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***WINNING
THE WILDERNESS***

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Winning the Wilderness

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The Blessing of Asher

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Unless there be in the background a
mother,
no portrait of a man is complete.
—Winston Churchill

The old Aydelot farm reached quite down to the little village of Cloverdale, from which it was separated by Clover Creek. But the Aydelot farmhouse stood a good half-mile away up the National pike road toward the Virginia state line. The farm consisted of two long narrow strips of ground, bordering the road on either side and walled about by forests hiding stagnant marshes in their black-shadowed depths. Francis Aydelot had taken up the land from the government before the townsite was thought of. Farming was not to his liking and his house had been an inn, doing a thriving business with travelers going out along that great National highway in ante-railway days. But when the village took root and grew into a little town, the village tavern absorbed the revenue from the traveling public, and Francis Aydelot had, perforce, to put his own hands to the plow and earn a living from the land. It was never a labor of love with him, however, and although he grew well-to-do in the tilling, he resented the touch of the soil as something degrading. 2

Cloverdale did not grow toward him, because, out of prejudice at its being, he would not sell one foot of his ground for town lot purposes. Nevertheless, since he was upright in all his dealings, the villagers grew proud of him, deferred to his judgment, quoted his opinions, and rated him generally the biggest asset of the community, with one exception. That exception was young Asher Aydelot, a pink-cheeked, gray-eyed boy, only son of the House of Aydelot and heir to all the long narrow acres from the wooded crest on the east to the clear waters of Clover Creek on the west. He was heir to more than these, however, if the heritage of ancestry counts for anything.

Jean Aydelot, the first of the name in America, driven from France by his family on account of his Huguenot beliefs, had settled in Virginia. He had quickly grasped the American ideals of freedom, the while he affiliated easily with the exclusive English Cavaliers. Something of the wanderlust in his blood, however, kept him from rooting too firmly at once. It happened that when a band of Quaker exiles had sought refuge in Virginia and was about to be driven out by the autocratic Cavaliers, young Aydelot, out of love for a Quaker girl, had championed their cause vehemently. And he was so influential in the settlement that he might have succeeded, but for one family—the wealthy and aristocratic Thaines. Through the son of this family the final expulsion of these Quakers was accomplished. The woman in the case was Mercy Pennington, a pretty Quakeress with whom young Jerome Thaine fell in love, promising protection to all her people in return for her hand. When she refused his offer, the Thaines carried the day, and

the Quakers again became 3 exiles. Jean Aydelot followed them to Pennsylvania and married Mercy Pennington, who was promptly disowned by the Quaker Church for this marriage to one outside its membership.

In spite of all this heresy, however, the Aydelots became one of the leading families in the development of the colonies. Their descendants fell heir to the traits of their French-English forbears: freedom of belief, courage to follow a cause, a touch of the wanderlust, the mercurial French mind, and the steady poise of the followers of the Inward Light. A trace of bitterness had come down the years, however, with the family history; a feud-like resentment against the family of Jerome Thaine of Virginia.

Francis Aydelot had crossed the Alleghanies and settled in Ohio in frontier days. Here his life, like his narrow, woods-bound farm, was clean and open but narrowed by surroundings and lack of opportunity. What had made for freedom and reform in his ancestors, in him became prejudice and stubborn will. Mrs. Aydelot was a broad-minded woman. Something of vision was in her clear gray eyes. Love of beauty, respect for learning, and an almost statesman-like grasp of civic duty and the trend of national progress were hers, too.

From such ancestry came Asher Aydelot, the healthiest, happiest country boy that ever waked the echoes of the old Ohio woodlands, or dared the currents of her mad little rivers, or whistled fearlessly as he scampered down the dusty pike road in the soft black summer nights.

Asher was just fifteen when the Civil War swept the nation off its feet. The Quaker spirit of Mercy Pennington

made fighting repulsive to his father, but in Asher the 4 old Huguenot courage of Jean Aydelot blazed forth, together with the rash partisanship of a young hot-blood whose life has been hemmed in too narrowly by forest walls. Almost before Cloverdale knew there was a war, the Third Ohio Regiment was on its way to the front. Among its bearded men was one beardless youth, a round-faced drummer boy of fifteen, the only child of the big farmhouse beside the National road. In company with him was his boyhood chum, Jim Shirley, son of the Cloverdale tavern keeper.

