

THE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

Laura and Mary were up next morning earlier than the sun. They ate their breakfast of cornmeal mush with prairie-hen gravy, and hurried to help Ma wash the dishes. Pa was loading everything else into the wagon and hitching up Pet and Patty.

When the sun rose, they were driving on across the prairie. There was no road now. Pet and Patty waded through the grasses, and the wagon left behind it only the tracks of its wheels.

Before noon, Pa said, "Whoa!" The wagon stopped.

"Here we are, Caroline!" he said. "Right here we'll build our house."

Laura and Mary scrambled over the feed-box and dropped to the ground in a hurry. All around them there was nothing but grassy prairie spreading to the edge of the sky.

Quite near them, to the north, the creek bottoms lay below the prairie. Some darker green tree-tops showed, and beyond them bits of the rim of earthen bluffs held up the prairie's grasses. Far away to the east, a broken line of different greens lay on the prairie, and Pa said that was the river.

"That's the Verdigris River," he said, pointing it out to Ma.

Right away, he and Ma began to unload the wagon. They took out everything and piled it on the ground. Then they took off the wagon-cover and put it over the pile. Then they took even the wagon-box off, while Laura and Mary and Jack watched.

The wagon had been home for a long time. Now there was nothing left of it but the four wheels and the part that connected them. Pet and Patty were still hitched to the tongue. Pa took a bucket and his ax, and sitting on this skeleton wagon, he drove away. He drove right down into the prairie, out of sight.

“Where’s Pa going?” Laura asked, and Ma said, “He’s going to get a load of logs from the creek bottoms.”

It was strange and frightening to be left without the wagon on the High Prairie. The land and the sky seemed too large, and Laura felt small. She wanted to hide and be still in the tall grass, like a little prairie chicken. But she didn’t. She helped Ma, while Mary sat on the grass and minded Baby Carrie.

First Laura and Ma made the beds, under the wagon-cover tent. Then Ma arranged the boxes and bundles, while Laura pulled all the grass from a space in front of the tent. That made a bare place for the fire. They couldn’t start the fire until Pa brought wood.

There was nothing more to do, so Laura explored a little. She did not go far from the tent. But she found a queer little kind of tunnel in the grass. You’d never notice it if you looked across the waving grass-tops. But when you came to it, there it was—a narrow, straight, hard path down between the grass stems. It

went out into the endless prairie.

Laura went along it a little way. She went slowly, and more slowly, and then she stood still and felt queer. So she turned around and came back quickly. When she looked over her shoulder, there wasn't anything there. But she hurried.

When Pa came riding back on a load of logs, Laura told him about that path. He said he had seen it yesterday. "It's some old trail," he said.

That night by the fire Laura asked again when she would see a papoose, but Pa didn't know. He said you never saw Indians unless they wanted you to see them. He had seen Indians when he was a boy in New York State, but Laura never had. She knew they were wild men with red skins, and their hatchets were called tomahawks.

Pa knew all about wild animals, so he must know
78 Highlighters about wild men, too. Laura thought he would show
her a papoose some day, just as he had shown her
fawns, and little bears, and wolves.

For days Pa hauled logs. He made two piles of them,
one for the house and one for the stable. There began
to be a road where he drove back and forth to the
creek bottoms. And at night on their picket-lines Pet
and Patty ate the grass, till it was short and stubby all
around the log-piles.

Pa began the house first. He paced off the size of it
on the ground, then with his spade he dug a shallow
little hollow along two sides of that space. Into these
hollows he rolled two of the biggest logs. They were
sound, strong logs, because they must hold up the
house. They were called sills.

Then Pa chose two more strong, big logs, and he rolled these logs onto the ends of the sills, so that they made a hollow square. Now with his ax he cut a wide, deep notch near each end of these logs. He cut these notches out of the top of the log, but with his eye he measured the sills, and he cut the notches so that they would fit around half of the sill.

When the notches were cut, he rolled the log over. And the notches fitted down over the sill.

That finished the foundation of the house. It was one log high. The sills were half buried in the ground, and the logs on their ends fitted snugly to the ground. At the corners, where they crossed, the notches let them fit together so that they were no thicker than one log. And the two ends stuck out beyond the notches.

Next day Pa began the walls. From each side he rolled up a log, and he notched its ends so that it fitted down over the end logs. Then he rolled up logs from the ends, and notched them so that they fitted down over the side logs. Now the whole house was two logs high.

