









# The Conquest

*The Story of a Negro Pioneer*

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By THE PIONEER.

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To the  
**HONORABLE BOOKER T. WASHINGTON**

## *INTRODUCTORY*

*This is a true story of a negro who was discontented and the circumstances that were the outcome of that discontent.*    -i-    -i-    -i-



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# The Conquest

## CHAPTER I

### DISCONTENT—SPIRIT OF THE PIONEER

OOD gracious, has it been that long? It does not seem possible; but it was this very day nine years ago when a fellow handed me this little what-would-you-call-it, Ingalls called it "Opportunity." I've a notion to burn it, but I won't—not this time, instead, I'll put it down here and you may call it what you like.

Master of human destinies am I,  
Fame, love, and fortune on my footsteps wait.  
Cities and fields I walk. I penetrate  
Deserts and seas remote, and passing by  
Hovel, and mart, and palace—soon or late  
I knock unbidden once at every gate.  
If sleeping, wake—if feasting, rise before  
I turn away. It is the hour of fate,  
And they who follow me reach every state  
Mortal's desire, and conquer every foe  
Save death; but those who doubt or hesitate,  
Condemned to failure, penury, and woe  
Seek me in vain and uselessly implore,  
I answer not, and I return no more.

Yes, it was that little poem that led me to this land and sometimes I wonder well, I just wonder,

that's all. Again, I think it would be somewhat different if it wasn't for the wind. It blows and blows until it makes me feel lonesome and so far away from that little place and the country in southern Illinois.

I was born twenty-nine years ago near the Ohio River, about forty miles above Cairo, the fourth son and fifth child of a family of thirteen, by the name of Devereaux—which, of course, is not my name but we will call it that for this sketch. It is a peculiar name that ends with an "eaux," however, and is considered an odd name for a colored man to have, unless he is from Louisiana where the French crossed with the Indians and slaves, causing many Louisiana negroes to have the French names and many speak the French language also. My father, however, came from Kentucky and inherited the name from his father who was sold off into Texas during the slavery period and is said to be living there today.

He was a farmer and owned eighty acres of land and was, therefore, considered fairly "well-to-do," that is, for a colored man. The county in which we lived bordered on the river some twenty miles, and took its name from an old fort that used to do a little cannonading for the Federal forces back in the Civil War.

The farming in this section was hindered by various disadvantages and at best was slow, hard work. Along the valleys of the numerous creeks and bayous that empty their waters into the Ohio, the soil was of a rich alluvium, where in the early Spring the back waters from the Ohio covered thousands

of acres of farm and timber lands, and in receding left the land plastered with a coat of river sand and clay which greatly added to the soil's productivity. One who owned a farm on these bottoms was considered quite fortunate. Here the corn stalks grew like saplings, with ears dangling one and two to a stalk, and as sound and heavy as green blocks of wood.

The heavy rains washed the loam from the hills and deposited it on these bottoms. Years ago, when the rolling lands were cleared, and before the excessive rainfall had washed away the loose surface, the highlands were considered most valuable for agricultural purposes, equally as valuable as the bottoms now are. Farther back from the river the more rolling the land became, until some sixteen miles away it was known as the hills, and here, long before I was born, the land had been very valuable. Large barns and fine stately houses—now gone to wreck and deserted—stood behind beautiful groves of chestnut, locust and stately old oaks, where rabbits, quail and wood-peckers made their homes, and sometimes a raccoon or opossum founded its den during the cold, bleak winter days. The orchards, formerly the pride of their owners, now dropped their neglected fruit which rotted and mulched with the leaves. The fields, where formerly had grown great crops of wheat, corn, oats, timothy and clover, were now grown over and crumpled in a tangled mass of weeds and dew-berry vines; while along the branches and where the old rail fences had stood, black-berry vines had grown up, twisting their thorny stems and forming a veritable

hedge fence. These places I promised mother to avoid as I begged her to allow me to follow the big boys and carry their game when they went hunting.

In the neighborhood and throughout the country there had at one time been many colored farmers, or ex-slaves, who had settled there after the war. Many of them having built up nice homes and cleared the valley of tough-rooted hickory, gum, pecan and water-oak trees, and the highlands of the black, white, red or post oak, sassafras and dog-wood. They later grubbed the stumps and hauled the rocks into the roads, or dammed treacherous little streams that were continually breaking out and threatening the land with more ditches. But as time wore on and the older generation died, the younger were attracted to the towns and cities in quest of occupations that were more suitable to their increasing desires for society and good times. Leaving the farms to care for themselves until the inevitable German immigrant came along and bought them up at his own price, tilled the land, improved the farm and roads, straightened out the streams by digging canals, and grew prosperous.

As for me, I was called the lazy member of the family; a shirker who complained that it was too cold to work in the winter, and too warm in the summer. About the only thing for which I was given credit was in learning readily. I always received good grades in my studies, but was continually criticised for talking too much and being too inquisitive. We finally moved into the nearby town of M—ph. Not so much to get off the farm, or to be near more colored people (as most of the



younger negro farmers did) as to give the children better educational facilities.

The local colored school was held in an old building made of plain boards standing straight up and down with battens on the cracks. It was inadequate in many respects; the teachers very often inefficient, and besides, it was far from home. After my eldest sister graduated she went away to teach, and about the same time my oldest brother quit school and went to a near-by town and became a table waiter, much to the dissatisfaction of my mother, who always declared emphatically that she wanted none of her sons to become lackeys.

When the Spanish-American War broke out the two brothers above me enlisted with a company of other patriotic young fellows and were taken to Springfield to go into camp. At Springfield their company was disbanded and those of the company that wished to go on were accepted into other companies, and those that desired to go home were permitted to do so. The younger of the two brothers returned home by freight; the other joined a Chicago company and was sent to Santiago and later to San Luis DeCuba, where he died with typhoid pneumonia.

M—pla was an old town with a few factories, two flour mills, two or three saw mills, box factories and another concern where veneering was peeled from wood blocks softened with steam. The timber came from up the Tennessee River, which emptied into the Ohio a few miles up the river. There was also the market house, such as are to be seen in towns of the Southern states—and parts of the

Northern. This market house, or place, as it is often called, was an open building, except one end enclosed by a meat-market, and was about forty by one hundred feet with benches on either side and one through the center for the convenience of those who walked, carrying their produce in a home-made basket. Those in vehicles backed to a line guarded by the city marshall, forming an alleyway the width of the market house for perhaps half a block, depending on how many farmers were on hand. There was always a rush to get nearest the market house; a case of the early bird getting the worm. The towns people who came to buy, women mostly with baskets, would file leisurely between the rows of vehicles, hacks and spring wagons of various descriptions, looking here and there at the vegetables displayed.

We moved back to the country after a time when my father complained of my poor service in the field and in disgust I was sent off to do the marketing—which pleased me, for it was not only easy but gave me a chance to meet and talk with many people—and I always sold the goods and engaged more for the afternoon delivery. This was my first experience in real business and from that time ever afterward I could always do better business for myself than for anyone else. I was not given much credit for my ability to sell, however, until my brother, who complained that I was given all the easy work while he had to labor and do all the heavier farm work, was sent to do the marketing. He was not a salesman and lacked the aggressiveness to approach people with a basket, and never talked

much; was timid and when spoken to or approached plainly showed it.

On the other hand, I met and became acquainted with people quite readily. I soon noticed that many people enjoy being flattered, and how pleased even the prosperous men's wives would seem if bowed to with a pleasant "Good Morning, Mrs. Quante, nice morning and would you care to look at some fresh roasting ears—ten cents a dozen; or some nice ripe strawberries, two boxes for fifteen cents?" "Yes Maam, Thank you! and O, Mrs. Quante, would you care for some radishes, cucumbers or lettuce for tomorrow? I could deliver late this afternoon, you see, for maybe you haven't the time to come to market every day." From this association I soon learned to give to each and every prospective customer a different greeting or suggestion, which usually brought a smile and a nod of appreciation as well as a purchase.

Before the debts swamped my father, and while my brothers were still at home, our truck gardening, the small herd of milkers and the chickens paid as well as the farm itself. About this time father fell heir to a part of the estate of a brother which came as a great relief to his ever increasing burden of debt.

While this seeming relief to father was on I became very anxious to get away. In fact I didn't like M—pla nor its surroundings. It was a river town and gradually losing its usefulness by the invasion of railroads up and down the river; besides, the colored people were in the most part wretchedly poor, ignorant and envious. They were

set in the ways of their localisms, and it was quite useless to talk to them of anything that would better oneself. The social life centered in the two churches where praying, singing and shouting on Sundays, to back-biting, stealing, fighting and getting drunk during the week was common among the men. They remained members in good standing at the churches, however, as long as they paid their dues, contributed to the numerous rallies, or helped along in camp meetings and festivals. Others were regularly turned out, mostly for not paying their dues, only to warm up at the next revival on the mourners bench and come through converted and be again accepted into the church and, for awhile at least, live a near-righteous life. There were many good Christians in the church, however, who were patient with all this conduct, while there were and still are those who will not sanction such carrying-on by staying in a church that permits of such shamming and hypocrisy. These latter often left the church and were then branded either as infidels or human devils who had forsaken the house of God and were condemned to eternal damnation.

My mother was a shouting Methodist and many times we children would slip quietly out of the church when she began to get happy. The old and less religious men hauled slop to feed a few pigs, cut cord-wood at fifty cents per cord, and did any odd jobs, or kept steady ones when such could be found. The women took in washing, cooked for the white folks, and fed the preachers. When we lived in the country we fed so many of

the Elders, with their long tailed coats and assuming and authoritative airs, that I grew to almost dislike the sight of a colored man in a Prince Albert coat and clerical vest. At sixteen I was fairly disgusted with it all and took no pains to keep my disgust concealed.

This didn't have the effect of burdening me with many friends in M—pls and I was regarded by many of the boys and girls, who led in the whirlpool of the local colored society, as being of the "too-close-to-catch-cold" variety, and by some of the Elders as being worldly, a free thinker, and a dangerous associate for young Christian folks. Another thing that added to my unpopularity, perhaps, was my persistent declarations that there were not enough competent colored people to grasp the many opportunities that presented themselves, and that if white people could possess such nice homes, wealth and luxuries, so in time, could the colored people. "You're a fool", I would be told, and then would follow a lecture describing the time-worn long and cruel slavery, and after the emancipation, the prejudice and hatred of the white race, whose chief object was to prevent the progress and betterment of the negro. This excuse for the negro's lack of ambition was constantly dinned into my ears from the Kagle corner loafer to the minister in the pulpit, and I became so tired of it all that I declared that if I could ever leave M—pls I would never return. More, I would disprove such a theory and in the following chapters I hope to show that what I believed fourteen years ago was true,

## CHAPTER II

## LEAVING HOME—A MAIDEN



**I** WAS seventeen when I at last left M—pls. I accepted a rough job at a dollar and a quarter a day in a car manufacturing concern in a town of eight thousand population, about eight hundred being colored. I was unable to save very much, for work was dull that summer, and I was only averaging about four days' work a week. Besides, I had an attack of malaria at intervals for a period of two months, but by going to work at five o'clock A. M. when I was well I could get in two extra hours, making a dollar-fifty. The concern employed about twelve hundred men and paid their wages every two weeks, holding back one week's pay. I came there in June and it was some time in September that I drew my fullest pay envelope which contained sixteen dollars and fifty cents.

About this time a "fire eating" colored evangelist, who apparently possessed great converting powers and unusual eloquence, came to town. These qualities, however, usually became very uninteresting toward the end of a stay. He had been to M—pls the year before I left and at that place his popularity greatly diminished before he left. The greater part of the colored people in this town were of the emotional kind and to these he was as attractive as he had been at M—pls in the beginning.

