Voyages
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Published by University of Ottawa Press

Moodie, Susanna and John Thurston.
Voyages: Short Narratives of Susanna Moodie.

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THE WELL IN THE WILDERNESS;
A TALE OF THE PRAIRIE. —
FOUNDED UPON FACTS

In vain you urge me to forget —
That fearful night — it haunts me yet;
And stampt into my heart and brain,
The awful memory will remain;
Yea, e'en in sleep, that ghastly sight,
Returns to shake my soul each night. — Author

Richard Steele, was the son of one of those small landholders, who are fast disappearing in merry Old England. His father left him the sole possessor of twenty-five acres of excellent arable land and a snug little cottage, which had descended from father to son, through many generations.

The ground plot, which had been sufficient to maintain his honest progenitors for several ages, in the palmy days of Britain's glory and independence, e'er her vast resources past into the hands of the few and left the many to starve, was not enough to provide for the wants of our stout yeoman, and his wife and family; which consisted at that period, of three sons, and one daughter, a lovely blooming girl of ten years, or thereabouts. Richard and his boys toiled with unceasing diligence — the wife was up late and early, and not one moment was left unemployed; and yet they made no headway, but, every succeeding year, found them in arrears.

"Jane," said the yeoman, one evening, thoughtfully, to
his wife, after having blessed his homely meal of skimmed milk and brown bread, "Couldst thee not have given us a little treat to-night. Hast thee forgotten, that it is our dear Annie's birth-night?"

"No Richard, I have not forgotten, how could I forget the anniversary of the day, that made us all so happy. But times are bad. I could not spare the money to buy sugar and plums for the cake; and I wanted to sell all the butter, in order to scrape enough together, to pay the shoemaker for making our darling's shoes. Annie, knows that she is infinitely dear to us all, though we cannot give her luxuries to prove it."

"It wants no proof, dear Mother," said the young girl, flinging her round, but sunburnt arms, about her worthy parent's neck, "Your precious love, is worth the wealth of the whole world to me. I know how fond you, and the dear father, are of me, and I am more than satisfied."

"Annie is right," said Steele, dropping his knife and holding out his arms for a caress. "The world could not purchase such love as we feel for her, and let us bless God, that poor though we be, we are all here to night, well and strong, aye, and rich, in spite of our homely fare, in each others affections. What say you my boys:" and he glanced with parental pride, on the three fine lads, whose healthy and honest countenances, might well be contemplated with pleasure, and afford subjects for hopeful anticipation for the future.

"We are happy father," said the eldest cheerfully.

"The cakes, and the spiced ale would have made us happier," said the second, "Mother makes such nice cakes."

"So she does," cried the third. "It seems so dull to have nothing nice on Annie's birth-day. I should not care a fig, if it were Dick's birth-day, or Owen's, or mine, but not to drink Annie's health, seems unlucky."

"You shall drink it yet," said Annie laughing.

"In what?" asked both the boys in a breath.

"In fine spring water," and she filled their mugs, "Better God never gave to his creatures. How bright it is — how it sparkles. I will never from this day, ask a finer
drink. Here is health to you my brothers, and may we never know what it is to lack a draught of pure water.” Annie, nodded to her brothers, and drank off her mug of water; and the good-natured fellows, who dearly loved her, followed her example. Oh little did the gay hearted girl, think in that moment of playful glee, of the price she was one day destined to pay for a drink of water.

The crops that year were a failure and the heart of the strong man, began to droop. He felt that labor in his native land, could no longer give his children bread, and unwilling to sink into the lowest class, he wisely resolved while he retained the means of doing so, to emigrate to America. His wife made no opposition to his wishes, his sons were delighted with the prospect of any change for the better; and if Annie felt a passing pang, at leaving the daisied fields, and her pretty playmates the lambs, she hid it from her parents. The dear homestead, with its quiet rural orchard, and trim hedge-rows, fell to the hammer; nor was the sunburnt cheek of the honest yeoman, unmoistened with a tear, when he saw it added to the enormous possessions of the Lord of the Manor.

“Jane,” he said, grasping his wife’s trembling hand, hard between his own, “courage my woman; the sooner we go now the better. We have no longer a home in England.”

“I was born here Richard,” said the poor creature, in a broken voice and with her eyes streaming with tears, “and it is so hard, to tear one’s self away.”

“So was my father, Jane, and my father’s father,” returned the husband, “and ‘tis riving my heart assunder, to part with the roof which sheltered an honest race for so many years; but duty demands it of me, and now the debt is paid.”

