HARD SCRABBLE
By
MABEL MARSH

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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Episodes I Cradled, Conditioned and Commissioned</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes II Shocks, Surprises and Settling In.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes III Double-tenth Day and Sports.</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes IV Chinese New Year and The Towkay.</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes V Tragedies and Comedies.</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes VI Live-with-ics and Cupid's Escapades.</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes VII Royal Occasions.</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes VIII Wars, Rumors of Wars and The Aftermath.</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes IX Funerals and Lepers.</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes X Fun, Frolics and Furloughs.</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes XI Bishops and the Religious Aspect.</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episodes XII The Return and Recognition</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Christmas Day in Malaya, Dec. 25, 1910. Kuala Lumpur at last! Greetings from this far away city!

After 44 days of travel I arrived on the 22nd instant in time to catch my breath before Christmas. It seems strange to be celebrating this annual festival in the tropics, with no snow, sleigh bells, holly wreaths, mistletoe, nor Santa and his reindeer. Even that jolly gentleman is called by another name — Father Christmas.

However, there are a few features recognizable. We have been visited by groups of carol singers from our Asian Churches, both Chinese and Tamil; been showered with gifts of delicacies, such as sea-weed jelly, soya-bean cakes, oranges and pomelos, small cakes of gula-malacca (sugar made from palm products) and fresh eggs in cartons of ten each, Chinese style.

One Chinese Towkay sent us a large white goose which we will enjoy tonight at dinner along with British and Chinese guests. I believe there is to be plum pudding according to British custom, blazing blue with lighted brandy.

I am told that the queer name of this small city (only 30,000 inhabitants) means Muddy Mouth — so named from the confluence of two rivers near the center of the town. Most of the people are Chinese descended from early tin miners more than three centuries ago. The streets are lined with shop houses where business occupies the ground floor and the family the up-stairs. Most of the buildings are made of brick, plastered over and color-washed a muddy ochre, with none more than 3 stories tall.

Where the rivers join stands a beautiful Moslem Mosque with an onion shaped dome, the type of architecture of all buildings housing Government agencies. The British have a Protectorate over all four States that form the Federation, and also maintain a Resident in the capital cities of each of the other five States, while Singapore and Penang belong to the Straits Settlements and boast of being Crown Colonies.
Every one goes bare-footed or clomps along in wooden shoe-bottoms held in place by a strap over the toes. These keep the feet dry in case of rain and protect them from the heated pavements. The streets are crowded with pedestrians dodging between rick-shaws, hand-carts, motor-cycles, horse-drawn carriages, and bicycles, since there are few sidewalks. Trucks are known as lorries which handle some of the freight, but most of it is conveyed in bullock carts that move leisurely thro' the streets, sometimes a dozen or more in one procession, often passing our school at night.

The main thoroughfare is known as High Street. Our school is located on the corner of High St. and Kampong Atap, the name given to the little mining village long before the British Resident transferred his residence from the old Selangor State capital of Klang to the newly selected capital in 1876, and renamed it Kuala Lumpur. That was the year rubber was introduced into Malaya. In 1896 this town was selected as the capital of the Federation of the four states, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and Pahang.

The Malays, who own the Peninsula, live, for the most part, in villages near their rice fields. Each State has a Sultan who lives in his own palace, called the “Istana”, in the Capital City. The Royal Families live near since he may have more than one wife.

There are few motor-cars on the streets. Our means of conveyance is the humble rickshaw. We have no ice-box, no running hot water, no modern sanitary arrangements, no window panes, no flies; but mosquitoes galore, crows in great crowds, showers every day, plenty of noise and unsavory smells, and a great many unfamiliar languages that make it necessary to educate the coming generation in English so they can understand one another.

I am still astounded to find myself here and have to pinch myself to be sure I am me. But the outlook is favourable for an interesting year ahead.

MABEL MARSH
CHAPTER I

Cradled, Conditioned and Commissioned

The Civil War in the U.S.A. left many families disturbed, unsettled, frustrated and economically insecure. It was a wise Providence that made available at a low price the prairie lands of the Mid-West, giving courage and hope to new settlers and home-steadeers who sought to break away from familiar environments in the East.

Among those hardy pioneers were my mother's family, consisting of her parents, their five sons and two daughters, her mother's two brothers with their families, all trekking out from Illinois in covered wagons, and landing on neighboring farms in Southeastern Kansas in 1868.

