Contents

1

Seeing the Elephant

Olive!"

The sun was barely up. Why was Lucy shaking her? And what was the commotion outdoors? Olive remembered waking to barking dogs during the night, but before she could work out what was happening, it was morning and her sister Lucy was dragging off the coverlet.

"Get up. Get dressed. Help Mary Ann get ready. And then get Charity Ann dressed. We have company."

"Company?" Olive stretched, reaching her arms way above her head and extending her toes as far as they'd point. How could they have company this early? Their cabin stood on an isolated Illinois homestead a full five miles outside Fulton. It wasn't on the way to anything.

"Yes, you lay-abed, we have company," Lucy said, excitement tingeing her words. "The Wheelers and the Pounds stopped late last night on their way from New York to the

West." Lucy gave Olive one final shake before leaving. "You must get up. I need to help Ma and the ladies prepare breakfast. Lorenzo is chopping wood, and Royce is helping him."

Olive threw off the coverlet and sat on the side of her bed, lifting the edge of the curtain and peeking out the window. The yard teemed with activity. Two canvas-covered wagons had pulled in the yard during the night. It looked like a regular frolic with children running, dogs barking, and Pa standing by the wagons talking with two men.

Had they brought those wagons all the way from East Bloomfield? New York seemed so far away, almost like another country. Olive remembered that her mother and father had been married in East Bloomfield.

Once, when Pa and Lorenzo were away, Ma told the girls all about her wedding in the old East Bloomfield Congregational Church. She had carefully lifted her watered silk wedding dress out of the chest. As Ma told them all about the day, she let Lucy, Olive, and Mary Ann unfold the gown, showing them the puffy gigot sleeves and the heavily weighted skirt. She unrolled her Mary Stuart cap and the delicate lace ruff from the linen in which they were lightly rolled. The lace was so fine it looked like cobwebs. Ma confided that she had waited to marry until the very end of April in the hope that the lilacs would force a bloom. The wedding supper had been at the home of the Wheelers.

Why, it must be the same Wheelers who were whooping it up in their yard!

Olive woke her little sister, Mary Ann. Putting a finger over her lips, Olive pointed Mary Ann toward the outhouse. Normally the girls would have taken care of their entire toilette in their room, but Olive didn't relish having to clean the slops bucket while company visited. The girls managed to slip back inside before anyone saw them.

Olive poured water from the pitcher into the basin. She washed, wrung the cloth out, and repeated the procedure, helping Mary Ann wash up.

"Do we wear our Sunday dresses, Olive?" Mary Ann loved her new Sunday dress.

"No. I think we have work to do. Let's wear our next-to-best dresses." She put a pinafore over Mary Ann's and an apron over her own. "Can you tidy up the room while I take care of Charity Ann?"

"Oh dear, I can't empty the basin." Of late, the words "oh dear" had peppered much of Mary Ann's conversation. She overheard a neighbor use the phrase and had enthusiastically adopted it.

"We'll leave it for now." In a large family, they'd long ago learned to pitch in and help each other out. They'd also learned that taking care of people came first and chores must sometimes go by the wayside.

Olive readied three-year-old Charity Ann for the day. She would follow Olive the rest of the day.

"Olive Ann." Ma followed her out onto the doorstep, setting the white glazed stoneware crock on the step along with

her pair of pruning shears. "Fill this crock with lilacs, will you? When you are finished, put it on the table that Lucy and Lorenzo are setting up under the oak."

Lucy and Lorenzo had laid a pair of wide boards across two sawhorses, and Lucy was smoothing one of Ma's best Belgian linen tablecloths over the makeshift table. Some of the other young people carried dishes and utensils to the table.

Olive hurried to cut an armful of lilacs. Ma's lilac bush scented the entire yard, and, despite the early hour, Olive had to gently brush bees away as she cut. They started work early when lilac nectar scented the air. She remembered to scrape the blade along the woody stems before putting them into the crock so the lilacs could soak water deep into the marrow of their flesh. When she couldn't squeeze another stem into the crock, she carried the lilacs to the center of the table and went to fetch water to fill the crock.

"Why, Mary Ann Sperry!" One of the women carrying out a platter of flapjacks stopped short of the table. "I mean . . . Mrs. Oatman." The woman blushed to have resorted to Ma's maiden name.

"Whatever is wrong, Mrs. Wheeler?" Ma looked concerned.

