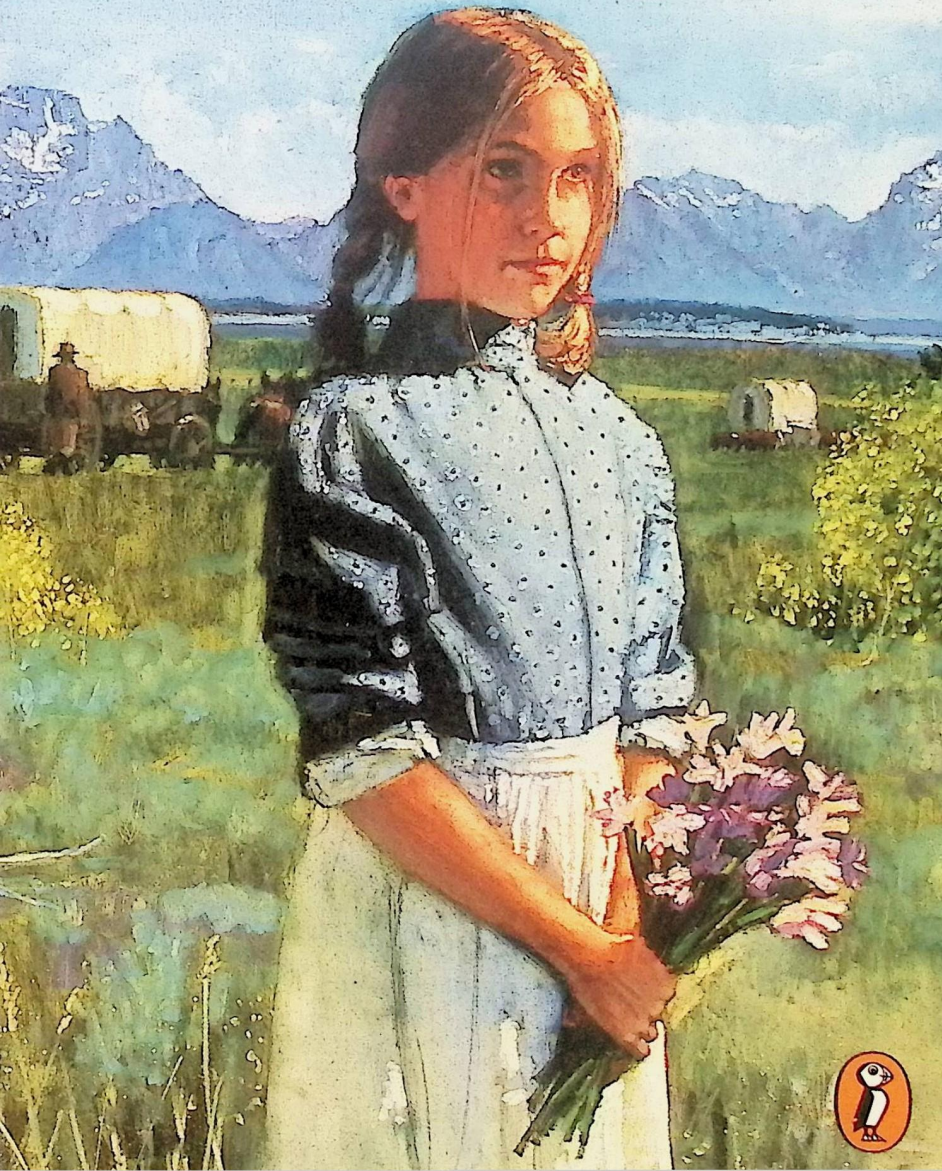


Jean Van Leeuwen

Bound for Oregon



One

“Louvina, are you awake?” I whispered.

Silvery light from the full harvest moon streamed in through the curtains. My sister Louvina was curled up next to me in the bed we shared, a small, still lump beneath the bedcovers. It wasn't she who had awakened me. Was it the bright moonlight?

Then I heard voices through the thin floor below. They were talking about Oregon again.

All that fall it had been happening—ever since my father had gone to town one Saturday morning and heard a stranger talking about this marvelous country out west. Standing up on a box in the middle of the sidewalk, the man had held forth about the wonders of this western paradise: the beautiful valleys of rich black soil, the outstanding timber and water, the mild climate that could not be beaten anywhere. A farmer could take up free land out there, he said. Six hundred and forty acres of the best farmland in the world.

“And they do say, gentlemen,” the man added with a smile, “that out in Oregon pigs run around under the acorn trees, round and fat and already cooked, with knives and forks sticking out of them so you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry.”

We all had laughed when we heard this, and the rest of us had forgotten about it. But not Father.

Now I could hear his voice and that of his cousin Will, along with the deep solemn voice of our neighbor down the road, George Kimball. They were talking about Indians.

I couldn't help myself. I had to know what they were saying. Usually my little sister slept so deeply that even the cannons fired off on the Fourth of July would not wake her. Just to make sure, I wormed my way over to the edge of the bed and waited a moment. Louvina did not stir.

Carefully I slid out from the warm sheets and crept to the edge of the sleeping loft. I could make out a rough triangle of the room below: the tall stone fireplace, one of the splint-bottomed easy chairs that Father had made, a pair of dust-stained boots stretched out on the hearth rug.

