

OUT THERE ON THE PLAINS

By

Robert A. Egbert



William Jacob Strong?  
Alice Fish Bury Walsh  
\* William Walsh?

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The spirit of gathering with the Saints in Zion was filling the hearts of the Saints in Europe. What was this spirit? It was an undefinable, intangible something. However, it was an irresistible force. People would work almost night and day and save in every conceivable way to get enough money for the trip to Zion.

This spirit found root in the heart of a man, William, and of his wife, Alice, who were the parents of three young children. When the spirit first entered their hearts they put it aside, for why should they leave their home in a pleasant valley in England to face a long and dangerous journey across the ocean and into the wilds of western America. Their friends and relatives had not joined the Church so they would be left behind. Soon the spirit came again, and this time it came with added force. They tried to put it off again, but it would not leave. Finally Alice said, "Will, let's emigrate to Zion. I can't explain what it is, but something just seems to urge me on."

They disposed of their property for what they could get, bade farewell to their loved ones and their native land, and left Liverpool in the little sailing vessel "Horizon" May 25, 1856.

How gracious the allwise creator is in not permitting us to look into the future. If we could see the end from the beginning we would shrink many times from entering upon those experiences which prove to be the tempering fires of our souls.

As the sturdy little "Horizon" left her dock that spring morning her white sails flapped in the breeze, a few, fleecy, white, clouds floated lazily across the sky, and the sun shone brightly upon the city and the wide expanse of deep blue water. On the deck, among many others, stood that courageous, young mother, Alice. Her head was bared revealing a mass of black hair; her clear blue eyes were filled with tears. Whether they were tears of sorrow at leaving "her own, her native land" whose shoreline was now gradually receding from view, or whether they were tears of joy which came as a result of her having answered that irresistible call (come to Zion), I shall not attempt to say. She held her baby in her arms and her other two children, (Robert) and (John), clung to her skirts of homespun. Her husband, a man about thirty years of age, bronzed and hardened by the long hours of toil, stood by her side. He put his arm around her waist; they took one last, fond look at the land which had been theirs, and then turned their faces to the West. As they did so a new light seemed to shine upon their countenances. The joy they felt seemed to radiate from them. "Will", she said, "Will, we are on our way to Zion!" He gave her hand a squeeze and they descended light-heartedly to their quarters.



During the first week all went well. The winds were favorable so that it looked as if the ship would make a record trip. The Saints on board were cheered with the idea that they would reach Iowa City, Iowa, which was the western terminus of the railroad, in time to get an early start across the plains with a wagon train. Everyone seemed to catch the spirit of cheerfulness. They joined in singing songs and chatting about their joyful expectations. Alice crooned lullabies to her baby in time to the lazy rolling of the vessel. And then after the baby would drop off to sleep the patient mother would tell her two little boys many-times-told stories, which had been brought to England by the missionaries, of the Indians, the long journey across the plains, and the rugged, snow-capped mountains.

Early in the afternoon of the eighth day at sea clouds commenced to lower in the sky out in the West. The wind, which had been carrying them steadily on their way, lulled and then ceased entirely. For a time there prevailed only an ominous stillness. Soon a breeze sprang up from the West; the clouds lowered and blackened, and vivid flashes of lightning streaked their way across the sky. The breeze quickened and soon increasing to a wind. The sea became choppy. The Captain ordered all passengers below and all hands on deck. Sails were rapidly lowered and everything made ready for the storm which soon burst upon them in all its fury. The little vessel seemed to be a mere plaything in that angry sea. It would float astride a mountainous wave for a second, and then dash forward into an awful chasm only to be tossed playfully to the shoulders of the next onrushing wave. For hours the storm raged, and it drove the ship, not towards America and Zion, but back towards the shores of England.

No one slept through the awful blackness of that night. Anxious hearts waited for the coming of the dawn--waited perhaps to be dashed upon some hidden rocks, or to be swallowed up by a mountainous wave. Alice and her husband clung to their children to prevent the little ones from being pitched from their bunks. As the hours dragged by and the feeling of fear became more tense in the hearts of all the helpless Saints on board, Alice began to sing: "Come, Come Ye Saints". Will joined her. Soon those within hearing began to join in until all were singing heartily. The feeling of tenseness was relieved. As they came to the words: "And should we die before our journey's through" Alice started. The true meaning of these words had never seemed the same to her before. She quickly collected herself, however, and helped finish the song.