An April sun was slipping behind the treetops, and the twilight mists were already rising above the creek. Francis Aydelot and his wife sat on the veranda watching Asher in the glory of a military suit and brass buttons coming up the pike with springing step.

“How strong he is! I’m glad he is at home again,” the mother was saying.

“Yes, he’s here to stay at last. I have his plans all settled,” Francis Aydelot declared.

“But, Francis, a man must make some plans for himself. Asher may not agree,” Mrs. Aydelot spoke earnestly.

“How can our boy know as well as his father does what is best for him? He must agree, that’s all. We have gone over this matter often enough together. I won’t have any Jim Shirley in my family. He’s gone away and nobody knows where he is, just when his father needs him to take the care of the tavern off his hands.”

“What made Jim go away from Cloverdale?” Mrs. Aydelot asked.

“Nobody seems to know exactly. He left just before his brother, Tank, married that Leigh girl up the Clover 5 valley somewhere. But everything’s settled for Asher. He will be marrying one of the Cloverdale girls pretty soon and stay right here in town. We’ll take it up with him now. There’s no use waiting.”

“And yet I wish we might wait till he speaks of it himself. Remember, he’s been doing his own thinking in the time he’s been away,” the mother insisted.

Just then, Asher reached the corner of the door yard. Catching sight of the two, he put his hands on the top of the paling fence, leaped lightly over it, and came across to the veranda, where he sat down on the top step.

“Just getting in from town? The place hasn’t changed much, has it?” the father declared.

“No, not much,” Asher replied absently, looking out with unseeing eyes at the lengthening woodland shadows, “a church or two more, some brick sidewalk, and a few stores and homes—just added on, not improved. I miss Jim Shirley everywhere. The older folks seem the same, but some of the girls are pushing baby-carriages and the boys are getting round-shouldered and droopy-jawed.”

He drew himself up with military steadiness as he spoke.

“Well, you are glad to settle down anyhow,” his father responded. “The old French spirit of roving and adventure has had its day with you, and now you will begin your life work.”

“Yes, I’m done with fighting.” Asher’s lips tightened. “But what do you call my life work, father?”

It was the eighth April after the opening of the Civil War. Asher had just come home from two years of army service on the western plains. Few changes had come to the little community; but to the young man, who eight 6 springtimes ago had gone out as a pink-cheeked drummer boy, the years had been full of changes. He was now twenty-three, straight as an Indian, lean and muscular as a veteran soldier. The fair, round cheeks of boyhood were brown and tinged with red-blooded health. There was something resolute and patient in the clear gray eyes, as if the mother's own far vision had crept into them. But the ready smile that had made the Cloverdale community love the boy broke as quickly now on the man's face, giving promise that his saving sense of humor and his good nature would be factors to reckon with in every combat.

Asher had staid in the ranks till the end of the war, had been wounded, captured, and imprisoned; had fought through a hospital fever and narrowly escaped death in the front of many battle lines. But he did not ask for a furlough, nor account his duty done till the war was ended. Just before that time, when he was sick in a Southern prison, a rebel girl had walked into his life to stay forever. With his chum, Jim Shirley, he had chafed through two years in a little eastern college, the while bigger things seemed calling him to action. At the end of the second year, he broke away, and joining the regular army, began the hazardous life of a Plains scout.

Two years of fighting a foe from every way the winds blow, cold and hunger, storms and floods and desert heat, poisonous reptiles, poisoned arrows of Indians, and the

deadly Asiatic cholera; sometimes with brave comrades, sometimes with brutal cowards, sometimes on scout duty, utterly and awfully alone; over miles on endless miles of grassy level prairies, among cruel canyons, in dreary sand lands where men die of thirst, monotonous and maddening in their barren, eternal sameness; and sometimes, between sunrises of superb grandeur, and sunsets of sublime glory, over a land of exquisite virgin loveliness—it is small wonder that the ruddy cheeks were bronze as an Indian's, that the roundness of boyhood had given place to the muscular strength of manhood, that the gray eyes should hold something of patience and endurance and of a vision larger than the Cloverdale neighborhood might understand.

