

Hidden Fire

Laura Goodman Salverson

Illustrated by

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HIDDEN FIRE

By LAURA GOODMAN SALVERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY BRYANT FRYER

A poignant, heart-searching story of a woman's life—with its lights and shadows—an epic of the Canadian prairies.

The most humble of mankind are not without their quota of ennobling sorrows and heartening joys. Neither are they lacking in those significant moments which are impregnated with the desires and hopes of better things.

It may be that such experiences are but the fragments of that first "divine discontent" which drove mankind from an Eden of irresponsible existence to the rugged paths of painful thought: a reversion to that hazy, unformulated desire that forced the first reptile from his oozy bed.

But, whatever the psychological explanation may be, this clear, indisputable fact remains, that regardless of how great our self-satisfaction is to-day, discontent, even misery, may rule our lot tomorrow; and this without any definite or apparent change of circumstance.

Such, at least, was the experience of Martha Croyer, “Old Martha” as the villagers of Neah familiarly called her. Not that she was actually so old in years, but rather because through toil and suffering she had acquired a garb of age.

For thirty years she had been the faithful wife of John Croyer, drudging uncomplainingly upon his farm. She had so long been a silent, unobtrusive toiler, that the rising generation remembered her only as a somewhat heavy-featured old lady, entirely commonplace and said to be under her husband’s thumb.

On a certain spring morning, however, Old Martha arose from her bed with unusual alacrity, threw a faded shawl over her flannelette nightgown and hurried to the window.

The newly-risen sun had lifted the morning vapors, leaving the meadow fresh and beautiful, like some fairy island lately emerged from the sea. The arbor to the east of the house was sheathed in that delicate green seen only in springtime, and from an adjacent birch a cardinal darted, challenging the world with his rapturous song.

But all this had transpired upon many another bygone day, kindling usually no deeper sentiment than this—that here again was opportunity for fruitful labor at field or wash tub.

Not the beauty of the spring, then, nor yet the call of mating birds had drawn her to the window. No, the lure was a rollicking, old-fashioned song, borne in all its buoyant gaiety upon the fragrant morning air. Somewhere beyond the farm fences were carefree campers making for the distant hills, leaving behind them the echo of their song to re-awaken yet other echoes for Old Martha.



They rushed upon her; these memories, jostling one another in their swift approach. Old hopes, old dreams, old desires!

Suddenly she was overwhelmed at the sense of her misery, appalled at the price she had paid for her dull, peaceful life; yet she could not but marvel at the foolishness of the human heart. Was the resignation bought by the persistent patience of a lifetime to be undone by the spell of the simple lyric? Yet how wide it had swung the fettered gates of memory and emotion!

One by one they rushed upon her, these memories, jostling one another in their swift approach. Old hopes, old dreams, old desires! Hurriedly, with trembling fingers, she finished dressing, for she had caught the sound of noisily clanging barn doors, denoting that John had finished the morning "feeding" and, in accordance with all sensible habit, a hot and plentiful breakfast should await his return to the house.

On opening the kitchen door, admitting a flood of sunlight, Old Martha heard with relief the voice of some neighbor hailing her husband. It would give her grace to get things well under way, this early morning gossip, whatever its import. But though she worked swiftly and efficiently, to all outward appearances the same placid housewife, yet her thoughts were alien to the tasks in hand and were very strange thoughts indeed.

While carefully measuring the coffee to the desired strength, and beating the eggs for an omelet, she pondered, later coming to the astounding conclusion that since these emotions, so long and conscientiously subdued, now again broke forth in fierce new strength, it was right and desirable they should do so. That now, at last, she could be free to heed them—to snatch from life at least a semblance of joys long missed, before it be forever too late.

For the first time it dawned upon her habit-shackled mind that she could put to some tangible use the little hoard of money, which, to her frugal eyes, had in the last few years grown to a considerable sum. With that quickness of decision which sometimes comes to conservative natures, she formulated her plans. She would go to Elizabeth, her brother's widow, who still dwelt in the little mountain village where their youth had been spent. Yes, with Elizabeth she would live again in dreams and come at last to a knowledge of the fulness of life.

John, she argued with herself, was hardly aware of her except in such tasks as were hers to perform. These, she knew, could equally well be done by another and John could now easily afford the expense such help would incur.

For the last few years affairs had been going well at the farm; the stock had increased and the crops had been abundant. Yet, apparently, it made little difference. Fortune had smiled so late upon them that the Croyers, in their deep-rooted, poverty-ridden ways, derived about as much satisfaction from her gifts as an infant would from a saddle horse. The only discernible change lay in the new barn buildings, the sleek stock and in that little hoard of Martha's—money earned from poultry products, a source of income which always had been hers and out of which she procured all household staples.

Back in the hard, lean years when each succeeding failure wrung something of joy and life from both of them, she had, with ever increasing resourcefulness and self-denial, met many a minor debt with this slender revenue. With a grim smile she thought of the simple pleasures and the long deferred hopes lying in the grave of those debts.

