

“Ellen’s Confession” from *Settlers on the Marsh* by Phillip Grove

He found her at the house, preparing breakfast.

"Come in," she said when she saw him at the door.

"Sigurdson is dead," Niels said slowly.

She looked at him with wide, haggard eyes.

He straightened. "He's dead. Let that go. I am alive. I want to speak about myself."

"Niels," Ellen pleaded, "I sent you away last night. I am not going to put you off again if you insist. But had we not better wait?"

"No. I have got to know. I have to get this clear. I am quiet. There is no use in waiting."

"Very well," she acquiesced. "Sit down. I shall listen."

"Ellen," he broke out, "there's a house on my place, the best-built, roomiest house for many miles around. In it there are things that I've bought through these years and which I've never used. There's a sewing machine; there's a washing machine; there are curtains, packed away; there are parcels with towels, bed-linen, table-cloths, and what not. Do you know for whom that house was built, for whom those things were bought?"

"I know," she said, smiling sadly. "I have feared it ever . . . ever since I saw the house."

"Feared it?" he repeated . . . "Ellen, when I filed on that homestead, I did so because it was near to you. When I fenced it, I drove your name into the ground as the future owner with every post. When I cleared my field, I did it for you. When I dug the cellar of the house, I laid it out so it would save you work. When I planned the kitchen and the dining room, I thought of nothing but saving you steps. When I bought the lumber, I felt I was taking home presents for you. Whenever I came driving over the Marsh, I saw you standing at the gate to welcome me. When I laid out the kitchen garden, I thought of you bringing in the greens. Ellen, no matter what I have done during these years, it was done with you in mind."

An infinitely soft expression had come into the face of the girl; slowly she reached out with her hand and laid it on his where it was resting on the table that stood between them.

"Yes," she said. "All that I know, Niels. At least I often thought so. I could not help it. What was I to do? I always feared that one day I was going to give you pain. Yet I hoped you would understand . . ."

"Understand?" he repeated. "Understand what?"

"That between me and any man there can be but friendship."

"Friendship?" he echoed dully.

"Yes. You know I was lonesome. You know how lonesome I was. There were plenty who were willing to make me feel less lonesome. They wanted marriage. Long ago there were plenty of them. Your very friend Nelson had been among them. I turned all of them away, harshly, so that a few weeks after my father's death I was the most lonesome woman in the district. You came. I did not turn you away. I liked you. I had liked you from the day when I first met you. I was fond of you. I am fond of you. As of a brother. I would not do anything that might hurt you if I could help myself. You must feel that. Don't you, Niels?"--Her voice was as full of passionate pleading as his had been.

"Yes, but . . ." And in helpless non-comprehension he shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, it is so hard to explain," Ellen exclaimed. "Niels, I do not want to lose you. I am fighting for you with all my strength. I know a farmer needs a woman on the place. Take me as a sister. Marry another woman. But let us remain what we are!"

"Another woman . . ."

"Yes, Niels, you are thirty. You cannot but have seen other women. Surely you have sometimes thought of others but myself! Surely there are plenty of girls in the world; there are some in this settlement that will gladly be your handmaiden, that will jump at the chance of becoming the wife of a man like you."

Niels sat and brooded. He tried to follow her thought. He even tried to visualise a fulfilment of what she suggested. His vision was a blank. He shook his head.

"Ellen," he said, "before your father died, before I had filed on my claim, when I was living with Nelson, up in the bush, in winter, in the little shack he had; when I was

fresh from the squalour and poverty of the old country--then I used to dream of a place of my own, with a comfortable house, with a living room and a roaring fire in the stove, and a good, bright lamp burning overhead, of an evening. I was sitting with a woman, my wife, in the light of that lamp, when the nightly chores were done; and we were listening to the children's feet on the floor above as they went to bed; and we were looking and smiling at each other. Ellen, always then, in that dream, the woman was you . . . At other times, when I was thinking of my mother . . . How, even when my father was still living, she had to slave away, all day, getting wood, getting water, and taking in washing to pay for the children's clothes--for my father was just a labourer, hiring out from sun to sun; his wages were low, not more than ten, twelve dollars a month the year around; and there were six children to feed . . . And when my father died, she had to go herself, for little wages; and some of her employers were mean to her; but others gave her a pot of beans, or the bones of a roast in addition to her wages--a Krone, a quarter, a day--to take home . . . I still fumed and raged at it in retrospection . . . And I vowed to myself that no wife of mine should ever have to work as she had done. That was why I had come to this country. And when I thought of how I would rather slave and work my fingers to the bone than let my wife, the mother of my children, do one single thing beyond what it would be a pleasure for her to do--then, for six years now, I have always thought of you as that wife. Why was that? What do you think?"

