

Turkey Red

By Frances Gilchrist Wood

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The old mail-sled running between Haney and Le Beau, in the days when Dakota was still a Territory, was nearing the end of its hundred-mile route.

It was a desolate country in those days: geographers still described it as The Great American Desert, and in looks it certainly deserved the title. Never was there anything as lonesome as that endless stretch of snow reaching across the world until it cut into a cold gray sky, excepting the same desert burned to a brown tinder by the hot wind of Summer.

Nothing but sky and plain and its voice, the wind, unless you might count a lonely sod shack blocked against the horizon, miles away from a neighbor, miles from anywhere, its red-curtained square of window glowing through the early twilight.

There were three men in the sled; Dan, the mail-carrier, crusty, belligerently Western, the self-elected guardian of every one on his route; Hillas, a younger man, hardly more than a boy, living on his pre-emption claim near the upper reaches of the stage line; the third a stranger from that part of the country vaguely defined as "the East." He was traveling, had given his name as Smith, and was as inquisitive about the country as he was reticent about his business there. Dan plainly disapproved of him.

They had driven the last cold miles in silence when the stage-driver turned to his neighbor. "Letter didn't say anything about coming out in the Spring to look over the country, did it?"

Hillas shook his head. "It was like all the rest, Dan. Don't want to build a railroad at all until the country's settled."

"God! Can't they see the other side of it? What it means to the folks already here to wait for it?"

The stranger thrust a suddenly interested profile above the handsome collar of his fur coat. He looked out over the waste of snow.

"You say there's no timber here?"

Dan maintained unfriendly silence and Hillas answered. "Nothing but scrub on the banks of the creeks. Years of prairie fires have burned out the trees, we think."

"Any ores--mines?"

The boy shook his head as he slid farther down in his worn buffalo coat of the plains.

"We're too busy rustling for something to eat first. And you can't develop mines without tools."

"Tools?"

"Yes, a railroad first of all."

Dan shifted the lines from one fur-mittened hand to the other, swinging the freed numbed arm in rhythmic beating against his body as he looked along the horizon a bit anxiously. The stranger shivered visibly.

"It's a god-forsaken country. Why don't you get out?"

Hillas, following Dan's glance around the blurred sky-line, answered absently, "Usual answer is, 'Leave? It's all I can do to stay here.'"

Smith regarded him irritably. "Why should any sane man ever have chosen this frozen wilderness?"

Hillas closed his eyes wearily. "We came in the Spring."

"I see!" The edged voice snapped, "Visionaries!"

Hillas's eyes opened again, wide, and then the boy was looking beyond the man with the far-seeing eyes of the plainsman. He spoke under his breath as if he were alone.

"Visionary, pioneer, American. That was the evolution in the beginning. Perhaps that is what we are." Suddenly the endurance in his voice went down before a wave of bitterness. "The first pioneers had to wait, too. How could they stand it so long!"

The young shoulders drooped as he thrust stiff fingers deep within the shapeless coat pockets. He slowly withdrew his right hand holding a parcel wrapped in brown paper. He tore a three-cornered flap in the cover, looked at the brightly colored contents, replaced the flap and returned the parcel, his chin a little higher.

Dan watched the northern sky-line restlessly. "It won't be snow. Look like a blizzard to you, Hillas?"

The traveler sat up. "Blizzard?"

"Yes," Dan drawled in willing contribution to his uneasiness, "the real Dakota article where blizzards are made. None of your eastern imitations, but a ninety-mile wind that whets slivers of ice off the frozen drifts all the way down from the North Pole. Only one good

thing about a blizzard--it's over in a hurry. You get to shelter or you freeze to death."

A gust of wind flung a powder of snow stingingly against their faces. The traveler withdrew his head turtlewise within the handsome collar in final condemnation. "No man in his senses would ever have deliberately come here to live."

Dan turned. "Wouldn't, eh?"

"No."

"You're American?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I was born here. It's my country."

"Ever read about your Pilgrim Fathers?"

