A MAN FOR THE AGES

A STORY OF THE BUILDERS of DEMOCRACY

By IRVING BACHELLER

CHAPTER I.

Which Describes the Journey of Samson Henry Traylor and His Wife and Their Two Children and Their Dog Sambo Through the Adirondack Wilderness in 1831 on Their Way to the Land of Plenty—Furthermore It Describes the Soaping of the Brimsteads.

In the early summer of 1831 Samson Traylor and his wife, Sarah, and two children left their old home near the village of Vergennes, Vermont, and began their travels toward the setting sun with four chairs, a bread board and rolling-pin, a feather bed and blankets, a small looking-glass, a skillet, an ax, a pack basket with a pad of sole leather on the same, a water pail, a box of dishes, a tub of salt pork, a rifle, a teapot, a sack of meal, sundry small provisions and a violin, in a double wagon drawn by oxen. It is a pleasure to note that they had a violin and were not disposed to part with it. The reader must not overlook its full historic significance. The stern, uncompromising spirit of the Puritan had left the house of the Yankee before a violin could enter it. Humor and the love of play had preceded and cleared a way for it. Where there was a fiddle there were cheerful hearts. A young black shepherd dog with tawny points and the name of Sambo followed the wagon.

If we had been at the Congregational church on Sunday we might have heard the minister saying to Samson, after the service, that it was hard to understand why the happiest family in the parish and the most beloved should be leaving its ancestral home to go to a far, new country of which little was known. We might also have heard Samson answer:

"It's awful easy to be happy here. We slide along in the same old groove, that our fathers traveled, from Vergennes to Paradise. We work and play and go to meetin' and put a shin plaster in the box and grow old and narrow and stingy and mean and go up to glory and are turned into saints and angels. Maybe that's the best thing that could happen to us, but Sarah and I kind o' thought we'd try a new starting place and another route to heaven."

Sarah and Sampson had been raised on adjoining farms just out of the village. He had had little schooling, but his mind was active and well inclined. Sarah had prosperous relatives in Boston and had had the advantage of a year's schooling in that city. She was a comely girl of a taste and refinement unusual in the place and time of her birth. Many well-favored youths had sought her hand, but, better than others, she liked the big, masterful, good-natured, humorous Samson, crude as he was. Naturally in her hands his timber had undergone some planing and smoothing and his thoughts had been gently led into new and pleasant ways.

Let us take a look at them as they slowly leave the village of their birth. The wagon is covered with tent cloth drawn over hickory arches. They are sitting on a seat overlooking the oxen in the wagon front. Tears are streaming down the face of the woman. The man's head is bent. His elbows are resting on his knees; the hickory handle of his ox whip lies across his lap, the lash at his feet. He seems to be looking down at his boots, into the tops of which his trousers have been folded. He is a rugged, blond, bearded man with kindly blue eyes and a rather prominent nose. There is a striking expression of power in the head and shoulders of Samson Traylor. The breadth of his back, the size of his wrists and hands, the color of his face betoken a man of great strength. This thoughtful, sorrowful, attitude is the only evidence of emotion which he betrays. In a few minutes he begins to whistle a lively tune.

The boy Josiah—familiarly called Joe—sits beside his mother. He is a slender, sweet-faced lad. He is looking up wistfully at his mother. The little girl Betsey sits between him and her father.

That evening they stopped at the house of an old friend some miles up the rusty road to the north.

"Here we are—goin' west," Samson shouted to the man at the doorstep.

He alighted and helped his family out of the wagon.

"You go right in—I'll take care o' the oxen," said the man.

Samson started for the house with the girl under one arm and the boy under the other. A pleasant-faced woman greeted them with a hearty welcome at the door.

"You poor man! Come right in," she said.

"Poor! I'm the richest man in the world," said he. "Look at the gold on that girl's head—curly, fine gold, too—the best there is. She's Betsey—my little toy woman—half past seven years old—blue eyes—helps her mother get tired every day. Here's my toy man Josiah—yes, brown hair and brown eyes like Sarah—heart o' gold—helps his mother, too—six times one year old."

"What pretty faces!" said the woman as she stooped and kissed them.