"Oh Niels . . ."

"I will tell you. It was because I loved you, loved you from the very first day that I had seen you. Do you remember? . . . There I sat, at the breakfast table; and you were busy over the stove. I kept watching you; and your father did not like it. I did not know, of course, then; but I knew later on that already I had seen in you the mate of my life . . ."

Ellen smiled a reminiscent smile and nodded. "Yes," she said. "And then . . . Will you listen, Niels? It's a long story; and I don't know whether I can tell it. I don't know whether you will understand. I have to strip myself before you. I have to show you leprous scars in my memory. I will try . . ."

"What I must tell you is the story of my mother. Much of it I did not understand at the time. I was a child when these things happened. But I must speak to you as a woman . . ."

"You speak of your mother . . . How she used to work and to slave. Probably you know only the least of what she had to go through. You know the outside. You were a boy. Only a girl or a woman can understand another woman. I was a very observant child, old and experienced before my time. I saw and understood many things which

even my mother did not know, did not suspect I could understand. She often said, you will understand that one day, when I understood it right then. But some things I did not understand at the time. I saw them, and they lived in my memory; and I came to understand them later . . .

"Niels, if I am to make this thing clear to you, I shall have to speak to you, not as to a man, especially not a man who had hoped to be more to me than a brother. I shall have to forget that I am a young woman. There are things which even between older people are skipped in silence. If you are to understand, I must strip my soul of its secrets . . . I could not bear to have you look at me, Niels, while I tell them. But I know--I think I know what this means to you. I will do it if you wish . . ."

Niels rose and walked up and down through the room. Then he took his chair, turned it, and sat down, facing the window that looked out on the yard.

"Thanks," she said.

"I was nine years old when we came from Sweden. My father's people had been day labourers in the rye-districts of Soedermanland. They were prosperous in their small way. They had a little house of two rooms and a piece of land, half an acre maybe. They fattened a pig every year and kept a cow and a few hens. On the land they grew garden truck for the city.

"My father was also a farm hand as you say in this country; but he had to pay rent for the house in which we lived. There were three children, all girls; and my mother was weakly. Her illness had involved him in debt.

"Slowly, through years of discussion, against my mother's wish, the plan to emigrate took shape. My grandfather proposed to keep mother and children while father went out to explore the land. My father declined.

"But one day he proposed to leave the children and to take only mother. At that my mother revolted. But in another year he wore her resistance down till she consented to leave the two younger girls and to take only me. I was her first-born; she would not listen to leaving me behind. She always spoke of letting the others follow as soon as possible.

"But my grandparents were very fond of children. They were not old yet. They had never had but the one child of their own. And when they agreed to take my two sisters, they made their bargain, made it with my father: they were to be in the place of father and mother to them; and my parents were not to have any rights whatever over them any more. He did not tell my mother, thinking that she would give in later when she had got used to having one child only. She never did, of course. The separation remained to her a lifelong sorrow. But as you will see, that was the least she had to bear . . .

"We came away. My father had no difficulty in finding work in this country. He was strong and healthy. I don't know by what chance he came to Odensee. He had been working on a German estate in Sweden. He understood German well and spoke it a little; probably that was the reason. At Odensee he rented a one-roomed shack with three acres of land where he grew potatoes and raised pigs. He worked on the big farms in summer; and in winter he went to town, till he took up his homestead three years later.

"The place he rented in Odensee was part of a quarter section of almost wild land, south of the village. It belonged to an old man who had moved to town. The rest of the land was rented to a man by name of Campbell who had married a Swedish girl. He is now living north of here, on a place of his own; you may know him.

