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A STRANGE TEMPEST

By C. A. STEPHENS.

When, in 1907, I journeyed out to the Peace River country, in the Province of Alberta, to visit my kinsfolk, the Mastermans, at their wheat farm, I became good friends with the Woodbridges, who lived near by—that is, near as distances go in the great Northwest. Freeman Woodbridge had settled there some years before with his son and daughter, Winthrop and Milly, and their Uncle James. Woodbridge had built a sawmill below Fort St. John, on what is now called Woodbridge Creek.

That is a beautiful country—the Peace River region. To the west rise the "White Hills of God," as they call the Rockies; to the east the wide, rolling plains stretch away into the distance. Miles of bluebells carpet the unfenced, billowy hillsides. Scattered patches of balm of Gilead and thousands of acres of wild roses make the air fragrant. In July and August the land is covered with wild strawberries and blueberries.

One day, when I had stopped to eat some of the delicious strawberries, I came upon a curious fact: under the vegetation on the hillside were thousands and thousands of ant hills. I learned later that they were scattered everywhere, for hundreds of miles, especially on the vast stretches of sandy loam among the fragrant balm of Gilead trees, or beside the long, sparse belts of pine woods. I should never have supposed there were so many ant hills in the world as I saw on the rolling plains of the Peace River country.

Through that region a great many gold seekers passed in the mad rush for the Klondike. Often their outfits were woefully inadequate. Two of the gold hunters, for example, set out with only a shovel and a quantity of food, which they carried in wheelbarrows. An old man started out with two dozen packages of oatmeal on his back, a pound of salt, two pounds of sugar and a quart boiler; he expected those provisions to last him until he reached Alaska. Six others pooled what money they had and bought a second-hand steam engine, which they set up in an old freight car provided with a walking beam and a clumsy crank axle. This self-propelling contrivance they named the "Hercules"; and they expected to cross the Rocky Mountains in it, and to use it as winter quarters after they arrived in Alaska! Needless to say, the Hercules did not travel far.

A party of seventy or more got as far as the Battle River region, and there camped in sad discouragement for a fortnight. Apparently their outfit was not at all adequate; and there was probably internal dissension and fighting in the camp. At any rate, the party broke up tumultuously. Some of the more adventurous pressed on across the mountains, some turned back, and some—no one knows what became of them.

About ten years later, when trapping in the Battle River region, Winthrop Woodbridge and his Uncle James came upon the place where the party of gold seekers had camped and disbanded. Winthrop named it Calamity Camp.

The camp was on the bank of a creek that ran into the Battle River, in an open prairie country north of the Clear Hills. A few straggling cottonwood trees, the only trees in sight on that prairie, grew along the creek. Everywhere were evidences of the disorder with which the camp had broken up. The wrecks of not less than twenty carts or wagons were scattered along the bank of the creek; strewn over the ground were barrels, boxes, shovels, picks, crowbars and a great quantity of tinware; in one place were the bones of some horses and some rotted harnesses.

Winthrop and his uncle took home a great many of the abandoned articles that would be useful; and for a year or two after that, whenever the Woodbridges needed iron for their mill or for farming tools, they used to make a trip to Calamity Camp, and take home as many wagon tires and axles as Old Peregrination could draw. Old Peregrination was the stray horse that Winthrop had found some time before, and that, they supposed, had been abandoned by gold seekers.

But Calamity Camp proved of even greater benefit to the Woodbridges. Kernels of the oats, barley, peas and wheat that the adventurers had probably brought as provender for their animals had taken root in the prairie; the soil and climate had been so favorable that every season those grains grew and ripened over considerable tracts. Every fall the Woodbridges journeyed to the place, with a small threshing outfit that they had made at their mill, and hauled home loads of oats and peas for use in the winter. As Calamity Camp was thirty miles or more distant from them, the whole family went together. They let Brighteyes, Milly's Jersey cow, follow them; for in the unsettled state of the Peace River country it was not safe to leave so rare and valuable an animal behind.

They were generally gone from home for three nights, and sometimes for four. Old Peregrination could draw thirty bushels of the grain on a "prairie boat," which slid easily over the grass; and Brighteyes drew ten bushels on a little "boat" of her own. At first the cow did not like to draw the load, but Milly coaxed her to do it.

