CHILDREN OF THE COVERED WAGON

By Mary Jane Carr

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PREFACE

What would it have been like to leave all of the comforts of home—shelter, good food, and friendly neighbors—for the Oregon Territory in the middle of the nineteenth century? The answer to this question will become clear as you read the following story, for it chronicles the trials and tribulations of a company of pioneer men, women, and children who braved the dangers of the Oregon Trail in 1844.

Unlike many books of its kind, *Children of the Covered Wagon* provides a true and accurate picture of what pioneers heading west in a wagon train would have experienced. Readers will be drawn into the daily struggles of the pioneers as they trudged over a long and dangerous wilderness trail to reach their destination. Treacherous river crossings, scorching heat from the desert country, inhabitants of the Great Plains, and snow-capped mountains were just a few of the obstacles that routinely intruded themselves upon the weary travelers.

None but the hearty and adventurous dared to make the journey west, for disappointment and even death were common. The prospect of free land and a new start, however, caused some families to take on the risks associated with such a journey. With no guarantee that they would ever see the Oregon Territory, these brave pioneers left everything they knew, and nearly everything they owned, in the hope of a better life.

May each reader marvel at the daring exploits of the pioneers of bygone days who helped to settle the vast western wilderness territory.

Michael J. McHugh
Arlington Heights, IL
2005

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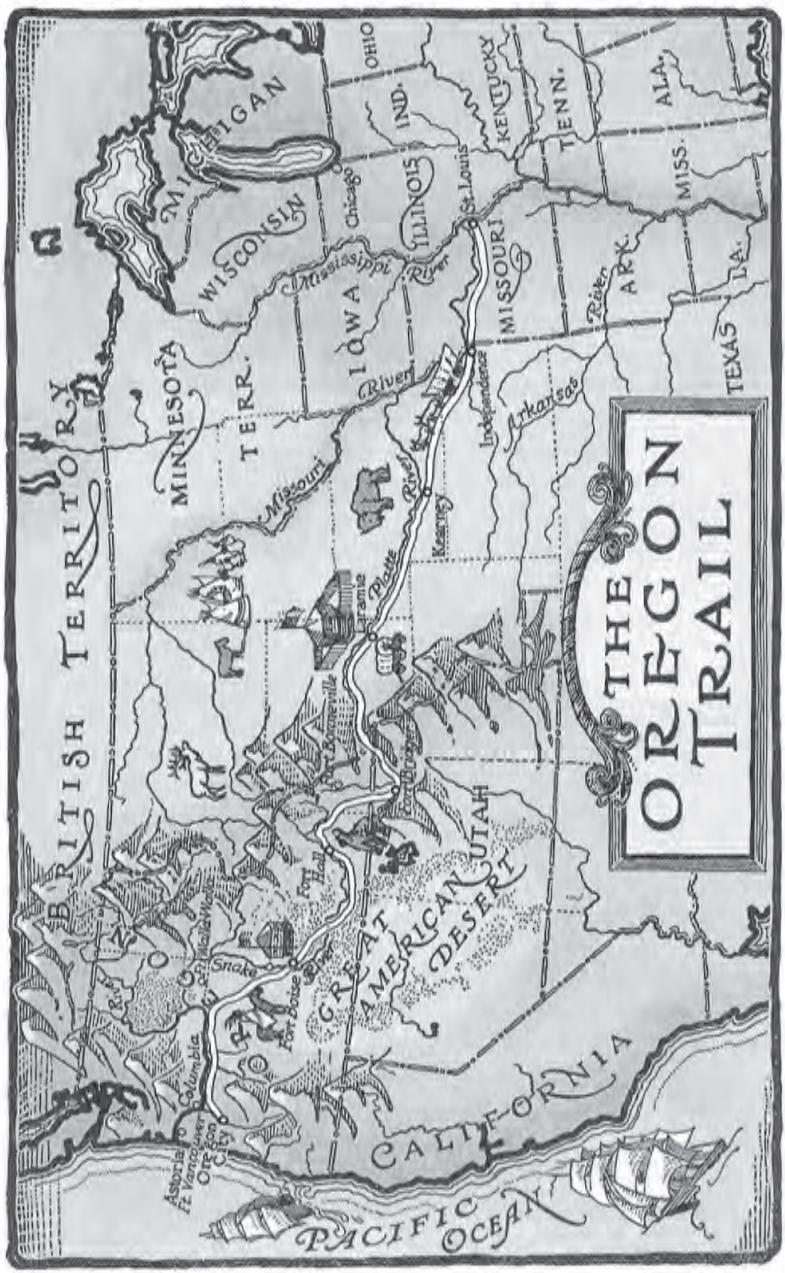


