Summer 1939

Return from Bohemia: A Painter's Story, Part I

Park Rinard

University of Iowa

No known copyright restrictions.

This thesis is available at Iowa Research Online: https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/5379

Recommended Citation

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd

Part of the Fiction Commons
RETURN FROM BOHEMIA
A Painter's Story, Part I

by

Park Rinard

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English, in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa

August, 1939
CONTENTS

Chapter 1 - Speak to the Earth 1
Chapter 2 - And It Shall Teach Thee 32
Chapter 3 - Whom the Lord Loveth He Chasteneth 73
Chapter 4 - The Kindly Fruits of the Earth 105
Chapter 5 - The Harvest is Past 146
Chapter 1

SPEAK TO THE EARTH

In Iowa, the pageantry of growing things is forever before the eye. In early April, as soon as the frost is out of the ground, the farmer seeds his oats. In May, the oats are up in a film of silky green as he turns over the black loam in the adjoining sodfields. He disc and harrows the ground, then plants his corn.

By June, the green shoots of corn have appeared, running in even rows over the rolling countryside. Light winds shimmer in lush waves through the oatfields. Another month of sunshine and rain, and the old fight with the stubborn children of the prairie -- the quack grass, the wild morning glory, and the button weed -- and the corn is knee-high, turning full leaves to the wind. This is the time of the first haying when the fragrance of clover is in the air.

July is harvest time for oats. Blonde and ripe, the grain banks swell the prairie. The grain is cut and shocks appear, sun-yellow, on fields striped green and gold. Threshing follows, with the shriek of machines and swirling clouds of chaff. The shocks disappear and straw-stacks arise, repeating the shapes of the hills.
In the blaze of August, the cornfields are majestic seas of dark, burnished green. In another month, the leaves begin to yellow and the spidery tassels bleach to bone-white against the deep blue of September sky. The approach of the Equinox is the signal for the farmer to cut his fodder-corn. Soon the pyramids of brown stalks stand evenly spaced on the bare stubble rows. In October, the uncut corn is ready to pick, and over the countryside on frosty mornings can be heard, like gunfire, the crack of the hard ears pitched against the bang-boards of farmers' wagons. After the husking, cattle push noisily among the brittle stalks, feeding on what the huskers have left. And winds charged with the first snows mourn through the desolate fields, rustling the dead leaves and the empty shucks.

Before the winter frost sets in, as his last tillage of the year, the farmer prepares for the next spring with fall plowing.

Such is the drama of the seasons in Iowa, the cycle of the growth of crops. But dominating the pageantry -- the golden sweep of oatfields in mid-summer, the majesty of tasseled corn in September, the sere remains of the harvest in the bleak months of winter -- dominating all this is solidity, the permanence, of the ground itself. The naked earth in rounded, massive contours, asserts itself through
everything laid upon it.

From glacial times the ground has enforced its sovereignty, thrusting away all that would obscure its surface. When first seen by white men, this midwest prairie was like no other region known to them -- a vast, open sea of soil. It was free of the forest and undergrowth common to other American regions. Its surface was not roughened by stone and rubble as were the hills of New England. Even the prairie grass was kept in check by great fires that swept each spring and fall from river to river. The deep loam itself was the surface. Rich and illimitable, it awaited the plow.

Three generations of cultivation have brought buildings, trees, fencing, and broad acreages of thriving crops. But all these, by contrast to the land, are but flimsy, transient things. They have not altered the primal character of the region; rather, they have accentuated the structural solidity of the ground and the assertiveness of the raw soil.

How strongly a people can reflect the individuality of the region in which they live! It was thus with the immigrants who came from the East to build upon this prairie. Finding no woodlands or deep valleys to shelter them, they had to learn a special intimacy with the soil. They had to adapt
themselves to the vast openness of the prairie and the ubiquitous light of an unbroken sky. And they and their children developed a character distinctive from that of other frontier peoples, a nature akin to that of the land itself. One could see it in their eyes. I saw it in the eyes of my father and mother — a quality bleak, far-away, timeless — the severe but generous vision of the midwest pioneer.

More than thirty years have passed since I was a boy on an Iowa farm. Yet these early scenes and experiences remain clearer than any I have known since. The rhythms of the low hills, the patterns of crops upon them, the mystery of the seasons, and, above all, a feeling for the integrity of the ground itself — these are my deep-rooted heritage.

I want to set down here the record of these most vivid years. I want to tell the story of my father and mother. In a sense, the ground is the principal character in the narrative and the lives chronicled but minor figures in its timeless history . . . patterns that come and go while the ground itself remains unchanged.
A mid-day in early June of the year 1898.

I sat on an island of sod beneath an enormous cottonwood tree that split the middle of the road in front of our farm: a small boy in faded blue overalls, -- fat, pug-nosed, with a round pinkish face and small blue eyes. Shadows from spruce, catalpa and cottonwood trees bent over the level farmyard and the patch of road in front of it, making a pool of deep shade.

To my six-year old mind at that particular moment, no problem in heaven or earth existed other than the mysteries of a garter-snake writhing and spitting on the fresh earth of a molehill. I sat cross-legged and watched solemnly and intently, prepared to reach out quickly if the snake began to glide away.

The scene is as clear to me as a passage out of a singularly vivid dream: the brilliant stripes of the garter snake against the black soil, the coolness of the leafy shade, the lazy quiet of the country at noon.

Outside the oasis of the farmyard, the sun was glaring down on the rolling cornfields, baking the soil to dull pink clods between the rows of young corn. The sky was thin blue, flecked with a few pale shreds of cloud. No sound could be heard except the
lazy sawing of crickets and an occasional rich bird-note. The countryside was fixed for an intense, breathless moment in the sleeping lull of noon.

Presently I heard the rattle of the harness and father's "Whoa!" as he drove the horses into the farmyard to feed in the barn during the noon meal. I heard my mother calling my older brother, who had been out in the fields with father. Then came two piercing whistles and the broad blurred sound of my brother calling me between cupped hands.

Leaving the snake reluctantly, I got up and walked along the drive into the farmyard. I picked my way with care to avoid the sharp places in the rutted road. Father was washing at the bench on the back stoop. His broad, blue-shirted back was dark with sweat from the morning's work in the fields.

Over by the rain barrel, Dave Peters, the hired man, was showing my brother Frank some kind of a chain puzzle carved out of wood.

"Hurry and get cleaned up, son," said father, scrubbing his face dry.

I stepped into the hot kitchen. It was filled with the aroma of coffee and the yeasty smell of freshly baked bread. Mother was at the big wood-range, dishing food out of the steaming kettles: hams, greens, and potatoes boiled in their skins. Jack, the
baby, was already in his high-chair.

"Dinner's all ready, son," mother said.

I drew a pan of cistern water at the sink and took it outside to the wash bench on the back stoop. When I had finished washing, I doused my head, as the grown-ups did, and combed back my hair, wet and sleek.

By the time I arrived at the table, the others were already seated. Father sat at the head of the table. Mother at the other end, with the baby beside her. Frank, a ten year old, round-faced and chunky like me, but of darker complexion, was next to me. Opposite us, the hired man hunched over his place like a great beaky bird. Dishes heaped with steaming food were on the table and the ironstone plate at each place lay bottom up. Before father served, he bowed his head.

"Heavenly Father. Bless this, our food, that it may help us in our daily work to do Thy will. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen."

While I bowed my head, I could not resist opening my eyes wide enough to peek at the trade-mark on the back of the heavy dinner plate: the battle of a lion and a unicorn. This strange conflict mystified me. Once I had heard Frank say that if the lion were as hungry as he was, it would make short work of that
For several minutes, we ate in silence except for the baby who blubbered to himself and drummed on his plate until mother gently scolded him.

"I see that the brindle cow has broken through the fence again," said father, at last, as he helped himself to more sugar for his coffee. "She's over in Abbotts' pasture. I want you to go over after dinner and bring her back, Frank."

Frank's face lighted up at this important assignment.

"And Dave, as soon as you get a little time, will you fix a yoke for her? This is the third time she's broken fence and I'm tired of it. I saw a forked branch down in the cordwood that you can use."

Dave Peters grunted affirmatively without looking up from his food.

"Pity's sakes," said mother to the baby. "Will you quit playing with your food and eat something?" She wiped his face and put a spoonful of potato into his mouth.

When the last morsel of apple pie had disappeared from the plates, the menfolk left the table with a heavy scraping of chairs.

"It will take us until tomorrow noon to finish plowing the corn," father said to mother as he
went out of the door. "I'll build your wash bench for you tomorrow afternoon."

Mother disappeared into the bedroom to put the baby to bed and I followed the men out the back door.

Outside, the farmyard was like a griddle under the mid-day sun. The hot dirt burned my bare feet as I hurried across into the tepid shadow of the barn. Frank started down the hill to round up the brindle cow, with Shep, the big tan-and-white collie bounding along beside him. Father and Dave Peters led the horses from the barn and set about hitching the two teams to the plows.

I stood watching Dave Peters harness the big dappled horses, fascinated by the way he grumbled at them as he pulled the straps tight. In my eyes, everything about the hired man was tinged with mystery. His hawk-like face, long reddish beard, and angular figure did not seem to belong to this world. Even the way he walked was queer -- striding along, hunched over and scowling at the ground, as if bound on some secret mission. I never saw him laugh or smile, and sometimes he wouldn't say a dozen words in the course of a whole day.

When he had finished hitching up the horses, he climbed on the sulky and drove slowly out of the farmyard to the west.

A rooster crowed, shaking the sheltered
stillness of the barn like an explosion. Remembering a new gopher hole in the meadow south of the farmyard, I started for it, dragging my feet in the soft dust along the edge of the barn. I stopped a minute at the hog pen. A huge sow was stretched out on her side and six little pigs were sucking at her teats. The other Poland Chinas, barrel-shaped fellows with loose, spotted skins that didn't fit, rooted noisily in the mud.

Sheep were grazing at the pasture edge where my gopher hole was. They plunged away in fright when they saw me coming. Shropshire Downs they were, white, with dark faces and ankles. Stupid creatures that bleated nervously from morning till night and were scared of their shadows. Not so the old ram —

The corner of my eye caught the coming danger. I jumped to one side. The big ram, charging from behind, ticked my left buttock with his horn. I sprawled in a patch of dirt. The ram galloped past, wheeled and started back. I scrambled to my feet and ran to safety on the other side of the windmill.

Tearfully, I limped toward the house. Father had just driven around the barn and into the fields. I was alone with my wounded pride and stinging bottom.

Suddenly there was a proud cackling nearby and a fussy hen with her brood of yellow chicks
trooped across the farmyard in front of me. Seven, eight, nine — the chicks were all there. In my interest, I forgot all about my humiliation.

Of all the creatures on the farm, I liked our Plymouth Rock chickens the best. Our white turkeys were shy and aloof. And the guinea fowl, so smooth they looked actually metallic, were too cynical and distrustful to appeal to a child. But the Plymouth Rocks were friendly and communicative. Often when I sat on the back step with a cookie, the chickens came up and shared it with me, clucking appreciatively as they pecked between my fingers.

Mother was calling me now. Time for my nap. I whined sleepily as I shuffled across the farmyard, digging my eyes with dirty fists.

II

Supper was over and the men in the barn were doing the evening milking. Mother had finished the dishes and was out watering her flowers along the side of the house. Alone in the kitchen, I lay on the floor under the dining table, drawing on a cardboard sheet saved from a box of crackers father had bought in Anamosa.

Like all children, I loved to draw and scribble. Mother encouraged me, thankful for so easy a way to keep me out of mischief.
I was very drowsy but my senses were alive with that false vividness that comes just before sleep. This spot under the table was my favorite retreat. The red checked cloth hung with nice arched openings, allowing both privacy and light. Just now, however, the sun was near setting and dusk was coming on, as soft and fragrant as woodsmoke. No longer able to see, under the table, I moved next to the screen door to continue my drawing. I could hear the deep buzz of the men's voices and the clank of the milk pails out in the barn. Frank was in the woodshed, splitting kindling for the next morning's fire.

Mother came in.

"You should be in bed, child," she said absently, as she took up the broom to whisk a few last crumbs from the floor.

Dave Peters strode through the kitchen without looking to right or left and clumped upstairs. I knew that he would read in his room for a while now, muttering to himself as he hunched over his Bible under the lamplight.

I heard father's heavy steps approaching from the barn. He stopped at the woodshed for a moment to speak to Frank. Then he came in the door, carrying a pail of foamy milk. He did not see me at first. When he went by, I caught the fragrance of the warm milk, a
hay odor with a faintly yeasty tinge reminiscent of newly baked bread.

Mother took the milk from father, carried it to the pantry and poured it into a crock. In the morning she would skim the cream off for breakfast.

Father took a lamp from the shelf and fumbled with it for a few moments in the half-darkness. When he had it lighted, he put it in the center of the kitchen table, adjusting the wick carefully. As the light flickered into the dusky corners of the room, he noticed me.

"Say, young man, don't you know that you should be in bed?"

I got to my feet hurriedly. Father meant business when he gave a command.

"What are you doing?" he asked, more gently. I held out the cardboard to him.

"Hmm," he said, peering solemnly at the rude scrawl. "Why, mother, look at this. I believe it's a setting hen."

Mother came over from the pantry.

"Mercy sakes," she said. "Of course it's a hen. A Plymouth Rock too. See the bars?"

"That's a lot of eggs for one hen to lay," said father.

Mother laughed. "I wish we could get our
hens to lay that many."

I stood over in the corner, a little frightened that I had not gone to bed when I was first told. Pleased though at the attention my drawing was getting.

A sterner note came into father's voice. "You don't think this will put mischief into the youngster's head, Hattie?"

"No, I don't think so, Maryville. He amuses himself for hours that way. Frank used to like to draw when he was that age too."

She took my hand. "Come, son, let's go to bed."

"That reminds me, Hattie," father called from the kitchen as mother and I were starting upstairs. "Do we still have that book Jenny Abbott brought over for the children?"

"The Grimm's Fairy Tales? Yes."

Then I could hear father talking to Frank. "In the morning after you finish your chores, I want you to take this book back to the Abbotts."

"Oh, gee, pa! We've only started it."

"It was very kind of Mrs. Abbott to loan the book to you. Thank her very much but tell her: We Quakers can read only true things."
III

How strange and wise my father is, I thought, as I watched him guide the plane across the pine board that was to be the top of mother's wash bench. Other persons like Frank and Dave Peters could do many things, but the way father did them was the right way -- the model by which all other performances were approved or condemned. He sent the plane singing across the wood with long careful strokes and the fragrant pine shavings whispered to the barn floor. If it had been a yoke for a cow, or a fence to be mended, Dave Peters could have done the job. But this was to be a bench for mother; there was no question of having Dave Peters do this. Father would build the bench himself and soon it would stand, smooth and firm, in the summer kitchen for mother.

There was a certain mystery and loneliness about father that I sensed, young as I was -- a strange quality of detachment which no-one would ever be able to understand. It revealed itself in the furrows of his long, severe forehead, in his austere eyes, in the attitudes to which his lean frame lent itself. Whatever his task might be, he himself remained untouched by it. As he leaned over the saw-horse now, sweat dripped from his face and the veins stood out on his arms. He worked hard and expertly and not without pleasure in his task. Yet he was aloof from his work. He did not become
entangled in its details and stained by its materials as Dave Peters would have become. This detachment was even more noticeable when he was out in the fields plowing, leaning slightly forward as the horses drew the blade through the loam. One sensed that he understood the soil and was subtly related to it. Yet, there was in him always that stern, haunting loneliness that would never surrender, even to the earth.

This quality stood between father and the rest of us. We loved him and revered him; yet knew that he was not of us.

To me, he was more god than father. His low, carefully spoken words were law. I never questioned his judgments or resented being punished by him.

Only on rare occasions did he reveal the simple affection that was in his heart. The morning I wandered into the north pasture where the bull was grazing had been such an instance. As father scooped me into his arms and carried me to safety, I had seen in his drawn face and his eyes drained thin with fear an infinite tenderness, powerless to express itself. Later, he had whipped me. But I did not forget what had passed across his face in that one tense moment.

From his Quaker parents, father had inherited a sober dignity, a revulsion against violence, and the love of simplicity and truth that prejudiced him against
graven and pictorial representation and fiction. He was better educated than most farmers and looked forward to the day when he would be able to send his children to college. In his living room he kept sets of Macaulay's and Hume's histories of England, well-worn from many evenings spent in reading after the children had gone to bed and his wife was sewing in the lamplight. His library also included a two-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln and a life of William Penn. Some of the neighbors thought him sinfully extravagant with periodical literature since he subscribed not only to the Anamosa Eureka, but to Harpers Magazine and Wallace's Farmer as well.

Father had finished the top of the bench and was notching one of the solid ends when I noticed a glow of sunlight creeping into the dusky corner of the barn. I looked up and saw mother standing in the doorway, the intense sunshine glancing from the white surface of her apron. She sun made a blurred gold outline around her brown hair. She had a tall glass of milk in one hand and some molasses cookies in the other.

"Well, don't sit there like a Stoughten-bottle," she said to me, laughing. "I've brought you some cookies."

Father looked up from his work. "I didn't see you there, Hattie."

"I came to see how my bench is coming. Here's a glass of buttermilk for you, Maryville."
While father drank the buttermilk and I munched the cookies, mother admired her bench. "It seems too good to put wash tubs on," she said, feeling its smooth surface.

She sat down beside me on the old apple barrel and we watched father work. Her apron smelled clean and crinkly as a cool morning smells in early summer. It was pleasant sitting there in the big, dark barn with her beside me and no sound except the singing of father's plane and the smart rap of his hammer.

If father seemed stern and remote to me, mother, by contrast, was very human and close. Not that she was demonstrative or volatile -- on the contrary, she was almost as reserved as father. But her restraint was earth-born; it was penetrable, understandable, and one felt her warm humanness all the more because it was subdued.

Mother was small and willowy and people often remarked that she seemed too delicate for farm-work. Mother was sensitive on this point and quick to refute it by her actions. She did not like to have others wait upon her, and kept her household going with a steady, indomitable efficiency. Her body was a slender wire, tempered far beyond its logical strength by her will, and she had the Yankee knack of getting things done.
In the musty half-light of the barn, I watched her face intent on father's actions. From her expression, one might guess that he could do nothing that was not perfect in her eyes.

Her face had some of the cherubic roundness characteristic of her father's family, the Weavers, although it was more thoughtful and dignified than mine would be. Her nose was small and slightly upturned, a suggestion of the Puritan there. Her firm chin indicated Dutch stubbornness underlying her gentle ways. At base, hers was the canny, practical nature of the New Englander, contrasting with father's southern deliberateness.

One of the first flowers I learned to recognize was the Sweet William and it always seemed to me that mother's eyes were that same prairie-sky blue. They had a far-away remembering light in them — not sad, like the unfathomable loneliness that haunted father's, but merry and practical.

Her voice was small and well-modulated and rang with a faintly abstract twang bearing the slightest suggestion of prophesy. Some nights she read to me before I went to sleep — usually a moral tale published in the Sunday School paper. When I was too sleepy to follow the story (which was always the same anyway), I loved to hear the unstrained cadence of her voice, easing me into spacious, leafy sleep.
How natural, how inevitable it seemed that we three should be together in the generous twilight of the great barn. In retrospect, the scene remains as simple and clear as the impression of a rain that fell this morning. I can still smell the fragrance of the pine shavings, hear the whistling of my father's plane, feel the presence of my mother at my side. It was as if we three had been drawn together in that place and moment to create an image for remembrance in after time.

These early years were composed of many such images. The world we lived in was like a green meadow against which things and people and events stood out with startling clearness. All took place upon that meadow in an ordered flow, attuned in some mystic way to the great central rhythm which determines the growth of crops and the coming and going of the seasons. I accepted our little world as complete and self-explained; I did not ask how it came to be or what ground lay outside.

Today I look back and wonder. What were the paths my parents traveled, and their people before them, -- the paths that led to my meadow? What strange convergence of destinies brought together my father and mother, those two so different in background and personality?

The paths fade quickly with the years, yet segments of them may still be seen, stretching back
over the hills of the past. There they are, clear for a way, now obscured by foliage, now clear again; they drop below hillsides, emerge like gray tapes from far valleys, and finally lose themselves forever in the distance.

Like all other paths of human life, they varied with countless factors of race and time and place. But always one force was dominant in fixing their direction. This was the power of the soil.

It was not gold or lust for adventure that drew the Weavers from Rhode Island to Connecticut to Up-State New York and thence to Iowa. And the Woods from Pennsylvania to Virginia, then half-way across the continent. And caused the North and the South, the Puritan and Quaker, to meet on strange ground and fuse there into a new type -- the Midwestern.

The magnet was the soil. In the soil was written the history of these people for generations; they were builders in the earth. Drawn by the power of the ground itself, the parents of my father and mother had come west to build up the new country. To Iowa they had come: beyond the great river, midway between oceans. Into the very heart of America.

IV

A grandfather of De Volan Weaver was in the American army in the revolution. According to the
story, he was a fiery young patriot who entered the war at the age of fourteen to take the place of his father, killed in battle. Thus I like to picture him. But perhaps this is wrong. Time can glaze over many indecorums of family history. Perhaps the grandfather of De Volsen Weaver was in reality a Tory sympathizer, pressed unwillingly into the ranks of the revolutionary rabble. In either case you may think of him as a hero -- a young radical fired with the love of freedom or a stout loyalist, faithful to God and King. It depends on the way you look at it.

Whatever fiery blood may have flowed in the veins of this grandfather, there was nothing spectacular about De Volsen Weaver himself. He was a chubby Anglo-Saxon with a brown Henry VIII beard and merry blue eyes, who operated a farm in Up-State New York. He was a good farmer and had a shrewd Yankee head for business. As he went through the routine of plowing, cultivating and harvesting, he dreamed of a new land, broader and more fertile than the rocky acres of his father.

One day, he packed his possessions and turned west. A thousand miles and more he traveled and arrived in central Iowa about the time the "forty-niners" were rushing across the country to the California gold-fields.

"Oh, Susanna," Weaver would hum (as who didn't in those days?), "Don't you cry for me. For I'm
off to California with my wash pan on my knee!" But he was satisfied to remain in Iowa where the gold was the friable deep loam of the prairies.

Instead of starting to farm at once, he took a job managing the hotel at Fairview, a village in Jones county, four miles southwest of Anamosa. He stayed in Fairview for several years and was married there to his boyhood sweetheart, Nancy Smith, who had come with her people from Chenango County, New York, to the little town of Barclay, Iowa. In 1858, the year the Lincoln-Douglas debates were being held in the neighboring state of Illinois, the Weavers' first child, Hattie, was born.

By this time, De Volsen Weaver was thoroughly tired of the hotel business. A farmer at heart, with the heritage of an agrarian people in his blood, he wanted to try his fortune at this rich Iowa land. So two years later, he gave up the Fairview hotel and moved to a farm a few miles west of town.

That fall, Abraham Lincoln was elected president.

"No telling what will happen now," declared De Volsen Weaver, who was a Democrat from the thick soles of his boots to the crown of his ample-brimmed hat.

Nor was there. In April of the next year, after Fort Sumter had been fired on, the Anamosa Eureka
changed its masthead to: "We compromise under No Menace: No Surrender of Principles; No Concessions to Traitors."

De Volsen Weaver did not go to war. He was as patriotic as the next one, but he had a sick brother, his mother, and his own wife and children to support. So he stayed on the farm and harvested his grain.

One October day, the sorghum mill on the Weaver farm set fire to the crisp grass in a side pasture, and in a few hours every building on the farm was burned to the ground.

The family moved back to Fairview, taking a house just south of the town limits. Indians, passing through the town, often stopped at the door to beg food and trinkets. Hattie's maiden aunt, Tillie, who lived with the Weavers, was deathly afraid of them. Once when Hattie's father and mother were gone, a stolid-faced brave came to the house. Frantic, Aunt Tillie hid Hattie under an enormous iron soap kettle and took refuge herself under a bed in the loft.

