

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The Gathering of the Clan

"There may be a washout at the big slough", said mother nervously. A heavy rain had fallen during the night before, and the road was muddy in spite of the bright sunshine. We found a big hole at one end of the diagonal bridge, but managed to get past. If the bridge had been out, as it often was, we would have had to go back to the corner and around by Peter Wilson's farm to get to church.

That Sunday in June, 1885, was sultry, unseasonably warm. "Good for the corn", father remarked cheerfully. "It'll be knee-high by the Fourth. Look at McDowall's lodged oats. He'll have a deuce of a time cutting them. Our soil is too rich for small grain." The wheels of our high, two-seated buggy chucked into deep ruts worn in the prairie sod as we crept along.

For thirty years the valley of Wolf Creek had been filling up with Scotch farmers. John and West Wilson and George Sloss had been the first

to come. Their brothers and sisters followed. Relatives and neighbors emigrated from Ayrshire in the "Old Country". On the prairies in the northern part of Tama County these thrifty Scotch pioneers formed a parish which they called Tranquillity. The social life of this rural community centered about the church, three miles west of Traer, where men, women, and children met on the Sabbath to worship according to the Presbyterian creed and visit about neighborhood affairs. Sunday was a day to anticipate with pleasure.

"Oh, see that peacock!" We children always watched for Squire Wilson's peafowls when we sighted his place a quarter of a mile away on the other road. There was the peacock standing in front of the pines with his tail spread, a gorgeous sight.

"Can't you hurry a little? I'm sure we'll be late for church," mother ventured.

But father pointed to the ridges of foamy sweat along the horses' hip bands. "I think we're early. The kitchen clock was fast." But it was a relief when we turned on to the main road at the Squire's corner and saw other teams plowing through the mud. The church was half a mile along the road to the right. It was a simple gabled building facing the north, with three high many-paned windows on each side. The pine trees were small in

those days. Tranquillity had no belfry like the other churches. But there was no need for a bell to call the people to church; they came anyway.

A little farther along we passed the Amity road leading down from the hills. James Taylor, the bachelor elder walking to save his horses, was getting into Edward Dodd's buggy and stammering, "Ay, ay. It's a fine day. Ay, ay, quite so, quite so."

Andrew McCosh crossed the road ahead of us as we rode up to the church. He had a head and beard like Aaron and a body like Abraham Lincoln. He was carrying the silver christening bowl. Mother began wondering whose baby was to be baptized. It would be Janet Dodd's; for her children had the measles at the last communion when the other babies were baptized.

Father drove up to the high platform where mother and the younger children got out. I stayed in the buggy. One of the elders turned in from the Traer road. His daughter stayed with me while her mother hurried into the church with a basket. She wanted to get the silver communion service on the grey marble-topped table and everything covered with the damask cloth before Dr. Hughes came into the pulpit. He was even then shaking hands with people outside.

The men greeted each other with heartiness as

they tied their horses, "Hoo air ye, Edward?" "It's a gran' day, Wullie." Then joining the group in front of the church they fell to discussing their wet hay.

From where we stood, we could look across the broad sweep of Wolf Creek Valley to the high hills on the other side, on the top of which wound the Ridge Road. To the east, near Traer, was National Grove; to the northwest, Four Mile Grove. The region beyond those hills was an enchanted land which I seldom saw, for our farm lay two miles south of Tranquillity.

"I met James Wilson in toon yesterday. He'd just come frae Washington", said a braw woman as she stepped out of the buggy and shook out her blue dimity frills. "In Smith's store they were all talkin' about his sacrificing his seat in Congress for General Grant but James made nathin' o' it, just speared if we kent aught aboot the cattle plague around Amity."

"How could this trouble we've been hearin' about all year be decided so quickly?" inquired a big woman standing near.

"Why did ye no see the papers!" exclaimed a good auntie. "They're a' fu' o' it and the worst of it is a Democrat represents the Fifth District the noo."

"Weel, Esther will be relieved that it's settled

that James'll no go back to Washington. She's ower much o' a lady to manage the farm an' hired men."

"Ay, it has its drawbacks to hae a famous husband wi' his mind always filled wi' big projects that will benefit the nation. For my pairt," the braw woman continued, "I'm very weel content wi' my man. He's no thinkin' beyond me and the weans. But there they're comin' noo. Is that no a fine dress Esther has? She so often wears purple. It's her color."

Four farms cornered at the church, the one lying along side belonging to James Wilson. His house was a little way up the road that passed the church. As he stopped to speak with his neighbors at the church door, he appeared more like a successful farmer than a Congressman. Though his manners were simple and cordial, he nevertheless had a noble bearing and gave an impression of great dignity and reserve. After he passed into the church with his wife, the men fell into a spirited discussion that impressed me strongly, for they spoke with much feeling.

In the last few minutes of the Forty-eighth Congress, the Republicans tried to put through a bill restoring to the dying General Grant his old army rank and pension; but the Democrats, in the majority then, demanded a vote first on the election

contest between James Wilson and Benjamin T. Frederick for the seat of United States Representative from the Fifth Iowa District. Though Wilson had held the position through the whole term of Congress, the Democrats were ready to decide the contest in favor of his opponent. The Republicans could easily have filibustered until the session closed, but they wanted to have the Grant bill considered and the Democrats refused to take it up until the election contest was settled. Thereupon, Wilson announced that if the House would vote to put General Grant on the retired list he was willing to be sacrificed. This was done.

"Some larger work'll come to Jeames," said a visionary cousin.

"Na, his party leaders will hae nae mair use for him", replied a neighbor with conviction as he spat out his quid of tobacco.

But Aunt Salie, Andrew Wilson's wife, voiced the sentiments of Tranquillity people when she said to Geordie Sloss as they went up the church walk, "Auch! An' what are they a' haiverin' [talking] aboot? Oor Jeames would never hae thocht o' daein' onything else."

The visionary cousin was right. There was a larger work ahead of "Tama Jim" Wilson. He was to serve as Secretary of Agriculture for sixteen years under McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft.

He added prestige to a family already prominent in a local way.

Tranquillity life revolved around the Wilson clan. There were three brothers, Uncle John (father of James), the Squire (West Wilson), Andrew, and five sisters — all with large families. The Wilsons have race pride and family loyalty. They were all "kisns" (cousins) — the various families of McMillans, Galts, Dodds, McDowalls, Slosses, and McCoshes.

In my childhood these "kisns", children of the older Wilson generation that came out from Scotland, had intermarried with other family groups and nearly all had settled on adjoining farms in the same agricultural community. Thus it was that the Tranquillity people were bound into a homogeneous group by the three strong ties of race, religion, and family. No wonder that outsiders spoke of these people as the clannish Scotch of Tranquillity.

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