**Plainswoman**

**By Williams Forrest**

The cold of the fall was sweeping over the plains, and Nora’s husband, Rolf, and his men had ridden off on the roundup. She was left on the ranch with Pleny, a handy man, who was to do the chores and lessen her fears.

Her pregnancy told her that she should hurry back East before the solemn grip of winter fell onto the land. She was afraid to have the child touch her within, acknowledge its presence, when he long deep world below the mountains closed in and no exit was available –for the body and for the spirit.

Her baby had not yet awakened, but soon it would. But gusts of wind and a forbidding iron shadow on the hills told her that the greatest brutality of this ranch world was about to start. And then one morning Pleny came in for his breakfast, holding the long finger of his left hand in the fingers of his right. For some time he had concealed his left hand from her, holding it down or in his pocket; and from the way he had held himself, she had thought it was a part of his chivalry, his wish to have table manners, use his right hand and sit up straight with a lady. But now he held it before him like a trophy, and one he did not wish to present.

Nora had been thinking of New England when Pleny came in –of the piano and the gentle darkness of her mother’s eyes, of frost on the small windowpanes, and the hearth fires, of holidays and the swish of sleighs, of men with businesslike faces and women who drank tea and read poetry, of deep substantial beds and the way the hills and the sea prescribed an area, making it intimate, and the way the towns folded into the hills. She was thinking of home and comfort, and then Pleny walked in; the dust trailed around his ankles, and the smell of cattle seemed to cling to his boots. A thousand miles of cattle and plains and work and hurt were clung like webs in his face.

Nora had made eggs, ham bread and coffee for the breakfast, but Pleny made them objects of disgust as he extended his hand, as shyly but as definitely as a New England lad asking for a dance, and said, “I got the mortification, ma’am. I have to let you see it.”

She looked at his index finger and saw the mortification of the flesh, the gangrene. He held the finger pointed forward, his other fingers closed. He pressed the finger with his other hand, and the darkened skin made a crackling sound like that of ancient paper of dangerous ice over a pond. And above the finger some yellow streaks were like arrows pointing to the hairs and veins above his wrist.

Nora smelled the food, gulped, stood up and turned away.

“I got to come to you, ma’am,” said Pleny. “I finally got to come to you.”

He spoke firmly but shyly, but she did not hear his tone; she heard only his demand. And her emotion rejected it and any part of it. Her emotion said that he should not have come to her and that she had nothing to do with it, and would not and could not. She walked toward the fireplace, staring into the low flames. She heard the wind coax the sides of the house. She said, pretending nothing else had been mentioned, “Pleny, there’s your breakfast.” She itemized it, as if the words could barricade her against him.

But after she had spoken she heard nothing but his steady, waiting breathing behind her. And she understood that she would have to turn and face it. She knew he was not going away and would not happily sit down to eat and would not release her.

The fire spoke and had no answer, even though it was soft. She turned and saw the weather on Pleny’s face, the diamonds of raised flesh, the scars. And she knew that death was in his finger and was moving up his arm and would take all of him finally, as fully as a bullet or freezing or drowning.

“What do you expect of me, Pleny?” she said.

He moved with a crinkling hard sound of stained dungarees, hardened boots and his dried reluctant nature. “Ma’am,” he said, “I don’t want you to think I’m a coward. I just wouldn’t want you to get that notion. I’ll take my bumps, burns and cuts, just like I did with this finger on the lamp in the bunkhouse and then on the gate before it could heal. I’ll take it without complaining, but I sure don’t like to doctor myself.” His lake-blue eyes were narrowed with thought, and the erosion in his face was drawn together, as if wind and sun were drawing his face closer together the way they did the land in the drought. “I just can’t bear to cut on myself,” he said, lowering his head with a dry shame. He lifted his head suddenly and said, “I suppose I’d do it out on the plain, in the mountains, alone. But I can’t do it here.”

His Adam’s apple wobbled as he sought in his throat for words. His lips were cracked and did not easily use explanations. “It just seems sinful, ma’am,” he said, “for a man to hack on himself.” Suddenly his eyes were filled with burning knowledge. He spoke reasonably, without pleading, but an authority was in his voice. “Ma’am, you never saw a man do that, did you, when somebody else was around to doctor him?”

She had watched and listened to his explanation without a stirring in her; she had done so as if she were mesmerized, like a chicken before a snake. Gradually his meaning penetrated her and told her what he meant.

“Ma’am,” he said, “would you do me the kindness to take off this here finger?”