Coincident with the commencement of Rev. McIntyre's soul stirring sermons a big revival

was inaugurated, and although the little church was filled nightly to its capacity, the aisles were kept clear in order to give those that were "sleeping in Hell's fire" (as the evangelist characterized those who were not members of some church) an open road to enter into the fold of the righteous; also to give the mourners sufficient room in which to exhaust their emotions when the spirit struck them—and it is needless to say that they were used. At times they virtually converted the entire floor into an active gymnasium, regardless of the rights of other persons or of the chairs they occupied. I had seen and heard people shout at long intervals in church, but here, after a few soul stirring sermons, they began to run outside where there was more room to give vent to the hallucination and this wandering of the mind. It could be called nothing else, for after the first few sermons the evangelist would hardly be started before some mourner would begin to "come through." This revival warmed up to such proportions that preaching and shouting began in the afternoon instead of evening. Men working in the yards of the foundry two block away could hear the shouting above the roaring furnaces and the deafening noise of machinery of a great car manufacturing concern. The church stood on a corner where two streets, or avenues, intersected and for a block in either direction the influence of fanaticism became so intense that the converts began running about like wild creatures, tearing their hair and uttering prayers and supplications in dissonant tones.

At the evening services the sisters would gather

around a mourner that showed signs of weakening and sing and babble until he or she became so befuddled they would jump up, throw their arms wildly into the air, kick, strike, then cry out like a dying soul, fall limp and exhausted into the many arms outstretched to catch them. This was always conclusive evidence of a contrite heart and a thorough penitent soul. Far into the night this performance would continue, and when the mourners' bench became empty the audience would be searched for sinners. I would sit through it all quite unemotional, and nightly I would be approached with "aren't you ready?" To which I would make no answer. I noticed that several boys, who were not in good standing with the parents of girls they wished to court, found the mourners' bench a convenient vehicle to the homes of these girls—all of whom belonged to church. Girls over eighteen who did not belong were subjects of much gossip and abuse.

A report, in some inconceivable manner, soon became spread that Oscar Devereaux had said that he wanted to die and go to hell. Such a sensation! I was approached on all sides by men and women, regardless of the time of day or night, by the young men who gloried in their conversion and who urged me to "get right" with Jesus before it was too late. I do not remember how long these meetings lasted but they suddenly came to an end when notice was served on the church trustees by the city council, which irreverently declared that so many converts every afternoon and night was disturbing the white neighborhood's rest as



well as their nerves. It ordered windows and doors to be kept closed during services, and as the church was small it was impossible to house the congregation and all the converts, so the revival ended and the community was restored to normal and calm once more prevailed.

That was in September. One Sunday afternoon in October, as I was walking along the railroad track, I chanced to overhear voices coming from under a water tank, where a space of some eight or ten feet enclosed by four huge timbers made a small, secluded place. I stopped, listened and was sure I recognized the voices of Douglas Brock, his brother Melvin, and two other well known colored boys. Douglas was betting a quarter with one of the other boys that he couldn't pass. (You who know the dice and its vagaries will know what he meant.) This was mingled with words and commands from Melvin to the dice in trying to make some point. It must have been four. He would let out a sort of yell; "Little Joe, can't you do it?" I went my way. I didn't shoot craps nor drink neither did I belong to church but was called a dreadful sinner while three of the boys under the tank had, not less than six weeks before, joined church and were now full-fledged members in good standing. Of course I did not consider that all people who belonged to church were not Christians, but was quite sure that many were not.

The following January a relative of mine got a job for me hauling water in a coal mine in a little town inhabited entirely by negroes. I worked from six o'clock P. M. to six A. M., and received two

dollars and twenty-five cents therefor. The work was rough and hard and the mine very dark. The smoke hung like a cloud near the top of the tunnel-like room during all the night. This was because the fans were all but shut off at night, and just enough air was pumped in to prevent the formation of black damp. The smoke made my head ache until I felt stupid and the dampness made me ill, but the two dollars and twenty-five cents per day looked good to me. After six weeks, however, I was forced to quit, and with sixty-five dollars—more money than I had ever had—I went to see my older sister who was teaching in a nearby town.

I had grown into a strong, husky youth of eighteen and my sister was surprised to see that I was working and taking care of myself so well. She shared the thought of nearly all of my acquaintances that I was too lazy to leave home and do hard work, especially in the winter time. After awhile she suddenly looked at me and spoke as though afraid she would forget it, "O, Oscar! I've got a girl for you; what do you think of that?" smiling so pleasantly, I was afraid she was joking. You see, I had never been very successful with the girls and when she mentioned having a girl for me my heart was all a flutter and when she hesitated I put in eagerly.

"Aw go on—quit your kidding. On the level now, or are you just chiding me?" But she took on a serious expression and speaking thoughtfully, she went on.

"Yea, she lives next door and is a nice little girl, and pretty. The prettiest colored girl in town."

Here I lost interest for I remembered my sister

was foolish about beauty and I said that I didn't care to meet her. I was suspicious when it came to the pretty type of girls, and had observed that the prettiest girl in town was oft times petted and spoiled and a mere butterfly.

"O why?" She spoke like one hurt. Then I confessed my suspicions. "O, You're foolish," she exclaimed softly, appearing relieved. "Besides," she went on brightly "Jessie isn't a spoiled girl, you wait until you meet her." And in spite of my protests she sent the landlady's little girl off for Miss Rooks. She came over in about an hour and I found her to be demure and thoughtful, as well as pretty. She was small of stature, had dark eyes and beautiful wavy, black hair, and an olive complexion. She wouldn't allow me to look into her eyes but continued to cast them downward, sitting with folded hands and answering when spoken to in a tiny voice quite in keeping with her small person.

During the afternoon I mentioned that I was going to Chicago, "Now Oscar, you've got no business in Chicago," my sister spoke up with a touch of authority. "You're too young, and besides," she asked "do you know whether W. O. wants you?" W. O. was our oldest brother and was then making Chicago his home.

"Huh!" I snorted "I'm going on my own hook," and drawing up to my full six feet I tried to look brave, which seemed to have the desired effect on my sister.

"Well" she said resignedly, "you must be careful and not get into bad company—be good and try to make a man of yourself."

## CHAPTER III

## CHICAGO, CHASING A WILL-O-THE-WISP

**T**HAT was on Sunday morning three hundred miles south of Chicago, and at nine-forty that night I stepped off the New Orleans and Chicago fast mail into a different world. It was, I believe, the coldest night that I had ever experienced. The city was new and strange to me and I wandered here and there for hours before I finally found my brother's address on Armour Avenue. But the wandering and anxiety mattered little, for I was in the great city where I intended beginning my career, and felt that bigger things were in store for me.

The next day my brother's landlady appeared to take a good deal of interest in me and encouraged me so that I became quite confidential, and told her of my ambitions for the future and that it was my intention to work, save my money and eventually become a property owner. I was rather chagrined later, however, to find that she had repeated all this to my brother and he gave me a good round scolding, accompanied by the unsolicited advice that if I would keep my mouth shut people wouldn't know I was so green. He had been traveling as a waiter on an eastern railroad dining car, but in a fit of independence—which had always been characteristic of him—had quit, and now in mid-winter, was out of a job. He was not enthusiastic concerning my presence in the city and

I had found him broke, but with a lot of fine clothes and a diamond or two. Most folks from the country don't value good clothes and diamonds in the way city folks do and I, for one, didn't think much of his finery.

I was greatly disappointed, for I had anticipated that my big brother would have accumulated some property or become master of a bank account during these five or six years he had been away from home. He seemed to sense this disappointment and became more irritated at my presence and finally wrote home to my parents—who had recently moved to Kansas—charging me with the crime of being a big, awkward, ignorant kid, unsophisticated in the ways of the world, and especially of the city; that I was likely to end my "career" by running over a street car and permitting the city to irrevocably lose me, or something equally as bad. When I heard from my mother she was worried and begged me to come home. I knew the folks at home shared my brother's opinion of me and believed all he had told them, so I had a good laugh all to myself in spite of the depressing effect it had on me. However, there was the reaction, and when it set in I became heartsick and discouraged and then and there became personally acquainted with the "blues", who gave me their undivided attention for some time after that.

The following Sunday I expected him to take me to church with him, but he didn't. He went alone, wearing his five dollar hat, fifteen dollar made-to-measure shoes, forty-five dollar coat and vest, eleven dollar trousers, fifty dollar tweed

overcoat and his diamonds. I found my way to church alone and when I saw him sitting reservedly in an opposite pew, I felt snubbed and my heart sank. However, only momentarily, for a new light dawned upon me and I saw the snobbery and folly of it all and resolved that some day I would rise head and shoulders above that foolish, four-flushing brother of mine in real and material success.

I finally secured irregular employment at the Union Stock Yards. The wages at that time were not the best. Common labor a dollar-fifty per day and the hours very irregular. Some days I was called for duty at five in the morning and laid off at three in the afternoon or called again at eight in the evening to work until nine the same evening. I soon found the mere getting of jobs to be quite easy. It was getting a desirable one that gave me trouble. However, when I first went to the yards and looked at the crowds waiting before the office in quest of employment, I must confess I felt rather discouraged, but my new surroundings and that indefinable interesting feature about these crowds with their diversity of nationalities and ambitions, made me forget my own little disappointments. Most all new arrivals, whether skilled or unskilled workmen, seeking "jobs" in the city find their way to the yards. Thousands of unskilled laborers are employed here and it seems to be the Mecca for the down-and-out who wander thither in a last effort to obtain employment.

The people with whom I stopped belonged to the servant class and lived neatly in their Armour Avenue flat. The different classes of people who

make up the population of a great city are segregated more by their occupations than anything else. The laborers usually live in a laborer's neighborhood. Tradesmen find it more agreeable among their fellow workmen and the same is true of the servants and others. I found that employment which soiled the clothes and face and hands was out of keeping among the people with whom I lived, so after trying first one job, then another, I went to Joliet, Illinois, to work out my fortune in the steel mills of that town. I was told that at that place was an excellent opportunity to learn a trade, but after getting only the very roughest kind of work to do around the mills, such as wrecking and carrying all kinds of broken iron and digging in a canal along with a lot of jabbering foreigners whose English vocabulary consisted of but one word—their laborer's number. It is needless to say that I saw little chance of learning a trade at any very early date.

Pay day "happened" every two weeks with two weeks held back. If I quit it would be three weeks before I could get my wages, but was informed of a scheme by which I could get my money, by telling the foreman that I was going to leave the state. Accordingly, I approached the renowned imbecile and told him that I was going to California and would have to quit and would like to get my pay. "Pay day is every two weeks, so be sure to get back in time," he answered in that officious manner so peculiar to foremen. I had only four dollars coming, so I quit anyway.

That evening I became the recipient of the

illuminating information that if I would apply at the coal chutes I would find better employment as well as receive better wages. I sought out the fellow in charge, a big colored man weighing about two hundred pounds, who gave me work cracking and heaving coal into the chute at a dollar-fifty per twenty-five tons.

"Gracious", I expostulated. "A man can't do all of that in a day".

"Poch", and he waved his big hands depreciatingly. "I have heaved forty tons with small effort".

I decided to go to work that day, but with many misgivings as to cracking and shoveling twenty-five tons of coal. The first day I managed, by dint of hard labor, to crack and heave eighteen tons out of a box car, for which I received the magnificent sum of one dollar, and the next day I fell to sixteen tons and likewise to eighty-nine cents. The contractor who superintended the coal business bought me a drink in a nearby saloon, and as I drank it with a gulp he patted me on the shoulder, saying, "Now, after the third day, son, you begin to improve and at the end of a week you can heave thirty tons a day as easily as a clock ticking the time". I thought he was going to add that I would be shoveling forty tons like Big Jim, the fellow who gave me the job, but I cut him off by telling him that I'd resign before I became so proficient.

