

A TEXAS FARM

Elsie pushed the old rocking chair near the window and sat down for a few minutes' rest and a fresh look at what was still interesting to her—the sky and prairie touching faces at the horizon line. Through the open door came a pleasant earthy smell, with now and then the sound of Alec's strong young voice encouraging the horses as he plowed. Nan, at the other side of the room, sniffed deeply as she covered another shelf of the cupboard with clean paper.

"Elsie! That's a real breath of nature. No factory smoke or garbage-barrel odors about that."

She stepped down from the box which she had been using in place of a step-ladder, and stood back to criticize.

"Our tableware makes quite a showing, doesn't it?" she said. "I didn't know we had so much till I began to pack it away on those shelves."

"It does seem queer to have only four rooms and no upstairs," said the younger girl, "but I don't care. There won't be so much to keep clean." She stooped to take up the great yellow cat that came rubbing against her gown.

"You precious old Tom Thumb! You haven't had half your share of petting lately, with all this moving business going on, have you? Nan, do you know what old Mrs. Tinkel said when I told her we were going to take Tom Thumb? She said we might depend on it we'd never have a luck; it was a bad sign to move a cat."

Nan jerked a chair into place against the wall resentfully.

"What has a cat to do with luck, I wonder? Old Mrs. Finkel has a sign for everything, and none of them ever comes true. We can't do worse than we did at Winover last year, with wages at the lowest and such prices on everything. Why, just look at dad and Alec. Elsie, can't you see a change in them already? Alec's shoulders are straightening right up and dad hasn't eaten so much ever since I can remember."

"Don't talk about Winover to me!" Elsie said. "I got so tired of looking at chimneys and factory smoke. And the noises!" She drew a long breath.

"And the smells!" added Nan.

"And Sammy Oliver's wife and those awful billboards! I tell you it seems good to have some clean sky to look at and be able to sleep at night!"

"I don't believe I am going to be a bit homesick," Nan said. "Of course we've only been here three days."

The warm February sun filled the little room and went far into the next, which had not yet been put fully to rights. Cook-stove and beds are the essentials of a home, and the girls had settled kitchen and sleeping-rooms first, leaving the sitting-room until they had more time and were rested.

For they were very tired with the excitement of breaking up their old home, and the long journey down from the North alone, in the wake of their household goods. Father and Alec had come on ahead to Texas, had spied out the land and built the little house.

It had come about rather suddenly this exodus from the old, tried things into the new. Andrew Garfield, who had come from a New England farm, was breaking down under factory work; his son hated the confinement of it, and the girls pined for the country and pure air. So it came to pass that they put their affairs in shape and were off for Texas.

Mr. Garfield and Alec had been there two months and the girls three days. Three such busy days! The girls had no time for exploring, no time for thought or homesickness. The men had gone straight to plowing, for it was time, the crops were under way, and the girls were left to do as they pleased.

It seemed to them both that they were set free. The great spaces, the pure sky, the sweet air delighted them. They could not breathe deep enough. What a silence after whirling Winover and the clatter of the long railroad journey! And such appetites!

Nan sang as she straightened the furniture and swept the floor with smart strokes of the new broom, twenty miles of plain prairie lay between her and the next house, but she did not think of that as she swept and sang.

"Nan!" Elsie's voice broke in sharply. "Do come and see what this is coming!"

"Somebody coming?" Nan ran to the window.

"I've been watching it ever since I sat down here. At first I couldn't make it out at all. There, now! It's a horse and—what a queer-looking man!"

The horse was a thin cayuse with a loping gait. Astride sat a slight figure, under a wide-brimmed hat, which touched the shoulders behind.

"It's an Indian!" Elsie whispered, beginning to get frightened.

"No, it isn't, and anyway, dad and Alec are right here. There, it has stopped to speak to them and they are pointing this way. Why, Elsie, don't you see? It's a man at all. It's a woman!"

It was a woman. She rode up to the door and hopped nimbly from the saddle. Under the brim of the big hat her face showed brown and seamed, with one wisp of gray hair, which the wind had blown loose, swaying over it. Her calico skirt was tucked into a pair of overalls, which stayed in place by being pinned tightly about her waist.

The girls stared at her in amazement. They had never seen such a woman, so brown, so strangely garbed. And she stared at them as if they were flowers of some new, bright crop which had come to unnatural bloom on the prairie.

"Howdy!" she said.