“Surely, Todd, you have not forgotten the Whitman massacre. Fourteen killed, including women and children. And that was only four years ago.”

I could imagine our neighbor's face as he spoke, long and wrinkled and mournful-looking, like one of his old hound dogs.

“They say the Indians are quiet now,” Father replied mildly.

“Ah, but for how long? The Pawnees are the worst

tribe. They will steal your horses, your stock." Mr. Kimball's voice rose, then abruptly faded so I had to strain to make it out. "Even, I hear tell, your women."

Beneath my thin nightgown a cold shiver traced its way down my backbone. *Indians. Massacres. Stealing women.* How could Father even think about making such a dangerous journey?

And why would he want to move again? I wondered. It had been less than two years since we had packed up everything we owned into a wagon and made our way from Indiana to Arkansas. Back then it was the ague that had made us move. I could still remember that sickness, with its awful chills and fever, as if I had had it yesterday.

First our bones would start to ache. Then we would grow so cold that we had to go to bed. We would lie there, shivering and shaking so hard that our teeth chattered and even the slats on the bed rattled. The next minute we would be burning up with fever. After a few days the sickness would go away, but then it would come back. Louvina and I swallowed so much bitter quinine, the taste was always in our mouths. Our relatives in Arkansas wrote to Father that they did not have the ague much there. So finally he decided to make the move. And none of us had been sick hardly a day since.

"The journey can take six months or more," Cousin Will joined in now, his thin voice filled with doubt. "Across endless plains and over the most difficult mountain ranges. It will wear out your animals."

Again Father answered quietly. "I understand the difficulties of the journey, and its dangers. But thousands are making it each year. We know how to prepare for it better than they did in the forties."

Grandma, I thought suddenly. My tiny, smiling, white-haired grandmother, who had taken care of me for six years after my own mother died, until Father married again. Only a few months ago she had come from Indiana to be near us. How could I possibly leave her again? And there was the schoolhouse just two miles down the road, with its smells of chalk and lunch pails and old wood-smoke. I loved everything about school, especially reading and committing my favorite poems to memory. And the meetinghouse, where we sang hymns each Sunday. I was partial to singing too. In that wilderness out west there would be no schoolhouses or meetinghouses, I was sure.

“Out on the plains,” pronounced George Kimball in his slow, sorrowful way, “the storms are terrible. Thunder and lightning like you have never seen, hailstones as big as hens’ eggs. And if you don’t cross the mountains before the snows begin, blizzards will get you. You remember what happened to the Donner party.”

I had overheard Father and Mother once talking about these unlucky travelers, trapped without food in the snowy mountains. They had stopped when they saw me. But from Mother’s hushed voice and Father’s slowly shaking head, I knew that whatever had happened to the Donner party was dreadful.

Father was silent. Surely, I thought, this meant that he was reconsidering. He would not really put his family through hardships like these. Straining to catch a glimpse of his face, I leaned over.

“Mary Ellen! What are you doing out of bed?”

It was Mother’s face instead, surprised and stern, at the foot of the ladder. With her skin as white as china and her pale hair pulled back from her face, she looked ghostly in the dim light.

I knew it was useless trying to explain. Mother had her rules, and she didn't take kindly to anyone breaking them.

"Back to bed," she ordered, frowning. "Quickly now."

"Yes, ma'am," I whispered. And quick and quiet as a rabbit, I crept back to my bed.

In the morning it seemed to me I must have been dreaming. The sun shone through the curtains onto the quilt that Grandma had made for me, creamy white with a sprinkling of deep-blue stars. The smell of apples and crisp fall leaves was in the air. Next to me Louvina still slept peacefully, looking as if she had not stirred all night long. From downstairs I could hear my baby sister Cynthia laughing.

Stretching, I looked up at a tiny black spider spinning a web in the chink between logs in the corner. All that talk about Indians and snowstorms couldn't be real, I thought. This was real: our snug log house, the barn out back where Father had his pottery wheel, Mother's flower garden. And Grandma, with her smiles and hugs, just down the road. There could be no better place to live than this.

The spider, busy at its work, reminded me that it was time for our morning chores.

"Louvina." I touched her with my bare foot, and immediately her brown eyes fluttered open. It always amazed me how my sister could go from a sound sleep to wide awake in an instant. And she awoke every morning with a smile.

"Maybe if we finish our chores early, Mother will have time to work on our dresses," I told her. Mother was sewing new Sunday dresses for us out of the soft wool she spun and wove herself.

"Oh, do you think so?" Louvina beamed, and we both jumped quickly out of bed.

Saturday mornings were always a busy time. Mother insisted that the cabin be just so for the Sabbath. A few hours later we were nearly finished with all of the cleaning and scouring, the churning and baking. Mother was just crimping the crust of an apple pie, while Louvina watched the baby. I had only to take out the ashes swept up from the hearth and I would be free for a little while.

Stepping out the back door, I emptied the ashes into the ash hopper. We saved them for making lye, which Mother used in cooking up her homemade soap. The air was so warm for October and the sun was shining so bright, it made me feel like singing. One of the hymns I often heard at the meetinghouse on Sundays popped into my mind.

"Enter into my jaw," I sang at the top of my voice, "and sit down on my throat!"

