



William's Cup

by Betsy Randolph

Moonlight, tender and warm, pressed against my tear-streaked face as I stood in the open prairie, eyes closed—next to the mound of fresh earth covering William, my husband of nine months. The babe inside my belly would never know him. The spring's full moon couldn't soothe my heartache or stop the cascade of tears; it merely provided light wherewith to pack. The wagon master said we pull out at daybreak. He has assigned a man, a stranger, to drive my team—I've no say in the matter after my pathetic attempt to drive them yesterday.

I'll leave William in Indian Territory, buried alongside the trail like so many others. My mother was correct after all. We should have stayed in Arkansas. But William's dream was a ranch out west. My only dream was William.

While I rolled the canvas covering and stowed the long wooden poles into the wagon bed, I pictured William going under the water again. Why had he tried to save Mrs. Selinski's mangy old dog, anyway? Both perished, victims of the river's hidden current. A sob caught in my throat, burning with retched desire to escape my mouth in a barbaric scream.

"Missus Long, you ready?"

I jumped at the intrusion, turning to stare at the man assigned to drive my team, the sun breaking over the horizon. Dark hair poked out from under his hat, curling up at his collar, untamed. I nodded my head, noting his unshaven face and rumpled, filthy clothes. He leaned over and spit tobacco on the ground.

"Let's get you settled in the back then."

"I'm walking."

"No, I'd rather you ride—least 'til we get out of Indian country."

My cheeks burned as I glared at him. Who was he to tell me what to do? I won't be taking orders from a stranger. Nor any man—ever again—if I can help it.

"I said, I'm walking. Mister Hemphill appointed you to drive my team. Nothing more."

He pulled his gray felt hat off his head, running his fingers through his thick hair. He stared down at his boots and sighed, his shoulders sagging. I crossed my arms, waiting for his eyes to meet mine again. When they did, I stiffened my back, standing up straighter. My chin rose a bit as heat climbed up my neck past the ruffled collar of my blouse. A boiling pot—bubbling, churning. "You've not even told me your name, yet you stand here ordering me around?"

His eyes flashed, his mouth parted as he started to speak, but then he pressed his lips together. He cast a quick glance at a nearby wagon. They were packed, mounted, and awaiting orders to move out. He turned back to me, offering a weak, lopsided smile.

"Name's John. John Bilberry. At your service, Missus Long."

He dipped his head—as if bowing to the queen. Flames of fury flared inside me—yet I bit my tongue. Seconds passed as I regained my composure, clenching my teeth the whole while.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mister Bilberry. Now, if you'll excuse me. I'll fetch my bonnet so we may be underway."

I turned back to the wagon, pulling out my bonnet and canteen, then tied the canvas flap. Without another word, he crammed his hat back on his head, spun on his heel, and strode to the front of my wagon. He climbed on and settled himself on its hard wooden bench. I had folded and stored our quilt, figuring whoever drove my team would bring their own. But from the looks of Mr. Bilberry's bony horse—secured to the back of my wagon—he was not in possession of much. Still, I've not a mind to see to the comforts of a brash man who seems to lack basic manners.

The wagon master loped his horse up and down the line, cupping his hands around his mouth shouting,

"Wagons, move out!" He pointed toward the west and we were underway.

I settled into a comfortable pace, walking alongside the wagon, well out of range of the filthy red dust coating everything. With canteen slung across my body, I stooped down ever so often to pick up sticks for our evening fire.

Last week, the wagon master collected a toll of one dollar, or something of equal value, from each of the eighteen wagons in our wagon train to trade with the Cherokee as we crossed their land. Last evening, as I watched the most brilliant sunset of oranges fading to reds just at the horizon—my whole body ached for my beloved William. I sobbed, crying until my eyes hurt. Just then, the wagon master approached. He stopped walking when he saw me crying, crimson dust settling around his boots. He turned, as if to leave. Embarrassed, I wiped my eyes. "It's quite all right, Mister Hemphill. Do come on."