When Asher had asked, "What do you call my life work, Father?" something impenetrable was in his direct gaze.

Francis Aydelot deliberated before replying. Then the decisive tone and firm set of the mouth told what resistance to his will might cost.

"It may not seem quite homelike at first, but you will soon find a wife and that always settles a man. I can trust you to pick the best there is here. As to your work, it must be something fit for a gentleman, and that's not grubbing in the ground. Of course, this is Aydelot soil. It couldn't belong to anybody else. I never would sell a foot of it to Cloverdale to let the town build this way. I'd as soon sell to a Thaine from Virginia as I'd sell to that town."

He waved a hand toward the fields shut in by heavy woodlands, where the shadows were already black. After a moment he continued:

“Everything is settled for you, Asher. I’ve been pretty careful and lucky, too, in some ways. The men who didn’t go to war had the big chances at money making, you know. While you were off fighting, I was improving the time here. I’ve done it fairly, though. I never dodged a law in my 8 life, nor met a man into whose eyes I couldn’t look squarely.”

As he spoke, the blood left Asher’s cheeks and his face grew gray under the tan.

“Father, do you think a man who fights for his country is to be accounted below the man who stays at home and makes money?”

“Well, he certainly can do more for his children than some of those who went to this war can do for their fathers,” Francis Aydelot declared. “Suppose I was helpless and poor now, what could you do for me?”

There was no attempt at reply, and the father went on: “I have prepared your work for you. You must begin it at once. Years ago Cloverdale set up a hotel, a poor enough tavern even for those days, but it robbed me of the patronage this house had before that time, and I had to go to farming. Every kind of drudgery I’ve had to do here. Cutting down forests, and draining swamps is a back-breaking business. I never could forgive the founders for stopping by Clover Creek, when they might have gone twenty miles further on where a town was needed and left me here. But that’s all past now. I’ve improved the time. I have a good share of stock in the bank and I own the only hotel in Cloverdale. I closed with Shirley as soon as I heard you were coming home. Shirley’s getting old, and since Jim has gone there’s no one to help him and take his place later, so he sold at a

very good figure. He had to sell for some reason, I believe. The Shirleys are having some family trouble that I don't understand nor care about. You've always been a sort of idol in the town anyhow. Now that you are to go into the Shirley House 9 as proprietor I suppose Cloverdale will take it as a dispensation of Providence in their favor, and you can live like a gentleman."

"But, father, I've always liked the country best. Don't you remember how Jim Shirley was always out here instead of my going down town when we were boys?"

"You are only a boy, now, Asher, and this is all I'll hear to your doing. You ought to be thankful for having such a chance open to you. I have leased the farm for five years and you don't want to be a hired man at twenty dollars a month, I reckon. Of course, the farm will be yours some day, unless you take a notion to run off to Virginia and marry a Thaine."

The last words were said jokingly, but Asher's mother saw a sudden hardening of the lines of his face as he sat looking out at the darkening landscape.

There was only a faint glow in the west now. The fields toward Cloverdale were wrapped in twilight shadows. Behind the eastern treetops the red disk of the rising moon was half revealed. Asher Aydelot waited long before he spoke. At length, he turned toward his father with a certain stiffening of his form, and each felt a space widening gulf-wise between them.

"You stayed at home and grew rich, Father."

"Well?"

The father's voice cut like a steel edge. He saw only opposition to his will here, but the mother forecasted the end from that moment.

"Father, war gives us to see bigger things than hatred between two sections of the country. There is education in it, too. That is a part of the compensation. Once, when 10 our regiment was captured and starving, the Fifty-fourth Virginia boys saved our lives by feeding us the best supper I ever tasted. And a Rebel girl—" he broke off suddenly.

"Well, what of all this? What are you trying to say?" queried the older man.

"I'm trying to show you that I cannot sit down here in the Shirley House and play mine host any more than I could—" hesitatingly—"marry a Cloverdale girl on demand. No Cloverdale girl would have me so. I've seen too much of the country for such a position, Father. Let the men who staid at home do the little jobs."