Behind me I heard muffled laughter. I whirled around and saw John Ragsdale, the fifteen-year-old boy who did chores for Father, watching me from the woodpile.

"I think you've got your words a little mixed up," he said. He set down his axe and flashed me a teasing grin. "Don't you know it's, 'Enter into my joy and sit down on my throne?'"

John was an odd-looking boy, I thought, with his too-long arms and legs, like a knobby-kneed colt, and sandy hair that refused to lie flat on his head, and a voice that alternately squeaked and croaked. He was always teasing me. When he looked at me with his wide eyes and crooked grin, I would feel my face start to turn pink.

It was doing it now.

“Of course I knew it!” I retorted. Turning my back on him, I hurried down the path to the barn.

The barn was a world of its own, peaceful and apart. I loved its rich earthy smells, the rustlings that might be mice up in the hayloft, the stamping and shifting sounds of animals in their stalls. The minute I walked through the door, I felt safe and warm. I liked to go there after my chores were done, just to be close to the animals and to Father. Though the barn was quite large, with many stalls, we kept only three horses and about a dozen cows. That was because farming was not Father’s real work. Pottery was.

I made my way down the row of stalls, stopping to give Daisy a pat. Louvina and I had named her. She was our favorite cow, a sweet-faced little two-year-old heifer the color of honey, who loved to be petted.

“Hello, Daisy.” I reached my hand through the rails to her.

She looked up at me with soft brown eyes, then licked my hand all over with her rough pink tongue.

Attached to the far end of the barn was the shed where Father worked at his pottery. It smelled of damp clay and straw. I stopped in the doorway, knowing I must be careful not to disturb Father if he was at the wheel.

He was. Shoulders hunched, eyes down so he didn’t notice me, he was focusing all of his attention on the lump of clay between his fingers. Father was not a tall man, but he always looked large to me when he was at his pottery wheel.

I had seen this so many times, ever since I was a tiny toddling child with Grandma holding me firmly by the hand. Yet each time it seemed new and miraculous—the



great chunk of reddish clay, the turning wheel, Father's fingers so sure and strong. Round and round spun the wheel, the clay rising, growing, changing shape until that moment when suddenly, magically, it became a jug or a milk crock or a bowl.

The moment came again. A pinch, a quick wipe of a finger, and it was finished. A pitcher this time, slender and graceful.

The wheel paused. Father looked up and smiled, and I went to sit in the straw beside him.

I knew better than to talk to him even now, as he broke off a small piece of clay and began rolling it between his hands, fashioning a handle. Instead I studied the other pitchers and jugs lined up to dry on a nearby bench. On each one, at the place where the bottom of the handle joined the vessel, I could see the clear print of Father's thumb. Looking at this thumbprint made me feel good inside. It was as if each piece of pottery he made had his picture etched into it. No matter who bought the piece or where it went, it would always somehow still be his.

The handle was smooth now, and just the right length. Working quickly, Father attached it at the top, then curled it around and pressed the end firmly into the side of the pitcher. There was his thumbprint again, as plain as could be.

I couldn't help smiling. Father smiled back. But in his gentle blue-gray eyes I could read a question. I could never keep my thoughts secret from Father for long. His eyes had a way of looking right inside my head. Without knowing I was going to say it, I suddenly blurted out, "Are we really going to Oregon?"

For a moment he didn't answer, just kept smoothing

the curve of the handle with a wet finger. Then his eyes met mine.

"I am thinking about it, Mary Ellen," he said quietly.

It was impossible to put into words the jumble of fears and regrets that swirled around inside my head. Indians and snowstorms, school, poetry, Grandma. All I could think of to say was, "But why? I like living in Arkansas. There is no ague here."

"No," Father agreed. "There is no ague here. But times are hard right now, and people are poor. They have no money even to buy one of my pitchers. Out in Oregon the land is rich and farming is easy. I have heard from people who have been there and seen it with their own eyes. And the government is giving away this rich land to anyone willing to settle it."

I could tell from the far-off look in his eyes that Father was remembering the man who had spoken in town, the one who joked about pigs with knives and forks sticking into them.

Then his face turned sober. "I know," he said, "that the journey would be long and difficult. It is more than two thousand miles, across rivers and deserts and high mountains. But many others are going. We would not be alone. And there are guidebooks now to show the way. I think that, with careful preparations, it could be done safely."

Was his mind made up, then? It almost seemed so to me.

Father's hand, rough and covered with powdery clay dust, reached out and gently brushed back the hair from my face.

"Don't worry so, Mary Ellen," he said, smiling. "Nothing has been decided yet. I must consider carefully, and

Mother and I need to talk some more. But everything will be all right, you'll see."

I nodded. As always, when Father smiled at me, it seemed as if the whole world would be all right.

Days passed. Then weeks. Still the talk of Oregon went on. Now dry brown leaves crunched beneath our feet as Louvina and I walked to school, and at night wintry winds swirled around the chimney. More friends and relatives came to sit beside the fire. Some, like young, pink-cheeked Cousin Fred and Mr. Pritchard the storekeeper, brought with them glowing letters from those who had already made the journey west. Others, like bent-over, old Great-aunt Harriet, came to offer warnings.