I had to send for more money to pay my board. My brother, being my banker, sent a statement of my account, showing that I had to date just twenty-five dollars, and the statement seemed to read coldly between the lines that I would soon be



books, out of a job, and what then? I felt very serious about the matter and when I returned to Chicago I had lost some of my confidence regarding my future. Mrs. Nelson, the landlady, boasted that her husband made twenty dollars per week; showed me her diamonds and spoke so very highly of my brother, that I suspicioned that she admired him a great deal, and that he was in no immediate danger of losing his room even when he was out of work and unable to meet his obligations.

My next step was to let an employment agency swindle me out of two dollars. Their system was quite unique, and, I presume, legitimate. They persuaded the applicant to deposit three dollars as a guarantee of good faith, after which they were to find a position for him. A given percentage was also to be taken from the wages for a certain length of time. Some of these agencies may have been all right, but my old friend, the hoodoo, led me to one that was an open fraud. After the person seeking employment has been sent to several places for imaginary positions that prove to be only myths, the agency offers to give back a dollar and the disgusted applicant is usually glad to get it. I, myself, being one of many of these unfortunates.

I then tried the newspaper ads. There is usually some particular paper in any large city that makes a specialty of want advertisements. I was told, as was necessary, to stand at the door when the paper came from the press, grab a copy, choose an ad that seemed promising and run like wild for the address given. I had no trade, so turned to the miscellaneous column, and as I had no references

I looked for a place where none were required. If the address was near I would run as fast as the crowded street and the speed laws would permit, but always found upon arrival that someone had just either been accepted ahead of me, or had been there a week. I having run down an old ad that had been permitted to run for that time. About the only difference I found between the newspapers and the employment agencies was that I didn't have to pay three dollars for the experience.

I now realized the disadvantages of being an unskilled laborer, and had grown weary of chasing a "will-o-the-wisp" and one day while talking to a small Indian-looking negro I remarked that I wished I could find a job in some suburb shining shoes in a barber shop or something that would take me away from Chicago and its dilly-dally jobs for awhile.

"I know where you can get a job like that", he answered, thoughtfully.

"Where?" I asked eagerly.

"Why, out at Eaton", he went on, "a suburb about twenty-five miles west. A fellow wanted me to go but I don't want to leave Chicago".

I found that most of the colored people with whom I had become acquainted who lived in Chicago very long were similarly reluctant about leaving, but I was ready to go anywhere. So my new friend took me over to a barber supply house on Clark street, where a man gave me the name of the barber at Eaton and told me to come by in the morning and he'd give me a ticket to the place. When I got on the street again I felt so happy and grateful to my friend for the information, that I gave the little mulatto a half dollar, all the money I had with

me, and had to walk the forty blocks to my room. Here I filled my old grip and the next morning "beat it" for Eaton, arriving there on the first of May, and a cold, bleak, spring morning it was. I found the shop without any trouble—a dingy little place with two chairs. The proprietor, a drawn, unhappy looking creature, and a hawkish looking German assistant welcomed me cordially. They seemed to need company. The proprietor led me upstairs to a room that I could have free with an oil stove and table where I could cook—so I made arrangements to "bach".

I received no wages, but was allowed to retain all I made "shining". I had acquired some experience shining shoes on the streets of M—ple with a home-made box—getting on my knees whenever I got a customer. "Shining shoes" is not usually considered an advanced or technical occupation requiring skill. However, if properly conducted it can be the making of a good solicitor. While Eaton was a suburb it was also a country town and this shop was never patronized by any of the metropolitan class who made their homes there, but principally by the country class who do not evidence their city pride by the polish of their shoes. Few city people allow their shoes to go unpolished and I wasn't long in finding it out, and when I did I had something to say to the men who went by, well dressed but with dirty shoes. If I could argue them into stopping, if only for a moment, I could nearly always succeed in getting them into the chair.

Business, however, was dull and I began taking jobs in the country from the farmers, working

through the day and getting back to the shop for the evening. This, however, was short lived, for I was unaccustomed to farm work since leaving home and found it extremely difficult. My first work in the country was pitching timothy hay side-by-side with a girl of sixteen, who knew how to pitch hay. I thought it would be quite romantic before I started, but before night came I had changed my mind. The man on the wagon would drive alongside a big cock of sweet smelling hay and the girl would stick her fork partly to one side of the hay cock and show me how to put my fork into the other. I was left-handed while she was right, and with our backs to the wagon we could make a heavy lift and when the hay was directly overhead we'd turn and face each other and over the load would go onto the wagon. Toward evening the loads thus balanced seemed to me as heavy as the load of Atlas bearing the earth. I am sure my face disclosed the fatigue and strain under which I labored, for it was clearly reflected in the knowing grin of my companion. I drew my pay that night on the excuse of having to get an overall suit, promising to be back at a quarter to seven the next morning.

Then I tried shocking oats along with a boy of about twelve, a girl of fourteen and the farmer's wife. The way those two children did work,—Whew! I was so glad when a shower came up about noon that I refrained from shouting with difficulty. I drew my pay this time to get some gloves, and promised to be back as soon as it dried. The next morning I felt so sore and stiff as the result of my two days' experience in the harvest.

fields, that I forgot all about my promise to return and decided to stay in Eaton.

It was in Eaton that I started my first bank account. The little twenty-dollar certificate of deposit opened my mind to different things entirely. I would look at it until I had day dreams. During the three months I spent in Eaton I laid the foundation of a future. Simple as it was, it led me into channels which carried me away from my race and into a life fraught with excitement; a life that gave experiences and other things I had never dreamed of. I had started a bank account of twenty dollars and I found myself wanting one of thirty, and to my surprise the desire seemed to increase. This desire fathered my plans to become a porter on a P——a car. A position I diligently sought and applied for between such odd jobs about town as mowing lawns, washing windows, scrubbing floors and a variety of others that kept me quite busy. Taking the work, if I could, by contract, thus permitting me to use my own time and to work as hard as I desired to finish. I found that by this plan I could make money faster and easier than by working in the country.

I was finally rewarded by being given a run on a parlor car by a road that reached many summer resorts in southern Wisconsin. Here I skimped along on a run that went out every Friday and Saturday, returning on Monday morning. The regular salary was forty dollars per month, but as I never put in more than half the time I barely made twenty dollars, and altho' I made a little "on the side" in the way of tips I had to draw on the money I had saved in Eaton.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE P——N COMPANY

**T**HE P——n Company is a big palace, dining and sleeping car company that most American people know a great deal about. I had long desired to have a run on one of the magnificent sleepers that operated out of Chicago to every part of North America, that I might have an opportunity to see the country and make money at the same time, and from Monday to Friday I had nothing to do but report at one of the three P——n offices in my effort to get such a position. One office where I was particularly attentive, operated cars on four roads, so I called on this office about twice a week, but a long, slim chief clerk whose chair guarded the entrance to the Superintendent's office would drawl out badly: "We don't need any men today." I had been to the office a number of times before I left Eaton and had heard his drawl so often that I grew nervous whenever he looked at me. That district employed over a thousand porters and there was no doubt that they hired them every day. One day I was telling my troubles to a friendly porter whom I later learned to be George Cole (former husband of the present wife of Bert Williams, the comedian). He advised me to see Mr. Miltzow, the Superintendent.

"But I can never see him" I said despairingly, "for that long imbecile of a clerk."

"Jump him some day when he is on the way from

luncheon, talk fast, tell him how you have been trying all summer to 'get on', the old man" he said, referring to the superintendent, "likes big, stout youngsters like you, so try it." The next day I watched him from the street and when he started to descend the long stairway to his office, I gathered my courage and stepped to his side. I told him how I had fairly haunted his office, only to be turned away regularly by the same words; that I would like a position if he would at any time need any men. He went into his office, leaving me standing at the railing, where I held my grounds in defiance of the chief clerk's insolent stare. After a few minutes he looked up and called out: "Come in here, you." As I stood before him he looked me over searchingly and inquired as to whether I had any references.

"No Sir," I answered quickly, "but I can get them." I was beside myself with nervous excitement and watched him eagerly for fear he might turn me away at the psychological moment, and that I would fail to get what I had wanted so long.

"Well," he said in a decisive tone, "get good references, showing what you have been doing for the last five years, bring them around and I'll talk to you."

"Thank you Sir," I blurted out and with hopes soaring I hurried out and down the steps. Going to my room, I wrote for references to people in M—pls who had known me all my life. Of course they sent me the best of letters, which I took immediately to Mr. Miltzow's office. After looking them over carelessly he handed them to his secretary asking

me whether I was able to buy a uniform. When I answered in the affirmative he gave me a letter to the company's tailor, and one to the instructor, who the next day gave me my first lessons in a car called the "school" in a nearby railroad yard placed there for that purpose. I learned all that was required in a day, although he had some pupils who had been with him five days before I started and who graduated with me. I now thought I was a full-fledged porter and was given an order for equipment, combs, brushes, etc., a letter from the instructor to the man that signed out the runs, a very apt appearing young man with a gift for remembering names and faces, who instructed me to report on the morrow. The thought of my first trip the next day, perhaps to some distant city I had never seen, caused me to lie awake the greater part of the night.

When I went into the porter's room the next day, or "down in the hole," as the basement was called, and looked into the place, I found it crowded with men, and mostly old men at that and I felt sure it would be a long time before I was sent out. However, I soon learned that the most of them were "emergency men" or emergencies, men who had been discharged and who appeared regularly in hopes of getting a car that could not be supplied with a regular man.

There was one by the name of Knight, a pitiable and forlorn character in whose breast "hope sprang eternal," who came to the "hole" every day, and in an entire year he had made one lone trip. He lived by "mooching" a dime, quarter or fifty cents



from first one porter then another and by helping some porters make down beds in cars that went out on midnight trains. It was said that he had been discharged on account of too strict adherence to duty. Every member of a train crew, whether porter, brakeman or conductor, must carry a book of rules; more as a matter of form than to show to passengers as Knight had done. A trainman should, and does, depend more on his judgment than on any set of rules, and permits the rule to be stretched now and then to fit circumstances. Knight, however, courted his rule book and when a passenger requested some service that the rules prohibited, such for instance as an extra pillow to a berth, and if the passenger insisted or showed dissatisfaction Knight would get his book of rules, turn to the chapter which dwelt on the subject and read it aloud to the already disgruntled passenger, thereby making more or less of a nuisance to the traveling public.

But I am digressing. Fred, the "sign-out-clerk" came along and the many voices indulging in loud and raucous conversation so characteristic of porters off duty, gave way to respectful silence. He looked favorably on the regular men but seemed to pass up the energies as he entered. The poor fellows didn't expect to be sent out but it seemed to fascinate them to hear the clerk assign the regular men their cars to some distant cities in his cheerful language such as: "Hello! Brooks, where did you come from? —From San Antonio? Well take the car 'Litchfield' to Oakland; leaves on Number Three at eleven o'clock to-night over the B. & R. N.; have

the car all ready, eight lowers made down." And from one to the other he would go, signing one to go east and another west. Respectfully silent and attentive the men's eyes would follow him as he moved on, each and every man eager to know where he would be sent.

Finally he got to me. He had an excellent memory and seemed to know all men by name. "Well Devereaux," he said, "do you think that you can run a car?"

"Yes Sir!" I answered quickly. He fumbled his pencil thoughtfully while I waited nervously then went on:

"And you feel quite capable of running a car, do you?"

"Yes Sir" I replied with emphasis, "I learned thoroughly yesterday."

"Well," he spoke as one who has weighed the matter and is not quite certain but willing to risk, and taking his pad and pencil he wrote, speaking at the same time, "You go out to the Ft. Wayne yards and get on the car 'Altata', goes extra to Washington D. C. at three o'clock; put away the linen, put out combs, brushes and have the car in order when the train backs down."

