The RIM OF THE PRAIRIE

BESS STREETER ALDRICH

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By BESS STREETER ALDRICH

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"Mother Mason," etc.

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THE RIM OF THE PRAIRIE

CHAPTER I

THE RETURN

ON the second Friday in September the evening passenger train from the East pulled into the Maple City station, a little late as usual, like an old man with a chronic complaint which he accepts stoically.

There was the customary stir around the station to greet this event. The drayman noisily backed his team into the platform. The agent came importantly out of the ticket office. A fat boy hurried along to get the mail sacks. A group of idlers pressed forward with a feeble show of animation. The brakeman swung down from the Pullman with a flourish of arms. It was almost a ridiculous anti-climax that after all this commotion only one passenger alighted . . . a young woman in her early twenties.

She wore a trim dark suit, a close-fitting hat and a fur, which gave her an appearance of slim daintiness. She gave no glance toward the people on the platform, but turned abruptly to her right and walked quickly past the baggage room and freight shed where a great pile of chicken crates gave forth feathery rustling sounds. The drayman, watching the stranger, made a half movement toward going after her and explaining that Main Street was up the other way, thought better of it and let her go.

The girl turned up a grassy side street without walks and hurried along in the soft dusk. She continued to walk

rapidly, looking neither to the right nor the left as though she wanted no one to speak to her. By this out-of-the-way route she reached Main Street near its end and crossed the railroad tracks where the pavement abruptly changed to gravel road. Only there did she stop in her swift walk, turn and look back toward the business part of town.

She saw a few new store buildings and a stone court house replacing the old brick one of her childhood. But to her searching eyes everything else seemed the same and yet paradoxically different. The street that had been so wide years before was not of unusual width. Buildings that had seemed huge were dwarfed. Far back up Main Street through the trees she could see the old Baldwin home that had once been the show place of the town. To her surprise the vast conservatory with its multitude of long paneled glass panes was merely a big double bay window. And she had once wondered whether there could be any other place in the world in which so much glass was assembled! It made her chuckle . . . to think how Time, the careless laundryman, shrinks many of our ideals.

If the Baldwin place had once been the show place of the town it was evidently no longer so, for up on the hill where formerly there had been only rank undergrowth, stood a new house, wonderfully fine and artistic for Maple City. Whose could it be? The girl, who had seen Italian architecture in its native setting, recognized it as belonging to the Renaissance period. There was something out of place about it here overlooking the sleepy maple-and-elm-bordered streets of the old midwestern town. It looked supercilious above the comfortable brick and frame houses, a little like a sophisticated alien among provincial natives.

She turned and walked to the bridge over Tinkling Creek. For a moment she loitered, seeing in memory the little girl who was herself drop a bent pin and line over its railing.

She recalled skating under it, too, with Walt Thomas, while a team and wagon rumbled and crashed over their heads. She had shivered and clung to Walt with, "What if it'd *bust* through?"

This was fun. She was enjoying herself . . . was glad she had decided to make the trip. She passed the creamery with its peculiar odor, half sour and half sweet, and the little cottages near it. She came to the Carlsons' home and from the number of children in the yard decided that the family had been increasing with its old-time regularity. In the dusk she recognized the mother, Jen Carlson, on her front steps, but not wanting to talk to her, she hurried along, ostrich-like.

She had left the town behind now and was out on the highway heading for the east. Night was beginning to settle down comfortably over the country. There was a hush on the twilight fields. It looked peaceful. But the girl knew that peace is a matter of heart and mind and not of location.

She passed the cemetery. There was no fear within her to be out on the country road. The way was too familiar and homelike to call forth any forebodings.

Several times cars passed her. When she saw their headlights coming she would slip farther up into the friendly shadow of the cottonwoods and Lombardy poplars that lined some of the pastures. The corn rustled eerily, its long brown fingers beckoning to her, its low sibilant voices whispering to her.

The moon swung up from the east and scattered white magic over the fields. It made the Lombardys look like the mosque towers from which the Muezzin cries the call to prayer. Those on the right of the road cast ridiculously long minaret-like shadows toward the northwest.

She passed the mile corner. As she walked she threw

back her head and breathed deeply of the night odor, that peculiar mid-west combination of loam and subsoil, corn and apple trees and clover bloom.