She ran senselessly, as if she were attempting to run long, far, back to New England. The best she could do was run through the rooms of the haphazardly laid-out house and get to her room and close the door and lean against it. She was panting, and her eyes were closed, and her heart was beating so hard that it hurt her chest. Slowly she began to feel the hurts on her shoulders, where she had struck herself against the walls and doors. Rolf had started this house with one room and had made rooms and halls leading off from it as time went on. She had careered through the halls to her room, as if fighting obstacles.

She went to her bed, but did not allow herself to fall down on it. That would be too much weakness. She sat on the edge of the bed, with her hands in her lap. Her wish to escape from this place was more intense than ever within her. And her reasons for it ran through her brain like a cattle stampede, raising acrid dust and death and injury –and fear, most of all.

Her fear had begun in the first frontier hotel in which she had spent a night. Rolf had been bringing her West from New England to his ranch in the springtime. The first part of the ride on the railroad had been a pure delight. Rolf’s hand was big, brown, with stiff red hairs on the back, a fierce, comforting hand; and her own had lain within it as softly as a trusting bird. The railroad car had had deep seats and decor that would have done credit to a fine home. As those parts of the world she had never seen went past, mountain, stream and hamlet, she had felt serene; and the sense of adventure touched her heart like the wings of a butterfly. She was ready to laugh at each little thing and she had a persistent wish to kiss Rolf on the cheek, although she resisted such an unseemly act in front of other people.

“I know I’ll be happy,” she said. And his big quiet hand around hers gave her the feeling of a fine, strong, loving, secure world.

But the world changed. After a time there were on a rough train that ran among hills and plains, and after a while there was nothing to see but an endless space with spring lying flat on it in small colorful flowers and with small bleak towns in erratic spaces, and the men on the train laughed roughly and smelled of whisky. Some men rode on the roof of the car and kicked their heels, fired guns and sang to a wild accordion.

Rolf’s hand seemed smaller. His tight, strong burned face that she had so much admired seemed remote; he was becoming a stranger, and she was becoming alone with herself. She, her love for him, her wish for adventure were so small, it seemed, in comparison to the spaces and the crudity.

One night the train stopped at a wayside station, and the passengers poured out as if Indians were attacking. They assailed the dining room of the canvas-and board- hotel as if frenzied with starvation. In the dining room Rolf abruptly became a kind of man she had never known. He grabbed and speared at plates like any of the others and smiled gently at her after he had secured a plateload of food for her that made her stomach turn. After affectionately touching her hand, he fought heartily with the others to get an immense plateload for himself. Then he winked at her and started to eat, in the same ferocious way as the others. His manners in New England had seemed earthy, interesting and powerful –a tender animal. But here, here he was one more animal.

That night they shared a bedroom with five other people, one a woman who carried a pistol. Rolf had bought sleeping boards and blankets, so that they would not have to share beds with anyone. The gun-carrying woman coughed and then said, “Good night, all you no-good rascals.”

Rolf laughed.

The spring air flipped the canvas walls. The building groaned with flimsiness and people. Nora had never before heard the sounds of a lot of sleeping people. She put her face against Rolf’s chest and pulled his arm over her other ear.

Late at night she woke crying. Or was she crying? There was crying within her, and there were tears on her face. But when she opened her eyes, the night was around her, without roof or walls, but there was the water of rain on her cheeks. Rolf bent over her. “We’re outside,” he said. “You were suffering. Exhausted, suffering, and you spoke out loud in your sleep.”

“Why did you bring me out here?” The blankets were wet, but she felt cozy. He was strong against her. The night was wet but sweet after the flapping, moaning hotel.

Some water fell from his face to hers. Was Rolf crying? No, not Rolf, no. But when he spoke, his voice was sad. “I told you how it would be, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t know,” she said. “I didn’t know how awful it could be.”

He spoke powerfully, but troubledly. “I can’t always take you outside, away from things. I can’t do that. There’ll be times when I can’t do for you, when only you can do it yourself.”

“Don’t be disturbed,” she said, holding him closer. “Don’t be disturbed.” The smell of the wet air was sweet, and it was spring, and they were alone and small again in an enclosed world, made of them both, and she was unafraid again. “I’ll be all right,” she promised. “Rolf, I will be all right.”

She slept with that promise, but it did not last through the next day. The train stopped after noontime in the midst of the plain. Cattle ran from the train. A lone horseman rode toward them out of curiosity. The sky was burning. Some flowers beside the tracks lifted a faint gossamer odor. Men were drinking and making tea on the stove of the car. Then they all were told that a woman two cars ahead was going to have a child, now. Nora was asked to go forward to attend her.

