

THE RAIN MAKER

Sarah wearily opened her eyes. The scene before her remained unchanged. The terraces of the dry, dust-clogged, valley stretched away into the distance, brown and charred. What had once been green and fruitful now lay desolate, barren and arid. As the sky darkened overhead a solitary gust of wind tore between the shacks, whipping up a stinging cloud of sand which scattered like rain across the verandah. Rain!

The air fell still again. The atmosphere hung heavy and lifeless. Her painful eyes wandered across the crop-less plain, along the cracked, dry, riverbed, up over the vividly coloured sandstone outcrops which stood as sentinels guarding the pass, and back to the sad collection of buildings which formed the settlement. It could so easily have been a paradise. It was to have been her heaven but, instead, it had turned into a furnace which she could describe as nothing short of the opposite. Her blank gaze fell on the motionless scene. Everything was still, except - what was that? There, by the riverbed, something furtively padding towards the leafless walnut tree. Was it a figure, dark and indistinct, or was it just her imagination? Was there really another living soul here, besides her, in this valley?

In a distant fury, thunder broke like cannon and avalanched from the sky, rolling up the valley, shaking the foundations below her. Sarah did not move, nor flinch, only closed her eyes again. Rain! If only it would rain!

It had rained that day in Liverpool. It had been raining hard. It no longer pained her conscience, this mournful recollection she had of her past. It all lay, remote, interred like some distant dream, vaguely remember, another dimension in another world. But what had been the purpose of it all? Why?

Yes, it had been raining and she had set out from her warm and secure home to buy food. Nothing more ambitious than that! "Mother," she had said so lightly and innocently, "tell me what you want and I will go. You know you should not go out in this weather."

"You will come straight back?" growled her mother. "No dilly-dallying on the way?"

"Of course I will," she promised and, clutching her father's cape over her head she had darted from doorway to doorway, gracefully leaping the outstretched puddles, a ballerina traversing the stage, flashing across the glistening pavements, out-running her reflection until, throwing herself into the doorway of a reasonably respectable dock-side inn, she had unintentionally found herself in the arms of Clem.

He had been kind then, it was true, but what preparation or training, what experience had she, a mere child of fifteen tender years, for such an encounter? Seeing her wet, and trembling in response to the firmness of his touch, he had led her inside, into a place where her mother would never have allowed her to go, and sat her down before a bowl of steaming soup. Then he had talked! As she had graciously angled her spoon to flood it from the correct side, he had talked. How he had talked! With words that fell like magic on her innocent ears, he related tales of India and Africa, and of a new land on the other side of the World which he referred to as 'Stralia. He told her of other lands and peoples, of customs and rituals, of sights and wonders, of opportunities incomparable with those in the home country. But this enthusiasm that drove his honeyed words rose to ecstasy when he described the Americas. There men were made rich overnight with gold and silver. There, there was no famine, no overcrowding, no mill owners, no landlords. There, men were free. There, vast tracks of land were available for no more than the taking. His mind was made up. He had renounced his life as a sailor and, with his family, was about to make his very last trip. Once across the Atlantic Ocean they would settle and establish a farm. It would be as large as the City of Liverpool and it would grow. In time others would join and form a

settlement. Maybe, and this was the nucleus of his grand plan, it would even become a town. That was how they began.

His family? What did he mean by his family? Sarah now knew that she should never have asked the question, though that answer had been innocent enough. He meant his kinfolk. He was not married, no, not yet. But he wanted a wife. He needed a wife! He said it would be difficult at first. Houses had to be built, barns, paddocks then, perhaps a small chapel. The land would have to be cleared and tilled. Seed would be sown and harvests reaped. She said she knew nothing of these kinds of things which all remained a mystery to her. That was of no consequence. He had chosen the spot. His uncle was there already.