“Oh, father, shall we ever love another place like this?” said Richard, the eldest boy. “I did not think, that I should feel so bad at going away. Every thing looks mournfully to-day; and my heart is so full, I can scarcely speak without feeling the tears come into my eyes. The dumb animals seem to know that something is wrong with us, as we pass to and fro, in a sort of stupid amazement. The very
house, if it could speak, would tell us, that it was sorry to change owners."

"Don't mention it, Dick. I feel low enough myself. Keep up your spirits. Strive to be cheerful, it will comfort your poor mother, under this severe trial. Women, my lad, feel parting with the old familiar places and faces, more keenly than men."

The Yeoman was right. His wife, who had been born and brought up on the farm, and had never known any other home, (for she was first cousin to her husband; an orphan child whom his mother had adopted,) was dreadfully cast down, and it required the united efforts of the whole family, to reconcile her to the change that awaited her.

After the sale was completed, and the money it brought duly paid, Steele lost no time, in preparing for his emigration. In less than a fortnight, he had secured their passage to New York, and they were already on their voyage across the Atlantic. Favored by wind and weather, after the first effects of the sea had worn off, they were comfortable enough. The steerage passengers were poor but respectable English emigrants, and they made several pleasant acquaintances among them. One family especially attracted their attention, and so far engaged their affections during the tedious voyage, that they entered into an agreement to settle in the same neighborhood. Mr. Atkins, was a widower, with two sons, the age of Richard and Owen, and an elder sister — a primitive gentle old woman, who had been once, both wife and mother but had outlived all her family. Abigail Winchester, for so she was called, took an especial fancy to our Annie, in whom she recognised a strong resemblance to a daughter whom she had lost. Her affection was warmly returned by the kind girl, who by a thousand little attentions, strove to evince her gratitude to Abigail, for her good opinion.

They had not completed half their voyage, before the Scarlet Fever broke out among the passengers, and made dreadful havoc among the younger portion. Steele's whole family were down with it at the same time; and in spite of the constant nursing of himself and his devoted partner;
and the unremitting attentions of Abigail Winchester, who never left the sick ward for several nights and days; the two youngest boys died and were committed to the waters of the great deep, before Annie and Richard recovered to a consciousness of their dreadful loss. This threw a sad gloom over the whole party. Steele said nothing, but he often retired to some corner of the ship to bewail his loss in secret. His wife was wasted and worn to a shadow, and poor Annie, looked the ghost of her former self.

"Had we never left England," she thought, "my brothers had not died!" but she was wrong. God who watches with parental love over all his creatures, knows the best season in which to reclaim His own. But human love in its blind yearning, is slow in receiving this great truth. It lives in the present, lingers over the past, and cannot bear to give up, that which now is, for the promise of that which shall be. The future, separated from the things of time, has always an awful aspect. A perfect and childlike reliance upon God, can alone divest it of those chilling doubts and fears, which at times shake the firmest mind, and urge the proud unyielding spirit of man to cleave so strongly to kindred dust.

The sight of the American shores, that the poor lads had desired so eagerly to see, seemed to renew their grief, and a sadder party, never set foot upon a foreign strand, than our emigrant and his family.

Steele had brought letters of introduction to a respectable merchant in the city, who advised him to purchase a tract of land in the then new State of Illinois. The beauty of the country, the fine climate, and fruitful soil, were urged upon him in the strongest manner. The merchant had scrip to dispose of in that remote settlement, and as is usual in such cases, he only consulted his own interest in the matter. Strangers are too easily persuaded. Steele thought the merchant, who was a native of the country, must know best, what would suit him, and he not only became a purchaser of land in Illinois, but induced his new friends to follow his example.

We will pass over their journey to the far west.
novelty and beauty of the scenes through which they passed, contributed not a little to revive their drooping spirits. Richard had recovered his health, and amused the party by his lively anticipations of the future. They were to have the most comfortable log house, and the neatest farm in the district. He would raise the finest cattle, the finest crops, and the best garden stuff, in the neighborhood. Frugal and industrious habits, would soon render them wealthy and independent. His Mother listened to these sallies with a delighted smile, and even the grave Yeoman's brow, relaxed from its habitual frown. Annie entered warmly into all her brother's plans; and if he laid the foundation of this fine castle in the air, she certainly provided the cement, and all the lighter materials.

As their long route led them farther from the habitations of man, and deeper and deeper into the wilderness, the stern realities of their solitary locality, became hourly more apparent to the poor emigrants. They began to think, that they had acted too precipitately in going so far back into the woods, unacquainted as they were with the usages of the country. But repentance came too late; and when at length, they reached their destination, they found themselves at the edge of a vast forest, with a noble open prairie stretching away as far as the eye could reach in front of them, and no human habitation in sight, or indeed existing for miles around them.

