

ERIS

BY
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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

CHAPTER XXI

CHAPTER XXII
CHAPTER XXIII
CHAPTER XXIV
CHAPTER XXV
CHAPTER XXVI
CHAPTER XXVII
CHAPTER XXVIII
CHAPTER XXIX
CHAPTER XXX
CHAPTER XXXI
CHAPTER XXXII
CHAPTER XXXIII
CHAPTER XXXIV
CHAPTER XXXV

TO
MY FRIEND
HARRY PAYNE BURTON

ERIS

CHAPTER I

THE baby was born at Whitewater Farms about nine in the morning, April 19, 1900. Two pure-breed calves,—one a heifer, the other a bull,—were dropped the same day at nearly the same hour.

Odell came in toward noon, heard these farm items from his foreman, Ed Lister.

For twenty years Odell's marriage had been childless. He had waited in vain for a son,—for several sons,—and now, after twenty sterile years of hardship, drudgery, and domestic discord, Fanny had given him a girl.

He stood in silence, chewing the bitter news.

“Awright,” he said, “that's *that!* Is Queen doin' good?”

Whitewater Queen was doing as well as could be expected and her fourth heifer-calf was a miracle of Guernsey beauty.

“Awright! Veal that danged bull-caaf. That's White Chief's second bull outa White Rose. I'm done. We'll take her to Hilltop Acres next time. And that's that!”

He dusted the fertiliser and land plaster from his patched canvas jacket:

“It blowed some,” he said. “I oughta waited. Cost me five dollars, mebber. I thought it might rain; that’s why. It’s one dum thing after another. It allus comes like that.”

He scraped the bottom of his crusted boots against the concrete rim of the manure pit.

A bitter winter with practically no snow; dry swamps; an April drouth; a disastrous run of bull-calves with no market,—and now, after twenty years, a girl baby!

How was a man going to get ahead? How was he to break even? Twenty years Odell had waited for sons to help him. He should have had three or four at work by this time. Instead he was paying wages.

“I guess Fanny’s kinda bad,” remarked the foreman.

Odell looked up from his brooding study of the manure.

“I dunno,” continued the foreman; “another Doc is here, too. He come with a train nurse n’hour ago. Looks kinda bad to me, Elmer.”

Odell gazed stupidly at Lister.

“What other Doc?” he demanded.

“Old Doc Benson. Doc Wand sent Mazie for him.”

Odell said nothing. After a moment or two he walked slowly toward the house.

In the kitchen a neighbour, one Susan Hagan, a gross widow, was waddling around getting dinner, perspiring and garrulous. Two or

three farm hands, in bantering conversation, stood washing or drying their faces at the sink.

Mazie, the big, buxom daughter of Ed Lister, moved leisurely about, setting the table. She was laughing, as usual, at the men's repartee.

But when Odell appeared the clatter of the roller-towel ceased. So did Mazie's laughter and the hired men's banter.

Mrs. Hagan was the first to recover her tongue:

"Now, Elmer," she began in unctuous tones, "you set right down here and eat a mite o' ham——" She already had him by the sleeve of his canvas jacket. She grasped a smoking fry-pan in the other hand. The smoke from it blew into Odell's face.

"Leggo," he grunted, jerking his arm free.

Mrs. Hagan encountered Mazie's slanting black eyes, narrow with derision:

"Elmer don't want to eat; he wants to see Fanny," said Mazie Lister. And added: "Your ham's burning, Mrs. Hagan."

"Where's Doc Wand?" demanded Odell heavily.

Mrs. Hagan savagely snatched the answer from Mazie's red lips:

"Oh, Elmer," she burst out, "he's went and called in old Doc Benson; and Benson he fetched a train nurse from Summit——" Smoke from the burning ham strangled her. Odell left her coughing, and strode toward the sitting room.

"Dang it!" he muttered, "what next!"

It was cool and dusky in the sitting room. He halted in the golden gloom, sullenly apprehensive, listening for any sound from the bed-room overhead.

After a little while Dr. Wand came downstairs. He was haggard and white, but when he caught sight of Odell he went to him with a smile. The village folk feared and trusted Dr. Wand. They feared his sarcasm and trusted his skill. But, with the self-assertion of inferiority, they all called him “Fred” or “Doc.”

“Well, Elmer,” he said, “the baby’s doing nicely.... I thought I’d like to have Dr. Benson look at Fanny.... A fine baby, Elmer.... Fanny asked me to think up some uncommon and pretty name for your little girl——”

“Name her anything,” said Odell thickly.... “Dang it, I waited twenty years for a boy. And now look what I get! It all comes to once. White Rose drops me a bull-caaf, too. But I can veal *that!*”

“Better luck next time——”

“No,” he interrupted fiercely, “I’m done!” He turned and stared at the sun-bars on the lowered shade, his tanned features working.