Hattie was seven years old and first being introduced to the mysteries of McGuffey's readers when Lee surrendered to Grant. Three years later, when she was a chubby youngster with two pleated braids down her back, the Weavers moved to Anamosa where De Volsen Weaver became deputy sheriff of Jones county. There Hattie grew to womanhood and although she became a
slender girl, as fragile as fine glass, she soon showed amazing energy and determination. She taught the Anamosa children their ABC's in the little plain brick schoolhouse on Strawberry Hill and was an untiring, capable mistress of the arts of housekeeping and cooking. She sang to her own accompaniment on the melodeon and took her place as a popular belle in the social life of the community. Sundays, she taught Sabbath school at the Strawberry Hill Presbyterian church.

The superintendent of the Sabbath school was a tall, bony young farmer with solemn blue eyes in a stern, angular face. His voice was low, and he formed his speech deliberately as if he were measuring each word by some larger vision. Francis Maryville Wood lived with his widowed mother on a farm three miles southeast of Anamosa. His people were Quakers, descended from the colony of English Friends who had settled in Pennsylvania with William Penn. Out here in Iowa, however, the family attended the Presbyterian church in Anamosa, the nearest Quaker meeting house being in Whittier, ten miles away.

Maryville Wood had been a mere boy when his parents, Joseph and Rebecca Wood, had left Winchester, Virginia, to build a new home in the midwest. Thrifty and hard-working, his people had rooted themselves in the new soil. By the time Maryville had reached manhood, there had been many fruitful harvests and the family had
prospered in a moderate way.

From his early years, Maryville Wood had been lonely and detached, separated from the other members of his family by a strange, unbridgable chasm. Although his first interest was in the things of the soil, he was a student by nature. In his early twenties, he had left the farm for a few years to attend Lennox Collegiate Institute, a tiny denominational college at Hopkinton, Iowa; then had returned home with his learning, satisfied to resume his work in the fields.

Having reached the age of thirty, he still worked long hours on his mother's farm and saved what money he could. In the evenings, he occasionally drove into Anamosa to call on the little school-marm who taught in his Sunday school. The couple sat stiffly in the carpeted Victorian parlor and talked about the weather and what the crazy railroads were going to do next. Week nights, she sang sentimental ballads and on Sunday nights, the family group gathered about the parlor organ to sing hymns.

One evening in that parlor, Maryville asked Hattie to be his wife.

With borrowed money he bought the farm next to his mother's place. On it he built a new white frame house, a fine big barn, and renovated the various other outbuildings.
By winter of 1885 the farm was ready for occupation, and on the sixth day of the following January, the couple were married. The event was faithfully recorded in the Anamosa Eureka.

"MARRIED, In Strawberry Hill, January 6th, 1886, by Reverend D. Russell: Francis M. Wood and Miss Hattie D. Weaver.

"This wedding was one of the happiest social events of the season. A very large company -- about fifty invited guests -- witnessed the ceremony and most heartily congratulated the happy pair upon the auspicious circumstances under which they commence the voyage of matrimonial life. The bridesmaid was Miss Mishler of Maquoketa, a most accomplished young lady. The groomsman was Mr. Frank Weaver, who came home from Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he is attending the university. His cultured and manly bearing added much to the interest of the occasion. The father and mother of the bride seemed very happy in bestowing their daughter upon a young man whom everyone esteems and honors. Nor were the family of the groom less pleased with the alliance. The bride was superbly arrayed in dark green silk, with plush trimmings, and made a most queenly appearance. Of the bridegroom it is not too much to say that he is the manliest of men, and one of the most energetic and prosperous of our young farmers. Through working hard
on the farm in his early youth, he has had opportunities
of education, which he has well improved, and by a well
selected library and the choicest periodical literature,
he has kept himself well informed of the progress of
events and will take his place among the thoughtful,
intelligent and progressive men of our times."

Among the "auspicious circumstances" under
which the young couple commenced the voyage of matrimonial
life may be listed the weather which dropped to twenty
degrees below zero with apparently no disposition to
abate. The cold was too bitter and the roads were
drifted too high to permit moving out to the farm
right away. Three weeks later the weather moderated
somewhat and Maryville Wood and his young wife loaded
their belongings in a lumber wagon and made their way
over the rutted, drifted roads to their new home.

To reach the farm, you took the main road
south of Anamosa about three miles until you were well
beyond the steep Cheshire hill. Then you turned to the
east on a narrow side road, following it a half-mile to
the crest of a broad, gently sloping rise. There was
the farm, a rectangular little colony of buildings,
sheltered on three sides by spruce, catalpa and hard
maple trees. In all directions the smooth hills rolled
away, open to the sky, except for a few lonely trees on
the hillsides and the clustered shapes of two or three neighboring farms in the distance.

In the years that followed, the interest and vitality of Hattie and Maryville Wood were closely confined to this patch of Iowa farmland. There were long periods when they were almost as completely shut away from the outside world as if they had been on an island in the ocean. The telephone had not yet come into general use and they had to drive three miles to Anamosa for mail and supplies. Often, when the roads were swollen with snowdrifts or covered with deep mud from the spring thaws, the Cheshire hill became an unconquerable barrier, and it was impossible to get to town in a wagon.

The couple knew poverty as well as loneliness. Maryville Wood had borrowed heavily to buy his farm and was forced to lag behind in his payments. He worked hard in the fields and his wife managed frugally. But always, it seemed, when they were getting a little ahead, some misfortune came -- a devastating storm, a drought or a plague of insects -- to put them back where they were. Still, they were not unhappy. They survived the lean years and built hopes for the future.

In 1888, when the country was beginning to talk about Benjamin Harrison as a candidate for President, Hattie Wood, on a day as bitterly cold as that on which she had been married, gave birth to a boy whom
she called Francis or Frank after his father.

In February, four years later, the Woods were expecting a second child. During the long winter nights of waiting, Maryville Wood sat in the living room, keeping very quiet so as to hear the slightest call of his wife from the adjoining bedroom. He fed the fire with spongy cottonwood logs until the stove grew rosy and the dry boards of the floor around it crackled.

Would the child who would come into the world in the next few days be boy or girl, he wondered. He wanted another boy; he had prayed for strong sons to farm this Iowa land. There would be time for girls later.

On February 13, a baby boy was born. What should it be named? One neighbor whose given name was Daniel offered Maryville Wood a handsome pair of rubber boots if he would name the baby after the prophet of the lion's den. Name and boots were declined.

"Let's call him 'Grant,'" said Hattie Wood. A cousin of hers in Waterloo had been thus christened after the great general.

"Grant," repeated Maryville Wood. "Grant Wood has a good firm swing to it. Grant it shall be."

For a middle name, they chose De Volsen after the
The honor thereby conferred on cousin and grandfather was questionable. The new arrival had such squawling fits it seemed that evil spirits must be in him. "Pity's sakes," said Hattie Wood, "I wonder what ails this young one. He's good as pie one day and the next day he's meaner than poison. . . . Can't be under-nourishment. He's so fat I can hardly lift him around."

"It's good to have him chunky," said Maryville Wood philosophically. "He'll make a good farmer."
Chapter 2

AND IT SHALL TEACH THEE

The morning coolness was already wilting into the dank heat of an early September day. My brother Frank walked briskly down the road to school, swinging our lunch pail beside him. I padded along behind, like a fat puppy. We kept to the middle, for the road-edge was sharp, while the ruts were full of warm feathery dust that felt good to our bare feet.

Green giants of corn loomed on either side of us, nodding their bleached tassels in the sharp sunlight. It was as if we were traveling through a lane hewed out of dense forest.

Every few steps, I stopped to inspect tumble bugs and Daddy Long Legs in the road or to capture a big grasshopper who had hopped out of the roadside weeds to crouch glassy-eyed in a hot rut.

Frank waited at the narrow wooden bridge for me to catch up. The little creek was almost dry now; much of its bed was baked hard, and broken in great cracks. It was choked with thick patches of smartweed and arrowhead lilies.

"There's a snapper," Frank said, pointing to a tiny black periscope sticking out of the murky water below the bridge.

A little farther down the road, I stopped to
pick some lavender horsemint out of the thick vegetation along the roadside.

"What are you going to do with that?" scoffed Frank, "Take it to teacher?"

We could hear the first bell ringing.

"Hurry up, slow-poke, or we'll be late to school."

As we neared the school, we saw other children coming along the road, the sun gleaming on their lunch-pails, and heard the shouts of boys and girls playing in the schoolyard.

Cottonwood school, so named for the trees forming a semi-circle in front of it, appeared abruptly out of the cornfields as you came down the road. The simple white frame school building and the two outhouses were startling in their bare simplicity against the rich textures of the landscape. Scraggly lilac, snowball and syringa bushes, planted by children on the preceding Arbor Day, struggled to relieve the bleakness of the yard.

The final bell rang; boys and girls who had been playing Run Sheep Run lined up with the rest of us in front of the door, and we marched in, depositing lunch baskets on the shelves just inside the door.

The teacher was standing in the front of the schoolroom where we came in, taking care that no dogs or cats should be brought in to disturb the peace. As I
passed her to go to my desk, I handed her the bouquet of horsemint. She smiled her broad, sunny smile and dimpled prettily.

Miss Linden was a husky farm-girl with reddish hair tied in an efficient knot on the back of her head and a complexion the color of strawberries. She was good-natured, patient, and practical. She was not easily provoked, but when she did become angry, she could bring a twelve-year old boy out of his desk with one powerful jerk.

When we had all taken our places, Miss Linden walked up to her desk on the raised platform in the front of the room. She blew a melancholy blast on her mouth-organ and we all stood to sing the first verse of "America." School had begun.

I liked being in the warm, chalky-smelling room with the buzzing excitement of all the children. It was fun having a desk of my own and a slate on which I could draw to my heart's content. The novelty of school had not yet worn off. Only two weeks before, mother had said: "I'll have to use the big lard pail now. With two lunches to pack, the little one won't do any more." And I had come with Frank to school for the first time.

I felt very important about it, too -- or at least, I would have, had it not been for Lily May. She was an impudent eight-year-old who had an annoying
way of turning up her nose and tossing her mouse-colored pigtails to express her disdain. I was too young to be going to school, she sniffed, and although she sat across the aisle from me, she made a point of paying very little attention to anything I did.

I was the only one in the beginning class at the time and my recitation came first thing in the morning. While the other children, ranging in age from six to fourteen, were supposed to study, I went up to the bench in front of Miss Linden's desk to recite. I rattled off my ABC's like a child prodigy, thanks to mother's careful home-training, and returned to my own desk, glowing with the teacher's approval.

For a certain length of time, after this, I contented myself by scribbling on my slate and listening to the other children recite. Then I began to get restless and fidgety. Since I could be counted on to start squirming about this time every morning, it was Miss Linden's custom to send me outside for an extra recess. Sometimes she devised some kind of "busy work" for these periods to keep me out of mischief.

This morning, my bringing her the horse-mint gave her an idea for my busy work. Eager to encourage this interest in flowers, she sent me out in the yard to get her a sample of every kind of plant I could find.

I was delighted. Here was my chance to show
off before Lily May and to please the teacher in the bargain. So I trotted outside and spent a busy and painstaking two hours breaking off or pulling up generous specimens of every plant I could find.

Just before noon, -- tired, dirty, but triumphant, I plodded back into the schoolroom, dragging a great load of shrubbery.

Immediately a great wail went up from all the children.

"Teacher, teacher, look!" shrieked Lily May. "That dirty little stinker has pulled up everything we planted on Arbor Day!"

IV

One November morning when I awakened, the air had a new tang: a quality fresh and tingling that I had not noticed before. When I looked out of the window, I saw the reason. Tiny grains of snow were swarming down slantwise from the northwest; a cupful of glistening powder had sifted in under the sash. It was the first snowfall of the year.

As Frank and I climbed into our clothes downstairs in front of the sitting room stove, we could hardly contain our excitement. The very feel of the air was enough to make one want to get out and race into the teeth of the wind.

After breakfast, however, our jubilant spirits
received a set-back. Mother had heard that one of the Byerly boys had the measles. So before we bundled up for school, she tied little square bags of asafetida gum around our necks.

"Aw gee, ma," said Frank, making an agonized face. "This stuff makes us stink like skunks."

"Hush, child," said mother. "Do you want to get the measles?"

Father and Dave Peters were just starting out of the farmyard in the wagon as we came out of the back door.

"Come on, boys," father called to us. "We're going to shuck corn over by the northwest fence. We'll give you a ride part way to school." Frank and I needed no second invitation.

Standing up in the box as the wagon creaked and bumbled out over the pasture hill, we caught the sting of the new snow in our faces. The sky was a sodden gray out of which at some indefinable point the tiny white granules took form. The windmill, barn, and other familiar objects were wrapped in a ghostly pallor. The snow drifted through the brown grass and whirled in eddies down the gullies.

Frank and I stopped for a few minutes to watch the men. They filled the air with echoes as they moved through the brittle forest of stalks, snapping
off the ears of corn, tearing away the shucks, and tossing the bare, glazed ears into the wagon. Hard at work, father did not see at first that we had stayed to watch. When he did notice, he spoke to us sternly. At that same moment, we heard the frosty tinkle of the school bell. We climbed hurriedly over the fence and ran top-speed down the road.

The first snowfall turned out to be only a slight dusting of powder over the crusty surface of the earth. We did not get a genuine blizzard until mid-January. When it came, however, it was a stem-winder. Two days and a night the skies poured down snow, burying the country waist-deep and cutting off transportation altogether. On the third day the snow stopped, but the mercury fell to thirty below and the gale swooped across the open fields, whipping up swirls of loose snow and beating them into great drifts.

It was bitter getting up that morning. Everything in the kitchen was frozen and the farmyard was drifted so high the men had difficulty getting from the house to the barn to care for the livestock. When father finally did get out to the stock, he found that two pigs had frozen to death during the night.

All day the house moaned in the wind, and screeched as the sheathing boards contracted in the cold and pulled out nails with an agonizing sound.
I was outside for only a few minutes that morning, but long enough to lose heart before the slash of that wind. It cut my face like sand blown out of a shotgun. About noon, a sudden onslaught cracked one of the cherry trees in our yard and toppled it into the snow.

In the morning, mother and Frank and I were busy getting things thawed out in the house, while the men worked outside as much as they could. But after dinner, we didn't have much to do but to sit inside and listen to the wind howl.

That afternoon, I remember, Frank and I were stretched out on the dining room floor on our stomachs, absorbed in the pages of the Montgomery Ward mail order catalog. Mother was standing at the window trying to see out through the heavy coating of frost.

"I believe this is the worst blizzard I ever saw," she said absently. "I was afraid all my plants would freeze last night."

Dave Peters sat over at the other side of the room, braiding a bull-whip. Crabbedly, near-sightedly, he hunched over his work, grunting with disgust when a braid went wrong but otherwise keeping his bitter, twisted silence.

A great blast of wind shook the house to its foundation, rattling the window-panes and sucking through the cracks with melancholy organ notes.
"Gosh, listen to the wind howl," said Frank, emerging from the spell of Montgomery Ward for a moment. "Bet it'll be three weeks before we can go to school again."

"What is Mr. Wood doing outside?" mother asked the hired man as she turned to go back into the kitchen. "Puttin' wood in the tank heater."

"He seems pretty upset about those pigs getting frozen last night."

"Two little pigs ain't much to lose in a bad freeze," snarled Peters contemptuously. "One place I worked, they lost thirty hogs and fifty head of cattle. Wain't such a bad blizzard neither."

"Look at that bicycle," said Frank, admiring a shiny "Speed King" pictured in the catalog. "Bet a fellow could ride as fast as a horse can run if he had that."

Father came stamping into the kitchen from outside, bundled in his sheepskin coat. A gust of cold wind whistled through the house.

"Think I have the barn banked so that nothing will freeze tonight," he said as he laid off his coat. He picked up the newspaper and sat down in the kitchen to read.

The days were very short now; it was pitch dark by supper time. That evening, after mother had
rubbed our chapped hands with mutton tallow, Frank and I went in by the sitting room stove to toast ourselves a while before we went to bed. Mother and father were cleaning lamps out in the kitchen, but Dave Peters was finishing the last braids on his bull-whip in front of the fire.

"Tell us a story, will you Dave?" we coaxed.

The hired man did not answer for a while. He sat there in the lamp-light, chewing tobacco glumly. At long intervals, he opened the glowing door of the stove and spat discreetly into the fire.

Frank and I waited breathlessly for his answer. If we could pry him out of his silence, we knew we would be rewarded. The hired man's past was a dark, mysterious bag out of which he could produce any number of blood-curdling stories. Sometimes he told us about his early experiences as a bargeman on the Mississippi; at other times he talked about the far West where he had been a sheepherder. Most of all, he liked to tell about Indians. He never actually said so, but we took it from his stories that he must have been an Indian fighter at one time himself

"Did I ever tell you about the Spirit Lake massacre?" he growled, at length, looking up craftily to make sure that mother was busy out in the kitchen.

Open-mouthed, we sat at his feet to listen.
"It was a long time ago . . . I was only a brat about the same size as you . . ." He told the story in a hoarse, ominous whisper, making sudden curving gestures with his talon-like hands. How in the raw morning of March eighth, 1857, Inkpaduta or "Scarlet Point," the Sioux, and his warriors, had stolen upon the settlers of the Spirit and Okiboji lakes region in northwestern Iowa, and murdered them family by family. How by the chill sunset of March ninth, the tomahawks of the braves had been red with the blood of all of the 32 settlers, save three women and one 14-year old girl who were carried away. How, out of these four, only one of the women and the girl had survived to return to their people.

The hired man gouged out the bloody details so vividly that Frank and I were fairly popeyed.

"An' little kids about your size are what the Indians liked best," he concluded. "They'd kill you with a tomahawk and scalp you like this -- "

He grabbed me suddenly by the hair and made a motion as if to scalp me. I squealed in terror.

That night in bed, under heaping comforters, with a hot soapstone wrapped in cloths at my feet, I thought about Inkpaduta, the murderous Sioux, shivered with fright, and smuggled closer to my brother.
III

In the winter, our world became very small and gray. The snow leveled the land and the bitter cold drew the family indoors by the fire. At first the change was pleasant. No image lies more warmly in my mind than that of a winter evening when the family was gathered around the sitting room stove. At such times, I think we felt most strongly the clumsy, inarticulate affection that bound us together as a family.

But as the winter dragged on, we began to chafe under the monotony. It was the time of sickness and discomfort. Chores were hard and the constant fight against the cold wore us down. Now that we were crowded into the house so much of the time, our dispositions began to grate against one another. I think father suffered most from the confinement. His temperament needed the nourishment of solitude and the soil; he was happiest when he spent his days out in the fields alone. For all of us, February was the dreariest month of the year.

By March, however, the backbone of the winter was broken. The world began to open up and become spacious again. Gradually the ground emerged from under the snow; the meadow slopes and gullies began to turn green and the highlands olive drab. March was a robust, noisy month with harsh days of snow and sleet, varied by
gorgeous, open days when the wind cracked merrily and the clouds bellied like white sheets in a cobalt sky. In the latter part of the month, flocks of wild ducks and geese passed overhead, flying northward in great V's. Every morning we were awakened at dawn by the tremendous booming sounds the wild prairie chickens made in the marshy spots of the region.

At first, April stung with acid winds and unexpected flurries of snow sent the early robins hopping about in fat pain. Then came fragrant showers, sunshine, and the full bloom of spring. Grassflowers and Sweet Williams appeared in the meadows and April melted into warm, luxuriant May.

Everyone was light-hearted these days. The season of the planting was the most joyful time of the year. Dave Peters strutted around like an old game-cock and mother sang as she hung out the washing. Even father seemed unusually buoyant and cheerful as if he had suddenly regained his youth. And is this not the great blessing of the farmer -- that in the spring when he plants his seed and visualizes the cycle of growth and harvest, he is born again himself, and through his husbandry, recaptures the spirit of his lost youth?

Before this spring, my physical horizons had been confined to the immediate vicinity of the farmyard. But now I ran footloose over the hills like a young colt. After school in the afternoons, or on Saturdays,
I often went out to watch the men work in the fields. Frank was old enough to work with them now; I envied him his increased importance.

I liked to stand on the crest of a hill and watch father or Dave Peters plowing in a field below. They guided the plow parallel to the sides of the rectangular field and progressed concentrically inward, cutting great square patterns with light stubble centers. Gradually the stubble disappeared under the plow until only a sea of black furrows remained. A few weeks later, when the tender shoots of young corn peeked out of the dark earth, the fields would look like black calico comforters tied with green yarn.

I explored the surrounding prairie with unending interest. Often I took a roundabout route home from school and searched the hills southeast of the farm for wildflowers and birds' nests. One such afternoon I remember especially well.

I came in from the fields laden with the souvenirs of my travels -- a great bouquet of wildflowers, together with prairie weeds of many varieties. Mother, who had been out looking at her garden, met me at the edge of the farmyard. Her face lighted up when she saw the flowers.

"My, but those are pretty," she said. "Let me get something to put them in." She disappeared through the kitchen door and returned in a few seconds
with a large earthenware jar.

The two of us sat down on the back stoop and she set about trimming the bouquet, removing part of the foliage and separating the flowers from the weeds.

"Do you know what these are, son?" she asked, holding out two delicate blossoms, one pink and the other powdery blue.

I knew the Sweet Williams.

"And this?"

She held out a fuzzy scarlet blossom. I shook my head.

"That's a fireball," she said. "And this other one of about the same color is a paintbrush. See how the blossom is green to start with and then suddenly turns bright red as if it had been dipped in paint?"

As we sat there, she told me the names of all the flowers I had brought -- buttercups, marsh marigolds and cowslips; lavender wild geraniums; prairie pointers; wild strawberries; blue flags; red-orange meadow lilies; and one great plume of Solomon's Seal.

She held out a prairie pointer for me to see its exquisite, spirited form. Its stem was long and slim, arching gracefully at the top and ending in a slender, pointed head. It was like a tiny wild horse.

The cowslips and marigolds made great blobs
of waxy yellow in the bouquet, while the more delicate blossoms sprinkled it with tiny drops of white and pink and blue.

She made me recite after her all the flowers that had bloomed earlier in the spring and those that would come in summer and early fall. The names ran through my mind like music . . . Johnny-jump-ups, shooting stars, Black-eyed Susans, jewel weed, milkweed blossoms, Bouncing Betts, gentians, asters, goldenrod . . .

Mother spoke these names fondly, for to her, each flower was a personality, almost human. It was inevitable that I, sitting there beside her and observing the great love she had for everything that grew, should share some of this feeling -- for her sake, if not for the sake of the flowers themselves. Later on, she was greatly pleased when I drew pictures of many of these flowers with a set of colored pencils father brought me from Anamosa.

Our session with the flowers was interrupted by Frank who came running from the fields east of the farmyard.

"I know where there's a meadow lark's nest with three baby birds in it," he said.

"Show me!" I was all eagerness.

"Don't stay long, boys," mother called after us. "Remember, Frank, it's almost time for you to start
your chores."

We found the nest, hidden in the edge of an oatfield. While we inspected the three tiny birds, the mother lark put up a great clatter a short distance away, trying to lure us away from the nest. But we didn't harm her babies. Instead, we put up a stake in front of the nest so that the men wouldn't destroy it when they cut the oats.

My education concerning the birds of the region was furthered greatly by the Arm and Hammer baking soda company who ran a series of cards in color illustrating American birds. The neighbors were kind enough to save their soda box inserts for me and in the course of time I had a large collection. I knew by sight the common prairie birds: robins, meadow larks, blue jays, Baltimore orioles, cardinals, bobolinks, crows, black birds, song sparrows, cowbirds and the others.

Although Frank was chiefly interested in mechanical things, he did share my enthusiasm for birds. It was he who discovered that what we called the rain crow, a bird which made the first announcement of coming rainstorms by a queer, throbbing noise like the sound of rocks being rubbed together beneath water, was formally known as a "black-billed cuckoo."