Chapter 1

Jerry and Jim

Jerry opened his eyes. It was dark, too dark for him to see anything. Someone was singing, he thought. The words of the song didn't make sense, but they had a pleasant, drowsy sound:

Creak, creak—squeak, squeak—
Thurump, thurump—creak, creak—

For a time Jerry lay listening contentedly, his mind misty with sleep. Finally he smiled. That wasn't a song at all. The branches of the big old walnut tree, brushing against the window of his bedroom, were making that squeaking, sing-song sound.

Funny! Last year—when he was ever so much younger—he used to say that the tree was scratching its fingernails on the windowpane. But how hot the room was tonight … and how thirsty he was! He put out his hand and touched something rough and hard. The touch awakened him thoroughly. He sat up, startled—and then he remembered. He wasn't at home. He was miles and miles away from home, in a place that they called "The Prairie," and his bed was in a covered wagon. The wagon was moving. Its wheels, rolling over the bumpy ground, were making that squeaking sound that he had mistaken for a song.

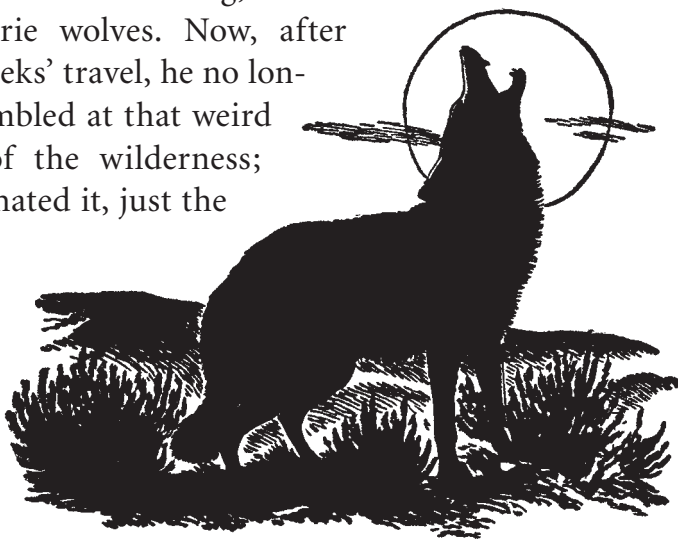
A wave of loneliness swept over Jerry. He was only a little boy—just seven—and the prairie was big and

filled with danger. He wasn't alone in the wagon on this dark night. His cousin, Jim, was with him; but Jim was asleep. By peering closely, Jerry could see him there in the dim light. He could touch him by reaching out his hand. Jim was going on eleven. He was a big boy, to Jerry, and he was wonderful. There was no need to be afraid of rattlesnakes, nor even Indians with tomahawks—if Jim were close. But he was asleep now, and to Jerry he seemed a thousand miles away.

There was tightness in Jerry's throat that had nothing to do with his thirstiness, and there was a hot stinging in his eyes. He was going to cry, but he remembered in time—emigrants didn't cry, and he was an emigrant—a pioneer. Jim said emigrants didn't cry. That little girl in the wagon ahead of theirs, Myra Dean, the doctor's little girl—she cried lots; but she was a girl, and a baby girl that was not even six. Jerry liked her, though. She had yellow hair that curled.

The wheels on Jim's side went down into a deep rut. Bump! Jerry had to brace himself to keep from tumbling over on Jim. Maybe that bump would wake Jim up. Jerry waited, hopefully, peering down at the sleeper. But no, Jim snuggled closer under the covers. Jerry sighed. Jim must be powerfully tired. How could he sleep through all the noise? It was strange how he could block out the creaking and groaning of big wagons, the plod-plodding of oxen hoofs, the lowing of cattle, the whinnying of horses, the barking of dogs, and the sorry cries of little calves that didn't like to be walking at night.