He had not meant to say all this, but the stretch of boundless green prairies was before his eyes, the memory of heroic action where men utterly forget themselves was in his mind, making life in that little Ohio settlement seem only a boy's pastime, to be put away with other childish things. While night and day, in the battle clamor, in the little college class room, on boundless prairie billows, among lonely sand dunes—everywhere, he carried the memory of the gentle touch of the hand of a rebel girl, who had visited him when he was sick and in prison. And withal, he resented dictation, as all the Aydelots and Penningtons before him had done.

"What do you propose to do?" his father asked.

“I don’t know yet what I can do. I only know what I cannot do.”

“And that is—?”

“Just what I have said. I cannot be a tavern keeper here the rest of my days with nothing to do half of the time except to watch the men pitch horseshoes behind the blacksmith shop, and listen to the flies buzz in the windows 11 on summer afternoons; and everything else so quiet and dead you don’t know whether you are on the street or in the graveyard. If you’d ever crossed the Mississippi River you’d understand why.”

“Well, I haven’t, and I don’t understand. But the only way to stop this roving is to make a home of your own. Will you tell me how you expect to support a Cloverdale girl when you marry one?”

“I don’t expect to marry one.” The smile was winning, but the son’s voice sounded dangerously like the father’s.

“Why not?”

“Because when I marry it will be to a southern girl—” Asher hesitated a moment. When he went on, his voice was not as son to father, but as man to man.

“It all happened down in Virginia, when I was wounded and in prison. This little girl took care of me. Only a soldier really knows what a woman’s hand means in sickness. But she did more. She risked everything, even her life, to get letters through the lines to you and to get me exchanged. I shiver yet when I think of her, disguised as a man in soldier’s clothes, taking the chance she did for me. And, well, I left my heart down there. That’s all.”

“Why haven’t you ever told us this before, Asher?” his father asked.

Asher stood up where the white moonlight fell full on his face. Somehow the old Huguenot defiance and the old Quaker endurance of his ancestors seemed all expressed in him.

“I wasn’t twenty-one, then, and I have nothing yet to offer a girl by way of support,” he said. 12

“Why, Asher!” Mrs. Aydelot exclaimed, “you have everything here.”

“Not yet, mother,” he replied. “And I haven’t told you because her name is Virginia Thaine, and she is a descendant of Jerome Thaine. Are the Aydelots big enough to bury old hates?”

Francis Aydelot sat moveless as a statue. When at length he spoke, there was no misunderstanding his meaning.

“You have no means by which to earn a living. You will go down to town and take charge of the Shirley House at once, or go to work as a hired hand here. But remember this: from the day you marry a Thaine of Virginia you are no longer my son. Family ties, family honor, respect for your forefathers forbid it.”

He rose without more words, and went into the house.

Then came the mother’s part.

“Sit down, Asher,” she said, and Asher dropped to his place on the step.

“We don’t seem to see life through the same spectacles,” he said calmly. “Am I wrong, mother? Nobody can choose my life for me, nor my wife, either. Didn’t old grandfather, Jean Aydelot, leave his home in France, and didn’t

grandmother, Mercy Pennington, marry to suit her own choice?"

Even in the shadow, his mother noted the patient expression of the gray eyes looking up at her.

"Asher, it is Aydelot tradition to be determined and self-willed, and the bitterness against Jerome Thaine and his descendants has never left the blood—till now."

She stroked his hair lovingwise, as mothers will ever do.
13

"Do you suppose father will ever change?"

"I don't believe he will. We have talked of this many times, and he will listen to nothing else. He grows more set in his notions as we all do with years, unless—"

"Well, you don't, mother. Unless what?" Asher asked.

"Unless we think broadly as the years broaden out toward old age. But, Asher, what are your plans?"

"I'm afraid I have none yet. You know I was a farmer boy until I was fifteen, a soldier boy till I was nineteen, a college student for two years, and a Plains scout for two years more. Tell me, mother, what does all this fit me for? Not for a tavern in a town of less than a thousand people."

He sat waiting, his elbow resting on his knee, his chin supported by his closed hand.

