

Winning the Wilderness

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don't you do more of it? Thaine asked.

The girl answered, smiling: "Just between us two, I hope to do a piece good enough to sell and help to lift the price of alfalfa seed a bit."

"By the way, I brought the first load of seed over just now. Where's Uncle Jim?" Thaine asked, trying not to let the pity in his heart show itself in his eyes.

"Uncle Jim is breaking down—weeds, I mean—for fall sowing. Wait a minute and I'll get you the money he left for you."

Thaine threw himself down in the shade beside Leigh's seat while she went into the house.

"I wish I didn't have to take that money, but I know better than to say a word," he said to himself. "Thank the Lord, the worried look is beginning to leave Uncle Jim's face, though. How could any of us get along without Uncle Jim?"

What little money he had to be worth so much, but it's the beginning of conquest," Leigh said as Thaine took the bills from her hand. "And it's a much more hopeful business to reclaim from booms and weeds than from this lonely old prairie as it was when Uncle Jim and your father first came here."

"It is just the same old pioneer spirit, though, and you are acting to manage just like my father fought loneliness, and besides, Asber Aydelot had Virginia Thaine to help him to keep his courage up."

A sudden flash depended on his rudeness and he continued: "Of course you are going to the picnic? You'll have to start early. It's a goodish way to 'The Cottonwoods.' The Sandflower Ranch needs my talents, so I can't go with the crowd, but I may drag in about high noon. I'll drive over in the buggy, and I'll try to make every minute to get off the wagon to ride home with me when it's all over."

"Maybe the pretty girls will all be preempted before you get there," Leigh replied.

"I know one that I hope won't be," Thaine said.

Leigh was bending over her drawing board and did not look up for a long minute. It was her gift to make comfort about her while she followed her own will unflinchingly. The breeze had blown the golden edges of her hair into fluffy ripples about her forehead and the den glint of August skies was reflected in her eyes, shaded by her long brown lashes. Thaine sat watching her every motion, as he always did when he was with her.

"Well," Leigh looked up with the query. "And what's to hinder your getting the pretty girl you want if she understands and you are swift enough to cut off the enemy from a flank movement?"

"The girl herself," Thaine replied.

"Serious! Tragical! Won't you give me that chrome-yellow tube by your elbow there? It was high reached for the paint and their hands met."

"Say, little Sketcher of Things, will you be missing me when I go to school next month? Or will your art and your ranch take all your thoughts?"

"I wish they would, but they won't," Leigh said. They will help to fill up the time, though."

"Leigh, may I bring you home to-morrow night? I don't go away the next day, and I won't see you any more for a long time."

"No, you may not," Leigh replied, looking up, and her sunny face framed by her golden-brown hair was winnily pleasing.

"Why not, Leigh? Am I too late?"

"Too early. You haven't asked Jo and been refused yet. But you are kind to put me on the 'waiting list.'"

Thaine was standing beside her now.

"I mean it. Has anybody asked you specially—to be your very particular escort?"

"Oh, yes. The very nicest of the crowd," Leigh's eyes were shining now. "But I've refused him," she added.

"Who was it?"

"Thaine Aydelot, and I refused him because it was good taste for me to do so. It's his last day at home—and—oh, I forgot what I was going to say."

"I wish you wouldn't make a joke of it, anyhow. Tell me why you are so unkind to an old neighbor and lifelong pal," Thaine insisted.

But Leigh made no reply.

"Tell me why you insist when by all the rules you are due to snake the prettiest girl in the crowd of the wagon and into your buggy. Why are you so enlisted to make all the other boys envy you?" Leigh had risen and stood beside the rustic seat, her arm across its high back.

"Because it is the last I've known of me," Leigh said. "I've known each other since childhood and have been playmates, chums, companions; because I am going one way and you another and our paths will widen more and more, and be wider now—oh, Leigh, because I want you."

He leaned against the back of U. S. seat and gently put one hand on her arm.

The yellow August sunshine lay on the level prairies beyond the river. The shining thread of waters wound

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away across the landscape under a play of light and shadow. The clover sod at their feet was soft and green. The big golden sunflowers hung on their stalks along the border of the lawn, and overhead the ripple of the summer breeze in the cottonwoods made a music like pattering raindrops. Under their swaying boughs Leigh Shierly stood, a fair, sweet girl. And nothing in the languorous beauty of the midsummer afternoon could have been quite so pleasing without her presence there.

She looked down at Thaine's big brown hand resting against her white arm, and then up to his handsome face.

"It would make me trouble for, for everybody. No, I'm coming home with the crowd on the hayrack." She lifted her arm and began to pull the petals from a tiny sunflower that lay on the seat beside her.

"Very well," Thaine was no longer in Thaine's tone. "Do you remember the big sunflower we found to send to Prince Quippl, once?"

"The one that should bring him straight from China to me," Leigh asked.

"You said that one was to tell him that you loved him and you knew it would bring him to you. But he never came."

"It's a way my principles have been doing," Leigh said with a little laugh. "If I were in China and you should send me a sunflower, I'd know you wanted me to come back."

"If I ever send you one you will know that I do," Leigh said. "Mean-

time, my prince will wear a sprig of alfalfa on his coat."