We watched the dramas of the birds as
they built their homes, raised their young, and struggled for existence against the elements and larger predatory birds. With partisan excitement, we saw tiny kingbirds drive large crows and owls from the vicinity of their nests. We marveled to see a group of cowbirds light on one of the family cows and clean up all the flies and ticks on the premises. The lack of maternal instinct in the female cowbirds who laid their eggs in other birds' nests utterly mystified us. And we were shocked at the tragedies of smaller birds impaled on thorns and barbed wire by the butcher birds.

When we returned to the farmyard from our trip to see the baby larks, the sun was blazing forth in the west, lighting up long, salmon-colored clouds. Father and Dave Peters had just come in from the fields where they had been giving the corn its first cultivation of the year. Shep, the big collie was chewing a bone under the cherry trees.

"Here, Shep," called Frank. "Let's go get the cows."

IV

"I see by the Eureka," said father as he dished the supper food, "that they had a big cyclone down in the southern part of the state. A real twister. Nobody killed, but it took the roofs off houses and barns and killed some livestock."
"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,"
said Dave Peters sonorously.

"Goodness," said mother, shuddering. "I'm
glad we have a storm cellar."

Dave Peters snorted. "People nowadays don't
know nothin' about cyclones," he growled, without looking
up from his plate. "Back in 1860, when I was a kid, a
cyclone blew the whole town of Comanche across the
river into Illinois."

"Cyclone!" cried Baby Jack suddenly, drumming
with his spoon on the shelf of his high-chair.

"I guess they did have some awful storms in
the old days," father said, "but the ones they have
nowadays are bad enough for me. We want to be especially
on the lookout for them the next few weeks."

He turned to Frank. "Do you boys know how to
tell when a cyclone is coming?"

"A funnel-shaped cloud," said Frank.

"That's right. Now I want you to always keep an
eye out for a cloud like that. It doesn't take long for
a twister to come once it's started."

All this talk about cyclones ran wild in my
imagination. Several nights before, mother had read
Frank and me The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere. I had
been a little vague about the details of the story
but I had got the general idea of Paul Revere's warning
the countryside of a great danger and thus making a hero of himself. With all the talk about cyclones, my fancy began to unconsciously recreate the story to a new pattern. I saw myself as another Paul Revere, warning the people of a dreaded "cyclone" and being handsomely praised when the storm was over and everyone had been saved.

Next morning, I was pleasantly day-dreaming about all this as I lay on my back in the shady part of the schoolyard, enjoying my customary special recess from school. This time, the teacher had been unable to think of any "busy work" for me to do. So I reclined in the shade lazily and thought of my imaginary acts of heroism. Through the branches of a cottonwood tree, I could see the sky, radiant blue except for a few white flakes of cloud around the edges. Suddenly, I noticed in the west a tiny white cloud, shaped like the utensil mother used when pouring vinegar into a jug. Here was the funnel-shaped cloud against which I had been warned!

Into the schoolhouse I ran, yelling "Teacher! Teacher! There's a cyclone coming!"

The younger children began to scream. I caught a glimpse of Miss Linden's broad face transfigured by fear.

She took charge of the situation admirably.

"Be quiet, children," she commanded. "We'll
run to Byerlys' and get into their cyclone cellar."

Out of the schoolhouse rushed the terrified children and down the road towards the Byerly farm. So great was the excitement and haste that the group was outside the schoolyard before Miss Linden discovered that the sky was bright blue with no threatening clouds in sight.

"Stop," she cried to her hysterical flock. "There's no cyclone coming. The sky is as clear as it can be. Turn around and come back."

In the meantime, my little cloud had either melted away or taken another shape. I began to feel uneasy. I did not like the grim look that had set upon the teacher's face. After she had herded the children back into the schoolhouse and quieted them as best she could, she took me firmly by the nape of the neck and dragged me around behind the schoolhouse.

She was a strong woman and she didn't stop spanking until she was exhausted. I bawled and screamed my innocence but my cries were drowned in the silence of the prairie.

V

I was wrenched out of warm sleep into chaos. A light flashed into my face. Half-conscious, I opened my eyes to see father standing over the bed, in his nightshirt, holding a kerosene lamp. A strong wind was blowing across the room making the yellow flame of
the lamp sputter low until it almost went out.

"Get up, sons. Hurry!" he said. "Bring your clothes. Don't wait to put them on."

A shattering crash of thunder shocked me wide awake. The air was chill and ominous with storm-feeling. Father strode across the room and slammed the window shut. My brother slipped out of bed and I did likewise. As I snatched up my clothes, lightning flashed and I saw the cherry tree outside the window outlined very clearly against the dark sky. Then came another great sprawling volley of thunder. I could feel the house sway in the quickening torrent of the wind.

Father hurried downstairs, guarding the flickering lamp as he went. Frank and I stumbled along behind him. I could hear the baby crying. In the kitchen, mother, with a wrapper thrown over her nightgown and her hair in braids down her back, was hurriedly stuffing food in a basket. The baby was on the floor bawling lustily. Dave Peters in a long striped nightshirt was throwing open the trap door to the cellar.

"That's enough food, Hattie," shouted father over the roar of the storm. "Come on now."

The hired man, with his Bible in one hand and a lamp in the other, descended into the dark cellar first. Frank and I followed him; then came mother with the baby in her arms. Father came last, bringing the
basket of food and a bundle of clothing hastily gathered up.

As we went down the steps, the damp chill struck us like the icy water of a well. The lamp light searched out eerie shapes in the dark corners. I was glad that Dave Peters was in front of me. A musty, earthy smell hung in the still air, mingled with the sour stench of last season's cabbages. Dave Peters stopped a moment to see that everyone was safely down. Then cautiously he led the way on through the darkness.

Instead of a special cyclone cave, father had built an enclosure in the main cellar with a double roof of heavy planks, supported by tree trunks. Now we all crowded into this compartment, feeling our way around by the pale, sickly glow of the kerosene lamp. Father found a barrel for mother to sit on and the rest of us huddled about her wretchedly.

"What time is it, Maryville?" mother whispered, her teeth chattering with the cold.

"About half-past twelve," said father. "Here, Hattie, put this blanket around you."

Mother took the blanket and wrapped it around the baby who was still whimpering in her arms.

The fury of the storm was muffled down here but deeper and more ominous. Pale blue flashes of lightning flickered through the darkness. Familiar
objects like the smoked hams hanging from a rafter, and the barrels in the corner, were transformed into strange, menacing shapes in the ghostly light.

Sick with exhaustion, shuddering from the fluid cold, we crouched in the darkness and wondered miserably what fate the storm would bring us. Frank, who had not said a word since we had been roused of bed, now whispered to me: "Gee, I'll bet this is a real cyclone. Are you scared?" "N-no," I chattered.

"Listen to that thunder," said mother. "I'm glad we have this place to come to."

"You hadn't ought to be afraid," said Dave Peters, peering at her by the lamp-glow. "The Lord will protect us. I have no fear of this storm."

"Well, I must say," said mother drily, "You did get downstairs in a hurry, just the same."

It began to rain heavily now; we could hear the angry spattering of the drops against the cellar windows.

"Pa, is this a real cyclone?" asked Frank. just "No, I guess it's turning out to be a bad thunderstorm. We'd better stay down here a while though. It's still lightning pretty bad."

"I seen thirty head of cattle killed once by lightenin' that struck a wire fence," said Dave Peters, almost cheerfully.
"Let's pray that it doesn't hail," father said. Only a few moments later, there was a sharp rap at a cellar window, followed by a fierce sustained tapping that threatened to break the glass.

After a long while the hail stopped and the storm settled down to a steady rain. We dragged ourselves wearily upstairs. The rain was drumming monotonously on the roof when I climbed into bed and fell instantly asleep.

Next morning, everyone was up at the usual time. The sky was clear blue and the sun was shining brightly as if there had never been a storm. But when I stepped out into the farmyard, the evidence was everywhere to be seen.

Branches were broken off the trees and turned so you could see the silvery underside of the leaves. The new little cabbage plants in the garden were pounded into the mud. Deep grass along the fences was all blown in one direction and looked as if it had been combed. Under the cherry tree I found three broken robin's eggs blown out of a nest. Water was standing in the hollow places in the farmyard and the horse-tank was running over. Chickens, ruffling their damp feathers in the sunlight, came out of the chicken house and walked through the wet grass with tall steps.

Father came around the edge of the barn with
Dave Peters.  

"Just had a look at the corn over east," I heard him tell the hired man. "It's all in shreds too."

He stooped a moment to pick up a big cottonwood branch.

"Well, anyway," he said, "the windmill is still standing."

VI

In deep summer, the country dozed in the stifling heat. The sky was a concave blue mirror, diffusing hard sunlight over the treeless fields and the air was choked with the musty fragrance of grain and weed and drying grass. The landscape became a glory of patch-work color: the bleached yellow of the small grain contrasting with the deep-forest green of the corn and the lighter greens of pasture and meadow.

Each field was separated from the others by sharp, geometric lines. Yet, the whole landscape was unified by the underlying solidity of the land and by the unceasing repetition of corn and oats and clover in the patchwork effect. And the gentle topographical roll gave to all the country a deep-seated sense of movement like the sea, movement that was repeated on the surface when the wind rippled through the cornfields and the banks of ripening grain.

A field of half-grown corn, the corrugations of
each leaf throwing reflections from the blue sky, is a
sight that cannot be described. About July first, the
men "laid the corn by" or discontinued its cultivation,
and in the dry heat of July and August, it shot up like
Jack's beanstalk. On the hot summer nights, I could
actually hear it grow -- making a slight popping sound
of the joints.

Summer was a wonderful time for farm boys. Free
from the cares of school, we went out with the men in
the fields, roamed the prairie or played in the farmyard.
From morning till night there was always something
exciting to do. Frank had a good many chores these days,
but my duties about the farm were still light. My
principal task was to look after my younger brother,
Jack, who was big enough now to rove about the place by
himself. If left alone, he had a habit of wandering into
some out of the way place and falling sound asleep. When
he was missed, all work on the farm had to be stopped
until he could be located. After a frantic search, we
were sure to find him asleep in some unpredictable place --
in an old, abandoned buggy; out along the fence-row; or
even in the outhouse.

Most of my time, however, I had to myself,
and I divided it between the farm itself and the surrounding
prairie. I spent long happy hours tagging about after the
men as they worked in the fields, and doing little odd
jobs to help them. This was most fun during haying season, and many pleasant images connected with that summer's haying remain in my mind. One is especially vivid.

It was a hot July morning and I was standing out in the hayfield southwest of the farm watching Dave Peters pitch the great, sweet-smelling forkloads to the rack. He did not like this work and grumbled bitterly all the while.

"Why don't you like to load hay, Dave?" I asked him.

"Well, if ye must know," he said peevishly, "it takes too much pitch."

When the hay was loaded high up on the rack, the hired man got ready to drive to the barn. Wasn't he going to take me? Tears of disappointment came to my eyes.

Impatiently, he scowled down at me. "Well, I suppose you'd like to ride in on the hay." Would I! He boosted me to the top of the towering load.

Alexander, Ceasar, Napoleon: you all had your great moments, but you never tasted the supreme triumph -- you were never a farm boy, riding in from the fields on a bulging rack of new-mown hay.

---

June was marred by one major tragedy. Shep,
the big collie, disappeared. Father searched the vicinity for him and put notices in the Anamosa Eureka, but we never saw the old dog or heard of him again.

Several weeks later, when the family grief had somewhat healed, father returned from a trip to Anamosa one evening with a mysterious burden in a gunny sack.

"I brought you something," he said to me, as he dismounted from the lumber wagon. He took the sack out of the wagon and let it down on the ground at my feet. Jumpy with curiosity, I untied the top and very carefully emptied the contents upon a patch of sod. Out tumbled a soft, fuzzy, tan-and-white puppy, looking even more surprised than I.

There was no argument over what to name the new arrival. Every farm in the vicinity had at least one pet named after the hero of Manilla Bay. By tacit, unanimous consent of the family, our new collie pup became known as "Dewey."

Shep, although he had always been a good friend of mine, had really been Frank's dog. But Dewey was mine from the first. I supervised his puppyhood like a jealous mother, and when he was big enough to run in the fields, he accompanied me on my long jaunts.

Another new personality was added to the farm that summer when father bought a horse he had been needing for some time. The new horse was a small, black
fellow with white markings on his face. He was uncommonly well-behaved and served both before the plow and as a riding horse. "Pat," as we named him, soon became a favorite of the entire family.

Father buried my overalls out beyond the cowshed.

"You'll know a skunk next time you see one, won't you, son?"

I would. My education in the wild life of the prairie was progressing.

There were few wolves and foxes in the region, but minks, weasels and skunks were plentiful. My pets, the Plymouth Rocks, were never safe from their attacks. The minks and weasels seemed especially vicious because they killed the chickens and sucked their blood, but did not eat them.

The largest animals of the prairie with which I was familiar and the most bothersome to the farmers, were the woodchucks. They made pests of themselves by throwing up great mounds of earth when tunneling their holes in fields or pastures. The farmers of the region did everything they could to exterminate them, but the groundhogs were far too cunning to be easily trapped or shot.

To us, they were the arch-villains of the prairie -- the most revolting and insolent of animals.
They were fat, oily rascals of a brindle color, with long yellow front teeth and fleshy tails. Nothing could be so exasperating as to see one sticking out of his burrow, motionless as a stump, making a derisive whistling noise through his hideous teeth. At the first sign of danger, he would uncannily rise up, turn, and disappear into the ground as if the whole process were done on mechanical springs.

It was just a year after the United States fought her war with Spain that my brother and I delivered our ultimatum to the woodchucks of Jones county.

On an afternoon when a warm summer rain was pattering on the roof, we sat in the summer kitchen and held a council of war. Frank had heard that gunpowder was made from potash, sulphur and charcoal, and the plan he proposed was that we manufacture a private stock for the destruction of woodchucks.

I clapped my hands and squealed with delight. I had visions of great explosions that would send the woodchucks hurtling out of their burrows far into the air. What a surprised look they would have on their faces!

When the rain stopped, we crept into the kitchen to get the ingredients. In the kitchen cupboard were crystals of chlorate of potash, kept to make gargles for sore throat in the winter time, and a bottle of yellow sulphur that was mixed with molasses for dosing
in the spring. I got these bottles without arousing mother's attention, and in the meantime, Frank obtained a quantity of charcoal from the stove and some matches.

Fully equipped, we withdrew behind the barn for artillery practice. Trembling with fear and excitement, we powdered the charcoal finely on a smooth stone and mixed it with the sulphur and potash crystals. Frank threw a match into the mixture.

Phoo -- it went! A mild, fizzing, but unmistakable explosion. Our exultation was complete.

For several days after that, our favorite diversion was to lie near the burrow of the enemy, attempting to "bomb" him from the earth. The process was highly satisfactory in our eyes. As a matter of military record, however, it is doubtful if the puny explosions ever proved more than a faint annoyance to the wily chicks.

During the summer, father made frequent trips away from the farm -- into Anamosa or over to the grist mill on Buffalo Creek. Occasionally he took me with him and I developed such a passion for travel that one day when he chose to leave me at home, I trudged along behind the lumber wagon anyway. Some distance down the road, discovering that I was in pursuit, he turned around grimly and took me back home. There he administered a tanning with a razor strop that made my cheeks glow. But
even this was not enough to curb my stubborn travel-lust. A few days later, I duplicated my performance, and this time he put me down in the dark cellar to repent my ways. For a while, I contented myself down there scribbling on the stone walls, inspecting the shelves of preserves and jellies, and sticking my finger down in the molasses barrel to sample the sugary syrup. But soon the novelty of this enforced cave-dwelling wore off. Thereafter, I waited for father's consent before going with him on his trips away from the farm.

Saturday afternoons in good weather, the entire family went in to Anamosa to take in produce and buy supplies. This was an event of great excitement to my brothers and me. As we breasted the final hill before coming into Anamosa, Frank always cried with a perennial enthusiasm of discovery: "I smell town!"

Anamosa, an ordinary midwestern village of 2,000 inhabitants, seemed to us a great metropolis. We admired its elegant false fronts, especially those of Holt's Opera House, the Niles Hotel, and (Lord forgive us) the gilded saloons. We were sure that no sight could be so impressive as the main street of Anamosa on Saturday night when it was lit up with gas lights and crowded with wagons and buggies.

In the lull between haying and harvesting, after the corn was laid by, we made a couple of Sunday
excursions over into the Wapsipinicon valley. This was a magnificent region of towering, tree-dotted hills, breaking off into sheer limestone cliffs. The heavy woods along the river seemed to us fabulously rich treasure troves after the sparseness of the prairie. In this canopied wonderland, ferns grew higher than our heads, velvety moss-beds lay at the trunks of trees, columbine grew profusely, and yellow ladyslippers peered out of the leaf mould. The river also fascinated us. Along its edge, Frank and I picked up petrified snails and clamshells -- precious souvenirs we would save to gloat over on winter nights when snowbound on the lonely farm.

After such a trip, I was content to stay close to the farm for several weeks. I felt like Marco Polo home from his travels. In my own private world, Anamosa was as important as Europe to Columbus, and the Wapsie valley, a half-dozen miles from our farm, had all the glamor that the orient had for Magellan and Vespucci.

There was only one haunting reminder of a great world outside, a fabulous world that existed only in legend, geography books, and Dave Peters' strange stories. To the north of the farm and out of sight over the hills, ran the main line of the Milwaukee. At sunset on a clear summer evening, I could see a feather of smoke balanced on the horizon, and if the wind was right, could
hear the weird, mournful whistle of the locomotive, wailing across the fields.

VII

After the fourth of July, all the family's thought and conversation pointed to the banner event of the farm year -- threshing.

Threshing, in our part of the country, as in most rural districts, was done as a neighborhood affair in threshing "rings." A farmer in the vicinity a bit more adventurous than the others -- it was Slim O'Donnell in our region -- owned the threshing equipment. Each summer, in the latter part of July, he assembled a crew to handle the machinery and started out on a threshing run that included all the farms for a dozen miles around.

When the machine stopped at a farm, all the men in the neighborhood convened to help that particular farmer with his threshing. In the meantime, the women of the household prepared a mighty dinner for the threshers and the marriageable girls of the neighborhood came in to help serve it. For young and old, threshing was the most important social event of the year, as well as the climax of the season's work.

By the middle of July, our oats were ripening into a gold wave and we were assured of an abundant yield. I knew that in a few days, father and Dave Peters would
harvest the grain, cutting it down to a close stubble and arraying the low hills with the sheaves. A week or two later, the big machine would arrive and all the farmers of the neighborhood would congregate at our farm.

Then, as luck would have it, an accident happened that wrecked all my plans. One afternoon when I was playing behind the barn, I ran a rusty nail into my foot. Infection set in and I was sent to bed with a fever. During all the remainder of July and a week of August, I was laid up, flat on my back. To my bitter disappointment, I missed all of harvesting and threshing -- the most exciting time of the farm year.

When I was finally able to walk again, it seemed so good to get out in the open that I spent more time than ever in the fields south of the farm. With only Dewey for company, I limped about happily, looking for snakes or ground-squirrels, or just lying on the side of a hill, day-dreaming.

I think it was at this time I first began to have a feeling that was strong in me ever after: namely, that these low hills were haunted -- haunted by ghostly herds and by the tribes of a phantom race.

The events of one afternoon had a great deal to do with shaping this illusion.
We had just finished dinner and I was standing by the back stoop when Dave Peters came out of the kitchen door. As he passed, he slipped a small, hard object into my hand.

"What is it, Dave?" I called after him. He did not answer, but strode on toward the barn with his peculiar, stumbling gait, scowling at the ground.

I inspected the object he had given me. It was a flat, pointed stone, scarred with innumerable tiny planes. I was puzzling over it when father came out of the barn, leading the black horse, Pat.

"Look, pa," I cried, running up to him. "Look at the rock Dave Peters gave me!" Father took it and examined it gravely.

"That's not just a rock, son. That's an Indian arrowhead and a fine one too. Dave must have picked it up in the field this morning."

The word "Indian" gave me a delicious, creepy feeling.

"What's an arrowhead?" I asked.

Patiently, he explained how the flint head was fastened to the shaft of the arrow and then shot with the bow.

"Did they kill buffaloes with them?"

"Why yes, they did. What do you know about buffalo, son? Did your teacher tell you about them
at school?

"Yes," I replied excitedly, "and Dave Peters told us about them, too."

Father stood rubbing his chin for a moment.

"I'm going over to the east pasture to look at some fence," he said. "You come along with me and I'll show you something."

He got on Pat and lifted me up in front of him. We rode slowly out around the windmill and across the pasture over towards the north fence. We stopped in the northeast corner of the pasture beside a circular depression that looked like the imprint of a great dishpan in the green pasture. It was 50 or 60 feet across, flat, hard-packed and bare except for a few scraggly tufts of grass.

"This place," father said, "used to be a buffalo wallow. See how hard it's packed down? The herds used to stand in a circle here with their heads in. When a buffalo swished his tail, it shooed flies not only from his own back but from the flanks of his neighbors on both sides. They all stomped their feet and switched their tails to keep off the flies. That's why this place is packed down so hard."

I was profoundly impressed. I already had an exaggerated image of the buffalo in my mind, gained from some terrifying pictures in a book at school, and
particularly from the buffalo robes father brought out in cold weather when the family drove to town in lumber wagon or sleigh. These were great coarse hides, unlined and untrimmed, with legs, neck and part of the tail left. Their rank, savage smell was enough to summon up all the terrors of primitive beasts. I remember that the horses used to snort with fear when we piled the robes into the wagon.

The thought of having a herd of these shaggy monsters in our west pasture was genuinely alarming.

"No telling for how many hundreds of years they came," father went on. "They stomped this place down so hard the plow won't break it. If I plant this field to corn as I plan to do next year, I'll have to blast this buffalo wallow out with dynamite."

As we rode back to the farmyard in silence, I felt a queer, unearthly sensation, the kind of feeling one might have if he suddenly discovered that the place in which he had been carelessly walking was a graveyard.

The fields were never empty for me after that. In my imagination, the great herds of bison still ruled the prairie, and over the low hills sped the brown feet of restless tribes: the Sioux, the Ioways, the Sauks, Foxes and Mascoutins.

Walking along the road to school in the fall, when the corn was fully grown, tasseled, and turning
brown in anticipation of frost, I imagined the stalks were a body of Indian warriors drawn up for a charge. And in October, when the corn was shocked, Indian villages sprang up in the fields; their brown wigwams dotted the hills. In the aching silence of the country night, I could hear the beat of the war drums and smell the smoke of council fires.
Chapter 3

WHOM THE LORD LOVETH HE CHASTENETH

I

On an afternoon in late August, I stood on the back stoop, slowly chugging up and down the dasher of the wooden churn. It was one of those rich, languid days of late summer that melt all the ambition in your body. Dewey was snoozing on the stoop nearby, one paw hanging over the edge. Occasionally he woke up long enough to snap at a fly. Mother was making jelly in the kitchen, singing softly as she worked. "Oh! don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?"

Frank and Dave Peters had driven over to Grandmother Wood's place to haul some lumber and father was out in the fields mending fence. I could see him through the spruce trees to the west, a tiny speck down in the lowland, moving slowly along the edge of the pasture.

Mother stepped out of the kitchen door to see how the butter was coming. She was still humming to herself as she looked inside the churn. "Sweet Alice, whose hair was so brown." Only a few yellow points floated on top of the cream.

"Goodness, child," she said, "You'll
have to churn harder than that or we won't even have butter for Christmas dinner."

Ashamed, I worked the dasher up and down for several minutes like the piston of a steam engine. When mother came to look in the churn again, the cream was covered with fat, yellow flecks and the butter was ready to be taken out. She brought out the big wooden crock and the paddle and dipped the flaky, yellow butter out of the churn into the crock.