"Asher, when you left school and went out West, I foresaw what has happened tonight," Mrs. Aydelot began. "I tried to prepare your father for it, but he would not listen, would not understand. He doesn't yet. He never will. But I do. You will not stay in Ohio always, because you do not fit in here now. Newer states keep calling you westward, westward. This was frontier when we came here in the

thirties; we belong here. But, sooner or later, you will put your life into the building of the West. Something—the War or the Plains, or may be this Virginia Thaine, has left you too big for prejudice. You will go sometime where there is room to think and live as you believe.”

“Mother, may I go? I dream of it night and day. I’m so cramped here. The woods are in my way. I can’t see a 14 mile. I want to see to the edge of the world, as I can on the prairies. A man can win a kingdom out there.”

He was facing her now, his whole countenance aglow with bright anticipation.

“There is only one way to win that kingdom,” Mrs. Aydelot declared. “The man who takes hold of the plow-handles is the man who will really conquer the prairies. His scepter is not the rifle, but the hoe.”

For all his life, Asher Aydelot never forgot his mother’s face, nor the sound of her low prophetic words on that moonlit night on the shadowy veranda of his childhood home.

“You are right, mother. I don’t want to fight any more. It must be the soil that is calling me back to the West, the big, big West! And I mean to go when the time comes. I hope it will come soon, and I know you will give me your blessing then.”

His mother’s hands were pressed lovingly upon his forehead, as he leaned against her knee.

“My blessing, and more than mine. The blessing of Moses to Asher of old, as well. ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be. The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.’”

She bent over her boy, and pushing back the hair from his forehead, she kissed it reverently, nor dreamed in how many a bitter strife would the memory of this sacred hour come back to him, with the blessed note of victory.

The next morning Asher put on his working clothes and began the life of a hired man on his father's farm. The summer was long and hot, and in the late August the dread 15 typhoid malaria swept up from the woods marshes. It was of virulent form and soon had its way with Asher's father and mother.

When the will of Francis Aydelot was read in court, the inexorable will of a stubborn man, it declared that the Cloverdale Hotel, the bank stock, and the farm with all the appurtenances thereunto pertaining, should descend to Asher Aydelot, provided he should remain a resident of Ohio and should never be united in marriage to any descendant of Jerome Thaine of the State of Virginia. Failing in this, all the property, except a few hundred dollars in cash, should descend to one Jane Aydelot, of Philadelphia, and her heirs and assigns forever; provided these heirs were not the children of Virginia Thaine of the state of Virginia.

On the same day, Asher wrote to one Jane Aydelot, of Philadelphia, to come to Ohio and take possession of her property. Then he carefully sodded the two mounds in the graveyard, and planted old-fashioned sweet pinks upon them, and bidding good-by to the home of his boyhood, he turned his face hopefully to the West.

CHAPTER II

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The Sign of the Sunflower

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Little they knew what wealth untold
Lay hid where the desolate prairies rolled:
Who would have dared, with brush or pen,
As this land is now, to paint it then?
—Allerton.

The trail had left the woodland far to the eastward, and wound its way over broad prairie billows, past bluffy-banked streams, along crests of low watersheds, until at last it slid down into an open endlessness of the Lord's earth—just a vasty bigness of landstuff seemingly left over when geography-making was done. It was untamed stuff, too, whereon one man's marking was like to the track of foam in the wake of one ship in mid-ocean. Upon its face lay the trail, broad and barren of growth as the dusty old National pike road making its way across uplands and valleys of Ohio. But this was the only likeness. The pike was a gravel-built, upgraded highway, bordered by little rail-fenced fields and deep forests hiding malarial marshes in the lower places.

This trail, flat along the ungraded ground, tended in the direction of least resistance, generally toward the southwest. It was bounded by absence of landmarks, boulder or tree or cliff. Along either side of it was a fringe of spindling sunflower stalks, with their blooms of gold marking

two gleaming threads across the plains far toward the misty nothingness of the western horizon. 17

The mid-September day had been intensely hot, but the light air was beginning to flow a bit refreshingly out of the sky. A gray cloud-wave, creeping tide-like up from the southwest, was tempering the afternoon glare. In all the landscape the only object to hold the eye was a prairie schooner drawn by a team of hard-mouthed little Indian ponies, and followed by a free-limbed black mare of the Kentucky blue blood.

Asher Aydelot sat on the wagon seat holding the reins. Beside him was his wife, a young, girlish-looking woman with large dark eyes, abundant dark hair, a straight, aristocratic nose, and well-formed mouth and chin.