"Now, Brighteyes," she said, "these oats are for your winter food, after the snow comes and the grass is gone, and you must be a good and grateful bossy and help us."

When Old Peregrination started off with his load, Brighteyes seemed to decide that it was the proper thing for animals to draw loads and set off willingly enough with her light prairie boat.

Early in September, the time when the Woodbridges used to make the trip to Calamity, there was often not a breath of wind stirring over the wide, rolling plains; the days were warm and sultry, and a haze usually hung over the distant horizon. The world seemed to have gone gently to sleep. But a week or so later cold blasts began to blow, and the days grew shorter, until the sun was visible for scarcely more than three hours in the twenty-four.

During the two days that the family usually spent there, Mr. Woodbridge, Winthrop and Uncle James were always busy, mowing the grain, which was dry as tinder, and running it through the thresher, for which Old Peregrination furnished the motive power. They pitched their tent at the foot of one of the cottonwood trees, and there Milly "kept house" and cooked the meals over a camp fire. When she was not busy with such duties she searched in the dry grass for spoons, tin cups or plates that the gold seekers had left, or watched the great flocks of wild fowl that, attracted no doubt by the wild grain, came and went over the prairie.

On one of those trips to Calamity Camp an odd adventure befell the Woodbridges. Early in the afternoon of their first day at the place, Winthrop and Uncle James were bringing in on carrying poles the dry grain that they had mowed; Mr. Woodbridge was running it through the thresher, and Milly was helping him by urging on Old Peregrination, who walked lazily round and turned the big wheel. The day was sultry, and the horse needed much urging to keep him at his task. The thresher made a great clatter; but in spite of the noise Milly heard the quark! quark! of a large flock of brant geese that were passing overhead. Apparently the birds intended to alight in the grain, but when they saw the people working there they veered away toward the south.

Milly stood watching them as they grew smaller and smaller in the distance; they were almost out of sight when she saw the flock suddenly scatter; some of the geese darted upward, some wheeled to the east, and others seemed to drop suddenly toward the earth.

For a moment she wondered what had frightened them; then she guessed that it was wind that had caused the flock to scatter. A fitful gust or two, rustling the leaves of the cottonwoods, had already reached them from the south. Before long, harder gusts of wind made the whole wide expanse of grass wave and seethe. Glancing southward again, Milly saw what seemed to be a great, dim cloud, like thin mist, that filled the whole sky in that direction; the cloud appeared to extend down to the very earth. She did not think it could be dust, for they rarely say dust clouds in the Peace Valley. And it was not dun-colored, but looked more like a great, thin piece of black gauze, let down from the sky to the earth.

Milly called to Winthrop to look at the cloud. He and Uncle James set down their carrying poles and stood looking at it for some time. It was still four or five miles away.

"I can't imagine what that is," Uncle James said.

Mr. Woodbridge stopped the thresher and stood with the others staring at the strange cloud, which was coming rapidly toward them. It did not at all resemble a thundercloud. To Milly it seemed like a black veil that was twisting and turning in great eddies a mile high. She thought of the waterspouts of which she had read, and of tornadoes; but this cloud was so thin that she could see through it.

"Some kind of queer storm!" Winthrop exclaimed. He and Uncle James turned the prairie boats over the bags of grain, in order to protect them from rain. Mr. Woodbridge tied the horse to one of the trees and went to secure Brighteyes, who was lying in the grass, farther down the creek, chewing her cud.

The curious black mist was now within a few hundred yards of them; and as it approached, they heard a low, hissing noise, as if drops of water were falling on a hot stove. The peculiar sound made Milly think of her kettles and tin baker at the camp fire, and she started to put them under cover. A second later the strange cloud enveloped them, and at the same moment a queer, sharp smell made them catch their breath. Their eyes, too, were nearly blinded. Winthrop had run to help Milly, but the girl could hardly see him. They felt in their faces, necks and hands a thousand sharp little stings, like needle pricks. They fought for breath.

"What is it? What is it?" Milly gasped.

Winthrop was brushing himself frantically with his hat. "It's some sort of winged things—wasps, bees!" he cried. "No, not bees! It's ants, Milly, flying ants! Millions of 'em!"

