

Patterns of Wolfpen

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WNU Service

CHAPTER XI—Continued

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"Daddy goes around like he had a trouble bound on his shoulders. He works down around the mill so much I don't know how he's ever going to get herbs for his medicine and the corn in and the hay made and the sorghum. Jasper works in the fields with a sorry look on his face, and I reckon he wants to marry. And Abrial is so excited about everything I can hear him flopping in his bed at night and ramming his knees with a bang into the wall. And there's Jesse working on through his big book and looking at his steer, and I know he is right nervous about going off over to town with so much to do about the place before winter and all these strange men coming here from down-river, and the hard feelings about Grover Sims getting killed. And there's Cynthia. What about you? You think about him and his maps and papers he's working on, and about how you're to get over to the Institute for a winter and about silly things in the trees that you'd just better leave to old Mr. Stingy Shellenberger and his black man. But it's not nice to call even him bad names."

These things gave her enough to think on. The work around the house offered more than she could do.

Slowly September was creeping into Wolfpen. Soon Cynthia would be going away and the thought was pleasant. She had finished the diverse colored cloth for the men's shirts and the blue twill cloth for her own dress, and now she was sewing them while Julia did the cutting.

"Next week will come in a hurry," Julia said.

"It's been such an odd summer," Cynthia answered.

"No two summers are the same, Cynthia."

"But this one is such an awful lot different the others seem alike."

"There have been others, Cynthia. The summer Jesse was sick, and the year Lucy got married, and the spring Jenny moved over on Horsepen; but you were little and didn't notice it like I did to see the two girls gone."

"And now with me about to go."

"But it's just over to town to the Institute, and not like marrying and going off for good and all."

"Sometimes I don't think I'd better go and leave you here with everything."

"It's not much, Cynthia, now that Mullens stays at the camp with the new men. I don't mind Shellenberger like you do, and I'll get Amy to come over on wash-days. I'll manage all right like I always have. I want you to go and you must. And what we don't get done can just wait. And there'll be a right smart of money when Mr. Shellenberger pays for the land. We've been putting more than enough stuff away each winter. You just set your mind at rest, and be thankful for your chances."

Cynthia sewed quietly in thought for a time. The looked at her mother, noting the unselfish look of her face in repose and conscious of the kindly strength of every faint line about her mouth and forehead. Her sense of withholding herself from intimate communication with Julia was suddenly and impulsively gone.

"Mother," she said.

"Yes, Cynthia."

"Do you think I ought to marry somebody?"

"Why, yes, Cynthia, some time you should marry."

"How old were you when you married Daddy?"

"Just about your age. A little younger."

"Is that too soon to marry or not?"

"It would be too soon for you, but it was right for me. I was big for my age. I knew how to manage a

house and your father asked me to marry him. A girl should marry when the right time for her comes."

"Do you think I ought to marry—Doug, Mother?"

Julia controlled her surprise before she spoke again.

"Doug is a mighty good boy."

"But do you think a girl ought to marry just a boy who is good? Doug asked me to."

"And what did you say to him?"

"I said it wasn't time to think about things like that, and he asked me if . . . if . . ."

"Asked you what?"

"If . . . well, he wanted to know if I . . . if he . . ."

She shifted the varicolored shirting on her lap, looking up and then down. "He said, 'Has that . . . have you gone to liking that surveyor?'"

It was uttered, and it seemed very strange to see it taken out of secret and put in the room between her and her mother—just a little phrase "liking that surveyor."

It was such an odd world within to be folded up in three words and stood upon a sewing stand or a bench by the loom.

Julia let it stand there until it was no longer ill at ease, and then said without probing Cynthia's secrets, "What did you tell Doug?"

"I told him a lie."

Its sudden stab was so unexpected that Julia exclaimed, "Why, Cynthia!"

"It seemed like a little tiny lie when I told it, but that was yesterday and today it looks as big as Cranesnest . . ."

"Mother."

"What, Cynthia?"

"Do you think Reuben was about the nicest boy you ever saw?"

"Well, I still remember your father, Cynthia."

"And how he saw you first on the chip pile. You always look the same when anybody mentions that. I'm glad you saw him first that way . . ."

"Mother."

"Yes, dear?"

"Do you know how I first saw Reuben?"

"No, you never said."