The impressions of the next few hours had smitten her ever since. The car in which the woman lay on a board suspended between seats across the aisle was empty except for herself and the third woman on the train. The cars before and after this one had also been emptied. The woman helping her said that the men were not even supposed to hear the cries of the woman in labor. It would not be proper. But were the men proper anyway? From the sounds in the distance, Nora could tell they were shouting, singing and shooting, and maybe fighting and certainly drinking. She had seen labor before, when the doctor was unavailable, blocked away by snow, so she was good enough here, and there were no complications. But there was no bedroom with comforters, a fire and gentle women about. The woman helping her was the one who wore a pistol, and she cussed.

When the child, a boy, was born, the gun-toting woman shouted the word out the window, and the air was rent with shouts and shooting. The woman on the board lifted her wet head, holding her blanketed baby. “A boy to be a man,” she said. “A boy to be a man.” She laughed, tears streaming from her eyes.

The woman with the gun said softly, “God rest Himself. A child of the plains been born right here and now.”

The train started up. Nora sat limply beside the mother and child. Men walked into the car, looked down and smiled.

“Now, that’s a sight of a boy.”

“Thank you kindly,” said the woman.

“Now, ma’am, that boy going to be a cattleman?” said another.

“Nothing else.”

“Hope we wasn’t hoorawing too much, ma’am,” said a tall man.

“Jus’ like my son was born Fourth of July. Thank you kindly.”

“Just made his tea, but it ain’t strong’s should be,” said a man carrying a big cup.

“Thank you kindly.”

Another man came up timidly –strange for him; he was huge. It turned out he was the husband. He did not even touch his wife. He looked grimly at his son. The woman looked up at him. “All these folks been right interested,” he said.

The woman smiled. The train jerked and pulled. Her face paled. The man put his hand on her forehead. “Now just don’t fret,” he said. “Just don’t fret.”

“Thank you kindly,” she said.

In her own seat, next to Rolf, Nora was pale. She flinched when the train racketed over the road. Rolf gripped her hand.

“Rolf?”

“Yes, honey?”

“She’s all right. The woman with the baby –she’s all right.”

”I know.”

“Then be quiet, don’t be disturbed. I can tell from your hand. You’re disturbed.”

He looked out the window at the plains, at the spring. “The trip took longer than I thought,” he said. “It’s time for spring roundup. I ought to be at the ranch.”

She was shocked. This great, terrible, beautiful thing had happened, and he was thinking of the roundup. Her hand did not feel small and preserved in his; it felt crushed, even though his fingers were not tightly closed.

“Rolf?” Her shock was low and hurt and it told in her voice. “Rolf. That woman had a baby on the train. It could have been awful. And all you can think of now is the roundup.”

He looked around t the others in the car. Then he lowered decorum, a little and put his arm around her.

He whispered, “Honey, I tried to tell you –I tried. Didn’t you listen? On the plains we do what has to be done. Why, honey, that woman’s all right, and now we’ve got to get to roundup.”

“But can’t we –can’t we be human beings?” she said.

He held her. “We are, honey,” he said. “We are. We’re the kind of human beings that can live here.”

She remembered all that and she remembered also that within two days after they had got to the ranch, Rolf had gone out with the men on spring roundup. That time, too. Pleny had been left with her to take care of the home ranch. She had been sad, and he had spoken to her about it in a roundabout fashion at supper one night. Pleny ate with her in the big kitchen when the others were gone, instead of in the bunkhouse. And he was shy about it, but carried a dignity on his shyness.

“Don’t suppose you know that the cattle’re more important than anything out here?” he said.

“It seems I have to know it,” said Nora.

Pleny was eating peas with a knife. She heard about it, but had never been sure it was possible.

“Couldn’t live here without the cattle,” he said.

“It seems to me that living here would be a lot better if people thought more about people.”

“Do. That’s why cattle’s more important.”

“I fail to understand you.”

Pleny worked on steak meat. “Ma’am, cattle’s money, and money’s bread. Not jus’ steak, but bread, living. Why, ma’am, if a man out here wants a wife, he has to have cattle first. Can’t make out well enough to have a wife and kids without you have cattle.”

I don’t think it’s right,” she had said then in the springtime. “I don’t think it’s right that it should be that way.”

And Pleny had replied, “Don’t suppose you’re wrong ma’am. I really don’t.” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Only trouble is, that’s the way it is here, if you want to stay.”

She hadn’t wanted to stay. As soon as she was sure she was pregnant, she wanted to go home. The spring had passed, and the summer hung heavy over the plains. The earth, the sky, the cattle, the people had dry mouths, and dogs panted with tongues gone gray. The wind touched the edges of the windmills, and water came from the deep parts of the earth, but you could not bathe in it. The water was golden and rationed, and coffee sometimes became a luxury –not because you didn’t have the coffee, but because the cool watery heart of the earth did not wish to serve you.