With great enthusiasm he described the valley to her; the headlands of stone, the crystal river, the green fertile pasture with its deep, rich, soil, the large, ancient, walnut tree, and the small plateau commanding the head of the valley where, on higher ground, they would build the settlement. It all found its place deep in her imagination. Yes, he needed a wife. She would have to be strong, to work, to bear children, but it would be a rich and rewarding life, better than anything that English cities could offer a girl like her. No sensible woman would refuse.

Quite helpless, Sarah found herself, her voice, telling him that she was strong. Why, oh why, had she spoken thus? What unearthly power had commanded her to offer herself for the great task that lay ahead? She had asked herself that question countless times without finding an answer. Why had those words tumbled from her lips at that moment, precipitating her irretrievably further and further down an unscaleable slope? And what had made Clem suddenly grasp her hand and say with genuine earnestness, "Come with me!"

Folk had often said that she was pretty, she knew, and had warned her mother, but she was small and they would have described her as nimble rather than strong, petite rather than homely.

Sarah swung around in the chair and took a cracked and dusty mirror from a crude, decrepit, table beside her. Look at her now, barely fifteen years later! Turning her gaze into the depths of the reflection, she ran a gnarled finger across the taut skin that spanned her prominent cheek bones. They had said she was pretty! She looked into her dark, sunken eyes, deep, and saw there, someone else. Lightning illuminated the whole of the valley and, reflected there in the mirror, alongside the walnut, stood a lone, shadowy, figure. With a hoarse gasp Sarah thrust the mirror face down on the table and spun around. There was no-one to be seen! The valley lay empty and deserted. Alone in the hot, sultry, gasping air she was suddenly chilled.

They had sailed for America that very afternoon. She had not returned home with the purchases for her mother. She had not packed any of her few personal possessions. She had not seen her mother again, ever. Clem, rushing her to the docks, told her there was not time. Before she knew it she was aboard, standing isolated on the deck of the ship, away from Clem's relatives, watching the pitching outline of Liverpool and her home diminish before it disappeared totally beneath a watery horizon.

The crossing was bad. The sailors said that it was exceptionally rough and the ship wallowed in the high seas, pitching and tumbling from wave to wave. The decks ran awash more often than not and at the peak of one the storms three of the sailors and an unfortunate gentleman who said he was from Bury and who was just taking the air, were swept away overboard and lost. Clem offered his services to the Captain and these were gratefully accepted. The result was that for the remainder of the voyage Clem spent his time before the mast and Sarah, confined to her pitifully meagre berth, was abandoned. She was, like many of her fellow passengers, unable to adjust to the ship's erratic motion and was constantly ill and consequently depressed. Her spirits barely rose when four days out of port the Captain joined Clem at her bunk side and, with a minimum of scant ceremony, joined them in marriage.

As they lay on the bunk gripped by a doleful melancholy, Sarah became increasingly preoccupied with thoughts of home and of her mother. Clem had said she could write as soon as they landed in America and, when he did come to sit alongside her, he tried to comfort her by talking incessantly of his plans for the future, his family who barely had a word to say to her, the settlement, and the town. "What do you think we ought to call it?" he said, puffing out his chest as if he was already mayor, sheriff and banker, "Clemsville? It ought to be named after me!"

"I am sure you are right," said Sarah. "I cannot imagine anyone naming anything after me."

She always shuddered when she thought of that crossing of the Atlantic, remembering too vividly the frightening noise of the wind, the thunder of the waves which seemed ever to threaten to breach the delicate timber, the cracking of the sails, the moaning of her fellow sufferers and, worse of all, the unbearable, indelible, stench. She had not seen a ship since. Nor had she written the letter.

