



THE real Christmas tree is the tree of life, its branches spread over all lands; and its leaves are for the healing of the nations.—Amos R. Wells.

Winning the Wilderness

By Margaret Hill McCarter.

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CHAPTER I.

The Blessing of Asher.

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

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

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

Jean Aydelot, the first of the name in America, driven from France by his family on account of his Huguenot beliefs, had settled in Virginia. He had quickly grasped the American ideals of freedom, the while he assimilated easily with the exclusive English aristocratic Cavaliers, something of the lust in his blood, however, kept him from rooting too firmly at once. It happened that when a band of Quaker exiles had sought refuge in Virginia and was about to be driven out by the autoeratic Cavaliers, young Aydelot, out of love for the cause vehemently championed their cause vehemently, so that he might have succeeded, but for one family—the wealthy and aristocratic Thaines, through the son

of this family the final expulsion of these Quakers was accomplished. The woman in the case was Mercy Pennington, a pretty Quakeress with whom young Jerome Thaine fell in love, promising protection to all her people in return for her hand. When she refused his offer, the Thaines carried the day, and the Quakers again became exiles. Jean Aydelot followed them to Pennsylvania and married Mercy Pennington, who was promptly disowned by the Quaker Church for this marriage to one outside its membership.

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

Francis Aydelot had crossed the

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

From such ancestry came Asher Aydelot, the happiest of the country boy that ever waked the echoes of the old Ohio woodlands, or dared the currents of her mad little rivers, or whistled fearlessly at he scampers down the dusty pike road in the soft black summer nights.

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

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

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

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

"But, Francis, a man must make



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some plans for himself. Asher may not agree," Mrs. Aydelot spoke earnestly.

"How can our boy know as well as his father does what is best for him? He must agree, that's all. We have gone over this matter often enough together. I won't have our son's life and lay in my family. He's gone away and nobody knows where he is, just when his father needs him to take the care of the tavern off his hands."

"What made him get away from Cloverdale?" Mrs. Aydelot asked.

"Nobody seems to know exactly. He left just before his brother, Frank, married that Leigh girl up in the Clover valley somewhere. But everything's settled for Asher. He will be marry-

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ing one of the Cloverdale girls pretty soon and stay right in town. We'll take it up with him now. There's no use waiting."

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

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

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

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

He drew himself up with military steadiness as he spoke.

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

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

It was the eighth April after the opening of the Civil War. Asher had just come home from two years of army service on the western plains. Few changes had come to the young man, community; but to the young man who eight springtimes ago, had gone out as a pink-cheeked drummer boy, the years had been full of changes. He was now twenty-three, straight as an Indian, lean and muscular as a

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