



A Sign in the Desert.

BY ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

"Come, Alga, jump in; we are ready to start now." Mrs. Percival from the back seat of a stout travelling carriage spoke to a young girl who was dancing about one of several large covered ox-wagons in the rear.

"Let me go in the wagon behind Buck and Bright, mamma! I think they are the dearest cows!" answered the young girl.

"But they are not cows, Alga. They are oxen, and I think you would get very tired of their slow walk before night, and wish you were with us in the carriage."

"But Jack is going to ride in the ox-wagon."

"Only for a little while, dear; just for a mile or two."

"Well, let me stay with him," pleaded the young girl. "I am sure it will be much nicer than riding in the carriage all day."

"Let the child do as she wishes," interposed Mr. Percival at this juncture. "We can easily take her in with us when she tires of the novelty of the ox-cart."

Alga laughed with delight, and with the grace of a bird which flies upon a tree branch she sprang up beside her brother and the driver, in the great moving wagon, and the cavalcade set forth on the perilous journey.

The time was mid-June, 1849; the scene, the outskirts of St. Louis. A little company of 18 people were en route for Sacramento. Mr. Percival had been lured by the golden promises of the great west to abandon his comfortable home in the east and the competence of his mercantile business and to set forth on the dangerous overland journey to California with his wife, a daughter of 15, and a son two years younger. To the city boys and brood children this experience seemed full of unbounded delight. They exulted in the free, new life, as birds might exult when liberated from a cage and allowed to fly about at will.

When a halt was made that night and the tents were pitched, both Alga and Jack declared it had been the happiest day of their lives, and they sank into a profound sleep, to awake early the next morning with bright anticipations of further delights.

But before a week had passed something occurred which sobered the gay spirits of the children. Two hundred miles beyond St. Louis, in a little cove of sagebrush and greasewood, they came upon the skeletons of a man, a woman and a child bleaching by the roadside. Near by were the open graves in which the bodies of these poor emigrants, dying on their journey to a new land, had not been allowed to rest. The Indians had swooped down like birds of prey upon the new-made graves, excavated the bodies, stripped them of the blankets and clothing and left them to the vultures and the wild beasts.

Alga huddled closely at her mother's side during the remainder of that day, and Jack seemed strangely subdued.

After this, each mile they traversed seemed to reveal some new and terrible sight or experience to our travellers. On awaking a few weeks later Mr. Percival found that his carriage and horses had vanished. They had been stolen by the Indians while the weary emigrants slept. Added to this disaster, Dick, the driver, who had been ailing for several days, was found to be seriously ill with what proved to be cholera. He and six other members of the party died during the next ten days and were buried by the roadside.

Before the emigrant wagons were out of sight the bodies were exhausted and stripped by the savages. Swift was the punishment, however, for the garments which enveloped the dead were impregnated with the germs of disease, and hundreds of Indians fell under the scourge of cholera. Ignorant of the cause, the surviving savages felt a superstitious terror of this band of emigrants, and believed them to be possessed of some spell which could bring disaster to their enemies. There was no fear of further disturbance from this tribe of savages.

The tedious weeks rolled on. Mr. Percival now drove one of the ox-wagons and Jack the other. They were passing over the great alkali plains, where pure water was more precious than liquid gold. The supply they had taken at the last clear stream was exhausted, and the emigrants were nearly fainting with thirst, when the rush and ripple of swiftly-flowing waters struck their ears, and they beheld the shores of the Humboldt River. Refreshed and strengthened, they camped there for the night, thinking to cross the stream early in the morning.

The light of dawn, however, revealed the fact that the river was so swollen by the melting mountain snows that to ford it was impossible. Mr. Percival and two other men who were strong swimmers decided to try the depth of the river. They found that the waters only reached their chins and were, therefore, obliged to abandon the wagons and carry over all those of the company who could not swim or wade, as well as all goods which could be strapped upon their backs and upon the animals. Jack distinguished himself on this occasion by swimming the river three times with packages strapped on his shoulders. Alga and her mother were carried across upon the backs of the men. To the animals were tied ropes, and the men on the opposite banks of the river pulled, coaxed and hauled them through the shallow places, where the mud and quagmires prevented them from swimming.

