

The Lost Wagon

Jim Kjelgaard

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The Land is Bright
The Lost Wagon

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For Alma and Rob Zaun

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*The characters, incidents and situations in this book are imaginary
and have no relation to any person or actual happening*

1. Pondering

WHEN HE had guided his plow halfway down the furrow, a bar-winged fly alighted just above Joe Tower's right ear. He felt it crawling, its presence irritating through the sweat that beaded his forehead and dampened his temples, and he knew that he should swat it away. When it was ready to do so the fly would bite him, and bar-winged flies drew blood when they bit.

He did not raise his hand because once again the devils which, at sporadic intervals, tormented him, were having a field day. The fly was a counter-irritant. He wanted it to bite. It was a time to be hurt because, after the fly bit him, there would be that much more satisfaction in smashing it.

At the same time he kept a wary eye on the mules. Though he was sometimes confused by the facts and affairs of his personal world, at the moment he had no doubt whatever about one thing. He hated all mules in general and these two in particular. They were big, sleek roan brutes with an air of innocence that was somehow imparted by their wagging ears and doleful expressions, but was entirely belied by the devil in their eyes. Twice within the past fifteen minutes they had balked, stepped over their traces, snarled their harnesses and kicked at him when he sought to untangle them. He had escaped injury because he knew mules. All his life he had handled animals, and most of the time he knew what they were going to do before they did it.

He felt the fly crawling around, and gloated silently as he awaited its bite. He mustn't harm the mules because a man simply never hurt his animals. But he could swat the fly, and so doing he could relieve all his pent-up anger at the mules and, this afternoon, at the world in general.

Not for a second did he take his eyes from the mules, and they seemed to know that he was watching them. Muscles rippled beneath taut hides as they strained into their collars and pulled as though they had never had any thought except getting the plowing done. Joe Tower's already tense nerves began to scream. The fly didn't bite and the mules didn't balk, and unless something happened very soon, he felt that he would be reduced to babbling idiocy.

Nothing happened except that the already hot sun seemed to become a little hotter on his sweat-drenched shirt and his perspiring head and arms. But he had been scorched by so much sun and had sweated so many gallons that he never thought about it any more. Sun and sweat were a part of things, like snow and ice. Nobody escaped them and nobody could do anything about them, and Joe wasn't sure that anybody should want to. If the sun didn't shine the crops wouldn't grow. Or if the sun did shine, and there was no snow to melt and fill subterranean reservoirs, the crops wouldn't grow anyhow. This basic reasoning should be obvious to anyone at all.

The rich brown earth turned cleanly as the plow wounded it, and the scorching sun burned a healing scab over the wound. Keeping intent eyes on both mules and waiting for the fly to bite, Joe was not one man but two.

One of them felt a soul-filling peace. It was good to plow and to have the nostril-filling scent of the newly turned earth, for these things were symbolic. The earth was a vast treasure house, but the treasure was not yielded freely. It was only for the strong, for him who could sweat and strain and guide a plow. Such a person was blessed beyond any others. But the other man who walked with Joe was angry and resentful. He did not doubt his own strength for he could plow as long a furrow as was necessary. He did dislike the forces, the petty forces that had nothing at all to do with plowing, which kept him from doing it.

Joe's lean, six-foot body adjusted itself perfectly to the rhythm of the plow. Hairy, sun-browned arms gripped the handles with exactly the right pressure, and there was something almost lyrically smooth in the way he could, without using his hands at all, control the reins that were looped over the small of his back. Gray-streaked hair that needed cutting and black beard shadowed a face that might have been thirty years old or fifty, and was thirty-four.

To himself and his work he gave little conscious thought. He had plowed so many furrows that plowing came almost as naturally as breathing, and he had long since ceased even to think about his own physical proportions. What sometimes seemed an age ago and sometimes only yesterday, he had fancied himself as a dashing figure and very handsome. He had been nineteen then and courting

Emma, and it was a foregone conclusion that the world was not only to be their oyster, but that it would be filled with the purest of pearls.

That had been yesterday, and yesterday was lost somewhere in the haze that every morning hung like a blue shroud over the low mountains that marched into the distance. This was today, and today meant work. But somehow, yesterday's dreams had not passed with passing time.

