Emanuel Haldeman-Julius

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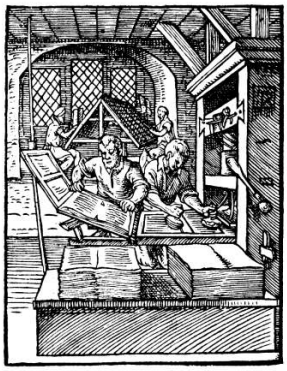

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338101419

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I. THE DUST IS STIRRED

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DUST was piled in thick, velvety folds on the weeds and grass of the open Kansas prairie; it lay, a thin veil on the scrawny black horses and the sharp-boned cow picketed near a covered wagon; it showered to the ground in little clouds as Mrs. Wade, a tall, spare woman, moved about a camp-fire, preparing supper in a sizzling skillet, huge iron kettle and blackened coffee-pot.

Her husband, pale and gaunt, the shadow of death in his weary face and the droop of his body, sat leaning against one of the wagon wheels trying to quiet a wailing, emaciated year-old baby while little tow-headed Nellie, a vigorous child of seven, frolicked undaunted by the August heat.

"Does beat all how she kin do it," thought Wade, listlessly.

"Ma," she shouted suddenly, in her shrill, strident treble, "I see Martin comin'."

The mother made no answer until the strapping, fourteen-year-old boy, tall and powerful for his age, had deposited his bucket of water at her side. As he drew the back of a tanned muscular hand across his dripping forehead she asked shortly:

"What kept you so long?"

"The creek's near dry. I had to follow it half a mile to find anything fit to drink. This ain't no time of year to start farmin'," he added, glum and sullen.

"I s'pose you know more'n your father and mother," suggested Wade.

"I know who'll have to do all the work," the boy retorted, bitterness and rebellion in his tone.

"Oh, quit your arguin'," commanded the mother. "We got enough to do to move nearer that water tonight, without wastin' time talkin'. Supper's ready."

Martin and Nellie sat down beside the red-and-white-checkered cloth spread on the ground, and Wade, after passing the still fretting baby to his wife, took his place with them.

"Seems like he gets thinner every day," he commented, anxiously.

With a swift gesture of fierce tenderness, Mrs. Wade gathered little Benny to her. "Oh, God!" she gasped. "I know I'm goin' to lose him. That cow's milk don't set right on his stomach."

"It won't set any better after old Brindle fills up on this dust," observed Martin, belligerency in his brassy voice.

"That'll do," came sharply from his father. "I don't think this is paradise no more'n you do, but we wouldn't be the first who've come with nothing but a team and made a living. You mark what I tell you, Martin, land ain't always goin' to be had so cheap and I won't be living this time another year. Before I die, I'm goin' to see your mother and you children settled. Some day, when you've got a fine farm here, you'll see the sense of what I'm doin' now and thank me for it."

The boy's cold, blue eyes became the color of ice, as he retorted: "If I ever make a farm out o' this dust, I'll sure 'ave

earned it."

"I guess your mother'll be doin' her share of that, all right. And don't you forget it."

As he intoned in even accents, Wade's eyes, so deep in their somber sockets, dwelt with a strange, wistful compassion on his faded wife. The rays of the setting sun brought out the drabness of her. Already, at thirty-five, grey streaked the scanty, dull hair, wrinkles lined the worn olive-brown face, and the tendons of the thin neck stood out. Chaotically, he compared her to the happy young girl — round of cheek and laughing of eye — he had married back in Ohio, fifteen years before. It comforted him a little to remember he hadn't done so badly by her until the war had torn him from his rented farm and she had been forced to do a man's work in field and barn. Exposure and a lung wound from a rebel bullet had sent Wade home an invalid, and during the five years which had followed, he had realized only too well how little help he had been to her.

It is not likely he would have had the iron persistency of purpose to drag her through this new stern trial if he had not known that in her heart, as in his, there gnawed ever an all-devouring hunger to work land of their own, a fervent aspiration to establish a solid basis of self-sustentation upon which their children might build. From the day a letter had come from Peter Mall, an ex-comrade in Wade's old regiment, saying the quarter-section next his own could be bought by paying annually a dollar and twenty-five cents an acre for seven years, their hopes had risen into determination that had become unshakable. Before the eyes of Jacob and Sarah Wade there had hovered, like a promise,

the picture of the snug farm that could be evolved from this virgin soil. Strengthened by this vision and stimulated by the fact of Wade's increasing weakness, they had sold their few possessions, except the simplest necessities for camping, had made a canvas cover for their wagon, stocked up with smoked meat, corn meal and coffee, tied old Brindle behind, fastened a coop of chickens against the wagon-box and, without faltering, had made the long pilgrimage. Their indomitable courage and faith, Martin's physical strength and the pulling power of their two ring-boned horses — this was their capital.