Down across the bottom lands, white as snow with the saleratus deposits of the water, across the great desert our little party started. The sand was knee deep in places. The pitiless sun was unclouded. The road was lined with abandoned wagons containing trunks and boxes of clothing, tools and machinery, bearing written labels, "Take what you want." But our footsore and weary travellers could carry no heavier loads than those under which they were already fainting and falling by the way. Day by day their numbers grew less. Mrs. Percival and Alga were the only surviving women now. Since crossing the Humboldt River they had found no water to drink, and the small quantity which they had been able to pack upon the oxen was almost exhausted, and the Carson River, for which they were in search, might be many miles distant still.

Mrs. Percival had been very weak for some days, and the little family of four had fallen behind the remainder of the party, and then suddenly Mr. Percival grew delirious and dropped down by the wayside, moaning, "Water! water!"

Mrs. Percival called Alga and Jack to her side, and said solemnly: "Children, your father has his death sickness. I want you to kneel and pray with me. We must abandon all thoughts of going on and prepare to die together."

They all knelt in silent prayer for a moment, only their sobs being audible. Then Alga's young voice pierced the air and shot like an arrow straight up through the sultry air to the brazen skies. "Oh, God, save papa! Save mamma! Save Jack and me! Send us water and send us help, and we'll serve you forever and ever, time and eternity. Amen!"

"So thirsty!" moaned the sick man. Why won't someone give me a drink? Can't you see it there all around you—oceans of water everywhere!"

"Moo-oo, moo-oo!" bellowed Buck, and lifted his nose and slowly sniffed the air. Then Bright did the same thing, and Spot and Speckle followed suit.

Alga sprang to her feet, her eyes ablaze with sudden hope, her little brown hands clasped eagerly.

"Oh, mamma! Oh, Jack! Did you hear that? Did you see that?" she cried. "We are saved—saved! God has heard us already!"

"Hear what, see what, child?" replied her mother, wondering if Alga, too, was seized with the delirium of fever.

"Oh, mamma, mamma," continued the young girl, "listen—look!"

Again there was the long, plaintive "Moo" of the oxen. Again they lifted their noses and sniffed the air. Alga watched them, her face radiant with joy.

"Mamma, dear mamma," she cried, "I tell you we are saved. Dick, the driver, told me that cows—oxen, I mean—could smell water ever and ever so far away when they were very thirsty; that as soon as they smelled it they lifted their noses and sniffed and moored a long, low moo; that it was a never-failing sign, and you had only to follow the cattle and you would find water. All four of the animals have done that twice. See, they are doing it again."

"But there is no one to go with them. Your father is ill, dying, and we cannot leave him." The discouraged woman's despondent words were broken in upon by the clear, firm voice of her young daughter.

"Mamma, I prayed to God for water, and he answered through a sign—just as he used to answer in Bible times. Buck and Bright were the instruments He used to make me understand that He heard my prayer. Now Jack and I must take the cattle and find the water. You must be brave, mother, and let us go, and trust it all to God."

"But you will have to walk, and it may be miles and miles—"

"It can't be over ten—I am sure Dick said ten at the most, mamma. And Jack and I will be together, and God will be with us, and with you, too, little mamma, for He can be in two places at once. Oh, yes, in ever and ever so many places at once."

It seemed strange to hear the young girl, scarcely more than a child, assuming the part of comforter and counsellor to her mother. But Mrs. Percival was strong physically, and the hardships and sorrows of the journey had completely wrecked her nervous system, while Alga was like some young shoot which a heavy rainstorm forces prematurely into blossom. The last month had made a full-grown woman of the girl, mentally and spiritually. It was she who was the mother now and Mrs. Percival was the child.

"Good-bye, dear mamma. Be brave and pray for us all," Alga called out as she set forth on her strange journey. She was holding Buck and Bright by ropes tied to their yokes as she spoke, and the forced smile on her lips hid poorly the tears in her eyes. Mrs. Percival stood weeping, with her hands clasped over her eyes, and above the sound of her sobs rose the piteous moan of the sick man calling for water.

"Good-bye, mamma. Cheer up. We'll soon be back," Jack called out as he followed his sister with Spot and Speckle.

"My poor, poor children, I shall never see you again," wept Mrs. Percival. Far better stay, and let us all die together."