In a moment the farmer comprehended all the difficulties and dangers of his situation; but his was a stout heart, not easily daunted by circumstances. He possessed a vigorous constitution, and a strong arm; and he was not alone. Richard was an active energetic lad, and his friend Atkins, and his two sons, were a host in themselves. Having settled with his guides, and ascertained by the maps which he had been given at Mr. ___'s office the extent and situation of his new estate, he set about unyoking the cattle which he had purchased, and securing them, while Atkins and his sons, pitched a tent for the night, and collected wood for their fire. The young people were in raptures with the ocean of verdure redolent with blossoms, that lay
smiling in the last rays of the sun before them. Never did
garden appear to them so lovely, as that vast wilderness of
sweets planted by the munificent hand of nature, with such
profuse magnificence. Annie, could scarcely tear herself
away from the enchanting scene, to assist her mother in
preparing their evening meal.

"Mother where shall we get water?" asked Annie,
glancing wistfully towards their empty cask. "I have seen
no indication of water for the last three miles."

"Annie, has raised a startling doubt," said Steele, "I
can perceive no appearance of stream or creek, in any
direction."

"Hist, Father!" cried Richard, "do you hear that? The
croaking of those hateful frogs is music to me just now, for
I am dying with thirst," and seizing the can he ran off, in
the direction of the discordant sounds.

It was near dark, when he returned with his pail full
of clear cold water, at which the whole party slaked their
thirst, before asking any questions.

"What delicious water — as clear as crystal — as cold
as ice. How fortunate to obtain it so near at hand,"
exclaimed several in a breath.

"Aye, but 'tis an ugly place," said Richard thoughtfully.
"I should not like to go to that well, at early day, or after
night-fall."

"Why not my boy?"

"Tis in the heart of a dark swamp, just about a hun-
dred yards within the forest, and the water trickles from
beneath the roots of an old tree, into a natural stone tank;
but all around is involved in frightful gloom. I fancied that
I heard a low growl, as I stooped to fill my pail, while a
horrid speckled snake glided from between my feet, and
darted hissing and rattling its tail into the brake. Father
you must never let any of the women go alone to that
well."

The yeoman laughed at his son's fears, and shortly
after the party retired into the tent and overcome with
fatigue were soon asleep.

The first thing which engaged the attention of our
emigrants, was the erection of a log shanty for the reception of their respective families. This important task was soon accomplished. Atkins preferred for the site of his, the open prairie; but Steele, for the nearer proximity of wood and water, chose the edge of the forest, but the habitations of the pioneers, were so near, that they were within call of each other.

To fence in a piece of land for their cattle, and prepare a plot for wheat and corn, for the ensuing year, was the next thing to be accomplished, and by the time these preparations were completed, the long bright summer had passed away, and the fall was at hand. Up to this period, both families had enjoyed excellent health, but in the month of September, Annie, and then Richard, fell sick with the intermittent fever, and Old Abigail, kindly came across, to help Mrs. Steele nurse her suffering children. Medical aid was not to be had in that remote place, and beyond simple remedies which were perfectly inefficacious in their situation, the poor children's only chance for life, was their youth, a good sound constitution, and the merciful interposition of a benevolent and overruling Providence.

It was towards the close of a sultry day, that Annie burning with fever, implored the faithful Abigail, to give her a drink of cold water. Hastening to the water cask, the old woman was disappointed in finding it exhausted. Richard having drank the last drop, and was still raving in the delirium of fever for more drink.

"My dear child, there is no water."

"Oh I am burning, dying with thirst. Give me but one drop, dear Abigail — one drop of cold water!"

Just then Mrs. Steele, returned from milking the cows, and Abigail proffered to the lips of the child, a bowl of new milk, but she shrunk from it with disgust, and sinking back upon her pillow, murmured, "water, water, for the love of God, give me a drink of water."

"Where is the pail," said Mrs. Steele, "I don't much like going alone to that well, but it is still broad day, and I know that in reality there is nothing to fear. I cannot bear
to hear the child moan for drink in that terrible way."

"Dear Mother," said Richard faintly, "don't go. Father
will be in soon, we can wait till then."

"Oh, the poor dear child is burning," cried Abigail,
"she cannot wait till then, do neighbor go for the water. I
will stay with the children, and put out the milk, while you
are away."

Mrs. Steele left the shanty, and a few minutes after,
the patients exhausted by suffering fell into a profound
sleep.