After she had finished squeezing out the water and working in the salt, she cut a slab of homemade bread for me and spread it with fresh butter and jelly. Then she fixed a sandwich and filled a pint mason jar with buttermilk for father.

With these in a basket, I hurried over the pasture hill, Dewey loping along beside me. I was used to this task. Mother often sent food and drink to the men in the fields during the hot summer afternoons. Buttermilk and a sandwich or cookies and a jug of water flavored with vinegar and molasses. I liked especially to take father's lunch to him. When he saw me coming, he would dismount slowly from cultivator or mower, and stand there in the field, with legs firmly apart, while he took his lunch. He ate in silence, chewing his food thoughtfully, drinking with strong, deliberate gulps. And always he was looking away, looking off into the
gray distance where the land met the thin blue of the prairie sky. There was a dignity in his silence like that of the fields themselves. It gave me a feeling of space and tranquility to be out there alone with him.

This afternoon, I found him in the corner of the west pasture, putting in a brace for a fence post. He swung the maul with loose, powerful strokes, driving the stake easily into the brown turf. When he saw me, he stopped work and stood beside the fence while he ate.

"Fence is bad here," he said when he had finished eating. "This fall when we market hogs, I think I'll put in a new fence all around."

Then he paused from his work a few minutes longer to tell me about the effect of the dry August on the crops -- how the corn was ripening early and that he expected a poor yield from our little patch of sugar cane. I stood opposite him, my feet planted solidly apart like his, and listened attentively.

(And why shouldn't I discuss such matters with father? Wasn't I old enough now to handle my share of the farm work? Didn't I feed the chickens sometimes and climb the thatched roof of the cowshed to get the eggs the hens had laid there?)

In a few days now, father was saying, it would be time to strip the sugar cane. I nodded my head knowingly and wrinkled my forehead like his.
(And why shouldn't I feel my responsibility? Didn't I distribute the hay in the mangers every evening now? Hadn't I helped with the milking three different times already?)

After father had finished talking, he resumed his work and I stood and watched for a while.

As I grew old enough to take an interest in the serious aspects of farm life, I began to understand my father's solitary temperament a little. True, in part, his silence and detachment were due to a strange, mystic quality peculiar to him alone, a quality which no-one would ever really comprehend. But in many respects, his was a nature common to all farmers, all men whose moods are shaped by unceasing conflict with droughts, storms, plagues, and other violent natural forces.

The farmer knows no security; at the time his fortunes look the best, his investment and a season's labor may be wiped out by a hailstorm or a plague of insects. This year, everything seemed to be coming well for us: the loft of the barn was filled with hay; the oat bins were overflowing; and the corn was bursting to good harvest. But still, uncertainty brooded in father's eyes. Newspapers carried ominous accounts of hog cholera in other parts of the state; frost might nip the corn before it was hardened; a
sudden flooding of the market might topple the price of pork before we sold our hogs. And the burden of the indebtedness on the farm was constantly on father's mind.

I do not remember that he or mother ever spoke of this indebtedness before the children; yet we all knew about it. We could tell when financial matters were especially troubling him, because he would sit in the living room after supper with a lost, frustrated look on his face and no taste for the book in his lap. He would sit that way for a while; then he would twist himself nervously out of his chair to give a lamp attention it did not need or to stalk out of the front door into the darkness.

Father was a poor hand in a business deal; he had no patience with money matters and was easily duped. Unfortunately, this was a sphere in which mother could give him little help. For all her shrewdness in various practical ways, she was lost at the mention of figures. The two of them feared the indebtedness, and its interest and compound interest, with the hysterical fear of those who do not understand the force which threatens them. They were incapable of seeing the situation in its totality; their only solution was to work hard and to save with a care that sometimes bordered on fanaticism.

simply

Frugality was not preached as a virtue in
the household; it was practiced as a necessity. One incident, occurring that September, is typical of this fact.

From a neighbor, we heard that a newspaper in the town of Cedar Rapids, 25 miles away, was advertising a drawing contest for children. When father consented to let me enter the contest, my excitement knew no bounds. India ink was required by the rules, and father said he would get me some in Anamosa the next day. For two days, I worked and planned in a fury of preparation and when father returned from town late the following afternoon, I got out in the yard to meet him.

He got down from the lumber wagon slowly; I could see in his face that something was wrong.

"Did you remember -- ?" I asked tremulously.

He put his hand on my shoulder for a moment.

"I'm sorry, son. The smallest bottle of India ink they had was 25 cents. We simply can't afford it." That was all; and I was left with my disappointment and the wonder that a bottle of ink could cost that incredible sum.

Our poverty was not the kind that existed in the slums of the great cities where thousands lacked food, clothing and shelter. Except for a few staple items such as salt and coffee, the farm produced the food we needed. Mother made a great part of our clothing,
and we cut and hauled our own fuel wood.

Still, we were money-poor, and cursed with the insecurity which that implies. The possibility that we might lose the farm and everything we possessed was never remote from our lives. And because that fear hung over us always, the loss of a herd of hogs by cholera, or the demolition of a cornfield by hail was a tragic event of the first order.

II

My brother and I had been stripping sugar cane all day, walking between the tall green rows with long wooden swords and chopping the leaves from the stalks. I was dead-tired from the unaccustomed labor in the broiling September sun, and after I climbed into bed, I lay awake for a few minutes while my blood seemed to pulse sluggishly to the rhythm of crickets, locusts and frogs that squeaked like batteries of rusty grindstone wheels in the darkness. I was just dropping off to sleep when I heard someone rush through the back door of the house, slamming the screen sharply. Dave Peters was talking down there in a high-pitched, excited voice; I caught a few of his words -- "... fire... cholera... hogs... Abbott farm..." In a few moments, the door slammed again and father and the hired man were out in the yard, mingling their voices with the insects' drone in low, blurred conversation.
I tried to stay awake, vaguely wondering what was wrong, but my drugged senses were slipping, slipping and soon I was lost in oceans of sleep.

Next morning I had forgotten all of this until I sat down at the breakfast table. There, the atmosphere of deep gloom I at once sensed brought back vividly the things I had heard the preceding evening. Mother was distracted; she poured coffee on the tablecloth and almost forgot to get our lunches ready to take to school. Through the window, I could see father and Dave Peters standing beside the hog lot, talking, and I could tell from their very attitudes that something was seriously amiss.

"Father wants to see you before you go to school," mother said, as she put the last sandwich into our lunch pail.

He was harnessing the dappled horses to the lumber wagon when we came outside. He stopped for a few moments to talk to us, looking away to the south through the open space between windmill and barn, as he spoke.

"There's hog cholera in the neighborhood," he said. "I've been expecting it for some time. John Abbott told me Sunday that some of his young pigs had been acting sick. Last night, we saw the fire in Abbotts' pasture where they were burning their first dead hogs."
You can see the smoke over there now, and if the wind was right, you could smell it."

Frank and I followed his gaze to the south where a wisp of smoke was curving into the sky.

"The plague is likely to hit our herd no matter what we do. But we'll have to take every care. We'll keep Dewey tied up, and if you see any strange dogs or cats coming into the farmyard, scare them away. There are a good many ways cholera can be spread."

A few days later, a half-dozen of our young pigs began to show signs of infection. They lost their appetites, became dumpish and watery-eyed, and separated themselves from the rest of the herd. Every time I saw them, they were either lying dopily in the corner of the pen, or else they were huddled together, trying to hide their heads under the litter. As the days passed, they became emaciated, and tottered pathetically as they moved about the lot.

When we got up the following Sunday morning, two of our young pigs were stiff upon the ground. After that, the disease spread, taking from one to three hogs a day. Playful young pigs, fat porkers almost ready for market, enormous brood sows, and even the big boar, the terror of the barnyard, became listless, ceased eating, and quietly died. Father did little these days except to putter about the hog pen, clearing debris
from outside the fence, repairing a board here and there, or just standing and watching the hogs. There was nothing he could do for them, and at the last, he shot some that were hopelessly stricken. By the end of the month, only two young sows survived from the entire herd.

It was too much labor to bury the dead hogs, and if they were buried, there was the risk for a considerable length of time, that rodents might spread the infection to the neighbors' hogs. So, according to custom, the men carted the dead animals out to a far corner of the farm, well away from buildings, and made a huge funeral pyre. The stiff, grotesque bodies were soaked with kerosene and ignited. There, the pyre burned for days, filling the air for miles around with the pungent scent of burning flesh.

I shall never forget that fire. At night, I could see it from my bedroom window, an ominous beacon, flashing its warning to neighboring farms not yet reached by the plague.

III

There was no cheer in our household during the weeks that the cholera wiped out our herd of hogs. Everyone tried to act as if nothing unusual had happened, but the efforts to break the gloom were obvious and only made matters worse. Unfortunately, we were having one of the hottest and driest early autumns in the history
of the region and the weather added to our listlessness and depression.

The swine plague, my first really serious experience with death, had a profound effect on me. The hogs had always seemed to me the most solid and hardy of animals. To see the entire herd, including the huge boar and the great brood sows, reduced to skeletal monstrosities, tottering about the pen, and finally to stiff, fantastic carcasses, was a tragedy that sank deeply into my mind. Furthermore, the experience had greater force now that I was old enough to grasp, at least vaguely, the significance of their loss to father.

My response, however, was chiefly of horror rather than sorrow. The hogs, except for the very small pigs, seemed inhuman, somewhat mechanical beasts to me; they were not pets like the cows and chickens. If our Plymouth Rocks had been exterminated, I should have been inconsolable. In fact, I think I was more put out one afternoon when I came home from school and found one of our fine cockerels lying motionless in the yard than I had been at any time during the swine plague.

"Is he asleep?" asked my little brother, Jack.

I felt of the chicken's wings and of his breast. The body was cold.

"I believe he's . . . dead."

Death was a word we had heard many times
during the past month. When the hogs were dead, father took them away to burn and that was an end of it. But I could not accept the fact that this chicken's life was destroyed as the hogs' had been. Before the stricken pigs had died, they had changed pathetically, had become skinny and weak. But this chicken, lying on the ground, looked the same as in life; so far as I could see, there wasn't a mark on him.

It seemed to me that I had to do something about this. The Plymouth Rocks were not only my favorite pets; now that I had the chore of feeding them and gathering their eggs, they were also my responsibility. I had watched them hatch and grow up, and when they had been in the featherless, adolescent stage, I had even gone so far as to rub mutton tallow on their wings to relieve sun-burn. I could not let them die!

"He looks all right," said Jack, stooping down to pet the chicken's wing. "Won't he wake up?"

An inspiration popped into my mind.

"I know!" I cried. "You wait here, Jack, and watch the chicken. I'll be right back."

A story I had heard Dave Peters tell was humming in my mind as I ran into the house -- something he had read in the newspapers or heard in the general store at Anamosa. Tugging at his whiskers portentously, the hired man had recounted how Mrs. McKinley, the
president's wife, had "died" and then been brought back to life by an injection of salt in the arm. The details were vague, but that was the gist of it.

Luckily, mother was down cellar when I came into the kitchen. I got a fistful of salt from the jar over the stove and took father's carving knife out of the china cupboard drawer. When I returned to the scene of the tragedy, Jack was shaking the chicken's head, trying to get him to open his eyes.

We took the body around to the side of the house where no-one would be likely to see us. Then I cut a long slit in the flesh of the cockerel's wing and rubbed salt into the wound.

"What will that do?" asked Jack wonderingly.

"Bring him back to life," I said with complete confidence.

Knowing that a dog or stray cat might carry the body away if we left it lying in the yard, we built a little compartment out of loose bricks to put it in. Although the walls of our makeshift hospital were only a foot high and very unstable, it seemed a satisfactory shelter to us.

I had the idea that the salt treatment was a sort of magic that would work better if we didn't watch it, so we forced ourselves to stay away all that evening.

But the next morning, the first thing we did
was to rush out to see how the chicken was. I arrived at the scene first. The brick shelter was thrown apart and empty!

"He's gone!" I cried. Jack and Frank came running to see. "Gone!" they echoed. We all danced about, hysterical with delight.

"Chicky woke up! Chicky woke up!" chanted Jack over and over again.

When our first excitement had somewhat subsided, we searched the flock for the revivified bird — just to be positive. Sure enough, there was one cockerel with a scratch on his wing. That erased all possible doubts.

As usual, Dave Peters didn't say a thing when we told him about it. He only grunted and scowled at the stick he was whittling.

IV

The minister had a nasal, bargaining voice with which he said prayers and started his sermons. He also had a terrible thunder-voice for frightening the sin out of his flock, but that would come later. "Our text this Sabbath," he was saying, "is the wrath of the Lord and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis Twenty-Nine . . . "

Scrubbed and starched into godliness, the congregation of the Strawberry Hill Presbyterian church
settled themselves stiffly on the hard oak pews and prepared to deliver judgment on the two wicked cities — and upon their own neighbors.

I sat in the grim Calvinistic twilight like a wooden image, walled in by my parents. My starched Eton collar cut into my neck and my throat was crumbling for the need of a drink of water. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see father sitting very straight and solemn beside me, his arms folded and his eyes fastened gravely upon the minister. On my other side was mother, with her hands in her lap, in an attitude of sweet composure, gently accepting every word that came from the preacher's lips. Beyond her, I could see Dave Peters, his long torso crooked forward, his eyes smouldering.

As soon as the sermon was under way and the minister's voice was coiling and uncoiling in a monotonous flow, I relaxed a little and rubbed my nose — it had been itching for what seemed like hours. Outside, the sun had emerged from the clouds, flooding bright sunlight through the stained glass windows in the east side of the church. The light from the biggest window came down on the pew in front of us like a gorgeous rainbow. My heart leaped up to see Widow Schmidt's jowls become green and Deacon Jones' whiskers blossom into an exquisite lavender.

While the congregation grappled with problems
of original sin and eternal damnation, my mind reverted to the topic that was of greatest importance to me at the time -- namely, joint snakes. For several days, I had been able to think of little else. It had all started one evening the week before when Dave Peters had told my brothers and me about an actual experience he had once with a joint snake. As the minister's voice writhed on, I seemed to hear the hired man telling the story, paring his fingernails with his jackknife as he talked.

"I was walkin' along the fence in the east pasture when I come on him. Prettiest sight I ever seen -- long and clear with the sun shinin' through him and showin' all his joints. Well here was my chance to catch the snake and git the reward that P. T. Barnum offered. I knowed that if I hit him with a stick, he'd break up and git away, so I took off my coat and sneaked up to throw the coat over him and catch him whole. Well, I got up to him all right but when I lifted up my coat to throw it over him, that snake busted up into a thousand pieces. I was so surprised, I dropped my coat. Then, what happened while I stood there? Ask me -- just what happened? Why, quick as lighnin', all the parts of the snake run themselves together, and away he glided as fast as a blue racer!"

As these words came back to me, I was no longer in church. I was out in a pasture capturing a
joint snake; I was taking it to Barnum and collecting the reward; I was accepting a job as a snake charmer in the circus.

Father's hand came down firmly on my arm and brought me back into the atmosphere of the church. No wriggling allowed here. I braced up and paid attention to the preacher. His voice was coiling now, ready to strike out in the climax of his sermon. The Lord, he was saying was Terrible in His Wrath, and would deal with all those who sinned today even as He had dealt with Sodom and Gomorrah. I began to feel qualms. Why hadn't I paid attention instead of thinking about joint snakes? The minister pointed an accusing finger into the congregation. My heart went cold. He was pointing directly at me.

"Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven."

I no longer needed father's hand to keep me still. I was scared stiff. Surely the Lord's punishment was aimed at me for dreaming about joint snakes in church. I didn't know what brimstone was, but the picture of fire raining down from heaven was vivid enough. Oh, why had I been so foolish as to offend the Lord? I listened breathlessly to the rest of the sermon.

It was a relief when the fireworks were at last over and I was still intact. The choir began to
singing "How Gentle God's Commands" and I relaxed.

Hymn singing these Sundays was not the sober, prosaic business it had once been. Something revolutionary had happened to the choir. Several of the younger members were now putting great passion and vibrato into their singing; they competed to see who could obtain the most coloratura effects. The competition was close this Sunday, but Nell Abbott was the prima donna; her soprano fluttered in shrill triumph over all the others.

Everyone agreed that the corruption of the choir had resulted from a visit of Jenny Sales to Anamosa. Jenny Sales was a local girl who had gone away to Europe, launched on a spectacular musical career, and eventually emerged as "Madame de Seales."

When the Madame had returned to Anamosa on a visit, she had created a sensation, and the young ladies of the town, admiring her magnificent trills, had undertaken to render the church hymns in what they considered the operatic manner.

The older ladies of the congregation were horrified at this blasphemy, and even the more liberal members of the church were shocked to hear Lead Kindly Light sung as if it had been the Miserere from Il Trovatore.

When the services were over that Sunday, and we were slowly milling out of the church, I got separated
from my parents in the aisle and wedged in between two elderly ladies who were engaged in a lively whispering conversation.

"Wasn't it awful today?" said one lady, making a grimace as if she had tasted alum.

"Shameful!" hissed the other. "I can't answer for some folks, but as for me, I don't approve of all this quaverin' in a person's voice when they are singin' 'Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessin'."

V

Weeks upon weeks, the rains had held off. The pastures were bleached to hay-color and the corn leaves became yellow as old parchment. Leaves were dropping early; the trees and fence-rows were already sparse and sere.

From time to time, we sighted blue smudges of smoke on the horizon. Knowing that it was too early for the hazes of Indian summer, we concluded that there were grass fires in the vicinity. These fires were usually started by the sparks from railroad locomotives, and when the landscape was as dry as it was this year, they could do a great deal of damage. We felt reasonably safe from them, however, since we were a good two miles from the Milwaukee line.

One afternoon after school, I was sitting in the shade at the east side of the house, carving my name
in a piece of wood with an old jackknife. Dewey lay nearby, panting from the exertion of his run across the fields. These October days were still hot, although the nights and early mornings were sharp. Frank was digging potatoes in the garden.

"Hey, you!" he called to me. "Come over here and help. You can pick up while I dig."

I reluctantly put away my knife and started back to the garden. I could hear a loud pounding from the barn. Father and Dave Peters were up in the loft making some repairs. I stopped a moment at the back stoop to get a drink from the water bucket. As I lifted the dipper to my mouth, I happened to look out over the sun-crisped hills to the west. Something caught my eye. I gazed intently for a minute until I was sure. It was smoke, blue clouds of it, rolling up from the hills!

"Mother, Frank!" I yelled, "there's a fire coming this way."

Frank dropped his spading fork and ran across the garden. Mother hurried out the back door. They looked into the west were I was pointing.

"Grass fire!" cried mother. "Run and tell the men. Hurry!"

Father and Dave Peters came out of the barn at a dead run. Father took one long look at the clouds
of smoke and gave orders.

"I'll plow a strip across the west pasture down as far as the fence. Won't have time to cut through the fence. Dave, you'll have to start a back-fire below the fence to protect the barn. Frank can help you -- no, Frank, you run the stock into the farmyard. Grant, you help Dave."

Father hurried to throw the harness on his fastest team. I followed the hired man. He rushed into the barn and snatched up a bunch of gunny sacks from a corner. I picked up the sacks he missed and ran after him.

"Watch out for that backfire," father called. "Let one spark get away and the barn will go!"

Dave and I dashed around behind the barn and plunged the gunny sacks into the horse tank. Mother came running from the house with a box of matches for us.

As the hired man and I hurried down the grassy slope south of the farm, loaded with dripping gunny sacks, father drove the plow into the west pasture. To the east I could hear Frank shouting at the cows as he started rounding them up.

"I'll start the fire along here," shouted Dave Peters, indicating an imaginary line. "We'll beat it out with the sacks when it gets even with this here bare patch."
We did not have time to look to the west to see how swiftly the big fire was approaching, but we could smell the smoke plainly now.

Dave Peters lighted the grass in several places and soon we had a little blaze crackling. The wind carried it back to the line in no time and we began beating it out with the wet sacks. Mother ran out with more wet cloths and helped us smother the flames. The hot breath of the backfire spit into our faces; our throats were choked with smoke.

As we worked, I caught an occasional glimpse of father, plowing across the pasture at as near a gallop as he dared. Frank was returning with the stock; the cattle came past our backfire, lowing and balking with fright.

The big fire was drawing very near now; dense clouds of stinging smoke were rolling over us. Father drove back into the farmyard and tied his lathered, frightened horses in the shade. We all stood along the south and west edges of the farmyard, ready to slap the wet gunny sacks on any sparks that might leap across the gaps made by backfire and plow. Two hay stacks and a straw stack stood beside the barn, and the cowshed was thatched with wild hay, dry as tinder. Any of these would burn in short order, and once fire got started in the farmyard, the barn and other buildings would be swept away too.
The grass fire was a billowing, irregular wall of smoke at the bottom of which orange flames reached out like snake-tongues as it moved forward. Driven by a good wind, the fire ran easily up and down the hills; we could hear its subdued crackling. As it swept into the marshy spots of the west pasture, it struck the patches of waist-deep wild hay and the flames sprang high, hurling sparks into the air.

Up the west pasture hill straight toward us raced the wall of smoke. It reached the firebreaks and the tongues of flame leaped out upon the bare strips.

"Look out, Peters!" shouted father. "Sparks in the grass by the cowshed there."

The hired man turned quickly and beat out a patch of fire that had flamed up without warning.

At the gaps, the fire seemed to pause a moment, like a spirited horse. Then the wall parted into two sections and swept past the ends of the firebreaks. One section reached the trees north and west of our house and stopped. The other traveled south of the farmyard, left a wide space untouched to the east, then extended into a long, crooked wall again, as it traveled on across the hills.

For more than an hour, we walked around the farmyard with wet cloths, taking no chances that some
bit of fire might remain to destroy our buildings. Father climbed high up on the windmill to look around. "Our place looks like a green island in a black lake, from up there," he said when he came down. Darkness had fallen by the time he and Dave were satisfied that we were completely out of danger.

At supper that night, everyone was in good spirits except Jack. He was peeved because he had been taking a nap and nobody had wakened him to see the excitement. As for me, I felt very proud to have helped stop the fire. A slight burn I had on my hand made me feel like a battle-scarred hero.

"Thank heavens, it didn't turn out any worse than it did," mother said as she set the gravy down on the table. "Lucky you men were here this afternoon."

Dave Peters had singed his whiskers in the backfire and looked fiercer than ever with the patch of gray frizzle on his reddish beard.

"That warn't no prairie fire," he growled. "Just a low grass fire -- nothin' like what they uster have. Not enough to get excited about."

Mother started to say something but held it back.

"Yes," said father, "in the old days when the tall buffalo grass grew on the prairie, we could never have stopped it the way we did. But this fire might have done enough damage."
There was one matter troubling me when I went to bed that night. When mother came to tuck Jack and me into bed, I asked her about it.

"Ma, did God punish us with that fire like the minister said in church?"

"I don't know, son. Perhaps he did. If so, we must not have been too wicked, because He didn't let the fire get into our farmyard."

Apparently this idea of the Lord punishing us with the fire made even more of an impression on my little brother than it had on me. For he lay there in the darkness for a long time, murmuring to himself:

"God punched us. God punched us."

VI

All that fall and winter, ill luck dogged us. The loss of our hogs from the cholera made us poorer than ever before, and all manner of other evils flocked in upon us. I heard mother say years later that this was the most troubled period she and father had ever known.

On top of other misfortunes, Jack and I caught the measles in early December. We had scarcely recovered from this disease when mother took sick with a severe cold. The cold grew worse, finally developing into pneumonia. She was in bed two months.

It was a shock for us to see mother, whose
energy seemed so inexhaustible, collapse. She lay there, white as the pillow on which she rested, the spirit drained completely from her. We all hovered about rather helplessly, suddenly realizing how much we depended on her. The house was a bleak, gloomy place without her moving about in it. Childishly, I resented the unseen force that had stricken her. I remember my vague, wondering grief when I saw her arms and hands resting limp above the covers. They lay at her sides like wilted flowers, the blue veins traced against the white flesh.

