

Chapter 1

Breaking Home Ties

RAY SMITH sat at the kitchen table, his hands folded in front of him, staring vacantly at the dirty dishes and the last crumbs on the bread dish. His wife, Mabel, had started to stack the dishes and then stopped to put her hand on his shoulder.

“Ray, things have been bad before,” she said tensely. She had tried to put all of the reassurance she could muster into the words, but they were freighted with the same emotion Ray was feeling.

The heavy tread of the 1929 depression was felt on the doorstep of the Smith family. Like death itself, it was an unwelcome visitor. There was a strange foreboding of what the future would bring, an apprehension of things to come.

For eight years Ray had supported his family by working as boom man for the Humptulips Boom Company near Grays Harbor, Washington. Life had never been exactly easy for the Smiths, but now with the west-coast logging companies closing it would be impossible to feed and clothe their eight children. He and Mabel had always practiced strict economy to provide for their children; however, their faithful frugality meant little at this time, for there would be nothing to economize.

She sat down beside him, trying hard to think of what they might do, of which way they should turn. At last Ray arose and with a heavy sigh announced that the next day he would pick up his last check at the company office.

“After that, I don’t know what,” he added.

Gathering all of the faith she could, Mabel looked up at her husband. “Oh, Ray, I’m sure the Lord will see us through.”

There was something in her voice that brought a little warmth to Ray’s heart; he actually felt better after she said that. “I wish I could believe like you,” he said hesitantly. “I - I just don’t know what we’re going to do, though.”

Then, as if he were a young boy again and blurting out all his problems to his mother, he sat down again, his head in his hands, and told Mabel how he felt. “Not only have they told me there’ll be no more work, but - but we have to move. I didn’t tell you this before, but we have to.”

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There was something cold and sinister about his expression of defeat that made Mabel pray silently for help. What did he mean, “have to move”? Then he told her that he had been told they would soon lose the roof over their heads. Years before Ray had made a verbal arrangement with the boom company to build a house on their land by the Humptulips River, with the agreement that he would have the first option to buy. Now, however, with the company defunct, it was a different situation. During the emergency the company had sold the land, and the new owner demanded that the Smith family move. The new owner was not impressed by any struggling, battling family; this was strictly business.

“When - when did he say we had to move?” stammered Mabel.

“Too soon.” Ray did not want to be definite, but he knew it was less than a month away.

During the ensuing days, Ray began thinking more and more of a letter he had received from his brother-in-law in the Bristol Bay area of Alaska. There was a note of courage in it that Ray could not shake from his mind; nor could he dismiss the idea that Alaska was a sort of Canaan’s land beckoning him from the darkness of Egypt. There was an exchange of mail, and with each letter came a clarion call to freedom. Here, at last, was an opportunity for a family! Now, with all other avenues blocked, the Alaskan adventure began to take on more meaning and significance. Rereading the letters, he noticed that Uncle Frank kept urging him to come north and bring the family to the frontier where there was abundant living for anyone willing to work for it.

“I tell you,” Ray said to the family one evening shortly after he had drawn his last check, “Alaska sounds good to me. How many would like to go to Alaska?”

Every hand went up. Boisterously the children acclaimed the idea. It sounded like a thrilling adventure to them, but there was a reluctance in Mabel’s voice and her hand did not wave as vigorously as her children’s. Sometime next winter her ninth child would be born, and she did not relish the thought of the isolation, the rigorous Alaskan climate, and the hardships of the wilderness. Not willing to allow her real feelings to be known, she entered into the family discussion of the possible move, but her heart was fearful.

Talk of Alaska went on practically every evening. In fact, it began cropping out during the day, at the breakfast table, and at any hour, until it seemed to the wife that it would be impossible to restrain her

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real feelings much longer. Then one day Ray burst into the room with a letter. It was from Uncle Frank at Snag Point, Alaska.

“This is it, folks; this is it,” he said exuberantly.

