

HIGHER GROUND

By Beverley Brenna

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NELLIE MOONEY dropped her basket of eggs and picked up a stick to chase the speckled chicken to the other side of the tidy, log henhouse. Her usually laughing eyes were wide with anger.

“Stay over there, you bad thing,” she yelled, “or I’ll put you in the stew pot. Stew pot!”

She turned and examined the yellow hen the other chicken had been pecking. It fixed a watery eye on her as she clicked her teeth at its bald and bleeding rump. Then it bobbed over to where she had dropped her basket.

Nellie checked through the eggs. Two had been cracked by the fall. Eggs were very dear, ten cents a dozen. Her first impulse was to hide the broken ones under the straw, but she wanted her mother to see what that awful chicken had made her do.

“Stew pot!” she hissed at it again. “I should let you out for the weasels.” But she didn’t. She carefully closed the henhouse door and headed up the hill to the farmhouse where she lived with her parents and five older siblings.

Her mother, however, did not lay the blame for the broken eggs on the chicken.

“Get the churn,” said Mrs. Mooney crossly. “You will make the butter.”

“But I—” Nellie began.

“Enough,” warned her mother. “Do as you’re told.”

Inwardly, Nellie groaned. She had hoped to spend the morning outside collecting arrowheads among the goldenrod and piles of buffalo bones down by the creek. The buffalo had vanished in 1879, the year before Nellie’s family had come to Manitoba. Secretly, Nellie hoped she’d see one of the lost giants after all, maybe among the poplar bluffs or galloping its way north west across the prairie towards the mysterious, blue-black Brandon Hills.

Pushing the handle of the big, wooden churn made her arms ache and as the butter started to form, the foot pedal got harder and harder to press. As she worked, she thought of the First of July picnic in Millford that afternoon, wondering if there'd be chocolates. Someone had brought some to last year's picnic—the first Nellie had tasted—and she had made hers last as long as she could, enjoying the unbelievable sweetness.

Dreaming of the picnic, Nellie missed the rattle of the small chunks of new butter. Gas building up inside the churn popped the cork and cream flew everywhere.

“Oh Nellie, you didn't let it air!” cried her mother, running in to see rivulets of cream seeping into the cracks of the floor.

“It came too fast,” Nellie exploded, much as the cream had done. “Stupid old stuff! I don't know why we need butter anyway—”

“You will learn to hold your tongue, young lady,” interrupted her mother. “That is a lesson you seem reluctant to learn, but maybe cleaning up this mess will teach you once and for all. Unless perhaps you'd prefer not to go to the picnic.”

Nellie's arms and legs ached, but she went out and got the bucket and filled it with hot water from the stove.

“Hold your tongue, hold your tongue,” she thought. “Someone's always telling me that.”

As she scrubbed the floor, she recalled the discussion about politics her mother and brother had had the other day. Her brother hoped a young lawyer from Winnipeg would earn a seat in the local legislature, but her mother strongly disagreed with his choice.

“Just vote for who you like,” Nellie had said to her mother to calm things down.

“Hush!” her mother snapped. “Women aren't allowed to vote.”

“Not allowed to vote!” exclaimed Nellie. “But that's wrong!”

“Hold your tongue,” said her mother.

“I'd like to throw this butter out the window,” Nellie muttered when she had finished cleaning the floor. Then she smiled in spite of herself. “But first I'd like to churn that chicken into it.”

Nellie tipped the heavy churn from side to side until the butter had chunked into one large piece. Then, her thin arms trembling, she carefully drained out the butter-milk

and scooped the butter into a wooden bowl where she worked in the salt. Finally, the butter neatly squared inside paper wrappers, Nellie approached her mother.

“Isn’t it almost time for the picnic?” she asked carefully.

“Yes, yes, I suppose it is,” answered her mother. “Change into your church dress, with the straw hat to match. Your sisters are upstairs.”

Nellie looked admiringly at the new print dress she pulled from the closet. Her mother had made it from material she brought from Ontario when they moved three years ago and Nellie was seven. The hat that went with the dress was lined with the same flowered cloth.