"Maaa! Maaa!" bawled the calves, as the shepherd dogs barked sharp, angry barks that seemed to say "stop your moaning!" There was another sound that had struck terror in Jerry's heart the first nights out on the prairie—the long, wild howl of prairie wolves. Now, after four weeks' travel, he no longer trembled at that weird voice of the wilderness; but he hated it, just the same.



Jerry coughed. His throat was so dry. The day had been hot and dusty, and they had had no water to drink since morning. That was why they were traveling at night. The men wanted to find water before they made the encampment. The cattle and horses and the big oxen that were drawing the wagons had to have water. Those poor little bawling calves were thirsty, too. Maybe they didn't understand why they were walking at night.

Sitting there in the lurching wagon, alone with his thoughts, the little boy felt a wild surge of rebellion against all this discomfort. Why did they have to go on this tiresome journey that seemed to have no end?

It was over two thousand miles! Six months it would take them, his uncle said, if they made good time.

Why did he have to leave his comfortable home—his house with its walls and roof that kept out the dust and heat and rain—his house that had a well of water right outside the door? Jerry swallowed, but the lump that filled his throat remained in place. He continued to think about his old home and his swing in the big old walnut tree … and ice cold water! And food that was cooked on a real stove and eaten on a table with a happy red tablecloth on it, filled his mind. More than any memory, however, the dearest thought was of old Auntie Kay, who had taken such good care of him (though she was not his true aunt) that he had scarcely ever missed his mother or father. Heaven, where Auntie Kay said they lived now, had not seemed far away when he was home. Now it seemed as distant as that strange place the wagons were going to … as far away as Oregon.

Sometimes, back home, when it was dark like this, Auntie Kay had held Jerry and rocked him to sleep. That was before he got to be seven, of course. But they had left Auntie Kay behind. She said that she had the rheumatiz and her leg joints were rusty—squeaky like the rocking chair. She was their faithful nanny, but she could never, never climb in and out of a wagon. So she remained back home in Missouri, and Jerry, who had never before been away from her, was out here, somewhere on the prairie, in a hot, jerking covered wagon, traveling toward Oregon. What did he care about Oregon? Wasn't Missouri good enough for anyone?

The words of Auntie Kay's rocking chair song came to Jerry's mind, and in a brave attempt at self-comfort, the lonely little boy started to sing, under his breath:

Honey Child, the stars are winkin'
And a-blinkin' in the sky;
Sly old sand man will come slinkin'
Round here, by and by …

Jerry tried hard to swallow the lump in his aching throat, but it popped out with a sound alarmingly like a sob. Then there was another and another—and then there were tears on his cheeks.

"Hi, there, Jerry—you awake?" It was Jim's voice.

Jerry didn't dare turn around and let Jim see the tears. A groping hand touched his back and traveled up to his shoulder. The wagon lurched, and Jerry fell back against Jim. He stayed that way, leaning close to Jim. With a swift swipe of his fist, he wiped his wet cheeks and nose. He didn't sniff, because if he did Jim would know that he had been—well, almost crying.

"Say, isn't this great?" Jim's voice was all glad and excited. "I wish we could sleep in a moving wagon every night, us two. I'll bet Father wishes he could be riding in a wagon instead of walking out there! Wonder where we'll be in the morning! Let's look out."

Jim drew back the canvas. They looked out in silence. There was a frail new moon that gave a soft light, making everything seem lovely. Their wagon was last in line that night. It would be first in line the next day—a law of the trail. Behind them wound the cow columns, long lines of slowly-moving livestock,

cattle, spare oxen, horses and mules, mounted herders riding alongside, rifles slung across their saddles. The prairie, that vast place of rolling miles, was not harsh and forbidding in this soft light. It was kind, somehow, and welcoming.

Jerry no longer felt alone. He was aware of the kinship, the nearness, of all the men and women and children in the long caravan that wound over the prairie. The cattle, oxen, mules, horses, and dogs—he felt a comradeship with them as well. He even grew to love the tired, thirsty little calves and Myra who was asleep in the wagon ahead. He would tell her, in the morning, how he had been awake at midnight … looking out.…

Creak, creak—squeak, squeak—
Thurump, thurump—creak, creak—

The funny song again … but it wasn't a wagon-squeak this time … it was Auntie Kay's rocking chair … back home.… Jerry's head rolled against Jim's breast. He was asleep, comforted. Jim laid him down on the mattress and stretched out beside him. There they slept, two little pioneers. Ahead of them lay the long trail that they must travel across burning prairies and stark plains, through raging rivers, over towering mountains, among suspicious Indians and savage beasts, in drenching rain and parching heat—on to Oregon.

