



PRAIRIE DAY

Soft whickerings were close to Laura's ear, and grain rattled into the feed-box. Pa was giving Pet and Patty their breakfasts.

“Back, Pet! Don’t be greedy,” he said. “You know it’s Patty’s turn.”

Pet stamped her foot and nickered.

“Now, Patty, keep your own end of the box,” said Pa. “This is for Pet.”

Then a little squeal from Patty.

“Hah! Got nipped, didn’t you?” Pa said. “And serve you right. I told you to eat your own corn.”

Mary and Laura looked at each other and laughed. They could smell bacon and coffee and hear pancakes sizzling, and they scrambled out of bed.

Mary could dress herself, all but the middle button. Laura buttoned that one for her, then Mary buttoned

Laura all the way up the back. They washed their hands and faces in the tin washbasin on the wagon-step. Ma combed every snarl out of their hair, while Pa brought fresh water from the creek.

Then they sat on the clean grass and ate pancakes and bacon and molasses from the tin plates in their laps.

All around them shadows were moving over the waving grasses, while the sun rose. Meadow larks were springing straight up from the billows of grass into the high, clear sky, singing as they went. Small pearly clouds drifted in the intense blueness overhead. In all the weed-tops tiny birds were swinging and singing in tiny voices. Pa said they were dickcissels.

“Dickie, dickie!” Laura called back to them. “Dickie-bird!”

“Eat your breakfast, Laura,” Ma said. “You must mind your manners, even if we are a hundred miles from anywhere.”

Pa said, mildly, “It’s only forty miles to Independence, Caroline, and no doubt there’s a neighbor or so nearer than that.”

“Forty miles, then,” Ma agreed. “But whether or no, it isn’t good manners to sing at table. Or when you’re eating,” she added, because there was no table.

There was only the enormous, empty prairie, with grasses blowing in waves of light and shadow across it, and the great blue sky above it, and birds flying up from it and singing with joy because the sun was rising. And on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there.

In all that space of land and sky stood the lonely, small, covered wagon. And close to it sat Pa and Ma and Laura and Mary and Baby Carrie, eating their breakfasts. The mustangs munched their corn, and Jack sat still, trying hard not to beg. Laura was not allowed to feed him while she ate, but she saved bits for him. And Ma made a big pancake for him, of the last of the batter.

Rabbits were everywhere in the grass, and thousands of prairie chickens, but Jack could not hunt his breakfast that day. Pa was going hunting, and Jack must guard the camp.

First Pa put Pet and Patty on their picket-lines. Then he took the wooden tub from the side of the wagon and filled it with water from the creek. Ma was going to do the washing.

Then Pa stuck his sharp hatchet in his belt, he hung his powder-horn beside the hatchet, he put the patch-box and the bullet-pouch in his pocket, and he took his gun on his arm.

He said to Ma: "Take your time, Caroline. We won't move the wagon till we want to. We've got all the time there is."

He went away. For a little while they could see the upper part of him above the tall grasses, going away and growing smaller. Then he went out of sight and the prairie was empty.

Mary and Laura washed the dishes while Ma made the beds in the wagon. They put the clean dishes neatly in their box; they picked up every scattered twig and put it in the fire; they stacked the wood against a wagon wheel. Then everything about the camp was tidy.

Ma brought the wooden pannikin of soft soap from the wagon. She kilted up her skirts and rolled up her sleeves, and she knelt by the tub on the grass. She washed sheets and pillow-cases and white underthings, she washed dresses and shirts, and she rinsed them in clear water and spread them on the clean grass, to dry in the sun.

Mary and Laura were exploring. They must not go far from the wagon, but it was fun to run through the tall grass, in the sunshine and wind. Huge rabbits bounded away before them, birds fluttered up and settled again. The tiny dickie-birds were everywhere, and their tiny nests were in the tall weeds. And everywhere were little brown-striped gophers.

These little creatures looked soft as velvet. They had bright round eyes and crinkling noses and wee paws. They popped out of holes in the ground, and stood up to look at Mary and Laura. Their hind legs folded under their haunches, their little paws folded

tight to their chests, and they looked exactly like bits of dead wood sticking out of the ground. Only their bright eyes glittered.

Mary and Laura wanted to catch one to take to Ma. Again and again they almost had one. The gopher would stand perfectly still until you were sure you had him this time, then just as you touched him, he wasn't there. There was only his round hole in the ground.

Laura ran and ran, and couldn't catch one. Mary sat perfectly still beside a hole, waiting for one to come up, and just beyond her reach gophers scampered merrily, and gophers sat up and looked at her. But not one ever came out of that hole.