Father no longer whistled as he walked out to the barn in the thin gray mist of early morning. And Mother's mouth seemed permanently set in a straight line. At night, as I huddled under my star quilt and another heavier one, I could hear their low voices through the floorboards, talking and talking. It was Father, I knew, who had the Oregon fever, as people called it in town, and Mother who was not sure.

Then one evening in mid-December, just as we were finishing dinner, Father set down his knife and fork and turned to Mother.

"Well, Angelina," he said, "what do you think about our making the journey?"

My breath caught, and I put my fork down too.

Mother was silent for a moment, looking down at her plate. Her face was so still and grave that I thought I knew what her answer must be.

Then she looked up. Her chin was firm and her back

as straight as her table knife. "If others can make the journey," she said slowly, "then I guess we can too."

Father's face split into a smile, as joyful as a young boy's.

"What do you girls think?" he asked, looking across at Louvina and me.

"I want to go too!" Louvina answered right away, her short brown braids bouncing.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Inside my head I was hearing George Kimball's voice. "Fourteen killed . . . women and children . . . hailstones as big as hens' eggs . . ." And I was seeing Grandma's stricken face, the tears rolling down her cheeks, as we drove away from her house back in Indiana.

"Mary Ellen?" Father was looking at me intently. I could see his smile beginning to fade.

I could not bear to lose that smile.

"If you go," I said, my heart thudding in my chest, "I will go too."

Two

“Mary Ellen!” Father called. “Bring me my saw, please. And take that small bucket and get some water.”

I hurried off to the well. But the minute I set down the brimming water bucket, I heard Mother’s voice.

“Mary Ellen!” she called. “Will you finish this churning while I get my soap to boiling? We’ll need to take a lot of soap, you know.”

So much had to be done to prepare for our journey. All winter long I seemed to race from one chore to another. Churning the butter. Minding the baby. Washing dishes. Helping card and spin all the balls of soft wool that Mother wanted to take along. I hardly had any time for my lessons or for memorizing my favorite poems by Robert Burns. Of course Louvina helped too. She was six years old now, and could bring in potatoes from the root cellar and sticks of wood for kindling. And she was good at helping me watch little Cynthia.

All the time I was doing my chores, my mind buzzed

with thoughts. About leaving things behind: our comfortable house, Mother's rosebushes that she loved so much, even Father's pottery wheel, which would not fit into our wagon, he said. About school, which I might never be able to go to again once we left Arkansas. And about Grandma. Especially Grandma.

When I first told her about Oregon, stopping by her house on my way to school, Grandma had laid aside the new quilt her busy fingers were stitching on. She pulled me down into her lap, smiling. Grandma's smile was like sunshine.

"I knew your pa would come to this," she said. "I just knew it!" Behind the smile, though, I could hear sadness in her voice. "He's gone and talked himself into it. Now what am I going to do without you, honey?"

I had thought about this late into the night, and an answer had come to me. A wonderful answer.

"Oh," I told her, "you'll soon be coming to Oregon too, just as you did to Arkansas."

Grandma's thin arms tightened around me. I nestled my head into that comfortable space between her neck and soft cheek, as I had so many times before. In the silence, the ticking of the clock on the wall was like both our hearts beating.

Then Grandma gave a long sigh. "Perhaps so, child," she said softly. "Perhaps so."

She had to come, I thought afterward. I couldn't imagine being without Grandma. She had taken care of me most of the first seven years of my life. My mother had died when I was just nine months old, and Father had carried me a long, long way on horseback through the snow to Grandma's house. Everyone said I was too young

to remember that journey, but sometimes I thought I did: Father's breath in the frosty air, snowflakes swirling around us, whitening the horse's dark mane, a startled rabbit hopping across our path. A few months later Father married my mother's sister. But soon after Louvina was born this wife died also. So Grandma had raised my sister and me until the time, two years ago, when he married his third wife, Angelina Tate.

As hard as I tried, I could not remember my own mother. All I knew about her was what Grandma had told me.

"She was a little bit of a thing," Grandma used to say. "No bigger than a pint of cider. But lively. Oh my, did she love to sing! And her hair was just the color of a copper penny."

I wished that I had copper-colored hair too, but mine was ordinary brown like Father's. Still, I was fond of singing.

Then there was the time when Louvina and I were playing some game and we got to laughing so we couldn't stop. All at once I noticed Grandma staring at me, tears shining in her eyes.

"What's wrong, Grandma?" I asked anxiously.

"Nothing is wrong," she answered, quickly dabbing her eyes. "It's just that you have your mother's smile."

That made two things I had of hers: her smile and her love of singing. Father never wanted to talk about my mother. It was Grandma who had given me the picture of her, hazy as it was, that I carried around in my head. Without Grandma I wouldn't have known her at all.

Father had to trade in town for a large sturdy wagon with a canvas cover and eight strong oxen to pull it. We

would also need a tent for sleeping, harness, bridles, and saddles for the horses, a gun, and many tools. Then there were all the provisions for a long journey: food, clothing, medicines, extra parts for the wagon. Besides all this, Father had to make yokes and pins and bows for hitching up the oxen. And a heavy driving whip.

I watched as he filled a long slim bag, narrowed at one end, with shot. Carefully he wove narrow strips of rawhide around it, and added a heavy handle and lashes. When he cracked it, standing outside the barn, it sounded like the shot of a gun.

