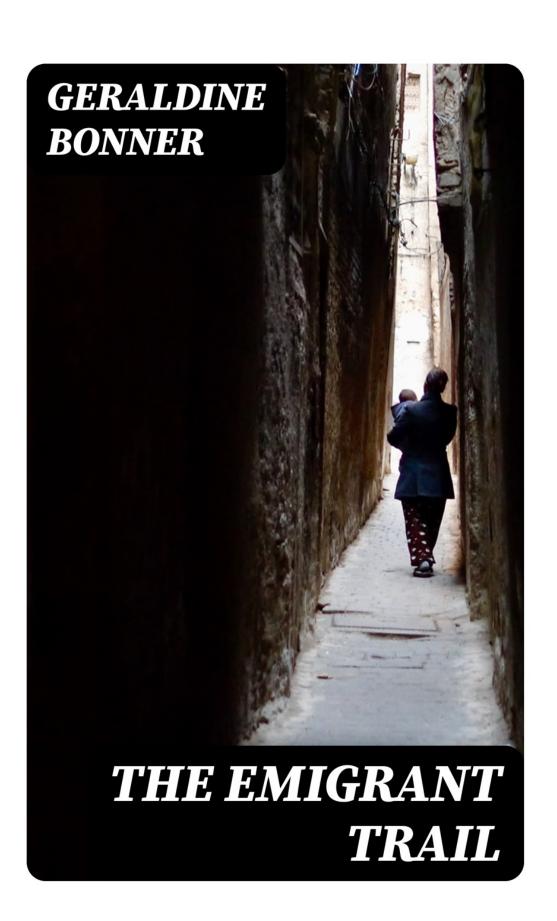


THE EMIGRANT
TRAIL



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The Emigrant Trail

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The Prairie

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CHAPTER I

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It had rained steadily for three days, the straight, relentless rain of early May on the Missouri frontier. The emigrants, whose hooded wagons had been rolling into Independence for the past month and whose tents gleamed through the spring foliage, lounged about in one another's camps cursing the weather and swapping bits of useful information.

The year was 1848 and the great California emigration was still twelve months distant. The flakes of gold had already been found in the race of Sutter's mill, and the thin scattering of men, which made the population of California, had left their plows in the furrow and their ships in the cove and gone to the yellow rivers that drain the Sierra's mighty flanks. But the rest of the world knew nothing of this yet. They were not to hear till November when a ship brought the news to New York, and from city and town, from village and cottage, a march of men would turn their faces to the setting sun and start for the land of gold.

Those now bound for California knew it only as the recently acquired strip of territory that lay along the

continent's Western rim, a place of perpetual sunshine, where everybody had a chance and there was no malaria. That was what they told each other as they lay under the wagons or sat on saddles in the wet tents. The story of old Roubadoux, the French fur trader from St. Joseph, circulated cheeringly from mouth to mouth—a man in Monterey had had chills and people came from miles around to see him shake, so novel was the spectacle. That was the country for the men and women of the Mississippi Valley, who shook half the year and spent the other half getting over it.

The call of the West was a siren song in the ears of these waiting companies. The blood of pioneers urged them forward. Their forefathers had moved from the old countries. across the seas, from the elm-shaded towns of New England, from the unkempt villages that advanced into the virgin lands by the Great Lakes, from the peace and plenty of the splendid South. Year by year they had pushed the frontier westward, pricked onward by a ceaseless unrest, "the old land hunger" that never was appeased. The forests rang to the stroke of their ax, the slow, untroubled rivers of the wilderness parted to the plowing wheels of their unwieldy wagons, their voices went before them into places where Nature had kept unbroken her vast and pondering silence. The distant country by the Pacific was still to explore and they yoked their oxen, and with a woman and a child on the seat started out again, responsive to the cry of "Westward, Ho!"

As many were bound for Oregon as for California. Marcus Whitman and the missionaries had brought alluring stories of that great domain once held so cheaply the country

almost lost it. It was said to be of a wonderful fertility and league-long stretches of idle land awaited the settler. The roads ran together more than half the way, parting at Green River, where the Oregon trail turned to Fort Hall and the California dipped southward and wound, a white and spindling thread, across what men then called "The Great American Desert." Two days' journey from Independence this road branched from the Santa Fé Trail and bent northward across the prairie. A signboard on a stake pointed the way and bore the legend, "Road to Oregon." It was the starting point of one of the historic highways of the world. The Indians called it "The Great Medicine Way of the Paleface."