"And a cockle burr in his whiskers, and cerulean blue overalls like mine, and he'll drogue against a glow with scrap with the soil till the soil gets like," Thaine added.

"Like it got your father," Leigh commented.

"Oh, he's just one sort of a man by himself," Leigh declared. "A pretty good sort, of course, else I'd never have recommended him to be my father."

Good-bye. I'll see you across the crowd tomorrow."

He turned at once and left her.

"The Cottonwoods" was a picturesque little grove grown in the last decade about a rocky run down which in the springtime a full stream swept. There was only a little ripple over a stony bed now, with shallow pools lost in the deeper basins here and there. The grasses lay flat and brown on the level prairie about it. Down the shaded valley a light, cool breeze poured steadily. Beyond the stream a gentle slope reached far away to the foot of the three headlands—the purple notches of Thaine Aydelot's childhood fancies.

The day was ideal. Such days come sometimes in a Kansas August. The young people of the Grass River neighborhood had made merry half of the morning in the grove, and as they gathered for the picnic lunch someone called out:

"Jo Bennington, where's Thaine Aydelot? Great note for him to disappear when this Charity Ball was executed mainly for him."

"Better ask Todd Stewart. He's probably had Thaine kidnapped for this occasion," somebody else suggested.

"I tried to do it and failed," Todd

Stewart assented. "I don't need him in my business. He can start to school to-day if he wants to."

"Well, he don't want him to go, do you, Jo?"

"Oh, I don't care especially. I'm going away myself, but not to the University, but I'm not going till papa's elected," Jo replied.

"And if papa's defeated we stay home all winter, eh?" Todd questioned.

"That all depends," Jo replied.

"Of course it does. What is it, and who depends on it? Jo, I'll help you if you must defend yourself."

Thaine Aydelot bounced down from the rocky bank above into the midst of the company and became at once Jo's escort by common consent.

"Now, life's worth living, Thaine's here. Let's have dinner," the boys urged.

It was not Leigh Shierly's fault that Thaine should be placed between her and Jo at the spread of good things to eat; nor Jo's planning that. Todd should be between Thaine and Leigh, but nobody could be unhappy to-day.

In the late afternoon the crowd strolled in couples and quartets and groups up and down the picturesque place.

Thaine had been with Jo from the moment of his coming and Leigh was glad that she had not yielded to the request of the afternoon before. She had become a little separated from the company as she followed a trail of golden sunflowers down the edge of the wide space between the stream

and the foot of the headlands towering far beyond it. The sun had disappeared suddenly and the gleam of the blossoms dulled a trifle. Leigh sat down on a slab of shale to study the effect of the shadow.

"Are you still looking for a letter that will bring Prince Quippl back?" Thaine Aydelot asked as he climbed up from the rough stream bed to a seat beside her.

"I'm watching the effect of sunshine and shadow on the sundewers," Leigh replied.

"It will be shadow if you wait much longer. The clouds are gathering now and we must start home."

"Then I must be going too. It's a lovely, lovely place here, though. Some time I'm going to the top of those bluffs, away off there."

"Let's go up now," Thaine suggested.

"But it's too late. I mustn't keep the crowd waiting," Leigh insisted. "It's a stiff climb, too."

"I can drive up. I know a trail through the brush. Let me drive you up, Leigh. It won't be so long. There is something in the air, something up there," Thaine insisted.

"Well, be quick, Thaine. We'll get into trouble if we are late," Leigh declared.

The trail up the steep slope twisted its way back and forth through the low timber that covered the sides of the bluffs, and the two in the buggy found themselves shut away in its solitary windings.

"What a shadowy road," Leigh said. And see that cliff dropping down beyond that turn. How could there be such a romantic place out on these level prairies?"

"It was my fairy land when I was a little tot," Thaine replied. "I came here long ago and explored it myself."

"I'd like to come here sketching sometime. See how the branches meet overhead. The odors from the bluffs are like the odors of the woodland back in the Clover valley in Ohio. I remember them, yet, although I was so little when I left there," Leigh said, turning to Thaine.

He shifted the reins, and throwing his hat in the buggy before him, he pushed back the hair from his forehead.

"Leigh, will you let me take you home? I didn't ask Jo after all. Todd wouldn't wait long enough for me to do that, as I knew well enough he wouldn't. Don't be mad at me. Please don't," he pleaded.

"Why, I'm glad if you really want me to go with you, but you shouldn't have stayed away this morning."

"I did it on purpose. I knew Todd wouldn't let the car slip—nor Jo neither if I let him have it."

"You let him have it merely because you didn't want the chance to-day. Your kindness will be your undoing some day," Leigh said with a smile that took off the edge of sarcasm.

Thaine said nothing in response, and they climbed slowly to the top of the bluff, and stood at last on the crest of the middle headland.

Below them "The Cottonwoods" and the winding stream whose course, marked by the dark green line of shrubbery, stretched toward Grass River, far to the southeast. To the westward a wonderful valley of level prairie spread endlessly, wherein no line of shrubbery marked a water-course nor tree rose up to break the circle of the horizon. Over all this vast plain the sun shone with a smile as serene as in the west the sunlight had pierced a heavy cloudbank and was pouring through the rift in one broad sheet of gold mist from sky to earth. Purple and grey and richest orange, blended all in the

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