Opening it, Ray read Uncle Frank’s reply to his latest inquiry. “I have arranged passage for you and your family on the Alaska Steamship Company boat sailing in May.” Ray read that sentence aloud several times, and each time there were cheers from all of the youngsters. Mabel joined in with them, for somehow she believed the hand of Providence was in this. Where else could they turn?

It would not be an easy thing to leave their cozy cottage by the Humptulips River. Mrs. Smith had many flowers and she had tried to make the place attractive. Around the front-yard fence there were crimson rambler roses and large moonflowers she loved so well. The huge old stump that could not be burned out or blasted because the house was too close to it, she had covered with woodbine and pink climbing roses. This was her home, nestled among the tall alders, an ideal place for her family to live, work, and play.

“Ray, I’ll miss so many things,” she said a few days later, when arrangements were being made for their move to Alaska. “I’ll miss seeing that spruce tree for a marker as we drive down the road, the alders, the river, and - and my flowers. Oh, Ray!”

“I know, Mabel.” He was going to say something about Alaska, but thought better of it. Together they walked around the yard for the last time. When they came to the pump in the front yard they stopped for a drink. Here Mabel’s sentiments welled up and her eyes became moist with the memory of all they had experienced in their home by the river.

“The pump Ray, with its clear, cold water! Remember how folks told us we couldn’t get good water here and how we had faith to believe there would be water?”

“You mean you had the faith. I never would have believed it myself.”

She patted the pump handle as they moved on. “Everyone around here stops to taste our water.”

Their two dogs, Sport and Buff, bounded in front of them as they came to the porch.

“We’ll have to get rid of you two. You will make somebody good pets, though,” said Ray.

Mabel caught Ray by the arm and looked up at him. He was not completely stoical about the idea of moving, but he simply was not the

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demonstrative type. As he looked at his wife, though, he could understand something of what was happening to her heart.

When the new owner of their property got wind that the Smiths were actually planning to move, he came over.

“If you get a chance to sell the house, you’d better do it. Otherwise I’ll burn it down if you leave it,” he said flatly.

“Well,” answered Ray slowly, “I built the house myself. Put a lot of work into it, too.” He spat on the ground and then let his eyes travel toward the house and up to the chimney. “Guess I’ll advertise.”

No sooner had the local paper carried the ad than a man offered Ray \$25 for the lumber. It was not much, but there was little time to wait for more offers. With his meager funds running low, Ray told the man he could have the house.

Now the family began packing in earnest. For those who have never tried to move with a houseful of young children, it is difficult to understand all the problems. About the time one box was packed, there were mouths to feed, diapers to change, or someone’s nose to wipe. Mabel Smith was used to having children around, but when it came to moving, that was another thing. She sat in the rocker by the stove and sighed at the heap of clothes, the empty barrels, and the general confusion. Little Luella was banging away on a dishpan, while four-year-old Roger was screaming because of a hurt thumb.

“How I wish they were older!” she mumbled half aloud.

Her children, beginning with Luella at the age of two, went up as stairsteps, two years at a time. Luella, Roger, Louise, Elinor, Dorothy, Sherb, Elmer, and Clyde, who was fifteen and the only one numerically out of order.

“If only a good angel could be sent to help me,” sighed Mrs. Smith.

“I don’t have wings, my dear; but I think I can be of some help,” a voice came from the open door.

“Mrs. Meservey!” Mabel half arose to greet her neighbor, but Mrs. Meservey motioned for the tired woman to stay seated.

“I figured you’d need help, so I said to myself, ‘Now, Mrs. Meservey, you get yourself down the road and help those Smiths while they need help.’”

“Oh, you don’t know how we appreciate your -” “Just never mind the palaver. There’s work to be done. Now I’ll go upstairs and throw down the things that you’ll need, Mabel. We’ll work from the top to the bottom and get this whole thing wrapped up sooner than you ever thought.”

