

Little House on the Prairie

By: Laura Ingalls Wilder

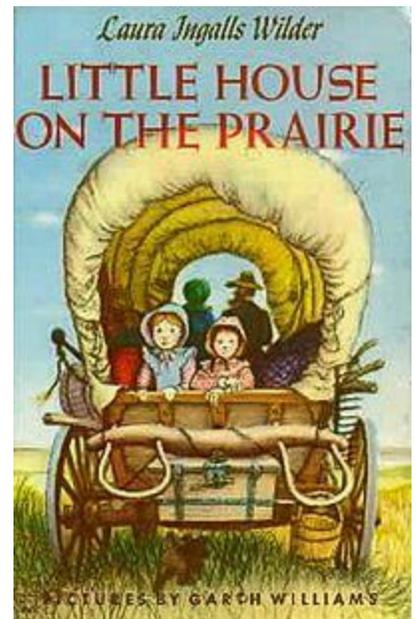
About this Book:

Little House on the Prairie is a children's novel by Laura Ingalls Wilder, published in 1935. This book is the third of the series of books known as the *Little House* series.

The book is about the months the Ingalls family spent on the Kansas prairie, around the town of Independence. Wilder describes how her father built their one-room log house in Indian Territory, having heard that the government planned to open the territory to white settlers soon.

Here, unlike in the original *Little House in the Big Woods*, the family meets difficulty and danger. They all fall ill from malaria, then thought to be the result of breathing the night air, though some believe it comes from eating bad watermelon. American Indians are a common sight for the little family, as their house was built in Osage territory, and Ma's open prejudice about Indians contrasts with Laura's more childlike observations about the Indians who live and ride nearby. The Indians begin to congregate at the nearby river bottoms and their war cries unnerve the settlers, who worry they may be attacked, but an Osage chief who was friendly with Pa is ultimately able to avert the hostilities.

By the end of the book, all the family's work is undone when word comes that U.S. soldiers are being sent to remove white settlers from Indian Territory. Pa decides to move the family away immediately before they can be forced to leave.



About the Author:

Laura Elizabeth Ingalls was born February 7, 1867, in a little log house in the Big Woods of Wisconsin. Laura's childhood was spent traveling west by covered wagon, through Indian Territory in Kansas, to Minnesota, and then to Dakota Territory, where she met and married Almanzo Wilder.

Laura's daughter Rose grew up listening to her mother's stories of those pioneer days. She urged her mother to write them down so that other children could enjoy them, as well. So in the 1930s and 40s, Laura recorded her memories of those days of long ago in a children's series known as the "Little House" books.

Although Laura died on February 10, 1957, at her home in the Ozarks of Missouri, she and her family will live forever in the hearts of her readers.



The Tall Indian

In those three days the norther had howled and screeched across the prairie till it blew itself out. Now the sun was warm and the wind was mild, but there was a feeling of autumn in the air. Indians came riding on the path that passed so close to the house. They went by as though it were not there.

They were thin and brown and bare. They rode their little ponies without saddle or bridle. They sat up straight on the naked ponies and did not look to right or left. But their black eyes glittered. Laura and Mary backed against the house and looked up at them. And they saw red brown skin bright against the blue sky, and scalplocks wound with colored string, and feathers quivering. The Indians' faces were like the red brown wood that Pa had carved to make a bracket for Ma. "I thought that trail was an old one they didn't use any more," Pa said. "I wouldn't have built the house so close to it if I'd known it's a highroad." Jack hated Indians, and Ma said she didn't blame him. She said, "I declare, Indians are getting so thick around here that I can't look up without seeing one."

As she spoke she looked up, and there stood an Indian. He stood in the doorway, looking at them, and they had not heard a sound. "Goodness!" Ma gasped.

Silently Jack jumped at the Indian. Pa caught him by the collar, just in time. The Indian hadn't moved; he stood as still as if Jack hadn't been there at all. "How!" he said to Pa.

Pa held on to Jack and replied, "How!" He dragged Jack to the bedpost and tied him there. While he was doing it, the Indian came in and squatted down by the fire.

Then Pa squatted down by the Indian, and they sat there, friendly but not saying a word, while Ma finished cooking dinner. Laura and Mary were close together and quiet on their bed in the corner. They couldn't take their eyes from that Indian. He was so still that the beautiful eagle feathers in his scalplock didn't stir. Only his bare chest and the leanness under his ribs moved a little to his breathing. He wore fringed leather leggings, and his moccasins were covered with beads.

Ma gave Pa and the Indian their dinners on two tin plates, and they ate silently. Then Pa gave the Indian some tobacco for his pipe. They filled their pipes, and they lighted the tobacco with coals from the fire, and they silently smoked until the pipes were empty.

All this time nobody had said anything. But now the Indian said something to Pa. Pa shook his head and said, "No speak." A while longer they all sat silent. Then the Indian

rose up and went away without a sound. "My goodness gracious!" Ma said. Laura and Mary ran to the window. They saw the Indian's straight back, riding away on a pony. He held a gun across his knees, its ends stuck out on either side of him.

Pa said that Indian was no common trash. He guessed by the scalplock that he was an Osage. "Unless I miss my guess," Pa said, "that was French he spoke. I wish I had picked up some of that lingo."

"Let Indians keep themselves to themselves," said Ma, "and we will do the same. I don't like Indians around underfoot." Pa told her not to worry.

"That Indian was perfectly friendly," he said. "And their camps down among the bluffs are peaceable enough. If we treat them well and watch Jack, we won't have any trouble."

The very next morning, when Pa opened the door to go to the stable, Laura saw Jack standing in the Indian trail. He stood stiff, his back bristled, and all his teeth showed. Before him in the path the tall Indian sat on his pony. Indian and pony were still as still. Jack was telling them plainly that he would spring if they moved. Only the eagle feathers that stood up from the Indian's scalplock were waving and spinning in the wind. When the Indian saw Pa, he lifted his gun and pointed it straight at Jack. Laura ran to the door, but Pa was quicker. He stepped between Jack and that gun, and he reached down and grabbed Jack by the collar. He dragged Jack out of the Indian's way, and the Indian rode on, along the trail.

Pa stood with his feet wide apart, his hands in his pockets, and watched the Indian riding farther and farther away across the prairie.

"That was a darned close call!" Pa said. "Well, it's his path. An Indian trail, long before we came." He drove an iron ring into a log of the house wall, and he chained Jack to it. After that, Jack was always chained. He was chained to the house in the daytime, and at night he was chained to the stable door, because horse thieves were in the country now. They had stolen Mr. Edwards' horses.

Jack grew crosser and crosser because he was chained. But it could not be helped. He would not admit that the trail was the Indians' trail, he thought it belonged to Pa. And Laura knew that something terrible would happen if Jack hurt an Indian.

Winter was coming now. The grasses were a dull color under a dull sky. The winds wailed as if they were looking for something they could not find. Wild animals were wearing their thick winter fur, and Pa set his traps in the creek bottoms. Every day he visited them, and every day he went hunting. Now that the nights were freezing cold, he shot deer for meat. He shot wolves and foxes for their fur, and his traps caught beaver and muskrat and mink. He stretched the skins on the outside of the house and carefully tacked them there, to dry. In the evenings he worked the dried skins between

his hands to make them soft, and he added them to the bundle in the corner. Every day the bundle of furs grew bigger.

Laura loved to stroke the thick fur of red foxes. She like the brown, soft fur of beaver, too, and the shaggy wolf's fur. But best of all she loved the silky mink. Those were all furs that Pa saved to trade next spring in Independence. Laura and Mary had rabbit skin caps, and Pa's cap was muskrat.

One day when Pa was hunting, two Indians came. They came into the house, because Jack was chained.