It seemed pitifully meager to Wade at that despondent moment, exhausted as he was by the long, hard journey and the sultry heat. Never had he been so taunted by a sense of failure, so torn by the haunting knowledge that he must soon leave his family. To die — that was nothing; but the fears of what his death might mean to this group, gripped his heart and shook his soul.

If only Martin were more tender! There was something so ruthless in the boy, so overbearing and heartless. Not that he was ever deliberately cruel, but there was an insensibility to the feelings of others, a capacity placidly to ignore them, that made Wade tremble for the future. Martin would work, and work hard; he was no shirk, but would he ever feel any responsibility toward his younger brother and sister? Would he be loyal to his mother? Wade wondered if his wife ever felt as he did — almost afraid of this son of theirs. He had a way of making his father seem foolishly inexperienced and ineffectual.

"I reckon," Wade analysed laboriously, "it's because I'm gettin' less able all the time and he's growing so fast — him limber an' quick, and me all thumbs. There ain't nothing like just plain muscle and size to make a fellow feel as if he know'd it all."

Martin had never seemed more competent than this evening as, supper over, he harnessed the horses and helped his mother set the little caravan in motion. It was Martin who guided them to the creek, Martin who decided just where to locate their camp, Martin who, early the next morning, unloaded the wagon and made a temporary tent from its cover, and Martin who set forth on a saddleless horse in search of Peter Mall. When he returned, the big, kindly man came with him, and in Martin's arms there squealed and wriggled a shoat.

"A smart boy you've got, Jacob," chuckled Peter, jovially, after the first heart-warming greetings. "See that critter! Blame me if Martin, here, didn't speak right up and ask me to lend 'er to you!" And he collapsed into gargantuan laughter.

"I promised when she'd growed up and brought pigs, we'd give him back two for one," Martin hastily explained.

"That's what he said," nodded Peter, carefully switching his navy plug to the opposite cheek before settling down to reply, "and sez I, `Why, Martin, what d'ye want o' that there shoat? You ain't got nothin' to keep her on!' `If I can borrow the pig,' sez he, `I reckon I can borrow the feed somewheres.' God knows, he'll find that ain't so plentiful, but he's got the right idea. A new country's a poor man's country and fellows like us have to stand together. It's

borrow and lend out here. I know where you can get some seed wheat if you want to try puttin' it in this fall. There's a man by the name of Perry — lives just across the Missouri line — who has thrashed fifteen hundred bushel and he'll lend you three hundred or so. He's willing to take a chance, but if you get a crop he wants you should give him back an extra three hundred."

It was a hard bargain, but one that Wade could afford to take up, for if the wheat were to freeze out, or if the grasshoppers should eat it, or the chinch bugs ruin it, or a hail storm beat it down into the mud, or if any of the many hatreds Stepmother Nature holds out toward those trusting souls who would squeeze a living from her hard hands — if any of these misfortunes should transpire, he would be out nothing but labor, and that was the one thing he and Martin could afford to risk.

The seed deal was arranged, and Martin made the trip six times back and forth, for the wagon could hold only fifty bushels. Perry lived twenty miles from the Wades and a whole day was consumed with each load. It was evening when Martin, hungry and tired, reached home with the last one; and, as he stopped beside the tent, he noticed with surprise that there was no sign of cooking. Nellie was huddled against her mother, who sat, idle, with little Benny in her arms. The tragic yearning her whole body expressed, as she held the baby close, arrested the boy's attention, filled him with clamoring uneasiness. His father came to help him unhitch.

"What's the matter with Benny?"

Wade looked at Martin queerly. "He's dead. Died this mornin' and your ma's been holding him just like that. I want you should ride over to Peter's and see if you can fetch his woman."

"No!" came from Mrs. Wade, brokenly, "I don't want no one. Just let me alone."

The shattering anguish in his mother's voice startled Martin, stirred within him tumultuous, veiled sensations. He was unaccustomed to seeing her show suffering, and it embarrassed him. Restless and uncomfortable, he was glad when his father called him to help decide where to dig the grave, and fell the timber from which to make a rough box. From time to time, through the long night, he could not avoid observing his mother. In the white moonlight, she and Benny looked as if they had been carved from stone. Dawn was breaking over them when Wade, surrendering to a surge of pity, put his arms around her with awkward gentleness. "Ma, we got to bury 'im."

A low, half-suppressed sob broke from Mrs. Wade's tight lips as she clasped the tiny figure and pressed her cheek against the little head.

"I can't give him up," she moaned, "I can't! It wasn't so hard with the others. Their sickness was the hand of God, but Benny just ain't had enough to eat. Seems like it'll kill me."