He pulled his hat from his head, smoothing his thinning hair to one side.

"Beggin' your pardon, Missus Long. Just need to collect the Choctaw toll."

"Choctaw toll? Why, I didn't know..."

"Yes'm, it's one dollar, or something of equal value. They're fair, like the Cherokee. We trade all sorts of goods with them and in return we're assured safe passage through the territory. This is a fairly new route from Fort Smith to Santa Fe, but it's the safest one by far."

My handkerchief was giving me fits, catching on a cuff button as I attempted to stow it back in the sleeve of my dress. "One moment, if you please." I gave up and hurried to the back of the wagon and climbed in, looking around for something to give him. I didn't have any possessions I wished to part with. In the bottom of my trunk, I'd stored our funds and important papers. I opened it, grabbing William's draw-string pocket bag. I withdrew a single silver dollar, pulling the leather string tight to close the bag, storing it back in my trunk.

As I climbed out of the wagon bed, Mr. Hemphill was squatting next to the rear wheel, running his hand over it and shaking his head. I peered over his shoulder.

"Everything all right?"

He stood and nodded his head. "Yes, ma'am. Just inspecting your wheel here. Might be a tad loose. I believe it'll hold for the time being though."

"Thank you for your assistance. Here you are." I handed him the coin.

He nodded and used his hat, motioning off to his left.

"Speakin' of assistance..."

My teeth ground together, my anger blazed within—anticipating another of his lectures about me—a single woman, alone on the trail needing a man. He had all but proposed to me before my William was even cold in the ground. I crossed my arms, waiting.

He had no idea what I was capable of. I hadn't needed William. I wanted him.

Mr. Hemphill shifted his weight from one dusty boot to the other.

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"Missus Long, I know you have strong feelings on the matter, can't say I blame you, but having someone to help you ain't a bad thing. This feller I got for you could use your help as well—lost his wife and little girl in a Comanche raid. Seemed fittin' for you two to partner up."

Words—sharp as swords—held at bay behind my tightly closed lips, beat against the back sides of my teeth. A nod of my head was all I could safely muster. At that, Mr. Hemphill turned and left me to my anger and unwielded words.

Although I felt pity at his loss, I was still stuck with a pig-headed man who lacked decorum and any sense of proper personal hygiene.

As I tossed my armful of sticks into the leather sling attached to the underside of my wagon—which William had called a 'possum belly'—making me laugh every time he said it, I wondered about this man driving my oxen. Mr. John Bilberry. Who was he, really? Where was he from? What exactly had happened to his family? We appeared to be about the same age—late twenties, maybe he was a bit older than me. I'd caught his profile earlier while walking alongside the wagon and acknowledged his striking features—bad manners notwithstanding—square jaw, thick neck, straight nose. I'd turned away when he caught me staring at him.

"You wanting to ride a piece?"

"No, thank you." I kept walking but slowed my pace. As my wagon, with all my earthly possessions inside, pulled

away from me, I contemplated my fate. Would I return to Arkansas or go on to Santa Fe as William wished? He'd travelled there alone last year and purchased a large parcel of land, contracting with local men to build us a ranch house. Still, I had options. I could sell out and return to Arkansas. Maybe resume my medical studies. I wasn't but a year away from completion. Medicine and doctoring people came easy to me. Back East I could set up a practice if I wished—there, the notion of women doctors wasn't absurd. William hadn't allowed me to attend once we were married. He said I was wasting 'valuable time and precious money' at the university. One thing was for certain; I wasn't bound by anything or anyone any longer.

We stopped for the night just shy of the Texas Panhandle and set up camp. The grass was scarce, water more so. If I hadn't collected twigs, branches, and cowpies along the way—we'd likely not have had a fire—I'd only made that mistake once since joining the wagon train.