"May I try it?" I asked.

But when he put the whip in my hands, with its thick handle and lashes longer than the height of a man, I could barely lift it.

Father smiled as I handed it back to him.

"It takes practice," he said.

In the meantime Mother was packing the churned butter and homemade soap into pottery jars. She wrapped other provisions in sacks or poured them into jars: flour, cornmeal, rice, beans, sugar, salt, coffee, tea, dried fruit, molasses, lard, bacon, hams. When she was not readying the food supplies, she was busy spinning and weaving strong cloth and making it up into clothing for the journey. I helped her cut out two pairs of pants for Father, and at night she sat stitching them by the fire.

"What can we take with us?" Louvina and I asked one morning.

Mother thought for a moment. "If each of you would like to make a reticule," she suggested, "you could fill them and we will try to find a corner somewhere in the wagon for them."

So Louvina and I set to work sewing two little cloth bags with drawstring tops. Inside them we put a few small toys, like our dolls with the carved wooden heads and the little pottery play dishes that Father had made. There were also compartments for needles and thread and the leftover scraps of fabric we were sewing into quilt squares. I already had ten squares finished in the Nine-Patch pattern that Grandma had taught me, and Louvina was just starting hers. And Grandma gave each of us a new thimble.

On March third, my ninth birthday, a brand-new wagon with red wheels sat outside in our front yard. Although the day was drizzly and cold, Louvina and I rushed outside to see it. The wagon looked tall and roomy, with the hickory bows that would hold the canvas cover in place curving high over the top. Father lifted us up, and the two of us sat side by side on the spring seat.

As we sat there, our journey suddenly seemed real to me. For the first time I felt a little prickle of excitement.

"We're going to Oregon," I told Louvina, cracking a pretend whip over the heads of pretend oxen. "Gee! Haw!"

Father laughed. "It won't be long now," he said.

Our departure was set for the beginning of April. Mother was worried about leaving so early, since this was the time of the worst storms out on the plains. But so many people were going west this spring of 1852, Father had heard. If we left later, there might not be enough grass for our animals to graze on. It was better to risk storms, he said, than famine.

Storms. Famine. When I heard those words, my mind clouded over again with doubts. We would be all alone

out on those plains, just one small family in one wagon. Back in the fall, when Father had first spoken of going to Oregon, many others, like Cousin Fred and Mr. Pritchard, had talked about going too. But as the months went by, little by little, they had changed their minds. Of course Father said we would be safe, armed with our guidebook and a good dose of common sense, and I trusted Father completely. I wanted to do what would make him happy. Then why was it that I still felt so reluctant to leave?

Mother had a little flower garden next to the front door. Sometimes, when her critical eye decided that their colors clashed, she would dig up one or another and move it to a different spot. Some of the plants popped right out of the ground. But others seemed anchored where they were, clinging with tiny curling root fingers to their small piece of earth. Maybe I was like one of those plants, I thought, holding fast to home.

I thought of Grandma. She would not have hesitated a minute, I knew. She had married at fourteen, leaving her father's farm in Pennsylvania and going off to settle in the wilderness of Indiana. You wouldn't know it to look at her, she was so tiny and frail-looking, like a gust of wind would blow her away, but Grandma was strong. With Grandpa she had chopped down trees to build a log cabin, and in it had raised eight children. She could paddle a canoe or shoot a rifle as well as any man, she always said proudly. One time, when Grandpa was away, she shot a panther out of a tree. Another time an Indian tried to steal a ham from up in the cabin rafters.

"I was stirring a kettle of hot cornmeal mush when I saw him," said Grandma, her blue eyes dancing, when she told the story. "I just snatched up my wooden spoon

out of the kettle and applied it to that Indian's backside. He left mighty quick, I can tell you."

And after Grandpa died, when she still had the five youngest to raise, Grandma had moved to town and opened up a grocery store. Oh, how I wished I was a little more like Grandma.

While I thought and worried, the preparations for our journey went on. A new bright-white canvas cover was stretched over the bows of the wagon. Then the packing began.

The wagon had high boards on its sides, making it nearly four feet deep. Father divided the space into two stories. On the bottom went everything that we would not be using every day, like the huge sacks of flour, medicines, extra clothing and dishes and wagon parts. This was carefully leveled. Then a strong piece of canvas was stretched over it, making a kind of second floor. On top of this were placed all the things that would be in daily use, neatly rolled and bundled. Father made a wooden grub box with a lid for food, and that sat in the front of the wagon, with the cooking pots wrapped snugly in sacks. An outside box was attached to the wagon for halters, hobbles, ropes, chains, axe, shovel, hammer, and other tools. And there was a rack for Father's gun.

One morning, while I was watching Father repair a harness in the barn, another of our neighbors came to speak to him. It was John Ragsdale's mother, a small faded-looking woman with a whispery voice.

"Please," she begged Father. "You must take John with you."

Father hesitated, looking at her. "I could certainly use his help with the animals," he agreed. "But are you sure?"

If he goes, there is no telling when you may see him again."

