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signs of progress and regression

Giant Field

By Margie Snowden North

Unorthodox ideas
and playing hunches
are part of the oilman's game.

Shell Oil, New York, 1947. . .
Orders to forsake that block of leases
back there in Western Oklahoma--
Beckham County, east--
(Where is that, anyway?)
those leaves that have been
shocked and vibrated and measured and recorded,
prodded and probed and burrowed to 13,000 feet,
Dry hole
Judged a failure by appropriate committees,
approved for abandonment.

But Shell's new president* was an oilman,
a trailblazer (as oilmen are likely to be)
and the explorer in him overruled
logic and raw facts.
His ultimatum: Try 'er again, boys
Re-examine the prospect.

Unorthodox, yes.
Sensible to forget a failure
But they gave her one more try.

Jackpot
Ace up a sleeve
A giant field**, and more
120 million barrels
of gleaming black gold
because an oilman--
the most prolific gambler of them all-
played a hunch and won.

**Max Burns was quoted later as saying, "I don't know why, but I couldn't begin my job as president by condemning an area as having no oil." It was on his first day as Shell's president that he refused to abandon the sites near Elk City.*

***Giant field: term for an oil field containing more than a million barrels.*

Fading Star — cont'd from page 25.

as she reached for the doorknob, however, James' hand shot out and he pulled her into the room by her hair. Mira touched her head now in remembrance. Yes, it was still quite sore. This time, she was sure that he meant to kill her, so she had fought him back. Her punches had been few; but because of his inebriated condition, she managed to throw him on the ground. She then ran out of the house and came to the only secure place she had known for a long time.

Now as she sat there, alone and afraid, she asked herself, "Why?" Why did her life have to be the way it was? Other girls led normal lives, but her life revolved around her stepfather and the kind of mood he was in. If he was in his usual drunk mood, she went around the house cowering and trying to hide, but it was useless. He usually found fault with everything she did, and he beat her for it. Her mother had stopped trying to protect her since the time James had broken her arm for doing so. She remembered the wild, crazy look he got when he beat her like a punching

bag. His eyes, full of hate and repulsion, seemed to probe into her very being while his clenched fists hit her again and again. Why did he hate her so much? Mira tried to please him, but he didn't care. Mira thought about the future. What did it have in store for her? Would she grow up to be like her mother? No! She wanted to be a nurse. But what chances did she have of even surviving?

The train whistle interrupted her thoughts. With a swift trot, she headed for the door and listened. Yes, it was very near. She would need to hurry if she wanted to be on time. She buttoned her worn jacket and stepped outside. At first, the cold numbed her, but then she broke into a slow, shaky jog. While running, she thought about what she was going to do. It was the only way out. Her life in this world was meaningless. The hurt and pain would be gone forever. Yes, she would do it! As if to reassure herself, she ran faster. From far away, she resembled a tiny struggling figure. When she arrived at the railroad tracks, she sat down, gasping for breath. Her eyes searched for the train and didn't find it, but the whistle came closer and closer. Slowly,

she got up and smoothed her hair as best she could. The tears were threatening to overflow, and she tilted her head back, looking at the dark, stormy sky. "God," she asked the Almighty, "Why did you put me in this world to suffer like this? What is the purpose of living if my life is controlled by such a beast?" As Mira uttered these words, a tiny patch of blue appeared in the sky. As if awakening from a dream, the truth dawned on her. Her brothers and sisters had not foolishly thrown themselves in front of a train. No. They had patiently waited and then just simply walked away. Why should she kill herself? Maybe she could become a nurse after all. Of course, it would take plenty of work, but she could do it. As she was thinking, she walked away. The train sped by, urging her to come back, but Mira walked on. Up in the sky, sunlight streamed through the patch of blue. Life wouldn't be easy for her, but after the storm, the most beautiful calm would envelop her. ■

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