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Westward Ho—In Epitome!

By BASFORD VAN DOKEN

I

YOU MAY talk about Fate or you may talk about *a* fate; and either Fate or a fate overtakes human beings variously. That is, it may loom on the far horizon—dark, portentous, implacable, compelling you, its victim, to a slow and fearful approach, your face tragically fixed, your life overshadowed. Or a fate may slip up from behind you quite unobtrusively, abiding in your shadow so quietly you have in no wise suspected its arrival until some day it taps you gently on the shoulder and smiles in your face. It may not, then, be tragic at all—just a plain and more or less commonplace fate—and you acknowledge the greeting with a responding smile. Lately I have found myself so slipped up on.

The twentieth century is one-third gone. With it has disappeared a certain outlook in America. And those of us whose time-spans reach a few years back into the old century have—consciously or unconsciously—watched it die. Perhaps my own case can be made to serve as illustration, but to broaden its significance I shall have to begin with forbears.

During the second year of the administration of Andrew Jackson—1830—my maternal grandfather was born in New Jersey, from whence his family moved a few years later to Ohio. As a lad of twenty he joined the “forty-niners,” traveled across plains, mountains and deserts; dug himself some two thousand dollars worth of gold out of the placers of California, returned via the Isthmus of Panama, and by 1855 had pushed westward again into Indiana, where he married my grandmother. Her father—my great grandfather—had emigrated thither from New Hampshire. The

year 1876 found the family, of which my mother was now a member, across another boundary line to the west in Illinois.

In 1874 my father, then eighteen years old (young men in those days ventured early), left his home in Maryland, and made his way half way across the continent to the frontier state of Missouri, where a farmer brother-in-law had taken a homestead. He, too, returned home, but only briefly, for by 1881 he had gravitated to Illinois, and had married my mother. Then again, four years later, my grandfather turned his face westward. This time he set out upon a scouting expedition for himself, his son, and his son-in-law, the three having pooled interests, seeking a likely opening for the founding of a new business. This rugged old pioneer recalled from his youthful experience, thirty-five years gone, the pleasant aspect of that prairie country lying between the Missouri, at Independence, and the Platte, to the northwest, across which he had once slowly traveled with oxen teams, and he now struck into this region. Here he found the land of his heart's desire, and chose for the home of his old age a small frontier settlement in the valley of a great roll of the prairie, a sweeping bend from southeast to east.

That little county-seat town, founded about 1870, constituted a boyhood habitat, whose works could never be escaped. It bore no signs of uniqueness, yet its traditions partook modestly of the color and the adventurousness of the Great West. There was the story of the old Overland Trail but a few miles to the north; and there was the story of the old stone flour-mill squatting comfortably in the shade of tall ash trees on the bank of the Little Blue, and using its power; for many years it had been the source of bread for homesteaders a hundred miles and more to the west. There were stories of Indian forays, and, most breath-taking of all, there was the tale of how King Fisher, a pioneer of the early seventies, had been stalked and killed by Indians near "Fulton's Bridge." Some five miles below

town, his grave, enclosed in a stave-and-wire fence, lay under the tall prairie grass on a high bluff rising abruptly a hundred feet above the river. A weird loneliness always pervaded the place for me, whenever, even as a sizeable youth, after tramping through a country of well developed farm-lands down the valley to this bluff, I climbed to its eerie site. The wind perpetually whistled there a kind of melancholy *crescendo* through the rank grass, though the valley-floor lay below in utterly peaceful silence. As a small boy, I can remember occasional comings and goings of Indians with the purpose of begging or selling trinkets, but they originated on the Omaha Reservation, and were some time past the stage of offering violence. That section of the West by the early nineties was no longer Indian country, but neither had it developed into the carefully tilled farm-country of later years. Searing winds in midsummer bore down upon us out of the sand-country to the southwest, withering the growing corn in the space of a day. At other seasons three-day gales, unceasing through dark and semi-light, lifted loose dry soil from the hills and hung it about the sky to form great curtains, through which the sun at evening looked blood-red, as through the smoke of a forest fire. And other clouds appeared, cirrus-textured, floating rapidly across the zenith, menacing all crops below, and sometimes settling to earth to devour them—softly rustling storms of locusts. Those early nineties developed stoicism in some, despondency in some; either a man's fortitude succumbed and he slunk away, or he lifted his face to the challenge of Nature and stayed on.