"I had burned my hand on the stove, and I was stirring the batter with my left hand, slopping it out against my old dress, and I was so hot and my hair was stringing down in my eyes and I was just about to cry. Then I heard the gate and thought it was Jesse and I went to the porch saying something to him and there he was tall and neat as a poplar, and I couldn't even run like you did when you first met Daddy, but I stood there and mumbled. And then I went back in the kitchen and cried . . ."

"Mother."

"Yes?"

"Don't things ever come out the way a body dreams them?"

"Hardly ever, dear. But sometimes they are better."

"I always thought I'd be looking neat and ladylike and standing by a pear tree, and I wasn't. But maybe it was more like you and Daddy."

They were both silent now, each running forward with her own thoughts and unaware for the instant that a unique moment had passed between them and that they had said things more intimately than ever before. After a time Julia came back, carefully preserving the fragile expansiveness which had confessed these things to her.

Then, "You liked him that much, Cynthia?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Have you . . . talked anything about it?"

"Yes . . . well, no, not right plain out. It is something you just know about the way you know you are breathing or a laurel sprig bursts out pink in the sun up the Pinnacle—or is that just crazy talk Jasper always said about me saying Saul was prowling around the place?"

"It's real nice to be able to know anything that way. A body can't

always know things for a certainty."

"He's going to be a county surveyor some day. What is a county surveyor?"

"I don't just know, but your Daddy would."

"I reckon it doesn't matter much. Don't you think he is different from Doug?"

"Yes. But he's lived different and worked different. Doug is nice folks."

"Mother. Do you think I ought to marry Reuben?"

"Well, Cynthia, you're going to school next week."

"Yes, and I wouldn't miss that for anything hardly. But there is next year."

"And," Julia continued, "he hasn't so much as asked you."

"He said he would come back, and, Mother, it just screamed out that very first day: 'That's him.'"

"Yes, but he may have . . . interests down the river where he lives, and you mustn't . . . unless he has told you . . .?"

"Can't you tell a body things in any way but words, Mother?"

"Why, yes, I reckon so, Cynthia, only a body could be mistaken, you know. Plenty folk mistake plain words. And it comes by nature for Reuben Warren to be nice to people."

"That afternoon we sat on the gray stone by the sycamore and he laid his hand over mine in the white-

hollow at Dry Creek filled with new men whom Sparrel called riffraff and was troubled about."

She waved to Jesse in the meadow where he had been furiously tossing hay and was sitting now under a haycock with the book opened on his knees. "I reckon Jesse sure means business whether he pitches hay or reads the law. I'm right glad he'll be over there too, even if he don't come for a week or two."

Sparrel was outside his shop, leaning against the shade by the door, looking to nowhere out of Wolfpen with puzzlement on his face. It slipped off as Cynthia came into the mill-yard, and he spoke kindly to her and patted the rump of the Finemare.

"You two make a fine-looking outfit, if I do say it myself."

Cynthia, seeing a remnant of her Daddy Sparrel in his eyes and voice, thought, "He ought to have more pleasure out of all this business than he's getting, but he lets other men's troubles be his own because they are on his land, when he ought to let Shellenberger and his black man run on to suit themselves, and be happy up Wolfpen with his own place."

She smiled to him, and waved back as she took the ford over Gannon.

And she smiled with her own sense of pleasure as she heard Abrial's voice pitched high saying, "No. It won't go that way. Here. Watch me."

She dreaded the thought of looking up the hollow where the trees had been cut. As she came into the road beyond the shadow of the Pinnacle where Dry Creek would burst into view, she played a game with herself and the Finemare. "We'll see if we can go by without either of us looking over there to the slaughter pens," she said aloud. It was a difficult game to play. She fixed her eyes on the Finemare's ears for many paces. Then she looked off to the bright, sun-tinted green on the timbered ridges to the north, and down into the cool dark pockets in the hollows where the shadows lay. The Finemare held her neck straight down the road between the Patches of rank horse-weeds as high as her back. "It's not fair for me, Finemare, because you couldn't see over along here even if you wanted to. But I just naturally face that over there because I sit sideways, and I have to stretch my neck to look the other way. It's funny how you try not to look at something you don't want to see and all the time feel it pulling at your eyes so hard you can't hardly keep them off of it." She looked at a great white roll of cloud, trying to decide whether to have it be a dragon straining for its prey, or a fair host of angels draping a veil of luminous wings over the unmolested hills. Then she decided they were just ordinary clouds with nothing to do but go riding in the sky in the afternoon.

