

THE GIRL AT THE HALFWAY HOUSE

A STORY OF THE PLAINS
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CHAPTER XVI.

The Halfway House.

"Miss Ma'y Ellen," cried Aunt Lucy, thrusting her head in at the door, "oh, Miss Ma'y Ellen, I wish't you'd come out yer right quick. They's two o' them pral' dogs out yer a-chasin' o'ush hens agin'—nasty, dirty things!"

"Very well, Lucy," called out a voice in answer. Mary Ellen arose from her seat near the window, whence she had been gazing out over the wide, flat prairie lands and at the blue, unwinking sky. Gathering each a bit of stick, she and Aunt Lucy drove away the two grinning daylight thieves, as they had done dozens of times before their kin, all eager for a taste of this new feathered game that had come in upon the range. With piteous words of admonition, the two corralled the excited but terror-stricken speckled hen, which had been the occasion of the trouble, driving her back within the gates of the enclosure they had found a necessity for the preservation of the fowls of their "hen ranch."

"It's that same Domineck, isn't it, Lucy?" said Mary Ellen, leaning over the fence and gazing at the fowls.

"Yess'm, that same ole hen, blame her fool soul! She's mo' bot'her'n she's wuf. We kin git two dollahs fer her cooked, an' seems like long's she's erlive she bound' fer ter keep me chasin' 'roun' after her. I 'clare, she jest keep the whole lot o' ouah chickens were down to a frazzle, she traisin' 'roun' all the time, an' them a-follerin' her. An', of co'se," she added argumentatively, "we all got to keep up the reputation o' ouah cookin'." I kin't ask these yer men a dollah a meal—not fer no lean ole hen wif no meat onice her bones—no, ma'am."

Aunt Lucy spoke with professional pride and with a certain right to authority. The reputation of the Halfway House ran from the Double Forks

timber, and as yet unsupplied with brick or boards. In addition to the main dugout there was a rude barn built of sods, and towering high above the squat buildings rose the frame of the first windmill on the cattle trail, a landmark for many miles. Seeing these things growing up about him, at the suggestion and partly through the aid of his widely scattered but kind-hearted neighbors, Major Buford began to take on heart of grace. He foresaw for his people an independent, rude and far below their former plane of life, it was true, yet infinitely better than a proud despair.

It was perhaps the women who suffered most in the transition from older lands to this new, wild region. The barren and monotonous prospect, the high-keyed air and the perpetual winds, thinned and wore out the fragile form of Mrs. Buford. This impetuous, nerve-wearing air was much different from the soft, warm winds of the flower-laden South. At night as she lay down to sleep she did not hear the tinkle of music nor the voice of night-singing birds, which in the scenes of her girlhood had been familiar sounds. The moan of the wind in the short, hard grass was different from its whisper in the peach trees, and the shrilling of the coyotes made but rude substitute for the trill of the love-bursting mocking bird that sang its myriad song far back in old Virginia.

One day Aunt Lucy, missing Quarterly Meeting, and eke bethinking herself of some of those aches and pains of body and forebodings of mind with which the negro is never unprovided, became mournful in her melody, and went to bed sighing and disconsolate. Mary Ellen heard her voice uplifted long and urgently, and suspecting the cause, at length went to her door.

"What is it, Aunt Lucy?" she asked kindly.

"Nothin', mam; I jess rasslin' wif ther throne o' Grace er I'll bit. We

essence of vital stimulus. Tall and shapely, radiant, not yet twenty-three years of age, and mistress of earth's best blessing, perfect health—how could Mary Ellen be sad?

"Chick-chick-chick-chick!" she called, bending over the fence of the chicken yard. "Chick, chick, chick!"

"I'll be thah Creechly wit ther fowls, Miss Ma'y Ellen," called out Aunt Lucy from the kitchen. And presently she emerged and joined her mistress at the corral.

"Aunt Lucy," said Mary Ellen, "do you suppose we could ever raise a garden? I was thinking, if we had a few peas, or beans, or things like that, you know—"

"Uh-huh!"

"And do you suppose a rose bush would grow—a real rose bush, over by the side of the house?"