As Nellie climbed into the wagon behind her father, she noticed that her brothers hadn’t had to change their clothes. Lizzie, one of Nellie’s older sisters, carried the carrot gelatins their mother had set overnight in the cellar. Hannah, the other sister, carried cinnamon rolls, curled like snail shells. Their mother held the hamper which contained ham sandwiches, plates, cups and cutlery, with two pies on top. Without fruit or eggs for the pies, Letitia Mooney had concocted a filling of molasses and butter thickened with bread crumbs and flavoured with vinegar and cinnamon. The three boys didn’t carry anything.

Tables had been placed under the poplar trees by the flax blue water of the Souris River. When the Mooney family arrived, they added their contribution to what was already there. Nellie walked along, admiring the variety. On one table were placed devilled eggs, buns, slices of cheese, sandwiches, and hard boiled eggs. There were also plates of fried chicken—although not Old Stew Pot, thought Nellie regretfully. The next table held potato salads, cabbage salads, jellied salads, lettuce cut up in sour cream, and pickles. Then there were the pies, the doughnuts, the jelly rolls, the cookies. Large coffee urns stood over to one side, the smell of the brew better than the taste, thought Nellie. And there was lemonade in big, metal cream cans.

At a booth set up that morning and run by the district’s welcoming committee, there was fresh ice cream made by Hettie Smith who had ice from winter kept in sawdust in an ice shack behind the house. Nellie had never tasted ice cream and she went over to take a peek. It looked like custard. The money made at this booth would go to welcome the new pioneers who had settled in the area, buying them baskets of supplies from the store in Millford. The smell of vanilla made Nellie’s mouth water.

“Five cents a bowl,” said one of the women running the booth.

Five cents! Nellie swallowed hard and thought of those broken eggs. She couldn’t ask her mother for money now.

Instead, she got a plate and helped herself to the food on the tables. She didn’t take any of her mother’s sandwiches—they ate lots of ham at home but filled her plate with fried chicken and a spoonful of each of the salads.

“Leave some for me!” called Jack, her next eldest brother.

Nellie saw from his plate that he was already returning for seconds.

“Pig!” she said.

While everyone ate, a brass band from Brandon played, with earth shaking tones, “Rule Britannia,” “The Maple Leaf,” and “God Save the Queen,” as well as other songs Nellie didn’t recognize. After a baseball game which pitted married men against single men, the foot races began. Nellie’s fists clenched in anticipation. The winners won a nickel—enough for ice cream! She hoped there would be a foot race for girls or at least one for girls and boys together.

Her mother frowned when she mentioned it.

“Girls, racing? Certainly not. Your skirts would fly up and your legs might show.”

“But the boys show their—”

“Keep silent!” said her mother.

“Keep silent!” the politician cried, looking severely at an older Nellie where she stood at the front of the auditorium with the men. She was allowed to listen to politics but not, apparently, able to speak her mind.

Why were women only entitled to listen, staying at the back of the room like a herd of cattle? And why, when the elections came, were they not allowed to vote? Nellie pondered these questions as she listened to the rest of the politician’s speech. But she didn’t interrupt again. At least, not this time.

Nellie went off behind a poplar bluff and practiced keeping her skirts down as she ran among the orange lilies. It was a hard thing to do. Her dress kept wrapping itself around her legs and with the thick red drawers underneath, she felt like a tethered pony. Disgusted, she plucked at some Saskatoon berries but they weren’t yet ripe and left a dusty taste in her mouth.

Soon, everyone gathered for the slow-ox race. Nellie crossed her fingers for her father’s black-and-white Jake. He was a gentle little ox and so pokey that at home they

harnessed him to another ox to get him going. This time though, the slowest ox of all won the prize and the prize was a big box of raisins from Read and Callendar's store.

As was the custom, owners didn't ride their own oxen. A neighbor's hired man—Jimmy Sloan—rode Jake, trying to get him to move as fast as possible by waving his straw hat and howling like a coyote. Jake, true to himself, twitched his ears and would not be hurried.