Those Indians were dirty and scowling and mean. They acted as if the house belonged to them. One of them looked through Ma's cupboard and took all the cornbread. The other took Pa's tobacco pouch. They looked at the pegs where Pa's gun belonged. Then one of them picked up the bundle of furs.

Ma held Baby Carrie in her arms, and Mary and Laura stood close to her. They looked at that Indian taking Pa's furs. They couldn't do anything to stop him.

He carried them as far as the door. Then the other Indian said something to him. They made harsh sounds at each other in their throats, and he dropped the furs. They went away.

Ma sat down. She hugged Mary and Laura close to her and Laura felt Ma's heart beating. "Well," Ma said, smiling, "I'm thankful they didn't take the plow and seeds."

Laura was surprised. She asked, "What plow?"

"The plow and all our seeds for next year are in that bundle of furs," said Ma.

When Pa came home they told him about those Indians, and he looked sober. But he said that all was well that ended well. That evening when Mary and Laura were in bed, Pa played his fiddle. Ma was rocking in the rocking chair, holding Baby Carrie against her breast, and she began to sing softly with the fiddle: "Wild roved an Indian main, Bright Alfarata, Where flow the waters Of the blue Juniata. Strong and true my arrows are In my painted quiver, Swift goes my light canoe A'down the rapid river.

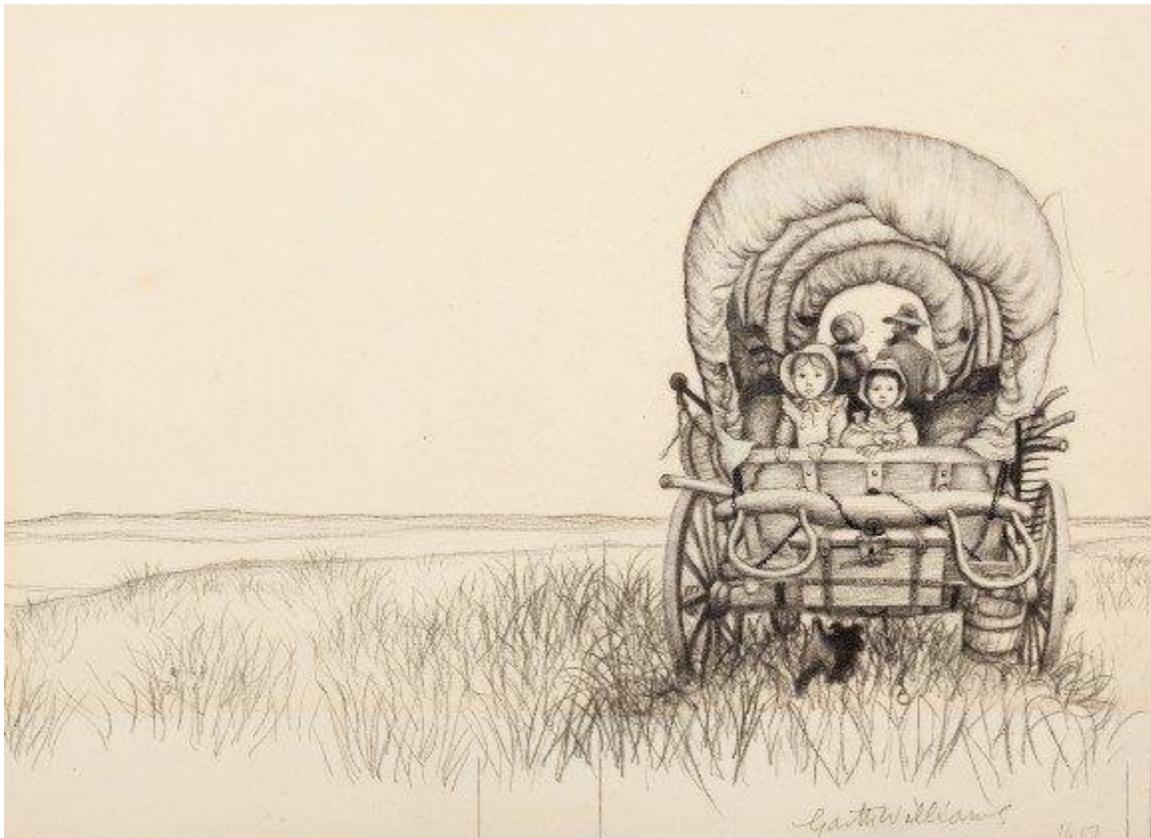
"Bold is my warrior good, The love of Alfarata, Proud wave his sunny plumes Along the Juniata. Soft and low he speaks to me, And then his war cry sounding Rings his voice in thunder loud From height to height resounding. So sang the Indian maid, Bright Alfarata, Where sweep the waters Of the blue Juniata. Fleeting years have borne away The voice of Alfarata, Still flow the waters Of the blue Juniata."

Ma's voice and the fiddle's music softly died away. And Laura asked, "Where did the voice of Alfarata go, Ma?" "Goodness!" Ma said. "Aren't you asleep yet?"

"I'm going to sleep," Laura said. "But please tell me where the voice of Alfarata went?" "Oh I suppose she went west," Ma answered. "That's what the Indians do."

"Why do they do that, Ma?" Laura asked. "Why do they go west?" "They have to," Ma said. "Why do they have to?"

"The government makes them, Laura," said Pa. "Now go to sleep." He played the fiddle softly for a while. Then Laura asked, "Please, Pa, can I ask just one more question?" "May I," said Ma. Laura began again. "Pa, please, may I ask what is it?" Pa asked. It was not polite for little girls to interrupt, but of course Pa could do it. "Will the government make these Indians go west?" "Yes," Pa said. "When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. That's why we're here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?" "Yes, Pa," Laura said. "But, Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to move?" "No more questions, Laura," Pa said, firmly. "Go to sleep."



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A Scream in the Night

The days were short and gray now, the nights were very dark and cold. Clouds hung low above the little house and spread low and far over the bleak prairie. Rain fell, and sometimes snow was driven on the wind. Hard little bits of snow whirled in the air and scurried over the humped backs of miserable grasses. And next day the snow was gone.

Every day Pa went hunting and trapping. In the cozy, firelit house Mary and Laura helped Ma with the work. Then they sewed quilt patches. They played Patty Cake with Carrie, and they played Hide the Thimble. With a piece of string and their fingers, they played Cat's Cradle. And they played Bean Porridge Hot. Facing each other, they clapped their hands together and against each other's hands, keeping time while they said: "Bean porridge hot, Bean porridge cold, Bean porridge in the pot, Nine days old. "Some like it hot, Some like it cold, Some like it in the pot, Nine days old. "I like it hot, I like it cold, I like it in the pot, Nine days old." That was true. No supper was so good as the thick bean porridge, flavored with a small bit of salt pork, that Ma dipped onto the tin plates when Pa had come home cold and tired from his hunting. Laura liked it hot, and she liked it cold, and it was always good as long as it lasted. But it never really lasted nine days. They ate it up before that.

All the time the wind blew, shrieking, howling, wailing, screaming, and mournfully sobbing. They were used to hearing the wind. All day they heard it, and at night in their sleep they knew it was blowing. But one night they heard such a terrible scream that they all woke up. Pa jumped out of bed, and Ma said: "Charles! What was it?" "It's a woman screaming," Pa said. He was dressing as fast as he could. "Sounded like it came from Scott's."

"Oh, what can be wrong!" Ma exclaimed.

Pa was putting on his boots. He put his foot in, and he put his fingers through the strap ears at the top of the long boot leg. Then he gave a mighty pull, and he stamped hard on

the floor, and that boot was on. "Maybe Scott is sick," he said, pulling on the other boot.

"You don't suppose?" Ma asked, low.