Her mother came out to take care of her during the worst part of the illness. Grandmother Weaver was a good person to have around at such a time. A plump, white-haired lady, with finely arched wrinkles over her eyebrows, she was like her daughter in many ways. She was cheerful and energetic, and had a competent, if rather nervous way of getting things done. She did a good job of nursing, cooked our meals, and sometimes in the evenings told Louisa Alcott stories to my brothers and me. We were all very fond of her.

Frequently, Grandfather Weaver stopped for a meal at the farm when he came from Anamosa to bring grandmother out, or to take her back to town. It seems to me that I never saw Grandpa Weaver in those days when he wasn't clinching a point with some time-worn
aphorism. "Penny wise, pound foolish -- that's McKinley," he would say, wagging a stumpy forefinger. He was round-faced and bearded, always full of gruff talk about business and politics. Jolly enough when conversing with adults, he seemed a little stern and exacting in his attitude towards children.

We did not see much of father's people during this period in spite of the fact that they lived only a quarter of a mile away. The feeling between our household and theirs was far from cordial. Grandmother Wood, a lean, gray-haired old lady with something rather helpless and pathetic in her face and manner, had not approved of father's marriage. Nor had father's unmarried sister and two brothers who lived at home. Uncle Clarence, an ingrown, sullen individual, and Uncle Eugene, the blustery, overbearing member of the family, were especially cool to mother. The only one of the Wood family who came to see us often was Aunt Sarah, father's elder sister.

She was a tall, gaunt old maid, a strange mixture of Quaker austerity and Victorian romanticism. Like the weather, her actions were decisive but unaccountable. With the best of intentions, she sometimes volunteered to help about the house, but her eccentric manner of doing things invariably upset the household and gave mother a nervous relapse. Aunt Sarah considered father's
children a special duty of hers like membership in the Ladies Aid, and she worked diligently at amusing and instructing us. It pleased her to have us call her Aunt Sally.

Part of the time during mother's sickness, we had no one in to take care of her, and one of the things I remember most vividly from this whole unhappy period was the way in which father took over mother's responsibilities in the household. He had been brought up to accept as immutable the distinction between the duties of man and woman in the family, and I doubt if it had ever occurred to him before that a man could do housework. But when Grandmother Weaver had to go back to Anamosa, he took over the offices of housewife and nurse as if he had always expected to assume them some day. Awkward and frequently bewildered, he washed dishes, scrubbed, tended to mother's needs, and even tried to bake graham muffins. He took care of us children as best he could; I remember especially how he saw Jack and me to bed every night and stood there, grave and slightly embarrassed, while we said our prayers.

Another thing remarkable about this period was the change in Dave Peters' attitude towards mother. There had always been a certain hostility between mother and the hired man. She had no patience with
his tall stories and bragging and Dave had frequently ruffled under the sting of her tongue.

But when mother fell sick, something happened to Dave. He was like a faithful old dog whose mistress was ill. He pounced upon the slightest opportunities to do things for her. For example, he thought nothing of driving to Anamosa on the most bitter day of winter to get her medicine. When he was in the house, he kept his sharp, condor-eyes fastened upon her door. Let any of us make the tiniest noise, and he made us feel as if we had committed a crime more serious than murder. Once when father dropped a piece of firewood on the sitting room floor, Dave upbraided him so fiercely that I was horrified. Apparently father didn’t mind, though, because when I went out into the kitchen a few minutes later, I found him chuckling to himself as he peeled the potatoes. This was one of the few times I ever heard father laugh.

So the winter dragged on, and in adversity we became acquainted with many sides of one another that might have remained hidden. When spring broke through the next year, the bad luck that had been following us seemed to depart and everyone felt new confidence and vitality. Then, that summer an important event occurred that I like to think of as officially terminating our
long period of misfortune.

Mother was unwell again, and father had brought Mrs. Zimmers, a fat, good-natured German woman, from Anamosa to help with the housework. I knew that the illness was not so serious as that of the preceding winter because no one seemed to be greatly alarmed about it. Besides, mother did not look ghastly this time, and even after she had gone to bed, she was able to talk to me the same as always. But there was a secretiveness about it all that puzzled and disturbed me. When I asked father or Frank or Mrs. Zimmers about mother's sickness, they only shook their heads mysteriously and went on with their work. This, of course, made me all the more curious, but some intuitive sense of delicacy forbade my speaking to mother herself about it.

One afternoon, Jack and I were standing in the farmyard, watching Frank tinker with the mowing machine, when Mrs. Zimmers came running out of the kitchen, very much excited. She called Frank to her, said something to him, and hurried back into the house. Frank turned and ran like a shot through the farmyard and out towards the field where father was cultivating corn. A few minutes later father came running into the yard, having left Frank to bring in the horses. He disappeared into the farmhouse, and Jack and I
stood beside the back stoop, waiting for the unknown to happen. Presently Mrs. Zimmers came to the door and handed me a note.

"Your father wants you boys to take this over to your Aunt Sally right away," she said.

Jack and I, thinking that we had been entrusted with an important mission, ran nearly all the way over to Grandmother Wood's. When we had delivered the note, we wanted to return home immediately to see what was happening there. But after Aunt Sarah had read the message, she flatly insisted on keeping us with her. She made us sit in the living room for hours while she read aloud from a tedious book called "Pilgrim's Progress."

It was nearly supper time before she let us go, and when we reached home, there was great excitement awaiting us. As we came down the road, we saw Dr. Perkins of Anamosa just turning out of our drive in his buggy; and Grandfather Weaver's buggy and the Abbotts' rig were standing in the farmyard.

The house was buzzing with low talk and laughter when we came in the kitchen door. Grandpa Weaver, father, and Mrs. Abbott were having a mysterious adult conversation in the kitchen, and the other people were standing about in the living room. Nobody paid any attention to Jack and me. We stood forlornly in
the corner of the kitchen, wondering what it was all about. Finally, father saw us, smiled, and motioned for us to come into the living room. Grandmother Weaver, Mrs. Zimmers and the others were in a huddle, peering down at something, and whispering. As we came closer, I could see that they were standing around the hooded walnut cradle in which my brothers and I had slept as babies. I followed father up to it and peeked in.

There was a tiny, red, puckered-up new babe, sound asleep.

"What do you think of her?" whispered father, proudly. "That's your new sister."

---

They christened the newcomer Nancy after her Grandmother Weaver, and Rebecca after her Grandmother Wood. But we all called her Nan. She had a round face, pale hair, and blue eyes, and looked exactly the same as mother had when she was a baby, so Grandmother Weaver said. With the arithmetic I had learned at Cottonwood school, I figured precisely how much older I was than my new sister, and the results were highly satisfactory to my pride.

For the most part, Nan was a good baby, but she did have her bad points. For one thing, she was very wayward about being put to sleep. This was frequently my task, and I found that if I rocked her
with the utmost care for half an hour, she would appear to be sound asleep. But the moment I started to tip-toe out of the room, "Yaaa!" she would squall, and I would have to come back to the cradle and do the whole process all over again. This was rather annoying to a fellow who was eight years old, going on nine.
Chapter 4

THE KINDLY FRUITS OF THE EARTH

I

The grain harvest was something to describe to one's grandchildren. The yield had been fairly abundant the year before, but father said he had never seen anything like the oats crop this summer. The straw was rich yellow, almost a butter color, and the grain heads were fat and perfectly formed. In mid-July, the fields were fairly choked with the banks of thick oats, ripe for the harvest.

By July 20th, we had cut and shocked our grain, and once more the family was tingling with the excitement that always preceded threshing. Each morning, we heard the shrill whistle of the threshing machine at some farm in the vicinity, calling in all the neighbors in the threshing run. Father and Dave Peters left with hayrack and team at dawn these days and didn't return until dusk. Supper every evening was enlivened by exciting talk about the day's threshing. Father and Dave became almost loquacious as they discussed the adventures and mishaps of the day's work in the fields. My brothers and I listened to this talk avidly and tried to content ourselves with the thought that our own big day would be at hand very soon. Mother was forever asking questions...
about the other farm women's dinners and fretting as to whether she would be able to provide as good a meal when we had our threshing.

Morning after morning, the whistle of the machine was heard closer to our farm. Father and Dave Peters spent any spare minutes they could find, checking our wagon box and hayracks to see that they were in good repair, and trimming the trees in the front yard so that the threshing machine could get through our drive.

"That's a pretty rickety bridge over the crick," Dave Peters said, brightening up at the prospect of calamity. "Do ye suppose the machine can get o'er it all right."

"They'll get over it all right," said father, drily. "Slim O'Donnell carries a half-dozen big oak planks on his machine. With those he can get across any bridge around here."

Mother was working furiously now preparing the great dinner she would have to serve the threshers. She cleaned the house from top to bottom until it fairly glistened. From the cellar she brought up quantities of jellies, preserves, and pickles and lined them up on the pantry shelves. She gathered all manner of garden vegetables and put them in baskets out in the summer kitchen. She sent Frank into Anamosa to buy crash toweling for roller towels and to borrow extra silverware
from Grandmother Weaver. And as the time grew short, a thousand smaller jobs occupied her, such as getting the table leaves out, taking inventory of chairs, and sorting out the best china.

The last two days, she did a baking such as I had never seen. Golden loaves of bread, pies, cakes, doughnuts, and big crocks of baked beans appeared in the pantry. She prepared chickens for frying and baked two great hams.

With a nursing babe on her hands, mother was still none too strong. So father insisted that Mrs. Zimmers should come out to help with the dinner. And when that good, dependable woman arrived at noon on the day before our threshing, I think mother could have kissed her for joy.

Frank and I had plenty to do in the way of preparation too. We cut the weeds in the yard and picked up all the untidy odds and ends around the place. We cleaned the kitchen chimney and brought in wood and corncobs for the range. We swatted flies for hours at a time, and got a place ready on the back stoop where the men could wash. One hateful job I had was to take the combs from the comb-box on the kitchen wall and clean them all out with a pin. As our last measure of preparation, Frank and I had baths and shampoos in a wooden washtub by the kitchen stove. Painfully clean, and with our best
overalls laid out for the next day, we were ready for the big event of the year.

That night, the threshing machine arrived at our place, and the excitement of its coming is something I shall never forget. Darkness had settled, except for a few silver splinters in the west, when we sighted the great hulk lumbering up the narrow side road to our farm. It looked for all the world like some immense fire-dragon. Sparks flew from it; lanterns which the crew carried swung like roving eyes in the darkness; the stillness was shattered for miles around by the ungodly rumble and clatter. When it finally turned into our drive, it looked as if it would crowd the trees and buildings out of the farmyard with its towering bulk. And the bedlam it created was such as you never heard, with the engine puffing, the gears and other apparatus rattling, and the crew shouting in the darkness like mariners bringing in a ship.

I had a hard time getting to sleep that night, for when I went to bed, every nerve in my body was tingling with excitement. A thousand hopes and anxieties were jostling about in my mind. I lay there sharply awake in the hot bedroom for what seemed hours, staring at the pool of silver moonlight on the floor and listening to the countless languid voices of the night. Somewhere out of the darkness drifted a wistful voice...
Glad excitement sang in my blood when I got out of bed the next morning. Day had dawned still and clear, with no sign of a cloud in the pale sky. The sun was pouring a dazzling flood on the stubbled, sweet-smelling fields where the shocks of grain stood ready for the threshers. The day was tailor-made for our threshing.

I raced through breakfast and my morning chores in record time. And when the threshing crew arrived to start the machinery, I was on hand to watch.

For the center of operations, they selected a level spot in the pasture just west of the farmyard. I was completely awed by the stupendous size and complexity of the threshing equipment. The steam engine which ran the other machinery and pulled it seemed to me as big as a railroad locomotive, and the huge body of the separator, with its auxiliary mechanisms, had so many bolts and wheels and arms that I wondered how the crew could remember what they were all for.

The three men who ran the equipment were in a jolly humor this morning. They laughed and spat and swore lustily while they got their dragon ready for a preliminary tryout. I watched them fire up the boiler, turn the engine around, and hook up the big belt that ran from the engine to the separator, driving all the innumerable gears of the machinery. Then suddenly, the
throttle was thrown open, the main belt moved, and the separator started with a loud, shuffling roar. The vibrations shook the earth under me.

The hero of the affair was Slim O'Donnell, the dashing, devil-may-care young farmer who operated the engine. He was known in the vicinity as a plunger and dare-devil who cared more about baseball and horse-racing than he did about tending to his farm. With a broad smile on his face and an old white cap set jauntily on his head, he sat under the canopy of the engine, handling the levers in such a grand manner you could not help admiring him. When he blew a tremendous blast on the whistle to remind the neighbors that this was our threshing day, he did it as unconcernedly as if he were striking a dinner gong.

Now the hayracks were beginning to stream through our farmyard, and we could see the men starting to load the shocks down in the lowland. They looked like ants, moving about on the bright fields.

Seeing that his machinery was all in order, Slim stopped the great belt to wait for the men to bring in the first load of grain from the fields. He vaulted down from his perch and leaned carelessly against one of the big back wheels of the engine, joking with the other members of the crew, and spitting great gobs of tobacco juice. Finally his merry glance lit on me.
"Hello there son," he drawled. "What's your name?"

"Grant," I piped, the blood rushing to my face.

"Grant what?"

"Grant Wood."

"Your hair's kind of red, ain't it?"

"Y-yes sir."

"Well, then, I guess I'll call you 'Redwood.'"

The threshing crew guffawed appreciatively, and I stared both at the ground -- embarrassed and pleased.

Presently, the first hayrack arrived from the fields, loaded with shocks; the machinery started up again, and the threshing was begun. The man on the rack pitched the bundles of oats to a pronged belt that carried them into the body of the separator. By this time, father had backed up a wagon to the side of the separator. The grain, divided from the straw in the separator and sifted of chaff by a blower arrangement, poured into father's wagon-box. Meantime, the straw was carried up a steep incline by means of a wide, canvas belt, and discharged upon the ground. Dave Peters was stationed where the straw came from the machine to build it into a compact, well-shaped stack.

All morning, the hayracks came in an unending stream, bringing the oats, while father and the other
two men driving high boxed wagons, formed another con-
tinuous chain hauling the threshed grain to the barn. When I had tired of watching the threshing machine, I climbed up on the seat with father and rode with him on several trips to and from the oat bins. Then, for variety, I rode out into the fields with Mr. Abbott on his hay rack. It was exciting to see the hayracks spread out over the hills and the swarms of men loading the yellow straw. But being out there was too hot to be fun for long. The hard sunlight glared on the bleached grainfields so bright that it made your head ache and the dry heat nearly stifled you.

Perhaps the most fun of the morning was going with Jim Flynn, the "water monkey" of the threshing crew, while he filled the water-wagon. The water-wagon, out of which the boiler of the threshing engine was replenished, was a wooden tank on wheels, equipped with a large hand pump. Since there was not enough breeze to drive our windmill this morning, Jim did not fill the wagon from the horse-tank, but instead, drove down to the open well in the marshy part of our east pasture.

By the time we had returned from this trip, it was noon. All operations suddenly stopped and the men swarmed in from the fields for dinner. When all the teams pulled into our farmyard, you would have thought
we were having a fair at our house. Some men left
their horses hitched and used nose bags for feeding.
The more careful ones removed the harness and rubbed the
animals down with big handfuls of grass.

Mother and Mrs. Zimmers had been at work all
morning getting the meals ready. They had set three
tables end-to-end in the sitting room, covering them
with neatly overlapped cloths so that they looked like
one. All available chairs, including the piano stool,
and even boxes and kegs, were placed around the table.

For the great event, the ironstone china of
everyday use had been set aside in favor of mother's
prized moss rose Haviland set. And since there was not
enough of this to go around, mother supplemented it with
a set of brown willow-ware that Grandmother Wood had
brought long ago from Virginia. Some of the knives and
forks on the table had red strings tied around them; --
this was the borrowed silver.

When the men had taken care of their horses,
they took turns at the wash basins on the wooden bench
outside the kitchen. They soosed their heads in the cold
well water and scrubbed and arms to get rid of the
sweat and fine chaff. Then, after combing their wet
hair so that their heads were sleek and glistening, they
all went in to dinner.

Meantime, the long table had been loaded with
food for regiments: mountainous dishes of mashed potatoes, great platters of fried chicken, garden vegetables of all kinds, preserves and jellies and pickles in fabulous profusion.

All the crowd could not be seated at once, and the hired man and my brothers and I had to wait for second table. I went around to the front door and watched the men at the first table put away the dinner. Never had I seen food disappear so rapidly; it seemed to me there must be no bottoms to their stomachs. A half-dozen girls of the neighborhood had come in to serve for mother, and they fluttered about the table, replenishing the serving dishes and carrying on shy flirtations over bowls of potatoes and platters of chicken.

At last, the hungry men satisfied their appetites, rounding off the enormous meal with huge slabs of apple pie and chocolate cake. Then we had our chance at the second table, and I did my best to duplicate the performance of the threshers. But long before I got to the apple pie, I was so stuffed I couldn't eat another bite.

All afternoon the threshing machine puffed and roared in our west pasture and sounded its shrill whistle when the racks were slow in hauling the shocks from the fields. And the procession of wagons continued between the machine and the barn, heaping our
bins with the clean bright oats. At dusk, the last half-load of shocks was brought in. Then all hands stood by while the last of our grain dribbled from the separator.

Slim O'Donnell closed the throttle and stopped the great belt.

"Hey, there, Redwood," he shouted merrily. "How would you like to blow the whistle?"

Would I? I clambered up to the seat beside the operator so fast I skinned my shin. The engine was still hot and sweating from its long day's labor and the air was pungent with the smell of hot oil. I could not reach the whang which operated the whistle, even from the beam over the driver's seat, so O'Donnell lifted me up. I grasped the leather thong firmly and tugged.

"Schleep!" screamed the whistle, loudly enough to shake down the strawstack. I let go in fright.

"That'll never do," said O'Donnell, roaring with mirth. "Give her a real yank."

This time I pulled as if my life depended on it, and held on. And what a terrific blast it was that I sent screaming over the dusky countryside!

Neighbor women, hearing it, knew that the Wood's threshing was over, and that tired and
hungry husbands would soon be home for supper.

II

Aunt Sarah Wood's voice droned on, stern and unbending like all things about her. Its monotony made every sentence she read sound like the minutes of the Presbyterian Ladies' Aid society.

I was perched on a big straight-backed chair, facing her, my legs dangling an uncomfortable half-way to the floor. The course of the story had long since escaped me. I watched the antics of a fly, looked out of the window, or studied Aunt Sarah's countenance.

At the moment, I was wondering how she could close her eyes at night — so tightly was her hair combed to her head. Her hair was dead-black and she wore it parted austere in the middle so that it framed the long pale oval of her face with mourning. Her expression was stiff and humorless, with long nose and chin and thin lips.

Dick turned his face to Torpenhow, she read, and raised his hand to set his helmet straight, but, miscalculating the distance, knocked it off. Torpenhow saw that his hair was gray on his temples, and that his face was the face of an old man...

I could hear a yellowhammer making his nervous, whirring song: in a tree outside and wished that I was over
in Grandmother Wood's orchard, the edge of which I could see under the drawn window blind. I was far too young to appreciate literature dealing with love or tragedy, or even adventure of any subtlety. Mr. Kipling's "The Light that Failed" was lost on me.

His luck, Aunt Sarah read on, had held to the last, even to the crowning mercy of a kindly bullet through his head.

Torpenhow knelt under the lee of the camel with Dick's body in his arms.

She sighed a deep sigh and closed the book primly.

"If I had known it was going to end so sad," she said, pecking at her cold eyes with a handkerchief, "I'd never have bought the book!"

As far as I was concerned, any ending was a good one.

"May I go out and play now, Aunt Sally?" I asked eagerly. She nodded and within the minute, I was outside in the sunlight, running towards the orchard.

The fact that I was too young to understand what she read to me did not seem to discourage Aunt Sarah, for despite her Quaker upbringing, she was a determinedly literary woman. No book of Laura Jean Libbey or Gene Stratton Porter had escaped her, and she had even tried her own hand at writing. In fact, the
heart-heavy romances and poems she contributed to farm papers had gained her quite a reputation among the women of the region. When I went over to Grandmother Wood's to play in the orchard or the big hay-mow, there was always the danger that she might call me in for a reading session in the airless living room. Fortunately, this was not too often, for Aunt Sarah was a busy person. She had many social cares, such as being an officer in the Presbyterian Ladies' Aid, a worker in the Foreign Mission group and a daughter of the American Revolution. Her membership in the last-named organization shows her tenacity of purpose, for it must have been no small task to single a revolutionary fighter out of her Quaker ancestry.

Now that I was old enough to participate in the various social events of the neighborhood, it seemed to me that Aunt Sarah dominated nearly all of them. The two most important festivals of the year: the threshing and the county fair, were somewhat out of her jurisdiction. But over the strawberry festivals, church socials, and patriotic gatherings, the shadow of her grimly-corseted figure fell like that of a patron saint. That August, she herself held a church social that I remember as being one of the most impressive affairs I ever attended.

For the occasion, she had transformed Grandmother Wood's front yard into an exotic bower with
Japanese lanterns strung between the great pines and chairs and tables spread over the lawn. The tinted glow of the lanterns lighted up the flower garden with its neat rows of zinnias, petunias and verbens. And the lights were skilfully arranged to show off Aunt Sarah's too most highly prized garden ornaments: one, an arbor vitae tree, trimmed to resemble a huge rooster; and the other -- this was the masterpiece of the neighborhood -- a man-high cottonwood stump, completely covered with clam-shells nailed inside out so as to give the iridescence of mother-of-pearl.

Our family arrived at the affair early, since mother was to help with the final preparations. Already, various members of the "committee" were there, efficient ladies in starchy, ball-sleeved dresses with sweeping skirts. Daintily-aproned, they glided about the yard, arranging cakes and other delicacies and supervising the boys who were winding the handles of ice cream freezers.

Self-conscious in my Sunday clothes, and shy of all the strange people, I lurked in the shadows and waited for the guests to come. Soon, the buggies began to arrive, bringing the good Presbyterians from Anamosa and vicinity. Matrons hurried about, putting their babies to sleep and delivering baskets of food. Starry-eyed young beauties walked in the garden full of
shy glances and soft laughter. Gangling girls in pigtails took care of the very small children. Bashful adolescent boys and jolly older men, all uncomfortable in store clothes, gathered in little groups, joshing among themselves. Always the country people were a bit shy of those who had come from town.

Aunt Sarah's moment of supreme triumph came when the minister arrived.

"Why, the Lord bless you, Sister Wood," he said as he shook her hand. "This is beautiful. Your church social is the greatest event since Dewey took Manilla!"

After a while, the guests seated themselves on the folding chairs facing the front porch and Aunt Sarah gave the signal for the program to begin. A flustered young lady stood up on the porch, opened her mouth, and out rolled "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," accompanied by vigorous stabbing gestures. When this recitation was over (in what may have been record time), the audience applauded heavily and was rewarded with an encore, "Horatius at the Bridge." Then came music. The walnut parlor organ had been dragged outside, and to its accompaniment, various members of the church choir sang and an elbowy young man performed on the violin.

I was just beginning to get over my
self-consciousness and to have some fun, playing with the town kids, when Aunt Sarah drafted me into the hateful task of selling little bouquets of garden flowers. From then on, the evening was misery for me. My sales procedure, never very successful, was to advance within a few feet of the prospective customer and whisper in a trembling falsetto: "You don't want to buy some flowers, do you?"

-------

Ordinarily, Aunt Sarah would have been horrified at the thought of going to the theatre herself, let alone taking Frank and me with her. But this play was different.

"It's something every Christian ought to see, Maryville," she had said, and in the end, father had consented.

Thus it was that on a hot August evening, she and Frank and I sat in the opera house at Anamosa, waiting for a performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to begin.

