

***HAYDEN
CARRUTH***

***THE VOYAGE
OF THE RATTLETRAP***

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The Voyage of the Rattletrap

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

II: OUTWARD BOUND

III: FROM LOOKOUT LAKE TO THE MISSOURI RIVER

IV: INTO NEBRASKA

V: ACROSS THE NIOBRARA

VI: BY CAÑONS TO VALENTINE

VII: THROUGH THE SAND HILLS

VIII: ON THE ANTELOPE FLATS

IX: OFF FOR THE BLACK HILLS

X: AMONG THE MOUNTAINS

XI: DEADWOOD

XII: HOMEWARD BOUND

II: OUTWARD BOUND

Table of Contents

The port of Prairie Flower was in the eastern part of the Territory of Dakota. It stood out on an open plain a half-dozen miles wide, which seemed to be the prairie itself, though it was really the valley of the Big Sioux River, that funny stream which could run either way, and usually stood still in the night and rested. To the east and west the edges of this valley were faintly marked by a range of very low bluffs, so low that they were mere wrinkles in the surface of the earth, and made the valley but very little lower than the great plain which rolled away for miles to the east and for leagues to the west.

It was a beautiful morning a little after the middle of September that the Rattletrap got away and left Prairie Flower behind. The sun had been up only half an hour or so, and the shadow of our craft stretched away across the dry gray plain like a long black streak without end. The air was fresh and dewy. The morning breeze was just beginning to stir, and down by the river the acres of wild sunflowers were nodding the dew off their heads, and beginning to roll in the first long waves which would keep up all day like the rolling of the ocean. We shouted "Good-bye" to Grandpa Oldberry and Squire Poinsett, but they only shook their heads very seriously. The cows and horses picketed on the prairie all about the little clump of houses which made up the town looked at us with their eyes open extremely wide, and no doubt said in their own languages, like Grandpa Oldberry,

that they had no recollection of seeing any such capers as this for many years.

"See here," I said, suddenly, to Jack, "where's that dog you said was going to follow us?"

"You just hold on," answered Jack.

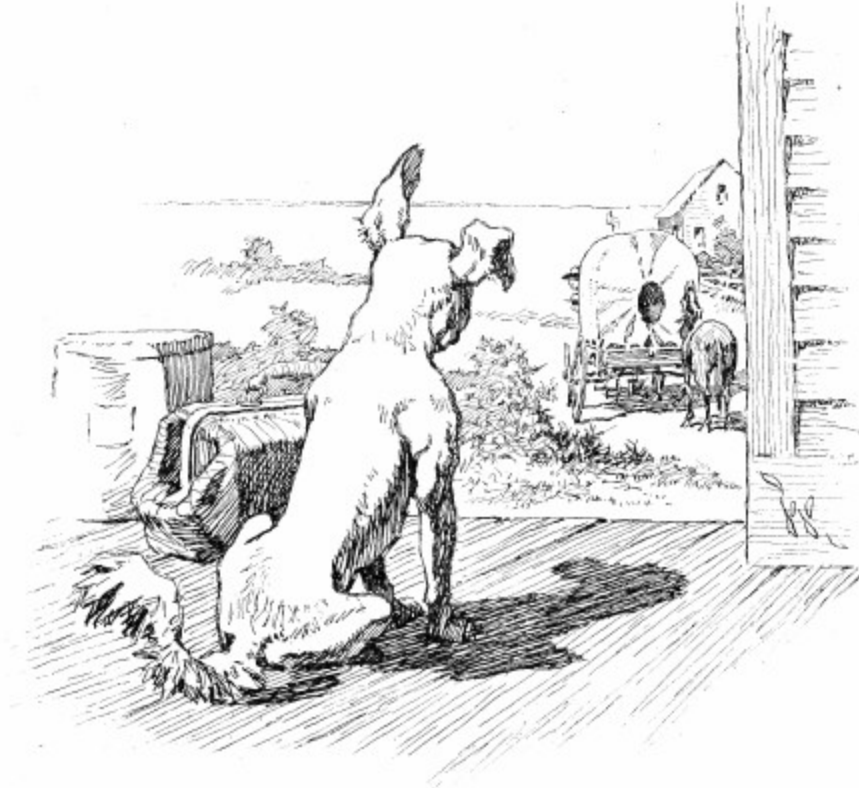
"Oh, are we going to have a dog, too?" asked Ollie.

"You wait a minute," insisted Jack.

Just then we passed the railroad station. Jack craned his head out of the front end of the wagon. Ollie and I did the same. Lying asleep on the corner of the station platform we saw a dog. He was about the size of a rather small collie; or, to put it another way, perhaps he was half as big as the largest-size dog. If dogs were numbered like shoes, from one to thirteen, this would have been about a No. 7 dog. He was yellow, with short hair, except that his tail was very bushy. One ear stood up straight, and the other lopped over, very much wilted. Jack whistled sharply. The dog tossed up his head, straightened up his lopped ear, let fall his other ear, and looked at us. Jack whistled again, and the dog came. He ran around the wagon, barked once or twice, sniffed at the pony's heels and got kicked at for his familiarity, yelped sharply, and came and looked up at us, and wagged his bushy tail with a great flourish.