It took another twenty uncomfortable days to travel from Boston to their ultimate destination, a trip which started on a jerky, slow, steam train and which terminated, dirty, dusty, and exhausted, on foot after the wheel had parted from the axle of their open wagon and rolled down a ravine into a river. Clem's family now had no doubt. All of this, the crossing, the journey, all this misfortune, it was Sarah's fault. They eagerly embraced the view of her culpability and greeted her with an irrational hostility which was never once annulled with peace. Collectively they adopted a spiteful habit of exclusion as far as she was concerned which, even after a year, had improved to no more than an open, lingering, resentment. They told Clem in her presence that she would be weak, unable to work or produce strong children. Clem's mother told them all that no doubt Sarah was pregnant even before they had left Liverpool. How else could she have persuaded her son to bring her? For Sarah nothing could be further from the truth, but worse of all they said that she was unlucky and that she would affect all of them.

Sarah tried to settle down to the routine that the life in the valley demanded of her, and maintained an uneasy truce over which Clem, still with the vision of the town in his eyes, presided over. As the leader he was able to protect her and she, in return, helped build their house, tended to the poultry, ran the buttery, and worked harder than she ever imagined was possible. But for what ever purpose God had placed her on earth, it was not to bear children. Clem and Sarah, despite his constant appetite and her unstinting submissive provision, remained unhappily childless as the community grew gradually during the early years. A number of new families joined them and the cluster of rough, primitive, buildings increased to eight. No-one enjoyed any real prosperity but a small surplus of production over need justified and underwrote their existence.

She was never happy, not in the carefree way she had been at home, but she stayed silent and subservient as there was no alternative but to go on from one day to the next. There was no escape, not even in that vast country. No where to go. Some nights, after her duties she would lie awake and think about home, in Liverpool, and her mother. Then she would start to worry and think of writing, but was there any point now? Unpalatable as it might appear, her mother could have died and she would never know. And if her mother was still alive she would have assumed that her only daughter, her little Sarah who had, one day, gone out shopping and disappeared off the face of the earth, was dead. At this thought she would shut up her mind, turn over, and silently cry herself to sleep.

The trouble must have started around the eleventh year. The rains came late and, when they did, the rainfall was lighter than usual. Crop yields fell and the pasture was bare by midsummer. Early in the following Spring the normally peaceful Indians, faced with starvation now that the buffalo had been driven away or exterminated, went on the rampage, raiding small

farms and settlements. Those in the valley had escaped, but they were relieved when troops were brought and ruthlessly re-established order. "It some old woman!" announced Clem, seemingly unsympathetic to the needs of the natives. "They say she's a Cheyenne or Sioux and she's some kind of witch doctor or fortune teller, a medicine woman if you like. She's been stirring up the tribes with tales of drought, doom and bad medicine. Talk about doom! The cavalry will take care of that!"

After a number of small, bloody, massacres, the Indians were calmed and driven away to remote locations. Secretly Sarah envied them and longed to go with them. Their fate could not be any worse than hers. Around her the settlers tried to return to their normal life but an uneasiness enveloped the valley and its community. For the next two years the rainfall remained light and, then, in the following year, none fell at all. They watched the rain clouds come, hang overhead, and depart without shedding a drop. Undaunted, Clem used his ingenuity and devised a system of irrigation from the river, but the water level was gradually falling, and the crops failed. It continued to fall, and the pasture disappeared. By mid-winter half of the livestock had died, and those that remained were so emaciated as to be of no value and past recovery. One by one the families drifted away as fresh news of Indian unrest reached their ears.

The crisis touched Sarah when Clem called a family conference. She found herself the object of unanswerable allegations, one after the other. "It's her fault," cried his mother. "The Indians knew it! We know it! We all know it! They've put the finger on her, that's what the Indian woman did. That's what all the trouble is about! There's a bad woman here, that old medicine woman said. No children, no good. No rain, no food, all die! It's your woman, Clem! Either she goes or we do. We'll all perish if she stays!"

"Perhaps she's a witch?" inserted one of the more spiteful Aunts.

"She's produced no children at all!" cried a niece. Sarah caught Clem's eye and rose, involuntarily, to her feet.

"I will leave you to decide exactly what has to be done," she said coldly and walked, trembling, from the meeting with as much dignity as she could muster. Later Clem came to her. She had been sitting just there, on the verandah, looking at the walnut tree and wondering if it, too, had died.