Checked in the act of what they called "jumping off" the emigrants wore away the days in telling stories of the rival countries, and in separating from old companies and joining new ones. It was an important matter, this of traveling partnerships. A trip of two thousand miles on unknown roads beset with dangers was not to be lightly undertaken. Small parties, frightened on the edge of the enterprise, joined themselves to stronger ones. The mountain men and trappers delighted to augment the tremors of the fearful, and round the camp fires listening groups hung on the words of long-haired men clad in dirty buckskins, whose moccasined feet had trod the trails of the fur trader and his red brother.

This year was one of special peril for, to the accustomed dangers from heat, hunger, and Indians, was added a new one—the Mormons. They were still moving westward in their emigration from Nauvoo to the new Zion beside the Great

Salt Lake. It was a time and a place to hear the black side of Mormonism. A Missourian hated a Latter Day Saint as a Puritan hated a Papist. Hawn's mill was fresh in the minds of the frontiersmen, and the murder of Joseph Smith was accounted a righteous act. The emigrant had many warnings to lay to heart—against Indian surprises in the mountains, against mosquitoes on the plains, against quicksands in the Platte, against stampedes among the cattle, against alkaline springs and the desert's parching heats. And quite as important as any of these was that against the Latter Day Saint with the Book of Mormon in his saddlebag and his long-barreled rifle across the pommel.

So they waited, full of ill words and impatience, while the rain fell. Independence, the focusing point of the frontier life, housing unexpected hundreds, dripped from all its gables and swam in mud. And in the camps that spread through the fresh, wet woods and the oozy uplands, still other hundreds cowered under soaked tent walls and in damp wagon boxes, listening to the rush of the continuous showers.

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On the afternoon of the fourth day the clouds lifted. A band of yellow light broke out along the horizon, and at the crossings of the town and in the rutted country roads men and women stood staring at it with its light and their own hope brightening their faces.

David Crystal, as he walked through the woods, saw it behind a veining of black branches. Though a camper and impatient to be off like the rest, he did not feel the elation that shone on their watching faces. His was held in a somber abstraction. Just behind him, in an opening under the straight, white blossoming of dogwood trees, was a newmade grave. The raw earth about it showed the prints of his feet, for he had been standing by it thinking of the man who lay beneath.

Four days before his friend, Joe Linley, had died of them—loe, himself, Three of and Leffingwell, Joe's cousin—had been in camp less than a week when it had happened. Until then their life had been like a picnic there in the clearing by the roadside, with the thrill of the great journey stirring in their blood. And then loe had been smitten with such suddenness, such awful suddenness! He had been talking to them when David had seen a suspension of something, a stoppage of a vital inner spring, and with it a whiteness had passed across his face like a running tide. The awe of that moment, the hush when it seemed to David the liberated spirit had paused beside him in its outward flight, was with him now as he walked through the rustling freshness of the wood.

The rain had begun to lessen, its downfall thinning into a soft patter among the leaves. The young man took off his hat and let the damp air play over his hair. It was thick hair, black and straight, already longer than city fashions dictated, and a first stubble of black beard was hiding the lines of a chin perhaps a trifle too sensitive and pointed. Romantic good looks and an almost poetic refinement were the characteristics of the face, an unusual type for the frontier. With thoughtful gray eyes set deep under a jut of brows and a nose as finely cut as a woman's, it was of a type that, in more sophisticated localities, men would have said had risen to meet the Byronic ideal of which the world was just then enamored. But there was nothing Byronic or self-conscious about David Crystal. He had been born and bred in what was then the Far West, and that he should read poetry and regard life as an undertaking that a man must face with all honor and resoluteness was not so surprising for the time and place. The West, with its loneliness, its questioning silences, its solemn sweep of prairie and roll of slow, majestic rivers, held spiritual communion with those of its young men who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

The trees grew thinner and he saw the sky pure as amber beneath the storm pall. The light from it twinkled over wet twigs and glazed the water in the crumplings of new leaves. Across the glow the last raindrops fell in slanting dashes. David's spirits rose. The weather was clearing and they could start—start on the trail, the long trail, the Emigrant Trail, two thousand miles to California!