"No," said Pa. "I keep telling you they won't make any trouble. They're perfectly quiet and peaceable down in those camps among the bluffs." Laura began to climb out of bed, but Ma said, "Lie down and be still, Laura." So she lay down.



Pa put on his warm, bright plaid coat, and his fur cap, and his muffler. He lighted the candle in the lantern, took his gun, and hurried outdoors.

Before he shut the door behind him, Laura saw the night outside. It was black dark. Not one star was shining. Laura had never seen such solid darkness. "Ma?" she said. "What, Laura?" "What makes it so dark?"

"It's going to storm," Ma answered. She pulled the latch string in and put a stick of wood on the fire. Then she went back to bed. "Go to sleep, Mary and Laura," she said. But Ma did not go to sleep, and neither did Mary and Laura. They lay wide awake and listened. They could not hear anything but the wind.

Mary put her head under the quilt and whispered to Laura, "I wish Pa'd come back." Laura nodded her head on the pillow, but she couldn't say anything. She seemed to see

Pa striding along the top of the bluff, on the path that went toward Mr. Scott's house.

Tiny bright spots of candlelight darted here and there from the holes cut in the tin lantern. The little flickering lights seemed to be lost in the black dark. After a long time Laura whispered, "It must be 'most morning." And Mary nodded. All that time they had been lying and listening to the wind, and Pa had not come back. Then, high above the shrieking of the wind they heard again that terrible scream. It seemed quite close to the house.

Laura screamed, too, and leaped out of bed. Mary ducked under the covers. Ma got up and began to dress in a hurry. She put another stick of wood on the fire and told Laura to go back to bed. But Laura begged so hard that Ma said she could stay up. "Wrap yourself in the shawl," Ma said.

They stood by the fire and listened. They couldn't hear anything but the wind. And they could not do anything. But at least they were not lying down in bed.

Suddenly fists pounded on the door and Pa shouted: "Let me in! Quick, Caroline!"

Ma opened the door and Pa slammed it quickly behind him. He was out of breath. He pushed back his cap and said: "Whew! I'm scared yet." "What was it, Charles?" said Ma.

"A panther," Pa said.

He had hurried as fast as he could go to Mr. Scott's. When he got there, the house was dark and everything was quiet. Pa went all around the house, listening, and looking with the lantern. He could not find a sign of anything wrong. So he felt like a fool, to think he had got up and dressed in the middle of the night and walked two miles, all because he heard the wind howl. He did not want Mr. and Mrs. Scott to know about it.

So he did not wake them up. He came home as fast as he could because the wind was bitter cold. And he was hurrying along the path, where it went on the edge of the bluff, when all of a sudden he heard that scream right under his feet.

"I tell you my hair stood up till it lifted my cap," he told Laura. "I lit out for home like a scared rabbit."

"Where was the panther, Pa?" she asked him. "In a tree top," said Pa. "In the top of that big cottonwood that grows against the bluffs there." "Pa, did it come after you?" Laura asked, and he said, "I don't know, Laura."

"Well, you're safe now, Charles," said Ma.

"Yes, and I'm glad of it. This is too dark a night to be out with panthers," Pa said. "Now, Laura, where's my bootjack?"

Laura brought it to him. The bootjack was a thin oak slab with a notch in one end and a cleat across the middle of it. Laura laid it on the floor with the cleat down, and the cleat lifted up the notched end. Then Pa stood on it with one foot, he put the other foot into the notch, and the notch held the boot by the heel while Pa pulled his foot out. Then he pulled off his other boot, the same way. The boots clung tightly, but they had to come off.

Laura watched him do this, and then she asked, "Would a panther carry off a little girl, Pa?"

"Yes," said Pa. "And kill her and eat her, too. You and Mary must stay in the house till I shoot that panther. As soon as daylight comes I will take my gun and go after him." All the next day Pa hunted that panther. And he hunted the next day and the next day. He found the panther's tracks, and he found the hide and bones of an antelope that the panther had eaten, but he did not find the panther anywhere. The panther went swiftly through tree tops, where it left no tracks.

Pa said he would not stop till he killed that panther. He said, "We can't have panthers running around in a country where there are little girls."

But he did not kill that panther, and he did stop hunting it. One day in the woods he met

an Indian. They stood in the wet, cold woods and looked at each other, and they could not talk because they did not know each other's words. But the Indian pointed to the panther's tracks, and he made motions with his gun to show Pa that he had killed that panther. He pointed to the tree tops and to the ground, to show that he had shot it out of a tree. And he motioned to the sky, and west and east, to say that he had killed it the day before. So that was all right. The panther was dead.

Laura asked if a panther would carry off a little papoose and kill and eat her, too, and Pa said yes. Probably that was why the Indian had killed that panther.

INDIAN JAMBOREE

Winter ended at last. There was a softer note in the sound of the wind, and the bitter cold was gone. One day Pa said he had seen a flock of wild geese flying north. It was time to take his furs to Independence. Ma said, "The Indians are so near!"

"They are perfectly friendly," said Pa. He often met Indians in the woods where he was hunting. There was nothing to fear from Indians.

"No," Ma said. But Laura knew that Ma was afraid of Indians. "You must go, Charles," she said. "We must have a plow and seeds. And you will soon be back again." Before dawn next morning Pa hitched Pet and Patty to the wagon, loaded his furs into it, and drove away. Laura and Mary counted the long, empty days. One, two, three, four, and still Pa had not come home. In the morning of the fifth day they began earnestly to watch for him. It was a sunny day. There was still a little chill in the wind, but it smelled of spring. The vast blue sky resounded to the quacks of wild ducks and the honk honk honking of wild geese. The long, black dotted lines of them were all flying north. Laura and Mary played outdoors in the wild, sweet weather. And poor Jack watched them and sighed. He couldn't run and play anymore, because he was chained. Laura and Mary tried to comfort him, but he didn't want petting. He wanted to be free again, as he used to be.

Pa didn't come that morning; he didn't come that afternoon. Ma said it must have taken him a long time to trade his furs. That afternoon Laura and Mary were playing hop scotch. They marked the lines with a stick in the muddy yard. Mary really didn't want to hop; she was almost eight years old and she didn't think that hop scotch was a ladylike play. But Laura teased and coaxed, and said that if they stayed outdoors they would be sure to see Pa the minute he came from the creek bottoms. So Mary was hopping.

Suddenly she stopped on one foot and said, "What's that?" Laura had already heard the queer sound and she was listening to it. She said, "It's the Indians." Mary's other foot dropped and she stood frozen still. She was scared. Laura was not exactly scared, but that sound made her feel funny. It was the sound of quite a lot of Indians, chopping with their

voices. It was something like the sound of an ax chopping, and something like a dog barking, and it was something like a song, but not like any song that Laura had ever heard. It was a wild, fierce sound, but it didn't seem angry. Laura tried to hear it more clearly. She couldn't hear it very well, because hills and trees and the wind were in the way, and Jack was savagely growling.

Ma came outdoors and listened a minute. Then she told Mary and Laura to come into the house. Ma took Jack inside, too, and pulled in the latch string.

They didn't play anymore. They watched at the window, and listened to that sound. It was harder to hear, in the house. Sometimes they couldn't hear it; then they heard it again. It hadn't stopped.

Ma and Laura did the chores earlier than usual. They locked Bunny and the cow and calf in the stable, and took the milk to the house. Ma strained it and set it away. She drew a bucket of fresh water from the well, while Laura and Mary carried in wood. All the time that sound went on; it was louder, now, and faster. It made Laura's heart beat fast.