"Mamma, God has sent us a sign, I tell you," cried Alga, almost sternly. "How can you doubt Him so? As sure as the sun is in the heavens, Buck and Bright will take me to the water. It may be only two or three miles away. It may be even nearer. Now, cheer up and moisten father's lips with the vinegar from the pickle bottle. Good-bye, Buck and Bright are anxious to be off. We will soon return, dear mamma."

The day was past noon when the journey was commenced. They proceeded slowly at first, for the cattle were weak and the sultry September day. But as the evening approached they revived; and ever and anon they lifted their noses and sniffed the air and gave utterance to their plaintive cry and accelerated their gait. It grew dark and Alga's feet were bleeding and sore, and she was almost fainting with fatigue, when Jack called her, "Alga, Spot is dying. He has fallen down and I cannot get him up. What will he be rested. If he dies, leave him and follow on with Speckle. I dare not stop till the oxen come to water. I think we are nearing it. Buck seems to sniff oftener now." So she plodded on, thinking her brother was not far behind her. By and by the cattle stopped and lay down exhausted. Alga dropped beside them and fell into a deep sleep. When she woke it was dawn, and the oxen were moaning and sniffing the air again. There was no sign of Jack far or near. Mile on mile of desert land stretched before and behind her, and not a human being was in sight. A sense of awful desolation seized upon her. She fell upon her knees, unable to form her prayer into words. She could only cry, "O, God! O, Christ!" and leave the Father and the Son to understand her need. She had some dried apples and bread in the bundle which she carried slung over her shoulder. This bundle contained several bottles in which she was to convey water back to her parents. She ate some of the fruit and bread; then, putting her arms about the neck of her oxen, she kissed them both between their honest brown eyes and urged them on their way again.

All day, all day, beneath the burning sky and over the arid plains, she staggered on, only pausing when the exhausted animals stopped to breathe, and while they lolled and panted Alga knelt under the burning desert skies and sent up her one cry, "O, Father, O, Son!" and then she stumbled on again.

Sometimes she sank to her knees in the sand. Thinking she could walk better without her shoes, she took them off, but the pain in her feet grew so intense she was obliged to replace them and limp along as best she could.

Once she clasped an arm about the neck of either animal and pressed her cheek first to one patient neck, then to the other as she sobbed out between her tears, "Oh, dear Buck! Oh, dear Bright! My heart is so sore for you. You haven't any faith or any knowledge of God's promise, and it must be some time before you know for you than for me by far. But you were the instruments He used to send me a sign, and I know he will take care of you as well as of me, you dear, dear comrades."

The second day was growing dark when she felt a sudden tightening of the ropes she held and a sudden straining forward of the ox team, and then, with a mad rush and a plunge and a wild bellowing they drove forward, dragging her headlong to the banks of a stream, the Carson River, where she sank, weeping, laughing, praying, praising God, almost mad with the ecstasy of the sound, the taste and touch of water—blessed, beautiful water.

It was not until dawn that she set forth on the return journey. Her body was refreshed, but her heart was tortured with the fear that she should find herself too late to bring succor to her parents, and that her brother was either lost on the plains or already dead. There was no trace of him on the homeward route. As the young girl drew near the spot where she had left her almost dying parents more than three days before her limbs refused to move at her bidding. Again she fell upon her knees, and now her prayer found words: "Oh, God, let me find them alive. Let me hear their voices once more. I cannot bear this awful silence longer."

Then she arose and went on, on and on until she looked straight into her mother's eyes. But Mrs. Percival was babbling now in delirium and did not know her daughter, while the father, lying white and wasted by her side, was asking feebly for "Water, water."

With a wild sob Alga clasped them both in her arms as she poured out the coveted beverage and pressed it to their burning lips. But it seemed at best only a brief respite for life for all of them. The supply of food would not last more than another day and the supply of water she had brought but two or three, even by the most sparing use of it. As the second night drew on, for the first time the young girl's courage and faith failed her. She dropped on the sand beside her parents and wept aloud. "God has forsaken us!" she cried. "Dear Lord Jesus, receive our souls!"

And just then there were a tramping sound of feet and a noise of voices, and she sat up and listened.

"It is the Indians coming to massacre us," she said. That is to be the end of it all. Pray God it may be swift."

