

Chapter 1

ON TOP OF THE BUTTES

Rugged is the canyon where the cold waters of the Imnaha River flow.

The Oregon eastland was wilder still when Hazel Weston was a girl. She lived along the Imnaha in the early part of this century. At that time log cabins were giving way to double-storied ranch houses, but the stern land never gave way to the rancher without a fight.

Hazel's father and uncles were among those "fighters" and although the girl was just five years old, her Uncle Roy said she could fight too.

"You're big enough to do a woman-sized job if you put your mind to it," he told her.

From then on, Hazel was tagged Big Enough by kin and canyon folk alike.

Since fall roundup was over, the Westons planned their twice-a-year trip to town for supplies - some seventy miles away.

"We're going to Joseph!" the girl sang as she bounced out of bed long before the roosters began their wake-up chorus.

Quickly dressing, Big Enough skipped in to set the table.

"Good morning!" Mother called from her place at the cookstove.

"Morning, Mom!"

Summer's sun had burned the girl's brown hair a copper color. Ordinarily, it stuck out in pigtails, but today was special. Today she combed her locks long for the trip.

From the sound of heavy boots stamping onto the front porch, Big Enough guessed that her father and Uncle Frank were through hitching up the horses.

"If all goes well, Frank, we should be back by Friday," Father was saying.

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While the grownups discussed their needs from town, Big Enough ate her west toward the Buttes, a steep mountain range. Dad hoped to make it to the top by dusk, where they could spend the night at halfway house.

The girl had learned that any home was called “halfway house” as long as travelers stayed there overnight and boarded their horses. Sometimes her own ranch served as a halfway house for others.

At noon, Father stopped at a restful place on Big Sheep Creek.

“Better eat as much as you can now, because it’ll be hours before Logans’ place and supper,” Mother warned.

While they ate lunch, the girl peered at the Buttes looming high above the canyon. Although the summit looked impossible to reach before nightfall, Big Enough knew they would. Up there the Logans’ hospitality always warded off the mountain’s icy chill.

The girl hoped they would arrive in time for stories. She had heard Mr. Logan’s tales, and especially enjoyed the one about a lovely green valley to the west where rivers and orchards mingled between snowcapped mountains. “I’d like to see that place someday!” her father had commented at the time.

Big Enough was used to the rocky, arid land of the Imnaha, so she couldn’t imagine a valley so splendidly green.

When Mother had asked if it was like the Wallowa Valley around Joseph, Mr. Logan exclaimed, “Why, there’s no comparison!” Besides the spectacular scenery surrounding it, his dream valley enjoyed mild winters, nothing like the bitter cold of the Wallowa.

Soon they were back on the wagon and bumping west again. After a few more hours, the grade became steep, and Father decided to rest Blacky and Jim before they started their climb.

“Can’t see any ice on the road up ahead. Might not have too bad a time getting up there, Ida!” Dad grinned at his small, dark-eyed wife.

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“Be fine with me!” Mother sighed. “Either way, you’ll get us to the top, Tom. Always have!”

The woman’s calm voice didn’t fool Big Enough. She sensed her mother’s relief. The road, hewn out of the mountainside, was frightening to the bravest soul. Once they began the climb, nothing stood between the wagon and deep gorge below. Although Blacky and Jim had on their no-slips, special ice shoes, the horses could easily lose ground if the heavy wagon should begin to slide backward down the slick grade.

Because of the danger, the girl was placed securely between her parents on the wagon seat. All afternoon Blacky and Jim leaned into their harnesses and labored up, up the steep road, except when Father’s frequent “Whoa” let the horses rest a while.

One such time, Big Enough peeked around her mother. Far below lay the canyon floor, its smattering of trees looking no bigger than mushrooms. The girl leaned carefully back in her place, grateful that her mother shielded her from the awesome view.

When their wagon finally pulled up to Logans’ place, dusk covered the sky. Shivering at the cold, Big Enough was eager to get inside and warm herself by the stove.

“Hello!” Mrs. Logan called from the doorway. “Fred will be out in a minute to help Tom put up the horses.”

Mom smiled wearily at the older woman as she led Big Enough into the house.

Soon they were all enjoying a hearty meal. Big Enough listened attentively while the adult chatter conveyed six months of news. Dad reported a good crop of alfalfa for him and Frank. The roundup was over, and the calves were all growing well.

Then the men retired to the parlor while the womenfolk - including a certain young lady - washed dishes. After being confined to the wagon all day, the girl welcomed the chore.