Toward the end of the second mile, Tinkling Creek, a gypsy stream that seemed to wander where it desired, swung across her path again. Frogs were croaking below its banks. A clammy dampness hung over it like a tangible thing. She crossed the white-railed bridge.

There was the Thomas place now on her right. She took the opposite side of the road under the Lombardys. If Walt's mother, Mattie Thomas, should see her, the whole countryside would know of her arrival.

There it was . . . on the left. . . . Uncle Jud Moore's place behind the cottonwoods. They did not know she was coming, did not believe that she would ever come again.

Now that she was so near she began, for the first time, to question her impulsive decision to come; questioned, too, the possibility of their still being there, whether in fact they were living. Aunt Biny especially, always frail, might not have lived through these years. The girl's heart was pounding tumultuously. Four years is a long time. If they were dead. . . . Quite suddenly the trouble she had given them seemed larger and more cruel.

She stood for a moment by the gate with its clanking chain on which a horseshoe swung. In the moon shadows nothing seemed changed unless there was a dwarfed crumbling look about the buildings as though Time had leaned heavily upon them.

There was a light in the middle room of the house and another one out in the cabin that had once been her playhouse.

She walked up the grassy path between the petunias. She knew that the blossoms were pink and lavender but, in the half dusk, half moonlight, they were all white. There was

that same odor again . . . the mingling of loam, alfalfa, dust, petunias, apple trees. . . .

She placed her bag quietly by the steps and walked to the sitting-room window. She had not dreamed that she would feel such fear and agitation, such hope that everything was as it had been.

There they were. Two old people sat by a red-covered, drop-leaf table. The old man, huge of body, gaunt framed, gray bearded, was reading a paper. The old lady, gentle looking, white haired, a crutch by her side, was darning a stocking. A swift flash of tears swept the girl's brown eyes and she put her hand to her throat to stop its quivering. Why, how *old* they looked! They had seemed only middle-aged the day she went away.

She lingered for a few moments as though she could not bear to leave the picture. Then she took off her hat and dropped it by her bag. Everything hung on her reception. There would be no middle ground of welcome. Either they would be quite beside themselves with joy or . . . shut the door upon her.

She stepped up on the porch and with infinite care to be quiet lay down at the very threshold of the door and curled herself into a ball. Then, trembling with the import of the decision, she reached up and knocked sharply.

She could hear the creaking of a chair, a heavy shuffling and the door above her opening. The old man looked out and then down at the girl by his feet. In a high squeaky voice that shook a little in spite of its brave attempt at fun, she said, "Baby on your doorstep."

There was a long moment in which she scarcely breathed. The old man seemed dazed as though the faculties of his mind could not adjust themselves to the peculiar situation. And then quite suddenly comprehending, he opened his bearded mouth and roared, great enormous laughter, and

slapped his knee. The girl looked up impishly. "I didn't really *darken* your doorway, Uncle Jud, did I?" Then she jumped up and threw her arms around him.

The old lady who had been coming forward slowly on her crutch, and peering curiously at the two, suddenly realized the truth and put out her hands. "Oh, my dear . . . my dear . . ." she said brokenly, her withered cheek against the fresh one. "My dear. . . ."

They stood in a little group together with some laughter and some tears. And because people do not say all that is in their hearts there were no apologies and no forgiveness, no questions and no answers. Only tears! And laughter! And home!

And then Uncle Jud Moore, whose idea of hospitality was to make the house very hot, was stuffing cottonwood chunks into the kitchen range. And Aunt Biny, her gentle face aglow, her worn crutch thumping over the scrubbed bareness of the kitchen floor, was getting a bite for the wayfarer to eat.

The girl curled up in a deep chintz-covered chair and took in the scene. The long narrow room, a combination kitchen and dining room, was spotless. In the dining-room end where she sat, rag rugs lay over the slate-colored painted floor. There were geraniums in the window and a little Black Prince fuchsia that looked as gentle and frail as Aunt Biny. The table was set with a white cloth and shining heavy dishes. In the kitchen end the huge range and wood-box, piled high with dried chunks, took up the width of the room. It was an old-fashioned room, not very convenient and not at all artistic, but to the girl it seemed peaceful, homelike, and because she was troubled, a haven.

There was much to say. Aunt Biny could not seem to get lunch for stopping to take in the fragrant slender charm of the girl curled up in the big chair. Uncle Jud asked mukti-

tudinous questions, ending each one with a split stick for the range, like so many cottonwood interrogation points.