She sank down on the door-step a little wearily, keeping the reins in her hand. Her keen eyes took in everything.

"You'd better take this chair," said Nan.

"Keep the cheer to yourself, honey. I'll set my hat where I can have an eye handy on this critter. That'd be right smart o' trouble to ketch him again, I can tell you, if I turned him loose." She took off her hat and set it on her knee, smoothing her hair back with one lean hand. "How long you've been haw?" she queried.

"Just three days."

"Wal, yo' are powerful slicked up. I must say. And yo' have got a heap o' smac."

"Wal, there are only four rooms!" cried Elsie.



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The woman laughed. "I have got one," she drawled. "Yo' can stand in the middle and touch sides every way, to say nothing about overhead. I live in a dugout. It ain't as sightly as this kind of building, but I consider it will stand a cyclone high as well. And yo' can fix it up easier. That's always some sod left. Cyclones don't take to sod, somehow, the way they do to b'oda."

The girls looked at each other. "Yo' all the women-folks yo' pa's got?" the woman went on.

Nan nodded.

"Wal, yo' can't get so mighty lonesome, seeing that's two of yo'. My nan heard that yo' were expected, and I reckoned yo'd be glad to see some one by this time, so that's how I'm come hyar."

She fumbled in the pocket of her overalls and drew out a snuff-bow filled with black dust and little chewed sticks. She dipped a stick into the snuff and rubbed it quickly over her teeth, then shut it into the box and put the box away. The girls looked at each other with horror in their eyes.

The clock was ticking round toward four. There was still much to be done in putting the house to rights and supper was to be planned and prepared. Would this strange woman never go?

Her pony was stamping up the turf about the door, where the first rain would make great mud-holes. Elsie moved nervously with every sound of the restless hoofs.

"I don't think we shall be lonesome," Nan said, coldly. "There is always so much to be done where one keeps house, you know, and especially after moving. We came from a big town full of noise, and it seems delightful to be just by ourselves—no neighbors, no children—"

The woman's eyes flashed at her sharply.

"Yo' ain't lived here thirty year, as I have," she said. "When yo' have yo'll be mighty glad of any kind of noise, if it ain't no'n a jack-rob-bit squealin'. As fo' neighbors—"

She paused. "Wal, yo'll be willin' to ride twenty-odd miles, as I have this afternoon, just to look on a woman's face?"

She rose stiffly, with her old hat in her hand.

"I won't take no mo' of the time yo' are wanting fo' other things," she said. "I'll just mosey back the way I come. But when yo' get lonesome enough to want to see somebody, yo'll always find me to home just this side of the Little Arroyo. Neighbors come in mighty handy sometimes."

She put her foot into the stirrup and sprang to her place, and while the girls still stood, trying to think of something that might be said, she rode away.

"Well, how did you like your visitor?" Alec asked, when he came in to supper.

"Like her!" cried Elsie. "She was awful! Look here!" She caught his arm and dragged him to the door, pointing to the mangled turf. "That is what her old pony did."

"Oh, I'll fix that," Alec said, laughing. "Who was she, anyway?"

"I don't know," Elsie said. "She didn't tell us her name and we didn't ask. She said she lived just this side of the Little Arroyo, wherever that is."

"Oh, yes, I know," Alec nodded. "It's due north from here. Straight prairie between, and nothing else. I guess, father, she is the wife of that man we talked with over at Central City. You remember him—Billy Cannon?"

"She's our nearest neighbor," Nan said, merrily, "but I don't think she will be running in to see us very often. Twenty miles is quite a distance to walk—or ride. And besides I don't think she liked us very well."

"I hope you treated her well," said Andrew Garfield. "These prairie folk are very sensitive, and we might be glad to ask a favor of her some time."

"Hoe-cake! Hoe-cake! Here's your hoe-cake!" sang Elsie, rapping on the table to call them to supper.

In due time the house was put in order and after that there was nothing to do but to keep it tidy. Cook-ing became a monotony. One cannot do much with pecan and corn-meal and molasses, and the girls pined for the little corner grocery to which they had been wont to run.

There were long hours of leisure and loneliness. The girls got out their old school-books and did a little algebra, but it was dreary work, and they read all that they had to read over and over and wrote long letters.

Then they tried helping out-of-doors and finally, when the weather permitted, they made a great flower-bed and planted there the seed of many delicate things which were to burn to death before they would fairly come to maturity.