I held my breath, hoping she would say yes. It wasn't surprising that John would want to go with us. We had taken him in a year ago because his stepfather was cruel to him. With six younger children to care for, including a new baby, his weary mother had nowhere else to turn. Father and Mother were fond of John, I knew, and there was something about his teasing ways that always cheered me. It would make a difference to all of us to have him along.

His mother's flushed face seemed barely able to hold in her feelings. But she nodded firmly. "He wants to go," she said.

"Then we will take him," Father promised.

Now the time was growing near. The wagon had been pulled up close to the house for the final packing. Many of our neighbors gathered around to watch. Mother kept thinking of one more thing that just had to go: a few pieces of good blue-and-white china that had belonged to her mother, some pretty tablecloths, a quart of wild plum preserves. There were the books I could not do without: Father's Bible, a volume of Robert Burns poetry and one of Longfellow, *Webster's Elementary Speller*, and a *Third Reader*, so Louvina and I could have lessons along the way. And the wooden washtub, a big brass kettle, and the rolled-up feather ticks that we would sleep on. As I handed them up one by one to Father, I thought that we were like birds building a nest.

At last Father fastened a small water keg to the side of the wagon, with a gourd dipper hanging beside it. He tied our two splint-bottomed easy chairs to the back, and hung

the tar bucket for greasing the wheels underneath. We were ready to leave the following morning.

I found it hard to fall asleep that night. While Louvina sighed like a sleeping kitten in the bed beside me, I lay stiff as a log, my eyes staring up into the darkness. All sorts of strange visions danced around in my brain. Painted Indian faces turned into Grandma's face, tears streaming down her cheeks. Hens' eggs fell out of the sky, changed into snow, and piled up in our wagon. But despite all my fears I knew that nothing could keep us from making this journey now. Finally, with the words "we're going to Oregon, we're going to Oregon" repeating over and over in my ears, I fell into an exhausted sleep.

Then suddenly it was morning, a bright sunny spring day, and Mother was calling us.

"Mary Ellen! Louvina! Come and help."

We hurried through breakfast. I helped Mother pack up our lunch in a basket. Then Louvina and I went outside to hand up the last of the cooking pots and our quilts and feather pillows to Father. Mother was busy sweeping out the empty house, to leave it tidy for the family to whom we had sold it. Meanwhile relatives and friends were arriving to say good-bye.

"Go and ask Mother if she has anything else to go in the wagon," Father told me.

I walked in the open door. Mother had finished sweeping, and the straw broom leaned against the wall next to the fireplace. That and a bare china cupboard that was too heavy to take with us were the only things left in a room that had always seemed crowded with furnishings. I looked at the fireplace, neatly swept out now, and the places where our two easy chairs had sat. The outline of

the hearth rug still showed on the dark plank floor, worn smooth by the tread of many feet. The room felt strange to me, empty and cold.

Mother appeared, taking off her apron.

"Father wants to know if there is anything else for the wagon," I said.

"Just these." Mother held up a wooden spoon and a folded paper of her flower seeds.

For a moment, neither of us moved. I stared around the room, trying to memorize it, not as it looked now but as it used to be. Though Mother said nothing, I thought maybe she was doing the same.

"Well," she said finally, "Father is waiting."

Our footsteps made a hollow sound as we walked to the door. I didn't look back when Mother latched it.

