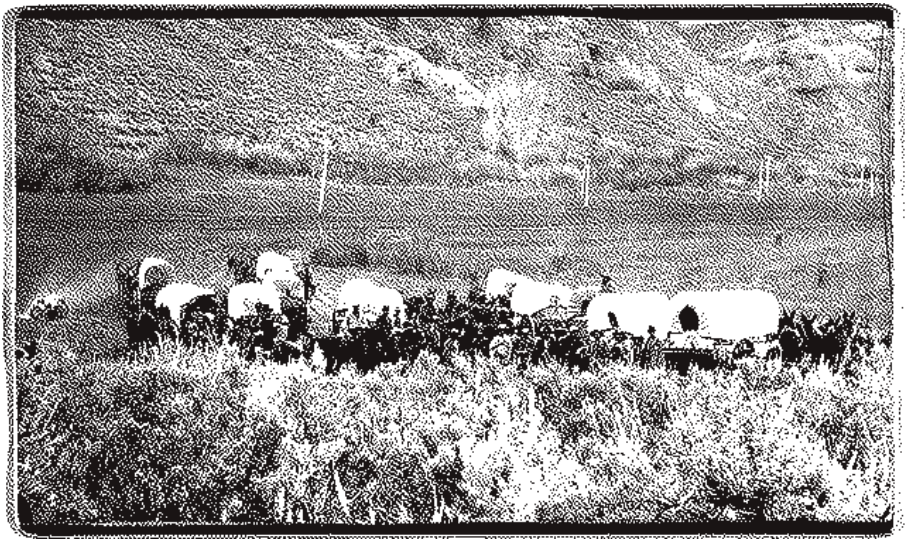

The House That Was Not

By Elia W. Peattie

THE SHAPE OF FEAR AND OTHER GHOSTLY TALES, 1898

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Cover: Mormon Emigrant Train, Echo Canyon, Charles William Carter, 1870, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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BART FLEMING took his bride out to his ranch on the plains when she was but seventeen years old, and the two set up housekeeping in three hundred and twenty acres of corn and rye. Off toward the west there was an unbroken sea of tossing corn at that time of the year when the bride came out, and as her sewing window was on the side of the house which faced the sunset, she passed a good part of each day looking into that great rustling mass, breathing in its succulent odors and listening to its sibilant melody. It was her picture gallery, her opera, her spectacle, and, being sensible,--or perhaps, being merely happy,--she made the most of it.

When harvesting time came and the corn was cut, she had much entertainment in discovering what lay beyond. The town was east, and it chanced that she had never ridden west. So, when the rolling hills of this newly beholden land lifted themselves for her contemplation, and the harvest sun, all in an angry and sanguinary glow sank in the veiled horizon, and at noon a scarf of golden vapor wavered up and down along the earth line, it was as if a new world had been made for her. Sometimes, at the coming of a storm, a whip-lash of purple cloud, full of electric agility, snapped along the western horizon.

“Oh, you'll see a lot of queer things on these here plains,” her husband said when she spoke to him of these phenomena. “I guess what you see is the wind.”

“The wind!” cried Flora. “You can't see the wind, Bart.”

“Now look here, Flora,” returned Bart, with benevolent emphasis, “you're a smart one, but you don't know all I know about this here country. I've lived here three mortal years, waitin' for you to git up out of your mother's arms and come out to keep me company, and I know what there is to know. Some things out here is queer--so queer folks wouldn't believe 'em unless they saw. An' some's so pig-headed they don't believe their own eyes. As for th' wind, if you lay down flat and squint toward th' west, you can see it blowin' along near th' ground, like a big ribbon; an' sometimes it's th' color of air, an' sometimes it's silver an' gold, an' sometimes, when a storm is comin', it's purple.”

“If you got so tired looking at the wind, why didn't you marry some other girl, Bart, instead of waiting for me?”

Flora was more interested in the first part of Bart's speech than in the last.

“Oh, come on!” protested Bart, and he picked her up in his arms and jumped her toward the ceiling of the low shack as if she were a little girl--but then, to be sure, she wasn't much more.

Of all the things Flora saw when the corn was cut down, nothing interested her so much as a low cottage, something like her own, which lay away in the distance. She could not guess how far it might be, because distances are deceiving out there, where the altitude is high and the air is as clear as one of those mystic balls of glass in which the sallow mystics of India see the moving shadows of the future.