Finally, dawn came, and with it came an abatement of the fury of the storm, but still the wind blew. Day after day it blew. Some days it would lull enough the ship to make some progress but on others it was actually driven back.



After several weeks of helpless drifting the measles broke out among the children on board. The three children of Will and Alice contracted the disease. The two youngest soon recovered but the oldest, Robert, who was six years of age, was not able to combat the disease so successfully. He became very much weakened by the measles and then pneumonia developed. For days he lingered, with his mother remaining constantly at his side ministering unto him the remedies then known and the ones she was able to procure under the conditions. The crisis of the disease was reached and passed and he began slowly to recover. His mother still watched over him tenderly as only a mother can but it was done with a price; for she soon became very ill. Since she was already weakened by her long and faithful nursing of her little son, it became a struggle indeed for her to overcome her prolonged illness. The burden of nursing now fell doubly heavy upon her faithful husband. For weeks while Alice was struggling between life and death Will spent almost the entire time night and day taking care of her and the children. When finally she recovered enough to sit up what a different looking person she was from the one who stood on the deck as the ship left Liverpool. Her face was now wasted and drawn; her eyes were sunken and she was so weak.

Days wore into weeks and still they were far at sea. They must reach America soon, for if they didn't it meant either staying in the East all winter with the idea of starvation confronting them, or taking a late trip across the plains with the thoughts of winter coming upon them before they reached their destination.

Finally on July 4, after six weeks of tossing about upon the stormy Atlantic they landed in Boston Harbor and from here they departed as rapidly as it was possible to procure transportation for Iowa City. Alice and Robert were quite rapidly regaining their health, but still they required a great deal of attention which the husband and father willingly gave.

Upon their arrival at Iowa City it was found that they were too late to join a wagon train that year. A council was held and it was decided that the Saints, then gathered at that point, numbering about six hundred would build hand carts and make a start as early as possible.

Everyone entered with vim into the work of building the handcarts and making final preparations. People sang at their work; they exchanged bits of wit and sarcasm good naturedly, and that atmosphere of cheerfulness and hopeful anticipation, which had been partially destroyed, at least, by the terrible ocean voyage, was revived throughout the camp to a very high degree. In order to accustom themselves to walking in preparation for the long trek across the plains, and also to gain strength Alice and her children spend considerable time in walking about through the camp. Will worked from daybreak until dark making a handcart.



The handcarts were made as light as possible, one of them weighing only about fifteen pounds. The two wheels were set far enough apart to permit them to follow the tracks of wagons. The tires were made of heavy sheet-iron and riveted to the fellows. The carts had no tongues, but the strips of wood bolted to the axles upon which the box rested extended far enough in front so that a crosspiece could be fastened to the ends leaving room for a person to walk between it and the cart. Thus those who pulled got into this space.

At last all the handcarts were completed and the company started westward on July 28. The company consisted of five hundred seventy-six persons, 146 handcarts, seven wagons, 30 oxen, and fifty cows and beef cattle. The first lap of their journey from Iowa City, Iowa, to Florence, Nebraska was over a sparsely settled country and here they learned many lessons regarding their mode of travel which were valuable to them later when they were hundreds of miles from civilization.

The real strenuous part of their journey began when they left Florence August 25. They toiled steadily on day after day. They would be strung out for over a mile along the dusty road which had been traversed by thousands of Oregon immigrants as well as Mormon pioneers. Usually the husband would pull while the wife would push. Children, who were too small to walk, were placed on the handcarts. This made it doubly hard for Will because Alice was still too weak to help much by pushing and also too weak to carry the baby. He went on uncomplainingly, however. The ceaseless toil was fatiguing. In spite of the fact that the daily ration of one pound of flour for each adult was not reduced during the first six weeks, everyone was hungry. When Fort Laramie was reached they exchanged their watches and other valuables for provisions.

Soon after leaving Fort Laramie it was found necessary to cut the daily ration of flour to three-fourths of a pound, later to one half, and still later to something less. This soon caused suffering. All members of the company began to show that pinched or drawn expression of undernourished individuals. The weaker ones commenced to fall victims of the terrible strain. Shallow graves were dug by the fast-weakening loved ones who remained. The dead were buried with very little ceremony other than a prayer, and the tears of their loved ones to consecrate the burial ground.

In spite of their hardships and sorrows they would enliven the time around their campfires by conversation and singing. The chorus of one of their songs ran thus: "For some must push and some must pull, As we go marching up the hill, and merrily on the way we go, Until we reach the Valley, O."