They all went into the house and Ma barred the door. The latch string was already in. They wouldn't go out of the house till morning. The sun slowly sank. All around the edge of the prairie the edge of the sky flushed pink. Firelight flickered in the dusky house and Ma was getting supper, but Laura and Mary silently watched from the window. They saw the colors fade from everything. The land was shadowy and the sky was clear, pale gray. All the time that sound came from the creek bottoms, louder and louder, faster and faster. And Laura's heart beat faster and louder.

How she shouted when she heard the wagon! She ran to the door and jumped up and down, but she couldn't unbar it. Ma wouldn't let her go out. Ma went out, to help Pa bring in the bundles.

He came in with his arms full, and Laura and Mary clung to his sleeves and jumped on his feet. Pa laughed his jolly big laugh. "Hey! hey! don't upset me!" he laughed. "What do you think I am? A tree to climb?"

He dropped the bundles on the table, he hugged Laura in a big bear hug, and tossed her and hugged her again. Then he hugged Mary snugly in his other arm.

"Listen, Pa," Laura said. "Listen to the Indians. Why are they making that funny noise?" "Oh, they're having some kind of jamboree," Pa said. "I heard them when I crossed the creek bottoms."

Then he went out to unhitch the horses and bring in the rest of the bundles. He had got the plow; he left it in the stable, but he brought all the seeds into the house for safety. He had sugar, not any white sugar this time, but brown. White sugar cost too much. But he had brought a little white flour. There were cornmeal and salt and coffee and all the seeds they needed. Pa had even got seed potatoes. Laura wished they might eat the potatoes but they must be saved to plant. Then Pa's face beamed and he opened a small paper sack. It was full of crackers. He set it on the table, and he unwrapped and set beside it a glass jar full of little green cucumber pickles.

"I thought we'd all have a treat," he said. Laura's mouth watered, and Ma's eyes shone softly at Pa. He had remembered how she longed for pickles. That wasn't all. He gave

Ma a package and watched her unwrap it and in it was enough pretty calico to make her a dress. "Oh, Charles, you shouldn't! It's too much!" she said. But her face and Pa's were two beams of joy. Now he hung up his cap and his plaid coat on their pegs. His eyes looked sidewise at Laura and Mary, but that was all. He sat down and stretched out his legs to the fire.

Mary sat down, too, and folded her hands in her lap. But Laura climbed onto Pa's knee and beat him with her fists. "Where is it? Where is it? Where's my present?" she said, beating him.

Pa laughed his big laugh, like great bells ringing, and he said, "Why, I do believe there is something in my blouse pocket."

He took out an oddly shaped package, and very, very slowly he opened it. "You first, Mary," he said, "because you are so patient." And he gave Mary a comb for her hair. "And here, flutterbudget! this is for you," he said to Laura. The combs were exactly alike. They were made of black rubber and curved to fit over the top of a little girl's head. And over the top of the comb lay a flat piece of black rubber, with curving slits cut in it, and in the very middle of it a little five pointed star was cut out. A bright colored ribbon was drawn underneath, and the color showed through. The ribbon in Mary's comb was blue, and the ribbon in Laura's comb was red. Ma smoothed back their hair and slid the combs into it, and there in the golden hair, exactly over the middle of Mary's forehead, was a little blue star. And in Laura's brown hair, over the middle of her forehead, was a little red star.

Laura looked at Mary's star, and Mary looked at Laura's, and they laughed with joy. They had never had anything so pretty.

Ma said, "But, Charles, you didn't get yourself a thing!" "Oh, I got myself a plow," said Pa. "Warm weather'll be here soon now, and I'll be plowing." That was the happiest supper they had had for a long time. Pa was safely home again. The fried salt pork was very good, after so many months of eating ducks and geese and turkeys and venison. And nothing had ever tasted so good as those crackers and the little green sour pickles.

Pa told them about all the seeds. He had got seeds of turnips and carrots and onions and cabbage. He had got peas and beans. And corn and wheat and tobacco and the seed potatoes. And watermelon seeds. He said to Ma, "I tell you, Caroline, when we begin getting crops off this rich land of ours, we'll be living like kings!" They had almost forgotten the noise from the Indian camp. The window shutters were closed now, and the wind was moaning in the chimney and whining around the house. They were so used to the wind that they did not hear it. But when the wind was silent an instant, Laura heard again that wild, shrill, fast beating sound from the Indian camps.

Then Pa said something to Ma that made Laura sit very still and listen carefully. He said that folks in Independence said that the government was going to put the white settlers out of the Indian Territory. He said the Indians had been complaining and they had got that answer from Washington. "Oh, Charles, no!" Ma said. "Not when we have done so much."

Pa said he didn't believe it. He said, "They always have let settlers keep the land. They'll make the Indians move on again. Didn't I get word straight from Washington that this country's going to be opened for settlement any time now?" "I wish they'd settle it and stop talking about it," Ma said. After Laura was in bed she lay awake a long time, and so did Mary. Pa and Ma sat in the firelight and candlelight, reading. Pa had brought a newspaper from Kansas, and he read it to Ma. It proved that he was right, the government would not do anything to the white settlers.

Whenever the sound of the wind died away, Laura could faintly hear the noise of that wild jamboree in the Indian camp. Sometimes even above the howling of the wind she thought she still heard those fierce yells of jubilation. Faster, faster, faster they made her heart beat. "Hi! Hi! Hi yi! Hah! Hi! Hah!"

Prairie Fire

Spring had come. The warm winds smelled exciting, and all outdoors was large and bright and sweet. Big white shining clouds floated high up in clear space. Their shadows floated over the prairie. The shadows were thin and brown, and all the rest of the prairie was the pale, soft colors of dead grasses. Pa was breaking the prairie sod, with Pet and Patty hitched to the breaking plow. The sod was a tough, thick mass of grass roots. Pet and Patty slowly pulled with all their might and the sharp plow slowly turned over a long, unbroken strip of that sod. The dead grass was so tall and thick that it held up the sod. Where Pa had plowed, he didn't have a plowed field. The long strips of grass roots lay on top of grass, and grass stuck out between them.

But Pa and Pet and Patty kept on working. He said that sod potatoes and sod corn would grow this year, and next year the roots and the dead grasses would be rotted. In two or three years he would have nicely plowed fields. Pa liked the land because it was so rich, and there wasn't a tree or a stump or a rock in it.

Now a great many Indians came riding along the Indian trail. Indians were everywhere.

Their guns echoed in the creek bottoms where they were hunting. No one knew how many Indians were hidden in the prairie which seemed so level but wasn't. Often Laura saw an Indian where no one had been an instant before. Indians often came to the house. Some were friendly, some were surly and cross. All of them wanted food and tobacco, and Ma gave them what they wanted. She was afraid not to. When an Indian pointed at something and grunted, Ma gave him that thing. But most of the food was kept hidden and locked up. Jack was cross all the time, even with Laura. He was never let off the chain, and all the time he lay and hated the Indians. Laura and Mary were quite used to seeing them now. Indians didn't surprise them at all. But they always felt safer near Pa or Jack. One day they were helping Ma get dinner. Baby Carrie was playing on the floor in the sunshine, and suddenly the sunshine was gone.

"I do believe it is going to storm," Ma said, looking out of the window. Laura looked, too, and great black clouds were billowing up in the south, across the sun.

Pet and Patty were coming running from the field, Pa holding to the heavy plow and bounding in long leaps behind it.

"Prairie fire!" he shouted. "Get the tub full of water! Put sacks in it! Hurry!"

Ma ran to the well, Laura ran to tug the tub to it. Pa tied Pet to the house. He brought the cow and calf from the picket line and shut them in the stable. He caught Bunny and tied her fast to the north corner of the house. Ma was pulling up buckets of water as fast as she could. Laura ran to get the sacks that Pa had flung out of the stable.

