

THE PALIMPSEST

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Bradford—A Prairie Village

In times past, the rising sun each morning spread its rays over the great expanse of undulating grassland, and quickened to life the pulse of a little prairie village. Bradford, in Chickasaw County, the home of "The Little Brown Church in the Vale", was a bit of old New England set down on the prairies of northeastern Iowa. The village was far from new when the first white settler discovered it. It was an early habitation of the Indians, for the little stream filled with silvered life which had cut its way through the very marrow of the land of this region, the little glades of its tributaries with their shade, their wild life and their willing offerings of wild fruit, all combined to make this a favored spot with the red man, a delectable place for a camping-ground. Here too, beside the stream, were the bodies of their dead.

For generations the Land of the Passing Ones kept its sacred secret. The log structures above ground were placed only where nature could best conceal them. And the bark-encased bodies which

were committed to the keeping of the oldest of the oak children where they might ever hear the whispered words of hope and lyrics of eager life, were only found in the most interior part of the grove.

Then came the first white man, and here at the Indian village, a trading post was established. Little did the forest dwellers realize what this outpost of the white man's power would mean to them. But the time came when it seemed as though their gods had entirely forsaken them; and discouraged and saddened with the thoughts of leaving the camping-ground of their ancestors they turned one last, long glance toward the land of their memories, then set forth to a new home. The land of their dreams, the heritage of their forefathers, was no longer theirs. Is it any wonder that these white intruders were looked upon with such bitterness?

The log cabins sprang up on every side with the departure of the Indian, for the white man also found this a pleasant vale for the location of a home. Great trees were felled, and within a fortnight, it almost seemed — so rapidly was the prairie silence broken — there had appeared on the Iowa prairies a little village. In the course of time it became a thrifty place, a metropolis of the prairies. All stages of that region included it in their daily routes. When the main street was reached the horses were driven at a terrific speed, for the entrance of the stage was a matter of great importance. It was the only communication with the outside world and

many of the town worthies made it a point to be on hand when it arrived. The occasion was of especial importance to the small boys for their fancies pictured a wild rush from one bandit holdup to another, with towns interspersed to make the dash interesting.

Down the long main street of the village the stage came madly dashing — past the church, the school house, the Academy (a red brick structure which was the pride of the day), past the old log courthouse, the wagon-shop, the brewery, the saw-mill, the blacksmith's, and the public square. At the Bronson House, the big hotel of the time, it stopped. Here it was that the mail had to be left, new bags taken on, and a change of horses made. Then it was free to continue on its way over the prairie, traversing a distance of nearly twenty miles before the next village was reached. Occasionally it ran parallel to the Indian trail which was worn deep in the prairie soil, but for the most part the voyage was one of monotony, unless the driver happened to be awake to the wonders of bird and plant life about him.

Of the buildings of the village, the church became the nucleus. About it, the lives of the settlers came to a focus. And such a church as that was! A small brown building of Puritan severity in its straight unornamented architecture. It was but a meeting house, why decorate it? From this building and the principles for which it stood, the spirit of the people flowed out. Near by, just over the little hill which arose abruptly from Dry Run, was the old manse.

It was a little stucco structure, and there the good "Brother Nutting" lived. But as we are watching, the door opens and there steps forth none other than the minister himself.

His long parson's cloak and stiff hat would at once proclaim him a member of the village aristocracy. But his face contains nothing of scorn or pride. He is a young man, filled with eagerness and energy. Only such a man could have started these people on the way toward the building of a new church, at a time when they had been worshipping in an old shed with no windows and doors to keep out the cold. Well known is he in these days for his learning and his wit. He startles the audience with his quick flashes of humor. His eyes never dull. There always flames in them the fire of some great enterprise, some worthy undertaking. They twinkle in the joke of the moment, but there always gleams beneath, that severity, that soberness which again is Puritanic, that seriousness which comes of the deeply thinking theologian, pointing the way to eternal life. He is the master mind of the people, their leader in intellect. But when the service is over, he is a builder, a business manager who knows how to carry on the financial affairs of enterprises which command the fortunes of many a pioneer. He is a man among men, ever ready to share the lot of the poorest member of his congregation. He accepts vegetables and harvest products in pay for his services and wedding fees may be paid in apples.

The church yard is rapidly filling with people, and carriages are constantly arriving. Country people are coming in from the district around. Here comes a pioneer family in Sunday attire. Hoop skirts and small bonnets enter the church and bob down the aisle. Stove-pipe hats and swallow-tails are displayed in the entrance. And when these aristocrats of the village have been seated, in come others. A cheery, pink-cheeked little mother leads her brood of five down to one of the front seats, while behind them comes the beaming father.

Ah, here is the renowned Mrs. ———. She comes of a very dignified and noble Canadian family, and is always looked upon as the very model for extreme nicety of taste in dress and manners. Her paisley shawl, her blue satin gown, so delicately made, her pearl ear-rings, and shapely hat, all bespeak for her the very best of style. Her face is filled with interest in the lives of those about her. She walks in a half deliberate, half eager manner. She receives nods from everyone as she passes down the aisle. She is a distinguished member of the congregation. Well indeed may the tall, straight, high browed, intellectual gentleman who follows her be proud of his prize. They live some little distance from Bradford, but are stopping with friends in the village. They left their place last evening, came to Bradford, did their Saturday shopping, stayed with a friend over night, and when they have attended the sermon by "Elder Nutting", and eaten a perfectly served chicken din-

ner at some other friends, they will drive back to their home late this afternoon. That will give them time to do the chores before the evening comes on.

There were many manners represented in the folk of this congregation, but it was the best manners of the town-folk, the nucleus of the best society which here gathered every Sabbath for worship. Stern Scotch Presbyterians, former Baptists, critical Methodists and many more who had never professed faith in any denomination, here came together in the common interests of the welfare of their community. It was a great spirit which could unite this group of people and maintain their constant interest and help in any enterprise, but Mr. Nutting seemed to possess just that spirit. He combined sympathy, tact, and humor, as he mingled with his people, in quite the proportion needed to accomplish the best results.

One element, and one only, was lacking from the congregation among those who could rightfully be considered the personae of the village. There is no record that the little hunch-backed saloon keeper ever entered the church. And with him, there was the group of the rougher element such as always establishes itself in any new Western outpost. The town worthies might bring eternal damnation upon this group, for all it mattered to the men comprising it; their interest was in the saloon and not in the matters pertaining to some vague, uncertain hereafter.

From the pastor and Dr. Pitts, a music-master who came over from Fredericksburg to conduct the sing-

ing school, there flowed out to the people the beauty of the holy message in word and song. Perhaps the influence of this young doctor who conducted music classes when he was not actually practicing his real profession, was greater than we of to-day can realize. Many a man may have been stirred to intense emotion by the ardor of the music-master's eager, well modulated voice. The man was tall, dignified and of noble appearance. In the newly built church, nearly sixty years ago, he sang for the first time in public the song "The Little Brown Church in the Vale." This was only one of his noble efforts to make life, the real life of song and beauty, the one which should become the prize of the people. The world heard the echoes of that simple song, and responded to it, while the Doctor lived on in his unpretentious manner, uplifting those who needed his cheery word and song.

In the spirit of these two men — pastor and singer — the village people "lived and moved and had their being." The words of God rang continually in their ears when they were at work, and their life was a constant association with the beauty of the region about them. So a sincerity to their ideals and a loyalty to their deepest convictions became community traits of the prairie village of Bradford.

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