Uncle James came running toward them, brushing himself with all his might. "Flying ants!" he gasped. Mr. Woodbridge, too, came racing up the creek bank; as he ran, he tried to brush the ants from his face and body. Old Peregrination was squealing and kicking, and tugging at his halter. Milly caught a glimpse of Brighteyes going down the creek with her tail high in the air; a moment later she heard her splash into a deep pool. Instinct had shown the cow how to escape her tormentors.

Hundreds of the ants settled over the Woodbridges. Gusts of them, with hissing wings, dashed into their faces. Wherever the ants touched their flesh they felt the same sharp little pain. Milly could not tell whether the creatures bit her or stung her. Probably the smart was caused by the formic acid that all ants give out when they are hurt or disturbed. As the ants fell to the ground the wings of many of them seemed to brush off.

Winthrop shouted to Milly to get into the tent; as soon as she was safe inside it, the others followed her. They closed the flap as quick as they could; but a gust of ants flew in before they could fasten it, and they could not free themselves from the pests for some time.

Old Peregrination had a bad time of it; but Mr. Woodbridge was afraid that if they untied him he would run off for miles. Away down the creek they could see Brighteyes' head just above water in the pool into which she had plunged. The odor of crushed ants pervaded the whole atmosphere.

The tent protected the Woodbridges pretty well from the pests that swarmed outside, and when they had brushed off the ants that had followed them in they were fairly comfortable. After an hour or more the tempest of ants abated perceptibly; the cloud of flying creatures continued to thin out until there were scarcely any in the air. It was then about sunset.

When the Woodbridges came out of the tent the ground was covered with the bodies and the white wings of the ants. Millions of the little creatures had been caught in the dry grass and grain; and on every little pool in the creek they formed a layer several inches deep. Most of them seemed to have perished where they fell.

There were such large quantities of their wings abong the grass and the grain that, without knowing it, the Woodbridges carried home great numbers of them in the bags of oats. Indeed it was difficult to keep them out of the food that they cooked that evening and the next morning.

Milly was not much poisoned by their bites or stings, and suffered only a little; but Winthrop passed a very uncomfortable night, and Uncle James had a good deal of pain.

How far the vast swarms of ants extended they had no means of knowing; but going home the next day they passed a little lake that was coated with a scum of ants; the fish were jumping merrily, and were making a great feast.

The family were at a loss to know where so many ants could have come from. They had never noticed any great number of ant hills in that part of the Peace River country. Mr. Woodbridge at last came to the conclusion that the ants must have come from some sheltered valley among the mountains to the southwest, and that the remarkably warm weather for the past week had caused them to swarm in unusually large numbers. For such migrations ants unfurl temporary wings. The south wind that had risen that afternoon had perhaps blown them on for a long distance from the place where they had first risen.

(The End.)

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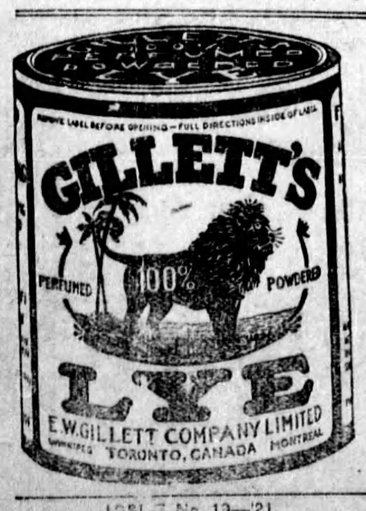

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Woman's Sphere

Seasonable Salads.

Housewives too often neglect to give salads the proper place in the diet, serving them only on special occasions. In reality the salad plays a very important part in the diet and the wise planner will see that it is served in some form nearly every day.

The food value of the salad is very apparent, since the fresh green plant contains large quantities of mineral salts, essential in the building of the body and in a form which is readily assimilated and also very agreeable to the palate. The salad dressing contains fat in the form of oil and the vegetables, meat, fish, eggs or fruit are all good food material often more nourishing when served in salad combinations than in some other way.