The logs fitted solidly together at the corners. But no log is ever perfectly straight, and all logs are bigger at one end than at the other end, so cracks were left between them all along the walls. But that did not matter, because Pa would chink those cracks.

All by himself, he built the house three logs high. Then Ma helped him. Pa lifted one end of a log onto the wall, then Ma held it while he lifted the other end. He stood up on the wall to cut the notches, and Ma helped roll and hold the log while he settled it where it should be to make the corner perfectly square.

So, log by log, they built the walls higher, till they were pretty high, and Laura couldn't get over them

any more. She was tired of watching Pa and Ma build the house, and she went into the tall grass, exploring. Suddenly she heard Pa shout, "Let go! Get out from under!"

The big, heavy log was sliding. Pa was trying to hold up his end of it, to keep it from falling on Ma. He couldn't. It crashed down. Ma huddled on the ground.

She got to Ma almost as quickly as Pa did. Pa knelt down and called Ma in a dreadful voice, and Ma gasped, "I'm all right."

The log was on her foot. Pa lifted the log and Ma pulled her foot from under it. Pa felt her to see if any bones were broken.

"Move your arms," he said. "Is your back hurt? Can you turn your head?" Ma moved her arms and turned her head.

"Thank God," Pa said. He helped Ma to sit up. She said again, "I'm all right, Charles. It's just my foot."

Quickly Pa took off her shoe and stocking. He felt her foot all over, moving the ankle and the instep and

every toe. "Does it hurt much?" he asked.

Ma's face was gray and her mouth was a tight line.

"Not much," she said.

"No bones broken," said Pa. "It's only a bad sprain."

Ma said, cheerfully: "Well, a sprain's soon mended. Don't be so upset, Charles."

"I blame myself," said Pa. "I should have used skids."

He helped Ma to the tent. He built up the fire and heated water. When the water was as hot as Ma could bear, she put her swollen foot into it.

It was Providential that the foot was not crushed. Only a little hollow in the ground had saved it.

Pa kept pouring more hot water into the tub in which Ma's foot was soaking. Her foot was red from the heat and the puffed ankle began to turn purple. Ma took her foot out of the water and bound strips of rag tightly around and around the ankle. "I can manage," she said.

She could not get her shoe on. But she tied more rags around her foot, and she hobbled on it. She got supper as usual, only a little more slowly. But Pa said she could not help to build the house until her ankle was well.

He hewed out skids. These were long, flat slabs. One end rested on the ground, and the other end rested on the log wall. He was not going to lift any more logs; he and Ma would roll them up these skids.

But Ma's ankle was not well yet. When she unwrapped it in the evenings, to soak it in hot water, it was all purple and black and green and yellow. The house must wait.

Then one afternoon Pa came merrily whistling up the creek road. They had not expected him home from hunting so soon. As soon as he saw them he shouted, "Good news!"

They had a neighbor, only two miles away on the other side of the creek. Pa had met him in the woods. They were going to trade work and that would make it easier for everyone.

“He’s a bachelor,” said Pa, “and he says he can get along without a house better than you and the girls can. So he’s going to help me first. Then as soon as he gets his logs ready, I’ll go over and help him.”

They need not wait any longer for the house, and Ma need not do any more work on it.

“How do you like that, Caroline?” Pa asked, joyfully; and Ma said, “That’s good, Charles. I’m glad.”

Early next morning Mr. Edwards came. He was lean and tall and brown. He bowed to Ma and called her “Ma’am,” politely. But he told Laura that he was a wildcat from Tennessee. He wore tall boots and a ragged jumper, and a coonskin cap, and he could spit that anyone could spit tobacco juice. He could hit anything he spit at, too. Laura tried and tried, but she could never spit so far or so well as Mr. Edwards could.

He was a fast worker. In one day he and Pa built those walls as high as Pa wanted them. They joked and sang while they worked, and their axes made the

chips fly.

On top of the walls they set up a skeleton roof of slender poles. Then in the south wall they cut a tall hole for a door, and in the west wall and the east wall they cut square holes for windows.

Laura couldn't wait to see the inside of the house. As soon as the tall hole was cut, she ran inside. Everything was striped there. Stripes of sunshine came through the cracks in the west wall, and stripes of shadow came down from the poles overhead. The stripes of shade and sunshine were all across Laura's hands and her arms and her bare feet. And through the cracks between the logs she could see stripes of

prairie. The sweet smell of the prairie mixed with the sweet smell of cut wood.