At last, the two families gathered in the parlor, and Big Enough glanced around at the pretty room meant only for

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company. Her ranch home didn't have a parlor, but Grandma Weston's house did - in Joseph, where they were heading. Little girls weren't allowed in the parlor, though, except when they were company. Now Big Enough was company.

"Well, Tom," Mr. Logan began, "you've heard all our tales. How about telling us how your folks came to that forsaken canyon anyhow - before they got some sense and moved to Joseph."

Dad's blue eyes twinkled with pride. He loved to talk about his pioneer parents, some of the first homesteaders in the area.

Big Enough settled back in a decorative chair near the stove and listened as her father began his story.

"Ma and Pa Weston came out here from Missouri in 1882, part of Captain Jar dine's wagon train. They were well prepared with supplies enough to make the long journey-and rifles in case of trouble. Some Indians weren't too happy about white folks traipsing across their land, ya know."

Father went on to describe their adventures. He was nine years old at the time, fourth youngest of a large brood. He remembered an incident on the plains when they met up with a tribe of angry warriors.

"Wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't gotten hold of whiskey somewhere." Father remarked. "But some of the braves were drunk and spoiling for a fight - with anyone. That was when our wagon train happened along."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Logan. "I would have prayed with all my might if I'd been there."

"Apparently, someone had, Ma'am," Dad continued, "because one of our guides spotted the Indians in time to warn the wagons and get them corralled. Amazing thing too, since a brave can hide himself and horse behind sagebrush, never showing a hair."

Father told how his mother ordered the children to lie flat in the wagon. "Taking a firm grip on the rifle, she stuck it through the canvas top. You see," he explained, "when the trouble started, Pa had left to join Captain Jardine. He knew Ma

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was protection enough for the family. A real sharpshooter, she's still a fearless woman!" Father bragged.

When young Tom heard the war cries and thundering pony hoofs, he couldn't restrain himself. He had to peek through a slit in the canvas. Charging toward him rode a group of dark-skinned braves with painted faces, scowling and whooping as they waved their rifles about wildly.

Big Enough forgot herself and asked, "Were you scared, Daddy?"

"Yes, I was," he admitted. "In fact, I was so scared, the hair bristled atop my head."

Mr. Weston then complained about his "bossy sister, Lizzy," who pulled him back down onto the floor just when a strange quiet settled over the place. His mother told him later that the Indians had come to an abrupt halt when they spotted the fringe of rifles greeting them.

"A little later my father and Captain Jardine parleyed with the chief. The sober Indians had talked the others out of their intentions, realizing that we were ready for trouble."

"How fortunate!" Mrs. Logan declared. "Just think, Tom! You might not be here now if -" she spotted Big Enough's saucerwide eyes - "if the guide hadn't warned the wagons in time."

Mr. Weston continued, describing a storm that came up. "I'd never seen the sky so black before. It actually looked green in places. Again we found protection. We happened across an English sheep station where the workers had just sheared their flock, leaving the station full of wool - the perfect place for us children to hide from the furious hail!"

Mother interrupted his story. "I don't recall hearing this before, Tom."

"Ida, that hail was as big as hens' eggs. Came crashing through the roof of that shed like it was paper and bounced around on the floor. I was burning up in that wool, but didn't dare climb out of it for fear of getting beat to death by the hail." Father's face broke into a wide grin. "In fact, if the hail didn't get me, Ma would have!"

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He told how the women found protection by wearing wooden buckets on their heads and burrowing into the wool with their children - every woman, that is, except Ma Weston. She had armed herself with a bucket and had joined her husband outside to help steady the team and get them under a roof.

“When the awful drumming stopped, Ma came back in and collapsed on a mound of wool. Her hair was all down, her dress torn in places. Said she had a bruise or two, but nothing serious. All the wagons and teams were safe. Of course, there was a good day’s mending to be done on the wagon tops. Some were so shredded they were beyond repair.”

“Providence was with you again, Tom!” Mrs. Logan said.

Father, who wasn’t at all religious, cleared his throat, then replied, “Maybe so, Mrs. Logan. Maybe so.”

Big Enough wondered what Providence meant. She had never heard that word before. She wondered about many things, especially about Grandma Weston. What a brave person she was!

Tomorrow the girl would see her grandmother face to face ... and Aunt Maggie ... and the interesting storefronts ...and...

Big Enough fell asleep.