

# Big Bend

By conscious effort, I steered my mind away from such dismal thoughts. I made myself think of what we had in our favor. To begin with, there were Bessie and I, and our faith in each other. Bessie knew as well as I what we were up against; but she was willing to go anywhere in the world that there was a faint hope of restoring my health.

And our hope lay now in the hot spring on our new property. The spring that boiled up out of a rock ledge on the river bank and spilled its medicinal waters into the Rio Grande.

This search for my health had started years ago when I'd contracted malaria in my home state of Mississippi. I'd been just a big kid then, and I'd forget I had malaria the minute I recovered from one bout with it and wouldn't think about it till the next attack.

But too many bouts weakened me badly and left me with such a torn-up stomach that I could hardly eat. I began listening to the people who said "Go West, young man!"

On the day I finally made up my mind to leave the dank swamp country of Mississippi, I was out in the middle of my father's cotton field, picking cotton. And right then, without mulling the subject over any more, I dropped my cotton sack and walked away. I went to my room and put on my seersucker suit. I packed my ten-dollar blue serge, a couple of shirts, two celluloid collars, and three pairs of socks. I was getting away from this fever-ridden country of calomel, chill tonic, and quinine. That day I bought a ticket for as far west as my last five dollars would take me.

But in less than two years, I was back again, too ill with malaria to take care of myself. I spent several months at home in bed where my mother could look after me. It was a long time before I was finally able to go to work again.

This time I took a job as a travelling salesman for a firm in Nashville, Tennessee. I worked a territory covering Louisiana and Alabama. And it was at this time that I met Bessie.

I was singing in the choir at a little church in Tupelo, Mississippi, and I can remember still how she looked when she came in. She was a big girl, with heavy blonde hair looped and piled high on her head. She was late and flustered, so that her face glowed a pretty pink.

I stopped singing, leaving the choir short one bass. I gulped, watching the girl walk to her seat. "That's the one for me," I thought. "That's the girl."

I lost no time getting acquainted, and soon began such an urgent courtship that I crowded Bessie into marrying me. It was the smartest thing I ever did.

For awhile, Bessie and I lived in Montgomery, Alabama, and she occasionally went with me on my selling trips out in the territory. But my health continued to be bad, and as soon as I thought I'd saved enough money to quit my job, we moved to Dallas.