"Yes, I'm going to stay six weeks or two months."

"Only two months! That ain't half long enough."

"Oh, *why* such a short time?" Now that she was home it seemed that it must be for always.

"I have to go back to my wedding," she said unconcernedly. "They quite insist that I shall attend it."

Aunt Biny on her crutch came up to the chintz-covered chair and put her hand on the girl's brown head.

"And so you've met a man you love?" she said gently.

The girl reached up and patted the worn old fingers. "Well . . ." she threw out her own hand in a little characteristic gesture, "I've met *a man*. . . ."

It hurt Aunt Biny. It did not sound right. There was a note missing from the girl's voice . . . a note that should have been there.

Both of the old folks questioned her further until, quite abruptly, she changed the subject.

"Do you have hired help living in the old cabin, Uncle Jud? I saw a light there when I came."

Uncle Jud roared and slapped his knee. "Help? Lord, no. A feller's out there writin'. Rented it for a week to write in. Writes all day and all night and tramps down the cockleburrs in Tinklin' Creek when he ain't. Works over in town in the First National Bank. This is his vacation. Lord!" He slapped his knee again in the ecstasy of the joke. "Think of puttin' in your vacation writin'! Name's Field. . . . Warner Field."

The girl stared at him. "Warner Field?" she repeated it questioningly as though she had not heard right. There was surprise and incredulity in her tone, and something that might have been either interest or pleasure. But old Jud Moore was not subtle. He did not concern himself with the

nuances of the human voice. And there were more important things to explain to the girl while she ate, the taxes for the new graveled road, the cow that had twin calves, the muskrat catch of the winter before with two minks thrown in for good measure.

After the three had talked for a long time, Aunt Biny said happily that they must all go to bed, that there would be a lot of to-morrows in which to visit. The girl took a lamp from a high shelf in the kitchen, lighted its clean wick, gave each of the old folks an impetuous kiss and went up the narrow built-in stairway. Straight to the south bedroom she went, opened the door and stepped inside. The room was neat and clean. The single bed was made up with a white spread and a fat pillow standing upright in its starched case. On the high bureau were a gay scarf and many girlish trinkets. A small writing desk stood in the curve of the south windows. The chairs, the pictures, the cedar chest, were all in their old places. Through the open closet door she could see a few out-of-date dresses and a sun-hat hanging limply on their hooks. Everything was just as she had left it. Nothing of hers had been changed. With the lamp still in her hand she stood for some time just inside the doorway and took in the picture of the old-fashioned room. It was not true that environment made any difference with one's personality but, if it were so, it would account for the feeling of tranquillity that possessed her, the witchery of the place that enveloped her. For a whimsical moment she had the sensation that the girl who climbed the stairs had been met at the door of the bedroom by another and, crossing the threshold, had become that one.

God send us a little home
To come back to when we roam.
Red firelight and deep chairs
And a small white bed upstairs.

CHAPTER II

WARNER FIELD

THE telling of a story is necessarily as flat as the paper on which it is penned. It has no third dimension. Like a picture on canvas there is no back side to it. And for that reason it will never show life in its completeness. For in reality while one thing is taking place a dozen small events are transpiring elsewhere to influence or change that particular act. If one could only walk around back of it and see these other incidents that are happening simultaneously, the story would become more complete and real, would take upon itself depth as well as length and breadth.

That one may know why Warner Field was spending a week in a cabin on old Jud Moore's farm, it becomes necessary, then, to walk around behind the story to the Sunday noon before the girl's arrival.

On that second Sunday noon in September, Warner Field turned in at the old Baldwin house, once Maple City's most select home, but now its most select boarding house. Warner Field was not quite thirty but he walked laggingly like a man from whom the energy of youth had fled.

Houses have personality. Have you never seen a dignified house looking disdainfully, critically down upon its frivolous bungalow neighbors? Or an old weather-beaten one trying to appear debonair in new shingles like a withered old woman in a wig?

The old Baldwin house—nicknamed "The Bee-House" by the boarders—had personality. It stood on the corner of

Main and Tenth Streets just far enough back in the maples and elms to give an impression of exclusiveness. It was large and solid, built of red brick and white sandstone, with a three-storied tower on one corner which, if detached from the rest of the house, would have made a substantial silo.

