

# *prairie* *madonna*

We called our parents Pap and Mother. Where the word Pap came from I never learned. It must have been a Kentucky word, for that is where they both were born. It sounds rather queer to folks now, but it never sounded strange to us. Names such as *papa*, *father*, *mama* or *moms* were the ones that seemed odd to us.

They were an odd looking pair, because Pap was so

tall and Mother was so short. Pap was what they called a *six-footer*, square shouldered and straight as an Indian, but Mother was shorter than you would think. I don't remember whether she was ever measured, but she could stand under my arm when it was held straight out sideways, and I am five foot seven and a half. So I reckon Mother must have been about four foot six inches tall — or short, whichever it was.

But what Mother lacked in height she made up in width. She was what was called a chunky woman, but she was as quick on her feet as a cat. No woman ever lived that could do more work, or do it faster or better. And it was a blessed thing that she was so peart and strong for she was the mother of fourteen children, and she raised them all too. I happened to be the twelfth one, and Old Hugh Gardner, who owned five or six farms, told mother that if she would name me after him, he would make me a present of a farm when I grew up. But he up and died long before that time came and I never got the farm. People generally called me *Huzer* for short, but when I was about six years old Pap got to taking rubbing treatments for rheumatism from a magnetic healer named Doctor Paul Caster and I renamed myself Huzer Orchard Doctor Paul Caster. After that some called me *Doc*, and some *Huzer*, and that was the way of it.

Mother never had any handy things to keep house with like women do nowadays, and had to do everything by hand. She was married at the age of fourteen, and through the long stretch of thirty years she either

had a baby on her lap or tugging at her skirts for some kind of motherly attention.

But that is only part of the story. She made all our clothes, carded wool, spun yarn, knitted all our stockings, socks, mittens, scarfs, and pulse warmers, a stitch at a time. She mended our clothes when they needed it, darned our worn out stockings, and kept us looking respectable. She roasted the green coffee in the oven, baked the bread, took care of the milk and cream from a dozen cows, filled the coal oil lamps and polished the chimneys, provided three square meals a day every day in the year, fed thrashing hands, helped pick a hundred geese every spring, got the children off to school on time, taught us manners, inspired us, doctored us when we got sick, saved our lives over and over again, and smiled and sang right through it all as though she liked it better than anything else in the world.

And that is not the whole story either. She not only raised fourteen of her own children, but she furnished a home for seven different orphans at different times. Some of these she just gave a home for a year or two, 'til they found a place to stay regular, but some of them lived at our house until they came of age. She treated them all just exactly like she treated us, the kindest and sweetest anybody ever heard about.

How did she manage to do it all? I'm sure I don't know. She was a wonderful woman and there is no way of explaining her. She was a regular bundle of springs, with a great big heart, and as pretty as a picture.

Without any let-up of duties that piled up every day, with no chance to travel hardly a bit, or any sort of change, she just kept on pouring out a regular flood of blessings on children, friends, and strangers alike. No angel in heaven ever had a pleasanter face, or made less complaint about her lot.

Mother raised the average of my parents pretty high. I never cared much for Pap until I was a man, but I always fairly worshipped Mother and would do anything in the world for her. Anybody would that ever knew her.

She had a way of singing at her work, and as she worked all the time, she was singing a good deal of the time. She had a sweet voice, too. Mostly she sang hymns, because there were not so very many other kinds of songs in those days. Long before we knew the meaning of any of them we liked to hear them, and that was I suppose because we knew what a wonderful heart they came out of. They were not a bit like the church songs they sing now. I don't suppose they are sung any more at all.

One she used to sing went like this:

I would not live always, I ask not to stay,  
Where storm after storm rises swift o'er the way,  
The few cloudy mornings that dawn on us here  
Are enough for life's trials, enough for its fears.

Right now as I look at those words I can't see so very much to them. But they were set to a tolerably pretty tune, that is, it was pretty when Mother sang it.

The consecrated cross I'll bear  
'Til death shall set me free;  
And then go home a crown to wear,  
For there's a crown for me.

That was another one I liked to hear her sing. For quite a spell I didn't catch all the words just right, and understood her to say "cross-eyed bear." But there wasn't anything funny about that at the time. It was one of Mother's songs, and what mattered about the bear's eyes I'd like to know. It was all right any way she sang it.

She knew two or three dozen church songs, and mostly they were kind of sad. But she was never sad herself, but was always seeing the bright side of things. Everything always brightened right up whenever she came around.

She knew several sentimental kinds of ballads too, and some of them had upwards of twenty verses to them. Those songs told a kind of story, and they were mostly saddish too. There was "The Silk Merchant's Daughter." That was a song and a half! There were lovers, and cruel parents, a lost glove, partings and gettings together again and no end of troubles and sadness. And she could sing "Barbery Allen" so gentle and sad-like that you just couldn't keep from crying, that's all. I reckon she knew a dozen of that kind of songs, and I never got tired of hearing them.

Mother, bless her heart, was our saviour. With all that she had to do, she found time to console us and keep us from open rebellion. As it was, four out of five

boys ran away from home as they came to about eighteen. I was the only one that stuck it out until I came of age. But that was not for Pap; it was for Mother. I made up my mind than I would stand anything before I would make her cry like she did when the older boys ran away. And I made good at it too but it was kinda hard sledding sometimes.

Mother even went so far as to find excuses for Pap. And anybody that could do that, at times, must have been a saint. I sometimes wonder if there was ever another such a woman.

It was always the talk of the neighborhood how easy she could hold a child on her lap. But practice makes perfect and she had the practice. She always held the baby on her lap at the table, fed him while she ate, poured all the tea and coffee, waited on the other children, minded the flies, and jumped up a dozen times during the meal to bring more biscuits, milk, water or perhaps a new jam she had forgotten to put on the table. Nobody else could have done all that.

Mother never wasted time resting. When she was not doing the regular work about the house, she mended clothes or socks. She knitted while visiting with neighbors who dropped in and knitted again every evening until bedtime. But somehow it never seemed to be work to her, for she seemed to take a delight in keeping busy.

How I did like to see her spin yarn! Pap kept a herd of sheep, and took the wool to Northfield, about twelve miles away, to have it carded. It came back from

the carding mill in big loose skeins with the wool formed together in rolls about as thick as your finger. Mother would mount a skein of this on a holder back of the spinning wheel, thread the spindle and commence to spin. She turned the big wheel by hand, and a little round belt ran down to the spindle and made it whirl. She would feed the carded wool to that spindle, holding it just the right way, and with just the right pull to turn out finished yarn as smooth and even as you ever saw. That was the beginning of dozens of pairs of stockings, socks, and mittens for children who were not very careful with them either, I am sorry to say.

That old spinning wheel had a lovely hum that didn't sound like anything else in the world. Mother would often tune her voice to it and sing a low and lovely song. It was the prettiest music anyone could imagine.

Pap's first name was Anderson, and Mother's was Caroline. She always called him *Annison*, and he called her *Calline*. They never used such words as *husband*, or *wife*, or *my man*, or *my woman* — or *he* or *she* or *it*, for that matter. To each other they were always just plain *Annison* and *Calline*, and I am as sure as can be that they loved each other dearly — a “monstrous lot,” to use one of Pap's expressions. They lived together in full partnership and devotion for seventy-four years, and seemed to love each other better all the time.