"Yes Sir," and I hurried out of the room, up the steps and onto the street where I could give vent to my elation. To Washington, first of all places. O Glory! and I fairly flew out to Sixteenth street where the P. F. & W. passenger yards were located. Here not less than seven hundred passenger and and P——n cars are cleaned and put in readiness for each trip daily, and standing among them I

found the Altata. O wonderful name! She was a brand new observation car just out of the shops. I dared not believe my eyes, and felt that there must be some mistake; surely the company didn't expect to send me out with such a fine car on my first trip. But I should have known better, for among the many thousands of P——n cars with their picturesque names, there was not another "Altata." I looked around the yards and finally inquired of a cleaner as to where the Altata was.

"Right there," he said, pointing to the car I had been looking at and I boarded her nervously; found the linen and lockers but was at a loss to know how and where to start getting the car in order. I was more than confused and what I had learned so quickly the day before had vanished like smoke. I was afraid too, that if I didn't have the car in order I'd be taken off when the train backed down and become an "emergie" myself. This shocked me so it brought me to my senses and I got busy putting the linen somewhere and when the train stopped in the shed the car, as well as myself, was fairly presentable and ready to receive.

Then came the rush of passengers with all their attending requests for attention. "Ah Polter, put my grip in Thoitzen," and "Ah Polter, will you raise my window and put in a deflector?" Holy Smither-ins! I rushed back and forth like a lost calf, trying to recall what a deflector was, and I couldn't distinguish thoitzen from three. Then—"Ah, Polter, will you tell me when we get to Valparaiso?" called a little blonde lady, "You see, I have a son who is attending the Univolcity thcah—now Polter don't don't forget please" she asked winsomely.

"Oh! No, Maam," I assured her confidently that I never forgot anything. My confusion became so intense had I gotten off the car I'd probably not have known which way to get on again.

The clerk seemed to sense my embarrassment and helped me seat the passengers in their proper places, as well as to answer the numerous questions directed at me. The G. A. R. encampment was on in Washington and the rush was greater than usual on that account. By the time the train reached Valparaiso I had gotten somewhat accustomed to the situation and recalled my promise to the little blonde lady and filled it. She had been asleep and it was raining to beat-the-band. With a sigh she looked out of the window and then turned on her side and fell asleep again. At Pittsburg I was chagrined to be turned back and sent over the P. H. & D. to Chicago.

At Columbus, Ohio, we took on a colored preacher who had a ticket for an upper berth over a Southerner who had the lower. The Southern gentleman in that "holier than thou" attitude made a vigorous kick to the conductor to have the colored "Sky-pilot," as he termed him, removed. I heard the conductor tell him gently but firmly, that he couldn't do it. Then after a few characteristic haughty remarks the Southerner went forward to the chair car and sat up all night. When I got the shoes shined and lavatory ready for the morning rush I slipped into the Southerner's berth and had a good snooze. However, longer than it should have been, for the conductor found me the next morning as the train was pulling into Chicago. He threatened

to report me but when I told him that it was my first trip out, that I hadn't had any sleep the night before and none the night before that on account of my restlessness in anticipation of the trip, he relented and helped me to make up the beds.

I barely got to my room before I was called to go out again. This time going through to Washington. The P. F. & W. tracks pass right through Washington's "black belt" and it might be interesting to the reader to know that Washington has more colored people than any other American city. I had never seen so many colored people. In fact, the entire population seemed to be negroes. There was an old lady from South Dakota on my car who seemed surprised at the many colored people and after looking quite intently for some time she touched me on the sleeve, whispering, "Porter, aren't there anything but colored people here?" I replied that it seemed so.

At the station a near-mob of colored boys huddled before the steps and I thought they would fairly take the passengers off their feet by the way they crowded around them. However, they were harmless and only wanted to earn a dime by carrying grips. Two of them got a jul fitsa grip on that of the old lady from South Dakota, and to say that she became frightened would be putting it mildly. Just then a policeman came along and the boys scattered like flies and the old lady seemed much relieved. Having since taken up my abode in that state myself, and knowing that there were but few negroes inhabiting it, I have often wondered since how she must have felt on that memorable trip of hers, as well as mine.

After working some four months on various and irregular runs that took me to all the important cities of the United States east of the Mississippi River, I was put on a regular run to Portland, Oregon. This was along in February and about the same time that I banked my first one hundred dollars. If my former bank account had stirred my ambition and become an incentive to economy and a life of modest habits, the larger one put everything foolish and impractical entirely out of my mind, and economy, modesty and frugality became fixed habits of my life.

At a point in Wyoming on my run to Portland my car left the main line and went over another through Idaho and Oregon. From there no berth tickets were sold by the station agents and the conductors collected the cash fares, and had for many years mixed the company's money with their own. I soon found myself in the mix along with the conductors. "Getting in" was easy and tips were good for a hundred dollars a month and sometimes more. "Good Conductors," a name applied to "color blind" cons, were worth seventy-five, and with the twenty-five dollar salary from the company, I averaged two hundred dollars a month for eighteen months.

There is something fascinating about railroading, and few men really tire of it. In fact, most men, like myself, rather enjoy it. I never tired of hearing the t-clack of the trucks and the general roar of the train as it thundered over streams and crossings throughout the days and nights across the continent to the Pacific coast. The scenery never grew

old, as it was quite varied between Chicago and North Platte. During the summer it is one large garden farm, dotted with numerous cities, thriving hamlets and towns, fine country homes so characteristic of the great middle west, and is always pleasing to the eye.

Between North Platte and Julesburg, Colorado, is the heart of the semi-arid region, where the yearly rainfall is insufficient to mature crops, but where the short buffalo grass feeds the rancher's herds winter and summer. As the car continues westward, climbing higher and higher as it approaches the Rockies, the air becomes quite rare. At Cheyenne the air is so light it blows a gale almost steadily, and the eye can discern objects for miles away while the ear cannot hear sounds over twenty rods. I shall not soon forget how I was wont to gaze at the herds of cattle ten to thirty miles away grazing peacefully on the great Laramie plains to the south, while beyond that lay the great American Rockies, their ragged peaks towering above in great sepulchral forms, filling me alternately with a feeling of romance or adventure, depending somewhat on whether it was a story of the "Roundup," or some other article typical of the west, I was reading.

Nearing the Continental divide the car pulls into Rawlins, which is about the highest, driest and most uninviting place on the line. From here the stage lines radiate for a hundred miles to the north and south. Near here is Medicine Bow, where Owen Wister lays the beginning scenes of the "Virginian"; and beyond lies Rock Springs, the home of the famous coal that bears its name and which com-

mands the highest price of any bituminous coal. The coal lies in wide veins, the shafts run horizontally and there are no deep shafts as there are in the coal fields of Illinois and other Central states.

From here the train descends a gentle slope to Green River, Wyoming, a division point in the U. P. South on the D. & R. G. is Green River, Utah. Arriving at Granger one feels as though he had arrived at the jumping off place of creation. Like most all desert stations it contains nothing of interest and time becomes a bore. Here the traffic is divided and the O. S. L. takes the Portland and Butte section into Idaho where the scenery suddenly begins to get brighter. Indeed, the country seems to take on a beautiful and cheerful appearance; civilization and beautiful farms take the place of the wilderness, sage brush and skulking coyotes. Thanks to the irrigation ditch.

After crossing the picturesque American Falls of Snake River, the train soon arrives at Minidoka. This is the seat of the great Minidoka project, in which the United States Government has taken such an active interest and constructed a canal over seventy miles in length. This has converted about a quarter of a million acres of Idaho's volcanic ash soil into productive lands that bloom as the rose. It was the beautiful valley of the Snake River, with its indescribable scenery and its many beautiful little cities, that attracted my attention and looked as though it had a promising future. I had contemplated investing in some of its lands and locating, if I should happen to be compelled by stress of circumstances to change my occupation. This came to pass shortly thereafter.



The end came after a trip between Granger and Portland, in company with a shrewd Irish conductor by the name of Wright, who not only "knocked down" the company's money, but drank a good deal more whiskey than was good for him. On this last trip, when Wright took charge of the car at Granger, he began telling about his newly acquired "dear little wifey." Also confiding to me that he had quit drinking and was going to quit "knocking down"—after that trip. Oh, yes! Wright was always going to dispense with all things dishonest and dishonorable—at some future date. Another bad thing about Wright was that he would steal, not only from the company, but from the porter as well, by virtue of the rule that required the porter to take a duplicate receipt from the conductor for each and every passenger riding on his car, whether the passenger has a ticket or pays cash fare. These receipts are forwarded to the Auditor of the company at the end of each run.

Wright's method of stealing from the porter was not to turn over any duplicates or receipts until arriving at the terminus. Then he would choose a time when the porter was very busy brushing the passengers' clothes and getting the tips, and would then have no time to count up or tell just how many people had ridden. I had received information from others concerning him and was cautioned to watch. So on our first trip I quietly checked up all the passengers as they got on and where they got off, as well as the berth or seat they occupied. Arriving at Granger going east he gave me the wink and taking me into the smoking room he proceeded to give me the duplicates and divide

the spoils. He gave me six dollars, saying he had cut such and such a passenger's fare and that was my part. I summed up and the amount "knocked down" was thirty-one dollars. I showed him my figures and at the same time told him to hand over nine-fifty more. How he did rage and swear about the responsibilities being all on him, that he did all the collecting and the "dirty work" in connection therewith, that the company didn't fire the porter. He said before he would concede to my demands he would turn all the money in to the company and report me for insolence. I sat calmly through it all and when he had exhausted his vituperations I calmly said "nine-fifty, please." I had no fear of his doing any of the things threatened for I had dealt with grafting conductors long enough to know that when they determined on keeping a fare they weren't likely to turn in their portion to spite the porter, and Wright was no exception.

But getting back to the last trip. An old lady had given me a quart of Old Crow Whiskey bottled in bond. There had been perhaps a half pint taken out. I thanked her profusely and put it in the locker, and since Wright found that he could not keep any of my share of the "knocked down" fares he was running straight—that is with me, and we were quite friendly, so I told him of the gift and where to find it if he wanted a "smile." In one end of the P—a where the drawing room cuts off the main portion of the car, and at the beginning of the curved aisle and opposite to the drawing room, is the locker. When its door is open it completely closes the aisle, thus hiding a person from

view behind it. Before long I saw Wright open the door and a little later could hear him ease the bottle down after taking a drink.

When we got to Portland, Wright was feeling "about right" and the bottle was empty. As he divided the money with me he cried: "Let her run on three wheels." It was the last time he divided any of the company's money with a parier. When he stepped into the office at the end of that trip he was told that they "had a message from Ager" the assistant general superintendent, concerning him. Every employee knew that a message from this individual meant "off goes the beam." I never saw Wright afterwards, for they "got" me too that trip.

The little Irish conductor, who was considered the shrewdest of the shrewd, had run a long time and "knocked down" a great amount of the company's money but the system of "spotting" eventually got him as it does the best of them.

I now had two thousand, three hundred and forty dollars in the bank. The odd forty I drew out, and left the remainder on deposit, packed my trunk and bid farewell to Armour Avenue and Chicago's Black Belt with its beer cans, drunken men and women, and turned my face westward with the spirit of Horace Greely before and his words "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country" ringing in my ears. So westward I journeyed to the land of raw material, which my dreams had pictured to me as the land of real beginning, and where I was soon to learn more than a mere observer ever could by living in the realm of a great city.

## CHAPTER V

"GO WEST YOUNG MAN AND GROW UP WITH THE  
COUNTRY"

**I**N justice to the many thousands of P—  
—n porters, as well as many conductors,  
who were in the habit of retaining the  
company's money, let it be said that  
they are not the hungry thieves and dishonest  
rogues the general public might think them to be,  
dishonest as their conduct may seem to be. They  
were victims of a vicious system built up and winked  
at by the company itself.

Before the day of the Inter-State Commerce  
Commission and anti-pass and two-cent-per-mile  
legislation, and when passengers paid cash fares, it  
was a matter of tradition with the conductors to  
knockdown, and nothing was said, although the  
conductors, as now, were fairly well paid and the  
company fully expected to lose some of the cash  
fares.