The train of wagons, following the lead of scouts, finally reached water late at night—a clear, running

stream. The tired men and women drank deeply, gratefully, and washed their dusty feet and faces. Then the wagons were driven into a circular position, so that the tongue of each wagon overlapped the rear of the wagon ahead, forming a barricade through which it would have been difficult for an enemy to break. The oxen were then unyoked and turned out with the other livestock to drink.

Those parched oxen and cattle and horses and mules and dogs ran to that water! Those little bawling calves that Jerry had been worrying about buried their dry noses in the cold water and sucked it up with long, noisy slurps. It was better than milk! Oh, it was better than anything else in the world! Then, after they had drunk, some of the oxen were driven into the center of the circle of wagons where they would be safe in case of a stampede, not an uncommon disaster on the trail. The cattle, horses, and mules, with the spare oxen, had been driven into the night corral and hobbled to prevent them from running or wandering away. Well-armed guards had been posted to watch over the camp, and the covered wagon travelers had rolled up in their blankets and fallen into sound sleep. The day's work was over.

"Ta-ra! Ta-ra! Ta-ra!" The high, clear note of a bugle broke the quiet of morning. It was followed by the smart, ringing crack of the sentinels' rifles: Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sleepers in wagons and tents leaped up, aroused by this strange alarm clock of the trail. Another day of travel was beginning.

The dawn streaked the sky with rose and lavender. The wind brushed the prairie grass with silver. From a small grove, not far from the big encampment, came the sound of birds singing, prairie plovers and whippoorwills, the first bird songs the emigrants had heard in many days. Far off, dim and dream-like in the pearly dawn, bands of antelope flashed into view and then away.

Usually, the sentinels awakened the sleepers shortly after daybreak, as early as four o'clock, for the wagons must be on the way early, and preparation for travel took some two hours. But this morning, because of the long march of the day before, the getting-up signal wasn't sounded until five. Not all the sleepers were aroused by the call of the bugles and rifles. Jerry slept peacefully on.

"He must be powerfully tired to sleep through all that noise," thought Jim, looking down at his little cousin. "Too bad! It's a shame to wake him up," Jim said to himself, as he pulled on his trousers and shirt, "but it'd be a worse shame to let him miss breakfast."

They were going to have cornbread and molasses for breakfast—a real treat. Johnny cake, they called it. Mother had promised. She had a way of frying it in bacon drippings when there wasn't time for baking. Breakfast was never kept waiting for anyone on the trail.

Jim leaned down and called in Jerry's ear, "Hi, there, Jerry! Roll out!"

Jerry gave no sign of having heard. Jim tried another method. "Johnny cake and molasses for breakfast, Jerry!"

Jerry's eyes opened. "Hello!" he greeted Jim. "What did you say?"

Jim sniffed the air. "Smell that! Wow, it smells like johnny cake and molasses!"

Jerry sat up abruptly. "And is there water?" he asked.

"A whole river of it!" responded his taller relative.

Jerry scrambled into his trousers, wide awake now. A whole river of water, and johnny cake and molasses for breakfast. Could anything be better? The boys jumped from the wagon and made for the stream.

Now the encampment, so quiet before the call of the sentinels, was all a-bustle. Smoke was rising from dozens of fires where breakfasts were being cooked. Boys were carrying water in buckets from the stream. Shouting and laughing, they stopped, now and then, to splash one another. Girls were helping their mothers unpack pans and tin dishes. Men and dogs were rounding up the livestock. Drivers were yoking oxen. Mothers were hurrying, getting breakfasts and seeing that the little tots were dressed. There were happy morning greetings and laughter. Hardships were forgotten for the time. Everyone was excited about the birds. Spirits were high.

Jerry and Jim had been sleeping in a supply wagon behind the one they called the "Home Wagon," in which Jim's mother slept. The boys decided to head for the Home Wagon. Jerry looked with interest, as he walked, at the Deans' wagon, where little Myra slept. Myra wasn't in sight. She was still asleep—lazybones! She'd be late for her breakfast.