The two, coming in from the East on the evening before, had reached the end of the stage line, where Asher's team and wagon was waiting for them.

The outfit moved slowly. It had left Carey's Crossing at early dawn and had put twenty-five miles between itself and that last outpost of civilization.

"Why don't you let the horses trot down this hill slope, Asher?" The woman's voice had the soft accent of the South.

"Are you tired, Virgie?" Asher Aydelot looked earnestly down at his wife.

"Not a bit!" The bright smile and vigorous lift of the shoulders were assuring.

"Then we won't hurry. We have several miles to go yet. It is a long day's run from Carey's to our claim. Wolf County is

almost like a state. The Crossing hopes to become the county seat.”

“Why do they call that place Carey’s Crossing?” Mrs. Aydelot asked.

“It was a trading post once where the north and south 18 trail crossed the main trail. Later it was a rallying place for cavalry. Now it’s our postoffice,” Asher explained.

“I mean, why call it Carey? I knew Careys back in Virginia.”

“It is named for a young doctor, the only one in ten thousand miles, so far as I know.”

“And his family?” Virginia asked.

“He’s a bachelor, I believe. By the way, we aren’t going down hill. We are on level ground.”

Mrs. Aydelot leaned out beyond the wagon bows to take in the trail behind them.

“Why, we are right in a big saucer. All the land slopes to the center down there before us. Can’t you see it?”

“No, I’ve seen it too often. It is just a trick of the plains—one of the many tricks for the eye out here. Look at the sunflowers, Virgie. Don’t you love them?”

Virginia Aydelot nestled close to her husband’s side and put one hand on his. It was a little hand, white and soft, the hand of a lady born of generations of gentility. The hand it rested on was big and hard and brown and very strong looking.

“I’ve always loved them since the day you sent me the little one in a letter,” she said in a low voice, as if some one might overhear. “I thought you had forgotten me and the old war days. I wasn’t very happy then.” There was a quiver

of the lip that hinted at the memory of intense sorrow. “I had gone up to the spring in that cool little glen in the mountain behind our home, you know, when a neighbor’s servant boy, Bo Peep, Boanerges Peeperville, he named himself, came grinning round a big rock ledge with 19 your letter. Just a crushed little sunflower and a sticky old card, the deuce of hearts. I knew it was from you, and I loved the sunflower for telling me so. Were you near here then? This land looks so peaceful and beautiful to me, and homelike somehow, as if we should find some neighbors just over the hill that you say isn’t there.”

“Neither the hill nor the neighbors, yet, although settlers will be coming soon. We won’t be lonesome very long, I’m sure.”

Asher shifted the reins to his other hand and held the little white fingers close.

“It wasn’t anywhere near here. It was away off in the southwest corner of—nowhere. I was going to say a shorter word, for that’s where we were. I took that card out of an old deck from the man nearest me. The Comanches had fixed him, so he didn’t need it in his game any more. There were only two of us left, a big half-breed Cheyenne scout and myself. I picked the sunflower from the only stalk within a hundred miles of there. I guess it grew so far from everything just for me that day. Weak as I was, I’ll never forget how hopefully it seemed to look at me. The envelope was one mother had sent me, you remember. I told the Cheyenne how to start it to you from the fort. He left me there, wounded and alone—’twas all he could do—while he went for help about a thousand miles away it must have

seemed, even to an Indian. I thought it was my last message to you, dearie, for I never expected to be found alive; but I was, and when you wrote back, sending your letter to 'The Sign of the Sunflower,' Oh, little girl, the old trail blossom was glorified for me forever." 20

He broke off so suddenly that his wife looked up inquiringly.

"I was thinking of the cool spring and the rocks, and that shady glen, and the mountains, and the trees, and the well-kept mansion houses, and servants like Bo Peep to fetch and carry—and here—Virginia, why did you let me persuade you away from them? Everything was made ready for you there. The Lord didn't do anything for this country but go off and leave it to us."

"Yes, to us. Here is the sunflower and the new home in the new West and Asher Aydelot. And underfoot is the prairie sod that is ours, and overhead is heaven that kept watch over you for me, and over both of us for this. And I persuaded you to bring me here because I wanted to be with you always."