Then came a wonderful time of blossom, when the prairie all round, as far as eye could see, was a thing

of tints and beauty. Phlox, verbenas, red and white and purple, and great patches of gleaming blue lupine shone in the fresh, fine buffalo grass. The chaparral gathered a little grace from nature's general bounty. Even mesquit and cacti seemed to have their place under the blue sky that smiled impatiently upon all.

The girls plucked flowers to their hearts' content, and the little house was sweet and bright all day long. Sometimes the farm horses went afield with great bunches of scarlet and purple nodding in their head-stalls.

The rainy season was over, all the grayness and wetness fled, and the sun had come to his own again. Who could be homesick in the midst of such wonders?

Then one day Alec came back from Central City with a new saddle in his wagon and a pony leading at the rear wheels. If they could manage this between them for awhile there would be another as soon as it could be found.

After that there were glad days, when the girls took riding lessons turn and turn about, while the pony trotted obligingly in a circle round the driven stake. It was not long before rope and stake were discarded and the pony took them on many a merry gallop over the prairie.

Now spring is the best part of the year on the prairie. For a time nature glows and pulsates with riotous vigor; then her color dims and her glad heart wearies.

The really hot days came singly at first, then in twos and threes, then in a host-like succession, until the water in the cistern shrank and the young corn rustled its blades in a very fever of thirst. The nights gave no relief. The very darkness throbed with heat and stillness.

"They say this summer is going to be a blisterer," Alec remarked, as he came in to dinner. "Suppose you can stand it, girls?"

"Oh, yes!" Nan spoke up quickly. She felt her father's dear eyes upon her. After all, it was no worse for them than for him, and very bravely she and Elsie made resolute never to let him or Alec see them blench. This hot weather could not last forever. The crops were doing finely, and the drought here, in this first year on the farm would put them in the way of more comforts than they had ever known.

That was in the beginning. Afterwards were times when the girls dared not meet each other's eyes or come upon each other suddenly unawares. Oh, for a bit of ice, for a long drink of water that refreshed, and did not taste of the cistern! Oh, for a tree that would cast a shadow, for something to see besides land and sky ever meeting, yet ever apart!

One night when the girls knelt down to pray Elsie suddenly lifted her head.

"Nan," she whispered, "I am going to pray for my father and mother."

"Why, Elsie," Nan said, "I've prayed for rain every night for three weeks."

It was a long time since Alec had been to Central City. There must be letters and papers waiting there, with perhaps some news from the weather-wise which would gladden their fearful hearts. So Alec started very early one morning on the pony. It was an all day's ride to Central City and back.

The girls had always missed Alec, but never as they missed him that day. They could not work, for the heat and the silence and loneliness pressed upon them until it seemed they must shriek outright in effort to make a sound which would bring with it an echo. But there were no echoes on the prairie.

Mr. Garfield moved restlessly about in the house and out. Once Nan found him on his knees before the little chest in his room, with a faded tintype in his hand. She knew it was her mother's picture, and she would have stolen away and left him, but he caught sight of her over his shoulder.

"Come here, daughter," he said, "and see how you look this very minute. This is your mother, Nan, and she was the best woman that ever lived. I've been thinking about her more than usual to-day somehow, and I believe she is just as near us here in Texas as she ever was in Winover."

Nan sobbed a little when she told Elsie about it. Presently they heard him go out of the house.

"Gone to look at the grain again," Elsie said. It will just kill father if anything happens to the crops."

"It will kill us if anything happens to him," Nan sighed; but why she said it she did not know.

An hour later they found him lying between the house and the threshold with a dark flush on his face. They dragged him into the house and got him upon his own bed. He had a pulse and they could see that he breathed, but that was all. Was it sunstroke or apoplexy? They did not know.

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Something came to Nan like a whisper as she looked on the dear, unconscious face.

"Yo'll always find me at home just this side of the Little Arroyo. Neighbors come in mighty handy sometimes."

The Little Arroyo—due north—straight prairie between. Nan took her hat down from the nail.

"I'm going to find that woman, Elsie," she said, simply. She stooped and kissed her father once and Elsie twice. There was no need of more to be said between them. Then she ran quickly out of the house. Within three minutes she had led Old Bob, the fastest horse of the pair, out of the stable, and was fitting the pony's saddle upon him.