Abigail busied herself in scalding the milk pans, and
in her joy at the young people's cessation from suffering
forgot the mother altogether. About half an hour had
elapsed, and the mellow light of evening had faded into
night, when Steele returned with his oxen from the field.

The moment he entered the shanty, he went up to the
beds which contained his sick children, and satisfied that
the fever was abating, he looked round for his supper, sur-
prised that it was not as usual ready for him upon the table.

"No water," he cried "in the cask, and supper not
ready. After working all day in the burning sun, a man
wants to have things made comfortable for him at night.
Mrs. Winchester are you here. Where is my wife?"

"Merciful goodness!" exclaimed the old woman turn-
ing as pale as death. "Is she not back from the well?"

"The well!" cried Steele grasping her arm, "How long
has she been gone?"

"This half hour, or more."

Steele made no answer. His cheek was as pale as her
own; and taking his gun from the beam to which it was
slung, he carefully loaded it with ball, and without uttering
a word rushed from the house.

Day still lingered on the open prairie, but the
moment he entered the bush it was deep night. He had
crossed the plain with rapid strides, but as he approached
the swamp his step became slow and cautious. The well was
in the centre of a jungle, from the front of which, Richard
had cleared away the brush to facilitate their access to the
water; and as he drew near the spot, his ears were chilled

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with a low deep growling, and the crunching of teeth, as if some wild animal was devouring the bones of its prey.

The dreadful truth with all its shocking heart-revolting reality, flashed upon the mind of the yeoman, and for a moment paralized him. The precincts of the well, were within range of his rifle, and dropping down upon his hands and knees, and nerving his arm for a clear aim, he directed his gaze to the spot from whence the fatal sounds proceeded. A little on one side of the well, a pair of luminous eyes glared like green lamps at the edge of the dark wood; and the horrid sounds which curdled the blood of the yeoman, became more distinctly audible.

Slowly Steele raised the rifle to his shoulder, and setting his teeth, and holding his breath, steadily aimed at the space between those glaring balls of fire. The sharp report of the rifle, awoke the far echoes of the forest. The deer leaped up from his lair. The wolf howled and fled into the depths of the wood, and the panther, for such it was, uttering a hoarse growl, sprang several feet into the air, then fell across the mangled remains of his victim.

Richard Steele rose up from the ground. The perspiration was streaming from his brow; his limbs trembled and shook, his lips moved convulsively, and he pressed his hands over his heaving breast, to keep down the violent throbbing of his agitated heart. It was not fear that chained him to the spot, and hindered him from approaching his dead enemy. It was horror. He dared not look upon the mangled remains of his wife — the dear partner of all his joys and sorrows — the companion of his boyhood — the love of his youth — the friend and counsellor of his middle age — the beloved mother of his children. How could he recognize in that crushed and defiled heap, his poor Jane. The pang was too great for his agonized mind to bear. Sense and sight alike forsook him, and staggering a few paces forward, he fell insensible across the path.

Alarmed by the report of the rifle, Atkins and his sons proceeded with torches to the spot, followed by Abigail, who unconscious of the extent of the calamity, was yet sufficiently convinced that something dreadful had occurred.
When the full horrors of the scene were presented to the sight of the terror-stricken group; their grief burst forth in tears and lamentations. Atkins alone retained his presence of mind. Dragging the panther from the remains of the unfortunate Mrs. Steele, he beckoned to one of his sons, and suggested to him the propriety of instantly burying the disfigured and mutilated body, before the feelings of her husband and children, were agonized by the appalling sight. First removing the insensible husband to his own dwelling, Atkins and his sons returned to the fatal spot, and conveying the body to the edge of the prairie, they selected a quiet lovely spot beneath a wide spreading chestnut tree; and wrapping all that remained of the wife of Richard Steele in a sheet, they committed it to the earth in solemn silence; nor were tears or prayers wanting in that lonely hour, to consecrate the nameless grave where the English mother slept.

Annie and Richard recovered to mourn their irreparable loss, to feel that their mother's life had been sacrificed to her maternal love. Time as it ever does, softened the deep anguish of the bereaved husband. During the ensuing summer, their little colony was joined by a hardy band of British and American pioneers. The little settlement grew into a prosperous village, and Richard Steele died a wealthy man, and was buried by the side of his wife in the center of the village church-yard, that spot having been chosen for the first temple in which the emigrants met to worship in his own house, the God of their fathers.

Victoria Magazine 1 (1847): 54–58. The Odd-Fellow's Offering for 1852 (1851); Bentley's Miscellany (1853).