The peculiar animation of the theatre crowd, the rococo interior of the opera house, the orchestra tuning up -- all this stirred up in me a strange excitement I had never before experienced. But most of all, I was fascinated by the stage; once I had set eyes on it, I could not look elsewhere. In front, two velvet
curtains parted to reveal a large picture, lovely beyond
description. It was a Venetian boating scene: moonlight
played upon the water, gondolas were silhouetted against
the sky, lovely ladies swooned in glamorous balconies.
It was framed in gilt, and around the outside was a
border of signs such as "Buy Your Groceries at Shaw
and Duttons" and "Eat Herrick's Pills." All in all, it
was the most gorgeous thing I had ever seen.

And behind this curtain . . . was the enchanted
world of make-believe, a world I little knew, but longed
for with immeasurable yearning.

Lights out, the play begins. Frank and I
forget the strange surroundings, the strange people; we
are swept away in the great human torrent of the
melodrama.

With her son in her arms, Eliza is fleeing . . .
the bloodhounds are baying at her heels . . . she is
at the river's edge . . . jump, girl, or be torn to
pieces! . . . one last backward look . . . she leaps! . . .
teeters perilously on an ice cake . . . gains her balance .
. . slowly drifts across . . . Saved!

Frank and I whoop as loudly as anyone in the
house.

And so the play goes on in thrills, laughter
and tears until at last, lovable old Uncle Tom falls
into the clutches of the vile Legree.
Twirling his moustache and laughing his devil's laugh, the fiend snaps the great blacksnake over the poor slave's back. Uncle Tom very obviously has a board in the seat of his pants, but that makes no difference to me; each cut of the whip is a cut into my soul.

Now, snarls Legree, he is going to kill Uncle Tom unless he tells... But Uncle Tom will never tell. He is not afraid to die. With a curse in his throat, Legree raises the great whip. He strikes -- with the butt of the whip! This is more than I can stand.

I jump up.

"You stop that!" I scream. "Stop it this minute, I say!"

Aunt Sarah jerks me down in the seat so hard my teeth rattle. A few in the audience guffaw. Most of the people scarcely notice. The players go on as if nothing had happened. In spite of me, Uncle Tom dies.

Now comes a wonderful scene. The space above the stage is suddenly flooded with pink clouds. In the midst of them is Little Eva. She is soaring upward. My mouth and eyes stretch wide open. I have always wondered about heaven -- at last I am to see it!

But suddenly Aunt Sarah bends over and hisses in my ear: "Come now, we must go." She grabs Frank
and me each by the arm and bundles us out of our seats
and up the aisle.

"Waaaa!" I bellow into the grief-hushed
darkness of the opera house. "I want to see heaven!
Waaaa!"

Aunt Sarah never explained why she jerked us
away from the gates of Paradise. As I have already
mentioned, her actions, like the weather, were decisive
but unaccountable.

III

We left mother and Baby Nan at the "art hall"
where the cookery and needlework exhibitions were being
held, and went out to make a tour of the fairgrounds.
Father led the way, with Jack clinging to one arm and
me to the other. Frank and Dave Peters brought up the
rear. Although it was early morning, the crowds were
already swarming among the stands and sideshow tents, and
the sun was steaming down without mercy through clouds
of hot dust. The fair was bedlam spread out over four
acres. A merry-go-round piped and thumped gaily; hawkers
were shouting their wares: "Canes, balloons, fancy
whips! Take home a soo-veneer!" Barkers were howling
the wonders of sideshows, peanut roasters were chugging.
The good-natured crowd rippled with loud talk and laughter.
And above all other sounds, the morning was punctured by
the strident baa-a-a's of balloon squawkers, inflated
from the lungs of hundreds of Jones county children.

Jack and I bobbed around at the ends of father's arms like game fish on lines. We passed a shooting gallery; a machine whipping pink webs of cotton candy; a fortune teller's tent. We paused a moment before a big peanut and drink stand, waiting for Dave and Frank to catch up with us. Great scoopfuls of peanuts were turning in the roaster and the air was rich with the exotic smell of their roasting. I looked yearningly at the sacks of snowy popcorn in the glass case of the machine, then at the round bowls of pink lemonade and the tall glasses standing wetly on the counter, surrounded by clouds of flies. Father had given each of us two nickels, and in the face of temptation, I put my hand in my pocket and clutched my wealth tightly.

Progress was slow because every few steps father had to stop to talk to some neighbor. It seemed as if everyone we knew was here. We had already seen the Abbotts, the Welches and the Flynns, and here was old Adalph Schmidt waddling up to father now and wanting to know: "Vood, how iss tings by you?"

We brushed past a man who had a great bouquet of colored balloons and squawkers, passed a pea and walnut shell game, and paused in front of a stand where a tall, evil-looking man in a checkered suit and derby hat was exhorting a handful of spectators to try his
gaming device.

"Right this way, folks," he whined, flashing his gold teeth in a lecherous grin. "Only ten cents, a dime. A child could do it. A child could win. Take your luck on the Golden Wheel."

The crowd around the stand was slowly increasing, but as yet, no one would venture to play the wheel. They stood about, listening to the Barker's talk with good-humored skepticism. We were in front and were pressed more and more tightly to the counter as the crowd grew.

"Tell you what I'm going to do, folks. To show you that this game is absolutely fair and that any of you may be the winner, I am going to let one of you play the Golden Wheel free!"

The crowd moved in closer.

"Now, Governor," said Gold-Tooth, pointing a nicotined finger at father. "I want you to have a play on me. Just pick your lucky number. What'll you take?"

All eyes turned to father, tall and dignified in his dark Sunday clothes.

"Thirteen," he said, somewhat sheepishly.

"Thirteen is the gentleman's number! Now ladies and gents, keep your eyes on the Golden Wheel."

Around it spun in a whirl of gaudy colors, then slowed down, clicking the paddles deliberately: 9, 10, 11, 12 -- 13!
The crowd gasped.

"A winnah! A winnah! cried Gold-Teeth.

"Good for five dollars. Hear that folks? Five dollars! My friend, I congratulate you. There, you see how easy it is? One spin of the wheel and the gent wins five dollars."

He grinned evilly, then affected a broken heart as he stacked five silver dollars on the counter in front of father.

"There you are, Governor. I sure hate to do this but you won it fair and square. Five silver dollars. All with one spin of the Golden Wheel! 'nd it didn't cost you a cent."

Father smiled with slow, good-natured contempt and pushed the silver dollars back.

"I don't want your money," he said quietly. With this, he turned away and herded Jack and me through the crowd. The last I saw of Gold-Teeth, he was standing motionless in front of his wheel, his evil mouth hanging wide open. As we went on down the midway, we could hear the surprised murmur of the crowd. Tears came to my eyes as I thought of that neat pile of silver dollars, but I did not dare question father's decision.

We passed the gilt whirl of the merry-go-round and stopped in front of a cluster of side-shows. I was greatly impressed by the big, gaudy paintings strung
up outside the tents to advertise the freak attractions. Emma Huge was shown, peering out squint-eyed from her 500 pounds of fat; Professor Bilbo, the sword-swallower, was caught in the act of eating his steely breakfast; Juanita, the world's most famous snake-charmer, was pictured, wreathed in her Sunday serpents.

As we were admiring these lurid effigies, Dave Peters edged over to father, scowling mysteriously. "I got to see a feller," he muttered. "Business. May take a long time; then agin it may not."

"All right, Dave," said father. "You know where our table is at the picnic grounds. You can meet us there at noon, or if you're still busy, we'll see you at the wagon after the main show's over this afternoon."

The hired man turned and hurried back through the crowd with that crazy, stumbling gait that was half walk and half run. I stared after him. It seemed to me that he was headed back to the Golden Wheel, but I couldn't be sure.

With incredible patience, father conducted us over every part of the fairgrounds. After we had looked over all the stands and sideshows and invested in a sack of peanuts apiece, he took us over to the livestock pavilion. There, prize-winning Poland China hogs were being exhibited, Holstein cattle and Shorthorns, enormous Percheron stallions, and finely bred Hampshire
sheep. Father gravely inspected each exhibit, asking questions from time to time of the others. Meanwhile, my brothers and I hung about restlessly. So far as we were concerned, this championship livestock was not a bit better than our farm animals at home. We craved the glamor of sword-swallowers and the music of balloon squawkers.

At noon, we went back to the art hall to get mother and the baby. I remember how mother hurried down the aisle between the exhibits to meet us. She was carrying Nan, and looked very young and pretty in her Sunday hat.

I thought you'd never come," she said to father, her eyes shining. "You can't guess what I have to show you."

"Why, Hattie," father said. "I knew your grape jelly would win a blue ribbon."

"And the fancywork, too," said mother, blushing.

---

In the grandstand that afternoon, sat a majority of the able-bodied population of Jones county, perspiring, fanning themselves, and trying to calm restless children. A steady breeze was blowing in from the west, but it was like the breath from a blacksmith's forge and provided no relief for the sweltering audience.
Father and my brothers and I had arrived at the beginning of the program, and we had watched as attentively as the heat permitted, the trotting races, the livestock parade, and the various clown and tight-rope acts. All of these had been interesting, but they were only preliminary attractions. Now we were to see the main feature of the afternoon, the most thrilling single event of the entire fair -- the balloon ascension.

Down in the grassy oval inside the race track, a crew of men were at work preparing for the inflation of the balloon. The great bag lay inert on the ground -- an enormous, gray-black mass of cloth. Near it was a long, metal ridge with a smokestack at one end. And over the stack were placed two very long poles, braced together in the form of an inverted "V."

It was hard to see what the men were doing because of the crowd of spectators who had climbed the fences and were standing about in a circle, watching the preparations at close hand. Frank and Jack and I kept up a continual stream of questions, and father did his best to answer them all.

A long trench had been dug, he told us, and this had been filled with firewood and covered with iron roofing. The roofing was the long metallic ridge we saw. At one end of this trench, an iron flue about the size of a small barrel had been installed, and the
other end had been left open.

Now we could see for ourselves the purpose of the tall, inverted "V." The men were hoisting the limp balloon by means of pulleys to the top of the poles. When it was up, it hung there, flopping in the breeze like an enormous peaked tent. A crew of six or eight held the folds of the cloth, keeping them away from the fire trench, and one man pressed the mouth of the great bag over the flue.

At the same time, we could see flames leap up at the other end of the trench where a fire had been started. All eyes were fixed intently on the balloon now. For some time, nothing seemed to happen; then the cloth began to swell out slowly, and as it did, the men who were holding the bag fed it gradually upward. Bigger and bigger grew the balloon and harder to manage in the breeze. Now and then we could see a glow lighten through the dark silk of the bag from the interior when the fire leaped up from the flue. Finally, the balloon pushed off from the long poles, and the men who had been holding the folds of cloth now took hold of the guy ropes. Officials were busy forcing the crowd out of danger.

"Pa, where's the balloon man?" asked Frank.

"I don't know, son, unless that's the man over to the right of the balloon." Father pointed to a man in overalls who had been directing the preparations
for the ascension. He was busy now straightening out the various ropes of the parachute and trapeze rigging that were stretched out on the ground to the right of the trench.

No, that couldn't be the performer. Surely, so great a personage as a balloon jumper wouldn't wear common overalls.

Even as we were assuring ourselves of this, the mystery was solved. The man withdrew to the edge of the crowd and quickly peeled off his outer garments. And there he stood -- a slim, athletic daredevil in black tights and a red waist glittering with silver spangles. The grandstand cheered him wildly.

The balloon was a huge black gourd over the arena now, tugging so hard with the wind that the men holding the guy ropes could hardly control it. The balloonist strutted out in front of the crowd to make his last bow. To the gentlemen he waved his hand gaily, to the ladies he blew a kiss. It was the adieu of a brave man who departs light-heartedly on a journey from which he may never return.

Suddenly, the men let go of the ropes and the great bag angled upward to the east. The crowd in the arena parted before its swoop like scared sheep. Horses hitched at the edge of the fairgrounds began to whinny and jerk their heads upward in terror.
ascensionist, running swiftly to keep from being dragged, was lifted into the air. He held to the trapeze with one hand and waved the other gallantly at the audience.

The balloon steadied and floated out to the southeast towards the Cheshire hill. Boys outside the fences scurried like ants in the direction of the flight. Higher and higher sailed the balloon. Now it was a dark bubble in the clear sky and the man a tiny drop hanging from it.

In the stands a great cry: He's jumping!

The black speck shot down through space, the parachute rigging streaming after him. Then the miracle. The parachute blossomed out like a white flower in the sky. It rocked a little, then steadied, and the daredevil wafted slowly downward.

The balloon, released of its passenger's weight, now turned over on its side. In another minute, it had turned completely over and was slipping down, leaving a trail of smoke in its wake. It deflated rapidly as it fell and finally became a mass of heavy cloth, dropping into some farmer's cornfield.

As we were coming out of the grandstand gates, we passed an Indian medicine show. On the back of the wagon, a squat, dingy-faced Indian woman was beating a tom-tom. A dark little man in a plug hat stood beside her, holding up a bottle for the crowd to
see. Apparently, he was about to make a speech.

"Look, pa," said Frank excitedly. "There's Dave Peters!"

We all looked just in time to see the hired man climb up on the back of the wagon. He brushed off his trousers, then stood up stiffly, his hat pressed against his bosom, his sharp eyes looking proudly out over the crowd.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the little medicine man shouted, with a foreign accent, difficult to understand. "It is with the greatest pleasure that I introduce to you the gentleman who will be your local agent for Dr. Alverdi's Famous Pain-Killer. He will have a supply of this celebrated elixir for you at all times and you can obtain it from him at the same reasonable price of fifty cents. Ladies and Gentlemen, I introduce to you -- Mr. David Zephaniah Peters!"

IV

October days were like symphonies in my blood: symphonies of sound and smell and dripping color. The days were full of bird song again after the long heat silences of August and September, and the nights were hushed with the mystery of falling leaves. On every hand lay the ripe fruits of the harvest; the clear air was flavored with their fragrance. The sky deepened into a ripe blue that seemed darker than the
grass on the bleached prairie. Patches of scarlet sumac flamed along the roadside, and the woodlands glowed with purples, violets, reds, oranges, salmons, yellows—flowing through the month from dark to bright like the colors in the morning sky. All the pigments of the landscape were blended in the last great display of the year. October was the long sunrise of Indian summer.

Far away, a voice. Then again and closer—not a voice out of dreams, but mother calling Jack and me: "Get up, sleepyheads, do you want to be late for school?"

Bright sunlight streamed into my face. As I lay in the warm bed, rubbing my eyes, I could hear the pigeons thrashing about on the roof, then subsiding with low, sobbing coos. A bluejay was scolding in the plum tree outside the window, and when he stopped, I could hear the small-talk of the robins, as cheery and contented as the voices of children at play.

The white-yellow edge of the sun was emerging from a ruddy glow in the east when I slipped out of bed. From the farmyard came the muffled thunder of hoofs and a dog's barking, and I knew that Dave Peters was driving the cows out to pasture. These October mornings were sharp; goose pimples appeared quickly on my arms and legs.
Jack was curled up with his arms over his face, snuggled in the warm luxury of sleep. It seemed a shame to wake him. I leaned across the bed and shook him by the shoulder. He turned over, mumbling incoherent, childish protest, and finally blinking his eyes.

I could smell the aromas of coffee and frying mush as I hurried downstairs to dress by the warmth of the living room stove. When I stepped into the kitchen, mother was at the range and Frank was getting up from the table to leave. He went to high school in Anamosa now, and early each morning rode into town on horseback. Baby Nan was cooing to herself in her cradle over by the kitchen window.

"Will you fetch a pail of water, please, before you sit down?" mother asked.

Sunlight was filtering through the trees, making yellow pools in the farmyard when I went outside. The sting of the wet, cold grass on my warm feet made me step gingerly. Father was out beside the barn, hitching up a team to the wagon. As I returned from the pump, I breathed deeply the wine-fragrance of the ripe grapes in the arbor along the west fence. Jack was at the table when I returned with the water, and the two of us ate hungrily of savory fried mush and thick molasses, eggs, and graham gems covered with sugar and cream.
A few minutes later, we were swinging down the road to Cottonwood school. The Indians had pitched their villages again; cornfields on either side of the road were dotted with the brown wigwams of fodder. The air was perfumed with the fruity odor of wild crabapples and plums, ripening in the copses along the fence row. No sign of a cloud cluttered the ultramarine sky, but a blue atmospheric haze lay over the horizon and gave the illusion of distant, mist-enveloped mountain ranges.

Long, filmy streamers of cobweb hung in the air and the milkweed pods had burst, sending their seed parachutes floating over the meadows.

Jack was loitering behind. I turned just in time.

"Here, spit those out -- poison!" I cried sharply. He had picked a cluster of the maroon sumac berries and was stuffing them greedily into his mouth.

We arrived at school as the last bell was ringing, and left the brown fields and sunshine to enter the severe little room with its smell of chalk, books and soured slate rags. Geography and arithmetic were tiresome these mellow days. Most of the while, I sat covering my slate and book-margins with pictures, or just daydreaming. The only time I fully awakened was when the teacher let me borrow the copy of Wood's *Natural History* from the little library shelf behind her desk. In this
book were fascinating pictures of zebras, lions, and hippopotamuses that I tried to copy on my slate.

At noon Jack and I had our lunch out of the lard pail I had carried to school that morning: sandwiches of home-made bread with fillings of raspberry jam which oozed through the bread and made it a brilliant magenta; peeled hard-boiled eggs, soon spotted with the prints of dirty fingers; and a piece of apple pie. We ate hurriedly; then joined the other children in strenuous games of Pomp Pom Pullaway and Ante High Over.

The taste of the outdoors during the noon hour completed my ruin for the rest of the school day. I drowsed during the long, hot afternoon, longingly impatiently for dismissal time. Through the open windows, I watched the purple grackles flock into the schoolyard in black waves, awakening the countryside with their loud clacking. I wondered vaguely whence came these white-eyed, jewel-feathered birds that stopped for a few hours each autumn and spring and then disappeared. Lazily I hoped that a gray field mouse, seeking winter quarters, might venture into the room and send the teacher and little girls climbing to the tops of their desks. My mind wandered away to a nearby cornfield where crows were cawing raucously, and I was startled momentarily out of my daydreams by the loud riveting of a woodpecker on the roof.
Finally, the teacher jingled the desk bell for dismissal. Free! Joyfully I ran outdoors and up the road, shouting back to my brother to hurry. From the meadows I could hear the clear tinkle of the baby meadow-larks, trying to imitate the notes of their parents. I kept my eyes on a landmark straight ahead as I ran, a maple tree in our farmyard whose leaves had turned a bright yellow. The afternoon sun had kindled this tree into a globular flame, like a haystack burning amid the dark evergreens.

A field length away from the farmhouse, in the lee of the hill, Jack and I could smell the spicy odors of pickling. The fragrance became sweeter with each step until we reached its source in our kitchen.

When we came in the back door, canning was done for the day and mother was putting the spices back in the cupboard. Jars of varicolored fruits and preserves were cooling, tops down on the table.

Mother looked tired and her face was streaked with perspiration.

"You're just in time, Grant," she said, smiling. "Will you please carry these jars down cellar?"

Mother knew this was a job I liked. I begged some cloves and stick cinnamon for Jack and myself, then went about my task. Filling a basket with the full jars, I carefully descended the steep cellar stairs.
The outside cellar door was open and the slanting rays of the afternoon sun were falling directly through the opening. One side of the moist cellar was flooded with bright sunshine. Now for my favorite ceremony. In the jars of preserves, glowing with warm light, were colors infinite in variety and richness. I arranged them on the shelves with care:

The blue green of stuffed, bull-nosed peppers; light greenish yellow of gooseberries and currants; pale yellow of pears; warmer yellow of apple jelly (each glass with a leaf of rose geranium on the top to give it flavor); the richer yellow of spiced Siberian crabapples; brownish yellow apple butter and ground cherry preserves; yellow plums with a slight orange tint; great two quart jars of orange-tinted peaches; the red-orange of wild plums; the flecked vermilion of tomatoes; the crimson of strawberries and raspberries; the deeper red of blackberries; red violet of loganberries and pickled beets; the blues and purples of tame plums, given variety and depth with grapes; the varied greens of cucumber pickles, watermelon pickles, piccalilli, green tomato pickles, chow-chow, bread-and-butter pickles; and moss-green dills covered with grape leaves.
When I had finished, I turned from this outlay of gorgeous, liquid colors to the raw fruits and vegetables that were heaped in bins adjoining the fruit shelves. There were heaps of bright orange carrots; white turnips with purple at the stems; purple beets; tan parsnips; soil-colored Irish potatoes; heavy, green cabbages; brownish red onions; and massive dark-green Hubbard squashes, covered with knobs and armored like rhinoceroses.

Near the cyclone compartment lay a glowing heap of pumpkins and beyond that, barrels of apples: brown russets; greenish Baldwins splashed with red; yellow Pippins; deep maroon Jonathans; Greenings; dark red Ganos and Ben Davises; scarlet wealthies; and yellowish, crimson-cheeked Iowa blushes. Two barrels, one of molasses and the other of cider, stood in the corner, guarding the fruit like somber sentinels.

The cellar air was crowded with the ripe odors of the various fruits and vegetables, mingled with the good, firm smell of sunwashed earth.

By the time the early farm supper was ready, my appetite was keen. I ate swiftly with a healthy, animal appreciation for every taste — potatoes, fried brown and crisp; roast pork that crumbled beneath the carving knife; garden vegetables; and thick slices of
moist, yeasty bread coated with yellow butter. While we were eating, the kitchen was lighted up by the glory of the sunset. The autumn haze had become an iridescent veil in the west and the sun was a huge ball of fire slipping down slowly into a sea of gold and amber. Then it was gone and only a patch of borrowed flame remained in the sky.

When we had finished supper, the farmyard was misty with twilight. The rhythmic see-saw of the windmill dipped into the air already vibrant with the sad, thinned-out fiddling of the insects. Walking out to the barn to tend to my evening chores, I could hear the tinkle of cowbells out in the pastures. Frank had already gone to drive the herd in.

The dusk of the big barn was alive with a strange mixture of odors: the ammonia smell of the stables, the grainy smell of hay, and the mealy scent of shorts and middlings and millet. I paused an uneasy moment before going up the ladder into the haymow. In the loft lurked enormous yellow and black spiders brought in with the hay and not yet killed by the frosts. Thistles were also mixed with the hay and could cause painful wounds to bare feet.

I was aroused by the sound of hoofs, the sudden loud clank of cowbells, and deep mooing, as the cows came into the farmyard. As usual, I was dawdling
over my chores. I started quickly up the ladder to the mow. Up through the loft floor I climbed and through the long, choking-dark tunnel in the hay. Heads of timothy hung out and dropped down my neck. As I sprang from the ladder to the sloping top of the hay, I felt a stab of fear lest I slip and fall headlong through the dark opening. Hurriedly, I pitched down enough hay for the horses. I descended cautiously to the loft level, then jumped away from the ladder and plunged down to light with a cushioned impact on the heap of hay I had thrown to the floor. I stretched out for a moment on the sweet-smelling bed, and a feeling of ineffable contentment and drowsiness flowed over me. A medley of sounds lulled my thickened senses: the regular crunching of the horses and the occasional thump of a hoof on the wooden floor; the soft mooing of the cows outside, waiting to be milked; the complaining grunts and squeals from the nearby hog-pen; and the barking of a dog in the distance.

Sleepily I got up and went about my task of filling the mangers with hay. When I had finished, I went outside to help with the milking. The cool night air cleared my head. "As I put a pail of feed down in front of one of the cows, preparatory to milking her, I could smell her warm, grain-milk breath. I balanced myself on the stool, clamping the big milk-pail between my knees with difficulty. The teats of the cow
were warm and comforting to the touch in the chill evening, and it was pleasant to hear the whine of the milk stream as it struck the bottom of the empty pail.