In the case of the porters, however, the circum-  
stances are far more mitigating. At the time I was  
with the company there were, in round numbers,  
eight thousand}porters in the service on tourist  
and standard sleepers who were receiving from a  
minimum of twenty-five dollars to not to exceed  
forty dollars per month, depending on length and  
desirability of service. Out of this he must furnish,  
for the first ten years, his own uniforms and cap,  
consisting of summer and winter suits at twenty  
and twenty-two dollars respectively. After ten

years of continuous service these things are furnished by the company. Then there is the board, lodging and laundry expense. Trainmen are allowed from fifty to sixty per cent off of the regular bill of fare, and at this price most any kind of a meal in an a-la-carte diner comes to forty and fifty cents. Besides, the waiters expect tips from the crew as well as from the passengers and make it more uncomfortable for them if they do not receive it than they usually do for the passenger.

I kept an accurate itemized account of my living expenses, including six dollars per month for a room in Chicago, and economize as I would, making one uniform and cap last a whole year, I could not get the monthly expense below forty dollars—fifteen dollars more than my salary, and surely the company must have known it and condoned any reasonable amount of "knock down" on the side to make up the deficiency in salary. The porter's "knock down" usually coming through the sympathy, good will and unwritten law of "knocking down"—that the conductor divide equally with the porter. All of which, however, is now fast becoming a thing of the past, owing to recent legislation, investigations and strict regulation of common carriers by Congress and the various laws of the states of the Union, with the added result that conductors' wages have increased accordingly. Few conductors today are foolish enough to jeopardize their positions by indulging in the old practice, and it leaves the porters in a sorry plight indeed.

All in all, the system, while deceptive and dishonest on its face, was for a time a tolerated evil,

apparently sanctioned by the company and became a veritable disease among the colored employees who, without exception, received and kept the company's money without a single qualm of conscience. It was a part of their duty to make the job pay something more than a part of their living expenses.

Ignorant as many of the porters were, most of them knew that from the enormous profits made that the company could and should have paid them better wages, and I am sure that if they received living wages for their services it would have a great moralizing effect on that feature of the service, and greatly add to the comfort of the traveling public.

However, the greedy and inhuman attitude of this monopoly toward its colored employees has just the opposite effect, and is demoralizing indeed. Thousands of black porters continue to give their services in return for starvation wages and are compelled to graft the company and the people for a living.

Shortly before my cessation of activities in connection with the P——n company it had a capitalization of ninety-five million dollars, paying eight per cent dividend annually, and about two years after I was compelled to quit, it paid its stockholders a thirty-five million dollar surplus which had accumulated in five years. Just recently a "melon was cut" of about a like amount and over eight thousand colored porters helped to accumulate it, at from twenty-five to forty dollars per month. A wonder it is that their condition does not breed such actual dishonesty and deception that society would be forced to take notice of it, and the traveling

public should be thankful for the attentive services given under these near-slave conditions. As for myself, the reader has seen how I made it "pay" and I have no apologies or regrets to offer. When that final reckoning comes, I am sure the angel clerk will pass all porters against whom nothing more serious appears than what I have heretofore related.

While I was considered very fortunate by my fellow employes, the whole thing filled me with disgust. I suffered from a nervous worry and fear of losing my position all the time, and really felt relieved when the end came and I was free to pursue a more commendable occupation.

In going out of the Superintendent's office on my farewell leave, the several opportunities I had seen during my experience with the P——a company loomed up and marched in dress parade before me; the conditions of the Snake River valley and the constructiveness of the people who had turned the alkali desert into valuable farms worth from fifty to five hundred dollars an acre, thrilled me so that I had no misgivings for the future. But Destiny had other fields in view for me and did not send me to that land of Eden of which I had become so fond, in quest of fortune. Such a variety of scenes was surely an incentive to serious thought.

What was termed inquisitiveness at home brought me a world of information abroad. This inquisitiveness, combined with the observation afforded by such runs as those to Portland and around the circle and, perhaps, coming back by Washington D. C., gave practical knowledge. Often western sheep-

man, who were ready talkers, returning on my car from taking a shipment to Chicago, gave me some idea of farming and sheepraising. I remember thinking that Iowa would be a fine place to own a farm, but quickly gave up any further thought of owning one there myself. A farmer from Tama, that state, gave me the information. He was a beautiful decoration for a P——n berth and a neatly made bed with three sheets, and I do not know what possessed him to ever take a sleeper, for he slept little that night—I am sure. The next morning about five o'clock, while gathering and shining shoes, I could not find his, and being curious, I peeped into his berth. What I saw made me laugh, indeed. There he lay, all bundled into his bed in his big fur overcoat and shoes on, just as he came into the car the evening before. He was awake and looked so uncomfortable that I suggested that he get up if he wasn't sleepy. "What say?" he answered, leaning over and sticking his head out of the berth as though afraid someone would grab him.

As this class of farmers like to talk, and usually in loud tones, I led him into the smoking room as soon as he jumped out of his berth, to keep him from annoying other passengers. Here he washed his face, still keeping his coat on.

"Remove your coat," I suggested, "and you will be more comfortable."

"You bet," he said taking his coat off and sitting on it. Lighting his pipe, he began talking and I immediately inquired of him how much land he owned.



He answered that he owned a section. "Geef but that is a lot of land," I exclaimed, getting interested, "and what is it worth an acre?"

"The last quarter I bought I paid eighty dollars an acre" he returned. That is over thirteen thousand and I could plainly see that my little two thousand dollar bank account wouldn't go very far in Iowa when it came to buying land. That was nine years ago and the same land today will sell around one hundred and fifty dollars an acre, and the "end is not yet."

I concluded on one thing, and that was, if one whose capital was under eight or ten thousand dollars, desired to own a good farm in the great central west he must go where the land was new or raw and undeveloped. He must begin with the beginning and develop with the development of the country. By the proper and accepted methods of conservation of the natural resources and close application to his work, his chances for success are good.

When I finally reached this conclusion I began searching for a suitable location in which to try my fortune in the harrowing of the soil.

## CHAPTER VI

"AND WHERE IS ORISTOWN?" THE TOWN ON THE MISSOURI

**I**T came a few days later in a restaurant in Council Bluffs, Iowa, when I heard the waiters, one white man and the other colored, saying, "I'm going to Oristown." "And where is Oristown?" I inquired, taking a stool and scrutinizing the bill of fare. "Oristown," the white man spoke up, drawing away at a pipe which gave him the appearance of being anything from a rover to a freight brakeman, "is about two hundred and fifty miles northwest of here in southern South Dakota, on the edge of the Little Crow Reservation, to be opened this summer." This is not the right name, but the name of an Indian chief living near where this is written.

"Oristown is the present terminus of the C. & R. W. Ry. and he went on to tell me that the land in part was valuable, while some portions were no better than Western Nebraska. A part of the Reservation was to be opened to settlement by lottery that summer and the registration was to take place in July. It was now April. "And the registration is to come off at Oristown?" I finished for him with a question. "Yes," he assented.

At Omaha the following day I chanced to meet two surveyors who had been sent out to the reservation from Washington, D. C. and who told me to write to the Department of the Interior for infor-

mation regarding the opening, the lay of the land, quality of the soil, rainfall, etc. I did as they suggested and the pamphlets received stated that the land to be opened was a deep black loam, with clay subsoil, and the rainfall in this section averaged twenty-eight inches the last five years. I knew that Iowa had about thirty inches and most of the time was too wet, so concluded here at last was the place to go. This suited me better than any of the states or projects I had previously looked into, besides, I knew more about the mode of farming employed in that section of the country, it being somewhat similar to that in Southern Illinois.

On the morning of July fifth, at U. P. Transfer, Iowa, I took a train over the C. P. & St. L., which carried me to a certain town on the Missouri in South Dakota. I did not go to Oristown to register as I had intended but went to the town referred to, which had been designated as a registration point also. I was told by people who were "hitting" in the same direction and for the same purpose, that Oristown was crowded and lawless, with no place to sleep, and was overrun with tin-horn gamblers. It would be much better to go to the larger town on the Missouri, where better hotel accommodation and other conveniences could be had. So I bought a ticket to Johnstown, where I arrived late in the afternoon of the same day. There was a large crowd, which soon found its way to the main street, where numerous booths and offices were set up, with a notary in each to accept applications for the drawing. This consisted of taking oath that one was a citizen of the United States, twenty-one years of

of age or over. The head of a family, a widow, or any woman upon whom fell the support of a family, was also accepted. No person, however, owning over one hundred and sixty acres of land, or who had ever had a homestead before, could apply. The application was then enclosed in an envelope and directed to the Superintendent of the opening.

After all the applications had been taken, they were thoroughly mixed and shuffled together. Then a blindfolded child was directed to draw one from the pile, which became number one in the opening. The lucky person whose oath was contained in such envelope was given the choice of all the land thrown open for settlement. Then another envelope was drawn and that person was given the second choice, and so on until they were all drawn.

This system was an out and out lottery, but gave each and every applicant an equal chance to draw a claim, but guaranteed none. Years before, land openings were conducted in a different manner. The applicants were held back of a line until a signal was given and then a general rush was made for the locations and settlement rights on the land. This worked fairly well at first but there grew to be more applicants than land, and two or more persons often located on the same piece of land and this brought about expensive litigation and annoying disputes and sometimes even murder, over the settlement. This was finally abolished in favor of the lottery system, which was at least safer and more profitable to the railroads that were fortunate enough to have a line to one or more of the registration points.





At Johnstown, people from every part of the United States, of all ages and descriptions, gathered in crowded masses, the greater part of them being from Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, North Dakota, Kansas and Nebraska. When I started for the registration I was under the impression that only a few people would register, probably four or five thousand, and as there were twenty-four hundred homesteads I had no other thought than I would draw and later file on a quarter section. Imagine my consternation when at the end of the first day the registration numbered ten thousand. A colored farmer in Kansas had asked me to keep him posted in regard to the opening. He also thought of coming up and registering when he had completed his harvest. When the throngs of people began pouring in from the three railroads into Johnstown (and there were two other points of registration besides) I saw my chances of drawing a claim dwindling, from one to two, to one to ten, fifteen and twenty and maybe more. After three days in Johnstown I wrote my friend and told him I believed there would be fully thirty thousand people apply for the twenty-four hundred claims. The fifth day I wrote there would be fifty thousand. After a week I wrote there would be seventy-five thousand register, that it was useless to expect to draw and I was leaving for Kansas to visit my parents. When the registration was over I read in a Kansas City paper that one hundred and seven thousand persons had registered, making the chance of drawing one to forty-four.

Received a card soon after from the Superinten-

dent of the opening, which read that my number was 4504, and as the number of claims was approximately twenty-four hundred, my number was too high to be reached before the land should all be taken. I think it was the same day I lost fifty-five dollars out of my pocket. This, combined with my disappointment in not drawing a piece of land, gave me a grouch and I lit out for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis with the intention of again getting into the P——n service for a time.

Ofttimes porters who had been discharged went to another city, changed their names, furnished a different set of references and got back to work for the same company. Now if they happened to be on a car that took them into the district from which they were discharged, and before the same officials, who of course recognized them, they were promptly reported and again discharged. I pondered over the situation and came to the conclusion that I would not attempt such deception, but avoid being sent back to the Chicago Western District. I was at a greater disadvantage than Johnson, Smith, Jackson, or a number of other common names, by having the odd French name that had always to be spelled slowly to a conductor, or any one else who had occasion to know me. Out of curiosity I had once looked in a Chicago Directory. Of some two million names there were just two others with the same name. But on the other hand it was much easier to avoid the Chicago Western District, or at least Mr. Miltzow's office and by keeping my own name, assume that I had never been



discharged, than it was to go into a half a dozen other districts with a new name and avoid being recognized. Arriving at this decision, I approached the St. Louis office, presented my references which had been furnished by other M—pla business men, and was accepted. After I had been sent out with a porter, who had been running three months, to show me how to run a car, I was immediately put to work. I learned in two trips, according to the report my tutor handed to the chief clerk, and by chance fell into one of the best runs to New York on one of the limited trains during the fair. There was not much knocking down on this run, but the tips, including the salary were good for three hundred dollars per month. I ran on this from September first to October fourth and saved three hundred dollars. I had not given up getting a Dakota Homestead, for while I was there during the summer I learned if I did not draw a number I could buy a relinquishment.