"He wants to get in. Give him a boost, Ollie," said Jack.

Ollie clambered over the dash-board and jumped to the ground. He pushed the dog forward, and he leaped. up and scrambled into the wagon, jumped over on the bed, where he folded his head and tail on his left side, turned around rapidly three times, and lay down and went to sleep, one ear up and one ear down.



SNOOZER

"He's just the dog for the Rattletrap," said Jack. "We'll call him Snoozer."

"That looks a good deal like stealing to me, Uncle Jack," said Ollie. "Doesn't he belong to somebody?"

"No," said Jack, "he doesn't belong to anybody but us. He came here a week ago with a tramp. The tramp deserted him, and rode away on the trucks of a freight train; but Snoozer didn't like that way of travelling, because there

wasn't any place to sleep, so he stayed behind. Since then he has tried to follow every man in town, but none of them would have him. He's a regular tramp dog, not good for anything, and therefore just the dog for us."

Snoozer was the last thing we shipped, and after taking him aboard we were soon out of the harbor of Prairie Flower, and bearing away across the plain to the southwest. In twenty minutes we were among the billowing sunflowers, standing five or six feet high on other side of the road, which seemed like a narrow crack winding through them. Ollie reached out and gathered a handful of the drooping yellow blossoms. The pony was tied behind carrying her big saddle, and tossing her head about, and showing that she was very suspicious of the whole proceedings, and especially of a small flag which Ollie had fastened to the top of the wagon-cover, which fluttered in the fresh morning breeze. Snoozer slept on and never stirred. At last the road came to the river, and then followed close along beside its bank, which was only a foot or so high. Ollie was interested in watching the long grass which grew in the bottom of the stream and was brushed all in one direction by the sluggish current, like the silky fur of some animal. After a while we came to a gravelly place which was a ford, and crossed the stream, stopping to let the horses drink. The water was only a foot deep. As we came up on the higher ground beyond the river we met the south wind squarely, and it came in at the front of the cover with a rush. We heard a sharp flutter behind, and then the wagon gave a shiver and a lurch, and the horses stopped; then there was another shock and lurch, and it rolled back a few inches.

"There," exclaimed Jack, "some of those wheels have begun to turn backward! I told you!"

I looked back. Our puckering-string had given way, and the rear of the cover had blown out loosely. This had been more than the pony could stand, and she had broken her rope and run back a dozen rods, where she stood snorting and looking at the wagon.

"First accident!" I cried. "She'll run home, and we'll have to go back after her."

"Perhaps we can get around her," said Jack. "We'll try."

We left Ollie to hold the horses, and I went out around among the sunflowers, while Jack stood behind the wagon with his hat half full of oats. I got beyond her at last, and drove her slowly toward the wagon. She snorted and stamped the ground angrily with her forward feet; but at last she ventured to taste of the oats, and finding more in the feed-box on the rear of the wagon, she began eating them and forgot her fright.

"I guess we'd better not tie her, but let her follow," said Jack. "As soon as we have gone a little ways she'll come to think the wagon is home, and stick to it."

"Yes," I said. "I think she is really as great a tramp as Snoozer, and just the pony for us." "Are we all tramps?" asked Ollie.

"Well," said Jack, "I'm afraid Grandpa Oldberry thinks we don't lack much of it. He says varmints will catch us."

"Do you think they will?" went on Ollie, just a little bit anxiously.

"Oh, I guess not," said Jack. "You see, we've got four guns. Then there's Snoozer."

"But will they try to catch us?"

"Well, I don't know. Grandpa Oldberry says the varmints are awfully thick this fall."

"But what are varmints?"

"Oh, wolves, and b'ars, and painters, and--"

"What are painters?"

"Grandpa means panthers, I guess. Then there's Injuns, and hoss-thieves, and--"

"There's a prairie-chicken!" I cried, as one rose up out of the long grass.

"Perhaps we can get one for dinner," said Jack.



MUTINY OF THE PONY

He took his gun and went slowly toward where the other had been. Another whirred away like a shot. Jack fired, but missed it. We started on, leaving the pony tossing her head and stamping her feet in a great passion on account of the report of the gun; but when she saw that we paid no attention to her and were rapidly going out of sight she turned, after taking a long look back at distant Prairie Flower, and came trotting along the road, with her stirrups dangling at her sides, and soon was following close behind.