"Nothing is wrong, but, I declare, if that doesn't look like the exact same crock of lilacs you used to set on your table in New York."

"It's most nearly the same," Ma said with a laugh, putting small pitchers of syrup on the table. "The crock is the salt-

glazed one your folks gave me as a wedding gift, and that lilac bush was started from a slip off a slip off a slip of my grandmother's bush from the Berkshires."

"Well, I'll be . . ." Mrs. Wheeler said. "How did you manage that?"

"My mother started one off grandmother's bush. When Mr. Oatman and I set out to move west, Mother gave me a slip off hers. It was wrapped in moss and tied with linen. I kept it moistened during the whole journey. By the time we reached LaHarpe, it was already well rooted. I left the moss and the linen around the root ball and set it into the ground."

Olive couldn't help seeing the sadness around Ma's eyes when she spoke of LaHarpe. Many a dream had died there.

"How did you move the bush from LaHarpe way out here to the country?"

"We didn't move the bush. In fact, we've left a lilac bush at every place we've alighted on this journey."

Ma motioned for the men to come sit down with the ladies. Lucy and Olive shooed all the children into the house to eat around the big kitchen table. After they got plates filled and little ones settled, they took food out to the big boys, sitting near the back door. Between mouthfuls, they replenished the platter of flapjacks on the adult table.

Ma flashed them a grateful look. They could see weariness in the set of her shoulders. Any day now she was expecting the seventh Oatman child.

"So, when you left LaHarpe, where did you go?" Mrs.

Wheeler was intent on catching up with all the years she'd missed.

"You do know we lost our mercantile in the depression of 1842, don't you?" Pa spoke quietly but seemed relieved to get the words out.

"Why, no, Royce, we did not know." Mr. Wheeler seemed uncomfortable and gave a look to his wife that seemed to fault her for prying.

"Too many folk lost everything," Mr. Pound said. He quietly folded his napkin. "You must be right proud to have built up another farm and taken such good care of your family."

Pa seemed to relax. "Thank you for that. It hasn't been easy. When we lost the store, we first went back to Pennsylvania to be near relations. The only things we took with us were our household belongings."

"And a slip off my lilac bush," Ma said smiling. "Does anyone care for more coffee?" She looked toward Lucy who carried the big graniteware pot steaming with freshly brewed coffee.

Olive began clearing plates as Lucy poured and the adults visited.

"We didn't stay long in Pennsylvania," Pa said. "The wide open spaces of the West had already settled in our blood, and it was too late to be satisfied back in the East."

"And you two coming from such established Yankee stock?" Mrs. Pound pretended to be shocked. "Mrs. Oatman,

don't I recall that your Sperry kin settled in Connecticut just a few years after the Mayflower landed?"

Ma laughed. "You don't think those fine Yankees ventured all the way from England to land on these shores because they were content to stay at home, do you?"

Olive could see Pa squeeze Ma's hand under the table.

"Mrs. Oatman is right," Pa said. "We both have a touch of wanderlust in us. We left Pennsylvania and made the trip out West again. I had to teach school in Chicago for a time to save enough to homestead a piece of land and start all over. We finally ended up here in Fulton."

Ma touched the lilacs on the table. "I went over to our old place in LaHarpe and snipped a piece of the Sperry lilac. When it sprouted, I knew we were home again."

"We met your children last night," Pa said. "Let us introduce you to our family." He signaled to the children to come. Charity Ann was already following Olive again. "This is our eldest daughter, Lucy. She is 16 now and a great help to her mother."

Lucy gave a proper curtsy.

"This is Lorenzo, he's 14; Olive Ann is 12; Royce here is 9; Mary Ann is 6; and Charity Ann is 3."

No one mentioned the soon-to-be-expected baby since a person never mentioned such things in polite society. It was one of those things one pretended not to notice.

The younger children ran off to play.

Olive hovered nearby to offer coffee or to clear things off the table. Charity Ann dogged her every step.

As Olive poured coffee into Mrs. Wheeler's cup, the woman turned to Ma and said, "I declare, Mrs. Oatman, if I didn't know Olive was your daughter, I'd say I was looking at you twenty years ago."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Pound. She turned to Olive. "Did you know your mama was reckoned to be the beauty of Ontario County?"

The comment made both Ma and Olive blush.

"Olive has her father's shiny dark hair, but those intense eyes and fine features are pure Sperry." Mrs. Wheeler seemed not to notice Olive's discomfort at being singled out. "And how ever does she keep that lovely fair skin living out here on the prairie?"