This relates to the purchasing of a relinquishment:


An entryman has the right at any time to relinquish back to the United States all his right, title, and interest to and in the land covered by his filing. The land is then open to entry.

A claimholder who has filed on a quarter of land will have plenty of opportunity to relinquish his claim, for a cash consideration, so that another party may get a filing on it. This is called buying or selling a relinquishment. The amount of the consideration varies with quality of the land, and the eagerness of the buyer or seller, as the case may be.

Relinquishments are the largest stock in trade of all the real estate dealers, in a new country. Besides, everybody from the bank president down to the humble dish washer in the hotel, or the chere boy in the livery, the ministers not omitted, would, with guarded secrecy, confide in you of some choice relinquishment that could be had at a very low figure compared with what it was really worth.

## CHAPTER VII

## ORISTOWN, THE "LITTLE CROW" RESERVATION

HEN I left St. Louis on the night of October fourth I headed for Oristown to buy someone's relinquishment. I had two thousand, five hundred dollars. From Omaha the journey was made on the C. & R. W.'s one train a day that during these times was loaded from end to end, with everybody discussing the Little Crow and the buying of relinquishments. I was the only negro on the train and an object of many inquiries as to where I was going. Some of those whom I told that I was going to buy a relinquishment seemingly regarded it as a joke, judging from the meaning glances cast at those nearest them.

An incident occurred when I arrived at Oristown which is yet considered a good joke on a real estate man then located there, by the name of Keeler, who was also the United States Commissioner. He could not only sell me a relinquishment, but could also take my filing. I had a talk with Keeler, but as he did not encourage me in my plan to make a purchase I went to another firm, a young lawyer and a fellow by the name of Slater, who ran a livery barn, around the corner. Watkins, the lawyer, impressed me as having more ambition than practical business qualities. However, Slater took the matter up and agreed to take me over the reservation and show me some good claims. If I bought, the drive was gratis, if not four dollars per day, and I accepted his proposition.

After we had driven a few miles he told me Keeler had said to him that he was a fool to waste his time hauling a d— nigger around over the reservation; that I didn't have any money and was just "stalling." I flushed angrily, and said "Show me what I want and I will produce the money. What I want is something near the west end of the county. You say the relinquishments are cheaper there and the soil is richer. I don't want big hills or rocks nor anything I can't farm, but I want a nice level or gently rolling quarter section of prairie near some town to be, that has prospects of getting the railroad when it is extended west from Oristown." By this time we had covered the three miles between Oristown and the reservation line, and had entered the newly opened section which stretched for thirty miles to the west. As we drove on I became attracted by the long grass, now dead, which was of a brownish hue and as I gazed over the miles of it lying like a mighty carpet I could seem to feel the magnitude of the development and industry that would some day replace this state of wildness. To the Northeast the Missouri River wound its way, into which empties the Whetstone Creek, the breaks of which resembled miniature mountains, falling abruptly, then rising to a point where the dark shale sides glistened in the sunlight. It was my longest drive in a buggy. We could go for perhaps three or four miles on a table-like plateau, then drop suddenly into small canyon-like ditches and rise abruptly to the other side. After driving about fifteen miles we came to the town, as they called it, but I would have said village of Hedrick

—a collection of frame shacks with one or two houses, many roughly constructed sod buildings, the long brown grass hanging from between the sod, giving it a frizzled appearance. Here we listened to a few boosters and mountebanks whose rustic eloquence was no doubt intended to give the unwary the impression that they were on the site of the coming metropolis of the west. A county-seat battle was to be fought the next month and the few citizens of the sixty days declared they would wrest it from Fairview, the present county seat situated in the extreme east end of the county, if it cost them a million dollars, or one-half of all they were worth. They boasted of Hedrick's prospects, sweeping their arms around in eloquent gestures in alluding to the territory tributary to the town, as though half the universe were Hedrick territory.

Nine miles northwest, where the land was very sandy and full of pits, into which the buggy wheels dropped with a grinding sound, and where magnesia rock cropped out of the soil, was another budding town by the name of Kirk. The few prospective citizens of this burg were not so enthusiastic as those in Hedrick and when I asked one why they located the town in such a sandy country he opened up with a snort about some pinheaded engineer for the "gvrment" who didn't know enough to jump straight up "a locating the town in such an all-fired sandy place"; but he concluded with a compliment, that plenty of good water could be found at from fifteen to fifty feet.

This sandy land continued some three miles west and we often found springs along the streams.

After ascending an unusually steep hill, we came upon a plateau where the grass, the soil, and the lay of the land, were entirely different from any we had as yet seen. I was struck by the beauty of the scenery and it seemed to charm and bring me out of the spirit of depression the sandy stretch brought upon me. Stretching for miles to the northwest and to the south, the land would rise in a gentle slope to a hog back, and as gently slope away to a draw, which drained to the south. Here the small streams emptied into a larger one, winding along like a snake's track, and thickly wooded with a growth of small hardwood timber. It was beautiful. From each side the land rose gently like huge wings, and spread away as far as the eye could reach. The driver brought me back to earth, after a mile of such fascinating observations, and pointing to the north, said: "There lays one of the claims." I was carried away by the first sight of it. The land appeared to slope from a point, or table, and to the north of that was a small draw, with water. We rode along the south side and on coming upon a slight raise, which he informed me was the highest part of the place, we found a square white stone set equally distant from four small holes, four or five feet apart. On one side of the stone was inscribed a row of letters which ran like this, SWC, SWQ, Sec. 29-97-72 W. 5th P. M., and on the other sides were some other letters similar to these. "What does all that mean?" I asked. He said the letters were initials describing the land and reading from the side next to the place we had come to see it, read: "The southwest corner of the south-

west quarter of section twenty-nine, township ninety-seven, and range seventy-two, west of the fifth principal meridian."

When we got back to Oristown I concluded I wanted the place and dreamed of it that night. It had been drawn by a girl who lived with her parents across the Missouri. To see her, we had to drive to their home, and here a disagreement arose, which for a time threatened to cause a split. I had been so enthusiastic over the place, that Slater figured on a handsome commission, but I had been making inquiries in Oristown, and found I could buy relinquishments much cheaper than I had anticipated. I had expected the price to be about one thousand, eight hundred dollars and came prepared to pay that much, but was advised to pay not over five hundred dollars for land as far west as the town of Megroy, which was only four miles northwest of the place I was now dickering to buy. We had agreed to give the girl three hundred and seventy-five dollars, and I had partly agreed to give Slater two hundred dollars commission. However, I decided this was too much, and told him I would give him only seventy-five dollars. He was in for going right back to Oristown and calling the deal off, but when he figured up that two and a half day's driving would amount to only ten dollars, he offered to take one hundred dollars. But I was obstinate and held out for seventy-five dollars, finally giving him eighty dollars, and in due time became the proud owner of a Little Crow homestead.

All this time I had been writing to Jessie. I had written first while I was in Eaton, and she had

answered in the same demure manner in which she had received me at our first meeting, and had continued answering the letters I had written from all parts of the continent, in much the same way. For a time I had quit writing, for I felt that she was really too young and not taking me seriously enough, but after a month, my sister wrote me, asking why I did not write to Jessie; that she asked about me every day. This inspired me with a new interest and I began writing again.

I wrote her in glowing terms all about my advent in Dakota, and as she was of a reserved disposition, I always asked her opinion as to whether she thought it a sensible move. I wanted to hear her say something more than: "I was at a cantata last evening and had a nice time", and so on. Furthermore, I was skeptical. I knew that a great many colored people considered farming a deprivation of all things essential to a good time. In fact, to have a good time, was the first thing to be considered, and everything else was secondary. Jessie, however, was not of this kind. She wrote me a letter that surprised me, stating, among other things, that she was seventeen and in her senior year high school. That she thought I was grand and noble, as well as practical, and was sorry she couldn't find words to tell me all she felt, but that which satisfied me suited her also. I was delighted with her answer and wrote a cheerful letter in return, saying I would come to see her, Christmas.



## CHAPTER VIII

## FAR DOWN THE PACIFIC—THE PROPOSAL.

**A**FTER the presidential election of that year I went to South America with a special party, consisting mostly of New York capitalists and millionaires. We traveled through the southwest, crossing the Rio Grand at Eagle Pass, and on south by the way of Torreon, Zacatecas, Aguas Calientes, Guadalupe, Puebla, Tehuantepec and to the southwest coast, sailing from Salina Cruz down the Pacific to Valparaiso, Chile, going inland to Santiago, thence over the Trans-Andean railway across the Andes, and onward to the western plateau of Argentina.

Arriving at the new city of Mendoza, we visited the ruins of the ancient city of the same name. Here, in the early part of the fifteenth century, on a Sunday morning, when a large part of the people were at church, an earthquake shook the city. When it passed, it left bitter ruin in its wake, the only part that stood intact being one wall of the church. Of a population of thirteen thousand, only sixteen hundred persons escaped alive. The city was rebuilt later, and at the time we were there it was a beautiful place of about twenty-five thousand population. At this place a report of bubonic plague, in Brazil, reached us. The party became frightened and beat it in post haste back to Valparaiso, setting sail immediately for Salina Cruz, and spent the time that was scheduled for a tour of Argentina, in snooping around the land of the

Montezumas. This is the American center of Catholic Churches; the home of many gaudy Spanish women and begging peons; where the people, the laws, and the customs, are two hundred years behind those of the United States. Still, I thought Mexico very beautiful, as well as of historical interest.

One day we journeyed far into the highlands, where lay the ancient Mexican city of Cuernavaca, the one time summer home of America's only Emperor, Maximilian. From there we went to Puebla, where we saw the old Cathedral which was begun in 1518, and which at that time was said to be the second largest in the world. We saw San Luis Potosi, and Monterey, and returned by the way of Loredo, Texas. I became well enough acquainted with the liberal millionaires and so useful in serving their families that I made five hundred and seventy-five dollars on the trip, besides bringing back so many gifts and curiosities of all kinds that I had enough to divide up with a good many of my friends.

Flushed with prosperity and success in my undertakings since leaving Southern Illinois less than three years before, I went to M—boro to see my sister and to see whether Miss Rocks had grown any. I was received as a personage of much importance among the colored people of the town, who were about the same kind that lived in M—ph; not very progressive, excepting with their tongues when it came to curiosity and gossip. I arrived in the evening too late to call on Miss Rocks and having become quite anxious to see her again, the night dragged slowly away, and I thought the con-

ventional afternoon would never come again. Her father, who was an important figure among the colored people, was a mail carrier and brought the mail to the house that morning where I stopped. He looked me over searchingly, and I tried to appear unaffected by his scrutinizing glances.

By and by two o'clock finally arrived, and with my sister I went to make my first call in three years. I had grown quite tall and ragged, and I was anxious to see how she looked. We were received by her mother who said: "Jessie saw you coming and will be out shortly." After a while she entered and how she had changed. She, too, had grown much taller and was a little stooped in the shoulders. She was neatly dressed and wore her hair done up in a small knot, in keeping with the style of that time. She came straight to me, extended her hand and seemed delighted to see me after the years of separation.

After awhile her mother and my sister accommodatingly found an excuse to go up town, and a few minutes later with her on the settee beside me, I was telling of my big plans and the air castles I was building on the great plains of the west. Finally, drawing her hand into mine and finding that she offered no resistance, I put my arm around her waist, drew her close and declared I loved her. Then I caught myself and dared not go farther with so serious a subject when I recalled the wild, rough, and lonely place out on the plains that I had selected as a home, and finally asked that we defer anything further until the claim on the Little Crow should develop into something more like an Illinois home.