While the company was toiling up the road which paralleled the Platte River, Robert, the oldest child of Will and Alice became seriously ill. He had not entirely regained his strength after his sickness while crossing the ocean. Now this terrible ordeal was too much for him. He was placed on the handcart and made as comfortable as possible. That night it was Will's duty to stand guard, a duty which was necessary to prevent depredations by the Indians. This left the mother alone to take care of her sick boy. All night long she watched over him as the fevered little fellow tossed about. She did what she could to relieve him and ministered the few meager remedies in her possession in an attempt to stave off the hand of death. As the father returned from guard duty at the coming of dawn he anxiously entered the tent. He found his wife weeping softly over the lifeless body of their boy. Alice looked up as her husband entered the tent and without any trace of bitterness in her voice sobbed: "God moves in a mysterious way, His purposes to obtain."

October was passing quickly and still that brave company was hundreds of miles from its destination. The nights became colder as the company ascended to higher elevations. A continental divide lay before them. There were high mountains and rugged canyons for them to traverse. So they struggled desperately on.

They left the Platte at its junction with the Sweetwater River and followed up the course of the latter. What a desolate region it was. A few trees were scattered along the banks of the river, and a scanty growth of grass extended for perhaps a quarter of a mile on each side. Beyond this section of grass many hills rose, whose surfaces have been carved into fantastic shapes and figures by the erosion of winds. There was no vegetation here except a scanty growth of greasewood. The bleakness of the country was appalling enough during fair weather, but now as indications of a storm multiplied, who can blame them if the hearts of that brave little company quailed somewhat.

One morning the wind started blowing harder than ever. Mist-like clouds commenced to form in the sky. Before the middle of the afternoon the sun was entirely hidden. Several packs of wolves had been noticed following the company throughout the day evidently intending to satisfy their hunger upon some straggling victim.

As the tents were pitched at dark that night the air was bitterly cold. There was very little wood to procure, so as soon as the scanty meal had been cooked and eaten those ragged, tired, and starving immigrants went to their tents and beds in a vain attempt to keep warm. The wind, which had been blowing all day seemed to increase. From every side came that most dismal and mournful of all night sounds, the howl of wolves.



Alice and Will snuggled their two remaining children between them to keep the little ones from freezing and then let their hearts wander simultaneously back down that trail of the Sweetwater, then down the Platte. At a little spot on the Platte they stopped a moment, for here lay their first-born, the one upon whom they had placed their fondest hopes. Alice choked back a sob. They then wandered on back over the plains of Nebraska, where the grass had been plentiful and where herds of buffalo roamed. On and on they went across Iowa, the railroad trip from Boston, the ocean voyage and finally to their former home. "Are you sorry you left there, Alice?" asked Will.

"No", she replied, "if I had it to do over again I would do the same thing. I feel that the Lord has a mission for us to perform. Our number may be broken again before we reach the Valley, but still we must go on." Will knew in his heart that this last remark was true and he knew who would be taken, but in order to save his wife from any unnecessary pain or anxiety he kept the truth to himself.

A cold, moist spray commenced to fall on their faces. What was it? How they shuddered as the truth dawned upon them. Snow was falling and the wind was whipping it under the edges of the tent. They pulled the bedding over their heads, and finally from sheer exhaustion they shivered off to sleep.

The prospects were very gloomy as the company commenced to break camp at daylight the following morning. The snow was six inches deep and still more falling. The wet, frozen tents were placed on the wagons; the partially wet bedding and meager personal belongings placed on the handcarts; and the ragged party commenced staggering forward. The tracks which were made by the first ones to start were filled by the drifting snow almost as soon as they were made and because of this fact the handcarts were doubly hard to pull. Alice and Will placed their two little tots on the handcart, covered them as well as they could to prevent them from freezing and then started forward. He pulled and she pushed. How hard it was! Their hands and feet became numbed with the cold. They had no gloves nor mittens, and their shoes were filled with holes. Onward they toiled. It now had become a race with death. The struggle through the snow was hard enough, but during the day they met another obstacle.

