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A Dark Road Winding

By Margaret Friedrich

Techla awoke, seasick again. In the crowded ship's cabin on the DANIA, she felt starved for fresh air. Nicholas and thirteen-year-old Kurt were up and gone. Maybe the whole journey had been a mistake, she thought. When will we ever walk on land again?

Since she and Nich were married in July, so much had happened. She remembered Nich's dancing brown eyes as he told her about his dream.

"You know the new Russian government has abolished our schools in all of Saratov Province. Now there is talk that the Bolsheviks will take away our churches too."

"Oh, no! We must have our church."

Now, in search of religious freedom, they were on their way to the United States of America with all the possessions they were allowed to take. Thechla could hardly believe it. She noticed that her son, Kurt, loved every minute. He roamed the one-class immigrant ship at will, making friends among the other young people. Since his father had died five years earlier, Kurt had wanted a father. His wish had come true, and he was happy.

As Thechla lay on her berth, regretting the long journey, Nich appeared. Her heart warmed at the sight of her good man with his dream. He sat on the side of her bed and stroked her blond hair. "Maybe, mine sweetheart, what you need is a breath of fresh air. Come, get dressed, and let's go on deck."

When she was ready, he helped her up the short flight to the deck. After he had found a sheltered corner for Thechla to sit in, Nicholas disappeared. The spray murmured softly against the side of the ship as she plowed through the calm sea. Thechla breathed deeply of the tangy salt air and began to feel a bit better. Her husband returned, carrying a steaming cup of tea and a few rye crackers. The slight bitterness of the rye crackers and the fragrance of the hot tea did indeed calm her jittery feeling. Nich smiled down at her.

"They say we'll dock tomorrow in New York Harbor."

"Oh, when?"

"They didn't say."

Next day, in the late afternoon, the small tender guided the big DANIA to her berth at Ellis Island. Thechla sighed with relief when the motion finally stopped and she could no longer feel the faint throb of the engines. Now, perhaps she would not feel so queasy. But she had begun to suspect that her discomfort was not all seasickness. Could she be pregnant--so soon?

They walked down the gangplank onto American soil on December 29, 1892. Both hope and apprehension quickened their heartbeats. The brashness of their adventure frightened them. At the same time, the sight of Miss Liberty on nearby Bedloe's Island, pointing her torch of

freedom toward heaven, calmed and reassured them. Two days later, they were on their way West.

In Kansas City, Nich bought a covered wagon, a team of horses, a sod-buster plow, an iron cookstove, a shotgun for game, as well as ammunition and camp food. He obtained a primitive map, and they set out on the three-day trip to Hometown, Kansas.

When they arrived, they found the place a confused tangle of potential farmers milling about and setting off in every direction in search of free land. Nicholas found one group better organized than most of the others. Surprisingly, they knew where they were going. They had sent representatives to scout the land. "You are welcome to join us, young man," the middle-aged leader of the group told Nich. Dr. Thom Goertz, a physician, advised everyone in his wagon train to lay in a three-months supply of food.

Accordingly, Thechla, Nich, and Kurt went shopping. They bought only necessities; Thechla looked longingly at the coffee but decided they could live without it. They filled the water barrels, one on each side of the wagon, and were ready to leave at dawn on Wednesday morning.

They were going to someplace called Cheyenne-Arapaho Country in Oklahoma Territory away to the south. Dr. Goertz assured them that they could find a farm there on which to file a claim. It was land not taken the year before in the third run to obtain free farms in Oklahoma.

Thechla was pleased that they would be in their permanent home before the baby came. To Nich she observed, "The road has often looked dark, but now I have a feeling that it will wind to a sunny end." He gave her a hug and a confident smile.

Six days later they were in Cheyenne-Arapaho Country. They stopped the wagon and gazed at the vista of prairie acres they had come to claim. Sunshine lighted the whole world. All the way to the horizon spread a sea of brown buffalo grass. Only the green cedars and the leafless elms and cottonwood trees growing along the Washita River broke the view.

The settlers staked their claims, registered them immediately, and turned to the next priority--shelter. A half-dugout was built for each of the dozen families in the Goertz Wagon Train. They had arrived on February 3. By cooperative effort, every family had moved into a permanent home by February 28. Thechla was appalled at the primitive dwelling. However, the shelter proved to be warm in winter and cool in summer.