"O, we don't know what will happen before that time" she spoke for the first time, with a blush as I squeezed her hand.

"But nothing can happen," I defended, nonplused, "can there?"

"Well, no," she answered hesitatingly, leaning away.

"Then we will, won't we?" I urged.

"Well, yes", she answered, looking down and appearing a trifle doubtful. I admired her the more. Love is something I had longed for more than anything else, but my ambition to overcome the vagaries of my race by accomplishing something worthy of note, hadn't given me much time to seek love.

I went to my old occupation of the road for awhile and spent most of the winter on a run to Florida, where the tipping was as good as it had been on the run from St. Louis to New York. However, about a month before I quit I was assigned to a run to Boston. By this time I had seen nearly all the important cities in the United States and of them all none interested me so much as Boston.

What always appeared odd to me, however, was the fact that the passenger yards were right at the door of the fashionable Back Bay district on Huntington Avenue, near the Hotel Nottingham, not three blocks from where the intersection of Huntington Avenue and Boylton Street form an acute angle in which stands the Public Library, and in the opposite angle stands Trinity Church, so thickly purpled with aristocracy and the memory big with the tradition of Philip Brocke, the last of that group of mighty American pulpit orators, of whom I had

read so much. A little farther on stands the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The mornings I spent wandering around the city, visiting Faneuil Hall, the old State House, Boston commons, Bunker Hill, and a thousand other reminders of the early heroism, rugged courage, and far seeing greatness of Boston's early citizens. Afternoons generally found me on Tremont or Washington Street attending a matinee or hearing music. There once I heard Caruso, Melba, and two or three other grand opera stars in the popular Rigoletto Quartette, and another time I witnessed "Siberia" and the gorgeous and blood-curdling reproduction of the Kishneff Massacre, with two hundred people on the stage. On my last trip to Boston I saw Chauncy Olcott in "Terrence the Coach Boy", a romance of old Ireland with the scene laid in Valley Bay, which seemed to correspond to the Back Bay a few blocks away.

Dear old Boston, when will I see you again, was my thought as the train pulled out through the most fashionable part of America, so stately and so grand. Even now I recall the last trip with a sigh. If the Little Crow, with Oristown as its gateway, was a land of hope; through Massachusetts; Worcester, with the Polytechnic Institute arising in the back ground; Springfield, and Smith School for girls, Pittsfield, Brookfield, and on to Albany on the Hudson, is a memory never to be forgotten, which evolved in my mind many long years afterward, in my shack on the homestead.

## CHAPTER IX

THE RETURN—ERNEST NICHOLSON

**I** LEFT St. Louis about April first with about three thousand dollars in the bank and started again for Cristown, this time to stay. I had just paid Jessie a visit and I felt a little lonely. With the grim reality of the situation facing me, I now began to steel my nerves for a lot of new experience which soon came thick and fast.

Slater met the train at Cristown, and as soon as he spied me he informed me that I was a lucky man. That a town had been started adjoining my land and was being promoted by his brother and the sons of a former Iowa Governor, and gave every promise of making a good town, also, if I cared to sell, he had a buyer who was willing to pay me a neat advance over what I had paid. However, I had no idea of parting with the land, but I was delighted over the news, and the next morning found me among Dad Durpee's through stage coach passengers, for Callas, the new town joining my homestead, via Hedrick and Kirk. As we passed through Hedrick I noticed that several frame shacks had been put up and some better buildings were under way. The ground had been frozen for five months, so sod-house building had been temporarily abandoned.

It was a long ride, but I was beside myself with enthusiasm. Callas finally loomed up, conspicuously perched on a hill, and could be seen long before

the stage arrived, and was the scene of much activity. It had been reported that a colored man had a claim adjoining the town on the north, so when I stepped from the stage before the postoffice, the many knowing glances informed me that I was being looked for. A fellow who had a claim near and whom I met in Oristown, introduced me to the Postmaster whose name was Billinger, an individual with dry complexion and thin, light hair. Then to the president of the Townsite Company, second of three sons of the Iowa Governor.

My long experience with all classes of humanity had made me somewhat of a student of human nature, and I could see at a glance that here was a person of unusual aggressiveness and great capacity for doing things. As he looked at me his eyes seemed to bore clear through, and as he asked a few questions his searching look would make a person tell the truth whether he would or no. This was Ernest Nicholson, and in the following years he had much to do with the development of the Little Crow.

## CHAPTER X

## THE OKLAHOMA GRAFT

**T**HAT evening at the hotel he asked me whether I wished to double my money by selling my relinquishment. "No," I answered, "but I tell you what I do want to do," I replied firmly. "I am not here to sell; I am here to make good or die trying; I am here to grow up with this country and prosper with the growth, if possible. I have a little coin back in old "Chi." (my money was still in the Chicago bank) "and when these people begin to commute and want to sell, I am ready to buy another place." I admired the fellow. He reminded me of "the richest man in the world" in "The Lion and the Mouse," Otis Skinner as Colonel Philippé Bridau, an officer on the staff of Napoleon's Army in "The Honor of the Family", and other characters in plays that I greatly admired, where great courage, strength of character, and firm decision were displayed. He seemed to have a commanding way that one found himself feeling honored and willing to obey.

But getting back to the homestead. I looked over my claim and found it just as I had left it the fall before, excepting that a prairie fire during the winter had burned the grass. The next morning I returned to Oristown and announced my intentions of buying a team. The same day I drew a draft for five hundred dollars with which to start.

Now if there is anywhere an inexperienced man is sure to go wrong in starting up on a homestead, it is



in buying horses. Most prospective homesteaders make the same mistake I did in buying horses, unless they are experienced. The inefficient man reasons thus: "Well, I will start off economically by buying a cheap team"—and he usually gets what he thought he wanted, "a cheap team."

If I had gone into the country and bought a team of young mares for say three hundred dollars, which would have been a very high price at that time, I would have them yet, and the increase would have kept me fairly well supplied with young horses, instead of scouting around town looking for something cheaper, in the "skate" line, as I did. I looked at so many teams around Oristown that all of them began to look alike. I am sure I must have looked at five hundred different horses, more in an effort to appear as a conservative buyer than to buy the best team. Finally I ran onto an "Oklahoma" grafter by the name of Numemaker.

He was a deceiving and unscrupulous rascal, but nevertheless possessed a pleasing personality, which stood him in good in his schemes of deception, and we became quite chummy. He professed to know all about horses—no doubt he did, but he didn't put his knowledge at my disposal in the way I thought he should, being a friend, as he claimed. He finally persuaded me to buy a team of big plugs, one of which was so awkward he looked as though he would fall down if he tried to trot. The other was a powerful four-year-old gelding, that would have never been for sale around Oristown if it hadn't been that he had two feet badly wire cut. One was so very large that it must have been quite

burdensome for the horse to pick it up, swing it forward and put it down, as I look back and see him now in my mind.

When I was paying the man for them I wondered why Nunemaker led him into the private office of the bank, but I was not left long in doubt. When I crossed the street one of the men who had tried to sell me a team jumped me with: "Well, they got you, did they?" his voice mingled with sarcasm and a sneer.

"Got who?" I returned questionly.

"Does a man have to knock you down to take a hint?" he went on in a tone of disappointment and anger. "Don't you know that man Nunemaker is the biggest grafter in Cristown? I would have sold you that team of mine for twenty-five dollars less'n I offered 'em, if the god-darn grafter hadn't of come to me'n said, 'give me twenty-five dollars and I will see that the coon buys the team.' I would have knocked him down with a club if I'd had one, the low life bum." He finished with a sneer and off he went.

"Stung, by cracky," was all I could say, and feeling rather blue I went to the barn where the team was, stroked them and hoped for the best.

I then bought lumber to build a small house and barn, an old wagon for twenty dollars, one wheel of which the blacksmith had forgotten to grease, worked hard all day getting loaded, and wearied, sick and discouraged, I started at five o'clock P. M. to drive the thirty miles to Calma. When I was out two miles the big old horse was wobbling along like a broken-legged cow, hobbling, stumbling, and

making such a burdensome job of walking, that I felt like doing something desperate. When I locked back the wheel that had not been greased was smoking like a hot box on the Twentieth Century Limited.

The sun was nearly down and a cold east wind was whooping it up at about sixty miles an hour, chilling me to the marrow. The fact that I was a stranger in a strange land, inhabited wholly by people not my own race, did not tend to cheer my gloomy spirits. I decided it might be all right in July but never in April. I pulled my wagon to the side of the road, got down and unhitched and jumped on the young horse, and such a commotion as he did make. I am quite sure he would have backed me off, had it not for his big feet being so heavy, he couldn't raise it quick enough to leap. Evidently he had never been ridden. When I got back to Oristown and put the team in the barn and warmed up, I resolved to do one thing and do it that night. I would sell the old horse, and I did, for twenty-two-fifty. I considered myself lucky, too. I had paid one hundred and ninety dollars for the team and harness the day before.

I sat down and wrote Jessie a long letter, telling her of my troubles and that I was awfully, awfully, lonesome. There was only one other colored person in the town, a barber who was married to a white woman, and I didn't like him.

The next day I hired a horse, started early and arrived at Callas in good time. At Hedrick I hired a sod mason, who was also a carpenter, at three dollars a day and we soon put up a frame barn

large enough for three horses; a sod house sixteen by fourteen with a hip roof made of two by fours for rafters, and plain boards with tar paper and sod with the grass turned downward and laid side by side, the cracks being filled with sand. The house had two small windows and one door, that was a little short on account of my getting tired carrying sod. I ordered the "contractor" to put the roof on as soon as I felt it was high enough to be comfortable inside.

The fifth day I moved in. There was no floor, but the thick, short buffalo grass made a neat carpet. In one corner I put the bed, while in another I set the table, the one next the door I placed the stove, a little two-hole burner gasoline, and in the other corner I made a bin for the horses grain.

## CHAPTER XI

## DEALIN' IN MULES

**I**T must have been about the twentieth of April when I finished building. I started to "hatch" and prepared to break out my claim. Having only one horse, it became necessary to buy another team. I decided to buy mules this time. I remembered that back on our farm in southern Illinois, mules were thought to be capable of doing more work than horses and eat less grain. So when some boys living west of me came one Sunday afternoon, and said they could sell me a team of mules, I agreed to go and see them the next day. I thought I was getting wise. As proof of such wisdom I determined to view the mules in the field. I followed them around the field a few times and although they were not fine looking, they seemed to work very well. Another great advantage was, they were cheap, only one hundred and thirty-five dollars for the team and a fourteen-inch-rod breaking plow. This looked to me like a bargain. I wrote him a check and took the mules home with me. Jack and Jenny were their names, and I hadn't owned Jack two days before I began to hate him. He was lazy, and when he went down hill, instead of holding his head up and stepping his front feet out, he would lower the beam and perform a sort of crow-hop. It was too exasperating for words and I used to strike him viciously for it, but that didn't seem to help matters any.

I shall not soon forget my first effort to break prairie. There are different kinds of plows made for breaking the sod. Some kind that are good for one kind of soil cannot be used in another. In the gummy soils of the Dakotas, a long slant cut is the best. In fact, about the only kind that can be used successfully, while in the more sandy lands found in parts of Kansas and Nebraska, a kind is used which is called the square cut. The share being almost at right angles with the beam instead of slanting back from point to heel. Now in sandy soils this pulls much easier for the grit scours off any roots, grass, or whatever else would hang over the share. To attempt to use this kind in wet, sticky land, such as was on my claim, would find the soil adhering to the plow share, causing it to drag, gather roots and grass, until it is impossible to keep the plow in the ground. When it is dry, this kind of plow can be used with success in the gummy land; but it was not dry when I invaded my homestead soil with my big horse, Jenny and Jack, that first day of May, but very wet indeed.