The harvest moon, a jumbo, pumpkin-colored disc, was appearing over the purple skyline to the east when I plodded into the farmhouse, every sense numb with delicious exhaustion. If I could only go to bed now! But from the living room, my mother was calling: "Be sure to wash your feet, son."

The water heated on the kitchen range for dishwashing had long since cooled. Sleepily, I went to the sink and pumped the wash-basin full of leafy-smelling water from the cold cistern. I dipped my warm feet into the icy water for a cruel instant. Then I wiped them, passing tenderly over the stone-bruises and especially the raw little cracks between the toes, caused by sharp granules of sand.

In front of the living room stove, I slipped out of my clothes and into my nightshirt. Then, with mother's kiss on my cheek, I shuffled wearily upstairs to bed. In the bedroom, hard, yellowish moonlight was streaming through the east window; the little wooden rocking chair in front of my bed made a soft shadow on the rag rug. The air was brittle-cold and tense with the unmistakable premonition of winter. Jack was already in bed, breathing evenly in sound sleep.
I knelt, shivering, at the bedside.

"Our Father Who art in Heaven . . . "

The prayer started in a sing-song and gradually wandered into a sleepy whine like a gramaphone running down.

". . . the kingdom and the power and the glory forever Amen."

I climbed between the cool sheets and lay there for a moment, thinking no thought, stirring no muscle. I was completely resolved in a great rhythm in which there was no yesterday or tomorrow, only one mysterious flow. The sheets had a clean, earthy smell from having been recently washed and dried on the grass, and the touch of the blankets was rough and firm beneath my chin. Outside, the wind stirred in the spruce trees.
Once a week, except in the most extreme weather, father drove to Anamosa to get the mail. His return from these trips always caused a little flurry of excitement in the household, although the mail seldom consisted of more than the Anamosa Bureka and perhaps one of the magazines to which father subscribed. Once in a while mother heard from Uncle Frank Weaver of Omaha, or father received a solemn epistle from his Quaker cousins in Virginia, but these occasions were very rare. And so far as I know, Dave Peters had never received a bit of mail since he had been working for us -- that is, until the mysterious letter arrived.

It was in late October that he received this letter; I remember very well the evening it came. Father drove in at dusk, and Dave and I hurried out in the yard to help him unhitch the horses.

"Guess I'm a little late tonight," father said as he climbed down. "Here, Dave, here's something for you."

He handed the hired man a long bulky envelope. Dave took it hesitantly and stood blinking at it a few moments in mute unbelief. Then all at once,
he turned and went like a streak across the farmyard and into the house.

He was not at the table when father and I came in to supper. He had gone straight up to his cold bedroom without eating. When I went to bed that night, his door was ajar, and I could see him hunched over his dresser, a column of fog rising from his whiskered lips as he spelled out the words of the letter.

The next evening, I was drawing in my favorite place under the table in the kitchen, and mother was preparing supper, when father came in the back door and said:

"What do you think, mother -- Dave Peters is leaving us!"

I stopped my drawing.

"What's that?" said mother in a shocked voice. "Why, has anything happened -- was that letter some bad news?"

"No, I don't think so. He didn't say what the letter was about. But whatever it was, it made him decide to do something he's been figuring on for a long time. He says he's going back to Cairo, Illinois, to get a job on the river."

"Oh pshaw!" Mother seemed greatly relieved. "He's always talking about going somewhere. Remember how he went on about going to the Klondike that time?"
But he never made a move to go."

Father sat down beside the stove.

"This time, I'm pretty sure he means it."

Mother shook her head slowly.

"I'd about as soon believe you were leaving, yourself. Did he say when he is planning to go?"

"After corn-picking."

Dave Peters leaving?

My brothers and I talked it over and decided that it was impossible.

Who was to cut willow whistles for us in the spring, if the hired man went away? Who was to make us toy windmills, and paddle boats to sail in the horse tank? And figure-four box traps for catching wild rabbits? Ever since we could remember, the hired man had been doing that sort of thing for us. He would make us almost anything we wanted, and when he had finished, he would go striding away, muttering to himself, as if offended by our efforts to thank him.

If Dave Peters went, who would tell us stories about Indians, buffalo hunting, and dark adventure on the great river? The hired man couldn't go away. You might as well say the sun wasn't going to rise the next morning.

Still, father seemed to be convinced.
"I do hate to see him go," I heard him tell mother. "In spite of his grumbling and tall stories, I don't think I could find a better man anywhere. Besides, he seems to belong here."

"He's always been real good about doing things for me, too," mother said. "Even though he sometimes gets me mad... But I don't think he's really going. I'll believe it when I see it."

Such conjecture was carried on strictly within the family. As usual, the hired man was non-committal and mysterious about his plans, and father warned my brothers and me not to bother him with questions. Only once did I disobey this order.

One afternoon when I came home from school, I found Dave sitting on the back stoop, his long, grotesque figure outlined against the thick glowing colors of the fall sunset. He was carving husking pegs -- small pointed sticks the men strapped to their palms in corn-picking for ripping the husks open.

I sat down beside him for a while and watched.

"Dave," I asked suddenly, "Are you going away?"

He blinked at me in mild surprise.

"Why, I reckon," he said gruffly.

"When are you coming back?"

He didn't answer this, but only went on with his work, scowling in silence at his nimble blade.
But Dave Peters did not go when he had planned. For right in the midst of corn husking, father was taken sick with a severe attack of asthma. He had been subject to the disease for years, but this was the worst attack he had ever had. I heard mother telling Grandmother Weaver about it later -- how he awoke after midnight, gasping for breath, sprang out of bed and ran to the open window. All through the night he struggled for air, his face as pale as a ghost's and the veins of his forehead standing out in purple cords.

On top of the asthma, he contracted a bad case of the grippe and this combination laid him up for three weeks or more. During that time, Dave Peters took charge of the farmwork and said nothing more about leaving. He finished the husking, got the corn stored for winter, and finished up the last of the fall plowing.

Frank and I helped as much as we could and I remember that during these weeks, Dave Peters taught me a great deal about farm processes. Most jobs around a farm, one learns gradually and cannot definitely say just when he did start doing them. But apparently Dave decided I was hold enough to handle a man's share of the chores now. He showed me how to do many new things and took great pains to see that every move I made was exactly right. When I was milking a cow, or pitching manure, he watched me like a hawk.
"Ye can't pitch right, just usin' your arms!" he would snarl. "Use all your weight. You can lift twice as much and it ain't only half the work."

He instructed me how to hitch up a team, although I was too small to get the heavy harness on the horses alone. When I asked him why you had to warm the bit by blowing on it before putting it in the horse's mouth, he was eloquent in his disgust.

"Don't ye remember how it felt that winter when ye got your tongue stuck to the window pane?" he growled.

---

At last father was able to be about again, and the hired man spoke once more about leaving.

"We've been hoping you would change your mind about going," father told him. "But we want you to do what seems best to you. When you're ready to go, I'll drive you in to Anamosa."

Having declared for a second time his intention of leaving, Dave seemed a little lost and wistful about it. Nonetheless, he began to prepare for his departure in earnest. Evenings he spent in the frosty privacy of his room, packing his clothes and sorting out the odds and ends that he had treasured in the pine chest in his closet. He finished a hardwood teething ring he had been carving for Nan, and divided among my brothers and me some arrowheads and pieces of
buffalo horn he had picked up over a period of years. But for all his mysterious preparations, he didn't leave, and as the days passed, we began to wonder if he hadn't changed his mind.

Sunday morning came and all the family got ready to go to church. But when father called Dave, the hired man replied that he wasn't going this morning.

"Goodness," said mother, "I wonder what's come over that man. This is the first time he hasn't gone to church with us since he's been here.

That noon, when we returned from Anamosa, we discovered the reason. Dave Peters had left!

"Walked all the way into town in this cold wind!" father said, shaking his head, perplexedly.

"-- with that heavy suitcase too!"

"Look," said Frank, "he left something here on the table."

On the dining table in the kitchen lay a package, wrapped in old newspaper. "Mrs. Wood" was written on the outside in the hired man's clumsy scrawl.

Mother unwrapped the package and inside she found a small book, bound in worn, brown plush.

"Why," she said, "it's the Bible he reads every night. . . . He ought not to have done this."

Jack and I cried, and everyone else was
solemn and depressed. Dinner was a gloomy affair, with scarcely a word spoken. We missed the hired man's crabbed, eccentric silence. There was a tonic quality to his bitterness, and the atmosphere of the house lacked savor without it.

"Well," said mother, trying to cheer us up. "Perhaps Dave Peters will come back in the spring."

But we all knew in our hearts that he wouldn't.

II

We prepared for the holidays with a special enthusiasm that year for it was to be Baby Nan's first Christmas. "We'll need an extra good tree," father said, and though he was not well, he made a long trip to the Wapsie valley where he cut a young cedar to set up in our living room. When he was not occupied with farm chores, he could be found in the barn, doing carpenter work about which he kept a strict secrecy. Mother began to get good things together for the holiday dinner, and in every spare moment, she sewed like a woman possessed. During the two days before Christmas, we all had a hand in decorating the tree with candles, popcorn, cranberries, and cotton batting.

It looked as if we were in for a drab Christmas as far as the weather was concerned. The 24th was cold and cheerless, with the sun a pale smear in the sky and
the land partially covered by a layer of drab, greyish snow. But Christmas eve, it became much warmer, and in the dusk, the snow began to fall. Swiftly and silently, the cotton flakes came down like a pale army in the night, changing the world completely.

After supper, the family gathered in the living room where we turned down the lamps and lighted the candles on the tree. It was even more beautiful than we had dared hope -- a tall, snowy pyramid, glittering with candles and ornaments and crowned by a silver star. We all felt a warm glow of pride in our handiwork. Mother brought the baby out to see the tree, and Nan gurgled in what we took to be approval. Frank and Jack and I were so excited that we spent most of the evening putting on our mackinaws and running outdoors to see how the tree looked from the yard. Outside, the sight was unforgettable; the newly fallen snow caught the brilliance of the candles and sparkled like drifts of diamond dust.

We would not be able to go to church in the morning, so after our first thrill over the Christmas tree had somewhat calmed, father read to us from Saint Luke.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.

Father read the chapter slowly and gravely, as one in whom reverence is a deep, intuitive thing and
faith is the dignity of life itself. We children sat at his feet to listen and the silence of the country night became alive for us with the mystery of the first Christmas.

When we were ready for bed, my brothers and I hung our stockings above the stove, and mother put up a tiny one for the baby. As I went to sleep, I was wondering uneasily if Santa Claus would have trouble getting down the chimney and through our stove.

Next thing I knew, it was morning. I was awakened by Jack who pulled my hair and screamed "Merry Christmas" in my ear. I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs after my brothers to see what Santa had brought us.

He had been there, all right. In each of our stockings was a pink mosquito netting bag full of striped hard candy, a wooden toy, and -- most exotic and exciting of all -- an orange! My toy was a small battleship with the word "Maine" painted on the bow. In the baby's little sock were a rattle and a silver spoon with "Nancy" engraved in the bowl.

In addition to the gifts in the stockings, there was a home-made sled for Jack, a box of colored pencils for me, and a new pair of boots for Frank. Each of us had a few items of clothing too -- shirts that mother had made, and the red mittens Grandmother Weaver
knitted for us every year.

After breakfast, Frank and I hurried through the chores and cracked nuts for dinner. Then we went outside and played the rest of the morning in the new snow.

The climax of the day came at noon. For dinner, mother had roasted one of our big white turkeys and with it she served sage dressing, cranberry sauce, and all manner of delicious trimmings. Only one thing kept it from being a perfect Christmas. As we sat down at the table, I think we were all wishing that Dave Peters were there with us.

Christmas had been the hired man's favorite day. He would always have presents for the entire family -- slingshots for my brothers and me, and some little items bought in Anamosa for mother and father. He would enjoy with great relish the Christmas tree, the big dinner, and the glow of family affection that was warmest on this day. And after dinner, he would invariably go into the parlor, removing his felt boots reverently before entering. There he would spend the afternoon, looking contentedly at the tintypes in the plush album and the colored engravings in the big family Bible.

Father elaborated on his usual grace a little, asking the Lord, among other things, to "bless Dave Peters, wherever he is, and make him happy this
Christmas." That made us all feel better.

Dessert was thick mince pie. Then, to round off the big dinner, mother brought out the bowl of nuts Frank and I had cracked that morning. There were black walnuts, butternuts, and hickory nuts, gathered in the woods the preceding fall, and, as a special treat for the occasion, a few English walnuts father had bought in Anamosa.

Grandfather and Grandmother Weaver had planned to drive out, but we knew they would not come, for the roads were too snowy for a wagon and not packed enough for a sleigh. In the afternoon, however, Aunt Sarah came wading over in Uncle Eugene's felt boots. My brothers and I staged a program for the grown-ups. Under Frank's direction, we sang a mournful ditty about how grandfather went to heaven and had no end of trouble because no one was there to find his spectacles for him. Then Jack, with the benefit of considerable prompting from mother and Aunt Sarah, recited "The Night Before Christmas." As the final number on the program, we gave an original melodrama in which Frank was General Custer, and Jack and I were redskins. My most important duty in this play, I remember, was to end Custer's last stand by popping a paper sack.

Father especially seemed to get a deep pleasure out of all this. Throughout the afternoon, he sat
contentedly by the stove, moving only when the fire needed 
wood. When the baby woke up from her nap and was brought 
out in the sitting room, he took her up and she went 
back to sleep in his arms.

But in the evening when the family was 
sitting around the fire eating popcorn, father began to 
get restless.

"I feel a little stuffy, mother," he said. 
"Guess I'll go outdoors for a while."

He stayed outside for a long time, walking 
slowly back and forth in the snow. When mother kissed 
me good night, I saw there was a worried look in 
her eyes.

III

During the winter, father was kept indoors 
more and more frequently with attacks of asthma. 
Finally mother persuaded him to go to a doctor in 
Anamosa for a physical examination. Dr. Perkins said 
something about heart trouble, gave him some medicine, 
and cautioned him severely about overwork.

"Why don't you take a two weeks' rest, 
Maryville," mother urged. "Jim Flynn will come over to 
help the boys with the chores if they need it, and by 
the end of two weeks, you'll feel a sight better."

Father said he would think it over, and looked 
at her as if to say: "Hattie, you're a good wife, but
this is one of those things you don't understand very well." He went on working as he had always worked.

People remarked how haggard he was looking. With the bluntness of country folk, they seemed eager to tell him so. Mother became furious at Aunt Sarah because her manner of greeting father these days was invariably: "Well, I declare, Maryville, you look more poorly every time I see you." Father only smiled at such remarks and said he guessed he felt about the same as ever.

Mother was very worried about him. Often when he was outside longer than she expected him to be, she sent me to see what he was doing. This seemed strange because she had always accepted everything father did without question. Even now, worried as she was, she did not nag at him. But as she went about her work, she quietly watched his every move, holding back until she could stand it no longer. Then she would scold him — all the more severely because she was a little frightened at doing it. Father was amused at these outbursts that seemed so out of character for mother. He listened patiently but never took them seriously.

Where mother failed in persuading him to let up with his work, however, the sickness succeeded. The attacks of asthma came suddenly, cutting short his breath and exerting an enormous pressure on his heart. Then he was laid up for days at a time, helpless and in
As the attacks recur with greater frequency, we could see a change in him. One of my most vivid memories of former winters was of father's impatience at being confined to the house by the bad weather. But this winter, he got so that he didn't chafe at staying in. Something within him had given away. He didn't worry about Frank and me doing the chores, either, as he had at first.

During the periods when he was well enough to be out of bed but too weak to go outside, he spent most of his time in his hickory rocker, looking out of the window to the west. He took an unending delight in the baby and would sit for hours, watching her play, or gently rocking her cradle. He seldom touched his Macaulay or Lincoln biography any more. Some days he seemed fairly contented, but on others -- especially when money matters were troubling him -- he had spells of extreme depression.

Occasionally, after a gloomy day during which his eyes had been dull with despair and he had spoken scarcely a word, his spirits revived in the evening. Sitting by the living room stove after a good supper, he relaxed and appeared to enjoy the family and the comforts of home more thoroughly than ever before. He talked some too. As he leaned back and closed his eyes, all the seasons of his life seemed to pass before his mind.
A warm light played on his memory, illuminating corners and niches he had not disturbed in years. He recalled the Quaker meeting house he had attended as a boy in Virginia, the sight of tobacco fields in the early morning, and the mists of the Blue Ridge mountains blending into the sky. He spoke of the first years after his family had settled in Iowa, and recalled how his father had tanned him once when he had tried to hitch a yearling steer to the good buggy. Most of all, he remembered things about the weather and the soil; the storms, the droughts, the bumper harvests: these had been vividly traced on his mind. He told of a tornado he had once seen and of the great drought of a few years before when all the creeks and springs in the vicinity had dried up. He had been forced to haul water for the stock in great hogsheads from the Wapsie River. I dimly remembered going with him on one of these trips although I couldn't have been more than three at the time. When he talked about things like this, his speech was rich with allusion to impressions first experienced in his boyhood and deepened by repetition in the succeeding years. Such as the smell of corn pollen in August, or the good feel of a plow beneath the hands in the spring turning when the soil is moist from the big thaws.

Father had never been one for reminiscence, and in the few evenings that winter when he opened up
his memory, we probably came closer to knowing him than at any other time. Yet, in another sense, such brief flashes only emphasized all the more strongly the solitary, mystic qualities that formed his inner personality. These had not changed. One had but to watch him as he sat at the window looking out, to realize he was still a stranger in his own house and always would be.

IV

It seemed to us we had never had such a lovely spring. The winter had been especially long and depressing with father sick so much of the time. We had thought February would never end. Then, when we were almost worn out with the monotony of the bleak months, spring suddenly arrived. It seemed to come all at once. One day we had been hemmed in by drab, snow-grey hills and blotched fields where drooped the slattern remnants of last year's cornstalks. And the next day -- as if by magic -- the meadows had changed to a deep emerald; the plowed fields lay neat and chocolate-hued in the mellow sunlight; and the slate-colored sky had opened into a fresh blue lake across which the big clouds swept like rafts of clean snow.

With the coming of spring, father began to feel much better. There were no more sick and dizzy spells. He worked from dawn to darkness as he had always done, and in the evening he read his books. He looked
so much better that even mother stopped fretting about him.

Above all, father looked forward to getting to work in the fields. "Going to get the crops in early, this year," he said.

He made me a promise, too. "You're not quite big enough, this year," he told me, "but next year you can help with the plowing."

The entire family was happy these days. An early spring with all its promise of abundance. And father well again! It was as if we were going to plow under the past with the old cornstalks and concern ourselves only with the good future.

Then, one gray morning when Jack and I came down to dress in front of the sitting room stove, we knew that something was wrong again. Breakfast had not been started. Mother was nowhere to be seen. Her bedroom door was closed. I went to it and listened. Apparently, she was inside, for I could hear someone moving about.

I was just starting out to find Frank when he came in the kitchen door, looking worried.

"Father's having another spell," he said. A real bad one, I guess."

We hung around for a while in the kitchen, feeling helpless and uneasy. After a while, the bedroom
door opened abruptly and mother came running out. Her face was drawn and there was a scared look in her eyes.

"Grant," she said -- her voice trembled -- "you must run over to Grandmother Wood's just as fast as you can. Tell them to drive into town for a doctor. I want Frank to stay here. Tell them, for the love of heaven, to hurry!"

Scared, half-crying, I ran out of the back door. The moist wind slapped my face as I raced down the road to the east. I scrambled over a fence and cut across plowed fields. My throat went dry; tearssmarted in my eyes. My feet bogged down in the wet loam. Hurry, hurrythrobbed in my ears. At the edge of Grandmother Wood's farm, I ran into a great tangle of willow brush cut down and left on the ground. I climbed over logs, fought myself free of branches, plunged through the twisted foliage into the farmyard.

Uncle Eugene was in front of the barn, hitching up a team. No change came over his rigid face when I gasped the message to him. He turned quickly and started toward the house.

A few minutes later, Uncle Gene, Aunt Sarah and I were in the one-seated rig, driving down the road as fast as the horses could pull through the mud. Aunt Sarah asked me questions about father's attack until she saw I knew none of the details. Then she and Uncle
Gene began to talk about how sick father had been and how they wouldn't be surprised at anything that might happen. This made me want to cry, but I managed not to.

When we stopped at our place, Frank came running out to the buggy.

"You won't have to go to town, Uncle Gene," he said. "Jim Flynn was just by and he's started in for the doctor on his fast bay."

Aunt Sarah and Uncle Gene got out and went with Frank to the house. I followed them, awed by their grim, ominous expressions. All was still in the house; our footsteps echoed unnaturally as we walked through the kitchen to the sitting room. Jack was by the sitting room window, rocking the baby's cradle, his eyes wide with fear and wonder. The bedroom door was closed. Aunt Sarah opened it quietly and she and Uncle Gene and Frank tiptoed in. They did not let me come too, but I caught a glimpse of the inside of the bedroom. I could see the lower end of the bed and the long still mound of covers under which father's figure lay. Mother was standing at the window, looking into space. Her body sagged forward as if she were very tired. Tears streamed down her face. When the others came in, she did not seem to notice.

V

They had services for him at the Strawberry Hill
Presbyterian church. I sat in one of the front pews between mother and Aunt Sarah. It seemed to me we waited for hours in the chill, hanging silence. Everything was heavy and oppressive about the place: the massive gray coffin, the sickening fragrance of tuber roses, the stiff black of the mourners. An occasional cough or sob grated harshly on nerves worn raw. It seemed that something must happen to ease the tension; yet nothing could happen. I felt Aunt Sarah's thin body quivering with sobs. Mother's eyes were red and swollen, but she was not crying now. She sat motionless, looking straight ahead. Once she reached over and took my hand. But that was small comfort; her hand was cold and lifeless.

At last the minister arose to give the funeral sermon.

"The departed ... loving husband and father ... upright citizen ... devout Christian ..."

I listened but could not realize that he was talking about my father in that hollow voice. He was talking about someone far away whom I had never known. "... whom Thou hast seen fit to cut off in the prime of life ..." Presently I was crying, but it was because I was tired and frightened, not because I realized my father was dead and that I should mourn. They had told me what had happened all right; that father had been
called to heaven and would not come back in this life. I had heard the words and repeated them. I was very brave about it, they said. But inwardly I had not understood. Nor did I now.

"For this corruptible must put on incorruption."

What did these words mean? And the family, assembled here in their heavy grief; the friends looking down at us long-faced from the distant hills of their sympathy — why were they here?

Perhaps if I had understood a little better, I should have wondered how those who had been unable to understand father in life, appeared to understand him so well in death; summing up his life so confidently and so confidently consigning him to the hereafter. There was something businesslike about their grief. It was as if they were making a final entry in a ledger, and they were making it like skilled bookkeepers: Maryville Wood, born 1845, died 1901. "There, that account is balanced; let us turn to another page."

They buried him in the green, wooded cemetery southwest of Anamosa. This was the same rich soil, the same firm, rolling prairie land he had farmed from boyhood.

Even when they lowered the casket into the grave, I did not realize that my father was gone. For
these rites were alien, unintelligible to me. While in my mind was stamped another and clearer image:

Of a tall figure, plowing; a gaunt figure, leaning slightly forward, who seems a man of the earth and the plow, yet in whose attitude is a mystic aloofness that will never surrender — even to the ground.

VI

The wagon jolted slowly along the hot road, rousing up clouds of powdery dust in which winged grasshoppers played. There was scarcely a sound other than the plop plop of the horses' hooves and the rumble of the milk cans in the back of the wagon... and occasionally a sudden loud trumpeting as one of the horses cleared his nose.

Frank and I rode in silence, yielding our weights lazily to the swaying of the wagon. Once in a while, Frank stirred himself to brush a fly from the back of one of the horses with his whip.