Our main street ran from west to east for exactly the length of a mile. Its foot was a model of prairie-town prosaicism, but its upper end found release beyond a quarter-mile of boxelder-shaded road in a big prairie pasture, stretching to the east past the horizon, and always typifying for us who drove the neighborhood milk cows back and forth, the great open spaces of our environment. A stable for

cows and horses was quite as common a back-yard edifice then as a garage is now. I remember the introduction into that little town successively of city water, the telephone, the electric light and the automobile.

II

At the end of nearly a year of university graduate work there came a revulsion against the professional career upon which, up to that time, I had fully determined. It derived, I am now persuaded, from heritage. A certain spring day's walk along a residence street of that university city confronted me with an advertisement of western land. Entering a combined office and living-room, I asked the man—poor chap, he regarded me at first as a likely "prospect"—for an opportunity to demonstrate my ability as a salesman, and was referred to the downtown office. By the end of the school term I was on my way west to the mountains, west to new country!

A journey into Eastern Wyoming, with its great splashes of yellow mesa and cool blue upland, with its long threads of sparse valley green, and Laramie Peak looming in the grayness of the distant south sky, opened up a new world. The selling project comprised some ten thousand acres of land to be irrigated from a storage reservoir then under construction. Trips in a mountain-wagon to the great concrete dam, thirty miles away, with La Prele Creek roaring down the canyon below it, became part of the program scheduled for all parties of prospective buyers, because, we were careful to observe, the magnitude of the spectacle helped us to "sell," though this, by no means, completed its meaning. Here was conquest—nature at her wildest yielding her power and fertility for milleniums untouched. The word "reclamation" took on significance.

With the following winter there arrived further opportunity for exploration. A former college room-mate, who

had made a modest fortune in land in five years, persuaded me to go with him to Western Dakota. That immense region had been isolated from the country to the east during all these years because railroads had not dared undertake the expense of bridging the Missouri River. Now, with increasing settlement, they had made the venture, though the crossing, by means of a flimsy structure of piling, was subject to periodical interruption, as floods, that poured down upon it from snow-caps far to the northwest, rendered it unsafe or swept it out entirely. The Rosebud Indian Reservation had been thrown open to settlement but a short time before, and the Pine Ridge Reservation lay only fifty miles to the southwest across the White River. Celebrations at which the Redmen appeared in so-called war-dances, horse-races, and other contests were not unusual. From these the performers would return to the reservations well laden with cases of groceries, bolts of calico and divers other supplies bestowed upon them in token of appreciation for their "show." I am not sure which were the more naively-minded—the performers or the spectators.

There was happening in this country what had happened in Nebraska and in Eastern South Dakota in the eighties. Sons of homesteaders and later pioneers who had seen the fertile prairie lands of Iowa mount to values of hundreds of dollars per acre settled in this new area, persuaded that the same possibilities for transformation and the same opportunities for accumulation existed here as in the older state. Here again occasional patches of corn and wheat and oats on the expanse of the prairies gradually thickened, until today, within its climatic limitations, it has grown to resemble the country to the east and south of it.

But upon a youth enamored of mountains and altitudes and their brilliant sunshine and ragged shadows, Dakota prairies could lay only slender and temporary hold. And, besides, the crest of the tide of immigration had passed for

the time being. During that same year my attention was drawn to the region known in the Northwest as the Big Horn Basin. The lure of this new country had caught the interest, too, of my father, though now past fifty, and together we set our faces once more toward the west.

The Basin is an immense hollow, a hundred miles across and a hundred miles long, lying east of the Yellowstone National Park and almost completely mountain-locked. Because of its location, it lay off the early beaten trails along the Missouri to the North and along the Platte and the Sweetwater to the south, but it was familiar ground to men like Bridger, David Jackson, Provost, and the Sublettes; Captain Bonneville made a journey down the Horn and the Big Horn just one hundred years ago; and one of the later great plainsmen, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, retired to this region to spend his last days. Its surface forms a great rough table tilting from south to north, and across it—breaking through a fifteen-mile canyon, where Owl Creeks meet Big Horns, and leaving through another canyon, forty miles long, with perpendicular walls two thousand feet high, where Big Horns face Pryors—flows the Big Horn River. Numerous tributaries, some designated as creeks and others very properly named rivers, flow rapidly down from the flanking mountains to make of this axial stream, by the time it has joined the Yellowstone, a worthy member of the trio of headwater rivers forming the mighty Missouri. There is nothing puny about this land. Rocky heights towering above the timber-line, great level distances, plunging waters—sometimes pouring limpidly over mountain boulders, sometimes in foaming flood, with grinding masses of ice threatening momentarily to pile up and deluge the surrounding country,—forests and deserts, winter's sub-zero cold and summer's burning heat all combine to issue to red-blooded manhood a persistent challenge.