To make matters worse, Doc, the big horse, believed in "speeding." Jenny was fair but Jack, on the landside, was affected with "hook-worm hustle," and believed in taking his time. I tried to help him along with a yell that grew louder as I hopped, skipped, and jumped across the prairie, and that plow began hitting and missing, mostly missing. It would gouge into the soil up to the beam, and the big horse would get down and make a mighty pull; while old Jack would swing back like the heavy end of a ball bat when a player

draws to strike, and out would come the plow with a skip, skip, skip; the big horse nearly trotting and dragging the two little mules, that looked like two goats beside an elephant. Well, I sat down and gave up to a fit of the blues; for it looked bad, mighty bad for me.

I had left St. Louis with two hundred dollars in cash, and had drawn a draft for five hundred dollars more on the Chicago bank, where my money was on deposit, and what did I have for it? One big horse, tall as a giraffe; two little mules, one of which was a torment to me; a sod house; and old wagon. As I faced the situation there seemed nothing to do but to fight it out, and I turned wearily to another attempt, this time with more success. Before I had started breaking I had invited criticism. Now I was getting it on all sides. I was the only colored homesteader on the reservation, and as an agriculturist it began to look mighty bad for the colored race on the Little Crow.

Finally, with the assistance of dry weather, I got the plow so I could go two or three rods without stopping, throw it out of the ground and clear the share of roots and grass. Sometimes I managed to go farther, but never over forty rods, the entire summer.

I took another course in horse trading or mule trading, which almost came to be my undoing. I determined to get rid of Jack. I decided that I would not be aggravated with his laziness and crow-hopping any longer than it took me to find a trade. So on a Sunday, about two weeks after I bought the team, a horse trader pulled into Calias, drew

his prairie schooner to a level spot, hobbled his horses—mostly old plugs of diverse descriptions, and made preparation to stay awhile. He had only one animal, according to my horse-sense (?), that was any good, and that was a mule that he kept blanketed. His camp was so situated that I could watch the mule, from my east window, and the more I looked at the mule, the better he looked to me. It was Wednesday noon the following week and old Jack had become almost unbearable. My continuing to watch a good mule do nothing, while I continued to fret my life away trying to be patient with a lazy brute, only added to my restlessness and eagerness to trade. At noon I entered the barn and told old Jack I would get rid of him. I would swap him to that horse trader for his good mule as soon as I watered him. He was looking pretty thin and I thought it would be to my advantage to fill him up.

During the three days the trader camped near my house he never approached me with an offer to sell or trade, and it was with many misgivings that I called out in a loud, heavy voice and David Harum manner; "Hello, Governor, how will you trade mules?" "How'll I trade mules? did you say how'll I trade mules? Huh, do you suppose I want your old mule?" drawing up one side of his face and twisting his big red nose until he resembled a German clown.

"O, my mule's fair", I defended weakly.

"Nothing but an old dead mule," he spit out, grabbing old Jack's tail and giving him a yank that all but pulled him over. "Look at him, look at him,"



he rattled away like an auctioneer. "Go on, Mr. Colored Man, you can't work me that way." He continued stepping around old Jack, making pretensions to hit him on the head. Jack may have been slow in the field, but he was swift in dodging, and he didn't look where he dodged either. I was standing at his side holding the reins, when the fellow made one of his wild motions, and Jack nearly knocked my head off as he dodged. "Now sir, if I considered a trade, that is if I considered a trade at all, I would have to have a lot of boot," he said with an important air.

"How much?" I asked nervously.

"Well, sir", he spoke with slow decision; "I would have to have twenty-five dollars."

"What!" I exclaimed, at which he seemed to weaken; but he didn't understand that my exclamation was of surprise that he only wanted twenty-five dollars, when I had expected to give him seventy-five dollars. I grasped the situation, however, and leaning forward, said hardly above a whisper, my heart was so near my throat: "I will give you twenty," as I pulled out my roll and held a twenty before his eyes, which he took as though afraid I would jerk it away; muttering something about it not being enough, and that he had ought to have had twenty-five. However, he got old Jack and the twenty, gathered his plugs and left town immediately. I felt rather proud of my new possession, but before I got through the field that afternoon I became suspicious. Although I looked my new mule over and over often during the afternoon while plowing, I could find nothing wrong. Still I had

a chilly premonition, fostered, no doubt, by past experience, that something would show up soon, and in a few days it did show up. I learned afterward the trader had come thirty-five miles to trade me that mule.

The mule I had traded was only lazy, while the one I had received in the trade was not only lazy, but "ornery" and full of tricks that she took a fiendish delight in exercising on me. One of her favorites was to watch me out of her left eye, shirking the while, and crowding the furrow at the same time, which would pull the plow out of the ground. I tried to coax and cajole her into doing a decent mule's work, but it availed me nothing. I bore up under the aggravation with patience and fortitude, then determined to subdue the mule or become subdued myself. I would lunge forward with my whip, and away she would rush out from under it, brush the other horse and mule out of their places and throw things into general confusion. Then as soon as I was again straightened out, she would be back at her old tricks, and I am almost positive that she used to wink at me impudently from her vantage point. Added to this, the coloring matter with which the trader doped her head, faded, and she turned grey headed in two weeks, leaving me with a mule of uncertain and doubtful age, instead of one of seven going on eight as the trader represented her to be.

I soon had the enviable reputation of being a horse trader. Whenever anybody with horses to trade came to town, they were advised to go over to the sod house north of town and see the colored man.

He was fond of trading horses, yes, he fairly doted on it. Nevertheless with all my poor "horse-judgment" I continued to turn the sod over day after day and completed ten or twelve acres each week.

## CHAPTER XII

## THE HOMESTEADERS

**O**F neighbors, I had many. There was Miss Carter from old Missouri whose claim joined mine on the west, and another Missourian to the north of her; a loud talking German north of him, and an English preacher to the east of the German. A travelling man's family lived north of me; and a big, fat, lazy barber who seemed to be taking the "rest cure," joined me on the east. His name was Starks and he had drawn number 252. He had a nice, level claim with only a few buffalo wallows to detract from its value, and he held the distinction of being the most uncompromisingly lazy man on the Little Crow. This, coupled with the unpardonable fault of complaining about everything, made him nigh unbearable and he was known as the "Beefor." He came from a small town, usually the home of his ilk, in Iowa, where he had a small shop and owned three and a half acres of garden and orchard ground on the outskirts of the town. He would take a fiendish delight in relating and re-relating how the folks in his house back in Iowa were having strawberries, new peas, green beans, spring onions, and enjoying all the fruits of a tropical climate, while he was holding down an "infernal no-account claim" on the Little Crow, and eating out of a can.

A merchant was holding down a claim south of him, and a baker lived south of the merchant. Thus it was a varied class of homesteaders around

Calias and Megory, the first summer on the Little Crow. Only about one in every eight or ten was a farmer. They were of all vocations in life and all nationalities, excepting negroes, and I controlled the colored vote.

This was one place where being a colored man was an honorary distinction. I remember how I once requested the stage driver to bring me some meat from Megory, there being no meat shop in Calias, and it was to be left at the post office. Apparently I had failed to give the stage driver my name, for when I called for it, it was handed out to me, done up in a neat package, and addressed "Colored Man, Calias." My neighbors soon learned, however, that my given name was "Oscar," but it was some time before they could all spell or pronounce the odd surname.

During the month of June it rained twenty-three days, but I was so determined to break out one hundred and twenty acres, that after a few days of the rainy weather I went out and worked in the rain. Starks used to go up town about four o'clock for the mail, wearing a long, yellow slicker, and when he saw me going around the half-mile land he remarked to the bystanders: "Just look at that fool nigger a working in the rain."

Being the first year of settlement in a new country, there naturally was no hay to buy, so the settlers turned their stock out to graze, and many valuable horses strayed away and were lost. When it rained so much and the weather turned so warm, the mosquitoes filled the air and covered the earth and attacked everything in their path. When I turned

my horses out after the day's work was done, they soon found their way to town, where they stood in the shelter of some buildings and fought mosquitoes. Their favorite place for this pastime was the post office, where Billinger had a shed swung over the board walk, the framework consisting of two-by-fours joined together and nailed lightly to the building, and on top of this he had laid a few rough boards. Under this crude shelter the homesteaders found relief from the broiling afternoon sun, and swapped news concerning the latest offer for their claims. The mosquitoes did not bother so much in even so slight an inclosure as this, so every night Jenny Mule would walk on to the board walk, prick up her ears and look in at the window. About this time the big horse would come along and begin to scratch his neck on one of the two-by-fours, and suddenly down would go Billinger's portable swing with a loud crash which was augmented by Jenny Mule getting out from under the falling boards. As the sound echoed through the slumbering village the big horse would rush away to the middle of the street, with a prolonged snort, and wonder what it was all about. This was the story Billinger told when I came around the next morning to drive them home from the storekeeper's cat bin where they had indulged in a midnight lunch. The performance was repeated nightly and got brother Billinger out of bed at all hours. He swore by all the Gods of Buddha and the people of South Dakota, that he would put the beasts up and charge me a dollar to get them.

Early one morning I came over and found that Billinger had remained true to his oath, and the

horse and mule were tied to a wagon belonging to the storekeeper. Nearby on a pile of rock sat Billinger, nodding away, sound asleep. I quietly untied the rope from the wagon and peaceably led them home. Then Billinger was in a rage. He had a small, screechy tremulo voice and it fairly sputtered as he tiraded: "If it don't beat all; I never saw the like. I was up all last night chasing those darned horses, caught them and tied them up; and along comes Devereaux while I am asleep and takes horses, rope and all." The crowd roared and Billinger decided the joke was on him.

Miss Carter, my neighbor on the west, had her trouble too. One day she came by, distressed and almost on the verge of tears, and burst out: "Oh, Oh, Oh, I hardly know what to do."

I could never bear seeing any one in such distress and I became touched by her grief. Upon becoming more calm, she told me: "The banker says that the man who is breaking prairie on my claim is ruining the ground." She was simply heart-broken about it, and off she went into another spasm of distress. I saw the fellow wasn't laying the sod over smoothly because he had a sixteen-inch plow, and had it set to cut only about eight inches, which caused the sod to push away and pile up on edges, instead of turning and dropping into the furrow. I went with her and explained to the fellow where the fault lay. The next day he was doing a much better job.

Those who have always lived in the older settled parts of the country sometimes have exaggerated ideas of life on the homestead, and the following

incident offers a partial explanation. Megory and Callas each had a newspaper, and when they weren't roasting each other and claiming their paper to be the only live and progressive organ in the country, they were "building" railroads or printing romantic tales about the brave homesteader girls. A little red-headed girl nicknamed "Jack" owned a claim near Callas. One day it was reported that she killed a rattlesnake in her house. The report of the great encounter reached eastern dailies, and was published as a Sunday feature story in one of the leading Omaha papers. It was accompanied by gorgeous pictures of the girl in a leather skirt, riding boots, and cow-boy hat, entering a sod house, and before her, coiled and poised to strike, lay a monster rattlesnake. Turning on her heel and jerking the bridle from her horse's head, she made a terrific swing at Mr. Rattlesnake, and he, of course, "met his Waterloo." This, so the story read, was the eightieth rattlesnake she had killed. She was described as "rattlesnake Jack" and thereafter went by that name. She was also credited with having spent the previous winter alone on her claim and rather enjoyed the wintry nights and snow blockade. Now as a matter of fact, she had spent most of the previous winter enjoying the comforts of a front room at the Hotel Callas, going to the claim occasionally on nice days. She had no horse, and as to the eighty rattlesnakes, seventy-nine were myths, existing only in the mind of a prolific feature story writer for the Sunday edition of the great dailies. In fact she had killed one small young rattler with a button.