John Croyer entered the house much after his usual manner. Yet, to Martha, surreptitiously watching him at his morning ablutions, it was plain that something was amiss, it was, however, not his way to talk on an empty

stomach, so she held her peace. Over his fourth muffin and second cup of coffee, he suddenly burst forth as she knew he eventually must:

“Matt’s having a tough time again—Tilly’s downright sick—powerful fever!”

“Seems as I’d call it Tilly’s tough time if I had my say,” his wife replied.

John glared at her.

“This is no joking matter, old lady. Matt says Dr. Bonn thinks she’ll not pull through—and little Carey’s only eight and the baby just six months. Fine mess for a man to be in!”

“So ’tis, so ’tis, John Croyer, and a fine cheap servant he’ll lose too, in Tilly. Fine worker Tilly was till the last two little ones came. Matt’s grey mare, I’ve noticed, has been browsing round quite some time with her little colt—but then—horses is horses, and wimmin’s only wimmin! Lucky she’ll be, I’m thinkin’, poor Tilly, to get her rest!”

John Croyer was not only surprised by this tirade, but stricken dumb. With his mouth full of muffin and his eyes popping, he stared at the sarcastic stranger sitting in the seat of his commonly self-effacing wife. Then he blared out:

“You talk like a crazy woman and a sinner, making light of the trials sent by the Almighty! Better hustle through your work. I’ll harness Ginger along towards noon. You’d best be doin’ what you can at Matt’s and save your tongue. Gabbin’ never done no good!”

“No, gabbin’ never done me any good, John Croyer, but at least I don’t lay it against the Almighty. I’ll be ready when Ginger is harnessed and I’ll lay out a bite of lunch so’s you needn’t want till I get back.” With which remark she left the table and went upstairs, leaving behind a sorely troubled spouse to brood on the general cussedness of women.

But if it was a perverted old woman who presided at John’s breakfast table, it was, nevertheless, an angel of mercy who stepped into Tillie’s bedroom.

One look at the sorely-trying woman and Martha knew affairs were even worse than she had believed. Another besides Dr. Bonn was in attendance—that Oldest Healer of the universe who brought relief at the first sickbed, and who will attend the last, and laid his insignia upon Tillie’s tired face.

Matt was standing stupidly beside the bed, while the six-months-old Joseph crawled about his mother's feet. In the window close at her head a great, grey cat sat preening itself in the sunshine. Martha shooed it away.

In the kitchen little Carey was feeding the other two children bread and milk, while a neighbor woman was frying pork and potatoes. The odor of the food hung heavily about the sick room—an accusation to the dying woman, who had no business to be dying in a world where so much pork was yet unfried, so many babies yet unreared.

Dr. Bonn drove up in the midst of this, breezed into the sick room in his customary dapper way, took the patient's temperature, listened to her heart, administered a stimulant in a tumbler of water, then beckoned for Matt to come outside. Martha sent the baby away with him.

After their departure, Tilly clutched at Martha's hand.

“Martha, Martha, I'm dying—and I'm glad. Only—there's little Carrie—already she's a slave, and she's never had nothing.”

Tilly's grip tightened and Martha patted her cheek in silent sympathy, lighting back her own tears. With difficulty the sick woman went on:

“Matt'll get another woman—housekeepers is hard to keep. But my Carey—seems as if I can't bear her to be a-slavin' for another woman. Martha, you and John's fixed well with no little ones—take my Carey and let her play—let her play, Martha till life gets her like the rest of us!”

At one time Martha would have felt it incumbent upon her to consult John, but in the strength of her new rebellion she hesitated not at all.

“Yes, yes, Tillie, I'll do what I can. Your little Carey'll play—I promise you good and plenty.”

The exhausted woman, falling back upon the pillows, lay with closed eyes. Life seemed to ebb out quickly now that the mind had relaxed its tenacious hold upon the great desire. Freedom, happiness, beauty! These things denied her, could they be won by the little daughter then all were well.

In Tillie's humble world, the men were lords, and though they toiled yet were they free. Hence she worried less about the little boys. Yet now and again she aroused herself from the enveloping stupor, bemoaning little Joseph so young, so helpless.

Eventually she fell asleep and Martha returned to the kitchen where the dinner, now cold, waited untasted upon the table. The neighbor woman had taken the children out. Martha saw her walking to and fro in the pasture, little Joseph in her arms and beside her Carey—miniature mother watching with serious eyes her little brothers as they gleefully chased the chickens about the field.

Martha heard subdued voices and recognizing one as that of her husband, she stepped out upon the porch.

Matt and John were seated, their broad backs toward her. Matt's body sagged dejectedly and she caught his rough, broken speech.

“All along I've been that mean and stingy—saving, saving, so's some day I could bring Tillie the bank book and say ‘See here, Tilly, now we can ease up a little and, maybe, do something fine for the kids too.’ Now I know what an ass I've been. Hard work, the doctor says, killed her. My Tilly that was so beautiful! You should have seen her, John, her blue eyes full of mischief! That granary last year could have waited, the money gone for help, now it's too late. John, John,” the poor man groaned, “why are men such fools?”