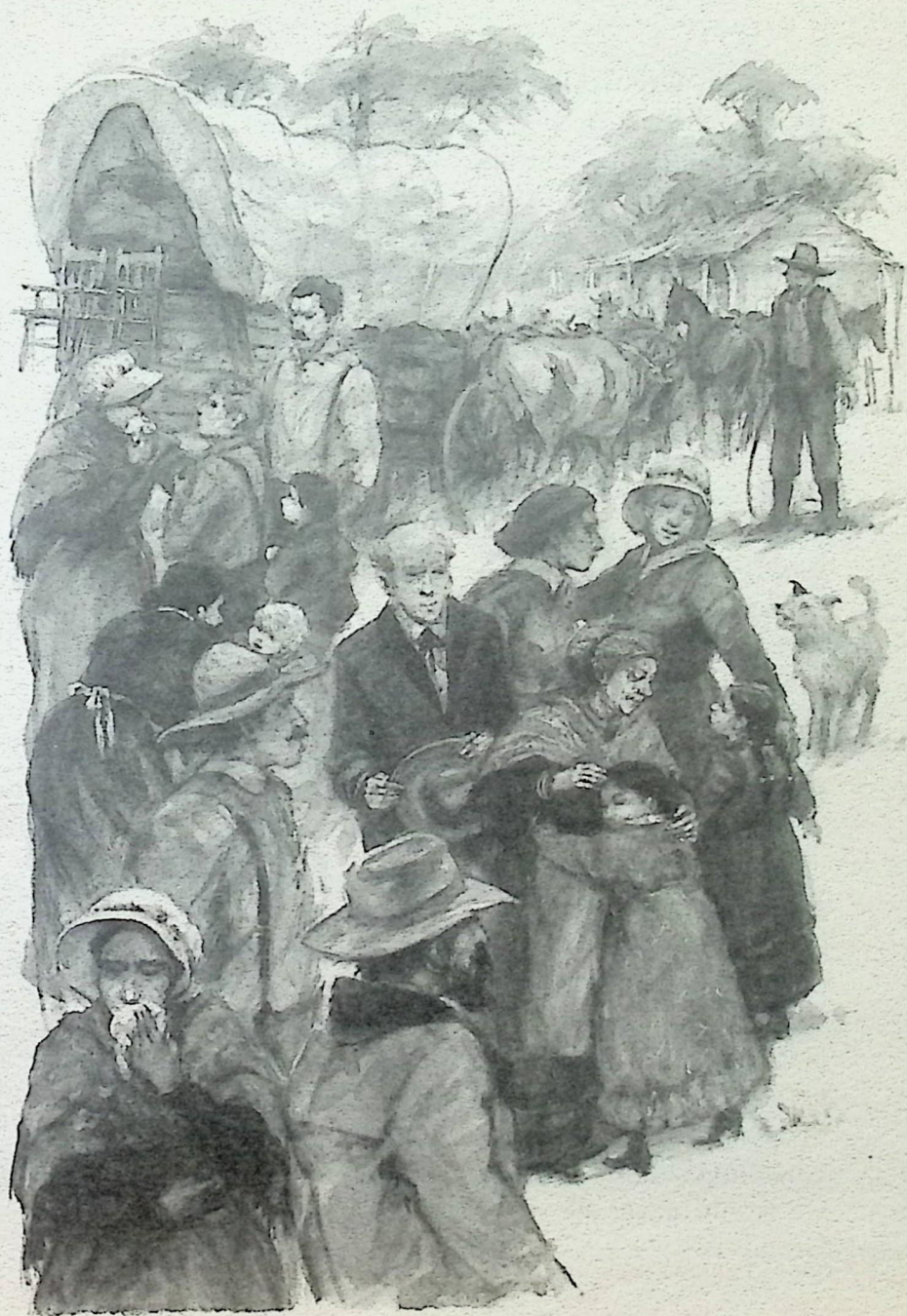
Father had sent John to gather up the animals. There were the four pairs of oxen, two milk cows named Lillie and Blackie, and our tame little heifer, Daisy. Louvina and I begged Father to take her along, and at last he had agreed. Then there were Father's two horses, Polly and Pet, and our watchdog, Rover.

The oxen were soon hitched to the wagon, and Polly was saddled for John to ride. Father stood next to the team, his new whip ready in his hand. Still, he did not give the order to move out.

We were being wrapped in hugs, covered with kisses, passed from one pair of arms to another. Cousin Fred nearly squeezed my breath away. Then came Cousin Martha and the minister's wife and Great-aunt Harriet.

"You'll be a good girl, won't you, Mary Ellen?" she whispered in my ear. "And take care of your little sisters."

"Oh, I just know we will never see you again!" someone wailed.



Cousin Will tickled me with his beard, then passed me to Mrs. Pritchard, who enfolded me in her plump arms.

"Keep up your courage," I heard the tall, pale young minister saying to Mother. "And whatever happens, don't fret. Courage will do more for you than anything else."

John's mother and younger sisters hovered over him. Even George Kimball, as worried-looking as ever, was giving Father some last-minute warning.

Finally I came to Grandma.

"Oh, honey, honey!" was all she could say to me, her bright blue eyes shining.

"Remember," I told her fiercely, wrapping my arms around her waist. "You'll soon be coming to Oregon too."

Grandma did not answer, just held me close for a long time. And I felt tears falling on my hair.

Slowly we climbed into the wagon, underneath that clean, white canvas cover. Mother was crying softly. Louvina and Cynthia looked scared. Finally, Father popped his whip.

"Gee, Buck!" he shouted.

The wheels began to turn, and the oxen moved toward the road.

Looking back through the round gathered opening in the wagon cover, I saw all the familiar faces, some smiling, some tearful, the many waving hands. Grandma, leaning on Cousin Will's arm, looked small and forlorn, her handkerchief clutched in one hand, the breeze ruffling her wisps of white hair. Suddenly I was filled with the most overwhelming sadness. Maybe it was true, I thought. Maybe we would never see any of those faces again. Not even Grandma's.

My eyes blurred with tears, and I couldn't help it. I put down my head and cried.

When I finally was able to look back again, the faces had disappeared from sight. All I could see was the rutted dirt road, the pale-green budding trees, and Rover, his white plume of a tail waving, running alongside the wagon.

The wheels rattled and creaked.

"Going-to-Oregon," they seemed to say. "Going-to-Oregon."

Three

That night for the first time we ate our dinner around a campfire. Mother brought out the good baked chicken that John's mother had cooked for us and the salt-rising bread and sweet cake that Grandma had made. The evening air was warm. Newly awakened frogs sang a cheeping song from a nearby creek. The wagon cover gleamed in the firelight. Rover lay curled between Louvina and me, his ears alert as always, his head pressing against my knee.

In spite of his warmth, I felt a little shiver of loneliness. It seemed strange to be outside beneath the dark sky and towering trees instead of inside our snug house. The sky, with its faraway pinpoints of stars, was so vast and we were so small. Louvina seemed to feel it too. She was quiet, and Cynthia, who rarely sat still, rested sleepily in Mother's arms. John stared silently into the fire. Had he been missing his family, I wondered, as he ate his mother's chicken with the propped-up lid of the grub box for a

table and an ox bow for a chair? Was he wishing now that he had never asked to go along?