They found Jim's mother, a big apron tied over her calico dress, stirring something in a large bowl. She looked up at them and smiled. Her cheeks were pink from the warmth of the fire, and her dark hair, clipped close because of an attack of typhoid fever the summer before, curled about her face like a little girl's. Her eyes were very blue. Jerry often had a puzzled "remembering" feeling when he looked at her. She reminded him of someone—long ago. The little boy didn't realize that she reminded him of his own mother. In fact, she was his own mother's sister.

"Did you sleep well, boys?" she asked above her stirring.

"Fine!" answered Jim, heartily, adding, "We were awake a while last night and we looked out at the prairie. It was great in the moonlight." He said nothing about the sobs that had awakened him. "Is that johnny cake you're mixing, Mother?"

She nodded, turning to look at the skillet that sizzled on the grate above the coals and sent up the good smell of frying bacon rinds.

"Where are we now, Aunt Beth?" asked Jerry.

"Not far from the Platte Valley—the big buffalo place," his aunt answered brightly.

"Is that almost to Oregon?"

The anxious note in the child's voice didn't escape his aunt's ear. She smiled at him, but she answered soberly, "Not nearly to Oregon, Jerry—but nearer than we were yesterday morning. That is a good thing to remember, dear. Every day is nearer than yesterday."

Jerry nodded, reassured. He gave his eager attention, now, to the yellow batter that was spreading and bubbling in the hot grease. He didn't suspect that his aunt's cheery words had been spoken to reassure her own heart as well as his.

Chapter 2

Myra

Myra was awakened by a shaft of sunlight that came slanting through the opening in the back of her bedroom wagon. The place beside her on the wagon floor where her mother had slept was empty. The sun that played in Myra's blue eyes and made a halo of her yellow hair was warm, which meant that it was not an early morning sun. In fact, the hour was late, as hours were reckoned on the prairie. Nearly two hours had sped by since the sentinels had sounded the getting-up signal. Breakfasts had been eaten all along the line, and dishes had been washed and packed in readiness for the new march of the new day.

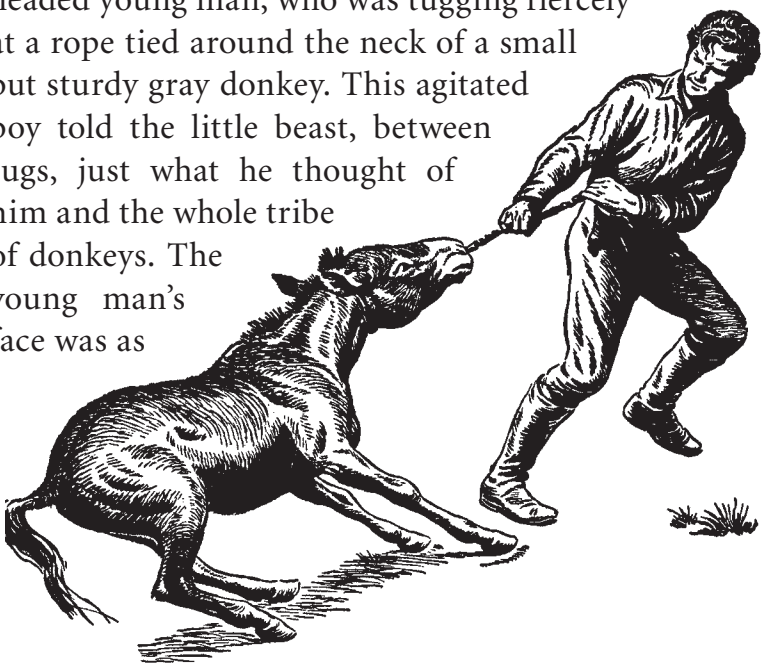
But it was not of breakfast that Myra thought first of all. It was not of her mother, even. Her eyes, losing the drowsiness of sleep, widened and darkened with alarm. She sprang up and began to search through the tumbled bedclothes. Her small fists thumped the bumps in the patchwork quilt frantically. Not there—not there. Oh, where, where? Down at the foot of the bed, she struck something hard. Holding her breath, she reached under the covers, and pulled out a doll, wrapped in a homespun shawl. She laughed aloud with relief. She kissed the doll over and over while she spoke breathlessly, "Oh, Annabelle, darling, aren't you glad it was only just a dream? Did you really think that the Indians had you and were going to scalp

all your hair off?" This would have been a difficult feat for even the most practiced warrior to perform, because Annabelle's hair was only painted on her china head—a wavy black mass that could never be tangled, that never had to be combed.