Before we realized it the chronometer showed that it was almost noon. By this time we had left the sea of sunflowers and crept over the wrinkle at the western edge of the valley, and were off across the rolling prairie itself. Still Snoozer never stirred.

"I wonder when he'll wake up?" said Ollie.

"You'll see him awake enough at dinnertime," said Jack.

"Well, you'll see me awake enough then, too," answered Ollie. "I'm hungry."

"We hardy pioneers plunging into the trackless waste of a new and unexplored country never eat but one meal a day," said Jack. "And that's always raw meat--b'ar-meat, generally."

"Well," said Ollie, "I don't see any b'ar-meat, or even prairie-chicken-meat. Why didn't you hit the prairie-chicken, Uncle Jack?"

"I'm not used to shooting at such small game," answered Jack, solemnly. "My kind of game is b'ar--b'ar and other varmints."

Just then we passed a house, and down a little way from it, close to the road, was a well.

"Here's a good place to have dinner," said Jack; so we drove out by the side of the road and stopped. "If I'm to be cook," said Jack to me, "then you've got to take care of the horses and do all the outside work. I'll be cook; you'll be rancher. That's what we'll call you--rancher."

I unhitched the horses, tied them behind the wagon, and gave them some oats and corn in the feed-box. The pony I fed in the big tin pail near by. The grass beside the road was so dry, and it was so windy, that we decided it was not safe

to build a fire outdoors, so Jack cooked pancakes over the oil-stove inside. These with some cold meat he handed out to Ollie and me as we sat on the wagon-tongue, while he sat on the dash-board. We were half-way through dinner when we heard a peculiar whine, followed by a low bark, in the wagon, and then Snoozer leaped out, stretched himself, and began to wag his tail so fast that it looked exactly like a whirling feather duster. We fed him on pancakes, and he ate so many that if Jack had not fried some more we'd have certainly gone hungry.

"I told you he was a true tramp," said Jack. "Just see his appetite!"

After we had finished, and the horses had grazed about on the dry grass some time, we started on. We hoped to reach a little lake which we saw marked on the map, called Lake Lookout, for the night camp; so we hurried along, it being a good distance ahead. All the afternoon we were passing 'between either great fields where the wheat had been cut, leaving the stubble, or beside long stretches of prairie. There were a few houses, many of them built of sod. Not much happened during the afternoon. Ollie followed the example of Snoozer, and curled up on the bed and had a long nap. We saw a few prairie-chickens, but did not try to shoot any of them. The pony trotted contentedly behind. Just before night I rode her ahead, looking for the lake. I found it to be a small one, perhaps a half-mile wide, scarcely below the level of the prairie, and generally with marshy shores, though on one side the beach was sandy and stony, with a few stunted cottonwood-trees, and here I decided we would camp. I went back and guided the Rattletrap to the

spot. Soon Jack had a roaring fire going from the dry wood which Ollie had collected. I fed the horses and turned them loose, and they began eagerly on the green grass which grew on the damp soil near the lake. The pony I picketed with a long rope and a strap around one of her forward ankles, between her hoof and fetlock, as we scarcely felt like trusting her all night. Snoozer got up for his supper, and after that stretched himself by the fire and blinked at it sleepily. The rest of us did much the same. After a while Ollie said.

"I think that bed in the wagon looks pretty narrow for two. How are three going to sleep in it?"

"I don't think three are going to sleep in it," said Jack.

"Where are you going to sleep, then, Uncle Jack?"

Jack laughed. "I think," he said, "that the rancher and the cook will sleep in the wagon, and let you sleep under the wagon. Nothing makes a boy grow like sleeping rolled up in a blanket under a wagon. You'll be six inches taller if you do it every night till we get back."

"Well, I don't think so," said Ollie, just a little alarmed at the prospect. "I'd prefer to sleep in the wagon. Maybe what Grandpa Oldberry said about wild animals is so. You say you like to shoot 'em, so you stay outside and do it--I don't."

At last it was arranged that Ollie and I should sleep inside and Jack under the wagon. We were surprised to find how early we were ready for bed. The long ride and the fresh air had given us an appetite for sleep. So we soon turned in, the dog staying outside with Jack.

"Good-night, Uncle Jack!" called Ollie, as we put out the lantern and covered up in the narrow bed. "Look out for

painters!"

I was almost asleep when Ollie shook me, and whispered, "What's that noise?"

I listened, and heard a regular, hollow, booming sound, something like the very distant discharge of cannon.

"It's the horses walking on the ground-always sounds that way in the night," I answered.

Again I was almost asleep when Ollie took hold of my arm, and said, "What's that?"



EFFECT OF A STRANGE NOISE

I once more listened, and recognized a peculiar creaking noise as that made by the horses cropping off the grass. I explained to Ollie, and then dropped off sound asleep. I don't know how long it was, but after some time I was again roused up by a nervous shake.

"Listen to that," whispered Ollie. "What can it be?"