"You can face it all for me?" he asked.

"With you, you mean. Yes, for we'll stop at 'The Sign of the Sunflower' so long as we both shall live. How beautiful they are, these endless bands of gold, drawing us on and on across the plains. Asher, you forget that Virginia is not as it was before the war. But we did keep inherited pride in the Thaine family, and the will to do as we pleased. You see what has pleased me."

"And it shall please me to make such a fortune out of this ground, and build such a home for you that by and by you

will forget you ever were without the comforts you are giving up now," Asher declared, looking equal to the task. "Virgie," he added presently, "on the night my mother told me to come out West she gave me her blessing, and the blessing of the old Bible Asher also—'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.' 21 I believe the blessing will stay with us; that the Eternal God will be our refuge in this new West and new home-building."

They rode awhile in silence. Then Asher said:

"Look yonder, Virginia, south of the trail. Just a faint yellow line."

"Is it another trail, or are you lost and beginning to see things?"

"No, I'm found," Asher replied. "We scattered those seeds ourselves; did it on Sundays when I was living on my claim, waiting till I could go back and bring you here. We blazed the way, marked it with gold, I'd better say; a line clear to Grass River. It leaves the real Sunflower Trail right here."

"Who were *we* in this planting?" Virginia asked.

"Oh, me and my first wife, Jim Shirley, and his shepherd dog, Pilot. Jim and I have done several things together besides that. We were boys together back in Cloverdale. We went to the war together to fight you obstreperous Rebels." There was a twinkle in Asher's eyes now.

"Yes, but in the end who really won?" Virginia asked demurely.

"You did, of course—in my case. Jim went back to Cloverdale for awhile. Then he came out here. He's a fine fellow. Plants a few more seeds by the wayside than is good

for him, maybe, but a friend to the last rollcall. He was quite a ladies' man once, and nobody knows but himself how much he would have loved a home. He has something of a story back of his coming West, but we never speak of that. He's our only neighbor now."

It was twilight when Asher and his wife slipped down 22 over a low swell and reached their home. The afterglow of sunset was gorgeous in the west. The gray cloud-tide, now a purple sea, was rifted by billows of flame. Level mist-folds of pale violet lay along the prairie distances. In the southwest the horizon line was broken by a triple fold of deepest blue-black tones, the mark of headlands somewhere. Across the landscape a grassy outline marked the course of a stream that wandered dimly toward the darkening night shadows. The subdued tones of evening held all the scene, save where a group of tall sunflowers stood up to catch the last light of day full on their golden shields.

"We are here at last, Mrs. Aydelot. Welcome to our neighborhood!" Asher said bravely as the team halted.

Virginia sat still on the wagon seat, taking in the view of sunset sky and twilight prairie.

"This is our home," she murmured. "I'm glad we are here."

"I'm glad you are glad. I hope I haven't misrepresented it to you," her husband responded, turning away that he might not see her face just then.

It was a strange place to call home, especially to one whose years had been spent mainly in the pretty mountain-walled Virginia valleys where cool brooks babbled over pebbly beds or splashed down in crystal waterfalls; whose

childhood home had been an old colonial house with driveways, and pillared verandas, and jessamine-wreathed windows; with soft carpets and cushioned chairs, and candelabra whose glittering pendants reflected the light in prismatic tintings; and everywhere the lazy ease of idle servants and unhurried lives.

The little sod house, nestled among sheltering sunflowers, 23 stood on a slight rise of ground. It contained one room with two windows, one looking to the east and the other to the west, and a single door opening on the south. Above this door was a smooth pine board bearing the inscription, "Sunflower Inn," stained in rather artistic lettering. A low roof extending over the doorway gave semblance to a porch which some scorched vines had vainly tried to decorate. There was a rude seat made of a goods box beside the doorway. Behind the house rose the low crest of a prairie billow, hardly discernible on the level plains. Before it lay the endless prairie across which ran the now half-dry, grass-choked stream. A few stunted cottonwood trees followed its windings, and one little clump of wild plum bushes bristled in a draw leading down to the shallow place of the dry watercourse. All else was distance and vastness void of life and utter loneliness.

