

THE WANDERERS

This might be called the Legend of Two Women. The one was Alzbeta, the other, Barbora. Both were women of high courage, of magnificent youth, of strong wills - but where the courage of Alzbeta sprang from the deep and overwhelming love of her husband which drowned out all petty desires for self, the strength of Barbora lay in her designs upon life, supreme aspirations of her soul, earnest, but not always noble. They were women fair to look upon, as charmingly distinct as a tulip and a holly hock. You may be sure Alzbeta was the dark, red tulip blending almost to a wine red shade, tell with luminous dark eyes, a face framed in a mist of dusky colored hair, the shade of a moonless sky - a, black heaven. There was a curve about the lips in repose that almost moved one to sadness. There was a beloved patience in her face that only comes to woman who have known struggle and love, who believe in life, who fear not death. And this patience gave her body an atmosphere of repose. It was as if she moved through the days along with the slow winds.

And then the dancing moods of young Barbora. She made sure to tuck flowers in her hair in the summer time; with a sweep of her lashes upon her cheek she believed to sway the world. Ah - there were blue skies made for her, she thought, as she lay back in the covered wagon with her head upon her arms. And then, the gold spilling California - yes, reeking with precious worldly metal, spluttering rich laden streams they would explore. When she passed her finger tips over her lidded eyes she seemed to see it all. And then she grew strong within her spirit. "I could endure anything for that at the end!"

They were doing a rare and dangerous thing, these two young women joining their husbands in the gold hunt in the year of fifty-nine. With Alzbeta it was love of her husband that gave her courage to withstand the hardships that must pour like rain upon them in that tiring, endless trip; with Barbora it was love of the future. Alzbeta had wept that day in Wisconsin when he^r husband decided upon the journey. He would come back, he had said, to his woman, bringing her gold, and then he had sung "and frankincense and myrrh!" But that night she had crept to Barbora's cabin while the men were busy, fixing up the old covered wagons, making sure the wheels were tight, making sure it would serve as a travelling home through the long and weary Months. She had taken Barbora's hands into her own and had whispered: "We cannot let them go alone. It would kill me - There are dangers - I must be with him! Barbora, let us follow our husbands- even if it be to the ends of the earth! And Barbora had quickly snatched her hands away and clasped them under her chin. Her eyes were all afire. "Yes - I must go there too. I must see it all - just as they do! Great Heaven, help us!"

And now as they were bumping over the hard dirt roads of Nebraska, under the burning summer suns. It seemed so far away - that day when they had started out - two covered wagons, five horses, two brave women and four aspiring men. They had passed through towns of Iowa, then through long stretches of empty prairies with lonely farms twenty or thirty miles apart; they had crowded under the shelter of their canvas roof in pouring torrents of rain; they had slept outside on starlit nights, rolled upon blankets on the ground, uncomfortable but with eager hopes in their hearts. And one dark and cloudy eve when Alzbeta and her husband were winding arm in arm about their little camp they came to the the wildly magnificent sight of a prairie fire. Their shouts aroused the others and together, all six of them, in the deadly silence of the night watched breathlessly the terrible picture in creation of itself - the far line of flaming fire on the horizon, the heavy clouds of smoke - rolling and penetrating and mingling, the wondrous blaze of it all!

Barbora crept up between her husband and Alzbeta's and grasped their arms in a fierce sort of clutch. Her eyes seemed to Alzbeta to catch the bright reflection of the flames. She stood there long, and then, as if absorbed in beauty, she quietly dropped her husband's hand, retaining Peter's, those other arm was around the waist of Alzbeta. The three stood thus, motionless, their eyes fixed on the brilliant sight ahead of them, thinking of nothing but the grandeur, the horror of the fire. And no one knew that into Alzbeta's heart crept a moments thrust that she despised herself for feeling. Was it not enough, she asked her soul, that she loved her husband, that she should allow the pettiness of acts to creep into her vision? It was true - Barbora was the life of the little traveling crowd. Thomas, her rough, unshaven, gold bent husband, was so intent upon his mission, so earnest in all his desires and dreams that he seemed quite unaware of his butterfly wife, even when she tied a red sash around her waist or pinned a flower in her hat hair. And Barbora laughed her days along quite able to dispense with the affections of a husband. There were others - and Peter was - She wandered if Alzbeta loved him because he was her husband or because he was Peter. There was a difference.