"Yes, ma'am. Got 'em from the fairies," Samson went on. "They have all kinds o' heads for little folks an' I guess they color 'em up with the blood o' roses an' the gold o' buttercups an' the blue o' violets. Here's this wife o' mine. She's richer'n I am. She owns all of us. We're her slaves."

"Looks as young as she did the day she was married—nine years ago," said the woman.

"Exactly!" Samson exclaimed. "Straight as an arrow and proud! I don't blame her. She's got enough to make her proud, I say. I fall in love again every time I look into her big, brown eyes."

They had a joyous evening and a restful night with these old friends and resumed their journey soon after daylight. They ferried across the lake at Burlington and fared away over the mountains and through the deep forest on the Chateaugay trail.

Since the Pilgrims landed between the measureless waters and the pathless wilderness they and their descendants had been surrounded by the lure of mystery. The love of adventure, the desire to explore the dark, infested and beautiful forest, the dream of fruitful sunny lands cut with water courses, shored with silver and strewn with gold beyond it—these were the only heritage of their sons and daughters save the strength and courage of the pioneer. How true was this dream of theirs gathering detail and allurement as it passed from sire to son. On distant plains to the west were lands more lovely and fruitful than any of their vision; in mountains far beyond was gold enough to gild the dome of the heavens, as the sun was wont to do at eventide, and silver enough to put a fairly respectable moon in it. Yet for generations their eyes were not to see, their hands were not to touch, these things. They were only to push their frontier a little farther to the west and hold the dream and pass it on to their children.

Those early years of the Nineteenth century held the first days of fulfillment. Samson and Sarah Traylor had the old dream in their hearts when they first turned their faces to the west. For years Sarah had resisted it, thinking of the hardships and perils in the way of the mover. Samson, a man of twenty-nine when he set out from his old home, was said to be "always chasing the bird in the bush." He was never content with the thing in hand. There were certain of their friends who promised to come and join them when, at last, they should have found the land of plenty. But most of the group that bade them good-by thought it a foolish enterprise and spoke lightly of Samson when they were gone. America has undervalued the brave souls who went west in wagons, without whose sublime courage and endurance the plains would still be an unplowed wilderness. Often we hear them set down as seedy, shiftless dreamers who could not make a living at home. They were mostly the best blood of the world and the noblest of God's missionaries. Who does not honor them above the thrifty, comfort-loving men and women who preferred to stay at home, where risks were few, the supply of food sure and sufficient and the consolations of friendship and religion always at hand? Samson and Sarah preferred to enlist and take their places in the front battle line of Civilization.

They had read a little book called The Country of the Sangamon. The latter was a word of the Pottawatomies meaning land of plenty. It was the name of a river in Illinois draining "boundless, flowery meadows of unexampled beauty and fertility, belted with timber, blessed with shady groves, covered with game and mostly level, without a stick or a stone to vex the plowman." Thither they were bound, to take up a section of government land.

They stopped for a visit with Elisha Howard and his wife, old friends of theirs, who lived in the village of Malone, which was in Franklin county New York. There they traded their oxen for a team of horses. They were large gray horses named Pete and Colonel. The latter was fat and good natured. His chief interest in life was food. Pete was always looking for food and perils. Colonel was the near horse. Now and then Samson threw a sheepskin over his back and put the boy on it and tramped along within arm's reach of Joe's left leg. This was a great delight to the little lad.

They proceeded at a better pace to the Black River country, toward which, in the village of Canton, they tarried again for a visit with Captain Moody and Silas Wright, both of whom had taught school in the town of Vergennes.

They proceeded through DeKalb, Richville and Gouverneur and Antwerp and on to the Sand plains. They had gone far out of their way for a look at these old friends of theirs.

Samson's diary tells how, at the top of the long, steep hills he used to cut a small tree by the roadside and tie its butt to the rear axle and hang on to its branches while his wife drove the team. This held their load, making an effective brake.

Traveling through the forest, as they had been doing for weeks, while the day waned, they looked for a brookside on which they could pass the night with water handy. Samson

Tramped Along Within Arm's Reach.

tethered, fed and watered their horses and while Sarah and the children built a fire and made tea and biscuits, he was getting bait and catching fish in the stream.