"Why, of course."

"Frontiersmen, same as us. You're living on what they did. We're getting this frontier ready for those who come after. Want our children to have a better chance than we had. Our reason's same as theirs. Hillas told you the truth. Country's all right if we had a railroad."

"Humph!" With a contemptuous look across the desert. "Where's your freight, your grain, cattle----"

"West-bound freight, coal, feed, seed-grain, work, and more neighbors."

"One-sided bargain. Road that hauls empties one way doesn't pay. No Company would risk a line through here."

The angles of Dan's jaw showed white. "Maybe. Ever get a chance to pay your debt to those Pilgrim pioneers? Ever take it? Think the stock was worth saving?"

He lifted his whip-handle toward a pin-point of light across the stretch of snow. "Donovan lives over there and Mis' Donovan. We call them 'old folks' now; their hair has turned white as these drifts in two years. All they've got is here. He's a real farmer and a lot of help to the country, but they won't last long like this."

Dan swung his arm toward a glimmer nor' by nor' east. "Mis' Clark lives there, a mile back from the stage road. Clark's down in Yankton earning money to keep them going. She's alone with her baby holding down the claim." Dan's arm sagged. "We've had women go crazy out here."

The whip-stock followed the empty horizon half round the compass to a lighted red square not more than two miles away. "Mis' Carson died in the Spring. Carson stayed until he was too poor to get away. There's three children--oldest's Katy, just eleven." Dan's words failed, but his eyes told. "Somebody will brag of them as ancestors some day. They'll deserve it if they live through this."

Dan's jaw squared as he leveled his whip-handle straight at the traveler. "I've answered your questions, now you answer mine! We know your opinion of the country--you're not traveling for pleasure or your health. What are you here for?"

"Business. My own!"

"There's two kinds of business out here this time of year. 'Tain't healthy for either of them." Dan's words were measured and clipped.

"You've damned the West and all that's in it good and plenty. Now I say, damn the people anywhere in the whole country that won't pay their debts from pioneer to pioneer; that lets us fight the wilderness barehanded and die fighting; that won't risk----"

A gray film dropped down over the world, a leaden shroud that was not the coming of twilight. Dan jerked about, his whip cracked out over the heads of the leaders and they broke into a quick trot. The shriek of the runners along the frozen snow cut through the ominous darkness.

"Hillas," Dan's voice came sharply, "stand up and look for the light on Clark's guide-pole about a mile to the right. God help us if it ain't burning."

Hillas struggled up, one clumsy mitten thatching his eyes from the blinding needles. "I don't see it, Dan. We can't be more than a mile away. Hadn't you better break toward it?"

"Got to keep the track 'til we--see--light!"

The wind tore the words from his mouth as it struck them in lashing fury. The leaders had disappeared in a wall of snow but Dan's lash whistled forward in reminding authority. There was a moment's lull.

"See it, Hillas?"

"No, Dan."

Tiger-like the storm leaped again, bandying them about in its paws like captive mice. The horses swerved before the punishing blows, bunched, backed, tangled. Dan stood up shouting his orders of menacing appeal above the storm.

Again a breathing space before the next deadly impact. As it came Hillas shouted, "I see it--there, Dan! It's a red light. She's in trouble."

Through the whirling smother and chaos of Dan's cries and the struggling horses the sled lunged out of the road into unbroken drifts. Again the leaders swung sidewise before the lashing of a thousand lariats of ice and bunched against the wheel-horses. Dan swore, prayed, mastered them with far-reaching lash, then the off leader went down. Dan felt behind him for Hillas and shoved the reins against his arm.

"I'll get him up--or cut leaders--loose! If I don't--come back--drive to light. Don't--get--out!"

Dan disappeared in the white fury. There were sounds of a struggle; the sled jerked sharply and stood still. Slowly it strained forward.

Hillas was standing, one foot outside on the runner, as they traveled a team's length ahead. He gave a cry--"Dan! Dan!" and gripped a furry bulk that lumbered up out of the drift.

