

Excerpts from *Variation West*, by Ardyth Kennelly

LIKE HAPPINESS, Burdick's Institution for the Care of the Sick was a secondary product, got hold of by Tot and Serapta Burdick, spinster sisters, in a roundabout way on account of the path their brother Murdock started down when he and his drinking friend Francis went to the auction at Camp Floyd and came home loaded down with cots, Army blankets and a pile of monstrously large kettles and pans he not only had no *use* for but no place to *store* except in the spare room at his sisters' house. Because of this (though for other reasons too), his wife Alice became quite intemperate in her harangue against him. All that pile of useless stuff!

Useful enough, though, Murdock knew, if she would listen to reason and he could sit down and talk with her man to man about God's idea of matrimony, which, set forth by the Prophet Joseph Smith before they killed him, was not just the condition of being husband and *wife*, though that had its virtues too, but more like prevailing as a shepherd and his *flock*. Murdock tried to explain this to Alice during their honeymoon nine years before, but she went into such paroxysms of fainting, hysteria and lunacy that he was deprived of ardor ever to bring the subject up again.

Could he have done so, however, and met with the understanding that would have privileged him to move between two, three or four households instead of just one measly cottage, think how practical these pallets, covers and big cooking utensils would be! The tenderness! You dear old sweetheart, you angel husband. (Instead of always being ripped up one side and down the other.) He often thought that what he should have done, while he was over there in England on his mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where he met Alice, was try to find out more about the true nature of the English before throwing in with one of them. (page 3)

IT IS AMAZING how heavy a human arm can be when not attached to the body. Tot buried it, wrapped in old calico, in the yard and when Mr. Harland got better and made ready to leave for the Montana gold fields, she took him out in the back yard and showed him its resting place. He thought of digging it up and taking it with him so as not to be lacking a part of himself on the day of Resurrection. But then he decided not to and keep a note on his person instead as to where it could be found when wanted. (page 20)

"SHE TOLD ME ONCE she was proud to have Brother Johnson sit in her kitchen and drink a cup of cocoa like he does every week. Because he was even wrote up once in the Salt Lake Tribune!"

"For what?"

"Because when he was on his mission, he was nearly ready to be cooked and ate by cannibals. Or anyway that's what he says when he gets up and bears his testimony. Only at the last minute he converted them. Also his sugar beet for three years running has took first prize at the Fair." (page 38)

THAT MAN WOULDN'T take to old age kindly. (How old was he? Forty? Maybe fifty?) Wouldn't take to sickness kindly, or enfeeblement. Losses kindly. *One* in particular that Mrs. Dooley said *struck only the men* ("impudence," she named it in a whisper), and when that happened they'd hang theirselves as soon as look at you. Not all, of course, but some. Though why a man should take it to heart like that she didn't know, when you considered how tiny a part them particular ornaments was of their whole body, and how little what they did amounted to, except in the case of fathering George Washington or, say, our own dear Prophet. If impudence, though, had actually struck the doctor, none of the ladies had any way of knowing. (page 34)

HINDLE BEING only five when she last saw her father some eighteen years before this, she couldn't remember much. "He brought us a sack of flour." Perhaps from his own mill, she wasn't sure. "Molasses candy." Now it came to her for the first time that the candy had to have been *made* by someone and she wondered which wife, which daughter. Did they know where it was going? "He'd always have a riddle to spring on us." Sometimes he had sprung it on them before, because with so many children—more than fifty, the paper said—he didn't always remember who had already heard it. Then she and Lucitie would know the answer and feel like they had put one over on *him*. But even knowing his tongue-twisters beforehand didn't give them any advantage, because he could say them so much faster. Still, they would try to beat him, and fall on the floor laughing. Then Mama would say they had better stop or next thing they knew they'd be crying. If it was bedtime he would hear their prayers, and then if they'd shut their eyes he would sing a song—

"How many times did you see him?"

"In my life? Six times, maybe seven. One of the songs he'd sing was—let me see now—'Oh, My Pretty Quadroon.'" Another time, driving through the empty land at dusk towards Durango, she thought of another. She didn't know the verse, but the chorus went,

O'Brien? McFadden? or Bates?

Now what is your name?

And what is your game?

And oh what was your name in the States?

Doctor chuckled. "There's Eastern tenderfoot written all over *that* for sure!"

"Why do you say that?" she said defensively.

"Why, because in my day, in these parts a good excuse for shooting a man would be for him to ask a question. 'What is your name?' 'What is your *game*?' " He laughed again. "Bang! right through the brisket! And the bartender would testify the fellow had it coming."