The following year my father, with his two brothers and a sister, arrived in the same community from Ohio, where they had gone from West Virginia soon after the war. The eldest brother had served in the G.A.R. and was married, as was also the sister. Both had families.

These husky farmers built their own log cabins, fenced their fields with hedges of osage orange, zig-zagging rails, or mud and stone. As land sold for $1.25 an acre, most of these neighbors were able to homestead sizeable farms, which in spite of floods, drought, hot winds from Texas and cold ones from Canada, ravages of greedy grass-hoppers and calculating chinch-bugs, seasonal tornadoes and cyclones, yielded them an adequate living and in time made Kansas one of the most prosperous States in the Union.

Much has been written of the bitter struggle of the slave-lovers of the South with the freedom-lovers of the North, that took place on Kansas Territory during those formative years. Those who favored freedom were labeled "Black Abolitionists" by the opposing party, so it is no small wonder that when the struggle was over and the right prevailed, the leaders should have selected for their new-born State this motto: "Ad astra per aspera" — which translated means, "To the stars through difficulties."

Thus surrounded by aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozen, my life began on a hilly farm where almost any night
one could look out on the horizon and see prairie fires burning,
hear the call of coyotes, count the twinkling stars in the sky,
and wake up in the morning to greet a colorful sunrise, listen
to the crowing chanticleer, the gabble of geese, lowing of cattle,
neighing of horses, and baaing of lambs.

Among my earliest memories is caring for the young of
these domestic animals that had for some reason failed to grow
and develop under normal circumstances. There is nothing
cuter than a little pet pig, and nothing harder to wean when
it no longer needs special attention.

The grief of my growing years was my sandy hair and
its accompanying freckles, which wearing a sun-bonnet was
supposed to prevent. My mother remembered the time I found
a nest of turkey eggs and came running in to ask if the eggs
were speckled because the turkeys went bare-headed.

The goslings grew to geese and the day came once a year
when these had to be picked to provide soft feathers for beds
and pillows. I can still sense the stuffy air of the closed corner
in the barn which became heavily laden with down, heat and
goosy odors.

I also recall one evening when, instead of the accustomed
blue, the sky took on the color of burnished brass and people
from neighboring homes came in fear and dread that the world
was coming to an end. It was some time before they learned
that a volcanic island near Java in the far Pacific had erupted
and had caused the discoloring of the atmosphere. History
records that this occurred in 1883, and the name of the disturber
was "Krakatoa." I was only a little over two years old when
this took place.

People have often wondered why I am not a coffee-
drinker. I shall tell you here and now. One festive occasion
my mother had invited a number of relatives to dinner and set
the long table in the dining-room to accommodate them. She
had borrowed a larged coffee pot which she placed on the
floor at the head of the table, just before calling in the guests.
We small children were running around chasing each other
when I happened to stumble over that pot of hot coffee.
Naturally the dinner was postponed indefinitely while the aunts
all came to my rescue with glycerine and cotton, and bound
up the scalded leg which still bears the scars after four-score
years.
At another time, I was sitting in front of the kitchen stove putting on my shoes and stockings, with my feet upon the hearth, when the coffee pot, whose spout was facing me, boiled over onto my foot. That scar is as big as a silver dollar and still quite evident. So I consider this an adequate excuse to leave coffee alone.

Another event stands out in my memory which made a lasting impression on my morals. One Spring day my sister and I asked permission to take off our shoes and stockings and go wading. Both parents said "No," but the temptation was too strong to be resisted. So we slipped down to the "draw," left our foot-wear behind a small bluff, and proceeded down the stream in the lovely cool water, not noticing our father leave his plowing to gather them up and plow them under.

Naturally, we were forced to trud home on our tender, bare feet, over the newly-plowed stubble, and spend the evening in disgrace and discomfort because of the cold. The following morning after breakfast, father invited us to go with him to find our lost belongings. He took with him a hoe with which he dug a dozen different holes before he found the right place. Needless to say, we did not forget this lesson in obedience.

Both my father and mother filled the need for teachers in those little country school-houses on the plains, known by such names as "Calf Pasture," "Squirrel Trap," "Hickory Grove," or "Lone Elm." They never allowed my sister and myself to forget that their one ambition for us was to become students in the Kansas State Normal School at Emporia, and follow their footsteps in the noble profession.