"Law, no, chile, what you talkin' 'bout? Nothin' hain't goin' to grow yer, jes'n hit's a little broom cohn, er some o' that alatawef, er that sort er things. Few beans might, ef we wordered 'em. My lan'!" with a sudden interest, as she grasped the thought, "what could I git fer right fraish beans, real string beans, I does wonder! Sakes, ef I c'd lev string beans an' apple pies, I sho'ly c'd make er fo' time, right quick. String beans—why, law, chile!"

"We'll have to think about this garden question some day," said Mary Ellen. She leaned against the corral post, looking out over the wide expanse of the prairie round about. "Are those our antelope out there, Lucy?" she asked, pointing out with care the few tiny objects, thin and knifeflike, crowned with short black forking tips, which showed up against the sky line on a distant ridge. "I think they must be. I haven't noticed them for quite a while."

"Yass'm," said Aunt Lucy, after a judicial look. "Them blame I'll goats. Thass'm. I wish't they all wuz'n so mighty peart an' knowin' all ther time, so't Majah Buford he c'd git one o' them now an' then fer to eat. I 'member mighty well how Cap'n Franklin sent us down er quarter o' an'lope. Mighty fine meat, hit wuz."

"Er—Miss Ma'y Ellen," began Aunt Lucy presently, and apparently with a certain reservation.

"Yes?"

(To be continued.)

WHERE HE GOT THEM.

Little Boy's Explanation Embarrassed Generous Teacher.

At recess one morning little Nathan Garowski withdrew to a corner and wept, and the heart of his pretty teacher was moved with compassion.

"What's the matter, Nathan?" she inquired gently. "Why don't you play with the others?"

Nathan looked up with dimmed eyes. Dust and tears mingled on his brown cheeks. He pointed mutely to his skirt and then broke into a roar: "It was the dress of Rebecca. Me mudder no money has for buy me any'ing. I neder have the trousers and the children—the children—they stick out the finger on me, and make a laughs. They call me—call me—a girl!"

"Don't mind them, dear," said Alice Harmon with sympathy. "They shall not laugh at you long. I will get you a coat and trousers, too."

Several days later Nathan appeared in the glory of a new suit and strutted about basking in the admiring glances of those who had despised him. His cup of pride was filled to overflowing when the superintendent came in with the principal for a visit of inspection. Nathan, well in the foreground, glanced at his garments and looked at the strangers for approbation.

"Why, little boy, what a fine pair of trousers!" said the superintendent affably. "Where did you get them?"

Nathan drew himself up to his full height, and outstretched his hand in the direction of his beloved teacher. "I got them off her," he announced. "I got them off Miss Harmon."

Then Alice Harmon, with the blush of confusion on her fair face, explained: "The—the children—on the East Side always say 'off' when they mean 'from.'"—Lippincott's.

GOT THERE AT LAST.

President's Messenger Long Delayed by Senatorial Courtesy.

One of the prerogatives of a United States senator is that when he steps aboard an elevator in the senate wing of the capitol he is carried immediately to his destination, no matter in which direction the elevator may be bound or who may be aboard. Three rings of the bell indicate that a senator wants to ride, and the conductor loses no time in responding to the call.

One day last week Mr. Barnes, the assistant secretary to the president, stepped aboard a senate elevator from the ground floor. In a portfolio under his arm he carried a message from the president of the United States to the Congress.

"Senate floor," said Mr. Barnes, as the conductor shut the door.

Just then there were three rings of the bell and the indicator showed that a senator wanted to be lifted out of the terrace. The elevator went down instead of up, and Mr. Barnes went along. The senator in the terrace only wanted to go to the ground floor. As he stepped off, however, there was another senatorial ring from the terrace. The senator wanted to go to the gallery floor, and the elevator went there without stopping. As the car started down there were three rings from the ground floor, and again the car failed to stop at the destination of the president's secretary. Fortunately for Mr. Barnes, this senator wanted to get off at the senate floor, and the congress, after long delay, received the message from the president.—Washington Post.

A LAST CENTURY VALENTINE

"Emily present this little trifle to one who she regards." More than seventy-five years ago Emily took up her quill pen and in dainty characters wrote the dedication on the fly leaf of "Friendship's Offering." In spite of her bad grammar a glance at the faded and delicate writing with its quaint flourishes and aristocratic angles is enough to prove that Emily was a fine young lady and that she really meant at least a little more than she said.