Once a shadow floated across the grass, and every

gopher vanished. A hawk was sailing overhead. It was so close that Laura saw its cruel round eye turned downward to look at her. She saw its sharp beak and its savage claws curled ready to pounce. But the hawk saw nothing but Laura and Mary and round, empty holes in the ground. It sailed away, looking somewhere else for its dinner.

Then all the little gophers came up again.

It was nearly noon then. The sun was almost overhead. So Laura and Mary picked flowers from the weeds, and they took the flowers to Ma, instead of a gopher.

Ma was folding the dry clothes. The little panties and petticoats were whiter than snow, warm from the sun, and smelling like the grass. Ma laid them in the wagon, and took the flowers. She admired equally the flowers that Laura gave her and the flowers that Mary gave her, and she put them together in a tin cup full of water. She set them on the wagon-step, to make the camp pretty.

Then she split two cold corn-cakes and spread them with molasses. She gave one to Mary and one to Laura. That was their dinner, and it was very good.

“Where is a papoose, Ma?” Laura asked.

“Don’t speak with your mouth full, Laura,” said Ma. So Laura chewed and swallowed, and she said, “I want to see a papoose.”

“Mercy on us!” Ma said. “Whatever makes you want to see Indians? We will see enough of them. More than we want to, I wouldn’t wonder.”

“They wouldn’t hurt us, would they?” Mary asked. Mary was always good; she never spoke with her mouth full.

“No!” Ma said. “Don’t get such an idea into your head.”

“Why don’t you like Indians, Ma?” Laura asked, and she caught a drip of molasses with her tongue.

“I just don’t like them; and don’t lick your fingers, Laura,” said Ma.

“This is Indian country, isn’t it?” Laura said. “What did we come to their country for, if you don’t like them?”

Ma said she didn’t know whether this was Indian country or not. She didn’t know where the Kansas line was. But whether or no, the Indians would not be here long. Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement. They could not know, because Washington was so far away.

Then Ma took the sadiron out of the wagon and heated it by the fire. She sprinkled a dress for Mary and a dress for Laura and a little dress for Baby Carrie, and her own sprigged calico. She spread a blanket and a sheet on the wagon-seat, and she ironed the dresses.

Baby Carrie slept in the wagon. Laura and Mary and Jack lay on the shady grass beside it, because now the sunshine was hot. Jack's mouth was open and his red tongue hung out, his eyes blinked sleepily. Ma hummed softly to herself while the iron smoothed all the wrinkles out of the little dresses. All around them, to the very edge of the world, there was nothing but grasses waving in the wind. Far overhead, a few white puffs of cloud sailed in the thin blue air.

Laura was very happy. The wind sang a low, rustling song in the grass. Grasshoppers' rasping quivered up from the immense prairie. A buzzing came faintly from all the trees in the creek bottoms. But all these sounds made a great, warm, happy silence. Laura had never seen a place she liked so much as this place.

She didn't know she had gone to sleep until she woke up. Jack was on his feet, wagging his stump tail. The sun was low, and Pa was coming across the prairie. Laura jumped up and ran, and his long shadow stretched to meet her in the waving grasses.

He held up the game in his hand, for her to see. He had a rabbit, the largest rabbit she had ever seen, and two plump prairie hens. Laura jumped up and down and clapped her hands and squealed. Then she caught hold of his other sleeve and hippety-hopped through the tall grasses, beside him.

"This country's cram-jammed with game," he told her. "I saw fifty deer if I saw one, and antelope, squirrels, rabbits, birds of all kinds. The creek's full of fish." He said to Ma, "I tell you, Caroline, there's everything we want here. We can live like kings!"

That was a wonderful supper. They sat by the camp fire and ate the tender, savory, flavory meat till they could eat no more. When at last Laura set down her plate, she sighed with contentment. She didn't want anything more in the world.

The last color was fading from the enormous sky and all the level land was shadowy. The warmth of the fire was pleasant because the night wind was cool.

Phoebe-birds called sadly from the woods down by the creek. For a little while a mockingbird sang, then the stars came out and the birds were still.

Softly Pa's fiddle sang in the starlight. Sometimes he sang a little and sometimes the fiddle sang alone. Sweet and thin and far away, the fiddle went on singing:

“None knew thee but to love thee,
Thou dear one of my heart. . . .”

The large, bright stars hung down from the sky. Lower and lower they came, quivering with music.

Laura gasped, and Ma came quickly. “What is it,

Laura?" she asked, and Laura whispered, "The stars were singing."

"You've been asleep," Ma said. "It is only the fiddle. And it's time little girls were in bed."

She undressed Laura in the firelight and put her nightgown on and tied her nightcap, and tucked her into bed. But the fiddle was still singing in the starlight. The night was full of music, and Laura was sure that part of it came from the great, bright stars swinging so low above the prairie.