Yesterday's dream had become today's dream, and it was made up of things that a man might hope to possess—no unreasonable things, but ordinary things, like a sizable piece of good land, owned free and clear; an extra team of mules; a flower garden for Emma to fool around with, and maybe a small orchard down the side of a hill; some pretty clothes for Emma and for blossoming Barbara, and some toys for the younger ones; and most of all, freedom from the never-ending uncertainty about meeting the next payment. It seemed as though that shouldn't be too much for a man to want, yet most of it was still a dream.

Joe blew his breath upward to see if he could make the fly leave him and, when it did not, he became angrier. He was almost always a creature of the moment, and always the moments were filled with things demanding immediate attention. To the exclusion of all else, this one centered in a team of fractious mules, a fly that must bite soon and a strong sense of restlessness.

He came almost to the end of the furrow and still the fly contented itself with crawling around his temple and stopping now and again to buzz its wings or clean its fragile feet. Joe's tension increased and, had it not been for the anticipated senses of achievement that swatting the fly would give him after it bit, he would have swatted it anyhow.

They reached the furrow's end, he prepared to swing the team around, and that was the second the fly chose to bite him. It was a sharp and sudden pain, somewhat like the prick of a needle, but the pain did not ebb as a needle wound would have. The fly had pierced a blood vessel and would now bloat itself with blood. Joe Tower's hot anger passed the boiling point but, where another man might have cursed, he said nothing.

He let go of the right plow handle so that he could raise his hand and swat the fly. A surge of purest pleasure shimmered

through him, for this was the second he had been awaiting. Just at that moment the mules rebelled.

Expertly, choosing precisely the right time, knowing not only exactly what to do but exactly how to do it, they stepped over their traces and swung away from each other. They plunged forward, dragging the plow on top of the ground. Instead of swatting the fly, Joe grabbed the reins with his right hand and pulled back hard.

The steel bits took hold, and the mule's jaws gaped open. But they were hard-mouthed, and Joe brought his left hand to the aid of his right while he fought back as stubbornly as the mules were fighting him. When he finally brought the team under control, the fly was gone and only a dull ache remained to prove that it had ever been.

For a moment Joe felt weak and spiritless, as though he had conceived some master plan which should have worked well but which instead had gone completely astray. Then, still eying the mules warily, he straightened them out and swung the plow around.

The silliness of what he had intended to do and the way he had intended to do it, struck him forcibly. He had actually made serious plans to relieve his own pent-up feelings by swatting a fly. He grinned and for a moment he rested.

His eyes strayed past the boundaries of his own farm to a green-clad hill where a little herd of cattle grazed. Joe looked wistfully at them. The cattle belonged to Pete Darnley, and Joe had a sudden overwhelming conviction that Pete was the smartest man in Missouri. Instead of worrying about a farm, Pete had merely acquired a judicious assortment of bulls and cows and let nature work on his side. Beyond the slightest doubt, cattlemen had all the best of everything. It would be nice if all one had to do was cull his herds every season and sell the increase.

Joe could not let himself rest for long because the sun was shining, the ground was ready for working, and he had problems. He had bought his eighty-five acres for \$600, of which he still owed Elias Dorrance, the banker, \$400. This fall Elias would expect another payment. If Joe did not get the field plowed and planted he would have no crops to sell and therefore no money, and Elias was not noted for his willingness to wait. It was strange how things never worked out the way a man thought they would.

Joe had understood before they were married that Emma had not wanted to leave her father. Old Caleb Winthrop was a widower of uncertain temperament, gentle one hour and abusive the next. Emma had been devoted to him since her mother's death, and she had been able to forgive his harshness and his tyrannies because she deeply pitied his loneliness. She was even able to persuade Joe that old Caleb "didn't mean anything" and that "things would surely work themselves out" once they were all living together.

Joe had had his doubts, but he laid them aside, and after the wedding he gave up his small interest in a near-by farm and came to work for his father-in-law.

Things didn't "work themselves out." Joe stuck to his job for five long years, chafing all the time under the old man's constant criticism. Caleb had let it be understood that some day the farm would belong to Joe and Emma, but meanwhile it seemed as though there was nothing Joe could do right—or if he did anything right then sure as fate he'd done it at the wrong time. Emma, who'd been able to tolerate the old man's venom easily enough when it was directed against herself, suffered agonies when Caleb would start to mutter and then to shout over something Joe had done.

