

OUR FARM HOMES



E judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done.—Longfellow.

Winning the Wilderness

(Continued from last week.)

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

On his return from the Civil War, Asher Aydelot, the hero of the story, refuses to settle down on his father's farm and announces his intention of marrying Virginia Thaine, a southern girl, and a daughter of a bitter enemy of the Aydelots. His father disinherits him, but he marries Virginia and together they trek westward to the Kansas plains, where Asher and his chum Jim Shirley have taken up land. Here they settle down to win success from the land. Many hardships are encountered.

Jim Shirley becomes dangerously ill and Virginia is the only person to go to Carey's Crossing for the plains' doctor. In the meantime Dr. Carey, along with a number of other men, are waiting for their mail at the post office at Carey's Crossing. Among these are Darley Chambers, the real estate hawk, and a stranger, who has registered at the Wilmington, Delaware. When Todd Stewart, who is distributing the mail, calls out that there is a letter for Mr. Jim Shirley, the stranger makes a hasty step forward, but Dr. Carey quietly takes charge of the letter and determines to deliver it in person. He sets out to take his mail to Jim, Virginia and loses her way in the fierce storm, but Dr. Carey comes to her rescue. He is surprised to learn that she is Virginia Thaine, whom he knew and loved in the South.

Gradually more and more come to Grass River Valley and, the days of lonely solitude for Virginia Aydelot were ended. The prairie yielded but slowly to its possessors, however, and only after they had paid out time, energy, hope and unflinching faith in its possibilities. A wrathful sun and a rainless sky wrought havoc to the crops. Darley Chambers did much these days to try and persuade the settlers to turn their backs on Grass River Valley and sell their claims to him. He even comes to Asher Aydelot with the inducement that he will pay Asher a commission on every claim, and will take no commission at all on Asher's claim. Asher sees through his game, however, and he, with the other settlers, decide to stay on the land, hoping that the terrible drought will soon be ended. Along with the drought came the memorable grasshopper pestilence of 1874 and when this pest had done its work, men living here of grass, weed, leaf or bit of tender bark on trees or shrubs now escaped. Darley Chambers, instead of assisting the settlers, now he can do to encourage them, but fails.

On the night of a great winter blizzard a little life flutters in and out of the Aydelot home and for days Virginia lies at the point of death. Carey and Peep, his colored servant, come to the rescue.

He looked the part, and Jim accepted him gladly. It is given to some men to know the power of the healing spirit. Dr. Carey was such a man. His presence controlled the atmosphere of the place. There was calm in his voice and in the touch of his hand as much as in his medicine. To him his own calling was divine. Who will say that the hope and belief with which his few drugs were ministered carried not equal power with them toward health and wholeness?

When Virginia Aydelot had fallen asleep at last the doctor came into the kitchen and sat down with the two haggard men to whom his coming had brought unspeakable solace.

"You can take comfort, Mr. Aydelot," he said assuringly. "My wife

has been well cared for. Hardly one man in a thousand could do as well as you have done. I wonder you never studied medicine."

"You seem confident of results, Doctor," Asher said gratefully.

"I have known the Thaine family all my life," Horace Carey said quietly. And Asher, whose mind was surged with anxiety, did not even think to be surprised.

"We did not recognize each other when I found her on the way to Carey's Crossing three or four years ago, and—I did not know she was married then."

He sat a while in silence, looking at the window against which the wind outside was whirling the snow. When he spoke again his tone was hopeful. Mrs. Aydelot has had a nervous shock. But she is young. She has a heritage of will power and good blood. She will climb up rapidly with the coming on of spring."

"You both need sleep," Carey said in a matter-of-fact way. Bo Peep will take care of things here, and I will take care of Mrs. Aydelot. We will attend to the burial at the earliest possible time in order to save her any signs of grieving. And you will not grieve either until you have more time. And remember, Aydelot, he put his hand comfortingly on Asher's shoulder. "Remember in this affliction that your ambition may stake out claims and set up houses, but it takes a baby's hand to really anchor the hearthstones. And sometimes it takes even more. It needs a little grave as well. I understood from Shirley that some financial loss last fall prevented you from going back to Ohio. You wouldn't leave Grass River now if you could."

Dr. Carey's face was magnetic in its earnestness, and even in the sorrow of the moment Asher remembered that he had known Virginia all her life and he wondered subconsciously why the two had not fallen in love with each other.