Mr. Bilberry was attaching a feed bag to his horse's head after caring for my oxen. He tipped his head back, sipping what I can only assume was whiskey from a silver flask. He nodded when I said supper was ready. Partnering up with him meant I was to prepare the meals and he was to handle everything to do with the wagon, the oxen, and their provisions.

Our meal consisted of chopped salt pork in pinto beans seasoned with a touch of coriander powder, and flap jacks with clover honey. Mr. Bilberry removed his hat and stood across the fire from me as I dished him up a plate. Our eyes met as I held his food out to him.

"Thank you, Missus Long."

Caramel-colored eyes held my blue ones for a heartbeat—then two. Something akin to pain or sorrow hid there in his eyes, showing itself for the briefest moment.

"You're welcome. Thank you for your assistance with the oxen, they're onery at times."

His lips pulled into a slight smile as he settled himself on William's folding chair. I held William's enamel tin cup out to him and our eyes met again. "Coffee?"

His eyes stayed steady on mine. "Yes, thank you."

There—that look—what was that? Agony? Maybe he suffered a malady. The wagon train lost an entire family to cholera two weeks ago. I'd not heard the family was ill until it was too late. I took careful stock of him.

"Is something amiss? Are you unwell?"

His coloring was good. He wasn't pale nor flushed. Still....

"No. I'm fine. Quite fine. Thank you."

Our fingertips touched as I handed him William's cup and I couldn't let go fast enough. Lightning shot up my arm. A buzz tickled my right ear. He sipped his coffee not meeting my eyes again. As I ladled beans onto my plate, my hand shook. What just happened? Coffee, the most likely culprit. I'd had too much. Oftentimes it does me that way. I dismissed all other notions as I smoothed my skirt and sat, plate on lap, coffee cup within reach—suddenly too weary to eat.

The scraping of Mr. Bilberry's spoon against the tin plate and the occasional pop of burning firewood filled the silence between us. My feet, quite fatigued, ached for a hot soak in Epsom salt. A small sigh escaped my lips. Hungry or not, I had no choice but to eat—seeing I was carrying a little life inside me. My appetite returned a bit as I chewed a spoonful of beans. They needed more salt. Without meaning to, my eyes drifted over to Mr. Bilberry. He stood and walked to the pot I'd moved off the coals.

"Mind if I help myself?"

Broad shoulders, thin waist—he appeared in good health, chewing tobacco and whiskey aside. I nodded my head.

"Please do."

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You're welcome. Thank you for your assistance with the oxen, they're onery at times.

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He tapped the ladle against his plate, ensuring every chunk of pork, every bean transferred over. He looked up, likely feeling the weight of my eyes on him. "It's delicious."

I chewed my food, nodding my thanks. Using my spoon, I cut a honey-covered bite of pancake from the stack on my plate. "Mister Bilberry, when did you join our wagon train? I'd not seen you before yesterday."

He studied me as he resumed his seat, his fingers wrapping around William's cup. "Hired on yesterday—wagon master rode over to Fort Reno, said he needed someone experienced with driving oxen." He hadn't looked at me while speaking—he'd been kind in that regard—seeing I'd so poorly managed driving my team, nearly crashing into another wagon when I failed to get them to stop. Reevaluating my earlier assessment of his character, I acknowledged that he'd been mannerly in his dealings with me all day.

The sound of gunfire interrupted my thoughts—two

loud shots off to our left.

Mr. Bilberry, dropping his plate and spoon on the ground, ran for his still saddled horse. He pulled his rifle from the scabbard, moving toward the sounds of the gunfire as I ran to hide behind the wagon.

Several tense moments passed with no other shots echoing across the vast plains. The incessant wind beat against the wagon canvas—an-out-of-rhythm drummer—drumming furiously.

Long shadows cast by the firelight, flickered fear and then, movement—a form—approaching. Unease roosted in my belly. My hands instinctually covered my child as I prayed for God to protect us.