Virginia Aydelot looked at the scene before her. Then she turned to her husband with a smile on her young face, saying again,

"I am glad I am here."

There is one chord that every woman's voice touches some time, no matter what her words may be. As Virginia spoke, Asher saw again the moonlight on the white pillars of

the south veranda of the old Aydelot farmhouse, and his mother sitting in the shadows; and again he caught the tone of her voice saying,

“Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.”

He leaped from the wagon seat and put up his arms to help his wife to the ground.

“This is the end of the trail,” he said gaily. “We have 24 reached the inn with ‘The Sign of the Sunflower.’ See the signboard Jim has put up for us.”

At that moment a big shepherd dog came bounding out of the weeds by the river and leaped toward them with joyous yelps; a light shone through the doorway, and a voice at once deep and pleasant to the ear, called out:

“Well, here you are, just as supper is ready. Present me to the bride, Asher, and then I’ll take the stock off your hands.”

“Mrs. Aydelot, this is Mr. James Shirley, at present the leading artistic house decorator as well as corn king of the Southwest. Allow me, Jim, to present my wife. You two ought to like each other if each of you can stand me.”

They shook hands cordially, and each took the other’s measure at a glance. What Shirley saw was a small, well-dressed woman whose charm was a positive force. It was not merely that she was well-bred and genial of manner, nor that for many reasons she was pretty and would always be pretty, even with gray hair and wrinkles. There was something back of all this; something definite to build on; a self-reliance and unbreakable determination without the spirit that antagonizes.

“A thoroughbred,” was Shirley’s mental comment. “The manners of a lady and the will of a winner.”

What Virginia saw was a big, broad-shouldered man, tanned to the very limit of brownness, painfully clean shaven, and grotesquely clean in dress; a white shirt, innocent of bluing in its laundry, a glistening celluloid collar, a black necktie (the last two features evidently just added to the toilet, and neither as yet set to their service), dark pantaloons and freshly blacked shoes. But it was Shirley’s face that caught Virginia’s eyes, for even with the tan it was a handsome face, with regular features, and blue eyes seeing life deeply rather than broadly. Just a hint of the artistic, however, took away from rather than added to the otherwise manly expression. Clearly, Jim Shirley was a man that men and women, too, must love if they cared for him at all.. And they couldn’t help caring for him. He had too much of the quality of eternal interest.

“I’m glad to meet you, and I bid you welcome to your new home, Mrs. Aydelot. The house is in order and supper is ready. I congratulate you, Asher,” he said, as he turned away to take the ponies.

“You will come in and eat with us,” Virginia said cordially.

“Not tonight. I must put this stock away and hurry home.”

Asher opened his lips to repeat his wife’s invitation, but something in Jim’s face held the words, so he merely nodded a good-by as he led his wife into the sod cabin.

Two decades in Kansas saw hundreds of such cabins on the plains. The walls of this one were nearly two feet thick and smoothly plastered inside with a gypsum product,

giving an ivory-yellow finish, smooth and hard as bone. There was no floor but the bare earth into which a nail could scarcely have been driven. The furniture was meager and plain. There was only one picture on the wall, the sweet face of Asher's mother. A bookshelf held a Bible with two or three other volumes, some newspapers and a magazine. Sundry surprising little devices showed the inventive skill of the home-builder, but it was all home-made and unpainted. It must have been the eyes of love that made this 26 place seem homelike to these young people whose early environment had been so vastly different in everything!

Jim Shirley had a supper of fried ham, stewed wild plums, baked sweet potatoes, and hot coffee, with canned peaches and some hard little cookies. Surely the Lord meant men to be the cooks. Society started wrong in the kitchen, for the average man prepares a better meal with less of effort and worry than the average or super-average woman will ever do. It was not the long ride alone, it was this appetizing food that made that first meal in the sod mansion one that these two remembered in days of different fortune. They remembered, too, the bunch of sunflowers that adorned the table that night. The vase was the empty peach can wrapped round with a piece of newspaper.

As they lingered at their meal, Asher glanced through the little west window and saw Jim Shirley sitting by the clump of tall sunflowers not far away watching them with the eager face of a lonely man. A big white-throated Scotch collie lay beside him, waiting patiently for his master to start for home.