Then all at once Father began to sing in his deep, clear voice. It was one of the hymns that we often sang at the meetinghouse on Sunday mornings: "My Faith Looks Up to Thee." After a minute Mother joined in, then John, in his uncertain cracking voice, and then Louvina and I. As the last notes died away, Father said quietly, "You know, God is just as near to us here as He is at home."

Leaning back on his elbows, he gazed up into the starry sky.

"Look, girls," he said, pointing. "There is Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens. And near it, do you see four stars close together? That is Orion, the Hunter."

"I see it!" cried Louvina excitedly. "I see the brightest star."

As I looked where Father's finger was pointing, it seemed to me that the stars had moved closer. And that they were watching over us.

A few minutes later John left us to make up his bed in the tent. We changed into our nightclothes and climbed into our own strange new beds inside the wagon. It was crowded, with trunks and barrels and the big washtub hemming us in, Louvina's elbow poking into my back, and everyone's breathing all mixed up together. But it felt snug.

"Good night, girls," came Father's soft, muffled voice. "Sleep well."

I pulled Grandma's quilt close around me, thinking of her fingers darting in and out, making all the hundreds of tiny stitches that held it together.

"Good night," I answered.

The last thing I saw before I closed my eyes was a sprinkling of stars shining through the round opening of the wagon cover.

When I awoke the next morning, I smelled bacon frying. Father had already made a fire and gone with John to milk the cows. Mother was cooking breakfast, baking biscuits in the black iron Dutch oven set over the fire.

"You can get dressed," she told me, "and then help your sisters get ready for breakfast. Quickly now! We want to make an early start."

After breakfast I washed the tin dishes while Louvina minded Cynthia. Mother strained milk, put up lunches for noon, and packed everything back into the wagon. Father and John pulled down the tent pole and carefully folded the tent. Then they yoked up the oxen, and once more we were on our way.

The wagon rolled along, rocking and creaking. Father walked ahead, next to the team, while John drove the animals behind. Mother sat up on the spring seat, her back straight as always, her face shaded by her green lace-trimmed sunbonnet. Cynthia was next to her in the small padded box that Father had made, just big enough for her to play and sleep in. Louvina and I rode inside the wagon, the cover tied up at the sides so we could see out. The cool breeze riffled through our hair.

For a while we played with our dolls, dressing and undressing them with scraps of fabric. Louvina could entertain herself this way for hours, but after a little while I grew restless. I hated sitting still. The oxen plodded so slowly. And there was nothing new to see, just the same winding road and new-green trees, dotted here and there with bursting blossoms, and small streams and an occa-

sional cabin, its chimney sending up a thin ribbon of smoke into the cloudless blue sky.

Then I made a discovery. If I stepped out onto the brake block, I could jump down to the ground without the wagon stopping.

This was a good game, I thought.

"Louvina, watch this!" I called, climbing up to try it again.

Mother turned around to look at me. "Be careful of the wheels," she warned.

"I will be."

I jumped free of them easily. But my heel caught in the hem of my blue, flower-sprigged dress, and I heard a harsh ripping sound.

It was only a tiny tear, I could see right away. Still, I could feel Mother frowning as I got quickly to my feet. She was always reminding me to be a lady. Why was that so important? I wondered. Why was it that most of the activities I thought were fun, like running and jumping and climbing, were not considered ladylike? Sometimes I found myself wishing that I had been born a boy. Then I could have fun and not worry about skirts constantly in my way.

It felt good to stretch my legs. I waved to John and he waved back, grinning. I walked along next to the wagon, stopping occasionally to pick an early spring flower or watch a bee buzzing in the grass or play a game of fetch with Rover. If the wagon got too far ahead, all I had to do was say, "Come on, Rover!" And we ran for a few minutes to catch up.

When we finally stopped late that afternoon, Father said, "We have come about twelve miles today, and Mary

Ellen must have walked six of them." He smiled at me. "If you keep that up, you will walk halfway to Oregon."

But after the third day the weather turned showery. Mother, who hated a mess, would not let me climb in and out of the wagon with my muddy shoes. So I had to spend all my time inside. Though I found it hard to sit still, Louvina and I thought of ways to amuse ourselves. We made up new games with our dolls and with a yarn ball that Mother had brought along. We read our books. We sang all the songs we could remember. "Happy Day" was our favorite, and we sang it the loudest when it was raining the hardest. We brought Cynthia in back with us and tried to teach her new words.

"Gee! Whoa! Haw!" she cried to the oxen in her tiny voice, making us laugh.

Sometimes John rode up alongside the wagon, his long legs dangling down over Polly's round sides.

"Hi thar, Cynthia!" he would call in his high-pitched voice.

"Hi thar, Don!" she would answer in the exact same voice, and even Mother had to smile.

Most nights we slept in the wagon, with John nearby in the tent. But once in a while toward twilight, when the setting sun stole the warmth from the sky, we would come upon a farmhouse or a log cabin in the woods, and we would be invited to spend the night. It felt good to eat dinner on a real table in front of a blazing fireplace and sleep in real beds again.

At these stops everyone was anxious to know where we were going. When Father told them, they all seemed to have advice to offer.

"Once you reach the wild prairies, you don't want to



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