Myra's imagination now pictured her terrifying dream as a thrilling adventure in which she had played a heroic part. She sang as she rocked the doll in her arms. "Don't you cry any more, honey. You're all saved now. Myra saved you."

Then, her attention captured by the sound of an angry voice outside the wagon, the little girl crawled to the opening in the canvas and thrust her tousled head out. "Hello, Michael O'Reilly!" she said.

"Heaven keep me from harm!" shouted a red-headed young man, who was tugging fiercely at a rope tied around the neck of a small but sturdy gray donkey. This agitated boy told the little beast, between tugs, just what he thought of him and the whole tribe of donkeys. The young man's face was as



red as his hair, and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He let the rope fall slack in his hands and stared at Myra in surprise.

"Myra Dean, is that you? My-oh-my, I thought you were a leprechaun, poppin' out on me like that! Whatever are ye up to—not dressed yet and the whole crowd about to pull out? Come on, now, ya villain! None o' your monkey-shines!" The last portion of his comments were addressed to the donkey that had pulled back, taking advantage of the slackened rope. "Come back here, ya rogue! Thought you'd get away that time, did ya?"

"But, Michael, listen—I had to save Annabelle!"

"To save her? Whatever was she up to, now?"

"The Indians were scalping her. They had her by the hair. I screamed and screamed, but nobody came, so I had to save her all by myself!"

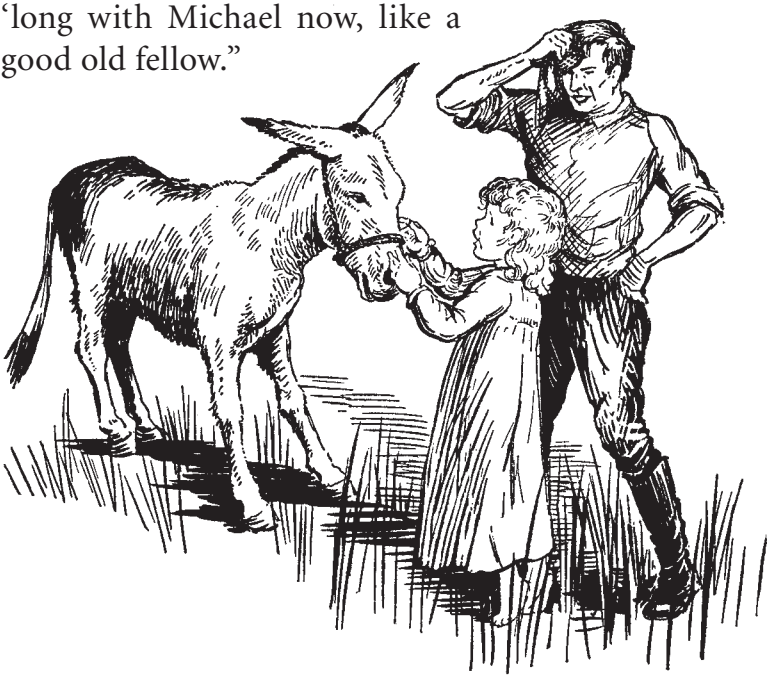
The little romancer sat back on her heels to observe the effect of this startling information on her audience. The young man fell into the spirit of the adventure, as Myra had known he would. Michael was as good at make-believe as she.

"Tsch! Tsch!" Michael made a sympathetic clicking sound with his tongue. "Think o' that, now! I didn't hear a single scream or I'd have come and knocked them Indians flat." He gave one last exasperated tug at the gray donkey's rope. "It's a good beatin' you're beggin' for, sirrah, and you're goin' to have it this minute." He reached for a braided rawhide whip that hung at the back of the wagon.

"Don't beat him, Michael! Let me show you!"

Myra laid Annabelle down and jumped from the wagon. Standing on bare tiptoe in the deep prairie grass, the little girl reached up to the donkey's white nose. The animal put his head down toward her hand, and she scratched his nose with her fingertips.

"Such a nice, good old fellow," Myra crooned. "Go 'long with Michael now, like a good old fellow."



"Well, I'm—a Frenchman!" exclaimed Michael O'Reilly, for the stubborn little creature that had resisted all his effort began to walk along very meekly.

