

CHAPTER II

FROM ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF JUNE, 1862, WHEN I LEFT WASHINGTON FOR THE WEST, UNTIL THE LATTER PART OF OCTOBER IN THE SAME YEAR, WHEN I WAS AT CRAB ORCHARD, KENTUCKY, AS A PRIVATE SOLDIER OF COMPANY "B," OF THE EIGHTY-EIGHTH REGIMENT, ILLINOIS INFANTRY VOLUNTEERS.

Going to the West

During one of my many journeys to and from Washington in the spring of 1862, I chanced to be upon the railroad train from that city to Baltimore. In the cars were many convalescent soldiers; some had been wounded, and were discharged and being sent home, to recruit that great army of cripples already appearing in the various States of the North; others, not so badly off, were on furlough and leave of absence, and going to their homes for a season, in the full uniform of the army, and this without being under any of the restraints or inconveniences of army discipline.

Among others on the train I met and became acquainted with Mr. Henry Weaver, whose home was at Loda, in Iroquois county, in the State of Illinois. He had been a private in Colonel Farnsworth's celebrated Eighth Regiment of Illinois Cavalry, and had just received his discharge from the service at one of the general hospitals situated in or near to Alexandria, Virginia, where he had been for a long time previously, suffering from typhoid fever.

By him I was told of the beautiful country he lived in, and how easy it was to get along there, especially for a young man such as I then was. By the time we reached Baltimore we were well acquainted, and on leaving him at the depot of the Northern Central railroad, I received and promised to accept from him a cordial invitation to visit him in his prairie home, so far away to the west.

For some time after this I continued to be engaged in going from camp to camp, as I have before related. My relatives and friends persisted in their refusal to sanction my going into the army, and at last I concluded myself that after all it would perhaps be better for me to abandon the idea.

For a little while I tried to settle down to hard study, but, with fifty thousand or more of armed men around me, and the continual hurly-burly of almost a state of siege, I made but little progress and realized less satisfaction. After

making up and tearing to pieces many different plans, I suddenly recalled to my mind the heartiness of the invitation I had received from Mr. Henry Weaver, and I thought I would very much like to see his beautiful home and country.

Eager at the thought, I determined to immediately banish myself from the stirring and demoralizing scenes by which I was so completely surrounded; go to Illinois, pursue my interrupted course of studies, and finally settle down to live there. All those of my friends to whom I mentioned my project applauded my resolution. My uncle jokingly warned me to return to the East again unless with my credentials as a member of Congress in my pocket. Even my elderly great-aunt thought I was on the right track at last, and soon after my last sad experience in the Shenandoah valley, with God-speed and good wishes from all of my friends, I started auspiciously for the great West. But alas for the strength or weakness of human resolution! The next time my friends heard of me I was a soldier indeed; but of that hereafter.

My objective point was Loda, of course, but I went direct to Chicago, so as to make of it a sort of base, as military men would say. I travelled on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, through a rough country and over great mountains, to the Ohio river at Bel-air. On our way we passed through several military stations, and I suffered from as many different attacks of depression of spirits. At Cumberland, in Maryland, I even went so far as to want to desert the train and go with the "boys" again.

From Bel-air, where I saw and crossed the Ohio river for the first time in my life, we went on to Columbus, the capital of the State of Ohio, and from thence on to Chicago. It had taken up nearly forty-eight hours to get there. I arrived in the wonderful city of Chicago late in the evening, and in a very tired, dusty, and hungry condition; but after a good bath and a tolerable supper, which I obtained at a hotel nearly opposite to the Union depot, I set out to view the city. I had travelled a long distance – two hundred miles longer than the whole of Great Britain; I had crossed high mountains and a great river, and I thought, as I went over the Allegheny mountains and the Ohio river, that I had at last seen some things of sufficient importance to entitle them to places on the map of the world. I esteemed myself as very nearly equal to him who had climbed Mont Blanc, or to the other one who had passed over the Andes.

Now I was in Chicago, eight hundred miles from tidewater, and I acknowledge to have felt some surprise on finding that the people were very much like the inhabitants of other cities I had visited, and although I had travelled so far, I was not after all in a foreign country. Having made my arrangements so that I could afford to stay but one day, I had to devise some means of seeing as much as possible of the city in that time. The streetcars seemed to be the best suited to my purpose, and upon one of them that passed the hotel, I got, and as I stood on the front platform, I engaged in conversation with the driver of it.

Talking with him (and he was a very enthusiastic talker, even for a Chicagoan), and viewing the city, I went to the end of the route. We passed by many hundreds of houses that had not yet been raised to the new grade of the streets, and that part of the city presented a curious aspect. Some years before it has been discovered that the grade of the city was in many places below the level

of Lake Michigan, and the work of raising the streets and the buildings to the new level had been going on. But once past the business centre, and where we got to where the residences of the poorer people were, the houses had not been raised, but the streets had. Many blocks has stores built on the corners, but between these corners the dwelling-houses seemed to be in a hole. Entrance from the street by means of the roofs appeared to be the easiest mode but in places where the distance was too great to be jumped, long stairs had been built from the street down to the front doors below.

After arriving at the end of the railroad line, I found myself on a large tract of land as flat as a mill-pond. I took another route on my return to the city, but the scenes were very much the same.

On the Prairies

Next day I took the train on the Chicago branch of the Illinois Central railroad. and ran south on that for ninety-nine miles to Loda. It was during this journey that I first realized the nature and extent of the grand Prairies. For miles upon each side of the road, and extending as far as the eye could reach, to the east, and to the west, there was nothing but flat, or very little rolling, prairie. Sometimes the horizon would seem to be broken by small, dark green objects of irregular shapes. These were groves of trees, oases in the blank prairie. The land itself was clothed in verdure, already thick and high. and all over were in bloom many kinds of plants and flowers growing in wild profusion that take great care and attention to be cultivated at all in other countries I had visited. While stopping at a small station on the open prairie I witnessed a phenomenon which I believe is peculiar to that country. It was an optical illusion. Although we were in the midst of a blank space, yet there appeared in the distance houses, churches, trees, and other objects, all of a grossly exaggerated size and turned upside down. There were many veritable castles in the air. It. was quite a study while it lasted,