A porch ran from the tower corner on the left around to the right side of the house where it ended rather foolishly in the windowless brick wall. There were double bay windows and gingerbread cornices, small glass panes in all the colors of the spectrum, and the word "Baldwin" picked out in pebbles on the top step. Old-fashioned it may have been but it was dignified. Fussy it may have looked but it had gentility. It said, "Of the modern young people who come in and out, I take no notice. Calm and reserved I sit here in the sun and the wind and the rain, like an old man, dreaming my dreams and counting my memories of the time when I was the show place of the town and all the country side came to look and exclaim."

There was a driveway which turned in from the Tenth Street side, ran under a porte-cochère (which no one in Maple City had ever had the temerity to pronounce) and ended in a barn built to match the house: red brick and sandstone, dormer windows and gimcracks. At least a barn it had been in Judge Baldwin's day, housing a pair of portly asthmatic horses, a surrey and a phaëton, to say nothing of a spotted pony and cart for the children. And now two of those little girls, who had driven around town years before, clean and stiff in their starched white dresses and broad brimmed hats tied under plump chins, were keeping boarders in the aristocratic old house which sat dozing and dreaming behind the maples. And the barn was a garage in which two of the boarders ran their cars up to the mangers where the spirits of the fat old horses stood munching ghost hay all night long.

No one could remember who started calling it "The Bee-House" and neither was any one definitely sure whether "B" stood for "Baldwin" or "Boarding" or for that type of Apis insect which has gone down in history with a reputation for improving each shining hour. If the last, it was aptly named, for all the boarders belonged to the class of American young people that earns its salt by the sweat of its brain.

The two little girls who had grown up to keep boarders were now Miss Ann and Miss Rilla. Twins! While quite easily distinguishable they were very similar in appearance: heavy, erect, gray haired and pink cheeked. Rather childishly they still dressed alike. Round china-blue eyes gave them an added touch of similarity. But where Miss Rilla's mouth turned up, Miss Ann's turned down. This point was characteristic of their dispositions. Miss Rilla was emotional. Any passing remark which touched upon joy, sorrow or sympathy set her tear ducts to working. Miss Ann was cold-hearted. Any passing remark which touched upon joy, sorrow or sympathy left her impassive, callous, questioning its motive. Miss Rilla was diplomatic. Miss Ann was blunt. "I'm fifty-four," Miss Ann would say frankly. And as everybody knows that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other, it followed that poor Miss Rilla, who thought her age her own business, was also fifty-four.

If Miss Rilla was full of sentiment, Miss Ann was businesslike. If Miss Rilla thought with her heart, Miss Ann used her head. Indeed, each one's attitude toward the boarders was typical of herself. To Miss Rilla the boarders were so many personalities. To Miss Ann the boarders were so many portions.

Because of the stern masculine quality in Miss Ann's make-up she naturally assumed the dictatorship and no

Worthy Patron or Illustrious Potentate was more chary of the reputations of his lodge candidates than Miss Ann of the boarders. To all applicants she presented an imposing and impenetrable front if it happened that she knew little about them. "We are full to-day," she would announce as firmly as though she possessed no more leaves for her table. "I'll let you know this evening."

Warner Field, however, had not found it difficult to gain admittance to the elect. When he arrived in Maple City to take a position in the First National Bank, O. J. Rineland, the president, had called up Miss Ann to engage a room for the newcomer.

For eight months now he had been living at the "Bee-House." Two-thirds of a year he had spent in Maple City and yet he felt no more an integral part of it than when he had first come. These months had been crowded with mental upheaval. Although he had given himself diligently to his new task, there had been neither buoyancy nor keen interest in it. In his unsettled condition he seemed to be two men; one who worked doggedly on, infinitely painstaking, habitually courteous; and one who was dissatisfied with his environment, critical of the community, deeply disgusted with himself.

Just now he went up the walk where leaf shadows from the elms lay thick under the September sun, entered the "Bee-House," and hung his hat in the vestibule. There was no one in the reception hall with its inlaid floor and fireplace, no one at least but old Judge Baldwin, who seemed a living personality looking pompously down upon the intruder from his heavy gilt frame.

Warner passed on to the dining room at the left. It was a long, narrow room, the result of the original dining room and old Mrs. Baldwin's bedroom having been thrown together after her death. A table with many people around it