So she resisted Dry Creek while they passed the rank horse-weeds, and the cane-brake shooting pale yellow poles high above her, and came to the open meadow. There she suddenly felt the lure of ugliness rushing across the open space and reaching for her eyes, as though a barrier had fallen. She resisted with an effort. She heard the voices of men framing the curious, sharp, monosyllabic cries to the mules and oxen. She felt the smell of wood smoke in her nose and on her tongue. Still she did not look, and the mare was absorbed in the animated manipulation of her own legs. "I reckon maybe we can do what we make up our minds to. And if you won't look while I do it, I'll shut my eyes till we are clean across the meadow and get our backs to it." She closed her eyes, and gave her body in relaxation to the rhythm of each precise step of the mare.

Then she felt the muscles on the mare's shoulders contract with a snap, and tighten back to her rump, as she swerved and broke the rhythm of her gait. Cynthia involuntarily opened her eyes to see a young rabbit leap into a clump of berry vines.

As she followed its leap she heard men shouting, followed by the swish and the sharp explosive crack of a tree beginning its fall. The mare looked and Cynthia looked into the hollow at the heavy fall of a great tulip tree, lunging against all the efforts of the lumberman down-hill through space in a thunderous sighing swish, rebounding from the ground on resilient limbs and springing like a beheaded chicken a dozen yards from the stump on the steep hillside.

"I reckon a body just has to look sometimes when things get hurt and die. Does it make your stomach twist too? We both did it at the same time, and maybe you are not so different from the other people just because your square mouth won't make any words."

And Cynthia looked into the smoking brush piles and ugly stumps where possums used to crouch in the padded silence.

The Mason place was unaltered; the weathered paling fence where she left the mare, the chickens about the yard, the slight musty smell of the house compounded of wood-smoke, unaired rooms, cooking and sickness. It dawned suddenly on Cynthia that it was this redolence of other people which had always made her vaguely unhappy at the Masons'.

The roof over the porch was still incomplete. There was a hen in Sarah's hickory-split rocker. Cynthia went on into the kitchen.

Sarah had her large bare feet propped on a cushion while she shelled beans from the sack by her side. She wept to see Cynthia, dabb-ling at her eyes and smiling and talking all the time about how long it had been since she had come to see her, of the progress of her afflictions, of the gifts Julia had sent, and of Doug. "He's gone over to his 'seng patch again. He goes over there purt' near every evening with his gun."

Cynthia told her about the news from Wolfpen and her plans for the Institute. Sarah made her usual exclamations and another of these visits was nearing an end.

"So you go off next week," Sarah said again, hobbling to the porch. "You'll be coming back to visit before long, I reckon."

"Yes, it's not so far."

"Doug is over by the 'seng bed, Cynthia. He'd never get over it if you went off without saying good-by," she said, dabb-ling at her eyes again.

"I'll go by the patch like I said. You take good care of yourself while I'm gone."

"I'll do the best I can, Cynthia. I wish you didn't have to hurry off."

Doug was crouched in a clump of sumac bushes looking down on the oblong glade. He was so intent that he did not see or hear her at once. She slipped down from the mare and stood watching him shoulder the gun, and trying to see what he could be shooting at. There was nothing to be seen but a few cardinals flitting about the red seed-pod berries on the 'seng. While she looked, he fired, and as she batted her eyes and calmed the startled mare she saw a puff of red feathers jerk sharply upward and then flutter to the ground.

"Oh!" she cried, as if she were hurt, and hid her eyes against the mare's neck.

"Why, howdy, Cynthia."

He came out of the bushes full of pleasure at the unexpected sight of her, and then looking puzzled as he sensed obscurely that she had turned away her spirit.

"How's the folks?" he said, touching the mare's mane.

"What in the world are you shooting, Doug?" she demanded.

"Birds."

"Was that a cardinal you just killed?"

"Yes. That makes nearly two hundred I got this week and I only missed three."

"Oh, shame on you, Doug! How could you do such a thing!"

"Why, they're heartin' every berry in my 'seng patch and eating the seed I wanted to save."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

CHAPTER XII

IT WAS in the afternoon at the end of August that Cynthia went down to say good-by to Sarah Mason and Doug. It was the first time in many weeks that she had sat the Finemare and ridden out of Wolfpen. It was a joyous thing to feel horse muscle flow under her thighs and connect with her spirit, to hear the soft, plopping of quick hoofs against the sand. It was tonic to efface the thought of what she would see when she peered into the



"You'll Be Coming Back to Visit Before Long, I Reckon."