And so it was that as the Sunflower Inn had received the first bride and groom to set up the first home in the Grass River Valley, so the first baby born in the valley opened its eyes to the light of day in the same Sunflower Inn. And out of this sod cabin came the first form to its burial. And it was the Sunflower Ranch that gave ground for God's Acre there for all the years that followed. It happened, too, that Jim Shirley had been the friendly helper at this bridal supper and happy house-warming more than three years ago, so now it was Jim Shirley who in the hour of sorrow was the helper still.

The winter season passed with the passing of the blizzard. The warm spring air was delicious and all the prairies were presently abloom with a wild luxuriance of flowers.

Asher carried Virginia to the sunshine at the west window from which she could see the beautiful outdoor world.

"We wouldn't leave her now if we could," she declared as she beheld all the glory of the springtime rolling away before her eyes.

"Bank accounts bring comforts, but they do not make all of life nor consecrate death. We have saved our first-born back to the prairie. It is sacred soil now," Asher replied.

And then they talked of many things, but mostly of Dr. Carey.

"I have known him from childhood," Virginia said. "He was my very first sweetheart, as very first sweethearts do. He went into the war when he was young. I didn't know much that happened after that. He was at home, I think, when you were in that hospital where I first saw you, and—oh, yes, Asher, dear, he was at home when your blessed letter came to me up in the old greasy deuce of hearts and the sunflower. It was this same Bo Peep—Carey's boy, who brought it to me up in the glen behind the big house. Horace left Virginia just after that." Virginia closed her eyes and lived in the past again.

"I wonder you never cared for Dr. Carey, Virgie. He is a prince among men," Asher said, as he leaned over her chair.

"Oh, I might, if my king had not sent me that sunflower just then. It made a new world for me."

"But I am only a common farmer, Virgie, just a king of a Kansas claim, just a home-builder on the prairie," Asher insisted.

"Asher, if you had your choice this minute of all the things you might be, what would you choose to be?" Vir-

ginia asked.

"Just a common farmer, just a king of a Kansas claim," Asher replied. Then looking out toward the swell of ground beside the Grass River school-house where the one little mound of green earth marked his firstborn's grave, he added, "Just a home-builder on the prairie."

The Grass River settlers who had weathered the hurricane of adversity, poor, but patient and persistent still, planted, sometimes in tears to reap in joy, sometimes in hope, sometimes in heartless hope deferred, but failed not to keep on planting. Other settlers came rapidly and the neighborhood thickened and broadened. And so, amid hardships still, and lack of opportunity and absence of many elements of culture, a sturdy, independent, God-fearing people struggled with the soil, while they lifted their faces full of hope and determination to the skies above them.

What of the prairies they could subdue they bent to their service. What they could not overcome they defied the right to overcome them. There were no lines of social caste. They were needy or full together.



A Clump of Narcissus (Daffodils) in Perennial Border.

They shared their pleasures; together they laughed at calamities; and they comforted one another in every sorrow.

A new town was platted on the claim that Dr. Carey had preempted where the upper fork of Grass River crossed the old Sunflower trail. The town of Wyckton was named. Wyckton, a founders ruled her baby boy with membership among them. Moreover, they declared their intentions of forever heating back all efforts at saloon building within the corporation's limits, making Wyckton their sworn enemy for all time.

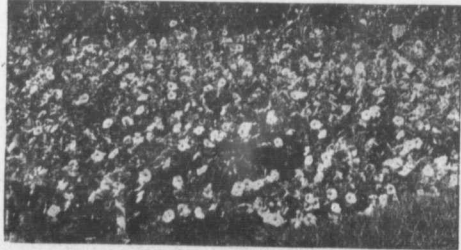
One summer Sabbath afternoon, three years after the grasshopper raid of dreadful memory, Asher came again to the little grave in the Grass River graveyard where other graves were consecrating the valley in other hearts. This time he bore in his arms a dimpled, brown-eyed baby boy who cooed and smiled as only babies can and flung his little square fists aimlessly about in baby joy of living.

"We'll wait here, Thaine, till your mother comes from Bennington to tell us about the little baby that just came to our settlement only two days ago and staked out a claim in a lot of hearts."

Little Thaine had found that his fist and his mouth belonged together, so he offered no comment. Asher sat down on the warm sod with the baby on his knees.

"This is your little sister's grave, Thaine. She stayed with us less than a day, but we loved her then and we love her still. Her name was to have been Little Nell. Her name was to have

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A plot of Dwarf Rose-pink Petunias on July 16th. Seed was sown indoors on March 15th.