Poor Emily! Her lilies and roses are long withered, along with the other flowers which bloomed in the reign of King George IV., to whose "Most Excellent Majesty" the little morocco bound volume is dedicated. And "one who she regards" has gone also with the rest. Were they married one day—Emily and "one who she regards"? Or did Emily die early of a broken heart, perhaps?

Her handwriting looks as if she might have easily fallen a victim to some such old-fashioned malady. And did "one who she regards" leave Emily behind and come to the States to seek his fortune? Certainly in some way the book which Emily gave him as a valentine in 1826 found its way to this country and, passing from hand to hand, finally turned up on the stalls of a little second-hand book shop in the French quarter of old New Orleans.

The little book is spotted with brown and yellow now; its morocco cover is badly marked and torn. But for the sake of the unknown but dear and dainty Emily—as well as for its own—it shall be cherished hereafter and given such care as Emily herself might wish for "the little trifle" which perhaps told a tender secret to the unnamed man who was its original owner.

"Friendship's Offering" is a fat and sturdy little book of nearly 400 pages. It was handsomely and well bound, as is proven by the fact that even to-day it makes a gay show with the gold rosebuds and scrolls stamped on its back. It was one of that great crop of annuals which people of good condition were wont to send to their friends on the recurrence of New Year's and St. Valentine's days.

We do such things differently now. Instead of a volume of 400 pages stuffed with stilted verses and tragic tales written by as many lords and ladies—nothing less than Esquires being admitted under any circumstances—we send to our friends a gay card stamped out of colored paper by a machine. And we pick up this old volume of "Friendship's Offering" and laugh as we look over the table of contents.

But poor Emily's long forgotten love affair is not the only ancient memory revived by a glance at the little book. Buried in its table of contents are the names of twenty people who in their day were famous as literary lights, but who have long since flickered out into oblivion.

Who remembers Mona, Eliza, Caroline and the rest, whose "Legendary Stanzas," "Romantic Tales," and "Lines to a Wreath of Dead Flowers" moved Emily and her sisters of the 1820s to tears? Who remembers Bernard Barton, the Quaker poet and friend of Lamb? Least of all, what modern reader would follow him as far half a dozen pages or more he "Treads with slow and mournful steps the loved and lonely shore?" Lord Byron died less than two years before this volume of "Friendship's Offering" was printed, and it is pretty full of newly found verses by his Lordship. Mr. Washington Irving sends some verses by his late Lordship, "extracted by that gentleman from the album of Captain Medwin," and it only needs a glance at the first line—"Be it so—we part forever"—to recognize the true Byronic flavor.

Lady Caroline Lamb, who had been separated from her husband the year before, and whose intrigues with Lord Byron were still familiar, "extracted from her album" another set of verses by his late Lordship, the perusal of which at this date is likely to provoke a smile of amusement—they are so typical of the strained and grandiloquent poet.

In all the emphasis and extravagance of italics and capital letters, Lord Byron implores Lady Caroline to let him go and, Lady Caroline apparently takes a malicious pleasure in printing the verses by way of showing that the poet was much in love with her.

Since still the culture tears my heart—
Let me this agony endure,
Not thee—O! dearest as thou art!
In mercy, Clara, let us part!

Who is writing poetry of this kind now? And if such poetry were written, who would read it?

There is one paper in "Friendship's Offering" which might well furnish a text for some one who is anxious to accuse Dr. Conan Doyle of plagiarism in the creation of Sherlock Holmes. The paper is by the late Richard Lovell Edgeworth Esq., father of the better known Maria Edgeworth. It is called "Stage Coach Physiognomists" and relates how one of the passengers was able to tell the full life history of all his fellows by simply noticing such bits of gesture, manner or apparel as have since guided the famous detective in his amazing discoveries. Sherlock at his best was never more observing or more astonishing than this casual coach passenger who traveled the same way more than fifty years before him.

L. E. L. Letitia Elizabeth Landon—whose pen name is more familiar than her writings, was then in her

early twenties, and contributed half a dozen sets of verses in heroic style. Nor was "Friendship's Offering" without names which are well known even now. Miss Mitford has a sketch, "The Lady of Beachgrove," full of old-fashioned sentiment and ladylike mystery. Perhaps the best remembered things about Miss Mitford is the fact that when she was only ten years old she drew a prize of \$100,000 in a lottery, and that after her father had squandered her money she supported him for years by the earnings of her pen.