"All--right--son." Dan reached for the reins.

Frantically they fought their slow way toward the blurred light, staggering on in a fight with the odds too savage to last. They stopped abruptly as the winded leaders leaned against a wall interposed between themselves and insatiable fury.

Dan stepped over the dashboard, groped his way along the tongue between the wheel-horses and reached the leeway of a shadowy square. "It's the shed, Hillas. Help get the team in." The exhausted animals crowded into the narrow space without protest.

"Find the guide-rope to the house, Dan?"

"On the other side, toward the shack. Where's--Smith?"

"Here, by the shed."

Dan turned toward the stranger's voice.

"We're going 'round to the blizzard-line tied from shed to shack. Take hold of it and don't let go. If you do you'll freeze before we can find you. When the wind comes, turn your back and wait. Go on when it dies down and never let go the rope. Ready? The wind's dropped. Here, Hillas, next to me."

Three blurs hugged the sod walls around to the north-east corner. The forward shadow reached upward to a swaying rope, lifted the hand of the second who guided the third.

"Hang on to my belt, too, Hillas. Ready--Smith? Got the rope?"

They crawled forward, three barely visible figures, six, eight, ten steps. With a shriek the wind tore at them, beat the breath from their bodies, cut them with stinging needle-points and threw them aside. Dan reached back to make sure of Hillas who fumbled through the darkness for the stranger.

Slowly they struggled ahead, the cold growing more intense; two steps, four, and the mounting fury of the blizzard reached its zenith. The blurs swayed like battered leaves on a vine that the wind tore in two at last and flung the living beings wide. Dan, slinging to the broken rope, rolled over and found Hillas with the frayed end of the line in his hand, reaching about through the black drifts for the stranger. Dan crept closer, his mouth at Hillas's ear, shouting, "Quick! Right behind me if we're to live through it!"

The next moment Hillas let go the rope. Dan reached madly. "Boy, you can't find him--it'll only be two instead of one! Hillas! Hillas!"

The storm screamed louder than the plainsman and began heaping the snow over three obstructions in its path, two that groped slowly and one that lay still. Dan fumbled at his belt, unfastened it, slipped the rope through the buckle, knotted it and crept its full length back toward the boy. A snow-covered something moved forward guiding another, one arm groping in blind search, reached and touched the man clinging to the belt.

Beaten and buffeted by the ceaseless fury that no longer gave quarter, they slowly fought their way hand-over-hand along the rope, Dan now crawling last. After a frozen eternity they reached the end of the line fastened man-high against a second haven of wall. Hillas pushed open the unlocked door, the three men staggered in and fell panting against the side of the room.

The stage-driver recovered first, pulled off his mittens, examined his fingers and felt quickly of nose, ears, and chin. He looked sharply at Hillas and nodded. Unceremoniously they stripped off the stranger's gloves; reached for a pan, opened the door, dipped it into the drift and plunged Smith's fingers down in the snow.

"Your nose is white, too. Thaw it out."

Abruptly Dan indicated a bench against the wall where the two men seated would take up less space.

"I'm----" The stranger's voice was unsteady. "I----," but Dan had turned his back and his attention to the homesteader.

The eight by ten room constituted the entire home. A shed roof slanted from eight feet high on the door and window side to a bit more than five on the other. A bed in one corner took up most of the space, and the remaining necessities were bestowed with the compactness of a ship's cabin. The rough boards of the roof and walls had been hidden

by a covering of newspapers, with a row of illustrations pasted picture height. Cushions and curtains of turkey-red calico brightened the homely shack.

The driver had slipped off his buffalo coat and was bending over a baby exhaustedly fighting for breath that whistled shrilly through a closing throat. The mother, scarcely more than a girl, held her in tensely extended arms.

"How long's she been this way?"

"She began to choke up day before yesterday, just after you passed on the down trip."

The driver laid big finger tips on the restless wrist.

"She always has the croup when she cuts a tooth, Dan, but this is different. I've used all the medicines I have--nothing relieves the choking."