"My-oh-my, it must be a gift from the Almighty you have, Myra!" the young man laughed. "I'd best be off with him now, while the influence is on him."

He started away, leading his donkey. Then he turned back, a worried frown creasing his forehead.

"That's no way for you to be, child—barefooted in the grass with rattlesnakes and all manner of varmints runnin' around." He lifted the small, nightgowned figure and placed her in the wagon. "Stay there, now, 'til I call one of the girls to get you dressed."

"Michael!" Myra called after him. "I'm going to name your donkey. I'm going to name him Beauty!"

Michael threw back his head and laughed. "I'd thought of another name for him," he said, "but if you say so, Beauty it is." He and the reformed donkey disappeared between the wagons.

Myra sat alone with Annabelle, and suddenly the happy glow went out of the morning. All around was the excitement and noise of last moment preparations for the day's travel. Men were shouting to one another as they hitched the oxen. Ox chains clanked as the big animals, frisky after the night's rest, tossed their heads, some of them trying to throw off the heavy yokes. Boys laughed and talked as they put the finishing touches of grease on the wagon hubs. No one noticed the little girl who sat with her doll in the Dean wagon. She felt forlorn and forsaken. In a few moments the long, lurching ride would begin. Myra began to cry. Where was her mother? Why hadn't she been called to breakfast with everyone else? She buried her face in Annabelle's homespun shawl and raised her voice in a wail of protest. As Jerry had observed, Myra knew how to cry. She had not yet learned the

hard lesson of self-reliance the little pioneers of those stern days knew by heart before their overland journey was at an end.

"There, Myra—it's all right, little girl!"

Myra lifted her tear-stained face. Laura Thompson, a girl of nineteen, pretty as a wild rose, who taught the small children Bible stories around the campfire in the evening, climbed into the wagon. Laura and her younger brother, Dan, were orphans who were working their way west by making themselves generally useful. Everyone in the company of emigrants, including Michael, was in love with Laura. But Michael, so bold in other matters, was tongue-tied in the presence of Laura, although he and Dan were close companions.

Myra poured out her woe to Laura, in one breath, "Mother's gone and I'm all alone and I haven't had my breakfast and Michael says it's time to pull out."

"Here's your breakfast, Myra." Laura held out a bowl of steaming cornmeal porridge. "It's all sweetened and ready to eat."

Myra's eyes widened. "Am I going to eat here in the wagon when it isn't raining?"

"Yes, dear—to save time," Laura answered, getting Myra's clothing together. "Then you're to get dressed in a jiffy, and then, your mother says, you may run alongside the wagons with Jerry. You'll like that, won't you?"

"Where is Mother?"

Laura didn't answer at once. Myra looked questioningly at her and saw that Laura's eyes were red as if she, too, had been crying. Laura spoke slowly. "Your mother has been helping your father with sickness. A wagon had to drop out of line last night."

"Is the sickness better?" asked Myra.

"Better," answered Laura. Her voice quivered.

"Why were you crying, Miss Laura?"

"I was there, you know"—the girl drew a sharp breath—"and it made me sad to see the suffering. But … it's all over now. Eat your breakfast, honey."

"I'm glad it's all over," said Myra cheerfully. She scooped up her mush with hungry zest. "My father always makes sick people better, doesn't he?"

"Your father is a good doctor and a good man," said Laura, folding the bedclothes.

In the excitement of the prospect of running alongside the wagons with Jerry and Jim, Myra asked no more about the wagon that had dropped out of line the night before. Laura was thankful that the conversation ended. She didn't want to tell the child about the newly-made grave back there on the prairie. It was a tiny grave where they had buried a baby that had been born in the night and that had died before the stars had faded out.

Myra laughed suddenly. "Do you know, Michael O'Reilly said that I had a gift from the Almighty? He said that because I made his little donkey walk just by

scratching his nose—the donkey's nose, I mean, Miss Laura. What do you think of that?"

Laura laughed as she tied a pink sunbonnet under Myra's chin. She kissed the glowing face on which the tears had not yet dried.

"May you always treasure God's gifts, Myra!" breathed Laura. "We need them as much as we need the ox teams to pull us through—"

"Catch up! Catch up!" The order to be on the way rang along the line of wagons, carried by hearty men's voices. Michael came running toward the Dean wagon which he was to drive that day. Laura and Myra scampered out. The day's march was beginning.