

prairie *storms*

I don't know why it was, but when I was a boy on the farm, I was most scared to death of storms. Any sort of a little cloud was a threat, and a big, black one caused me to fairly shake in my boots. Lightning and thunder drove me right down into the cellar if it was in the daytime, and deep under covers, head and ears, if it was in the night. Yet I never was struck by light-

ning, or killed by a storm, but I must have suffered more from fright than if I had been.

Maybe it was because we lived so much out of doors, and could see what a big thing a summer storm is. Big rippers used to come down from the northwest on summer afternoons about five o'clock. The whole sky out that way would be black as ink, but in it — not so very high up — would be a grayish band of clouds that meant wind a plenty. Every little bit a great red streak of lightning would sizzle down across the black face of the clouds, then thunder would rumble closer and closer, and let you know that you were in for it this time if you didn't watch out.

The wind would still be in the east, though, and I used to hope that it would prove strong enough to hold the storm back. The folks used to say that the storm was coming up against the wind. It seemed to me that it must be a whopper to be able to do that. That was long before we ever heard of stratum currents, and we supposed that all the wind there was always traveled in the same direction.

But pretty soon the east wind would stop blowing, and there would be a dead calm. Out in the west you could see a great grayish mess of something, right down on the ground, and coming to beat the band. A minute later it struck, and that ornery looking nightmare on the ground turned out to be dust, picked up and carried along by the wind. The trees would begin to bend away over, chickens would go scurrying to shelter, hogs would squeal, the cattle would run under the

sheds, and the field hands would come swarming in with the work horses, yet like as not get caught before they reached the barn.

When the wind got right down to business a little later, the trees and bushes would bend over pretty near to the ground, and maybe a lot of limbs would break off. Loose boards would go clattering along the ground, there was a frightful roaring sound, and every whip-stitch a blinding flash. Right after it there would be a clap of thunder that would shake the dishes in the cupboard, and just about scare a body to death.

By this time it was so dark that it might as well be night. Then the rain would come dashing down, a blinding sheet of water that shut off all view of everything outside just like a wall. Maybe it would last that way for half an hour and then slack up a little. But just when you began to think the worst might be over, the wind would shift to another quarter and come with a side-swiping blast that was worse than the first one. The trees now bent in a fresh direction and another deluge came down. But the house was still standing, and we were in the dry, and after a while Pap would say the storm was letting up and we took on fresh hope.

Pretty soon the thunder would be rumbling harmlessly away off to the southeast, and only a lot of big lazy raindrops kept coming down. A light streak in the west told us that the storm was broken up, and we were safe again, at least 'til the next one came along. Then just as we were beginning to have some fun wading barefoot in the water, a terrific streak of forked

lightning would come whipping back from the storm, right overhead, and there would be a muttering crash of thunder. It would kind of taper off and come back in echoes, and thump and rumble around for quite a spell, and wind up with a boom or two that seemed to shake the whole county.

Then the rainbow would begin to form across the east, getting brighter and brighter as the sun came out more 'til it stood clean across the sky as pretty as anything could be. And right over there in John Tucker's field was the end of it, and a sack of gold. But every time we ever tried to get it, something happened to the rainbow. It either petered out or changed its location before we got there, so we finally quit trying. It was always awfully wet going anyhow.

Everywhere about the place there would be little gullies washed out by the rain, and in the fields, where the ground was soft, some great big ones. All the low ground would be under water, and up would come the creek, just booming with black water. It would be all cluttered up with rails, limbs of trees, grain bundles, every kind of rubbish you ever heard of, and sometimes the wreck of a wooden bridge. Once some drowned chickens came floating down, and a dead hog, and a privy, and a lot of ear corn. It was fun to stand on the bridge and try to spear things as they came under, but we never had much luck at it. We never had any tools to work with except what we could find along the fences, and it's hard to jab a wooden stick into anything and make it hold.

We did manage one time to fasten onto a dead dog that came down in the freshet. Pierkses two boys, one of 'em, got an eye on him first when it was a hundred yards off, coming fast, and riding low in the water. We hurried and got a forked limb and broke the branches off a foot from the fork, and stood there all ready for it. There was a sharp bend just above the bridge, and the current slammed the dog right over against the bank. One of the Flamm boys was posted over there — barefooted, of course — on the slickest kind of a bank, that slanted a right smart toward the water. When the dog brushed along the bank right under him, he couldn't help trying for him. He did get it by the hind leg but the current was too swift and set up quite a pull. We all ran over to help him, but we didn't get there in time, and George slipped right down into that black water.