“It’s like the herd,” he said. “Either the cow or the herd-bull’s to blame for every dinged bull-caaf. And I can’t afford to breed ’em together more’n twice.... Twenty years I been lookin’ for a boy, Doc. No, I’m done. And that’s that!”

“You’d better go and eat,” suggested the doctor.

Odell nodded: “Fanny awright?”

“We’re watching her. Perhaps you’d better stay around this afternoon, Elmer——”

“I gotta spread manure——”

“I want you within calling distance,” repeated the doctor mildly.

Odell looked up. After a moment’s hesitation:

“Awright, Doc. I guess I can work around nearby. You must be dead-beat. Eat a snack with us?”

“Not now. I can’t leave your wife.”

“Do you mean that Fanny’s kinda bad?”

“Yes.... Your wife is very, very ill, Elmer. Dr. Benson is with her now.”

Breaking ground for a new kitchen garden that afternoon, Odell found the soil so infested with quack-root, horse-radish, and parsnip that he gave it up and told Lister that they’d fence the place as cheaply as possible and turn the hogs on it.

Lister hooked up a horse and drove away to hunt for locust posts and wire. Odell dragged his plow to the wagon shed, stabled the fat gray horse, walked slowly back toward the wood shed. There was a dead apple tree he could fell while waiting.

It was very still there in the April sunshine. All signs of rain were gone. The wind had died out. Save for the hum of bees in crocus and snow-drop, and except for the white cock’s clarion from the runs, no sound broke the blue silence of an April afternoon.

Odell looked up at the window of his wife’s bed-room. The white-capped nurse was seated there, her head turned as though intent upon something taking place within the room. She did not stir. After a while Odell picked up his spading fork and wiped the tines.

Yes, every kind of bad luck was coming at once; drouth, bull-calves, wind to waste fertiliser, doctors' bills, expenses for a nurse, for Mrs. Hagan, for posts and wire,—and the land riddled with quack and horse-radish....

He'd about broken even, so far, during the last twenty years. All these years he'd marked time, doggedly, plugging away. Because, after all, there had been nothing else to do. He could not stop. To sell meant merely to begin again somewhere else, plug away, break about even year after year, die plugging. That was what general farming meant in White Hills when there were wages to pay. He could have made money with sons to help him.... Life was a tread-mill. What his cattle took from the land they gave back; nothing more. He was tired of the tread-mill. A squirrel in a cage travelled no further and got as far....

Odell drove his spading fork into the ground, sifted out fragments of horse-radish roots, kicked them under the fence into the dusty road beyond.

Dr. Wand's roadster stood out there by the front gate. Behind it waited Dr. Benson's driver in the new limousine car. Odell had not felt he could afford any kind of car,—not even a tractor. These danged doctors....

As he stood with one foot resting on his spading fork, gazing gloomily at the two cars, Dr. Benson, fat, ruddy and seventy, came out of the house with his satchel.

He nodded to Odell:

“Dr. Wand wants you,” he said. “She's conscious.”

After the portly physician had driven away down the dusty road, Odell went into the house and ascended the stairs to the common bed-room from which now, in all probability, he was to be excluded for a while.

Dr. Wand, beside the bed, very tired, motioned Odell to draw nearer. It was the ghost of his wife he saw lying there.

“Well,” he grunted with an effort, “you don’t feel very spry, I guess. You look kinda peekid, Fan.”

All the stored resentment of twenty barren years glittered in his wife’s sunken eyes. She knew his desire for sons. She knew what he now thought of her.

She said in a distinct voice to Dr. Wand: “Tell him.”

The doctor said: “Your wife has asked me to think up some new and unusual name for the baby. I suggested ‘Eris,’” he added blandly. And, after a silence: “Your wife seems to like the name.”

Odell nodded: “Awright.”

His wife said to the doctor, in her painfully distinct voice: “I want she should have a name that no other baby’s got.... Because—that’s all I can give her.... Something no other baby’s got.... Write it, Doctor.”

Dr. Ward wrote “Eris” on the birth certificate. His expression became slightly ironical.

“Eris,” he repeated. “Do you both approve this name?”

Odell shrugged assent.

“Yes,” said the woman. “She’s mine. All I can give her is this name. *I* give it.”

“Eris was the name of a Greek goddess,” remarked the doctor. He did not explain that Eris was the goddess of Discord. “I’m very sure,” he added, “that no other baby is named Eris.... But plenty of ’em ought to be.... Was there anything you wanted to say to your wife, Elmer?”

“Hey?” demanded Odell, stupidly.

Suddenly something in the physician’s eyes sent a dull shock through Odell. He turned and stared at his wife as though he had never before laid eyes on her. After a while he found his voice:

“You—you’ll get better after a spell,” he stammered. “Feel like eatin’ a mite o’ sunthin’ tasty? You want I should get you a little jell ’rsunthin’—Fanny——”

Her bright, sunken gaze checked him.

