

TWO-THIRTY CROSSING

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SLEET POUNDED AGAINST the windowpane of the Nebraska soddy while John Maxwell's father lay in his bed by the wall. His throat sounded terribly raw as he coughed from deep in his lungs. John covered his ears to escape the sounds. Each day Papa grew worse. Now he was burning with fever, his blue eyes clouded and confused. Fear crept up John's back with icy fingers.

It was just he and Papa here on their homestead claim. The nearest neighbor lived across four miles of rolling prairie, while the town of Grand Island, Nebraska, lay fully ten miles southwest of the Maxwell homestead. How could he ever get word to the doctor there without leaving Papa alone? Mama would know what to do.

But Mama and the girls wouldn't join them until the following spring of 1869. That had sounded like such a great plan when they'd all been together in their little house back in St. Louis, Missouri. John shivered. Then it had seemed so easy to homestead—just live on the land and grow crops for five years to become its owners. But the question chipped away at the back of John's mind—could grown men die from cough and fever? What good would free land be to them without Papa?

The feverish man's breath rattled in his chest. He muttered strange phrases and thrashed as if to drive back his terrible sickness.

"Papa!" John knelt by the bed. "Can you hear me?"

But Mr. Maxwell only moaned.

The ticking of the little mantel clock they had brought from back home pounded in John's ears. Mechanically he noted the time: five after two. In less than half an hour, the afternoon train to Grand Island would roar through the crossing more than three miles away.

Then an idea pierced his fear-clouded mind. John jerked on his mackinaw and grabbed his cowboy hat off the table. Papa had given the hat to him that past summer when he had turned twelve. “A man needs a good hat in this country,” his father had said. John swallowed around the lump in his throat. Back then the gift had made him happy. Today it was small comfort.

Turning to his bed, John yanked the white case from his pillow and tucked it inside his shirt. Then, stuffing the matchbox in his pocket, he snatched the kerosene lantern from its hook and dashed out the door without looking back.

Icy rain hit him with a cruel fist. The whole world seemed gray and dripping as he sprinted for the sod barn, and the wide sweep of surrounding prairie seemed cold and forbidding. Once inside the low building, the familiar bulk of their milk cow calmed him somewhat, and the two plow horses looked up with mild surprise. For a moment John stared at their huge heads and bulging muscles. Papa had been plowing in the October cold when he had started to cough. By the time he had finished breaking enough ground to plant a crop next spring, he could hardly walk.

“Got ’er done, John,” he had rasped. “Come spring, you an’ me’ll plant our first crop.”

Papa hadn’t been up since. A knife of fear twisted in John’s belly. He turned from the workhorses and made his way past the animals to where the Maxwells’ saddle horse stood. She was a game little black mare he and Papa had named Ozark after the low, wooded mountains of southern Missouri. Conscious of swiftly flying time, John grabbed a bridle and slipped the bit between Ozark’s teeth. Smoothing the saddle blanket onto her back, he heaved the saddle on and cinched it tight.

Next John tied the lantern to his belt. Then he led the horse from the quiet of the barn into the cruelty of the sleety afternoon. Dancing, Ozark laid her ears back as John got a foot in the stirrup and threw himself up into the saddle. The lantern banged awkwardly against his thigh, but the pillowcase was a comforting warmth against his belly.

John threw a glance over his shoulder. The little soddy where his father lay seemed so lost and helpless as it perched on the small knoll of their homestead—like an island in the midst of an infinite ocean of brown grassland. Turning from the sight, John took a deep breath to steady his hands and clapped his heels into the mare’s flanks.

She leaped ahead like a rock from a slingshot, and he leaned forward to put more of his weight over her powerful shoulders, helping her the only way he knew how.

The railroad tracks lay an eternity beyond him. Normally John loved to wander over the long, slow roll of the Nebraska plains, following the brush-and-tree-lined coulees to where the vast land met the broadness of the sky. Now, instead of exciting him to see how the land stretched forever, it filled him with despair.

The tough, brown grass of the prairie seemed to drag at Ozark's pounding hoofs. How could a horse's thin legs hope to cover the expanse in time? If the great, black engine steamed past as they raced toward it, what would he do then? Tomorrow might be too late for Papa. John thudded his heels into the mare's flanks again, and she flattened out like a racehorse, pitting muscle and bone against a cold, iron monster.

Never had the prairie seemed so infinite. Never had time seemed to fly on such swift wings. The straining horse beneath him lathered and steamed while the frozen rain cut at John's face. Then ahead and to his left came the whistle of the train! It would soon be at the crossing. John nearly lost a stirrup as he prodded the mare to an ounce more speed. He had to make it. He just had to.