There had come a day when Caleb shouted at Joe a little too loud and a little too long. Emma asked Joe to step outside with her, there was something she wanted to say to him.

They walked away together toward the big tree over by the barn, and when they got there Emma turned to Joe and looked into his tired and angry eyes, and she put her hands on his arms and felt there the rapid tensing of his muscles as he clenched and unclenched his fists that were dug deep into his pockets.

"Joe," she said, "I was wrong. I should never have asked you to come here to work for Pa." The color rose up into her face. "I can't stand it when he yells at you. Something terrible happens inside of me. I—I *hate* him when he yells at you, Joe."

He took his hands out of his pockets and drew her close to him, and she put her head down on his shoulder and wept bitter tears. He moved his work-roughened hand tenderly over her soft hair, and he held her gently and rocked her a little because he felt she was trying to make a decision, a hard and painful decision, and he didn't want to influence her one way or the other.

When she quieted she talked again, blurting the words as though she had to get them out quickly—while she dared. “We can’t stay,” she said. “It’s not right the way he treats you. And he won’t change, Joe. He hates the thought of you getting his land, and he means to make you pay—not in money or work, but in other ways. Mean ways. It’s not worth it, Joe.”

A smile came over his face, and he held her away from him so she could see him and how good he felt. “I prayed to hear you say this, Emma. I’ve been wanting to leave for a long, long time, but I waited for you to come to it by yourself.” He looked at her with all the love he felt and could never quite put into words. “I couldn’t go without you, Emma, and I wouldn’t force you to come—more especially because I can’t offer you anything away from this farm. I’ll have to work as a hired man till we can get together enough to buy us some land of our own.”

Emma put her face down against his shoulder, and the words that came up were muffled. “I’ve got a confession to make, Joe. I knew you wanted to leave. I knew it a long time ago. But I was afraid to speak out against Pa. I guess I’ve always been afraid of Pa, not knowing it, thinking all the time I just respected him the way a daughter should. But hearing him yell at you, I found out something I never knew. I can get mad at Pa. I can get so mad at him that I’m not frightened at all any more. I could walk right up to Pa this minute and tell him we’ve had just about enough!”

She lifted her face then, startled by her own audacity, and said, “Want to see me do it?” And then, before he could say yes or no, she ran away from him back to the house, quick as a deer. Joe chased her, and when he came in panting through the door there she was standing in front of Caleb with her eyes blazing, and saying, loud and clear, “Pa, we’ve had just about enough!”

For eight years Joe had worked as a hired hand for other farmers. Being a menial did not trouble him at all, but he worried greatly over the fact that he was seldom able to offer his family more than the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. Within his inner soul was a deep conviction that they deserved more. A great oak could not flourish in a flower pot, and human beings could not grow as humans should if they must always be restricted.

Last year Emma had overwhelmed him by producing \$600 which, almost penny by penny, she had saved over the years. Two hundred had gone into the land and \$400 into things needed for the land: mules, cows, harness, the plow, the harrow and a host of other things which never seemed very expensive when one bought them singly but which ate up money when purchased together. Now this wasn't working out. Though a part of Joe could be perfectly in tune with what he was doing, another part resented it fiercely. Good land was for good crops, and good crops were a joy to the heart and soul. But Joe looked over what he had already plowed and seemed to see there a row of dollar bills for Elias Dorrance. He thought uneasily of the way he lived, and wondered if his sons and daughters would have to live that way too. Then this feeling faded until it was only a vague irritation, and Joe became the complete farmer.

He guided the plow down another furrow and another. It was hard and hot work, but Joe licked his lips in anticipation as he forced himself to plow one more furrow. It pleased him to work as hard as he could, and sweat as much as he could, before he indulged himself because then the indulgence was appreciated all the more. Swinging back on still another furrow, he halted the mules in their tracks and walked to a leafy sycamore that spread its green branches where the plowed field ended. He pulled a handful of wilting grass aside and revealed a brown stone jug.