He was close to the camp. Through the branches he saw the filmy, diffused blueness of smoke and smelled the sharp odor of burning wood. He quickened his pace and was about to give forth a cheerful hail when he heard a sound that made him stop, listen with fixed eye, and then advance cautiously, sending a questing glance through the screen of leaves. The sound was a woman's voice detached in clear sweetness from the deeper tones of men.

There was no especial novelty in this. Their camp was just off the road and the emigrant women were wont to pause there and pass the time of day. Most of them were the lean and leathern-skinned mates of the frontiersmen, shapeless and haggard as if toil had drawn from their bodies all the softness of feminine beauty, as malaria had sucked from their skins freshness and color. But there were young, pretty ones, too, who often strolled by, looking sideways from the shelter of jealous sunbonnets.

This voice was not like theirs. It had a quality David had only heard a few times in his life—cultivation. Experience would have characterized it as "a lady voice." David, with none, thought it an angel's. Very shy, very curious, he came out from the trees ready at once and forever to worship anyone who could set their words to such dulcet cadences.

The clearing, green as an emerald and shining with rain, showed the hood of the wagon and the new, clean tent, white as sails on a summer sea, against the trees' young bloom. In the middle the fire burned and beside it stood Leff, a skillet in his hand. He was a curly-headed, powerful country lad, twenty-four years old, who, two months before, had come from an Illinois farm to join the expedition. The frontier was to him a place of varied diversion, Independence a stimulating center. So diffident that the bashful David seemed by contrast a man of cultured ease, he was now blushing till the back of his neck was red.

On the other side of the fire a lady and gentleman stood arm in arm under an umbrella. The two faces, bent upon Leff with grave attention, were alike, not in feature, but in the subtly similar play of expression that speaks the blood tie. A father and daughter, David thought. Against the rough background of the camp, with its litter at their feet, they had an air of being applied upon an alien surface, of not belonging to the picture, but standing out from it in sharp and incongruous contrast.

The gentleman was thin and tall, fifty or thereabouts, very pale, especially to one accustomed to the tanned skins of the farm and the country town. His face held so frank a kindliness, especially the eyes which looked tired and a little sad, that David felt its expression like a friendly greeting or a strong handclasp.

The lady did not have this, perhaps because she was a great deal younger. She was yet in the bud, far from the tempering touch of experience, still in the state of looking forward and anticipating things. She was dark, of medium height, and inclined to be plump. Many delightful curves went to her making, and her waist tapered elegantly, as was the fashion of the time. Thinking it over afterwards, the young man decided that she did not belong in the picture with a prairie schooner and camp kettles, because she looked so like an illustration in a book of beauty. And David knew something of these matters, for had he not been twice to St. Louis and there seen the glories of the earth and the kingdoms thereof?

But life in camp outside Independence had evidently blunted his perceptions. The small waist, a round, bare throat rising from a narrow band of lace, and a flat, yellow straw hat were the young woman's only points of resemblance to the beauty-book heroines. She was not in the least beautiful, only fresh and healthy, the flat straw hat shading a girlish face, smooth and firmly modeled as a ripe fruit. Her skin was a glossy brown, softened with a peach's bloom, warming through deepening shades of rose to lips that were so deeply colored no one noticed how firmly they could come together, how their curving, crimson edges could shut tight, straighten out, and become a line of forceful suggestions, of doggedness, maybe—who knows?—perhaps of obstinacy. It was her physical exuberance, her downy glow, that made David think her good looking; her serene, brunette richness, with its high lights of coral and scarlet, that made her radiate an aura of warmth, startling in that woodland clearing, as the luster of a firefly in a garden's glooming dusk.

She stopped speaking as he emerged from the trees, and Leff's stammering answer held her in a riveted stare of attention. Then she looked up and saw David.

"Oh," she said, and transferred the stare to him. "Is this he?"

Leff was obviously relieved:

"Oh, David, I ain't known what to say to this lady and her father. They think some of joining us. They've been waiting for quite a spell to see you. They're goin' to California, too."