Nellie pushed Mrs. Dale's baby buggy along the hill at the side of the race, proud that Mrs. Dale was counting on her to look after baby Sara.

"Who can I count on?"

Nellie looked around at the other quilters. They were all ignoring the plea from the minister's wife to sign a petition to Parliament requesting a vote for Canadian women.

"I'll sign," Nellie said.

There were a few audible gasps from the other women. Nellie Mooney, the teacher, was going to sign the petition.

"Women should help each other," Nellie said quietly as she signed her name.

"Got a smile?" Nellie tickled baby Sara under the chin and then pushed the buggy up onto higher ground.

Suddenly, black-and-white Jake leaped forward. Jimmy Sloan was thrown sideways, sending a whisky bottle flying out of his jacket, and the ox lurched up the rise to where Nellie stood with the baby. Nellie saw him coming but she didn't run. Jake crashed past, inches away, his eyes white, his sides squeezing like a bellows. Nellie saw Jake's stomach painted with blood. Jimmy Sloan had cheated and used spurs! He got up unsteadily and started away. He was drunk.

Hot anger washed over Nellie.

"You—you—you should be ashamed of yourself!" she cried, the words cool on her tongue. "You should—"

"And what about you, Mrs. Nellie McClung? Who's darning your husband's socks while you're out making your speeches?" sneered a man from the audience.

"A woman's place is in the home, with her children!" called another man angrily.

"I dare say her husband's dead," muttered a woman.

Nellie looked calmly across the hall. When she continued speaking, her voice was pleasant.

“My family is well, thank you, they’ll be glad you asked after them. My husband did have a slight cold last year, but he is quite recovered. And,” she lowered her voice in a conspiratorial whisper, “his socks are in excellent shape—he will be delighted at your concern.”

Laughter rippled across the room.

“But I must ask you,” Nellie went on, her voice increasing in force, “Would it be right to shut the door of the church in the faces of half the congregation? Is it wise to close the shop at noon, turning away half the day’s customers? Half of this town is women, am I not correct? When you look into the eyes of your mother, your wife, your sister.. are you not ashamed to tell them that when they travel, the only accident insurance available is for men? Why is this? And why, when your daughters may join you at church or at the store, are they turned away at the voters’ box?” Nellie looked into the eyes of her listeners. “Those of you who stand in the way of half this town should be, and I’ll say it again, ashamed.”

“Ashamed!” Nellie called after Jimmy Sloan’s retreating figure.

“Hush, Nellie,” said her mother, coming up the hill to take her arm.

“No, I won’t hush! He hurt our Jake and he could have hurt me. And the baby!” She stood dizzily and looked down the hill at the man who was still weaving away from the crowd.

“You should—you should—you’re just a real COWARD Mr. Sloan! A REAL COWARD!” she yelled. The more she spoke, the lighter she felt, until it seemed her feet weren’t touching the ground at all. “COWARD!” A white-faced Mrs. Dale gathered baby Sara in her arms, choking back sobs.

Mrs. Mooney pushed the baby buggy down the hill, leading Nellie, stiff-legged, along with it. Her mother didn’t look at her when she said quietly, “You stood your ground and saved the baby, Nellie. Good girl.”

“I’ll stand my ground on this,” said Nellie to the Premier of Manitoba.

“Take it from me, Mrs. McClung,” he told her “Nice women don’t want the vote.”

“Maybe your nice women aren’t working in dirty factories. They’re not widows begging money from their sons, and they’re not watching their children go hungry while their drunken husbands do what they please,” snapped Nellie. “I know many nice women in these situations and, believe me, they want to pick Members of Parliament who will make laws to help them.”

The Premier didn’t respond. He was thinking about what this woman was saying and wondering uncomfortably if perhaps it mightn’t be better to have her on his side after all.

At the bottom of the hill, Mrs. Dale nodded at Nellie, her eyes still full of tears.
“Thank you,” she said.

Nellie held her pride like a chocolate in her cheek. For once that day, she had done the right thing.