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Dear, kind, energetic Mrs. Meservey! The one neighbor who had been almost a part of the family through the years. Whenever there were little girls' clothes to make, it had been Mrs. Meservey who did the sewing. Mabel could make boys' things, but she never wanted to fuss with girls' clothing; so it was a trade affair with the two women.

Down came the clothes to be packed around the fruit jars in the wooden barrels. Boxes were crammed full and nailed shut. Soon a feeling that order was coming from the chaos pervaded the house, and Mabel realized that before long they would be finished with the packing.

Many of the household things were given away or sold. Most of the furniture and household items were delivered to the new owners, but the old Engman range and the double mattress and spring would go with them. A recently purchased Maytag washer completed the list for their future home. What they needed later would have to be shipped when they had the money.

In all the packing and planning the Smiths kept their children in the foreground. For Mabel there was the question of what to do with the youngsters during the long, cold winters. For this reason she had saved enough money to buy good used books and games, with dominoes taking top priority. Ray, however, thought of barber and dental tools, leather and a half-soling outfit, and, most of all, the valuable information he had obtained on childbirth from the family doctor. In the wild northern frontier he would have to be the midwife and nurse.

"We don't want to forget to take a good supply of 'Grandpa's Salve,'" said Mrs. Smith as she packed a box.

For years the Smiths had used a family formula handed down from grandpa Fogerty of Civil War days. It was a standing joke that it could grow hair on steel overnight. The mixture of beeswax, rosin, tallow, turpentine, sassafras, eucalyptus, grain alcohol, and nine other ingredients practically guaranteed success in curing man or beast, regardless of the ailment.

The day of departure came. The man who had bought the house for \$25 was there with his tools and was already tearing off the windows and doors. With mixed emotions the couple loaded the children into the waiting truck.

"Ray, I'm so glad some of my flowers bloomed before we had to leave," said Mrs. Smith.

"Good-by, old house; good-by, old car," the children called from the back of the truck. Everything had been sold or given away except

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the unwanted jalopy in the shed. The truck they were to ride in to Seattle belonged to Jim Putvin, who had traded Ray hauling charges for his half of the boat they had owned jointly.

After driving for several hours, they stopped at Auburn to visit relatives. Clyde hopped out and ran forward. "Mamma, I'm cold back there."

"Well, Clyde, put on your co - " Mrs. Smith stopped short. "Dear me, Clyde, I do believe in all the hustle we packed your coat. It's probably in the bottom of some barrel."

Thus Clyde got an unplanned foretaste of the chilly blasts to come. On the trip north he had only his sweater and a hope that his coat was safe in one of the barrels.

That night the Smiths stayed with their relatives. "I do believe you're taking those children north just to freeze them," the relatives said.

"We'd surely freeze in the road along the Humptulips, too," was Ray's only comment. "We have no home now."

"Well," they answered emphatically, "you'll never see us up in that icebox."

"Don't worry," said Mrs. Smith. "The way things are now, you'll follow us."

On May 13, 1930, the S.S. "Victoria" was gathering steam for her long voyage on the outside passage from Seattle to Bristol Bay. Ray Smith stood on the gangway a moment as he watched his family board the steamer. Even though he knew nothing of what lay before him, there was a sparkle in his eye, a glint of courage that seemed to answer the challenge of the hour. He turned to wave at the only two persons who had come to see them off, W. C. Christiansen, a faithful friend, and L. E. Biggs, conference treasurer. The latter had slipped a \$5 bill into Ray's hand as he said farewell.

"Get something for the kiddies with this," he had said, "and may God be with you, wherever you go."

As the whistle blew its deep blast, the Smiths stood at the railing waving or holding their hands over their ears. Slowly the ship moved away from the dock, leaving the two friends behind. Then, as the steamer turned out into Puget Sound, the northbound family knew that somewhere up beyond the great-circle route to the Orient was a rendezvous with destiny.