Before you could blink an eye George was underneath the bridge, his head bumping along against the timbers, for the water came up to within three inches of the bridge. But right away he popped out on the other side, and we all scampered down the north bank to help him out, if he needed help. But he was a good swimmer and pretty soon he got hold of a sour dock root that was sticking out of the bank, and crawled out as slick as you please. He was sure a wet boy, but we were all pretty wet by this time for a drizzling rain had set in more than an hour before. But we didn't mind that when as many things were floating in the creek as there were that day.

By this time the dog was a hundred yards below us and going at a good clip. It looked like we were going to lose him. But we took a long run — maybe a quarter of a mile ahead of him — and at a place where a line fence was washed out, got a pole and stretched it across kind of slantwise. When the dog came down a minute later he hit the pole, and the current slid him over to our side and we nabbed him and dragged him out. He was a genuine Newfoundland, most as big as a calf.

But we soon found out that he hadn't been drowned in that flood. He had a bullet hole in his forehead, one of his ears was gone, and on several places on his body the hair had slipped off. So we calculated that he had been dead several days, and the freshet had picked him up and was floating him off. We hated to see a fine dog like that dead. But there was no helping it now. We couldn't think of any use we could make of him so we rolled him back into the water and let him go.

Just then we heard Pap calling us. When we got up by the barn where he was, he told us that the storm had blown down about forty rods of rail fence, and that the cattle were in the young corn. Then all hands went running down there to drive the cattle out and lay up that fence.

Pap certainly knew all about building a rail fence. He had a home-made tool — with a crossbar on it — that he set down in line with two or three stakes where the fence ought to be, to show how much worm to

use. He would lay the lower rail and lap, and it was our job to lay up all the rest. We had to have the corners straight up and down and fasten them with lock-rails to hold them there. It isn't so very hard to do when the rails are dry. But take a mess of wet rails, sometimes half buried under mud that had washed off the fields, and it was the most particular kind of a job to get a rail fence to  up straight 'til you got the lockers on.

Next morning Pap found out that the lower flood gate was washed out by the freshet, and that the stock was liable to get into Schomp's field. That would never do. It would make Schomp mad for one thing, and worse than that, his fields were all alive with cockle-burs. The cattle would get them on their tails and scatter them all over our place and cause no end of trouble getting rid of them.

So right after breakfast we hitched up a team to the big wagon, loaded in tools, wire, planks, and everything, and drove through the soft fields to the lower line fence to fix the flood gate.

By this time the water had run down 'til it wasn't over two feet deep in the creek, but the banks were all smeared over with mud, where the high water had been — and the slickest, slimiest mud you ever saw. But no matter about that, the flood gate had to be fixed right away, so we rolled our britches high as we could and went right at it.

It wasn't such a bad job, especially for a youngster,

and we liked it better than common work. We dug two holes for the anchor posts, and got about as muddy as pigs doing it. Then we slid a log across and tied it to the anchors. We strung a set of wires down from this log and fastened planks and poles to them to make the gate, and at the bottom put a heavy pole to hold everything down straight. All this was fixed so that when a flood came along the gate would lift with the rising water, and close down again as the water got lower. It was a good theory but hardly ever worked. Generally drift wood got clogged and choked in the flood gate and made the water back up, sometimes a quarter of a mile, 'til finally the weight got to where the whole thing gave way and floated off down the creek.

Bad as storms were in the daytime, though, they were a good many times worse at night. In daylight you can see *how* you are getting killed, but at night you haven't the slightest show at all. A fellow's feelings, when a night storm is coming up, are about as uncomfortable as anything could possibly be.

I always slept in a corner room upstairs with my brother Frank. There were two windows on the west and one on the north. Nobody could possibly have set them better to let in all the lightning and thunder. No matter how hot the night was, I burrowed deep down under the covers — close up to Frank as I could squeeze — and sweat, and sizzled, and suffocated with my fingers in my ears all through every storm that came up. Once in a while I would peep out to see

if it had quit, but like as not a thunderbolt big as a stovepipe would let loose right in my face and back I would duck for another half hour.

That big brother I slept with was mighty little help, for he could sleep like a baby right through the worst kind of storms. He didn't appear to have any sense about danger at all. Finally, after I was pretty near drowned in sweat the storm would let up, and I never forgot to thank God for that. Nothing can be sweeter than to hear the thunder rumbling away off in the southeast, and see the stars shining once more. My goodness, what a relief it was!