To Martha's wonderment her practical and unemotional husband muttered:

“Just naturally born so, I reckon, not allowin' of it for conceit. Buck up, man, buck up! You can make good to the children!”

“But my Tillie—my Tillie—”

Martha stepped down from the porch confronting the men.

“Matt,” she said, “do this for Tillie, tell her what you just said—not that you're a fool, she knows that, I reckon, but that you love her—that she's still beautiful. No woman ever lived but would stop outside paradise to hear her lad say that.”

Like a priestess of some strange religion she continued, her voice vibrant with emotion:

“You think I'm a crazy old woman, but for twenty years I've been what your Tillie was for ten. Tell her of the old days, and Matt, promise me this—say that Carey shall get what her mother never had, and”—whimsically, “tell her you'll buy Carey a new dress—a silk dress, Matt—tell her that. It sounds so foolish I know, but that's just what makes misery, Matt, what's so little to some, is a tragedy to others. I know what I say, I've seen your Tillie in her

shabby dress standing out in yonder field, a tiger lily pressed against her poor white cheek, lookin' off into nowhere with such eyes as it hurt to see. Oh, yes, Tillie will know what you mean better'n you yourself ever will, when you tell her Carey gets a silk dress."

Having said this to the stupefied men, she hurried off to relieve the other woman of Joseph's care. Later, between them, they hustled the little ones off to the next farm, leaving at home only Carey, who was old enough to understand the calamity which was about to engulf them.

Two hours later, when Martha tip-toed into the sickroom, she beheld one of life's miracles. Tillie lay propped up in her husband's arms, on her face a look of rapture defying expression. Toil and pain were painted out by the artistry of love. Slow, heart-wrung tears were stealing down Matt's brown, unshaven face, while with that tenderness which lies dormant in most big men, he caressed his wife's head, stroking her corn-colored hair—the one attribute of beauty which neither toil nor time had touched.

Tillie smiling—Tillie with flying hair! Old Martha had a vision of her as she must have been long before coming to this valley farm. Like one gazing into a secret place and feeling ashamed, she crept away, her eyes dim, and made ready to go home to the evening milking.

For the angel of death may visit us, yet the homely tasks rise up and claim us. Only momentarily, on the wings of joy or grief, are we lifted out of ourselves, realizing vaguely the majesty of life. Then we descend into the commonplace, and for our common selves this is well.

A week after Tillie's funeral, Old Martha was rummaging up in the attic looking for odds and ends with which to furnish Carey's room, for John was willing the child should come and Matt was eagerly grateful, promising to provide well for her needs.

John had driven off to the village early in the day, so his wife decided that the opportunity for making certain changes in the household—a thing abhorrent to her husband—was unusually good. Moreover being still decided upon her trip, she wanted to ascertain whether certain old trunks were suitable for the journey. Now however, because of little Carey, the adventure was to be only a holiday and the child, of course, was to go with her.

These various tasks had used up the day and it was already growing dusk when as she dusted out the last hide-covered trunk, an eager voice shouted:

“Mattie, Mattie!”

Something long buried arose within the old lady’s breast. Her heart beat rapidly, sending the blood to her head. How long the years since she had heard that call! Agitated, she dropped weakly down upon the trunk, just managing to answer:

“Here, Johnnie, here in the attic.”

Sheepishly, like a small boy caught giving his lady an apple or a tadpole or some such token of love, John Croyer entered the attic carrying a paper box. Not only was he freshly shaven in the best Sabbath style, but arrayed from top to toe in new and expensive garments.

The eternal coyness of woman raised its long-silent voice:

“My, but you’re handsome, Johnnie!”

But, John, flushing painfully, seated himself on a neighboring box and thrust the package into his wife’s lap.

“I’m hoping you’ll do some more understanding, Mattie,” he said, then falling silent sat twisting his new hat around in his hands.

From folds of tissue paper, clouds of grey silk, with here and there a touch of rose, peeped forth. With trembling fingers Martha held aloft the treasure. It was a dress, so delicate and beautiful that she knew her husband must have ordered it from the distant city. No country village had its equal.

Then, in spite of the difficulties she was having with her throat, a desire to laugh assailed her. John’s line of reasoning was so obvious. A dress for Carey—a dress for her! From the dim recesses of memory came a recollection. Once on the far blue hills, where they had dreamed their little dream, she had voiced a longing for a white, bell-shaped blossom growing near a certain bluff. Thence on, the fragrant bells were hers whenever procurable, but—never a different flower.

A premonition of the useless silk dresses which would now be hers for all future time burst upon her, and she broke into a cheery laugh.

“Oh, Johnnie, Johnnie,” she cried, “you’ve not changed a bit! I see it now, I see it now!” And half fearful that this merry mood might pass:

“Johnnie, do you remember the Ryan’s ball—when Freddie broke his fiddle string?”

“Because I danced so long with the belle of the ball?” he finished for her.

“Mattie,” he shouted, “the schottische, the schottische.”

And with, it must be confessed, a stiff and awkward bow, he said:

“Come, give me your hand. We’ll just try the step!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Hidden Fire* by Laura Goodman Salverson]