With deepened discomfort, Martin hurried to the creek to water the horses. It was good, he felt, to have chores to do. This knowledge shot through him with the same thrill of discovery that a man enjoys when he first finds what an escape from the solidity of fact lies in liquor. If one worked

hard and fast one could forget. That was what work did. It made one forget — that moan, that note of agony in his mother's voice, that hurt look in her eyes, that bronze group in the moonlight. By the time he had finished his chores, his mother was getting breakfast as usual. With unspeakable relief, Martin noticed that though pain haunted her face, she was not crying.

"I heard while I was over in Missouri, yesterday," he ventured, "of a one-room house down in the Indian Territory. The fellow who built it's give up and gone back East. Maybe we could fix a sledge and haul it up here."

"I ain't got the strength to help," said Wade.

Martin's eyes involuntarily sought his mother's. He knew the power in her lean, muscular arms, the strength in her narrow shoulders.

"We'd better fetch it," she agreed.

The pair made the trip down on horseback and brought back the shack that was to be home for many years. Eighteen miles off a man had some extra hand-cut shingles which he was willing to trade for a horse-collar. While Mrs. Wade took the long drive Martin, under his father's guidance, chopped down enough trees to build a little lean-to kitchen and make-shift stable. Sixteen miles south another neighbor had some potatoes to exchange for a hatching of chickens. Martin rode over with the hen and her downy brood. The long rides, consuming hours, were trying, for Martin was needed every moment on a farm where everything was still to be done.

Day by day Wade was growing weaker, and it was Mrs. Wade who helped put in the crop, borrowing a plow, harrow,

and extra team, and repaying the loan with the use of their own horses and wagon. Luck was with their wheat, which soon waved green. It seemed one of life's harsh jests that now, when the tired, ill-nourished baby had fretted his last, old Brindle, waxing fat and sleek on the wheat pasture, should give more rich cream than the Wades could use. "He could have lived on the skimmed milk we feed to the pigs," thought Martin.

In the Spring he went with his father into Fallon, the nearest trading point, to see David Robinson, the owner of the local bank. By giving a chattel mortgage on their growing wheat, they borrowed enough, at twenty per cent, to buy seed corn and a plow. It was Wade's last effort. Before the corn was in tassel, he had been laid beside Benny.

Martin, who already had been doing a man's work, now assumed a man's responsibilities. Mrs. Wade consulted more and more with him, relied more and more upon his judgment. She was immensely proud of him, of his steadiness and dependability, but at rare moments, remembering her own normal childhood, she would think with compunction: "It ain't right. Young 'uns ought to have some fun. Seems like it's makin' him too old for his age." She never spoke of these feelings, however. There were no expressions of tenderness in the Wade household. She was doing her best by her children and they knew it. Even Nellie, child that she was, understood the grimness of the battle before them.

They were able to thresh enough wheat to repay their debt of six hundred bushels and keep an additional three

hundred of seed for the following year. The remaining seven hundred and fifty they sold at twenty-five cents a bushel by hauling them to Fort Scott — thirty miles distant. Each trip meant ten dollars, but to the Wades, to whom this one hundred and eighty-seven dollars — the first actual money they had seen in over a year — was a fortune, these journeys were rides of triumph, fugitive flashes of glory in the long, gray struggle.

That Fall they paid the first installment of two hundred dollars on their land and Martin persuaded his mother to give and Robinson to take a chattel on their two horses, old Brindle, her calf and the pigs, that other much-needed implements might be bought. Mrs. Wade toiled early and late, doing part of the chores and double her share of the Spring plowing that Martin, as well as Nellie, could attend school in Fallon.

"I don't care about goin'," he had protested squirmingly.

But on this matter his mother was without compromise. "Don't say that," she had commanded, her voice shaken and her eyes bright with the intensity of her emotion; "you're goin' to get an education."

And Martin, surprised and embarrassed by his mother's unusual exhibition of feeling, had answered, roughly: "Aw, well, all right then. Don't take on. I didn't say I wouldn't, did I?"

He was twenty-three and Nellie sixteen when, worn out and broken down before her time, her resistance completely undermined, Mrs. Wade died suddenly of pneumonia. Within the year Nellie married Bert Mall, Peter's eldest son, and Martin, at once, bought out her half interest in the farm,

stock and implements, giving a first mortgage to Robinson in order to pay cash.

"I'm making it thirty dollars an acre," he explained.

"That's fair," conceded the banker, "though the time will come when it will be cheap at a hundred and a half. There's coal under all this county, millions of dollars' worth waiting to be mined."

"Maybe," assented Martin, laconically.