"My father wouldn't step foot in a saloon."

"I well believe it. Your father's a tenderfoot, that has been his downfall. Thirty years in the West and it never penetrated. Like coolie labor."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean coolie labor and Mormons, they're just alike. Stick together, talk their own lingo. The coolies smoke their poppy juice in dim, dark caves. All the Mormons need to do for it to work the same is read their scriptures. Six of one and half a dozen of the other. They bow down, they're natural slaves, the both of them. Is that the *West*? Girl, the West's not *in* a man not free."

"What do you mean, bow down?" She knew, though, and smarted for her kinfolk and for herself too.

"But getting back to your song. Not only wouldn't a true Westerner *ask* you your name, he'd be downright disappointed if you *told* him. Because one of the privileges out here used to be to size up a stranger and *give* him a name! 'Skillet'—'Boston'—'Ichabod Crane'—whatever seemed the most appropriate. Unless of course he was dead by then from asking foolish questions!" (pages 72–73)

WITH THE PERTURBATION of mind characteristic of a bad conscience, she ventured in.

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do for you?" the clerk behind the counter said.

Trying not to tremble, she unrolled the diploma and laid it before him. "I would like to register and—buy a license."

“For what?”

“Why, to—practice medicine.” She added quickly, “Just on women,” in case he thought her purpose more grandiose than her appearance warranted.

He looked at the diploma, then at her, frowning behind the glasses pinched on his nose. “On who?”

“Women,” she said faintly. “Women’s ailments.”

“Oh.” He coughed a little. “I’m usually across the hall in Vital Statistics. This here’s your credential? Looks like a diploma.”

“That’s what it is.”

“Physician, Surgeon and—?”

She interrupted. “That part there I’ve kind of let fall by the wayside.”

“What part?”

“Surgeon.”

“Oh.” He pondered that. Then, “What’s this word?” He put his finger on it, turning the diploma around enough for her to see.

“Accoucher?” She pronounced it syllable by syllable, “ac,” “couch,” “cher.”

“What’s a word like that supposed to mean?” he said.

What *was* it supposed to mean? Through the years she had asked to have defined all the unimportant words in the world, while the one *important* word—She clung to the counter with wet, cold fingers. “Why,” she said, swallowing down a dry throat, “it means just what it sounds like.”

“Sounds like ‘couch.’”

“Well, you know, that’s it, sir. As I was saying, I just treat womenfolk, and you would be surprised how many—get up in the morning, put their clothes on, make a stab at doing their work, but—by afternoon or even before noontime they’re *laying on the couch*.”

“If that don’t beat all,” he said. “You got her to a T! Cora, my wife. Bawling, laying down, weaker’n a cat—”

“How long has she been like that?”

“Too blame long. It’s getting pretty old. You cure ’em, do you? When they come to you?”

“I do unless—” She fell back on Doctor’s old extenuation, that sometimes things do rest in higher hands than ours. (pages 137–38)

FOREVER IS A FUNNY THING, is only time inconstant, only life that bears within it (like an engine does its means of generating power) steadfast change. The hardest heart, the thickest ice, the stiffest monument, all will melt into the distant sky, break into rain, to tears, to clouds of sand. And that change—count on it—will change again! And so the spring came round in mint condition and almost instantly began to tarnish. (page 40)

ALBERT’S GREAT-GRANDFATHER Henri, when the Marquis de Beaurepaire and his family were escaping and begged him to go with them—for what would they do without a barber, hairdresser and wig-maker like Henri Alfonse?—agreed to do so. But the Marquis’ trunkful of money having got lost after they arrived in London, Monsieur Henri Alfonse had to say farewell and go off on his own. He fended so well that in no great while he had his own hairdressing establishment, a French wife, daughter of an exiled maker of sable carriage-ropes lined with satin, and a son named Pierre who grew up to be a hairdresser like (and in partnership with) his father Henri. When Pierre married an English girl and had a son, he was named Francois. Francois became a hairdresser too.