“You ain’t asked to see the baby,” she said in her thin, measured voice; “I’m sorry I ever bore a child to you, Elmer.”

Odell reddened: “Where is it——?” He stumbled up from his chair, looking vaguely about him, confused by her brilliant eyes—by their measureless resentment.

For life was becoming too brief for pretence now. Fanny knew it; her husband began to realise it.

She said: “I’m *glad* I have no sons. I’m sorry I bore a child.... God forgive me.... Because I’ll never rest, never be quiet, now.... But I don’t mind so much ... if THEY will let me keep an eye on her

somehow——” She tried to lift her head from the pillow: “I want to see her,” she said sharply.

“Yes,” said the doctor. “I want you to see her. Wait a moment——”

As he passed Odell he drew him outside. “Go downstairs,” he whispered. “I’ll call you if she asks to see you again.”

“She ain’t a-goin’ to get no better?” demanded Odell hoarsely.

“No.”

The physician passed on into the adjoining room, where the nurse sat watching a new-born baby in its brand new cradle.

Odell continued down the stairs, and seated himself in the dim sitting room....

Everything was coming at once—drouth, wind, bull-calves, girl babies—and Death.... All were coming at once.... But no sons had ever come. None would ever come now. So—wages must go on.... A woman to mind the baby.... And somebody to keep house for him.... Expense piling on expense. And no outlook—no longer any chance to break even.... Where was he to get more money? He could not carry the farm on his own shoulders all alone. The more work planned, the more men needed; and the more it all cost. Increased acreage, redoubled production, got him no further. Always it was, at best, merely an even break—every loss offsetting every gain....

One of the cats came in with a barn rat hanging from her mouth, looked furtively at Odell, then slunk out, tail twitching.

The man dropped his elbows on the centre table and took his unshaven face between both scarred fists....

The room had grown as still as death now. Which was fitting and proper.

After a long while Dr. Wand descended the stairs. Odell stood up in the semi-dusk of the sitting room.

“She didn’t ask for you again,” said the doctor.

“Is—*is she—gone?*”

“Yes.... Quite painlessly.”

They walked slowly to the porch. It was nearly milking time. The herd was coming up the long lane,—the sun dipping low behind,—and a delicate rosy light over everything.

“You got your milking to do,” said the doctor. “I’ll notify Wilbur Chase. I’ll see to everything, Elmer.”

Wilbur Chase was the local undertaker. The doctor went out to the road, cranked his car, got in wearily, and rolled away toward the village.

Odell stood motionless. In his ears sounded the cow-bells, tonk-a-tonk, tonk-a-tonk, as the Whitewater herd turned leisurely into the barn-yard. Ed Lister opened the sliding doors to the cow-barn. A frisky heifer or two balked; otherwise the herd went in soberly, filing away behind spotless, sweet-smelling rows of stalls, greeted thunderously by the great herd-bull from his steel bull-pen.

Odell, heavy-eyed, turned on his heel and went upstairs.

But at the door of the silent room above the nurse barred his way.

“I’ll let you know when you can see her,” she said. “She isn’t ready.”

Odell gazed at her in a bewildered way.

“The baby is in the other room,” added the nurse. “Don’t wake her. Better not touch her.”

He went, obediently, stood in the doorway, his scarred hands hanging.

Eris lay asleep in her brand new cradle, almost invisible under the white fabrics that swathed her.

The chamber of death was no stiller than this dim room where life was beginning. There was no sound, no light except a long, rosy ray from the setting sun falling athwart the cradle.

So slept Eris, daughter of discord, and so named,—an unwelcome baby born late in her parents’ lives, and opening her blind, bluish eyes like an April wind-flower in a world still numb from winter.

Odell stared at the mound of covers.

It would be a long while before this baby could be of any use at Whitewater Farms.

CHAPTER II

IT is a long lane that has no turning, either for cattle or for men.

When Fanny died Odell was forty. Two months later he married the strapping daughter of Ed Lister. And came to the turn in the long, long lane he had travelled for twenty years.

For, as Whitewater Queen was a breeder of heifer-calves, Mazie Lister proved to be a breeder of men.

Every year, for the first four years, she gave Odell a son.

There was no fuss made about these events. Mazie Lister was the kind of girl who could eat cabbage for breakfast, wad it down with pie, drive it deeper with a quart of buttermilk.

Once, to prove she could do it, she ate a whole roast sucking pig, five boiled potatoes, six ears of corn, a dish of cranberry sauce, and an entire apple pie; and washed it down with three quarts of new cider.

Her feed never fattened her; it seemed to make her skin pinker, teeth whiter, long, slanting black eyes more brilliant.

No cares worried her. She laughed a great deal. She was busy from dawn to dark. Unfatigued but sleepy, she yawned frightfully toward nine o'clock. It was her time to roost.

Mazie's instincts concerning progeny were simple. She nursed each arrival as long as necessary, then weaned it. Then the

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