Pa was plowing, shouting at Pet and Patty to make them hurry. The sky was black now, the air was as dark as if the sun had set. Pa plowed a long furrow west of the house and south of the house, and back again east of the house. Rabbits came bounding past him as if he wasn't there.

Pet and Patty came galloping, the plow and Pa bounding behind them. Pa tied them to the other north corner of the house. The tub was full of water. Laura helped Ma push the sacks under the water to soak them.

"I couldn't plow but one furrow; there isn't time," Pa said. "Hurry, Caroline. That fire's coming faster than a horse can run."

A big rabbit bounded right over the tub while Pa and Ma were lifting it. Ma told Laura to stay at the house. Pa and Ma ran staggering to the furrow with the tub.

Laura stayed close to the house. She could see the red fire coming under the billows of smoke. More rabbits went leaping by. They paid no attention to Jack and he didn't think about them; he stared at the red under sides of the rolling smoke and shivered and whined while he crowded close to Laura. The wind was rising and wildly screaming. Thousands of birds flew before the fire, thousands of rabbits were running.

Pa was going along the furrow, setting fire to the grass on the other side of it. Ma followed with a wet sack, beating at the flames that tried to cross the furrow. The whole prairie was hopping with rabbits. Snakes rippled across the yard. Prairie hens ran silently, their necks outstretched and their wings spread. Birds screamed in the screaming wind. Pa's little fire was all around the house now, and he helped Ma fight it with the wet sacks. The fire blew wildly, snatching at the dry grass inside the furrow. Pa and Ma thrashed at it with the sacks, when it got across the furrow they stamped it with their feet. They ran back and forth in the smoke, fighting that fire. The prairie fire was roaring now, roaring louder and louder in the screaming wind. Great flames came roaring, flaring and twisting high. Twists of flame broke loose and came down on the wind to blaze up in the grasses far ahead of the roaring wall of fire. A red light came from the rolling black clouds of smoke overhead. Mary and Laura stood against the house and held hands and trembled. Baby Carrie was in the house. Laura wanted to do something, but inside her head was a roaring and whirling like the fire. Her middle shook, and tears poured out of her stinging eyes. Her eyes and her nose and her throat stung with smoke. Jack howled. Bunny and Pet and Patty were jerking at the ropes and squealing horribly. The orange, yellow, terrible flames were coming faster than horses can run, and their quivering light danced over everything.

Pa's little fire had made a burned black strip. The little fire went backing slowly away against the wind, it went slowly crawling to meet the racing furious big fire. And suddenly the big fire swallowed the little one.

The wind rose to a high, crackling, rushing shriek, flames climbed into the crackling air. Fire was all around the house.

Then it was over. The fire went roaring past and away.

Pa and Ma were beating out little fires here and there in the yard. When they were all out, Ma came to the house to wash her hands and face. She was all streaked with smoke and sweat, and she was trembling. She said there was nothing to worry about. "The back fire saved us," she said, "and all's well that ends well." The air smelled scorched. And to the very edge of the sky, the prairie was burned naked and black. Threads of smoke rose from it. Ashes blew on the wind. Everything felt different and miserable. But Pa and Ma were cheerful because the fire was gone and it had not done any harm.

Pa said that the fire had not missed them far, but a miss is as good as a mile. He asked

Ma, "If it had come while I was in Independence, what would you have done?"

"We would have gone to the creek with the birds and the rabbits, of course," Ma said.

All the wild things on the prairie had known what to do. They ran and flew and hopped and crawled as fast as they could go, to the water that would keep them safe from fire. Only the little soft striped gophers had gone down deep into their holes, and they were the first to come up and look around at the bare, smoking prairie.

Then out of the creek bottoms the birds came flying over it, and a rabbit cautiously hopped and looked. It was a long, long time before the snakes crawled out of the bottoms and the prairie hens came walking. The fire had gone out among the bluffs. It had never reached the creek bottoms or the Indian camps.

That night Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott came to see Pa. They were worried because they thought that perhaps the Indians had started that fire on purpose to burn out the white settlers. Pa didn't believe it. He said the Indians had always burned the prairie to make green grass grow more quickly, and traveling easier. Their ponies couldn't gallop through the thick, tall, dead grass. Now the ground was clear. And he was glad of it, because plowing would be easier.

While they were talking, they could hear drums beating in the Indian camps, and shouts. Laura sat still as a mouse on the doorstep and listened to the talk and to the Indians. The stars hung low and large and quivering over the burned prairie, and the wind blew gently in Laura's hair. Mr. Edwards said there were too many Indians in those camps; he didn't like it. Mr. Scott said he didn't know why so many of those savages were coming together, if they didn't mean devilment. "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," Mr. Scott said. Pa said he didn't know about that. He figured that Indians would be as peaceable as anybody else if they were let alone. On the other

hand, they had been moved west so many times that naturally they hated white folks. But an Indian ought to have sense enough to know when he was licked. With soldiers at Fort Gibson and Fort Dodge, Pa didn't believe these Indians would make any trouble.

"As to why they are congregating in these camps, Scott, I can tell you that," he said. "They're getting ready for their big spring buffalo hunt." He said there were half a dozen tribes down in those camps. Usually the tribes were fighting each other, but every spring they made peace and all came together for the big hunt.

"They're sworn to peace among themselves," he said, "and they're thinking about hunting the buffalo. So it's not likely they'll start on the war path against us. They'll have their talks and their feasts, and then one day they'll all hit the trail after the buffalo herds. The buffalo will be working their way north pretty soon, following the green grass. By George! I'd like to go on a hunt like that, myself. It must be a sight to see." "Well, maybe you're right about it, Ingalls," Mr. Scott said, slowly. "Anyway, I'll be glad to tell Mrs. Scott what you say. She can't get the Minnesota massacres out of her head."

Indian War Cry

Next morning Pa went whistling to his plowing. He came in at noon black with soot from the burned prairie, but he was pleased. The tall grass didn't bother him anymore. But there was an uneasiness about the Indians. More and more Indians were in the creek bottoms. Mary and Laura saw the smoke from their fires by day, and at night they heard the savage voices shouting.

Pa came early from the field. He did the chores early, and shut Pet and Patty, Bunny and the cow and calf, into the stable. They could not stay out in the yard to graze in the cool moonlight. When shadows began to gather on the prairie and the wind was quiet, the noises from the Indian camps grew louder and wilder. Pa brought Jack into the house. The door was shut and the latch string pulled in. No one could go outdoors till morning. Night crept toward the little house, and the darkness was frightening. It yelped with Indian yells, and one night it began to throb with Indian drums.

In her sleep Laura heard all the time that savage yipping and the wild, throbbing drums. She heard Jack's claws clicking, and his low growl. Sometimes Pa sat up in bed, listening.

One evening he took his bullet mold from the box under the bed. He sat for a long time on the hearth, melting lead and making bullets. He did not stop till he had used the last bit of lead. Laura and Mary lay awake and watched him. He had never made so many bullets at one time before. Mary asked, "What makes you do that, Pa?"

"Oh, I haven't anything else to do," Pa said, and he began to whistle cheerfully. But he had been plowing all day. He was too tired to play the fiddle. He might have gone to bed, instead of sitting up so late, making bullets.

No more Indians came to the house. For days, Mary and Laura had not seen a single Indian. Mary did not like to go out of the house any more. Laura had to play outdoors by herself, and she had a queer feeling about the prairie. It didn't feel safe. It seemed to be hiding something. Sometimes Laura had a feeling that something was watching her, something was creeping up behind her. She turned around quickly, and nothing was there. Mr. Scott and Mr. Edwards, with their guns, came and talked to Pa in the field. They talked quite a while, then they went away together. Laura was disappointed because Mr. Edwards did not come to the house. At dinner Pa said to Ma that some of the settlers were talking about a stockade. Laura didn't know what a stockade was. Pa had told Mr. Scott and Mr. Edwards that it was a foolish notion. He told Ma, "If we need one, we'd need it before we could get it built. And the last thing we want to do is to act like we're afraid."