The gentleman lifted his hat. Now that he smiled his face was even kindlier, and he, too, had a pleasant, mellowed utterance that linked him with the world of superior quality of which David had had those two glimpses.

"I am Dr. Gillespie," he said, "and this is my daughter Susan."

David bowed awkwardly, a bow that was supposed to include father and daughter. He did not know whether this was a regular introduction, and even if it had been he would not have known what to do. The young woman made no attempt to return the salutation, not that she was rude, but she had the air of regarding it as a frivolous interruption to weighty matters. She fixed David with eyes, small, black, and bright as a squirrel's, so devoid of any recognition that he was a member of the rival sex—or, in fact, of the human family—that his self-consciousness sunk down abashed as if before reproof.

"My father and I are going to California and the train we were going with has gone on. We've come from Rochester, New York, and everywhere we've been delayed and kept back. Even that boat up from St. Louis was five days behind time. It's been nothing but disappointments and delays since we left home. And when we got here the people we were going with—a big train from Northern New York—had gone on and left us."

She said all this rapidly, poured it out as if she were so full of the injury and annoyance of it, that she had to ease her indignation by letting it run over into the first pair of sympathetic ears. David's were a very good pair. Any woman with a tale of trouble would have found him a champion. How much more a fresh-faced young creature with a melodious voice and anxious eyes.

"A good many trains have gone on," he said. And then, by way of consolation for her manner demanded, that, "But they'll be stalled at the fords with this rain. They'll have to wait till the rivers fall. All the men who know say that."

"So we've heard," said the father, "but we hoped that we'd catch them up. Our outfit is very light, only one wagon, and our driver is a thoroughly capable and experienced man. What we want are some companions with whom we can travel till we overhaul the others. I'd start alone, but with my daughter——"

She cut in at once, giving his arm a little, irritated shake:

"Of course you couldn't do that." Then to the young men: "My father's been sick for quite a long time, all last winter. It's for his health we're going to California, and, of course, he couldn't start without some other men in the party. Indians might attack us, and at the hotel they said the Mormons were scattered all along the road and thought nothing of shooting a Gentile."

Her father gave the fingers crooked on his arm a little squeeze with his elbow. It was evident the pair were very good friends.

"You'll make these young men think I'm a helpless invalid, who'll lie in the wagon all day. They won't want us to go with them."

This made her again uneasy and let loose another flow of authoritative words.

"No, my father isn't really an invalid. He doesn't have to lie in the wagon. He's going to ride most of the time. He and I expect to ride all the way, and the old man who goes with us will drive the mules. What's been really bad for my father was living in that dreadful hotel at Independence with everything damp and uncomfortable. We want to get off just as soon as we can, and this gentleman," indicating Leff, "says you want to go, too."

"We'll start to-morrow morning, if it's clear."

"Now, father," giving the arm she held a renewed clutch and sharper shake, "there's our chance. We must go with them."

The father's smile would have shown something of deprecation, or even apology, if it had not been all pride and tenderness.

"These young men will be very kind if they permit us to join them," was what his lips said. His eyes added: "This is a spoiled child, but even so, there is no other like her in the world."

The young men sprang at the suggestion. The spring was internal, of the spirit, for they were too overwhelmed by the imminent presence of beauty to show a spark of spontaneity on the outside. They muttered their agreement, kicked the ground, and avoided the eyes of Miss Gillespie.

"The people at the hotel," the doctor went on, "advised us to join one of the ox trains. But it seemed such a slow mode of progress. They don't make much more than fifteen to twenty miles a day."

"And then," said the girl, "there might be people we didn't like in the train and we'd be with them all the time."

It is not probable that she intended to suggest to her listeners that she could stand them as traveling companions. Whether she did or not they scented the compliment, looked stupid, and hung their heads, silent in the intoxication of this first subtle whiff of incense. Even Leff, uncouth and unlettered, extracted all that was possible from the words, and felt a delicate elation at the thought that so fine a creature could endure his society.

"We expect to go a great deal faster than the long trains," she continued. "We have no oxen, only six mules and two extra horses and a cow."

Her father laughed outright.

"Don't let my daughter frighten you. We've really got a very small amount of baggage. Our little caravan has been made up on the advice of Dr. Marcus Whitman, an old friend of mine. Five years ago when he was in Washington he gave me a list of what was needed for the journey across the plains. I suppose he's the best authority on that subject. We all know how successfully the Oregon emigration was carried through."