Only fresh crisp greens should be used. They should be washed, rolled in a wet cloth and kept in a cold place for several hours before using. Ingredients, such as vegetables, fruits or meat must be cut into uniformly sized pieces. They should not be allowed to stand until discolored or soggy. Apples, for instance, cannot be cut up until just before serving. All materials must be cold, dry, crisp and combined just before serving time.

Much care should be used in combining the selected ingredients to make the salad attractive in appearance. Make the individual portions of uniform size and not too large. A spoonful of salad dressing or whipped cream is carefully placed on top of the whole, with an additional garnish of any of the following: sliced green peppers, pimentos, pickles, hard boiled eggs, stuffed olives or cherries. These make an attractive appearance which readily appeals to the appetite.

Heavy salads, such as the meat, fish or cooked vegetable salads should not be served with a heavy dinner but should form the main dish at lunch or supper.

For a delicious country supper, serve vegetable salad or fish salad, with baking powder biscuit, fruit and coffee. To make fish salad use the chicken salad recipe given here, substituting fish for chicken meat.

To make the biscuit, sift very thoroughly with one quart of flour, two heaping teaspoonfuls of baking powder and one-half level teaspoonful of salt. Add two rounding or four level tablespoonfuls of shortening. Mix as soft as it can be handled with milk or cream. If you use cream omit the shortening. Work swiftly after you add the liquid until the biscuits are in a "quick" oven.

If you prefer not to make salad dressings, delicious substitutes can be purchased, ready to dress the salad. For those who make the dressing at home, these recipes are excellent:

French salad dressing—2 tablespoonfuls vinegar, 6 tablespoonfuls oil, ½ teaspoonful salt, red pepper. Combine ingredients in a bowl. Beat steadily until thoroughly blended and thick. Serve on fresh greens at the table just as needed. The ingredients may be mixed, beaten and put into a bottle, kept corked and set in a cool place. Just before using, shake the bottle hard, thoroughly to blend the ingredients.

Salad combinations—Serve any of the following with French dressing:

Water cress, lettuce or young dandelion greens.

Lettuce, cucumbers, sliced tomatoes, radishes, onion.

Lettuce, asparagus (cooked whole), green pepper rings.

New carrots, finely sliced cabbage, horseradish.

Cooked dressing accompanies these combinations:

Lettuce, oranges, bananas, pineapple, nuts.

Lettuce, oranges, grapefruit, white grapes, marshmallows.

Lettuce, slice pineapple, cheese ball on top.

Lettuce, halved pears or peaches, nut meats.

Looking Forward to the Fall Fairs.

Shall you exhibit? The answer is that every forward-thinking farm woman includes at least the county fair in her plans for the year. The whole scientific world proves to us that there is no such thing as luck. Even in the world of invention men do not wait for inspiration to make discoveries, but when there is need for something new they begin at once to "figure" how it can be supplied. The matter of prize-taking at our provincial and county fairs is no matter of luck but of good planning and hard work and determination not to be beaten.

Now, while the chicks are fluttering out of the incubators, while the calves and pigs and colts are tame under the hand, while the garden is yet in the stage where cultivation and care help a whole lot, is the time for the farm woman to make up her mind what and where she will exhibit.

The exhibit is the trying-out field, the place where every man and woman—and increasing numbers of boys and girls—have a chance not only to show their mettle but to prove what can be done in field and garden and yard and pen to bring up the whole standard of production.

Every year the number of women exhibitors increases—may their number this year far outreach everything that has been even dreamed about!

The wish just expressed is no idle one. The public exhibition of what farm women accomplish is one of the best educators of farm women of which we have knowledge. One perfect can of fruit, one perfectly developed cockerel, one perfectly made garment, holds more of suggestion and inspiration, when viewed by the woman who thus far has not been able to quite make the perfect score, than a dozen preachments.

Parallel with the exhibits, in educational value, are the demonstrations in canning, baking and so forth now so frequently conducted at our fairs, not by trained leaders from outside the community, but by the women—and boys and girls—themselves. An exhibit plus a demonstration, to the observer who really wishes to learn, is worth ten printed chapters on how to do these things. The very fact that you have the know-how, means that you have a definite responsibility to put your knowledge within the reach of your fellow farm-women who have not had your opportunities.

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