The girl lifted heavy eyelids above blue semicircles of fatigue and the compelling terror back of her eyes forced a question through dry lips.

"Dan, do you know what membranous croup is like? Is this it?"

The stage-driver picked up the lamp and held it close to the child's face, bringing out with distressing clearness the blue-veined pallor, sunken eyes, and effort of impeded breathing. He frowned, putting the lamp back quickly.

"Mebbe it is, Mis' Clark, but don't you be scared. We'll help you a spell."

Dan lifted the red curtain from the cupboard, found an emptied lard-pail, half filled it with water and placed it on an oil-stove that stood in

the center of the room. He looked questioningly about the four walls, discovered a cleverly contrived tool-box beneath the cupboard shelves sorted out a pair of pincers and bits of iron, laying the latter in a row over the oil blaze. He took down a can of condensed milk, poured a spoonful of the thick stuff into a cup of water and made room for it near the bits of heating iron.

He turned to the girl, opened his lips as if to speak with a face full of pity.

Along the four-foot space between the end of the bed and the opposite wall the girl walked, crooning to the sick child she carried. As they watched, the low song died away, her shoulder rubbed heavily against the boarding, her eyelids dropped and she stood sound asleep. The next hard-drawn breath of the baby roused her and she stumbled on, crooning a lullaby.

Smith clutched the younger man's shoulder. "God, Hillas, look where she's marked the wall rubbing against it! Do you suppose she's been walking that way for three days and nights? Why, she's only a child--no older than my own daughter."

Hillas nodded.

"Where are her people? Where's her husband?"

"Down in Yankton, Dan told you, working for the Winter. Got to have the money to live."

"Where's the doctor?"

"Nearest one's in Haney--four days' trip away by stage."

The traveler stared, frowningly.

Dan was looking about the room again and after prodding the gay seat in the corner, lifted the cover and picked up a folded blanket, shaking out the erstwhile padded cushion. He hung the blanket over the back of a chair.

"Mis' Clark, there's nothing but steam will touch membranous croup. We saved my baby that way last year. Set here and I'll fix things."

He put the steaming lard-pail on the floor beside the mother and lifted the blanket over the baby's head. She put up her hand.

"She's so little, Dan, and weak. How am I going to know if she--if she----"

Dan re-arranged the blanket tent. "Jest get under with her yourself, Mis' Clark, then you'll know all that's happening."

With the pincers he picked up a bit of hot iron and dropped it hissing into the pail, which he pushed beneath the tent. The room was oppressively quiet, walled in by the thick sod from the storm. The blanket muffled the sound of the child's breathing and the girl no longer stumbled against the wall.

Dan lifted the corner of the blanket and another bit of iron hissed as it struck the water. The older man leaned toward the younger.

"Stove--fire?" with a gesture of protest against the inadequate oil blaze.

Hillas whispered, "Can't afford it. Coal is \$9.00 in Haney, \$18.00 here."

They sat with heads thrust forward, listening in the intolerable silence. Dan lifted the blanket, hearkened a moment, then--"pst!" another bit of iron fell into the pail. Dan stooped to the tool-chest for a reserve

supply when a strangling cough made him spring to his feet and hurriedly lift the blanket.

The child was beating the air with tiny fists, fighting for breath. The mother stood rigid, arms out.

"Turn her this way!" Dan shifted the struggling child, face out. "Now watch out for the----"

The strangling cough broke and a horrible something--"It's the membrane! She's too weak--let me have her!"

Dan snatched the child and turned it face downward. The blue-faced baby fought in a supreme effort--again the horrible something--then Dan laid the child, white and motionless, in her mother's arms. She held the limp body close, her eyes wide with fear.

"Dan, is--is she----?"

A faint sobbing breath of relief fluttered the pale lips that moved in the merest ghost of a smile. The heavy eyelids half-lifted and the child nestled against its mother's breast. The girl swayed, shaking with sobs, "Baby--baby!"