David was glad to show he knew something of that. A boy friend of his had gone to Oregon with this, the first large body of emigrants that had ventured on the great enterprise. Whitman was to him a national hero, his ride in the dead of winter from the far Northwest to Washington, as patriotically inspiring as Paul Revere's.

There was more talk, standing round the fire, while the agreements for the start were being made. No one thought the arrangement hasty, for it was a place and time of quick decisions. Men starting on the emigrant trail were not for wasting time on preliminaries. Friendships sprang up like the grass and were mown down like it. Standing on the edge of the unknown was not the propitious moment for caution and hesitation. Only the bold dared it and the bold took each other without question, reading what was on the surface, not bothering about what might be hidden.

It was agreed, the weather being fair, that they would start at seven the next morning, Dr. Gillespie's party joining David's at the camp. With their mules and horses they should make good time and within a month overhaul the train that had left the Gillespies behind.

As the doctor and his daughter walked away the shyness of the young men returned upon them in a heavy backwash. They were so whelmed by it that they did not even speak to one another. But both glanced with cautious stealth at the receding backs, the doctor in front, his daughter walking daintily on the edge of grass by the roadside, holding her skirts away from the wet weeds.

When she was out of sight Leff said with an embarrassed laugh:

"Well, we got some one to go along with us now."

David did not laugh. He pondered frowningly. He was the elder by two years and he felt his responsibilities.

"They'll do all right. With two more men we'll make a strong enough train."

Leff was cook that night, and he set the coffee on and began cutting the bacon. Occupied in this congenial work, the joints of his tongue were loosened, and as the skillet gave forth grease and odors, he gave forth bits of information gleaned from the earlier part of the interview:

"I guess they got a first rate outfit. The old gentleman said they'd been getting it together since last autumn. They must be pretty well fixed."

David nodded. Being "well fixed" or being poor did not count on the edge of the prairie. They were frivolous outside matters that had weight in cities. Leff went on,

"He's consumpted. That's why he's going. He says he expects to be cured before he gets to California."

A sudden zephyr irritated the tree tops, which bent away from its touch and scattered moisture on the fire and the frying pan. There was a sputter and sizzle and Leff muttered profanely before he took up the dropped thread:

"The man that drives the mules, he's a hired man that the old gentleman's had for twenty years. He was out on the frontier once and knows all about it, and there ain't nothing he can't drive"—turning of the bacon here, Leff absorbed beyond explanatory speech—"They got four horses, two to ride and two extra ones, and a cow. I don't see how they're goin' to keep up the pace with the cow along. The old gentleman says they can do twenty to twenty-five miles a day when the road's good. But I don't seem to see how the cow can keep up such a lick."

"A hired man, a cow, and an outfit that it took all winter to get together," said David thoughtfully. "It sounds more like a pleasure trip than going across the plains."

He sat as if uneasily debating the possible drawbacks of so elaborate an escort, but he was really ruminating upon the princess, who moved upon the wilderness with such pomp and circumstance.

As they set out their tin cups and plates they continued to discuss the doctor, his caravan, his mules, his servant, and his cow, in fact, everything but his daughter. It was noticeable that no mention of her was made till supper was over and the night fell. Then their comments on her were brief. Leff seemed afraid of her even a mile away in the damp hotel at Independence, seemed to fear that she might in some way know he'd had her name upon his tongue, and would come to-morrow with angry, accusing looks like an

offended goddess. David did not want to talk about her, he did not quite know why. Before the thought of traveling a month in her society his mind fell back reeling, baffled by the sudden entrance of such a dazzling intruder. A month beside this glowing figure, a month under the impersonal interrogation of those cool, demanding eyes! It was as if the President or General Zachary Taylor had suddenly joined them.

But of course she figured larger in their thoughts than any other part or all the combined parts of Dr. Gillespie's outfit. In their imaginations—the hungry imaginations of lonely young men—she represented all the grace, beauty, and mystery of the Eternal Feminine. They did not reason about her, they only felt, and what they felt—unconsciously to themselves—was that she had introduced the last, wildest, and most disturbing thrill into the adventure of the great journey.