“It’s just me. John. Uhh... Mister Bilberry.” He slid his rifle back in the saddle scabbard as I stood from behind the wagon wheel. His eyes dropped to my stomach, my hands still covering my womb. A look crossed his face then—one I couldn’t quite place. I slid my hands over my skirt using my fingers to straighten the seam, smoothing unrelenting wrinkles. Mr. Bilberry stood with his arms loose at his sides looking as if someone had punched him in the gut.

“You’ll likely not appreciate what I say next, Missus Long, but I hope you hear me out.”

In an instant, my dander was up. Grabbing fistfuls of my long skirt, I lifted the hemline out of the dirt and hurried back toward the fire. “What of the gunshots?” I said over my shoulder.

He hurried to catch up to me. “Rattlesnake.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“Just the sidewinder.”

Neither speaking, we stood fireside across from each other—the heat of the day gone. He opened his mouth to say something, so I turned, stooping to pick up his discarded plate and spoon. I filled a pot with water for washing and set it on the hot coals.

What he was doing, I cannot say. I’d turned my back on him as I collected all the dishes and utensils. Using my apron to cover the iron handle, I grabbed the pot before it boiled over, placing it on a knee-high stump. Baking soda would scrub everything clean. More liberal with it than I should have been, I dumped a dollop into the water. When I could tolerate the temperature, I dunked my hands in, working up a sweat and a good ole mad—dreading whatever it was Mr. Bilberry wished to say to me.

He watched me work from his perch—William’s camping chair. At the very thought, heat rose up my neck. He might drink from William’s cup and sit in William’s chair but he could never, would never take William’s place.

How many more days would I have to endure this man? I carried the clean dishes and pots to the wagon and climbed in. Slamming the tin plates and cups back into the wooden crate they travelled in, I released my fury on my few remaining belongings—which only served to infuriate me further.

Mr. Bilberry called out to me, “Missus Long, will you please come sit a spell? I wish to speak with you before we turn in.”

Before climbing back out of the wagon, I grabbed my shawl and wrapped it around my shoulders. When I walked back to the fire, I did so under duress. It was well past time to retire and I was exhausted and irritable. “Yes? What is it?”

He pointed toward my chair.

“Please, sit.”

But I refused, wrapping my shawl tighter around my shoulders. I stared him dead in the face, daring him to issue me my next orders.

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, picked up a stick, and tossed it into the fire. He brought his eyes up to mine. There it was again—that look. It pinned me in place, weakening my angry composure. I sat down in my chair, staring at him the whole while. Shadows from the firelight emphasized his square jaw and softened his features until his lips pressed tightly together—a line chiseled in granite. He kicked at a glowing ember that popped out of the fire near his boot.

“Thought we might get to know each other a bit.”

Suspicious, I leaned back in my chair, looking at him from the corner of my eye.

“Earlier, you said I might not like what you had to say. So, tell me plain. It’s late and I am spent—you’ll recall I walked twelve or so miles today.”

He sighed, dropping his eyes to the fire. Dancing flames of orange, red, and yellow flickered between the black, charred wood. He poked at the fire with a long stick, a forlorn look crossing his face. Sad. Boyish, almost. His persona tempering my anger. I sighed and softened my tone. “Please, Mister Bilberry. Do go on. Whatever it is, I’ll hear you out.”

His eyes lifted to mine again—such intensity there—hot caramel.

“Seeing that you’re with child, we should marry. I’ll be a good father to your....”

Whatever else he had to say—he would say to the wind. I jumped up and without so much as a “good night,” marched to my wagon and climbed in.

Oh, the nerve of that man!

The next morning, he had the fire blazing, water boiling, ham slices sizzling before I'd even climbed back out of the wagon. He'd shaved his face and combed his hair, parting the dark curls on one side, slicking them down against his head. Our eyes met as I approached.