Robert Southey, then in his prime, has a long poem in the fat, little book, and Miss Jane Porter, whose "Scottish Chiefs" and "Taddeus of Warsaw," had already been printed, is represented by a melancholy tale.

Mrs. Opie mourns through a couple of "Epitaphs for Friends," and modest T. Hood Esq., has an ode on autumn, quite like the similar efforts of young poets before and since his time. T. Hood Esq. was not yet thirty years old when "Friendship's Offering" was printed. He had recently left the engraver's trade for literature and had hardly begun as yet to make a name for himself in his new line. Doubtless if the "Present Editor" could have foreseen that his modest contributor was to write "The Song of the Shirt" and "The Bridge of Sighs," and the other poems which have made him famous, "T. Hood Esq." would have been given more prominence in the table of contents. But the "Present Editor" is not

receptacles and gifts quite out of the old simple spirit of the day.

A fashionable shopkeeper insists that the vogue of valentine gifts is largely a matter of evolution, and that for several years they have been growing more general, more personal and more expensive. A young man who usually is satisfied with sending the object of his admiration flowers, bonbons or books, now selects a gift that will show relations of a more intimate nature. Flances, especially, let their imagination and their purse-strings run riot.

KEEPS UP CUSTOM OF THIRTY YEARS

Big valentines and little valentines, fat valentines and thin valentines, white valentines and red valentines, cheap modest little valentines and proud and costly valentines—every old kind of valentine dangled from shelves and lay heaped on counters, while a half dozen clerks were busy attending to the rush of St. Valentine's day.

There was the young man with one hand on money in his eye, buying a white \$1.25 valentine, with eyes riveted on a red \$3 creation. Clearly, he wished he could afford the red. In a corner, looking uneasy, were two young women discussing animatedly a heap of pink and blue valentines.

Unnoticed by the crowd inside the shop, a coach drew up to the curb. It was a most pretentious "turnout," with coachman and footman in livery, with a pair of restless bays and with shining harness mounted heavily with glistening silver. The footman



"LOVE'S WHISPERS"—Bouguereau.



Drove away the two grinning thieves.

of the Brazos north to Abilene, and much of the virtue of the table was dependent upon the resources of this "hen ranch," whose fame was spread abroad throughout the land. Saved by the surpassing grace of pie and "chicken fixings," the halting place chosen for so slight reason by Buford and his family had become a permanent abode, known gratefully to many travelers and productive of more than a living for those who had established it. It was, after all, the financial genius of Aunt Lucy, accustomed all her life to culinary problems, that had foreseen profit in eggs and chickens when she noted the exalted joy with which the hungry cow punchers fell upon a meal of this sort after a season of salt pork, tough beef and Dutch-oven bread.

At first Major Buford rebelled at the thought of inkeeping. His family had kept open house before the war, and he came from a land where the thoughts of hospitality and of price were not to be mentioned in the same day. Yet he was in a region where each man did many things, the first that thing which seemed nearest at hand to be done.

From the Halfway House south to the Red River there was nothing edible. And over this Red River there came now swarming uncounted thousands of broad-horned cattle, driven by many bodies of hardy, sunburned, bearded, hungry men. At Ellisville, now rapidly becoming an important cattle market, the hotel accommodations were more pretentious than comfortable, and many a cowboy who had sat at the board of the Halfway House going up the trail, would mount his horse and ride back twenty-five miles for dinner. Such are the attractions of corn bread and chicken when prepared by the hands of a real genius gone astray on this much miscooked world.

Thus the little Southern family quickly found itself possessed of a definite, profitable and growing business.

Buford was soon able to employ aid in making his improvements. He constructed a large dugout, after the fashion of the dwelling most common in the country at that time. This manner of dwelling, practically a roofed-over cellar, its side walls showing but a few feet above the level of the earth, had been discovered to be a very practical and comfortable form of living place by those settlers who found a region practically barren of

all po' weak sinners, Miss Ma'y Ellen."

"Yes, I know, Lucy."

"An' does you know, Miss Ma'y Ellen, I sorter gits skeered sometimes, out yer, fer fear mer supplecasshus ain't goin' take holt o' heaven jess right. White folks has one way er prayin', but er nigger kaint pray erlone—no, mam, jess kaint pray erlone."

"Now, Aunt Lucy," said Mary Ellen, sagely, "there isn't anything wrong with your soul at all. You're as good an old thing as ever breathed, I'm sure of that, and the Lord will reward you if he ever does any one, white or black."