Moments later, Ozark pounded up to the crossing as if a pack of wolves were at her heels. John threw himself from the saddle, glad the mare had been trained to stand still when her reins were dropped. He stumbled the last few feet, willing himself not to watch the locomotive bearing down upon him, no more than a mile away. Kneeling by the tracks, he fumbled with his matches and lantern. Again the whistle blew—a blaring trumpet in his ears.

Once, twice, the matches sputtered in the sleety drizzle. The third one caught for a moment but fizzled out as he touched it to the lantern's wick.

Toooooo WHOOOOOOOO. Too close. John dropped the lantern. Jerking the pillowcase from under his shirt, he jumped between the rails and whipped the cloth back and forth with all his strength. Would the engineer see this little white blur in the gray afternoon? In the back of his mind, he recalled Papa saying it could take a train more than half a mile to slow down and stop.

Half a mile? The train loomed closer and closer, and John couldn't tell if it was slowing at all.

WHOOooo WOOOOOOO. The giant eye of the headlight cut through the sleet. John stood his ground, a rabbit in the path of a great predator. If he couldn't stop the train, no doctor would come, and Papa might die. John could think no further than that.

He whipped off his hat and waved it, too—hoping, praying. “Stop! Please, stop! Don't you see meeeeeeee?” he screamed as the locomotive barreled down upon him. One last wave. One last plea. “STOP!”

He leaped from between the rails and hit the ground hard before rolling away from the tracks. Moments later he felt the suck of the engine and caught a glimpse of the angry, red face of the engineer. John's panting was loud in his ears as the hissing monster screeched its way to a stop nearly a quarter of a mile beyond him.

In a daze, John stuffed his pillowcase back under his shirt, gathered up his lantern and Ozark's reins, then tottered on suddenly weak legs to where the locomotive had halted. His horse stayed by his side. The engineer leaped from the cab and rushed toward him.

“You crazy boy!” the man bellowed. “You could'a got yerself killed right there! More than one man has got crushed flaggin' a train like that.”

John tried not to burst into tears. “P-please, sir. I'm sorry, sir,” he stammered. “I just had to stop you—my papa's real sick. Would you take word to the doctor in Grand Island for me?”

The engineer's voice was suddenly gentle. “What's wrong with 'im?”

John tried to keep his voice from shaking. “He's coughing real bad, talking crazy, burning with fever.”

“Could be pneumony.” The burly man cleared his throat. “Where do you live, boy?”

“About three miles northeast of here—in a soddy on a small knoll.”

“I'll tell you what. When we hit town, I'll start Doc Matthews in that direction. He should be to your place before dark.” The man turned to go, then looked back and said, “Hope your pa will be all right, son.”

The lump of tears in John's throat was too big to let words squeeze by, so he nodded and tried to smile.

Moments later, the train pulled away like a massive serpent. Twin streaks of warmth ran down John's icy cheeks, but he smiled into the sleety Nebraska wind as he raised

his hat in a salute to the disappearing train. Then he mounted Ozark and turned the tired, black mare back toward the sod house to find that his father was more ill than before.

Doc Matthews arrived on horseback as the gray daylight faded to grayer twilight.

“Well, son, he’s mighty sick,” the silver-haired man said. “It’s pneumonia, all right.”

John stared at his hat, now hanging next to his father’s on the post in the center of the room. “But, Doctor,” John said, swallowing hard, “will he—?”

The doctor’s hand was warm on John’s shoulder. “That’s in the good Lord’s hands. All I know is that tonight is critical. If we can get him through till morning, he should be on the mend.”

Papa thrashed and moaned worse than ever, wild-eyed and racked with deep coughing. Doc Matthews rolled up his sleeves. “I’m going to need some hot water, John, and a couple of extra blankets. And how are you at making coffee?”

“I’ve watched Papa a lot,” John said, glad to have something—anything—to do that might help.

As he stirred up the fire in the cookstove, he tried not to think of all the mornings Papa had smiled at him across the rim of his cup.

“Here’s the water, sir.” John watched as the doctor rummaged in his black bag. “I’ll just set your coffee here on the table. Can I get you anything else?”

“Nothing right now, son. Thanks.” Doc spread the blanket over the sick man. “I’ll let you know if I need anything later.”

John vowed he would stay awake to help, but the next thing he knew, the morning sun streamed across his face. Doc Matthews drowsed in a chair near Papa’s bed.

The sour taste of fear flooded John’s mouth as he crossed to the quiet form on the other bed. The moaning was over, the restless hands still. “Oh, Papa,” John whispered, reaching down and stroking his father’s work-worn hand. “We were going to plant our land, come spring.”

The hand beneath John’s stirred.

“And so we shall, son.” Papa’s voice was very weak, but as he gazed up at John, his eyes were as clear and blue as the Nebraska sky. “So we shall.”