He greeted me with a smile free of chewing tobacco. "Good morning." He poured water into the wash basin he'd placed on a wooden stump. "Let that cool a bit first. I can carry it to the wagon for you, if you'd like some privacy while you freshen up."

Stunned, I stood like a statue, trying to make sense of what I was seeing and hearing. When I could speak, I did so with utmost care. "No, thank you. Here is fine." My feet seemed to shuffle unwillingly toward the makeshift wash stand. Dipping my fingers into the water and yanking them

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Who was this warm—open—honest man holding William's cup? Appraising me, approving of me, wanting me. No man had ever looked at me like that—had made me feel like... that.

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right back out.

Mr. Bilberry moved my skillet atop orange coals, sprinkling water in as it heated. When the water danced across its seasoned surface, he cracked eggs and dropped them in. He used his chin to point to the wagon nearest us. "How do you take your eggs? Procured these from Missus O'Neal."

Fresh eggs? I'd not had any for weeks.

He looked up from the skillet. "You better say soon or..."

"Scrambled."

"Give me a few minutes and I'll have you some breakfast."

He smiled then. A genuine smile. Deep dimples pierced both cheeks, changing his face entirely. More than striking, Mr. Bilberry's features were... handsome. The realization brought heat to my cheeks. I dropped my eyes to the wash basin, dunking my hands in and splashed the too-hot water on my face to cover my embarrassment.

After drying my hands and face, I stood warming by the fire. "How can I help?"

"Everything's done. Want some coffee?"

"I can get it."

"No, I will. Sit down. Please."

No man had ever waited on me before. Certainly not William. Perish the thought!

I wasn't quite sure how I should feel or behave, but I did as he requested, smoothing my skirt behind my thighs before settling on my folding chair. He poured coffee into my tin cup, vapors rising from its surface as he carried it to me. Steam wafted between our faces as he leaned down and handed me the cup. Our fingers touched at the exchange and our eyes met. Lightning flashed, caramelizing something deep within me. A shudder, from the base of my skull and flowing downward in waves, reverberated over my entire body. Down down down.

Somehow, I recovered my composure by the time he dished up my scrambled eggs and ham. He handed me my plate; eyes fixed on mine.

He knew.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind. He knew the effect he had on me.

I forked eggs into my mouth not expecting much yet quickly admitted his cooking abilities. The eggs were perfection—fluffy, flavorful. I looked up from my plate to see him staring at me.

"Is it edible?" He scraped eggs out onto his plate, looking at me again while awaiting my answer.

"More than edible."

All was quiet for a moment. I used my apron to wipe my mouth while I stared across the fire at this bizarre stranger, my new partner. When he looked up from his plate, our eyes locked. His eyebrows raised, eyes large and searching, pleading. "Forgive me for last night."

Who was this warm—open—honest man holding William's cup? Appraising me, approving of me, wanting me. No man had ever looked at me like that—had made me feel like... that.

"There's nothing to forgive. While your proposal may make sense to you and others, it serves only to further insult my sensibilities." I placed a hand on my belly. "I've a plan for our future formulating in my mind. And while I can't discount that you'll be a part of it, I can't say how. Hope that's enough, for now."

He chuckled, lavishing me with another of his smiles—the corners of his eyes crinkling, lips pulling up at both corners. And those dimples!

He nodded his head. "Yes, ma'am. It is."

He gathered our dishes and placed them into a pot of hot water. Not waiting for me to offer to wash, he rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows and sunk his large hands in, washing.

Wait! Were we changing roles? I allowed my lips the unaccustomed movement of pulling up at the corners as I pointed to the washed, tin cup William used to drink from.

"Mister Bilberry, does this mean I'm driving the oxen today?"

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Retired law enforcement officer and US Army veteran, Betsy Randolph, lives and writes near Guthrie, Oklahoma. Her published work includes: *The Oklahoma Gazette*, *Wood's Reader Magazine*, *Southern Literary Journal*, among others. Betsy is the author of three novels and two middle-grade readers.