The crawling of our wagon seemed the only movement on the countryside this morning. Windmills stood without turning, cattle grazed motionless on the hills, and the fields of corn and ripe oats lay asleep in the metallic sunshine. Yet everywhere the landscape breathed the mystery of hidden forces at work in the earth; the silence pulsed with the slow rhythm of growing crops.
It was unpleasant riding, especially through the airless lanes where the road was shut in on both sides by corn, and the dust hung in thick, static clouds. But Frank and I didn't mind. We were on our way to Anamosa and were thoroughly enjoying the luxury of going somewhere. Other days of the week, we took our milk to the crossroads and put it on a platform for the Flynns to haul with theirs. But this was Saturday morning when we went to Anamosa ourselves, hauling the milk to the creamery and getting our mail at the postoffice. The weekly trip to town was about the only diversion Frank and I got now. Twenty cows to milk morning and night; stables to keep clean; sheep, hogs and poultry to tend; and various other chores to look after -- all this did not leave much time for recreation.

So it was with the satisfaction of a respite well-earned that we rode along on this July morning, unmindful of heat and dust and the discomfort of the hard wagon-seat.

As we came out of the side road up to the highway, we could see a man working on the fence at the edge of the pasture across the road.

"Hello, Mr. Abbott," shouted Frank. His words had an unusual resonance in the bright morning air.

John Abbott stopped his fence-mending long enough to give us a friendly wave.
"Hello there," he called jovially. "How are you Wood boys getting along running the farm?"

"Just fine!" replied Frank with a trace of pride in his voice.

Riding was a little smoother on the main road. Frank began to whistle cheerfully.

"Look here," he said suddenly, pointing to a patch of dusty grass by the roadside. "That's where I pulled out to the side of the road when that horseless carriage came by last week."

"Gee," I said, admiringly, "I wisht I'd been with you."

"Honest, you never heard such a racket in your life. If I hadn't got out and held the horses' heads, they'd have run away sure. Maybe you'd have been scared if you'd been along -- "

"I would not."

When we got to the top of the Cheshire hill, we could see a big cloud of dust far down the road. A horse and rig were coming towards us, traveling at a good speed. The marking of the horse was plain from quite a distance. It was black with a white chest.

"Must be a stranger," said Frank. "Nobody around here has a horse like that."

When the approaching driver got within hailing distance of us, he reined over to the side of the
road and stopped.

"I suppose he wants to ask us directions,"
said Frank.

We could see now that he was an elderly man
with a gray beard --

"Why it's Grandfather Weaver!"

It was grandfather, all right, sitting straight
and austere with a light linen duster over his lap.

"Hello, boys," he said when we drew up beside
him. "I recognized you back there a way, so I thought
I'd stop and wait for you."

Frank and I wanted to ask a dozen questions
all at once.

"Where's grandma? -- "

" -- and where did you get the horse and buggy?"

"Well," said Grandfather Weaver, smiling at
our curiosity, "grandmother had to stay in Cedar Rapids
this time. So I came over to see you and your mother
by myself. I came from Cedar Rapids to Anamosa on the
train. Then I rented the horse and rig from the livery
stable in Anamosa. Ain't she a dandy?"

"Gosh, yes!" We admired the young mare,
whose flanks shone shiny black under the coating of dust.

"Well, I suppose you boys will be back to
the farm in time for dinner. I'll see you then. Be
careful with the team."
Grandfather clucked at the fine mare, who perked up her ears and started smartly up the road again.

As we resumed our way toward town, Frank and I could hardly hold our excitement. A visit from Grandfather Weaver was a real event now that he and grandmother lived in Cedar Rapids.

"Won't mother be surprised?" said Frank. "Say—do you suppose grandpa brought us anything from the city?"

When we returned to the farm that noon, we found, as we had hoped, that grandfather had brought each of us a package of candy from Cedar Rapids. But that was nothing, compared to the news he had for us!

After we had finished dinner, and Frank and I were about to go to work again, mother said:

"Wait a few minutes, boys. I want you to come into the sitting room for a little while before you go out. Grandfather has something to say to you."

"Me too?" piped Jack, fearful of being left out.

"Yes, you too."

In the sitting room, we three boys stood around uncomfortably, wondering what this was all about. Grandfather Weaver sat down in the rocker we had always called father's chair and rocked in silence for a few moments, tugging at his beard thoughtfully. In a few
moments, mother came in with the baby in her arms and
grandpa was ready to begin.

"Well, boys," he said, clearing his throat
solemnly, "I've been talking to your mother about some­
thing this morning and now I'm going to talk it over
with you.

"Your mother tells me you have been doing a
good job of taking care of the farm -- better than could
be expected. That's fine. We're proud of you. And
the work won't hurt you none, either -- do you good, in
fact.

"But pretty soon now, school will be starting,
and you won't be able to do all the chores and go to
school again. And your mother says that whatever
happens, she's going to see that you go on with your
studies. That means we'll have to figure out some new
way for you to get along.

"Now, you could stay here on the farm and
try to get on the best you can. But even letting the
crop-land out on shares, you would have to have a hired
man. The trouble there is that a good hired man is hard
to get and besides you can't afford one. As you boys may
know, there's a good deal of money owed on this farm.
If you had to pay a hired man, it don't look like you'd
be able to keep up the payments. So that has to be
considered too.
"This morning, we were talking all these things over and we finally hit upon a plan that seemed to me about the best of any. Your mother thought so too, but she said she wanted to see how you boys felt about it before she made up her mind. So now it's up to you.

"How would you like to move to Cedar Rapids?"

VII

Within a week after mother had inserted ads in the Anamosa paper, offering our farm for sale, several prospective buyers turned up. In the middle of August — sooner than we had expected — we sold the farm on what Grandfather Weaver called "very satisfactory terms" and the prospect of our moving to Cedar Rapids became a certainty.

My brothers and I were walking on air. When we woke in the morning, our first thoughts were about Cedar Rapids; we chattered about it during our meals; and at night, mother had to scold us for lying awake in bed, talking.

Frank was as pleased about moving to the city as Jack and I were, but he tried to appear matter-of-fact about it since he was older and better traveled than we were. Anamosa was the biggest town Jack and I had ever seen, but Frank had been in Cedar Rapids itself. He had made the trip that spring shortly after Grandfather and Grandmother Weaver had moved there, and had returned
to the farm with glowing accounts of urban wonders. His description of a modern bathroom had been especially vivid.

"Instead of privies, you just do it right in the house. You pull a chain and there is a tremendous gurgling sound . . . ."

Now we were actually going to move to the city, Jack and I had to hear everything about it over and over again.

"Is Cedar Rapids really bigger than Anamosa?" we asked with persistent incredulity.

"Anamosa!" Frank would snort contemptuously, "Why Cedar Rapids' little finger is bigger than Anamosa!"

As usual, mother fitted inconspicuously into the background of our excitement. If she was hurt by our childish and somewhat callous eagerness to leave the farm, she never showed it. And we, in our turn, were too enthusiastic about going to wonder what the uprooting might mean to her.

I realize now that this was perhaps the hardest time of her life. Not that she was reluctant to leave the farm for its own sake. She had never been fully suited to farm life -- had never had the same zest for it father had. Yet, after all, the farm had a strong hold upon her. It had seen the early years of her marriage, full of hardships and hopes; the births of the
four children; the sudden overwhelming tragedy of father's death. When she left it, she would prematurely bury that part of her life lived in its own right. The future she would live for her children.

Uncertainty clouded that future, too. From the sale of the farm and from father's insurance, mother hoped to get enough money to buy a small house and get us started in the city. But after that, we would have to shift for ourselves, and, as Grandfather Weaver had admitted, it would be no "bed of roses."

All of these things must have been in mother's mind during the weeks we were getting ready to move. Most of all, I think, in the memories awakened by our preparations, she was living over again the horror of father's death. She didn't show this much: hers was too reserved a nature to reveal profound feelings. To outsiders she seemed as cheerful and serene as ever. But I remember there were a few changes in her manner. She didn't sing at her work any more, for example, and she had little spells of absent-mindedness when she would stop in the midst of some task and look off into space as if trying to remember something dear and long-forgotten.

And on one occasion I got a real glimpse of the unhealed grief she was keeping to herself. The shock -- the mingled surprise and tenderness and childish humiliation -- I felt at discovering the secret depth of
her sorrow, remains with me yet.

It was late one night, long after my brothers had gone to sleep, and I was tossing in bed in unaccustomed wakefulness. Frank and I had been talking about Cedar Rapids and the excitement burned in my mind like a fever, driving sleep away. Finally, I crept out of bed to go downstairs for a drink.

I padded down in my bare feet, a little frightened by the darkness and a little ashamed of my fright. There was no sound in the house but the ticking of the clock. I was relieved to see there was a light in the sitting room. Mother, I thought, had forgotten to blow out the light before she went to bed. No, when I got to the bottom of the stairs, I saw her, lying on the caterpillar couch behind the stove, her head buried in her arms. She was in her nightgown, with her wrapper about her and her hair let down over her shoulders. At first, I thought she was asleep; then I saw that her body was shaking. She was crying — not as a grown woman, a mother — but as a little girl who was lost and afraid.

She started with fright when I went over and put my arm on her shoulder, but when she saw who it was I knew she was glad that I had come.

---

The people who were buying the farm wanted us
to vacate by the first of September. We couldn't get away that soon, mother told them, but we would try to be out by the end of the first week in September. Even that was cutting the time short, considering all that was to be done. Our household goods we planned to ship to Cedar Rapids, but we would have to dispose of our livestock and implements before we left the farm.

That meant an auction. There was more excitement for you! I had always wanted to go to an auction -- now, one was coming to us.

Grandfather Weaver made another trip out to the farm to help us make arrangements for the sale and for moving our household goods to Cedar Rapids. He had dodgers printed for us in Anamosa, and a few days later, the cross roads blossomed out with bright yellow, blue and red bills, advertising the sale of our livestock and implements. These were illustrated with pictures of huge horses and pop-eyed hogs which, to my distress, resembled none of our own farm animals.

Curiously enough, in looking forward to the auction, it did not for some time occur to me that this would mean parting with all my farm pets. When the fact finally did dawn on me, I took the matter up with mother in alarm.

"Ma, will all the cows be sold at the auction?"

"Yes, son. We couldn't take them with us."
"And the -- chickens?"
"Yes."
"And even Pat?"
"Yes, I'm afraid so -- even Pat."

This was putting a different slant on things. I no longer looked forward to our departure with feelings of unmixed joy. And when I learned that Dewey was to be left behind, I very nearly rebelled. But the lure of the city was strong, even pitted against my attachment for the farm animals. Besides we were too busy with preparations for moving to have much time for regrets. So, if I wasn't able to quell my misgivings, I at least put them aside for a time.

Early September brought its usual hard, soaking rains and we were afraid the roads would be so bad we wouldn't have anybody at our sale. When the morning of the auction day itself came -- cold, misty, with a heavily overcast sky, -- we simply gave up hopes for a good attendance. But as it turned out, we needn't have worried at all. For even before we had finished our chores that morning, wagons, plastered to the boxes with mud, began to pull into our farmyard, bringing prospective buyers to inspect the stock before the bidding started. By mid-morning, a big crowd of farmers, heavily-booted, and burly from thick clothing under their overalls, were milling about our barn and farmyard.
The auctioneer was fat, kindly "Dad" Walters, who had known father and mother for twenty years or more. He was a ruddy, stub-legged little man with a droopy, tobacco-stained moustache and an inexhaustible fund of optimism. I don't remember that we ever saw Dad when he didn't have time to stop and talk indefinitely and to fish some dingy peanuts for us boys out of his pockets. He was so rotund that when Jack climbed up on his knee to play with his massive gold watch fob, the stomach left scarcely enough ledge for the boy to sit on.

"Dad" arrived about half-past nine, wearing his broad-brimmed black "campaign hat" and driving his ancient strawberry roan. Jack and I ran out to see him.

"Well look at this, would you," he bayed at the dried-up little clerk-of-the-sale riding with him. "Durned if there ain't a welcome committee."

I helped Dad unhitch his decrepit old nag and put it out to pasture. The horse was a familiar object of jest in the vicinity. Wherever the auctioneer went, some farmer would shout at him: "Well, Dad, when are you gonna auction off that old crowbait of yours?" And Dad would defend his nag good-naturedly. "Why, that's the best horse in Jones county. Only two things wrong with him -- he's hard to catch in the pasture and he ain't no good when you catch him!"

Jack and I tagged proudly along after the auctioneer as he walked through the crowd of
farmers. Everybody in the county, it seemed, knew him and he could call them all by name. "'Lo, Herm . . . H'are ya, Rufus . . . What are you doin' here, 'Dolph Schmidt? This is an auction -- ain't givin' away nothin' free here! . . . ."

Dad Walters didn't stop outside but marched on into the kitchen where mother was busy preparing the lunch she would have to serve that noon.

"Just thought I'd gossip with you a few minutes before the sale begins, Hattie," he shouted genially, sitting down by the kitchen table.

Mother was trying to appear calm this morning, but I could tell she was having a hard time to keep the tears back. Before Dad went out to start the auction, however, he had got her to chuckling in spite of herself over the latest story about Ed Struble, the region's most hen-pecked husband. It seems that Struble had escaped from his shrewish wife for a day, had gone to the county fair (via the Anamosa saloons), and had returned home that night with the image of an undraped lady tattooed on his forearm.

For all Dad's easy-going ways, he knew how to handle a sale better than any other auctioneer in the county. People counted on him to put on a good show and he never disappointed them. He kept up a constant stream of banter and when the buying slowed up,
he would single out some farmer in the crowd and josh him into bidding.

He was in fine form this morning. Once the sale was under way, he kept things moving so fast I couldn't keep track of what was happening. In two hours, he disposed of our farm implements and all of our hogs.

Then it was time for lunch. Mrs. Abbott, fat and explosively good-natured, had come over to help mother. The two women served the hungry crowd great stacks of hogshead cheese sandwiches and gallons of steaming coffee. After lunch, the sale was resumed.

It was not pleasant to stand by and watch our sheep, cows, turkeys, and my old friends, the Plymouth Rocks, auctioned off as if they had been so many vegetables. But I managed to keep up a stout front during the afternoon except for one time. That was when I had to lead our favorite horse, Pat, up and down a lane of prospective buyers.

VIII

I opened my eyes with that vague, half-suppressed anxiety with which one wakes on the momentous days of his life. Bare walls and a naked expanse of pine floor... I remembered -- the sitting room. We had gone to bed on mattresses laid out on the floor. Our furniture had been hauled away the day before. And this morning, we
ourselves were leaving for Cedar Rapids!

The excitement came back with a sickening rush and forced me wide awake. I sat up and looked around.

The room was grey with the chill of early morning. Light from the east was beginning to sift through the curtainless windows, thinning the shadows. Jack was curled up beside me, sound asleep. Frank was sleeping on a mattress next to ours and beyond him were mother and the baby. I heard mother's regular breathing.

A soft thumping sound made me turn quickly. Dewey was lying at the head of my mattress, watching me with affectionate interest, his tail gently thwacking the floor. For once — on this last night — he had been given the privilege of sleeping in the house. I felt a sudden twinge, remembering we were going to leave him today.

I could stay in bed no longer. Anxious to escape the cold gloom of the house, I got up, slipped into my clothes and tiptoed out through the dusky kitchen. Dewey followed, yawning, and wagging his tail gratefully.

Outside, the dawn was beginning to spread, firm and clear, out of white mists in the east, suffusing the barnyard with restrained, clear light. This was going to be one of those luxuriant days of late summer
when nature seems surfeited with her own fruitfulness.

I jumped off the back stoop into the dew-chilled grass and started towards the barn. I took a few steps, then stopped dead-still. An uncanny feeling came over me.

Day was stirring, but the farm was not awakening with it. The whole place lay silent and deserted, like a country churchyard.

No rooster crowed. No cows grazed in the yard, ready to be milked. The wagon that had stood between house and barn was gone. No pigs were squealing for their food from the nearby pen; no white turkeys hung about, waiting for their morning feed.

All that could be heard in the silence was the steady whistling of the windmill and the rapid click click of the pumpshaft.

All at once, the farm had become a foreign, unfamiliar place. Dewey noticed the change too; his tail drooped and he stayed close by me.

I heard a thrashing and guttural cooing in the barn sakes and looked up eagerly. A white dove took noisy wing, flapping off into the wind. The pigeons, ignored when the barnyard was full of animals and fowl, now assumed a role of friendly importance. They were the last familiar sign of life.
We ate breakfast on a packing box in the kitchen that morning in an atmosphere of mixed excitement and gloom. None of us had much to say. When we did talk, we kept our voices down to half-whispers, for ordinary tones stirred up loud echoes in the empty house. My brothers and I were now curiously subdued. Even Jack was quiet and sober-faced.

"We'll have to hurry like everything," mother said nervously. "We don't want to keep John waiting." John Flynn, our kindly Irish neighbor, had volunteered to haul us to Anamosa in his lumber wagon.

After breakfast, we made haste to pack the cooking things and to roll up the mattresses and bed clothing in neat bundles. We had everything ready a full hour before John was to come.

"Now," said mother, as she was getting the baby's things together. "I want all of you to look through the house for one last time to see that you haven't left anything."

Small chance of that, we thought, the way mother had scrubbed the place out for the new tenants.

I slipped upstairs first. The hired man's room was clean and bare as a bone. I looked carefully to see if there was any remembrance of Dave Peters left -- a religious motto on the wall or an Indian relic on the window-sill. But the room was empty, with only the stern silence to remind me that Dave Peters had once occupied it.
occupied it.

In our bedroom, broad sunlight lighted up the big-flowered wallpaper at which I had stared so many mornings. There was the china matting on the floor, and the black-japanned stove pipe register down which Jack and I had often dropped marbles. But all the other familiar things were gone.

The parlor was the most changed room in the house. It had always been aloof from the other rooms, shut away with its billowy carpet and plush furniture for such occasions as the semi-annual visits of the preacher. Now, stripped of its finery, it was suddenly pulled down to the level of the other rooms. There was something cheap and pathetic about its bareness. I noticed particularly a shelf beneath which the parlor organ had stood. Formerly, mother had kept this covered with an elegant satin cover, embroidered with red roses. But now, the cover was gone, and the shelf was revealed as ugly, unfinished pine board.

The sitting room -- next to the kitchen, the most used room in the house -- was full of memories. Over the high shelf on the east wall was a startling, ragged-edged silhouette where the walnut clock had stood. It was as if the clock had gone and left its ghost behind. Other ghosts were left on the wall too. Behind the stove were the memories of many calendars,
one imprinted on the other. Above these, a clean oblong reminded one that "Thunder and Lightning," that memorable picture of the black horse and the white horse, frightened by a terrific storm, had once hung there.

When I went out into the kitchen again, Mrs. Abbott was there, saying goodbye. She had brought over a bulging shoe box of chicken sandwiches for us to eat on the train, and a present for mother of several crocheted table mats.

"Of course, we'll come in to see you!" she was telling mother. "That is, provided I can ever budge that man of mine from the farm."

I wandered outdoors again, feeling once more the ghostly silence of the farmyard. Dewey tagged along with me, nuzzling my side. I felt a curious empty and let-down sensation. Could it be that there were no chores to do -- no milking, no stock to feed, no cattle to drive down the lane to the pasture?

All at once, the delicious anticipation of going to the city was smothered by the sadness and infinite disquiet of departure. I had a vague, calamitous feeling the world would never be the same again.

I sat down on the back stoop beside the neat bundles of bedding and the little red grocery cupboard in which mother had packed her cooking things. I was
glad we were taking this cupboard along. It was one that father had made -- a simple pine box coated with red barn paint and fastened with a cast iron latch. I had always liked it; it had seemed like a little house to me. A fragrant, mysterious little house, haunted by the good smells of spices mother kept in it.

Frank was down in the basement, poking about to see that nothing was left down there. Jack came around the corner of the barn with a great armload of cedar darts, toy windmills, and other home-made contrivances -- most of them the handiwork of Dave Peters. He deposited them in an untidy pile by the back stoop.

"There," he said, emphatically, "We'll need those when we get to Cedar Rapids."

A whirl of last minute confusion. John Flynn's friendly, confident laughter as he helped us load our things. One final look about the place, and we were gone.

I remember noticing the garden as we pulled out of the farmyard and being startled by its unkempt appearance. Weeds were growing high among the flowers; radishes and onions had gone to seed; lettuce was flowering out with spikes of yellow blossoms.

Mother rode on the wagon seat beside John Flynn, the baby in her arms. As we turned to go west
on the little side road, she did not look back to where the house stood, bleak and curtainless like a man without eyelids.

Jack and I and Dewey were tucked in the front of the wagon box. Frank rode behind to see that nothing fell off.

I was tired from all the excitement; the slow, regular bumping of the wagon made me drowsy. The warm sun cast a dreamy haze over the countryside. This was the period of over-lushness; summer had reached its peak and was coasting along on its seedy abundance. Vegetation was thick everywhere and the air was rich with its pollen. Golden rod gilded great stretches of pastureland; horse mint nodded among the weeds at the roadside; and black-eyed susans winked from the fence row. The countryside was alive with the insects that screeched and sawed their crescendo until the whole landscape seemed to sway lazily to their rhythm.

The early September rains had brought out the emerald in the pastures again; patches of tufty green grass had appeared in the brown stubble-fields. The corn was ripening. I heard the coarse leaves whispering in the breeze and once more the tasseled giants were drawn up like Indian warriors along the fence row. From the bottom of a hill, looking up, the rows of stalks, silhouetted against the sky, were as
neat and regular as the teeth of a comb.

We jolted slowly over the little wooden bridge. Droopy smartweeds, studded with coral blossoms, were blooming in the creekbed where water trickled once more. Out of the willow brush down the creek rose a cloud of noisy grackles. Other birds, seen only in couples during the hot months, were now flocking in the meadows.

At the crossroads, John Flynn's mother and wife were waiting to say goodbye to us. They had packages, too.

"Just thought you'd maybe like some apple pie to eat on the train," Mrs. Flynn said to mother. They stood watching us until we were out of sight.

We passed Cottonwood schoolhouse and I had a disturbing feeling that I should be there. No, this was Saturday; the building was closed. A lone figure was in the yard, splitting wood. I recognized him as one of the Byerly boys. He waved and stopped to watch us go by.

When the wagon started up the Cheshire hill, I began to feel panicky. Now came the hardest part of all -- we were to leave Dewey at the Cheshires. They had lost their dog recently and had said they would be glad to have our collie.

"Don't look like anybody's home," said
John Flynn as he stopped in front of the farm.

Dejectedly, I climbed out of the wagon and hurried up the drive. Dewey bounded along beside me.

The barnyard was empty.

"Hello," I shouted. No answer. The house was locked up and the lumber wagon was gone.

I unhooked a door of the big barn and looked inside. It was quiet and dark in there. Dewey went on in, trustfully. I banged the door shut and ran blindly back to the wagon.

The road was still very muddy in front of the Cheshire place. John Flynn giddapped at his team. They had to pull hard to make the remaining few yards to the top of the steep hill.

"At least," said mother, trying to break the gloom, "we won't have to struggle over this hill any more."

At that, I had a terrible feeling that we were never coming back again. . . never.

At the top of the Cheshire hill, we all looked back for a last view of the farm. I saw our place and Grandmother Wood's very plainly. They looked like green islands in the tacky patchwork of the landscape.

Suddenly John Flynn cried out: "Look ahead! Look at this fellow coming up the hill!"
A big white horse was galloping up the road towards us, top-speed, the rider bending low over its neck.

"A stranger. Lord but he's riding! Wonder what's wrong."

The horse was fast bearing upon us, plowing up mud furiously. We heard the heavy splatter of hoofs on the moist roadbed. We saw the horse's broad laboring chest, its distended nostrils, the muscles straining in its neck.

For a moment, it seemed as if horse and rider were going to plunge on by us. Then, just in front of us, the stranger pulled his mount short. The big horse wheeled on its hind legs with a storm of hoofs, splattering mud in all directions.

The rider turned in his saddle and shouted:
"President McKinley has been assassinated!"