As he sat in the dingy, little backroom of the bank, while Robinson's pen scratched busily drawing up the papers, he was conscious of an odd thrill. The land — it was all his own! But with this thrill welled a wave of resentment over what he considered a preposterous imposition. Who had made the land into a farm? What had Nellie ever put into it that it should be half hers? His mother — now, that was different. She and he had toiled side by side like real partners; her efforts had been real and unstinted. If he were buying her out, for instance — but Nellie! Well, that was the way, he noticed, with many women — doing little and demanding much. He didn't care for them; not he. From the day Nellie left, Martin managed alone in the shack, "baching it," and putting his whole heart and soul into the development of his quarter-section.

II. OUT OF THE DUST

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AT thirty-four, Martin was still unmarried, and though he had not travelled far on that strange road to affluence which for some seems a macadamized boulevard, but for so many, like himself, a rough cow-path, he had done better than the

average farmer of Fallon County. To be sure, this was nothing over which to gloat. A man who received forty cents a bushel for wheat was satisfied; corn sold at twenty-eight cents, and the hogs it fattened in proportion. But his hundred and sixty acres were clear from debt, four thousand dollars were on deposit drawing three per cent in The First State Bank — the old Bank of Fallon, now incorporated with Robinson as its president. In the pasture, fourteen sows with their seventy-five spring pigs rooted beside the sleek herd of steers fattening for market; the granary bulged with corn; two hundred bushels of seed wheat were ready for sowing; his machinery was in excellent condition; his four Percheron mares brought him, each, a fine mule colt once a year; and the well never went dry, even in August. Martin was — if one discounted the harshness of the life, the dirt, the endless duties and the ever-pressing chores — a Kansas plutocrat.

One fiery July day, David Robinson drew up before Martin's shack. The little old box-house was still unpainted without and unpapered within. Two chairs, a home-made table with a Kansas City Star as a cloth, a sheetless bed, a rough cupboard, a stove and floors carpeted with accumulations of untidiness completed the furnishings.

"Chris-to-pher Columbus!" exploded Robinson, "why don't you fix yourself up a bit, Martin? The Lord knows you're going to be able to afford it. What you need is a wife — someone to look after you." And as Martin, observing him calmly, made no response, he added, "I suppose you know what I want. You've been watching for this day, eh, Martin? All Fallon County's sitting on its haunches — waiting."

"Oh, I haven't been worrying. A fellow situated like me, with a hundred and sixty right in the way of a coal company, can afford to be independent."

"You understand our procedure, Martin," Robinson continued. "We are frank and aboveboard. We set the price, and if you can't see your way clear to take it there are no hard feelings. We simply call it off — for good." Wade knew how true this was. When the mining first began, several rebels toward the East had tried profitlessly to buck this irrefragable game and had found they had battered their unyielding heads against an equally unyielding stone wall. These men had demanded more and Robinson's company, true to its threat, had urbanely gone around their farms, travelled on and left them behind, their coal untouched and certain to so remain. Such inelastic lessons, given time to soak in, were sobering.

"Now," said Robinson, in his amiable matter-of-fact manner, "as I happen to know the history of this quarter, backwards and forwards, we can do up this deal in short order. You sign this contract, which is exactly like all the others we use, and I'll hand over your check. We get the bottom; you keep the top; I give you the sixteen thousand, and the thing is done."

"Well, Martin," he added, genially, as Wade signed his name, "it's a long day since you came in with your father to make that first loan to buy seed corn. Wouldn't he have opened his eyes if any one had prophesied this? It's a pity your mother couldn't have lived to enjoy your good fortune. A fine, plucky woman, your mother. They don't make many like her."

Long after Robinson's buggy was out of sight, Martin stood in his doorway and stared at the five handsome figures, spelled out the even more convincing words and admired the excellent reproduction of The First State Bank.

"This is a whole lot of money," his thoughts ran. "I'm rich. All this land still mine — practically as much mine as ever — all this stock and twenty thousand dollars in money — in cash. It's a fact. I, Martin Wade, am rich."

He remembered how he had exulted, how jubilant, even intoxicated, he had felt when he had received the ten dollars for the first load of wheat he had hauled to Fort Scott. Now, with a check for sixteen thousand — sixteen thousand dollars! — in his hand, he stood dumbly, curiously unmoved.

Slowly, the first bitter months on this land, little Benny's death from lack of nourishment, his father's desperate efforts to establish his family, the years of his mother's slow crucifixion, his own long struggle — all floated before him in a fog of reverie. Years of deprivation, of bending toil and then, suddenly, this had come — this miracle symbolized by this piece of paper. Martin moistened his lips. Mentally, he realized all the dramatic significance of what had happened, but it gave him none of the elation he had expected.

This bewildered and angered him. Sixteen thousand dollars and with it no thrill. What was lacking? As he pondered, puzzled and disappointed, it came to him that he needed something by which to measure his wealth, someone whose appreciation of it would make it real to him, give him a genuine sense of its possession. What if he were to take Robinson's advice: fix up a bit and — marry?