"In a few minutes from the time I wet my hook a mess of trout would be dressed and sizzling, with a piece of salt pork, in the pan, or it was a bad day for fishing," he writes.

After supper the wagon was partly unloaded, the feather bed laid upon the planks under the wagon roof and spread with blankets. Then Samson sang songs and told stories or played upon the violin to amuse the family.

Often if the others were weary and depressed he would dance merrily around the fire, playing a lively tune, with Sambo glad to lend a helping foot and much noise to the program. By and by the violin was put away and all knelt by the fire while Sarah prayed aloud for protection through the night. So it will be seen that they carried with them their own little theater, church and hotel.

Soon after darkness fell, Sarah and the children lay down for the night, while Samson stretched out with his blanket by the fire in good weather, the loaded musket and the dog Sambo lying beside him. Often the howling of wolves in the distant forest kept them awake, and the dog muttering and barking for hours.

Samson woke the camp at daylight and a merry song was his reveille while he led the horses to their drink.

When they set out in the morning Samson was wont to say to the little lad, who generally sat beside him: "Well, my boy, what's the good word this morning?" Whereupon Joe would say, parrot like:

"God help us all and make His face to shine upon us."

"Well said!" his father would answer, and so the day's journey began.

Often, near its end, they came to some lonely farmhouse. Always Samson would stop and go to the door to ask about the roads, followed by little Joe and Betsey with secret hopes. One of these hopes was related to cookies and maple sugar and buttered bread and had been cherished since an hour of good fortune early in the trip and encouraged by sundry good-hearted women along the road. Another was the hope of seeing a baby—mainly, it should be said, the hope of Betsey. Joe's interest was merely an echo of hers. He regarded babies with an open mind, as it were, for the opinions of his sister still had some weight with him, she being a year and a half older than he, but babies invariably disappointed him, their capabilities being so restricted. Still, not knowing what might happen, he always took a look at every baby.

The children were lifted out of the wagon to stretch their legs at sloughs and houses. They were sure to be close behind the legs of their father when he stood at a stranger's door. Then, the night being near, they were always invited to put their horses in the barn and tarry until next morning. This was due in part to the wistful faces of the little children—a fact unsuspected by their parents. What motherly heart could resist the silent appeal of children's faces or fail to understand it? There were memorable nights for Sarah and Joe and Betsey. In a letter to her brother the woman said:

"You don't know how good it seems to see a woman and talk to her, and we talked and talked until midnight, after all the rest were asleep. She let me hold the baby in my lap until it was put to bed. How good it felt to have a little warm body in my arms again and feel it breathing! In all my life I never saw a prettier baby. It felt good to be in a real house and sleep in a soft, warm bed and to eat jelly and cookies and fresh meat and potatoes and bread and butter. Samson played for them and kept them laughing with his stories until bedtime. They wouldn't take a cent and gave us a dozen eggs in a basket and a piece of venison when we went away."

On a warm, bright day in the sand country they came to a crude, half finished, frame house at the edge of a wide clearing. The sand lay in drifts on one side of the road. It had evidently moved in the last wind. A sickly vegetation covered the field. A ragged, barefooted man and three scrawny, ill-clad children stood in the dooryard. It was noontime. A mongrel dog, with a bit of the hound in him, came bounding and barking toward the wagon and pitched upon Sambo and quickly got the worst of it. Sambo, after much experience in self-defense, had learned that the best way out of such trouble was to seize a leg and hang on. This he did. The mongrel began to yelp. Samson lifted both dogs by the backs of their necks, broke the hold of Sambo and tossed aside the mongrel, who ran away whining.

"That reminded me of a bull that tackled a man over in Vermont," he said. "The man had a club in his hand. He dodged and grabbed the bull's tail and beat him all over the lot. As the bull roared, the man hollered: 'I'd like to know who began this fuss anyway.'"

The stranger laughed.

"Is that your house?" Samson said.

The man stepped nearer and answered in a low, confidential tone:

"Say, mister, this is a combination poorhouse and idiot asylum. I am the idiot. These are the poor."