So three generations were working at Alfonse & Son: Henri, Pierre and Francois. But with Francois the whole ancestral line ground to a halt, because Francois didn't want to get married. Even to please his grandfather Henri on his deathbed, Francois said non, and Henri died an unhappy man. But Francois had enough of women and their hair à la Sappho, à la Venus, à la Caracalla and d'Egyptienne by day. To contend with them by night as well would have been more than he could bear. (p. 105)

IT IS NOT TRUE, of course, that say the word "wish" and some sufflation like the breath of the Holy Ghost goes to work to grant it. But sometimes the utterance *does* move some airy element to activity, and one fine day . . . Wasn't it you who wished for such and such? Well, behold! Hindle would be starting up that grand staircase between the bronze boy and girl statues on the newel posts holding up the branches lit with amber globes, she would be going down that wide upstairs hall to that polished door, turning the silver doorknob and walking into that bedroom all pale blue satin and Brussels lace. She would hear that china cottage clock covered with roses and tiny birds chime once, chime twice, glance up worriedly and see the back of it and her own white face reflected in the mirror over the mantel. Didn't you want to be here? Wasn't that you? (page 259)

MRS. CLARENDON decided against a bunch of wormy old antiques. The new, the most recherché was for her. The Salt Lake Tribune printed the story of the housewarming on the front page. Twenty-eight rooms, area for a ballroom on the third floor, twenty-two-foot ceilings, corner towers, satinwood, rosewood, two dining rooms, kitchen of solid slate, ten-foot-wide airtight cookstove, built-in safes, one for the family silver made out of a ton of Ophir ore, one for Napoleon brandy and other fine liquors, one for valuables such as the Russian necklace of sapphires and a diamond bracelet that goes around the arm above the elbow five times and has three hundred diamonds running along it, which Mrs. Clarendon will be wearing on the night of the entertainment. If you're going to do something do it right, states Colonel Clarendon. (He has become a Colonel in the meanwhile.) Hot water flows through the towel racks to keep the towels warm. A carriage house, a stable, blooded horses, six house flunkies, two yard men, a stableman, coachman and man of all work. Only one other set of china like it in the world! Peacock-blue satin draperies, four hundred and two and three-fourths yards at three English pounds per yard (fifteen dollars), figure it out for yourself. Drawing room carpet alone cost five thousand dollars. Nothing will wear out. Mrs. Clarendon's gown . . . Colonel Clarendon . . . orchestra . . . roses . . . champagne corks popping like the Battle of Antietam . . .

The Tribune said it would like to be able to turn the clock back to twenty or thirty years ago, and see what the bon ton, the elegantly clad company at the party, was doing *then*. Bent over pick, shovel and sluice box some of the haughtiest now, sweat running down their bare backs, or keeping a saloon or working in a boarding house or freighting over the mountains or hammering up a shack. Sleeping at night on a rough board bedstead with poles across for slats and a mattress and pillow stuffed with dried bulrushes; old blankets, bedbugs, lice; a filled-up private place of ease out back; soap made out of soup-fat and clay. Eating pork and beans, greasy steak, spuds, pickles, dried-apple sauce. No swans then of spun sugar and isinglass, no consommé de volaille, galantine of turkey, pheasant, bécasses et bécassines, and twenty-seven kinds of cake and candy.

But such are the opportunities in this great land of ours if people are willing to roll up their sleeves! Or, as Minerva said when she read the account, in some cases roll up their skirts at the right moment. (page 259)

EVEN IN UTAH'S badlands, where the fad started of cutting the throats of sinners to save their souls, such an extinguishment was rare, and in the Mormon outpost of San Bernardino it made no headway at all.

Not that sinners, reprobates and sly offenders didn't live *there* like anywhere else. A headstrong girl turned down a man high up in the church because of his white-filmed eye and the fur on his tongue (and got the licking of her life). One time a calf was stolen, the Roberts lost a shift off their clothesline, pies had vanished cooling on a sill. But of course that could have been thieving Mojaves. The Lord's name was taken in vain, the Ten Commandments went against. Many a wife and house had been coveted. Maid-servants would have been coveted too, oxen and asses also, had any lived around there at the time, which none did. And oddly enough, there in San Bernardino the reading of the Bible betimes was looked upon as if not a crime, at least a misdemeanor. One of which the Danish painter was several times seen to be guilty. Now why would he be doing that? more than one person wondered. With the Book of Mormon at hand, the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price, why would he be rummaging through Scripture? once or twice even at Sunday school, and when he should have been at work. Not to say the Bible didn't *count*. But as Joseph Smith, their own dear Prophet, said, it counted only insofar as it was translated correctly. Which would not have been a problem except that if Joseph was the only man on earth (which he declared himself to be) able to tell which parts were translated correctly and which parts were not, and if a mob came along and *killed* him (which they did) before he had a chance to *tell* anyone, don't that leave things very much up in the air? In a land like ours, however, where Protestant principles long severed from the Roman communion hold sway, to cast off the *Bible* would be like repudiating soap or the Winchester carbine. So where members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints dwell the Good Book dwells also, large and with a Concordance, as a parlor embellishment and place to press a flower and keep family records. But as to *reading* it, that, the Saints of the Last Dispensation leave to the Gentiles, while the Saints themselves draw from the clanking Book found hidden like fairy gold in the Hill Cumorah that which, uncreated and eternal, subsists more in the essence of the Deity than all the other evangels in the world put together! (pages 266–67)