She struggled for self-control and stood up straight and pale. "Dan, I ought to tell you. When it began to get dark with the storm and time to put up the lantern, I was afraid to leave the baby. If she strangled when I was gone--with no one to help her--she would die!"

Her lips quivered as she drew the child closer. "I didn't go right away but--I did--at last. I propped her up in bed and ran. If I hadn't----" Her eyes were wide with the shadowy edge of horror, "If I hadn't--you'd have been lost in the blizzard and--my baby would have died!"

She stood before the men as if for judgment, her face wet with unchecked tears. Dan patted her shoulder dumbly and touched a fresh, livid bruise that ran from the curling hair on her temple down across cheek and chin.

"Did you get this then?"

She nodded. "The storm threw me against the pole when I hoisted the lantern. I thought I'd--never--get back!"

It was Smith who translated Dan's look of appeal for the cup of warm milk and held it to the girl's lips.

"Drink it, Mis' Clark, you need it."

She made heroic attempts to swallow, her head drooped lower over the cup and fell against the driver's rough sleeve. "Poor kid, dead asleep!"

Dan guided her stumbling feet toward the bed that the traveler sprang to open. She guarded the baby in the protecting angle of her arm into safety upon the pillow, then fell like a log beside her. Dan slipped off the felt boots, lifted her feet to the bed and softly drew covers over mother and child.

"Poor kid, but she's grit, clear through!"

Dan walked to the window, looked out at the lessening storm, then at the tiny alarm-clock on the cupboard. "Be over pretty soon now!" He seated himself by the table, dropped his head wearily forward on folded arms and was asleep.

The traveler's face had lost some of its shrewdness. It was as if the white frontier had seized and shaken him into a new conception of life. He moved restlessly along the bench, then stepped softly to the

side of the bed and straightened the coverlet into greater nicety while his lips twitched.

With consuming care he folded the blanket and restored the corner seat to its accustomed appearance of luxury. He looked about the room, picked up the gray kitten sleeping contentedly on the floor and settled it on the red cushion with anxious attention to comfort.

He examined with curiosity the few books carefully covered in a corner shelf, took down an old hand-tooled volume and lifted his eyebrows at the ancient coat of arms on the book plate. He tiptoed across to the bench and pointed to the script beneath the plate. "Edward Winslow (7) to his dear daughter, Alice (8)."

He motioned toward the bed. "Her name?"

Hillas nodded. Smith grinned. "Dan's right. Blood will tell, even to damning the rest of us."

He sat down on the bench. "I understand more than I did, Hillas, since--you crawled back after me--out there. But how can you stand it here? I know you and the Clarks are people of education and, oh, all the rest; you could make your way anywhere."

Hillas spoke slowly. "I think you have to live here to know. It means something to be a pioneer. You can't be one if you've got it in you to be a quitter. The country will be all right some day." He reached for his greatcoat, bringing out a brown-paper parcel. He smiled at it oddly and went on as if talking to himself.

"When the drought and the hot winds come in the Summer and burn the buffalo grass to a tinder and the monotony of the plains weighs on you as it does now, there's a common, low-growing cactus scattered over the prairie that blooms into the gayest red flower you ever saw.

"It wouldn't count for much anywhere else, but the pluck of it, without rain for months, dew even. It's the 'colors of courage.'"

He turned the torn parcel, showing the bright red within, and looked at the cupboard and window with shining, tired eyes.

"Up and down the frontier in these shacks, homes, you'll find things made of turkey-red calico, cheap, common elsewhere----" He fingered the three-cornered flap, "It's our 'colors.'" He put the parcel back in his pocket. "I bought two yards yesterday after--I got a letter at Haney."

Smith sat looking at the gay curtains before him. The fury of the storm was dying down into fitful gusts. Dan stirred, looked quickly toward the bed, then the window, and got up quietly.

"I'll hitch up. We'll stop at Peterson's and tell her to come over." He closed the door noiselessly.

The traveler was frowning intently. Finally he turned toward the boy who sat with his head leaning back against the wall, eyes closed.