Mary and Laura looked at each other. They knew it was no use to ask questions. They would only be told again that children must not speak at table until they were spoken

to. Or that children should be seen and not heard. That afternoon Laura asked Ma what a stockade was. Ma said it was something to make little girls ask questions. That meant that grown-ups would not tell you what it was. And Mary looked a look at Laura that said, "I told you so."

Laura didn't know why Pa said he must not act as if he were afraid. Pa was never afraid. Laura didn't want to act as if she were afraid, but she was. She was afraid of the Indians. Jack never laid back his ears and smiled at Laura any more. Even while she petted him, his ears were lifted, his neck bristled, and his lips twitched back from his teeth. His eyes were angry. Every night he growled more fiercely, and every night the Indian drums beat faster, faster, and the wild yipping rose higher and higher, faster, wilder. In the middle of the night Laura sat straight up and screamed. Some terrible sound had made cold sweat come out all over her.

Ma came to her quickly and said in her gentle way: "Be quiet, Laura. You mustn't frighten Carrie."

Laura clung to Ma, and Ma was wearing her dress. The fire was covered with ashes and the house was dark, but Ma had not gone to bed. Moonlight came through the window. The shutter was open, and Pa stood in the dark by the window, looking out. He had his gun. Out in the night the drums were beating and the Indians were wildly yelling. Then that terrible sound came again. Laura felt as if she were falling; she couldn't hold on to anything; there was nothing solid anywhere. It seemed a long time before she could see or think or speak.

She screamed: "What is it? What is it? Oh, Pa, what is it?"

She was shaking all over and she felt sick in her middle. She heard the drums pounding and the wild yipping yells and she felt Ma holding her safe. Pa said, "It's the Indian war cry, Laura." Ma made a soft sound, and he said to her, "They might as well know, Caroline."

He explained to Laura that that was the Indian way of talking about war. The Indians were only talking about it, and dancing around their fires. Mary and Laura must not be afraid, because Pa was there, and Jack was there, and soldiers were at Fort Gibson and Fort Dodge.

"So don't be afraid, Mary and Laura," he said again. Laura gasped and said, "No, Pa." But she was horribly afraid. Mary couldn't say anything; she lay shivering under the covers. Then Carrie began to cry, so Ma carried her to the rocking chair and gently rocked her. Laura crept out of bed and huddled against Ma's knee. And Mary, left all alone, crept after her and huddled close, too. Pa stayed by the window, watching.

The drums seemed to beat in Laura's head. They seemed to beat deep inside her. The wild, fast yipping yells were worse than wolves. Something worse was coming, Laura

knew it. Then it came the Indian war cry. A nightmare is not so terrible as that night was. A nightmare is only a dream, and when it is worst you wake up. But this was real and Laura could not wake up. She could not get away from it. When the war cry was over, Laura knew it had not got her yet. She was still in the dark house and she was pressed close against Ma. Ma was trembling all over. Jack's howling ended in a sobbing growl. Carrie began to scream again, and Pa wiped his forehead and said, "Whew! "I never heard anything like it," Pa said. He asked, "How do you suppose they learned to do it?" but nobody answered that. "They don't need guns. That yell's enough to scare anybody to death," he said. "My mouth's so dry I couldn't whistle a tune to save my life. Bring me some water, Laura." That made Laura feel better. She carried a dipper full of water to Pa at the window. He took it and smiled at her, and that made her feel very much better. He drank a little and smiled again and said, "There! now I can whistle!"

He whistled a few notes to show her that he could.

Then he listened. And Laura, too, heard far away the soft pitter pat, pat pat, pitter pat pat, of a pony's galloping. It came nearer. From one side of the house came the drum throbbing and the fast, shrill, yapping yells, and from the other side came the lonely sound of the rider's galloping. Nearer and nearer it came. Now the hoofs clattered loudly and suddenly they were going by. The galloping went by and grew fainter, down the creek road.

In the moonlight Laura saw the behind of a little black Indian pony, and an Indian on its back. She saw a huddle of blanket and a naked head and a flutter of feathers above it, and moonlight on a gun barrel and then it was all gone. Nothing was there but empty prairie. Pa said he was durned if he knew what to make of it. He said that was the Osage who had tried to talk French to him. He asked, "What's he doing, out at this hour riding hell bent for leather?" Nobody answered because nobody knew. The drums throbbed and the Indians went on yelling. The terrible war cry came again and again.

Little by little, after a long time, the yells grew fainter and fewer. At last Carrie cried herself to sleep. Ma sent Mary and Laura back to bed.

Next day they could not go out of the house. Pa stayed close by. There was not one sound from the Indian camps. The whole vast prairie was still. Only the wind blew over the blackened earth where there was no grass to rustle. The wind blew past the house with a rushing sound like running water.

That night the noise in the Indian camps was worse than the night before. Again the war cries were more terrible than the most dreadful nightmare. Laura and Mary huddled close against Ma, poor little Baby Carrie cried, Pa watched at the window with his gun. And all night long Jack paced and growled, and screamed when the war cries came.

The next night, and the next night, and the next night, were worse and worse. Mary and Laura were so tired that they fell asleep while the drums pounded and the Indians yelled. But a war cry always jerked them wide awake in terror. And the silent days were even worse than the nights. Pa watched and listened all the time. The plow was in the field where he had left it; Pet and Patty and the colt and the cow and calf stayed in the barn. Mary and Laura could not go out of the house. And Pa never stopped looking at the prairie all around, and turning his head quickly toward the smallest noise. He ate hardly any dinner; he kept getting up and going outdoors to look all around at the prairie.

One day his head nodded down to the table and he slept there. Ma and Mary and Laura were still to let him sleep. He was so tired. But in a minute he woke up with a jump and said, sharply, to Ma, "Don't let me do that again!" "Jack was on guard," Ma said gently. That night was worst of all. The drums were faster and the yells were louder and fiercer. All up and down the creek war cries answered war cries and the bluffs echoed. There was no rest. Laura ached all over and there was a terrible ache in her very middle.

At the window Pa said, "Caroline, they are quarreling among themselves. Maybe they will fight each other." "Oh, Charles, if they only will!" Ma said.

All night there was not a minute's rest. Just before dawn a last war cry ended and Laura slept against Ma's knee.

She woke up in bed. Mary was sleeping beside her. The door was open, and by the sunshine on the floor Laura knew it was almost noon. Ma was cooking dinner. Pa sat on the doorstep.

He said to Ma, "There's another big party, going off to the south."

Laura went to the door in her nightgown, and she saw a long line of Indians far away. The line came up out of the black prairie and it went farther away southward. The Indians on their ponies were so small in the distance that they looked not much bigger than ants.

Pa said that two big parties of Indians had gone west that morning. Now this one was going south. It meant that the Indians had quarreled among themselves. They were going away from their camps in the creek bottoms. They would not go all together to their big buffalo hunt.

That night the darkness came quietly. There was no sound except the rushing of the wind. "Tonight we'll sleep!" Pa said, and they did. All night long they did not even dream. And in the morning Jack was still sleeping limp and flat on the same spot where he had been sleeping when Laura went to bed.

The next night was still, too, and again they all slept soundly. That morning Pa said he felt as fresh as a daisy, and he was going to do a little scouting along the creek.

He chained Jack to the ring in the house wall, and he took his gun and went out of sight down the creek road.

Laura and Mary and Ma could not do anything but wait until he came back. They stayed in the house and wished he would come. The sunshine had never moved so slowly on the floor as it did that day.