The little town of G— had sprung up only two years before our arrival, when the railroad went through toward

the south. It had, when I first saw it, a half-dozen frame store-buildings, two stone buildings—three of the eight occupied by saloons—a church, a school, and a few houses sitting about in the tall sage-brush of the bottom-land, where the town-site had been located. The dust in the main street lay like yellow flour six inches deep. It was all very rough and very crude, but as I stepped outside the hotel that first night into the crystal-clear moonlight, caught the odors of black sage and wood-smoke from supper fires, and felt the utter stillness of the great spaces scarcely touched by this little cluster of men and their abodes, it was easy, also, to indulge in dreams. Here lay a town-to-be, and on the bluff yonder across the river lay a piece of ground, purchased only that day, summoning all that one might count as his personal resources. Later, one instinctively learned to care for the little town, its enterprises, its people, its sprawling growth. But one cared still more for that ground upon the bluff; it became a symbol, a very personally human mark upon the desert.

We began with raw sagebrush land, but above it lay a ridge of fresh earth that marked the end of a canal built to carry water from a point twenty miles to the east of us. This was our reclamation project, and we set to work upon it. We attacked it gladly, adventurously, and, of course, a bit too simply. Time slipped by, and ten full years, with all their planning, worry and life-energy, went into it. At the end of that period this raw piece of ground had become a well developed ranch, with out-buildings, orchards, fields of alfalfa and grain, gardens and truck patches and berry patches, with cattle and horses in the pasture and flocks of chickens and water-fowl wandering about or splashing in the irrigation ditches. And out from the shade of tall poplar trees and the coolness of a luxuriant lawn a modern white-bodied, green-roofed bungalow looked up-valley toward the point where the shimmering Big Horn took unto itself the Grey Bull after its course down the long valley

that stretched away to the southwest toward the Wind River Range.

III

I have known some of the way of life that great groups of mankind have known from the dawn of civilization, and, in so far, life has for me an ineradicable richness. The pioneer casts a few troubled glances backward or ahead. His position is analagous to that of the soldier engaged; the immediacy of the struggle precludes query and long-range speculation. He can heartily subscribe to the text: "Sufficient unto the day the evil thereof." And the genuineness of his contribution, he reckons, cannot well be questioned; responsibility for future developments and the reduction of future complexities must fall to others; upon him rests the primary responsibility as to the sufficiency of foundations. And this is a peculiar recompense—the satisfaction of the founder.

Today I watch with some concern the groups that each year leave the schools and universities to move on toward their objectives. Their problem is a different one even from mine, very different from that of my father or my grandfather. An era has come to a close. The economy of a country with great reserves of open land for her young men is essentially unlike that of an older nation. I talk often with young men about to graduate from a certain Western institution of higher learning. There is no consciousness among them of new territory waiting to be opened up; these men know it is almost non-existent in the United States. They look in another direction—toward the East, or toward the cities, or, if they are particularly adventurous, toward other countries. Vicariously they may share the experience of the pioneers of whose careers they read; they will never know its real significance. But, after all, how much of its meaning is valid today? Constantly my interpretations of events revert to childhood and youthful outlooks

which the contemporary current of events marks false; I must as constantly revise and reconstruct. Coupled with the accessibility of an open public domain there grew in America a far-from-lovely species of economic individualism. Its influence permeated every nook of the West, as well as the East, and lent its weight toward a disastrous culmination. The passing of an era is often not unmixed with blessing.

* * *

After ten years on the Wyoming ranch, my father completed his westward trek across the continent to spend his declining years where, as he put it, he might watch the ships go sailing out of the harbor, as he had seen them when a boy on Chesapeake Bay. (One wonders if the present population of California realize to what extent their numbers today result from the fact that to a generation now nearly gone theirs was not a vacation-land, but the Golden Land of the Farthest West.) The professional world has apparently, at last, engulfed me, but I confess to an itching desire for ten acres of ground awaiting its first cultivation (again, epitome!) I surmise that when my eleven-year-old grows a bit older he will some day experience an urge that attacked in turn his great-great-grandfather, his great-grandfather, his grandfather, and his father—and he will try, perforce, but vainly, to satisfy himself with a fishing trip to the mountains!