Nan was hardly upon his back before he was off. At first she had all she could do to keep in the saddle and hold him to his course. Her heart thumped in her side, her anxious thoughts were back in the farmhouse with her stricken father and Elsie. She urged on the old horse that was already doing his best. Once she cried out a prayer, and old Bob leaped as if he felt her need anew in every fibre.

Twenty miles—twenty miles! His hoofs beat out the words with a dreary rhythm. Presently Nan became aware that she was farther from home than she had ever been before. The prairie began to take on a strange look, streaks of chaparral ran into the sky; clumps of scrub-oak, dwarfed and twisted, shook their thirsty leaves at her as she passed. Was she keeping in the right direction?

The sun was still at her left shoulder as it had been when she started, but even a little going astray means much on the prairie. She had lost track of time and space.

Then suddenly something sprang up out of the ground quite close—a heap of dirt with a stovepipe in it and a shack of boards near. There was a hole in the dirt-heap and a woman before it with her lean hand shading her eyes. The woman held out her arms as Old Bob galloped up and Nan fell into them.

"Wal, I reckoned yo'd be coming long one of these days," was what the woman said. She was as unkempt as ever, the stain of snuff was on her teeth, and she squinted in the hot light, but to Nan she looked like an angel. She drew the girl in out of the sun and brought her a pan of water.

"Sunstroke!" she commented, when Nan had gasped out her tidings. "It ain't no mo'n wha yo' might expect. Yo' paw ain't seasoned through yet, I reckon."

A lean, unshaven man came clouching in from somewhere and looked with amazement at Nan.

"Yo', Bill," said his wife, "yo' fix that cayuse ready fo' business."

She took the overalls down from their peg and stuffed her limp skirts into them. By the time she had equipped herself the pony was at the door.

"Yo' climb yo' hoss and foller," she commanded Nan. "I'm goin' right on. Keep in sight if yo' can. Yo' hoss is nigh winded, and anyway he is built too high to keep up with this critter of mine."

She settled herself in the saddle and shook the reins. The cayuse stretched out his long neck and the race began.

Never in his best days could old Bob have kept up with the limber little prairie pony ahead of him. Nan urged him to the top of his speed, but the best he could do was to keep in sight. Hope was in the girl's heart and a great humility all so, for she felt somehow that this man, whom she had despised would be able to render a blessed service.

The afternoon had passed in a way that Elsie must ever remember. She had done some ineffectual things for her father, and when she had done them she sank on her knees beside the bed and laid her lips to his hand and prayed and waited.

Suddenly came the thumping of hoofs without, and as she sprang up a woman entered at the door of the next room—a woman in overalls, with a wide-rimmed hat in her hand. She just glanced at the girl and went on to the sick man's side.

"Bring me some cloths and water," she said, "and light a fire." "Pears like I know sunstroke when I see it!"

When Nan came in a little while later she found her father with his head packed in wet towels and with hot things at his feet, slowly coming back to consciousness.

He was able to speak to Alec when the boy came riding home through the breathless night with a great bundle of letters and a fat-shin-ving with glad tidings, able to speak and smile and take the trembling hand of the boy as he bent over him. A look passed between them, asking on one side, answering on the other.

"The bulletins promise rain for Thursday," Alec said, speaking the words in such quiet fashion as he had not dreamed possible when he heard the news.

Andrew Garfield turned away his face and shut his eyes. But when Nan laid her hand on his cheek it was wet.

Billy Cannon's wife stayed that night and most of the next day, for the pony, true to his reputation, wandered far, and was not easily brought back into captivity. But before that time the girls had learned to know their neighbor well, and to put a right value upon "the many excellent qualities which radiated from her unpromising personality."

"You saved father's life," Nan said when the time for good-by came. Elsie was hanging on her shoulder and her hand was in that of the prairie woman. "We can never repay you, never—never!"

The prairie woman's eyes rested softly on the fervent young face.

"Never is a long time," she drawled. "Let me tell yo', honey, I had a li'l gal once, and she died—burned right up with the fever betwix' two days. Life ain't been just the same to me since. She was my onliest one. I know I ain't just what I'd have had if she had lived. I'd have had a house of my own, maybe, and things in it. It ain't much of a place to ask young folks to, but some day, when yo' are hancing round without anything to do, if one of yo' yo'n rid will jump on to that pony of yo'n and ride out to see me—wal, I won't say how I'll feel about it, but I reckon yo'll find out."

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