OF THE BUSTS, bubbies, udders, knockers, branched and flowering tits that were a part of the female of whatever species, he as a farm boy had been well aware from an early age, but except for clutching social handfuls of bosom from time to time, much as a nursing baby does, after he grew big enough to take girls out, or using them for a pillow on a picnic, he tried to steer as clear of *them* as of the abominable connection with domestic animals (especially the licentious she-goat) that could send an innocent boy to hell. Somehow synonymized in his rural mind were *beasts* and *breasts*... (page 518)

BUT WHAT WAS "saved"? . . . Well, "saved" might be to learn to bear what happens to you. Because how you bear it is more important than what it is. To line up the unchangeable amid constant change. To protect your freedom with a certain amount of discipline, the way a rancher fences in his grazing lands. To mark your pivots through the abyss, and (order being heaven's first law) run a course of action through the formless void. But because the biggest part of the entire universe of space and time can never be apprehended by direct, first-hand experience, you've got to get at it in other ways, he said. By such as the mechanism of Wyandra's perception and her memory, and by books. But books that give rise to something, like a steam engine produces steam. (page 608)

THEY READ ANYTHING, as a goat eats tin cans, apples or underwear off the line. (page 608)

AND LAST BUT not least, he said that according to his friend Dr. F. Avery Jones, pathological fermentation in the stomach may generate enough methane gas to cause a pretty big explosion if a person should belch while lighting a cigarette. As a comparable microbic effect in the lower intestine generates inflammable and explosive hydrogen sulphide and plain hydrogen, if God had not in his mercy arranged for evolution to place the anus quite far away from the mouth, smoking would never have become popular. And what of insouciance then? “And so since the whole of life is a folly and the best we can do is commit it, I say to you, baby, *nunc aut nunquam*. For degrading practices, play Ravel. Do not put on a Bach fugue. And God forbid the Tabernacle choir.”

He was now, of course, *persona non grata*. Well, what did he expect? Thank heaven it was late at night, a local program nobody really watched, an hour when De Servientibus—the kind that tarred and feathered and rode offenders out of town on a rail and lynched and eunuchated people—slept the sleep of the just.

“I merely said . . .”

At the university it was decided that since Jeppe promised not to make any more public appearances during his sojourn but to confine himself to teaching, and since it was only a composition class in a basement room in the Music Hall, not the important nuclear physics department . . . and for Betty Luebke’s sake, through whose good offices Kennecott Copper had been *most gracious* to the institution . . . they would let Jeppe stay and give his seminar. (pages 644–45)

AT THE TOP of the deep gully overgrown with willows and tules, they parked the car and walked the rest of the way. The land stretched out. Once upon a time there was no time and it was then that . . . autumn stood, blue haze along the horizon, the dusty smell of dry grass and wheat stubble in the air. And they came, fixed, perpetuated in unchanging form, sometimes at night, sometimes by broad daylight. It happens like that in the vicinity of churchyards, marshes, great buildings, solitary places, or places notorious because of some murder or where a very dreadful crime has been committed. *Ambulones*, they move about at midnight on great heaths and desert places.

The trail boss, he comes first, heading the procession of carts, white-tops, horsemen . . . silent as clouds. God, they have banged along. Drive a man crazy, gritty wheels, the iron clank of traces, neck yokes, clumped hooves, clump clump clump, buckets, rattling pans, a crying child, laughter, moos and bleats, yells and barking dogs and squeaking brakes, men taking the name of the Lord in vain, the long whip’s crack when deadhead oxen drop back and let their mates do all the pulling. This causes, God damn ’em, the doubletrees to scrape the wheel and the ox doing the pulling gets nervous . . . and then . . .

But all is noiseless as the still moon now, as pinnacles of aged snow, they plod behind thick glass, walk like treading water through soft sand with feet like leaden weights, stumble on rocks, climb and run downhill, bodies with their measure and their space but instantaneous pictures on the air, shadowgraphed like life there, eerily . . . (pages 704–5; quoting from Robert Burton’s 1621 work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*)