tomatoes, as the wettest food I had, when Lassie’s bark announced a caller. Gladly I hurried to the door.

Approaching at a sedate pace was a huge, gaunt, gray horse mounted by a small, thin, ragged, fair-haired boy with wide blue eyes and a sensitive, even high-bred face. His air was timid, appealing.

“Good evenin’!” he piped, reining in the enormous animal and pulling off his tattered straw hat. “I come over to see could I git to haul water for you?”

Now I had been under the impression that hauling water—or anything—was a man-size job and this child, why, I wanted to hold up my arms, have him slide down into them, carry him into the Cabin and minister to his very evident physical needs—and mother him.

“You?” I asked. “Can *you* haul water? And where do you come from?”

“Yes’m. I kin do it.” There was resignation in his voice. “I’m aimin’ to go to school all winter an’ I have to earn my books an’ clo’es. . . . You want water, don’t you? A man told me.”

“Why—yes!” Pitying amazement made my words come slowly. “I need it badly but—how will you manage it?” I did not know country children then.

“My grandfather says I kin use his stone boat an’ old Doll here. She ain’t no good no more for hard work, but he says he’ll keep her for me if I use her right and ‘tend her myself. She pastures on the range so she don’t hardly cost nothin’. We just had us a well drilled and the water’s good and Grandfather says it has to pay for itself. I’m used to haulin’. I hauled all our folks used for a year before we got the well, from a spring ‘way over yonder.”

“And where do you live?”

“‘Bout a mile n’ a half over that way,” gesturing into the deepening night. “It’s more’n two and a half round by the road but there’s a man lets me come through his place—he lets me let down the wires if I put ‘em back right.” He sighed faintly. Letting down barbed wires and getting them back right was not so trivial a task for such slender, ill-nourished muscles as his.

“And what shall I pay you?”

“I don’t know,” his clear eyes studied the distance. “‘Bout

whatever you think right, I guess. Would fifty cents a haul be too much?”

“All right, sir! Can you come tomorrow? And won’t you come in now and have some hot toast and jam with me? It is good jam—I brought it from Chicago!”

But he shook his head, replaced his hat, and, quite with the air of a man putting temptation behind him, gathered up the reins. “No ‘m! Thanks awf’lly. There’s chores to do yet. I don’t like to do ‘m after dark but there’s some moon tonight if it don’t cloud over. I thought I better git over before you got someone else. Only way I can see to earn my books and clo’es. . . . You don’t need to come down to the gate—I’ll put it up all right—I’m used to gates. Good night!” Again that faint sigh. He was evidently tired to the bone—perhaps to the young soul of him.

At the gate the child climbed down—there was no spring in him. He struggled with the tall gate pole and the twisted wires. Wise old Doll sedately paced out to the road and stopped for him. He climbed to the high saddle and his thin young voice rang through the night, “Git up, *Doll!*” The darkness swallowed them up—the wornout horse and the baby pioneer earning an education in the wilderness. As I nibbled my cold toast, the story of Elijah the Tishbite to whom the ravens brought “bread and flesh in the morning and bread and flesh in the evening,” recurred to me. There are ravens and ravens. And water is quite as necessary as bread and flesh. The day of miracles, it is indeed past?

Hedrick was the youngest of three orphaned children who had come with their grandparents to the plains. The others were girls who hated books and helped the Grandmother about the house, gladly playing off from school whenever possible. But Hedrick had

begged so to be allowed to study that he had been offered this way to get text books and clo'es.

Promptly at the time agreed upon the little fellow arrived with his first consignment of water. The tightly closed barrel was full to the brim. Through the little square opening in the head, only a two-quart pail could be introduced. With this he filled the big pail I held and when it was full I lugged it into the house and transferred the precious supply to my barrel. For all his appearance of frailty the child worked briskly, assuring me that I was getting an alkali-free product, perfectly clean, meanwhile blissfully unconscious that at each plunge of his arm his grimy hand and dirty sleeve dipped into the water. But—what price moisture? Never have I parted with my fifty-cent pieces so willingly as when I laid them in that thin little palm, and never did simple word of thanks rush home so warmly as his, the while, with huge satisfaction, he tucked away his earnings in a dirty cotton tobacco sack.