One winter my mother's roll of pupils consisted of only seven boys, but she was frequently reminded of the thoughtful care she took with their instruction by expressions of appreciation from them as they came and went through our community.

My father taught in Allen County, and one winter happened to have a boy by that name. One day he asked this pupil in what County he lived, and he replied, "Allen County." Then he asked the next boy the same question, and he answered, "Hickman County" — this being his surname.

It was through their mutual interest in schools, music and religion that my parents became acquainted. They were engaged to be married on New Year's Day in 1879, but a raging
blizzard made it impossible for my father to go to the County Seat after his license; consequently, the wedding took place on January 5, in the “Little Brown Church in the Vale” — which was still standing at the turn of the century.

My mother’s only sister lost her chum to the Mission Field in Japan whence came frequent letters about her work and interesting experiences. This may have inspired in me the desire to take up work overseas, for I cannot remember the time when asked what I would do with my life, that I did not reply, “I am going to be a missionary,” and it seems everything pointed to preparation for this task.

The summer I celebrated my fourth birthday proved to be a momentous one for that whole part of the country, for a railroad, scheduled to run from St. Louis, Missouri to Madison, Kansas, was completed. Two small trading-posts, each a mile or more from the main track, were neither considered important enough to lure the road their way; consequently the people living in them decided to move their belongings to a new center, which inherited the name of Kincaid from the founders of the Bank they established there.

Those houses and store buildings had to pass over the road in front of our home, and we children were warned to keep back lest they topple over on us. It was exciting to watch this strange procession, hear the groans and creaks of the rollers, and listen to the imaginative discussions of interested neighbors as to the changes such a venture invited.

Later on in the year, the day came for the first locomotive to arrive. The sight of the big black engine belching clouds of smoke and steam, the peculiarly-shaped smoke-stack, the loud clanging bell, the shrill whistle, made a never-to-be-forgotten impression on us youngsters.

Naturally this opened up unheard-of possibilities for the whole community. My father decided to sell the farm and invest in a general Merchandise Store in order to give his growing family the advantages of School and Church made available by this new settlement. Consequently my formal education began at an early age in an improvised school-room set up over a meat-market on Main Street. We sat on long benches, the girls at one end, and the boys at the other. Since I was the youngest girl, it was my lot to sit next to a boy, which
proved to be almost as great a trial as having freckles and being called “sorrel-top” or “Red-head” — “Ginger Bread.”

After two years in this improvised class-room, we had to vacate to make way for beginners; but as the new school building was not yet completed, our parents delegated my brother and me to attend a country school not far from our grandfather’s farm, where we were to stay during the week. Consequently, we were duly enrolled at the opening of the Fall term, and returned to our foster home in the late afternoon to report that the teacher expected brothers to sit with sisters, a procedure not at all to our liking. All had double desks.

The following day we left home earlier than necessary and arrived to find no one else on the school premises. While my brother went to explore the playground, I felt impelled to investigate the school-room by looking through the key-hole. What did I see but a strange huge monster with large, round eyes and a beaked nose, gray in color, standing as tall as the stoves? While I stood and gazed in wonderment, it turned its head which so terrified me, that I called to my brother to come with me to report to the teacher what I had seen.

Fortunately he had left home and was not far down the road. When I affirmed that there was a big animal as tall as an elephant in the class-room, he seemed to take it as a joke. I can remember how brave I thought him to be as he unlocked and opened the door. As he did so, a little owl flew from its perch and lighted on a picture frame on the wall. Such an exciting event could not be kept secret, and before the bell rang, all the pupils were making merry over this happening at my expense. This was more than my sensitive soul could endure. Consequently that evening my brother and I trudged our weary way back to town, and no amount of coaxing could induce me to return to that school. Many times have I pondered over this extraordinary experience, and have never been able to satisfactorily explain that strange apparition or phenomenon that cost me two months of schooling as well as many potential friends, some of whom I later came to know intimately.

However, these months were not altogether lost. I had read about Princess Wilhelmina, who happened to be my age, and her keen interest in knitting. This inspired a desire to follow her hand-craft. Since ready-made mittens or gloves were not yet available, my father promised me 25 cts. a pair...