Thechla soon saw that bugs could and frequently did come into the dugout through every chink. She panicked the day she sensed movement overhead and glanced up to see a green prairie snake hanging full length from one of the sapling rafters. Even as she stared, horrified, the writhing



thing dropped to the floor and slithered directly toward her. She screamed and ran out the door.

Nich found her in the wagon, sobbing. It was the only time he had seen a tear during all the arduous journey. Alarmed, he tried to find the source of her sorrow. "Are you in pain? Is the little one coming? What can I do?"

"No, no," she screamed at him, "We have come all this distance to live like animals."

Not knowing anything to say, he simply held her close until her sobbing ceased. When she had gained a measure of control, she told him about the bugs and the snake. "I don't think I can ever live in that horrible hole in the ground."

"Ah, mine sweetheart, it is only temporary, you know. In five years all these beautiful acres will be our very own. We'll build a fine house with many rooms; we'll have glass windows and wooden floors. And children will fill our rooms and make us merry. Just wait. You'll see." The dream again! He was making her believe it. She relaxed a bit and realized how tired she was.

"But what about the snake in the house?"

"I'll take care of that slim fellow," he told her. "Why don't you lie here and rest while I deal with the visitors in our hole in the ground?" He placed a pillow under her head and covered her with a patchwork quilt against the chill March wind that always seemed to sweep the prairie. Through tears, she gave him a doubtful smile. She closed her eyes.

Armed with a fence post, he entered the dugout and found the little snake coiled in the warmth of the iron stove, apparently sleeping. He quickly dispatched the intruder and carried it far away from the house. With a short stick, he squashed every bug he could find. As he finished his exterminating job, Kurt brought in a half dozen quail he had shot.

The two of them dressed the birds at the rough bench in the yard. As his new father built the fire for cooking, Kurt brought wood. "Do you think you could find some poke greens along the creek?" Nich asked the boy.

"I'll try," answered Kurt as he ran off to one of his

favorite spots.

Nich had the quail frying in the iron skillet when Kurt returned with an armload of greens. Those were soon washed and steaming in the pot. They set the packing-case table; and when the food was nearly ready, went to check on Techla.

She opened her calm blue eyes. "Mother, Mother," Kurt shouted. "Supper's ready. We cooked."

"You cooked?"

"Well, Father cooked, but I brought in the stuff."

Thechla returned Nich's smile and held up her arms. He picked her up and set her on her feet on the ground. While her husband and son put the food on the makeshift table, she splashed cool water on her face and brushed her hair. She looked carefully all around the room and then relaxed.

The spring-like aroma of the fresh greens stimulated the appetite. The scent of the crisply brown tender meat satisfied a hunger none of them had recognized. As the meal progressed, Kurt told them a story he had heard when he stopped in to see his friend, Peter Kuntz. "Herr Kuntz and the pastor were talking about something scary."

"What were they talking about?" inquired his mother.

"Herr Kuntz said some of the men in the County Seat were really angry about our people moving in here and filing claims. They didn't want to give up the grazing land they were leasing."

"Son, I wouldn't worry about it," commented Nich. "We have done nothing wrong nor illegal. The United States Government invited us to make good farms here and to produce food for the expanding population in the West."

On April 12, late in the afternoon, Kurt came in with his friend Peter. He wanted permission to spend the night with Peter. Nich gave his new son permission to go. Kurt stuck his head in the doorway and shouted, "Mother, I'm going to Peter's house for the night. Father said I might."

"Have a nice time," she called after him.

As dusk began to fall, Thechla told Nich, "It's time." He dropped the tools he was using and summoned Mrs. Hamar.

the neighbor-midwife. The baby was born a few minutes after 2:00 o'clock the next morning. His vigorous cry was welcome news to his parents.

Next day, Thechla wanted to sing with the meadowlark outside the window. She wrote her parents almost a paean of joy.

Dear Mother and Father,

Our beautiful son Konrad (named for you, Father) was born about 2:00 this morning. He is healthy and active. I am doing well too--no complications. Nich is the proudest of fathers.

Our baby has blue eyes like yours, Mother, and a full head of blond hair like yours, Father. Do keep us in your prayers, as I know you always do. We'll wait until a traveling missionary comes to have him baptized. He will be christened Nicholas Konrad, but we plan to call him Konrad. I'll send you a picture when one of the itinerant photographers visits our neighborhood.