Then, as Pa cut away the logs to make the window hole in the west wall, chunks of sunshine came in. When he finished, a big block of sunshine lay on the ground inside the house.

Around the door hole and the window holes, Pa and Mr. Edwards nailed thin slabs against the cut ends of the logs. And the house was finished, all but the roof. The walls were solid and the house was large, much larger than the tent. It was a nice house.

Mr. Edwards said he would go home now, but Pa and Ma said he must stay to supper. Ma had cooked an especially good supper because they had company.

There was stewed jack rabbit with whiteflour dumplings and plenty of gravy. There was a steaming-hot, thick cornbread flavored with bacon fat. There was molasses to eat on the cornbread, but because this was a company supper they did not sweeten their coffee with molasses. Ma brought out the little paper sack of pale-brown store sugar.

Then Pa brought out his fiddle.

Mr. Edwards stretched out on the ground, to listen.

But first Pa played for Laura and Mary. He played

their very favorite song, and he sang it. Laura liked it best of all because Pa's voice went down deep, deep, deeper in that song.

“Oh, I am a Gypsy King!

I come and go as I please!

I pull my old nightcap down

And take the world at my ease.”

Then his voice went deep, deep down, deeper than the very oldest bullfrog's.

“Oh,

I am

a

Gyp

sy

KING!”

They all laughed. Laura could hardly stop laughing.

“Oh, sing it again, Pa! Sing it again!” she cried, before she remembered that children must be seen and not heard. Then she was quiet.

Pa went on playing, and everything began to dance. Mr. Edwards rose up on one elbow, then he sat up, then he jumped up and he danced. He danced like a jumping-jack in the moonlight, while Pa’s fiddle kept on rollicking and his foot kept tapping the ground, and Laura’s hands and Mary’s hands were clapping together and their feet were patting, too.

“You’re the fiddlin’est fool that ever I see!” Mr. Edwards shouted admiringly to Pa. He didn’t stop dancing, Pa didn’t stop playing. He played “Money Musk” and “Arkansas Traveler,” “Irish Washerwoman” and the “Devil’s Hornpipe.”

Baby Carrie couldn't sleep in all that music. She sat up in Ma's lap, looking at Mr. Edwards with round eyes, and clapping her little hands and laughing.

Even the firelight danced, and all around its edge the shadows were dancing. Only the new house stood still and quiet in the dark, till the big moon rose and shone on its gray walls and the yellow chips around it.

Mr. Edwards said he must go. It was a long way back to his camp on the other side of the woods and the creek. He took his gun, and said good night to Laura and Mary and Ma. He said a bachelor got mighty lonesome, and he surely had enjoyed this evening of home life.

"Play, Ingalls!" he said. "Play me down the road!" So while he went down the creek road and out of sight, Pa played, and Pa and Mr. Edwards and Laura sang with all their might.

"Old Dan Tucker was a fine old man;
He washed his face in the frying-pan,
He combed his hair with a wagon wheel,
And died of the toothache in his heel.

“Git out of the way for old Dan Tucker!
He’s too late to get his supper!
Supper’s over and the dishes washed,
Nothing left but a piece of squash!

“Old Dan Tucker went to town,
Riding a mule, leading a houn’ . . .”

Far over the prairie rang Pa’s big voice and Laura’s little one, and faintly from the creek bottoms came a last whoop from Mr. Edwards.

“Git out of the way for old Dan Tucker!
He’s too late to get his supper!”

When Pa’s fiddle stopped, they could not hear Mr. Edwards any more. Only the wind rustled in the prairie grasses. The big, yellow moon was sailing high overhead. The sky was so full of light that not one star twinkled in it, and all the prairie was a shadowy mellowness.

Then from the woods by the creek a nightingale began to sing.

Everything was silent, listening to the nightingale's song. The bird sang on and on. The cool wind moved over the prairie and the song was round and clear above the grasses' whispering. The sky was like a bowl of light overturned on the flat black land.

The song ended. No one moved or spoke. Laura and Mary were quiet, Pa and Ma sat motionless. Only the wind stirred and the grasses sighed. Then Pa lifted the fiddle to his shoulder and softly touched the bow to the strings. A few notes fell like clear drops of water into the stillness. A pause, and Pa began to play the nightingale's song. The nightingale answered him. The nightingale began to sing again. It was singing with Pa's fiddle.

When the strings were silent, the nightingale went on singing. When it paused, the fiddle called to it and it sang again. The bird and the fiddle were talking to each other in the cool night under the moon.