"Does you think that, honey?"

"Indeed I do."

"Well, sometimes I thinks the Lord ain't goin' to forgive me fer all ther devilment I done when I was 'il. You know, Miss Ma'y Ellen, hit take a life er prayer to wipe out ouah transgresshus. Now, how kin I pray, not to say pray, out yer, in this yer lan'? They ain't a chu'ch in a hunderd mile o' yer, so fer's I kin tell, an' they sho'ly ain't no chu'ch fer enlud folks. Seems to me like, ef I c'd jess know er single nigger, so'st we c'd meet onic er while, an' so'st we c'd jess kneel down together an' pray commefible like, same's ef 'twas back in ole Vehnny—why, Miss Ma'y Ellen, I'd be the happiest ole 'ooman ever you did see."

Mary Ellen rose and went to her room, returning with her guitar. "Listen, Aunt Lucy," she said; "I will play and you may sing. That will make you feel better, I think."

It was only from a perfect understanding of the negro character that this proposal could come, and only a perfect dignity could carry it out with grace; yet there, beneath the floor of the wide prairie sea, these strange exercises were carried on, the low throbbing of the strings according with the quavering minors of the old-time hymns, until Aunt Lucy wiped her eyes and smiled.

"Thank yer, Miss Ma'y Ellen," she said; "thank yer a thousand times. You sho'ly does know how toe comfort folks mighty well, even a pore ole nigger."

On the morning following Aunt Lucy's devotional exercises that good soul seemed to be altogether happy and contented and without any doubts as to her future welfare. Mary Ellen was out in the open air, bonnetless and all a-blow. It was a glorious, sunny day, the air charged with some

the only man who has made such a mistake.

Plentifully sprinkled in among the professional poets and literary men and women are my Lords and Ladies. Not for a moment does the "Present Editor" forget that he is editing a volume of the "gentry and nobility," to whom his work is dedicated. The Rt. Hon., My Lord Dillon, has some bad verses on "Spain" in the Byronic manner, and My Lord Dorchester is given several pages for a sad and silly apostrophe to an "Astrologer."

"Friendship's Offering" is illustrated with three or four ancient steel engravings, representing such classic scenes as "Aeneas and Dido," views of Ispahan in Persia, and illustrations for the "Laughing Horseman."

All in all, Emily's was a valentine well worth having. Since she wrote her quaint dedication on its flyleaf two English kings and one queen have died, and the fourth monarch is now on the throne. What valentine of the present year will be as well worth looking over in 1975?

Character of Day Changing.

Good St. Valentine is rapidly being transformed from the patron saint of loving hearts into the head of a gift enterprise. If he keeps up the pace established for him this year he will soon rival St. Nicholas.

It seems only yesterday since the generous swain gave expression to his feelings in burning words, hidden in the depths of paper lace and impossible couplets. Now the approach of the affectionate old saint's day finds the young man's thoughts, if not his fancy, turning toward violets at advanced prices, bonbons in extravagant

jumped to the sidewalk as quickly as his tight-fitting buckskin breeches permitted and opened the coach door. An old man, a very old man, alighted and, resting on his cane, made for the front door of the valentine shop.

None noticed the newcomer. Every one was busy with his own affairs. But the owner of the shop saw the customer, greeted him pleasantly and led him to a chair. A valentine the old man wanted. The proprietor seemed to know his man. A white satin box long and wide, was produced, and within lay what was likely the most gorgeous valentine ever sent in New York. It was brilliant crimson, gold mounted and in the centre of the pillow, in oil, was a landscape, an emblem and an inscription which the writer, from afar, could not make out. Evidently the old customer was pleased. For some minutes he gazed admiringly at the costly piece, then closed the box, smiled approval and left the shop, followed by a clerk carrying the box to the coach.

"What does an old foggy like that do with a valentine?" was asked.

The proprietor did not take kindly to the question. "That old foggy has been coming here ever since I opened this store, thirty years ago. The old foggy is one of the wealthiest men in this city. The old foggy regularly orders his valentine three months ahead of time and pays as much for them as many a bank clerk earns in a month. And when a woman has lived faithfully for thirty years beside a man, the old foggy thinks she's entitled at least to one valentine a year." And the questioner knew he had touched a sore spot of the old foggy's friend.—New York Press.