But he did come back. Late in the afternoon he came. And everything was all right. He had gone far up and down the creek and had seen many deserted Indian camps. All the Indians had gone away, except a tribe called the Osages.

In the woods Pa had met an Osage who could talk to him. This Indian told him that all the tribes except the Osages had made up their minds to kill the white people who had come into the Indian country. And they were getting ready to do it when the lone Indian came riding into their big powwow.

That Indian had come riding so far and fast because he did not want them to kill the white people. He was an Osage, and they called him a name that meant he was a great soldier. "Soldat du Ch Èñö e," Pa said his name was.

"He kept arguing with them day and night," Pa said, "till all the other Osages agreed with him. Then he stood up and told the other tribes that if they started to massacre us, the Osages would fight them."

That was what had made so much noise, that last terrible night. The other tribes were howling at the Osages, and the Osages were howling back at them. The other tribes did not dare fight Soldat du Ch Èñö e and all his Osages, so next day they went away. "That's one good Indian!" Pa said. No matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe that the only good Indian was a dead Indian.

Indians Ride Away

There was another long night of sleep. It was so good to lie down and sleep soundly. Everything was safe and quiet. Only the owls called "Who oo? Who oo?" in the woods along the creek, while the great moon sailed slowly over the curve of the sky above the endless prairie.



In the morning the sun shone warmly. Down by the creek the frogs were croaking. "Garrump! Garrump!" they cried by the edge of the pools. "Knee deep! Knee deep! Better go 'round."

Ever since Ma had told them what the frogs were saying, Mary and Laura could hear the words plainly. The door was open to let in the warm spring air. After breakfast Pa went out, whistling merrily. He was going to hitch Pet and Patty to the plow again. But his whistling suddenly stopped. He stood on the doorstep, looking toward the east, and he

said, "Come here, Caroline. And you, Mary and Laura." Laura ran out first, and she was surprised. The Indians were coming.

They did not come on the creek road. They came riding up out of the creek bottoms far to the east. First came the tall Indian who had gone riding by the house in the moonlight. Jack was growling and Laura's heart beat fast. She was glad to be close to Pa. But she knew this was the good Indian, the Osage chief who had stopped the terrible war cries.

His black pony came trotting willingly, sniffing the wind that blew its mane and tail like fluttering banners. The pony's nose and head were free; it wore no bridle. Not even one strap was on it anywhere. There was nothing to make it do anything it didn't want to do. Willingly it came trotting along the old Indian trail as if it liked to carry the Indian on its back. Jack growled savagely, trying to get loose from his chain. He remembered this Indian who had pointed a gun at him. Pa said, "Be still, Jack." Jack growled again, and for the first time in their lives Pa struck him. "Lie down! Be still!" Pa said. Jack cowered down and was still.

The pony was very near now, and Laura's heart beat faster and faster. She looked at the Indian's beaded moccasin, she looked up along the fringed legging that clung to the pony's bare side. A bright colored blanket was wrapped around the Indian. One bare brown red arm carried a rifle lightly across the pony's naked shoulders. Then Laura looked up at the Indian's fierce, still, brown face.

It was a proud, still face. No matter what happened, it would always be like that. Nothing would change it. Only the eyes were alive in that face, and they gazed steadily far away to the west. They did not move. Nothing moved or changed, except the eagle feathers standing straight up from the scalplock on the shaved head. The long feathers swayed and dipped, waving and spinning in the wind as the tall Indian on the black pony passed on into the distance. "Du Ch Èñö e himself," Pa said, under his breath, and he lifted his hand in salute. But the happy pony and the motionless Indian went by. They went by as if the house and stable and Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura were not there at all. Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura slowly turned and looked at that Indian's proud straight back. Then other ponies and other blankets and shaved heads and eagle feathers came between. One by one on the path, more and more savage warriors were riding behind du Ch Èñö e. Brown face after brown face went by. Ponies' manes and tails blew in the wind, beads glittered, fringe flapped, eagle feathers were waving on all the naked heads. Rifles lying on the ponies' shoulders bristled all along the line.

Laura was excited about the ponies. There were black ponies, bay ponies, gray and brown and spotted ponies. Their little feet went trippety trip trip, trippety trip, pat patter, pat patter, trippety pat patter, all along the Indian trail. Their nostrils widened at Jack and their bodies shied away from him, but they came on bravely, looking with their bright eyes at Laura. "Oh, the pretty ponies! See the pretty ponies!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Look at the spotted one."

She thought she would never be tired of watching those ponies coming by, but after a while she began to look at the women and children on their backs. The women and children came riding behind the Indian men. Little naked brown Indians, no bigger than Mary and Laura, were riding the pretty ponies. The ponies did not have to wear bridles or saddles, and the little Indians did not have to wear clothes. All their skin was out in the fresh air and the sunshine. Their straight black hair blew in the wind and their black eyes sparkled with joy. They sat on their ponies stiff and still like grown up Indians. Laura looked and looked at the Indian children, and they looked at her. She had a naughty wish to be a little Indian girl. Of course she did not really mean it. She only wanted to be bare naked in the wind and the sunshine, and riding one of those gay little ponies.

The Indian children's mothers were riding ponies, too. Leather fringe dangled about their legs and blankets were wrapped around their bodies, but the only thing on their heads was their black, smooth hair. Their faces were brown and placid. Some had narrow bundles tied on their backs, and tiny babies' heads stuck out of the top of the bundles. And some babies and some small children rode in baskets hanging at the ponies' sides, beside their mothers. More and more and more ponies passed, and more children, and more babies on their mothers' backs, and more babies in baskets on the ponies' sides. Then came a mother riding, with a baby in a basket on each side of her pony.

Laura looked straight into the bright eyes of the little baby nearer her. Only its small head showed above the basket's rim. Its hair was as black as a crow and its eyes were black as a night when no stars shine. Those black eyes looked deep into Laura's eyes and she looked deep down into the blackness of that little baby's eyes, and she wanted that one little baby.

"Pa," she said, "get me that little Indian baby!"

"Hush, Laura!" Pa told her sternly. The little baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura's eyes.

"Oh, I want it! I want it!" Laura begged. The baby was going farther and farther away, but it did not stop looking back at Laura. "It wants to stay with me," Laura begged. "Please, Pa, please!"

"Hush, Laura," Pa said. "The Indian woman wants to keep her baby."

"Oh, Pa!" Laura pleaded, and then she began to cry. It was shameful to cry, but she couldn't help it. The little Indian baby was gone. She knew she would never see it any more. Ma said she had never heard of such a thing. "For shame, Laura," she said, but Laura could not stop crying. "Why on earth do you want an Indian baby, of all things!" Ma asked her.

"Its eyes are so black," Laura sobbed. She could not say what she meant. "Why, Laura," Ma said, "you don't want another baby. We have a baby, our own baby." "I want the other one, too!" Laura sobbed, loudly. "Well, I declare!" Ma exclaimed. "Look at the Indians, Laura," said Pa. "Look west, and then look east, and see what you see."

Laura could hardly see at first. Her eyes were full of tears and sobs kept jerking out of her throat. But she obeyed Pa as best she could, and in a moment she was still. As far as she could see to the west and as far as she could see to the east there were Indians. There was no end to that long, long line.

"That's an awful lot of Indians," Pa said. More and more and more Indians came riding by. Baby Carrie grew tired of looking at Indians and played by herself on the floor. But Laura sat on the doorstep, Pa stood close beside her, and Ma and Mary stood in the doorway. They looked and looked and looked at Indians riding by.

It was dinner time, and no one thought of dinner. Indian ponies were still going by, carrying bundles of skins and tent poles and dangling baskets and cooking pots. There were a few more women and a few more naked Indian children. Then the very last pony went by. But Pa and Ma and Laura and Mary still stayed in the doorway, looking, till that long line of Indians slowly pulled itself over the western edge of the world. And nothing was left but silence and emptiness. All the world seemed very quiet and lonely.