For two seconds, wanting to cheat himself of no part of this, he looked at the jug. Its earthen sides were beaded with little globules of water, and as it lay in the sycamore's shade it looked inviting. Joe knelt to pick it up, and the jug was cool to his hand. He pulled the corn cob stopper and held the jug to his lips while he took great gulps of cold water. It was part of the ritual, a measure of things as they must be. A man who had never been sweat-stained from hard labor could not know the true goodness of cold water. His thirst satisfied, Joe put the jug back and covered it with grass.

The day had been hard and somewhat frustrating, but it was with a sense of loss and resentment that he noted the long shadows of early evening draping themselves over the fields. The day couldn't possibly be ended, but as soon as he knew that it was ending he felt a rising pleasure. No man had a right to rest while there was daylight in which he might work, but anybody with half a lick

of common sense knew that you couldn't work at night. When it was impossible to work, the whole time might be given to dreams, and dreams were a very important part of life, too.

Knowing very well that their day was over too, and that they were going to pasture, the mules stood meekly and made no attempt to kick as he unhitched them. Free from the plow, they stepped along as briskly as though they hadn't just finished pulling it for more than ten hours, and there was something akin to friendliness in their eyes when Joe drove them into the pasture, stripped their harness off, hung it on the upper railing, and shut the pasture gate behind him.

He turned to watch the mules frisk like a couple of colts across the green grass, then lie down and roll luxuriously in it. Not until tomorrow morning would he have to fight them into harness again, and that made him forget, in part, the trouble he had had with them today. He grinned at the mules.

There was a soft footstep beside him and Joe's oldest daughter was there. She was slim and tall, and almost startlingly beautiful. There was little resemblance to either Joe or Emma; Barbara was the re-creation of some ethereal being who had been in the family of one or the other perhaps 100 and perhaps 500 years ago. She had been one of the really awe-inspiring events in Joe's life. He was not naive and he knew the ways of nature. But when he had courted Emma he had known only that he was desperately in love with her and that he wanted her always at his side. It had simply never occurred to him that they, too, should produce children; he hadn't thought that far. When Emma told him she was pregnant he had walked around in a half daze for weeks. He hadn't really believed it until Barbara's arrival.

Joe said, "Hello, Bobby."

She said, "Hello, Dad," and she added, as though it were an afterthought, "The chores are done."

Joe frowned. At the same time, since he was tired, he knew some relief. Half the families around put their children to work in the fields as soon as they were big enough to pull weeds, but Joe had never liked the idea and he didn't hold with his womenfolk doing field work at all. Men were supposed to work the fields, but almost as soon as she was big enough to do so, Barbara had taken a hand. She liked to do things, and for all her seeming slightness she

was very strong. Just the same, even though he was relieved because he would not have to milk the cows, swill the pigs, and do all the other things that forever needed doing, Joe didn't like it. But he spoke with the gentleness that Barbara inspired in him.

"You shouldn't be doing such chores."

She smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling, and Joe thought of Emma. "I like to do them and it won't hurt me."

Because he did not know what to say, for a moment Joe said nothing. It was unreasonable because a man always had the right to tell his children what to do, but secretly he was still more than a little overawed by Barbara. Then the silence became awkward and he asked,

"Where's Tad?"

"He— He's about."

Joe frowned. It was a foregone conclusion that Tad was about because Tad, his eldest son, was always somewhere. Joe thought of his children.

After Barbara they'd waited seven years for Tad. Then Emma, Joe, Alfred, and Carlyle, had arrived in rapid succession. If Joe understood any of them he understood Tad, for the eight-year-old thought and acted a great deal like the father. A wild and restless youngster, Tad was wholeheartedly for anything he didn't have. As long as there was something he really wanted he was entirely willing to work like a horse for it.

Where the field joined the forest, a white and black dog of mixed ancestry panting into sight and stopped to look expectantly back over his shoulder. Joe stiffened, waiting for what he knew he would see now, and a moment later Tad appeared with Joe's long-barreled rifle over his shoulder and a cluster of squirrels in his hand.

Joe's anger flared. Tad loved to hunt, which was not unusual because all normal boys did. But nobody eight years old had any business running around the woods with a rifle and more than once Joe had forbidden Tad to use his. Joe's face became stormy as the youngster drew near.

"What you been doing?"

Tad stopped, every freckle on his multifreckled face registering total innocence and his eyes big with surprise. Joe fumed. The boy was like him and yet they were not alike. Never in his life had Joe

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