"We are going to have to move on, Sarah," he began. "We cannot risk staying here this summer and losing the little livestock that remains. We'll have to go higher, into the hills, and find some better pasture. We should be able to get by this year with hunting and living of the land. Maybe next year we will be able to start again, even come back here. This drought won't last for ever. There is just one snag." He paused. Sarah did not turn, but remained staring at the tree, waiting for the blow to fall, knowing exactly what he had to say.

"They don't want us along, do they?" she said in a low monotone.

"It is not as simple as that. It's you that they don't want along."

"Me!" she said, in knowing confirmation. "Me?"

"It sounds far worse than it is. I have worked out what we will have to do. I'll leave you with enough food to last four weeks. I can get them settled and then come back for you. We can go and find somewhere different, away from them. We can start again, a new life. We'll make it work, you'll see."

Ten weeks had now passed since she had stood, alone, on that verandah and watched the sad caravan consumed by its own dust. Clem had been generous, and she had been frugal, with the food. She had made it last nine weeks. She had survived the tenth week on water scooped from the muddy pools which formed the remnants of the river. She had found some ancient bread, discovered like gold, hidden in a tin in one of the shacks. Now that was gone, too.

The thunder roared and mocked her. Clem had not returned. Maybe he would never return. Maybe they had difficulty finding another spot, or something had happened to them. Maybe he was on his way at that very moment. Maybe he had never intended to return.

Whatever the truth might be, if he did not come soon there would be nothing to come for. She coughed. She was too dry to cry.

A swish, close by, made her start. "Sarah," a soft voice reached out from the darkness beyond the verandah. "Sarah, I have come for you." Her lips parted as she looked up and half-rose from her seat. At the foot of the steps stood the dark figure which she had seen earlier, the figure of an aged Indian woman. Sarah stared at her with total incomprehension.

"Mother?" she stammered.

"The time has come, Sarah, your time. It is told in the stars and it is as it is written. It is as it must be. Come!" The woman turned away and Sarah weakly stumbled after her. A fresh crash of thunder fell about them, shaking the air as lightning flooded the valley. Although it was noon, the sky hung dark, laden with weighted cloud which seemed to threaten to fall and crush her at any moment. The arid hot air scorched her lips, now blistered, thick and swollen. They stopped beneath the walnut tree.

"Mother?" croaked Sarah again.

"The walnut is a symbol of life to all men," said the Indian. "It is old and wise. Out of its shell sprang life and wisdom. Take the tree, Sarah. Place your arms around its trunk and hold it. Feel the longing for life in it. Give it life!"

Sarah stepped forward and knelt, in penance and contrition, placing her arms as the woman bade. An infinite serenity engulfed her. Outside the storm was raging, but within she was hallowed tranquillity. Hers had been a short life, unhappy and empty, but here was her purpose and her fulfilment. Strengthened, she turned her face upwards, her eyes searching the stark, bare, branches. The darkness moved in, but before her eyes closed for the last time, she felt pure water drop on her cheek, soothing, cooling, caressing, purging. It was absolution. In the last blinding flash, she knew all.

Travellers told of the spot with awe and wonder. There, they said, stood a walnut tree, its ancient trunk cleaved to the ground by lightning, yet fresh roots had sprung up through the dry stones of the Indian grave that sheltered at its foot. Some said these grew through the very remains of the person interred there, binding them to the earth. But most miraculous of all, in a valley which had permanently lost its river, from the rocks below the grave ran a spring of pure water which irrigated the valley; a spring that never faltered, even in the worse droughts, and which gave life to the tree and to all who came to live in the valley. Its lush fertility attracted settlers and a small township was established there, living in harmony with a small Indian community living nearby. To this day, though no-one is absolutely certain why, the town's name, taken from the Indian dialect, is called "Sarah's Springs".

THE END

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