Ma said she didn't feel like doing anything, she was so let down. Pa told her not to do anything but rest.

"You must eat something, Charles," Ma said. "No," said Pa. "I don't feel hungry." He went soberly to hitch up Pet and Patty, and he began again to break the tough sod with the plow. Laura could not eat anything, either. She sat a long time on the doorstep, looking into the empty west where the Indians had gone. She seemed still to see waving feathers and black eyes and to hear the sound of ponies' feet.



Soldiers

After the Indians had gone, a great peace settled on the prairie. And one morning the whole land was green.

“When did that grass grow?” Ma asked, in amazement. “I thought the whole country was black, and now there’s nothing but green grass as far as the eye can see.”

The whole sky was filled with lines of wild ducks and wild geese flying north. Crows cawed above the trees along the creek. The winds whispered in the new grass, bringing scents of earth and of growing things. In the mornings the meadow larks rose singing into the sky. All day the curlews and killdeers and sandpipers chirped and sang in the creek bottoms. Often in the early evening the mockingbirds were singing.

One night Pa and Mary and Laura sat still on the doorstep, watching little rabbits playing in the grass in the starlight. Three rabbit mothers hopped about with lopping ears and watched their little rabbits playing, too. In the daytime everyone was busy. Pa hurried with his plowing, and Mary and Laura helped Ma plant the early garden seeds. With the hoe Ma dug small holes in the matted grass roots that the plow had turned up, and Laura and Mary carefully dropped the seeds. Then Ma covered them snugly with earth. They planted onions and carrots and peas and beans and turnips. And they were all so happy because spring had come, and pretty soon they would have vegetables to eat. They were growing very tired of just bread and meat. One evening Pa came from the field before sunset and he helped Ma set out the cabbage plants and the sweet potato plants. Ma had sowed the cabbage seed in a flat box and kept it in the house. She watered it carefully, and carried it every day from the morning sunshine to the afternoon sunshine that came through the windows. And she had saved one of the Christmas sweet potatoes, and planted it in another box. The cabbage seeds were now little gray green plants, and the sweet potato had sent up a stem and green leaves from every one of its eyes. Pa and Ma took each tiny plant very carefully and settled its roots comfortably in holes made for them. They watered the roots and pressed earth upon them firmly. It was dark before the last plant was in its place, and Pa and Ma were tired. But they were glad, too, because this year they’d have cabbages and sweet potatoes.

Every day they all looked at that garden. It was rough and grassy because it was made in the prairie sod, but all the tiny plants were growing. Little crumpled leaves of peas came up, and tiny spears of onions. The beans themselves popped out of the ground. But it was a little yellow bean stem, coiled like a spring, that pushed them up. Then the bean was cracked open and dropped by two baby bean leaves, and the leaves unfolded flat to the sunshine. Pretty soon they would all begin to live like kings.

Every morning Pa went cheerfully whistling to the field. He had planted some early sod potatoes, and some potatoes were saved to plant later. Now he carried a sack of corn

fastened to his belt, and as he plowed he threw grains of corn into the furrow beside the plow's point. The plow turned over a strip of sod on top of the seed corn. But the corn would fight its way up through the matted roots, and there would be a corn field.

There would be green corn for dinner some day. And next winter there would be ripe corn for Pet and Patty to eat. One morning Mary and Laura were washing the dishes and Ma was making the beds. She was humming softly to herself and Laura and Mary were talking about the garden. Laura liked peas best, and Mary liked beans. Suddenly they heard Pa's voice, loud and angry.

Ma went quietly to the door, and Laura and Mary peeped out on either side of her. Pa was driving Pet and Patty from the field, dragging the plow behind them. Mr. Scott and Mr. Edwards were with Pa, and Mr. Scott was talking earnestly. "No, Scott!" Pa answered him. "I'll not stay here to be taken away by the soldiers like an outlaw! If some blasted politicians in Washington hadn't sent out word it would be all right to settle here, I'd never have been three miles over the line into Indian Territory. But I'll not wait for the soldiers to take us out. We're going now!"

"What is the matter, Charles? Where are we going?" Ma asked. "Durned if I know! But we're going. We're leaving here!" Pa said. "Scott and Edwards say the government is sending soldiers to take all us settlers out of Indian Territory." His face was very red and his eyes were like blue fire. Laura was frightened; she had never seen Pa look like that. She pressed close against Ma and was still, looking at Pa.

Mr. Scott started to speak, but Pa stopped him. "Save your breath, Scott. It's no use to say another word. You can stay till the soldiers come if you want to. I'm going out now."

Mr. Edwards said he was going, too. He would not stay to be driven across the line like an ornery yellow hound.

"Ride out to Independence with us, Edwards," Pa said. But Mr. Edwards answered that he didn't care to go north. He would make a boat and go on down the river to some settlement farther south. "Better come out with us," Pa urged him, "and go down on foot through Missouri. It's a risky trip, one man alone in a boat, going down the Verdigris among the wild Indian tribes." But Mr. Edwards said he had already seen Missouri and he had plenty of powder and lead.

Then Pa told Mr. Scott to take the cow and calf. "We can't take them with us," Pa said. "You've been a good neighbor, Scott, and I'm sorry to leave you. But we're going out in the morning." Laura had heard all this, but she had not believed it until she saw Mr. Scott leading away the cow. The gentle cow went meekly away with the rope around her long horns, and the calf frisked and jumped behind. There went all the milk and butter. Mr. Edwards said he would be too busy to see them again. He shook hands with

Pa, saying, "Good bye, Ingalls, and good luck." He shook hands with Ma and said, "Good bye, ma'am. I won't be seeing you all again, but I sure will never forget your kindness."

Then he turned to Mary and Laura, and he shook their hands as if they were grown up. "Good bye," he said. Mary said, politely, "Good bye, Mr. Edwards." But Laura forgot to be polite. She said: "Oh, Mr. Edwards, I wish you wouldn't go away! Oh, Mr. Edwards, thank you, thank you for going all the way to Independence to find Santa Claus for us."

Mr. Edwards' eyes shone very bright, and he went away without saying another word.

Pa began to unhitch Pet and Patty in the middle of the morning, and Laura and Mary knew it was really true; they really were going away from there. Ma didn't say anything. She went into the house and looked around, at the dishes not washed and the bed only partly made, and she lifted up both hands and sat down.

Mary and Laura went on doing the dishes. They were careful not to let them make a sound. They turned around quickly when Pa came in.

He looked like himself again, and he was carrying the potato sack. "Here you are, Caroline!" he said, and his voice sounded natural. "Cook a plenty for dinner! We've been going without potatoes, saving them for seed. Now we'll eat 'em up!" So that day for dinner they ate the seed potatoes. They were very good, and Laura knew that Pa was right when he said, "There's no great loss without some small gain."

After dinner he took the wagon bows from their pegs in the barn. He put them on the wagon, one end of each bow in its iron strap on one side of the wagon box, and the other end in its iron strap on the other side. When all the bows were standing up in their places, Pa and Ma spread the wagon cover over them and tied it down tightly. Then Pa pulled the rope in the end of the wagon cover till it puckered together and left only a tiny round hole in the middle of the back. There stood the covered wagon, all ready to load in the morning.

Everyone was quiet that night. Even Jack felt that something was wrong, and he lay down close to Laura when she went to bed. It was now too warm for a fire, but Pa and Ma sat looking at the ashes in the fireplace.

Ma sighed gently and said, "A whole year gone, Charles." But Pa answered, cheerfully: "What's a year amount to? We have all the time there is."