This had happened. Barbora was sick with fear of death. The fever had caught her in their slow crawl over the plains of Nebraska. She forgot the pains; she forgot as soon the wild ravings; but she could not banish from her stricken mind the thought that she might be dying. These illusions came to her in awful forms. She would speak her vision aloud and toss her arms and draw her fingers over her hot glowing face. Her husband - Alzbeta - were not able to go near her: they seemed to wear the mask of death upon their faces; they seemed to be clothed in long black garments. Peter - Peter alone was of another world. If he stood by her as she lay on the heap of quilts in the corner of the wagon; if he crept near and laid his hand upon her head, her terror - stricken soul was calmed and her eyes shone with a different light. There were solemn nights that followed one another, slowly.

The husband, Thomas, was walking in silence, to and fro, under the stars. Perhaps he was praying that she might be saved; perhaps he was repenting for his former days when he had offered no great love to her - such as the love that Peter gave Alzbeta. And now, the Lord was punishing him hard, now when he needed her the sight of him was as the sight of death.

And Alzbeta, sitting on the dry sod, leaning back against the wagon wheel, seemed to be alone with the moon in the whole solemn world. Just for a moment, when she grew so weary that she could not lift her head, she forgot Barbora, lying on the poor heap under the shelter of the canvas top, forgot that Peter sat by her side soothing her with soft crooning words until her great, wild eyes would close. The other men were in their blankets, far enough away to be forgotten too. They were superstitious, perhaps, and such occurrences - well, it was not good. The land stretched out before Alzbeta into endless black. Oh, this great, great quest for gold! Like a

body that was full of rivers, flowing each with breathless ease, she felt herself full of overpowering emotions. There was Peter - always the heart of her life. They were happy, even in those barren times in Wisconsin when days looked too big for them - too bad - too far reaching. And then a quietness had settled over him and he began to plan the California trip. She could see the strength of his decision growing stronger day by day, and with it crept a fear into her soul; that he might go alone, that he might drift away into that distant, dangerous land, that she might never see him more! And here, as she sat with the blackness of the night, she smiled. It was not the way God wished it. Yes, Peter was a man for the world. He could do big, bold, giant things; and he could remember that he was but a man on this monstrous earth and that nothing was too small, too tender - Yes, it would be Peter who could nurse the sick

from death! Only Peter - and God! Nothing was more pure in thought at that instant than

the mind of Alzbeta. She was glad - inexpressibly glad and truly proud of him!

And then - and then - Alzbeta put her hand upon the wheel and inclined her head to listen. Barbora was stirring. There was an uneasy murmuring inside the wagon. The sounds were low but so overwhelmingly deep that Alzbeta put her hand to her heart. It ached for the woman who lay suffering that flaming agony of body and mind. She heard Barbara speak in quick, dry breaths - "Yes - yes - to me- Peter - Peter - " The words were lost and others trailed slowly on the warm air "To know it - to see you - Am I dying - Peter - ?" A dry stifled sob seemed to choke her. Peter was talking, so softly, so gently that even Alzbeta could not hear with her head buried in her arms. It was like rocking in a soft wind; it was as if she were ill and Peter were crooning the words to her - to her.

"Ah - ah - " Barbora's voice trembled - "Can you - can you - Peter ---?"

"Yes - Barbora - dear heart! Remember - I love you - you must not die - you shall not die - because I love you - dear little flower, sweet heart - "

The moon had risen up and was lasing itself in the clouds. Great hot, blinding thoughts seemed to be swishing through the mind of Alzbeta. All she could think - all she could whisper through cold white lips was: "The moon - Peter - the moon - is standing - so still — it kills me - Ah - it kills me!"

She wandered over the wide prairie like a windblown branch. Night was swallowing her up. Sometimes she ran as if some horrible monster were following her and then, weary from exhaustion she would sink upon the prairie grass and rock her body and cry. The silhouettes of coyotes sprang up when the moon shone and the wolfish animals wailed and wept, as her heart was weeping - from the deepest must cuts she had

ever known. There were the Indians, the makes, the quick sands by the creeks? They had warned her against these, and now to be killed, crushed, swallowed up - she longed for that. Why - why was she so alone on this hellish prairie land? Did no one understand that she must die - die!

In the early dawn of the following day Peter crept from the covered wagon, pale, with his shoulders curving downwards. The air carried a fresh, new fragrance; the smell of the grasses was sweet. But Peter's eyes roved about the quiet camp. He must tell Alzbeta that Barbora had died at four o'clock, in the greatest peace that she could know. For Peter had learned in life that even death could be softened by gentle white untruths.

But somewhere, on a stretch of wide sunbaked prairie two wandering women were lost - never to return again.