CHAPTER III

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The next day broke still and clear. The dawn was yet a pale promise in the East when from Independence, out through the dripping woods and clearings, rose the tumult of breaking camps. The rattle of the yoke chains and the raucous cry of "Catch up! Catch up!" sounded under the trees and out and away over valley and upland as the

lumbering wagons, freighted deep for the long trail, swung into the road.

David's camp was astir long before the sun was up. The great hour had come. They were going! They sung and shouted as they harnessed Bess and Ben, a pair of sturdy roans bought from an emigrant discouraged before the start, while the saddle horses nosed about the tree roots for a last cropping of the sweet, thick grass. Inside the wagon the provisions were packed in sacks and the rifles hung on hooks on the canvas walls. At the back, on a supporting step, the mess chest was strapped. It was a businesslike wagon. Its contents included only one deviation from the practical and necessary—three books of David's. Joe had laughed at him about them. What did a man want with Byron's poems and Milton and Bacon's "Essays" crossing the plains? Neither Joe nor Leff could understand such devotion to the printed page. Their kits were of the compactest, not a useless article or an unnecessary pound, unless you counted the box of flower seeds that belonged to Joe, who had heard that California, though a dry country, could be coaxed into productiveness along the rivers.

Dr. Gillespie and his daughter were punctual. David's silver watch, large as the circle of a cup and possessed of a tick so loud it interrupted conversation, registered five minutes before seven, when the doctor and his daughter appeared at the head of their caravan. Two handsome figures, well mounted and clad with taste as well as suitability, they looked as gallantly unfitted for the road as armored knights in a modern battlefield. Good looks, physical delicacy, and becoming clothes had as yet no

recognized place on the trail. The Gillespies were boldly and blithely bringing them, and unlike most innovators, romance came with them. Nobody had gone out of Independence with so confident and debonair an air. Now advancing through a spattering of leaf shadows and sunspots, they seemed to the young men to be issuing from the first pages of a story, and the watchers secretly hoped that they would go riding on into the heart of it with the white arch of the prairie schooner and the pricked ears of the six mules as a movable background.

There was no umbrella this morning to obscure Miss Gillespie's vivid tints, and in the same flat, straw hat, with her cheeks framed in little black curls, she looked a freshly wholesome young girl, who might be dangerous to the peace of mind of men even less lonely and susceptible than the two who bid her a flushed and bashful good morning. She had the appearance, however, of being entirely oblivious to any embarrassment they might show. There was not a suggestion of coquetry in her manner as she returned their greetings. Instead, it was marked by a businesslike gravity. Her eyes touched their faces with the slightest welcoming light and then left them to rove, sharply inspecting, over their wagon and animals. When she had scrutinized these, she turned in her saddle, and said abruptly to the driver of the six mules:

"Daddy John, do you see—horses?"

The person thus addressed nodded and said in a thin, old voice.

"I do, and if they want them they're welcome to them."

He was a small, shriveled man, who might have been anywhere from sixty to seventy-five. A battered felt hat, gray-green with wind and sun, was pulled well down to his ears, pressing against his forehead and neck thin locks of gray hair. A grizzle of beard edged his chin, a poor and scanty growth that showed the withered skin through its sparseness. His face, small and wedge-shaped, was full of ruddy color, the cheeks above the ragged hair smooth and red as apples. Though his mouth was deficient in teeth, his neck, rising bare from the band of his shirt, corrugated with the starting sinews of old age, he had a shrewd vivacity of glance, an alertness of poise, that suggested an unimpaired spiritual vitality. He seemed at home behind the mules, and here, for the first time, David felt was some one who did not look outside the picture. In fact, he had an air of tranquil acceptance of the occasion, of adjustment without effort, that made him fit into the frame better than anyone else of the party.

It was a glorious morning, and as they fared forward through the checkered shade their spirits ran high. The sun, curious and determined, pried and slid through every crack in the leafage, turned the flaked lichen to gold, lay in clotted light on the pools around the fern roots. They were delicate spring woods, streaked with the white dashes of the dogwood, and hung with the tassels of the maple. The foliage was still unfolding, patterned with fresh creases, the prey of a continuous, frail unrest. Little streams chuckled through the underbrush, and from the fusion of woodland whisperings bird notes detached themselves, soft flutings