Thereafter, for many months, this little human raven of mine, illy protected from the cold by his scant and ragged clothing and as illy equipped for work by his scant and ragged strength, kept his appointments through all weathers and nearly always in darkness, for they would not let him earn his pittance until all the home chores—by which he earned his “keep”—were done. I forget just how many cows he milked, how many pigs he slopped, how much wood he split and carried in, how many weary steps he ran while the child in him sighed unavailingly for its right to laughter, play, enjoyment, comfort, rest and good food.

Once I ventured to increase the little sum per barrel but firmly he “reckoned not.” “Water don't cost nothin' an' old Doll she

pastures on the range.” *Water don't cost nothin'!* To get old Doll up from the range, harness her, pump the water, lift the heavy pailfuls up to the barrel head, open and close the devilish wire gates—I hate the memory of those wire gates to this day!—let down fence wires and put them back right, steer old Doll over the rough ground with cactus thorns ever ready to pierce worn boots,—for he walked beside the horse most of the way, dip the water back out, then the lonely trip back, unhitch old Doll and give her human ‘tending . . . *No, water don't cost nothin'!*

“Yep! It sure *do* git lonesome out here sometimes,” Hedrick admitted to me wistfully when he had arrived one evening later than common, making his solitary trip in almost total darkness and through a wild wind. “But I reckon ‘t aint no one’s fault. When I’m grown up and have an education I’ll have it easier maybe—Gra’mma says so. I thought I’d like to be one of these here writers for the papers—that wouldn’t be so hard, would it? I’d like it. You’d git to know a heap.”

Resolute and industrious to the core, the boy also had the sensitive nature of the artist. He passionately worshipped beauty. When the moon rode amid her chariots of clouds overhead, he forgot the chores at home in his rapture at sight of her. He loved to sing, his teacher told me, to read of beautiful things and places; he craved gentle amusement, shrinking from rough companions, though there was no shred of “sissy” about him; he loved order, cleanness, seamliness; he was sincere, loving, unselfish, dreamy, emotional. . . . “One of these here writers!”

When it grew so cold that the water froze around the edges of the barrel and pail, turning his ragged gloves into icy mail, I bought extra pairs of warm mittens and made him change them frequently

as he worked, drying the wet pairs in my oven. I gave him a pair to wear away but he turned them back with a wise shake of the head: “I’ll wear them here this way, if you don’t mind. If I take them home, the girls—”

Whenever he would stop for it, I insisted on a big cup of rich hot cocoa. Drawing his sleeve appreciatively across his mouth after the last sip, and looking at me solemnly, he would say, “That there’s sure good stuff—we don’t never have nothin’ like that at *our* house!” Then I would tuck his thin little scarf in snugly, pin the worn coat collar more securely, pull the old cloth cap down over his ears, pat his thin shoulder for good-bye, and, as I closed the door behind him, shout to heaven to witness that it was surely up to all the gods, known and unknown, to do something about this and do it soon! My little brother pioneer!

Such was our mutual “trial by water” on the semi-arid plains. I have given this full-length portrait of him because he typified many young lives that were in process of being deprived, stunted, hardened, warped, perhaps embittered, because “too early doomed to go in company with pain,” the pain of cheated childhood. Do we not need to be reminded that even to “the least of these,” our great country owes no small debt of gratitude, for they too helped to bring about the cultivation of her barren lands.

The water problem solved, I was well launched on my high emprise. Cabin O’Wildwinds more or less sheltered me from the elements, I had dog and cat for company, letters from distant friends whenever I could get someone to bring the mail, and out there and all around me lay my own one-hundred-and-sixty acres of virgin soil—if gumbo can be called soil!—to engage my skill, two willing hands, a head willing enough to learn but at first practically empty of

even the simplest knowledge of agricultural procedure. How would it all come out? I faced the future with a smile and pinned on my building-paper covered wall a word from Rabbi Ben Ezra:

“Then welcome each rebuff

That turns earth’s smoothness rough,

Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!

Be our joys three part pain!

Strive and hold cheap the strain;

Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!”

Yes, there were rebuffs, stings, striving, throes, sufficient and to spare, but they came with a magnificent accompaniment of encouragement, inspiration, satisfaction, happy discovery, clear joy—and swiftly increasing health and strength, physical, mental and spiritual.

With water in the barrel, I looked hopefully ahead.

(to be continued in the next issue of *Drumlummon Views*)



*A water barrel in his wagon . . . the priceless fluid slopping out at every jolt.
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