He pointed to the children.

"You don't talk like an idiot," said Samson.

The man looked around and leaned over the wheel as if about to impart a secret.

"Say, I'll tell ye," he said in a low tone. "A real, first-class idiot never does. You ought to see my actions."

"This land is an indication that you're right," Samson laughed.

"It proves it," the stranger whispered.

"Have you any water here?" Samson asked.

The stranger leaned nearer and said in his most confidential tone. "Say, mister, it's about the best in the United States. Right over yonder in the edge o' the woods—a spring—cold as ice—Simon-pure water. 'Bout the only thing this land'll raise is water."

"This land looks to me about as valuable as so much sheet lightnin' and I guess it can move just about as quick," said Samson.

The stranger answered in a low tone: "Say, I'll tell ye, it's a wild cow—don't stand still long 'nough to give ye time to git anything out of it. I've toiled and prayed, but it's hard to get much out of it."

"Praying won't do this land any good," Samson answered. "What it needs is manure and plenty of it. You can't raise anything here but fleas. It isn't decent to expect God to help run a flea farm. He knows too much for that, and if you keep it up He'll lose all respect for ye. If you were to buy another farm and bring it here and put it down on

"Elijah Brimstead Was a Friend o' My Father."

top o' this one, you could probably make a living. I wouldn't like to live where the wind could dig my potatoes."

Again the stranger leaned toward Samson and said in a half-whisper: "Say, mister, I wouldn't want you to mention it, but talkin' o' fleas, I'm like a dog with so many of 'em that he don't have time to eat. Somebody has got to soap him or he'll die. You see, I traded my farm over in Vermont for five hundred acres o' this sheet lightnin', unsighted an' unseen. We was all crazy to go west an' here we are. If it wasn't for the deer an' the fish I guess we'd 've starved to death long ago."

"Where did ye come from?"

"Orwell, Vermont."

"What's yer name?"

"Henry Brimstead," the stranger whispered.

"Son of Elijah Brimstead?"

"Yes, sir."

Samson took his hand and shook it warmly. "Well, I declare!" he exclaimed. "Elijah Brimstead was a friend o' my father."

"Who are you?" Brimstead asked.

"I'm one o' the Traylors o' Vergennes."

"My father used to buy cattle of Henry Traylor."

"Henry was my father. Haven't you let 'em know about your bad luck?"

The man resumed his tone of confidence. "Say, I'll tell ye," he answered. "A man that's as big a fool as I am ought not to advertise it. A brain that has treated its owner as shameful as mine has treated me should be compelled to do its own thinkin' er die. I've invented some things that may sell. I've been hopin' my luck would turn."

"It'll turn when you turn it," Samson assured him.

Brimstead leaned close to Samson's ear and said in a tone scarcely audible:

"My brother Robert has his own idiot asylum. It's a real handsome one an' he has made it pay, but I wouldn't swap with him."

Samson smiled, remembering that Robert had a liquor store. "Look here, Henry Brimstead, we're hungry," he said. "If ye furnish the water, we'll skirmish around for bread and give ye as good a dinner as ye ever had in yer life."

Henry took the horses to his barn and watered and fed them. Then he brought two pails of water from the spring. Meanwhile Samson started a fire in a grove of small poplars by the roadside and began broiling venison, and Sarah got out the bread board and the flour and the rolling-pin and the teapot. As she waited for the water she called the three strange children to her side. The oldest was a girl of ten, with a face uncommonly refined and attractive. In spite of her threadbare clothes, she had a neat and cleanly look and gentle manners. The youngest was a boy of four. They were a pathetic trio.

"Where's your mother?" Sarah asked of the ten-year-old girl.

"Dead. Died when my little brother was born."

"Who takes care of you?"

"Father and—God. Father says God does most of it."

"Oh dear!" Sarah exclaimed, with a look of pity.

They had a good dinner of fresh biscuits and honey and venison and eggs and tea. While they were eating Samson told Brimstead of the land of plenty.

After dinner, while Brimstead was bringing the team, one of his children, the blonde, pale, tattered little girl of six, climbed into the wagon seat and sat holding a small rag doll, which Sarah had given her. When they were ready to go she stubbornly refused to get down.