The river must be crossed. They shrank from the thought, for while it was not very deep, it was quite wide and the icy water was filled with mush ice. Alice tied her ragged skirts up, as the other women were doing, and she and Will stepped bravely into the stream. The icy water gnawed at their legs, but these conquering pioneers finally got across. How they suffered during the rest of that day would be difficult to contemplate. Unless one has experienced a Wyoming blizzard he shouldn't even try to imagine. Their wet clothes froze as the bitter, cold wind pierced them to the marrow. The wolves became more daring and now skulked along quite close. The snow which had fallen steadily all day was about ten inches deep by night. How much more could those poor souls suffer? Fifty-six of their number had died since the company had left the Platte.



That night it was Will's turn to stand guard again. He didn't say how hard it was for him to leave his little family, but his mind went back to that other night on the Platte. Alice knew what a terrible ordeal was ahead of him to stand through that bitter night, so she gave him her ration. At first he would not eat it, but she insisted and told him she was not well enough to eat anything. After the scanty supper which seemed only to make the hunger pains gnaw more severely, Will tenderly fondled his two children as they huddled around the fire. The little ones soon became warm enough to drop off to sleep and were put to bed by their parents. But what a bed! The snow had been shoveled away from a space large enough for a bed. The tent was so frozen it was laid flat on the ground and the bed arranged on one edge of it in a position to allow the other edge to be folded over the top. Will took a last fond look, kissed each one tenderly, and pulled the covers protectively over them. Alice clung to him a moment. "You are the bravest little woman in the world," he said. He kissed her, picked up his gun, and disappeared into the darkness. Alice sat by the fire a few minutes, and then with hunger pains gnawing at her stomach, and cramps darting up her chilled arms and legs she went to bed.

Sleep did not come to her soon, and when it did, it was what is called troubled sleep. Just before daylight she awoke with a start. A tense feeling clutched at her heart. Something had happened. She anxiously reached her hand out and felt each child. They were both breathing naturally. How anxiously she waited for daylight, and how anxiously she waited for Will. Finally daylight came, but Will didn't. She hurriedly told the Captain, a search was made and Will was soon found. He had stood guard for the last time, but he had done his duty. He had frozen to death while attempting to protect those dependent upon him.

That morning as Alice stood beside a large grave, with her baby in her arms and little four-year-old John clinging to her side, her heart was torn almost to shreds, for that grave was the resting place, not only of Will, but also of eleven of his companions who had died that night. What was there in store for her now? Of all trying days of her life this day was perhaps the most trying. It is hard to lose a father or a mother; it is hard to lose a child, one's own flesh and blood, but the hardest blow of all is to lose a true and faithful husband or wife. She faltered for a moment as she whispered in the anguish of her soul: "Why didn't I die while on the ship? Or why didn't the ship sink and save all this suffering?" She faltered for only a moment though, for as she looked into the emaciated little faces of her children a new resolve filled her noble heart. She whispered to her little ones. "I'll cling on to the end. We must reach Zion." She uttered a silent prayer for help, and then turned to the tasks before her.



She put her children on the handcart and took her place in that poor struggling group. The company was strung out for several miles. It had stopped snowing, but it was very cold so that the suffering from this source was still intense. Many dropped behind as the day wore on. Alice tugged at that handcart with all her might, but what a difficult task it was through that deep snow. She finally dropped from sheer exhaustion. As soon as she had revived enough to rise to her feet she tried again but the handcart would not move. Her babies cried from hunger and cold, but she could do nothing more for them. She had gone to the end of the rope. She staggered back to them, put herself in position so that her body would protect them from the bitter wind, and waited for the end.

The next thing she knew severe pains were shooting through her feet and someone was vigorously rubbing her hands. "Where am I?" she asked as she opened her eyes.

"You're all right," a strong vigorous man replied, "just drink this cup of hot tea and you will soon feel better."

"Yes, but the handcarts—why this is a wagon. Where are my babies?" asked Alice bewildered.

"They are right back there asleep." answered the man pointing to the back of the wagon.

"Who are you", asked Alice still bewildered.

"I am just one of the members of a relief train from the Valley." he answered. "Your feet were frozen so that I had to cut your shoes to get them off. If you will keep your feet in the snow which I now have them in the frost will be drawn out and they will soon be all right. You and your children can ride in this wagon until you are able to walk again. Others will have to ride too, so that it may be crowded at times. The storm has cleared, so that if we don't have any accidents we shall get to the Valley in about two weeks."

Alice drank the tea, and then she weakly sang "Come, Come Ye Saints". As she came to the words "But if our lives are spared again, to see the Saints their rest obtain" her eyes filled with tears of gratitude for she realized that that inevitable call (come to Zion) would soon be answered.