You should see how Kurt is growing. He already stands taller than my shoulder. He has learned to hunt and fish--brings in prairie chicken, fish, quail, or rabbit almost every day.

Nich sends his regards.

*Lovingly,
Thechla*

Kurt took the letter to Ben Geruska, whose time it was to carry all the community letters to the Post Office nine miles distant and pick up mail for all families in the neighborhood.

Nicholaus, proud and happy that all was well with his wife and son, went back to long hours in the field. He was working from daylight to dark, trying to get the required 20 acres plowed and ready for winter wheat. By the middle of September, the ground was ready, and he had fashioned a cottonwood-log drag to smooth the seedbed.

Thechla took five-month-old Baby Konrad with her and went to the field with Nich and Kurt. She left the baby sleeping in the wagon while she helped broadcast the Turkey Red seed wheat they had brought from Kansas. It took them only three days to sow the whole 20 acres. Tomorrow Nich would be out early to cover the seed with the drag.

They were all up early the next morning. Everyone was in good humor as they ate breakfast and Nich drove off to finish the wheat sowing. Bobby Konrad was now awake. His mother changed him and sat down to nurse him. All was quiet and peaceful.

About half an hour later, Kurt came running in. "Mother, Father is coming back."

"Oh, he must have forgotten something," she said and went on serenely feeding little Konrad. In a few minutes Kurt was back. "Mother, it's our horses and wagon, but Father is not driving."

Still holding the baby and with Kurt by her side, Thechla walked outdoors and stood waiting as the conveyance turned into their lane. George Muller, sitting beside the driver, jumped down and came running.

Breathlessly George delivered his message. "Sorry, Thechla, Nicholas has been shot." After a brief pause, "He is already dead." Holding the baby closer, she reached for Kurt's hand. He clung to his mother's hand with both of his.

She had no words and no tears.

Friends and neighbors were gathering. Corettia Buergus guided Thechla into the dugout and to the rocking chair. Kurt still clung to his mother's hand. Anna Mari Krist and her husband drove up in their carriage. Anna Mari suggested and all the friends concurred that it would be best to take Thechla and the baby and young Kurt to the Krist home while they laid out Nicholas in his own tiny, one-room house.

When Anna Mari told Thechla what had been planned, she spoke for the first time. "What happened?"

"An outlaw cowboy came riding past and shot Nich three times."

"But why?"

"We don't know why. He was probably one of those cattlemen against farmers."

"I want to see Nich."

Someone gently took the baby from her. She and Kurt, accompanied by Corettia, walked toward the wagon. One of the men had cleaned Nich's face of the dust that covered it as he fell. There was no mark on his face. She looked at the dear face of her good man and could not speak. Kurt, following his mother's example, neither spoke nor wept.

The women gathered a few things for Thechla, diapers for the baby, and a complete change of clothing for each of them. As the carriage with Anna Mari driving made its way down the lane, the friends and neighbors proceeded to do what must be done. They carried the body into the house, washed it, and dressed it in the best clothes Nich had. They laid him on his own bed.

There was no coffin available anywhere. There was no clergyman to conduct a funeral. Their lay leader, Adam Bender, could read the "Service for Christian Burial" from the BOOK OF WORSHIP. They would wait for a traveling missionary to conduct the funeral.

Two of the families had brought boards to build tables for their homes. They gladly gave them for the coffin. While several of the men dug the grave in the new cemetery, two others constructed the coffin. George Muller, with his poker, burnt an inscription on a split cottonwood log to serve as a headmarker. One family had some white paint; another had black paint. Someone painted the coffin white late on Friday afternoon. Someone overlaid it with black paint early Saturday afternoon, leaving white crosses showing. All was ready for the burial on Sunday.

When everything was over, there was still the problem of how to help Thechla. She knew what her neighbors were thinking. She herself had done some hard thinking and knew what she must do. Three of the families who had seemed closest to her and Nich accompanied her home. She knew they were reluctant to leave her alone. When Anna Mari offered, "Come stay at our house a few days," Thechla spoke in a low, determined voice.

"Thank you, everyone of you, for all your kindnesses. I know you will help in any emergency, but I must go on with my family. I know Nich's plans. Kurt and I, with the help of God, can carry on."

She looked at her teenage son and saw that he had matured beyond his years during the last few days. "Yes, Mother," he reassured her. "God will help us."

Then she knew that all the blessings Nich had foreseen in America would eventually be theirs. ❧