Lucy was the one most people accounted a beauty because she had Pa's round face and Ma's light-colored hair. Mary Ann favored the Oatman side as well, though she was of a frailer build. Little C. A. was simply a cherub of a girl, as Olive always liked to say. And the boys? Well . . . they were boys. Olive thought Lorenzo a taller version of their father, serious-looking and solid. He was the one who always looked out for his sisters. You could always count on Lorenzo. Royce was a round, playful, rosy-cheeked version of his mother.

"So tell us about your journey," Pa prompted the men, anxious to change the subject.

"All we hear about in the East is the opportunity in the West," Mr. Pound said.

"Mr. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune,* has been hammering us with editorial after editorial. Surely you've heard his famous words, even out here on the prairie . . ." Mr. Wheeler put a serious look on his face, puffed out his chest and said, "Go west, young man. Go west."

"Yes, and we've not only read his words, we've seen wagon load after wagon load heeding the call." Pa stood up to stretch his legs. "Where will you go?"

"We are going to take the Oregon Trail," Mr. Pound said. "At least that's the plan. We will head for Council Bluffs. That's where we'll rendezvous, purchase all our supplies, and join up with a wagon train."

Ma and the ladies stood up and shook out their skirts. They picked up the last of the dishes and went into the house to begin planning dinner. Since there were no children her age, Olive stayed close to the table so she could hear the talk of the West. The men talked about word of a gold rush in California and land to be had for the taking. They discussed the different routes and the best time of the year to start.

Olive watched her father as he listened to his friends. They pored over Mr. Wheeler's copy of *The Emigrant's Guide to California.* They walked over to the wagons, and she could see Pa running appreciative hands along the canvas stretched over the ribs and squatting down to look at the strength of the axles. By the time the women had dinner prepared in the

early afternoon, Olive saw a yearning in her father's face.

During dinner, the men continued to talk about the journey west. The children ate and cleared away the dishes, and still the adults talked.

"Do you fear going?" Ma asked later, as the women and the girls worked to bake enough loaves of bread to hold them until they reached Council Bluffs.

"Sometimes," admitted Mrs. Wheeler. "But look at them." She pointed to the men. "Once they make up their minds to see the elephant, there is no stopping them."

"See the elephant?" Ma asked.

"It's a figure of speech. Remember when we were children and the circus came to town? We couldn't think about anything else until we had been able to see the elephant." Mrs. Wheeler sighed as she looked out the door at the three men earnestly examining the wagon wheels.

"You asked about fear, Mary Ann." Mrs. Pound lowered her voice and lapsed back into girlhood names. "The term 'to see the elephant' actually comes from a story of a farmer who came to town with his whole crop of vegetables in his wagon. He arrived just in time to see the circus parade being led by the elephant." She gave the bread dough a hearty thump on the floured board. "He was thrilled to see the parade, but his horses startled and bolted, overturning his wagon and spilling his entire load of vegetables into the ditch." She continued to knead as she talked. "When the townspeople expressed their regrets for his loss, he just slapped his thigh and

said, 'I don't give a hang, for I have seen the elephant.'"

"Isn't that the truth," said Mrs. Wheeler. "Once a man's got a hankering to see the elephant, the cost doesn't seem to matter."

That night, they ate a supper of wild strawberries, crusty baked bread with newly churned butter, and glasses of cool milk. The grownups talked long into the night. The children continued to run and play in the dark, trying to trap fireflies and listening to the far-off sounds of wolves. Nobody stirred to put the children to bed—they sort of drifted off and fell asleep on one bed or another, hoping someone would eventually tuck them into the proper bed.

Early in the morning, before the sun had barely risen, the Pounds and the Wheelers packed the last of their things into the wagons and headed out of the Oatman yard. Children walked alongside the wagons, careful to stay to the side since the horses tied onto the back kicked up a lot of dust. The Oatmans walked alongside for a ways, calling out good-byes as they walked.

When Ma could no longer keep up, she called out, "God be with you, dear friends." When Ma said it, she meant it. She believed God walked with them every step of the way.

As the wagons pulled away, the Oatmans continued waving until all they could see was a cloud of dust on the horizon. Olive heard her mother sigh deeply and understood the reason —her father stood there staring after the wagons with a look of stark longing. At that moment, Olive knew the truth—Pa would not be satisfied until he saw the elephant for himself.

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