The fall roundup time came; and just before the outfit moved out, a cowboy, barely seventeen years old, had broken his leg. Rolf had pulled the leg straight, strapped a board to it and put the boy on a horse with a bag of provisions. “Tie an extra horse to him,” Rolf had commanded Pleny, “in case something happens.”

Pleny had done so. Rolf had asked the boy, “Got your money?”

“Got it right here.”

“Now, you get to that doctor.”

“Sure enough try.”

“Now, when you’re fixed up,” said Rolf, “you come back.”

“Sure enough will.”

Nora knew that it would take eight to ten days for the boy to get to the nearest doctor. She ran toward the boy and the horses. She held the reins and turned on Rolf. “How can you let him go alone? How? How?”

Rolf’s face had been genial as he talked to the boy, but now it hardened. But the boy, through a dead-white pain in his face, laughed, “Ma’am,” he said, “now who’s going to do my work and that other man’s?”

“Rolf?” she said.

Rolf turned to her, took her hands. “Nora, there isn’t anybody that can go with him. He knows that.”

The boy laughed. “Mr. Rolf,” he said, “when I get my own spread, I’m going to go out East there to get a tender woman. I swear.” He spurred with his good leg and, still laughing, flashed off into dust with his two horses.

“Rolf? He might die.”

Rolf bowed his head, then fiercely lifted it. “Give him more credit.”

“But you can’t –” she began.

“We can!” he said. Then he softened. “Nora, I don’t know what to say. Here –here there’s famine, drought, blizzard, locusts. Here –here we have to know what we must do if we want to stay.”

“I don’t like it,” she said.

A wind lifted and moved around them, stirring grass and dust. In the wind was the herald of the fall –and therefore the primary messenger of the bitter winter. In the wind was the dusty harbinger of work, of the fall roundup.

“Soon I’ll have to go,” he said, “for the roundup.”

“I know.”

“The plains are mean,” he said. “I know. I came here and found it. But I –I don’t hate it. I feel –I feel a –a bigness. I see –I see rough prettiness.” He bowed his head. “That isn’t all I mean.” He looked at her. “Soon I have to go. You’ll be all right. Pleny will take care of you.”

She hadn’t told him that she was sure she had a child within her. She felt that she must keep her secret from this wild place, because even if it were only spoken, the elements might ride like a stampede against her, hurting her and her child, even as they did in the dark when she was alone and the wind yelled against the walls beside her bed and told her how savage was the place of the world in which she lived.

There was a knock on her door. She looked up. Her hands, folded in her lap, gripped each other. She did not answer.

“Ma’am?”

She said nothing.

“It’s Pleny. I just can’t sit down and eat, ma’am, worrying about this mortification of the flesh I got. I just can’t sit down to anything like that. I just have to do something.”

She made her hands relax in her lap.

“I have it wrapped up in my kerchief, ma’am,” said Pleny, “but that ain’t going to do no good.”

She closed her eyes, but opened them at once, staring at the door.

Pleny said, “I ain’t going to leave you and the ranch, ma’am. Couldn’t do that. I have my chores to do.”

A small unbidden tear touched the edge of her eye and slipped down.

There was a silence, and then he said quietly, “The doc’s so far away, don’t ‘spect I could get there before that mortification took more of my flesh. Sure would hate that. Sure would hate that.”

A second tear burned silver on the edge of her eye and dropped and burned golden down her cheek and became acid on her line of chin, and her wrist came up and brushed it away.

She heard the wind and many messages and she imagined Pleny waiting. She felt a sense of response, of obligation, of angry maternal love, as if all the wistful hope and female passion of her nature had been fused, struck into life, made able because she was woman, and was here, and birth, survival, help, lay potent, sweet, powerful in her heart and in her hands.

She stood up. “Pleny?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“What must I do?”

He was silent, and she opened the door. Angrily, then firmly, she said, “Let’s go outside, Pleny.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She held the kindling ax. Pleny had his finger on the block. He closed his yes. The wind pulled her skirts. She looked up for a moment at the whirling light. Then, in necessity and tenderness, she swiftly did what must be done.

They were coming, the men were coming home from the roundup. The screen of dust was on the plain. She had been working on the meal and now it was the bread she was kneading. Working on the bread, she felt a kick against her abdomen.

She stopped, startled a moment, her hands deep, gripping in the dough –the kick again, strong.

Suddenly, in a way that would have shocked her mother, in a way that would have shocked herself not so long ago, she threw back her head and laughed, a fierce song of love and expectancy. She made bread and was kicked; she expected her man and she laughed, fiercely and tenderly. She was kicked, and a child of the plains had awakened within her.