She had not known there were neighbors so near, and she wondered for several days about them before she ventured to say anything to Bart on the subject. Indeed, for some reason which she did not attempt to explain to herself, she felt shy about broaching the matter. Perhaps Bart did not want her to know the people. The thought came to her, as naughty thoughts will come, even to the best of persons, that some handsome young men might be “baching” it out there by themselves, and Bart didn't wish her to make their acquaintance. Bart had flattered her so much that she had actually begun to think herself beautiful, though as a matter of fact she was only a nice little girl with a lot of reddish-brown hair, and a bright pair of reddish-brown eyes in a white face.

“Bart,” she ventured one evening, as the sun, at its fiercest, rushed toward the great black hollow of the west, “who lives over there in that shack?”

She turned away from the window where she had been looking at the incarnadined disk, and she thought she saw Bart turn pale. But then, her eyes were so blurred with the glory she had been gazing at, that she might easily have been mistaken.

“I say, Bart, why don't you speak? If there's any one around to associate with, I should think you'd let me have the benefit of their

company. It isn't as funny as you think, staying here alone days and days."

"You ain't gettin' homesick, be you, sweetheart?" cried Bart, putting his arms around her. "You ain't gettin' tired of my society, be yeh?"

It took some time to answer this question in a satisfactory manner, but at length Flora was able to return to her original topic.

"But the shack, Bart! Who lives there, anyway?"

"I'm not acquainted with 'em," said Bart, sharply. "Ain't them biscuits done, Flora?"

Then, of course, she grew obstinate.

"Those biscuits will never be done, Bart, till I know about that house, and why you never spoke of it, and why nobody ever comes down the road from there. Some one lives there I know, for in the mornings and at night I see the smoke coming out of the chimney."

"Do you now?" cried Bart, opening his eyes and looking at her with unfeigned interest. "Well, do you know, sometimes I've fancied I seen that too?"

"Well, why not," cried Flora, in half anger. "Why shouldn't you?"

"See here, Flora, take them biscuits out an' listen to me. There ain't no house there. Hello! I didn't know you'd go for to drop the biscuits. Wait, I'll help you pick 'em up. By cracky, they're hot, ain't they? What you puttin' a towel over 'em for? Well, you set down here on my knee, so. Now you look over at that there house. You see it, don't yeh? Well, it ain't there! No! I saw it the first week I was out here. I was jus' half dyin', thinkin' of you an' wonderin' why you didn't write. That was the time you was mad at me. So I rode over there one day--lookin' up company, so t' speak--and there wa'n't no house there. I spent all one Sunday lookin' for it. Then I spoke to Jim Geary about it. He laughed an' got a little white about th' gills, an' he said he guessed I'd have to look a good while before I found it. He said that there shack was an ole joke."

"Why--what--"

"Well, this here is th' story he tol' me. He said a man an' his wife come out here t' live an' put up that there little place. An' she was young, you know, an' kind o' skeery, and she got lonesome. It

worked on her an' worked on her, an' one day she up an' killed the baby an' her husband an' herself. Th' folks found 'em and buried 'em right there on their own ground. Well, about two weeks after that, th' house was burned down. Don't know how. Tramps, maybe. Anyhow, it burned. At least, I guess it burned!"

"You guess it burned!"

"Well, it ain't there, you know."

"But if it burned the ashes are there."

"All right, girlie, they're there then. Now let's have tea."

This they proceeded to do, and were happy and cheerful all evening, but that didn't keep Flora from rising at the first flush of dawn and stealing out of the house. She looked away over west as she went to the barn and there, dark and firm against the horizon, stood the little house against the pellucid sky of morning. She got on Ginger's back--Ginger being her own yellow broncho--and set off at a hard pace for the house. It didn't appear to come any nearer, but the objects which had seemed to be beside it came closer into view, and Flora pressed on, with her mind steeled for anything. But as she approached the poplar windbreak which stood to the north of the house, the little shack waned like a shadow before her. It faded and dimmed before her eyes.

She slapped Ginger's flanks and kept him going, and she at last got him up to the spot. But there was nothing there. The bunch grass grew tall and rank and in the midst of it lay a baby's shoe. Flora thought of picking it up, but something cold in her veins withheld her. Then she grew angry, and set Ginger's head toward the place and tried to drive him over it. But the yellow broncho gave one snort of fear, gathered himself in a bunch, and then, all tense, leaping muscles, made for home as only a broncho can.

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