"Hillas," his very tones were awkward, "they call me a shrewd business man. I am, it's a selfish job and I'm not reforming now. But twice to-night you--children have risked your lives, without thought, for a stranger. I've been thinking about that railroad. Haven't you raised any grain or cattle that could be used for freight?"

The low answer was toneless. "Drought killed the crops, prairie fires burned the hay, of course the cattle starved."

"There's no timber, ore, nothing that could be used for east-bound shipment?"

The plainsman looked searchingly into the face of the older man. "There's no timber this side the Missouri. Across the river, it's reservation--Sioux. We----" He frowned and stopped.

Smith stood up, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. "I admitted I was shrewd, Hillas, but I'm not yellow clear through, not enough to betray this part of the frontier anyhow. I had a man along here last Fall spying for minerals. That's why I'm out here now. If you know the location, and we both think you do, I'll put capital in your way to develop the mines and use what pull I have to get the road in."

He looked down at the boy and thrust out a masterful jaw. There was a ring of sincerity no one could mistake when he spoke again.

"This country's a desert now, but I'd back the Sahara peopled with your kind. This is on the square, Hillas, don't tell me you won't believe I'm--American enough to trust?"

The boy tried to speak. With stiffened body and clenched hands he struggled for self-control. Finally in a ragged whisper, "If I try to tell you what--it means--I can't talk! Dan and I know of outcropping coal over in the Buttes." He nodded in the direction of the Missouri, "but we haven't had enough money to file mining claims."

"Know where to dig for samples under this snow?"

The boy nodded. "Some in my shack too. I--" His head went down upon the crossed arms. Smith laid an awkward hand on the heaving shoulders, then rose and crossed the room to where the girl had stumbled in her vigil. Gently he touched the darkened streak where her shoulders had rubbed and blurred the newspaper print. He looked from the relentless white desert outside to the gay bravery within and bent his head, "Turkey-red--calico!"

There was the sound of jingling harness and the crunch of runners. The men bundled into fur coats.

"Hillas, the draw right by the house here," Smith stopped and looked sharply at the plainsman, then went on with firm carelessness, "This draw ought to strike a low grade that would come out near the river level. Does Dan know Clark's address?" Hillas nodded.

They tiptoed out and closed the door behind them softly. The wind had swept every cloud from the sky and the light of the Northern stars etched a dazzling world. Dan was checking up the leaders as Hillas caught him by the shoulder and shook him like a clumsy bear.

"Dan, you blind old mole, can you see the headlight of the Overland Freight blazing and thundering down that draw over the Great Missouri and Eastern?"

Dan stared.

"I knew you couldn't!" Hillas thumped him with furry fist. "Dan," the wind might easily have drowned the unsteady voice, "I've told Mr. Smith about the coal--for freight. He's going to help us get capital for mining and after that the road."

"Smith! Smith! Well I'll be--aren't you a claim spotter?"

He turned abruptly and crunched toward the stage. His passengers followed. Dan paused with his foot on the runner and looked steadily at the traveler from under lowered, shaggy brows.

"You're going to get a road out here?"

"I've told Hillas I'll put money in your way to mine the coal. Then the railroad will come."

Dan's voice rasped with tension. "We'll get out the coal. Are you going to see that the road's built?"

Unconsciously the traveler held up his right hand, "I am!"

Dan searched his face sharply. Smith nodded, "I'm making my bet on the people--friend!"

It was a new Dan who lifted his bronzed face to a white world. His voice was low and very gentle. "To bring a road here," he swung his whip-handle from Donovan's light around to Carson's square, sweeping in all that lay behind, "out here to them--" The pioneer faced the wide desert that reached into a misty space ablaze with stars, "would be like--playing God!"

The whip thudded softly into the socket and Dan rolled up on the driver's seat. Two men climbed in behind him. The long lash swung out over the leaders as Dan headed the old mail-sled across the drifted right-of-way of the Great Missouri and Eastern.

FOOTNOTE:

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