But the next thing she knew there was Jack leaning over her—Jack, picked up and brought back by the relief party sent

out from Georgetown to look up and assist the delinquents. And they brought food and medicine, horses and carriages, and every one of the four Percivals reached Sacramento alive, and Speckle and Buck and Bright as well as the rest. Only poor Spot was left by the wayside.

Afterward, when Alga was a famous society queen, she spoke with tears in her eyes of her two valued pets who had recently died of old age—Buck and Bright. But Alga and Jack are living to-day, and so are their parents, for every word of this story is true and it happened just as I have told it.

Our Library Table

"JOHN KING'S QUESTION CLASS." Charles M. Sheldon.—This author and speaker is so well known, "In His Steps" and other of his works have been so widely read, that introduction seems unnecessary. This is a cleverly-conceived book, a story being woven in with the question class in an interesting way. John King, an earnest minister, sets apart an evening in each week at his home for the reception of young people connected with his church; not girls and boys exactly, but those old enough to take their place in society. The plan was that each member should write (and sign) a question on any subject whatever, religious or secular. These questions were left with John King, and answered by him the following week, not, however, mentioning the names of his questioners, although in many instances they were guessed, because all these young people knew each other. This book is thoroughly wholesome, and should find a place in our households, especially where there are young people. John King is a fine type of a man, pure in word and deed, and thoroughly in sympathy with the many perplexities which often beset men and women when they come in contact with the world. He believes in youth and its need of recreation, and is the dear and valued companion and friend of his question class. Published by W. J. Gage & Co., Toronto.

"MORE CARGOES." W. W. Jacobs. "SUSPENSE." Henry Seton Merriman.—Anyone who read and laughed over "Many Cargoes," lately reviewed in our journal, can have a few more laughs over this most amusing book. Mr. Jacobs possesses an inexhaustible fund of anecdote, which he tells in the funniest manner. When the workers come home tired, let them have their tea-supper, and read aloud or to themselves "More Cargoes."

In "Suspense" Mr. Merriman has given us a very remarkable book. At first the story seems to be somewhat drag, the actors are almost too quiet. All this, however, is for a special purpose, and the masterly description of the Russian siege of Plevna brings to a climax a story in which the reader seems suddenly to have a vital interest. The author's thorough familiarity with human nature is here shown, as in his fine novels, "The Sowers," "With Edged Tools," etc. Mr. Merriman has a peculiar faculty of letting his readers become acquainted with his characters gradually. Often there is no detailed personal description, but it all seems to dawn upon one, and you see the people just as he means you to see them.

Published by Copp, Clark & Co., Toronto. The Canadian Almanac for 1900, brought out by this firm, contains a large amount of information. Price 25 cents. FELIX.

Domestic Science.

There is a movement on foot in Toronto to establish a School of Domestic Science, and we heartily endorse the scheme as a decided step in the right direction. To quote from a leading paper: "Such a school, in our opinion, is as necessary as the Law School, the Technical School or almost any other educational institution in the city. There is a proper or scientific way of preparing food, of ventilating and furnishing houses, and there is a slovenly, unscientific method of performing these services. Between the two there is all the difference in the world. Domestic science is, unfortunately, but very imperfectly understood and practised by those in charge of our households. The science of cooking is almost a liberal education in itself, but how many women are there who have studied the question from an economic or gastronomic standpoint? Sanitation in the household is a subject upon which books might be written without exhausting the question. Very few houses, however, are furnished with a view to securing the highest degree of health for their inmates. It is said that the taking of a bath invigorates the body as much as three hearty meals. How many workmen are aware of the fact? The house is the place where we spend the bigger part of our time. No kind of education is more desirable than that which concerns our health, and the management of the household as much as to do with our health and happiness as any other factor in life. We do not expect that a college of domestic science will bring about the millennium in the household, but it will help to ameliorate present conditions. If such a school can elevate domestic service to a higher level, so as to attract a more intelligent and a better class of girls, it will have ample justification for its existence."

No Great Difficulty.

A greedy boy is capable of clever misunderstandings.

"No, Willie, my dear," said the little boy's mother, "no more cakes to-night. It is too near bedtime, and you know you can't sleep on a full stomach."

"Well," said Willie, "but I can sleep on my back."—Harper's Round Table.