"I'm goin' away," she said. "I'm goin' aw-a-ay off to find my mother. I don't like this place. There ain't no Santa Claus here. I'm goin' away."

She clung to the wagon seat and cried loudly when her father took her down.

"Ain't that enough to break a man's heart?" he said with a sorrowful look.

Then Samson turned to Brimstead and asked:

"Look here, Henry Brimstead, are you a drinking man? Honor bright now."

"Never drink a thing but water and tea."

"Do you know anybody who'll give ye anything for what you own here?"

"There's a man in the next town who offered me three hundred and fifty dollars for my interest."

"Come along with us and get the money if you can. I'll help ye fit up and go where ye can earn a living."

"I'd like to, but my horse is lame and I can't leave the children."

"Put 'em right in this wagon and come on. If there's a livery in the place, I'll send ye home."

So the children rode in the wagon and Samson and Brimstead walked, while Sarah drove the team to the next village. There the good woman bought new clothes for the whole Brimstead family and Brimstead sold his interest in the sand plains and bought a good pair of horses, with harness and some cloth for a wagon cover, and had fifty dollars in his pocket and a new look in his face. He put his children on the backs of the horses and led them to his old home, with a sack of provisions on his shoulder. He was to take the track of the Traylors next day and begin his journey to the shores of the Sangamon.

They got into a bad swale that afternoon and Samson had to cut some corduroy to make a footing for team and wagon and do much prying with the end of a heavy pole under the front axle. By and by the horses pulled them out.

"When ol' Colonel bends his neck things have to move, even if he is up to his belly in the mud," said Samson.

As the day waned they came to a river in the deep woods. It was an exquisite bit of forest with the bells of a hermit thrush ringing in one of its towers. Their call and the low song of the river were the only sounds in the silence. The glow of the setting sun which lighted the western windows of the forest had a color like that of the music—golden. Long shafts of it fell through the tree columns upon the road here and there. Our weary travelers stopped on the rude plank bridge that crossed the river. Odors of balsam and pine and tamarack came in a light, cool breeze up the river valley.

"I guess we'll stop at this tavern till tomorrow," said Samson.

Joe was asleep and they laid him on the blankets until supper was ready.

Soon after supper Samson shot a deer which had waded into the rapids. Fortunately, it made the opposite shore before it fell. All hands spent that evening dressing the deer and jerking the best of the meat. This they did by cutting the meat into strips about the size of a man's hand and salting and laying it on a rack, some two feet above a slow fire, and covering it with green boughs. The heat and smoke dried the meat in the course of two or three hours and gave it a fine flavor. Delicious beyond any kind of meat is venison treated in this manner. If kept dry, it will retain its flavor and its sweetness for a month or more.

They set out rather late next morning. As usual, Joe stood by the head of Colonel while the latter lapped brown sugar from the timid palm of the boy. Then the horse was wont to touch the face of Joe with his big, hairy lips as a tribute to his generosity. Colonel had seemed to acquire a singular attachment for the boy and the dog, while Pete distrusted both of them. He had never a moment's leisure, anyhow, being always busy with his work or the flies. A few breaks in the pack basket had been repaired with green withes. It creaked with its load of jerked venison when put aboard.

Farther on the boy got a sore throat. Sarah bound a slice of pork around it and Samson built a camp by the roadside, in which, after a good fire was started, they gave him a hemlock sweat. This they did by steeping hemlock in pails of hot water and, while the patient sat in a chair by the fireside, a blanket was spread about him and pinned close to his neck. Under the blanket they put the pails of steaming hemlock tea. After his sweat and a day and night in bed, with a warm fire burning in front of the shanty, Joe was able to resume his seat in the wagon. They spoke of the Brimsteads and thought it strange that they had not come along.

On the twenty-ninth day after their journey began they came in sight of the beautiful green valley of the Mohawk. As they looked from the hills they saw the roof of the forest dipping down to the river shores and stretching far to the east and west and broken, here and there, by small clearings. Soon they could see the smoke and spires of the thriving village of Utica.

(To be continued.)

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