"As if it were yesterday I remember the first meeting between my mother and Mrs. Campbell. We had moved into the place a day or so before. The Campbells' house stood a quarter of a mile east of ours, a large, unpainted frame building half gone to ruin. The man was in the cattle business; but he was not yet making money. There were three acres of land broken near the house; and he had planted them to potatoes. There were four children. The woman had to look after the little crop, for the man used his business as a pretext to be hardly ever at home. So, from the first, I got used to seeing the woman work in the potato-patch.

"Since my mother knew neither English nor German, she was lost in the settlement. She had heard that Mrs. Campbell was Swedish. And, being in a strange country the ways of which she did not know, she was anxious to become acquainted with somebody she could talk to.

"It was in the afternoon of a summer day when we crawled through the fence of our yard and crossed over through the brush to the potato-patch.

"As I said, there were four children on the place. The oldest one was a girl of seven or eight: and she was watching the smaller ones--two were twins--while she picked weeds from the rows of the plants.

"The mother, a big, bony woman, was hoeing between the rows. She did not show any pleasure at meeting my mother.

"You have four children! my mother said.

"Yes, the woman replied with an exaggerated groan of disgust; and if another were coming, I'd walk off into the bush . . .

"My mother probably betrayed surprise; for the woman laughed and added, when a woman has got to work like a man, children are just a plague . . .

"When we came home, mother cried. She was thinking of the two little ones she had left behind; I knew; and I went to her and patted her hand, begging her not to cry.

"I knew and understood more, in a childish way, than the grown-ups thought. When you change your country, at that age, it somehow gives you an insight into things and a curiosity beyond your years.

"I asked her, Mother, where do children come from?

"I had often asked her that question before, and she had always answered, God sends them!--But this time she said, When men and women live together, children come. That is nature.

"Soon after, I was sent to school and began to learn English. I also began to see many things. Soon we had a cow; and then two or three; and half a dozen pigs. And my mother was working as hard or harder than Mrs. Campbell.

"My parents spoke in my presence as if I did not exist. You have noticed that that is the rule in these settlements where houses are mere cabins in which grown-ups and children are crowded together.

"So, from many things that were said and from some that I saw I inferred that mother expected shortly to have another child and that that greatly worried her; but even more did it worry my father. He began to speak still more curtly to my mother; and he treated her as if she were at fault and had committed a crime. He prayed even more than before, both more frequently and longer. Gradually my mother began to get into a panic about her condition.

"So, one day, taking me along, she went over to see that woman in the potato-patch once more.

"A number of things were said back and forth which I remember with great distinctness but which have nothing to do with my story.

"At last Mrs. Campbell laughed out loud. Of course, she said, it's plain to see by now. It's a curse. But I can tell you I wouldn't be caught that way. Not I! I'm wise.

"But what can you do? my mother exclaimed. He comes and begs and says that's what God made them male and female for. And if you want to hold your man . . .

"Again the woman laughed. I see her now, standing there in the potato-patch, straight up, with her red face to the sun and her hair blowing in the wind as she put her hands on her hips and held her sides with laughing . . .

"I was only ten years old. But I tell you, I knew exactly what they were talking about. And right then I vowed I should never marry. I was furious at the woman and afraid of her.

"You're innocent all right, she said at last contemptuously. I don't mean it that way, child. But when I'm just about as far gone as you are now, then I go and lift heavy things; or I take the plow and walk behind it for a day. In less than a week's time the child comes; and it's dead. In a day or two I go to work again. Just try it. It won't hurt you. Lots of women around here do the same.

"So, when we came home, my mother took some heavy logs, dragged them to the saw-buck, and sawed them. I begged her not to do it; but even I could see that she was desperate.

"Next day she was very sick. I was sent to the house of the German preacher in the village. And when I was allowed to come back, my mother was at work again on the land. She looked the picture of death; but she was cheerful. My father prayed more than ever.

"Once again the thing happened while we were still at Odensee. The Campbells had moved away to where they are living now; and mother had absolutely no intercourse any longer with anybody. Mother dreaded my father's visits at home by this time.

"Then, early in the spring of the third year, we moved out here. There were no buildings. We camped. Our few things stood under the trees. There was no tent even. Nothing but the sky.

"My father began to clear the yard and to pile logs for building. Mother worked with axe and brute force, helping him. Even I had to help, lifting and pulling when the logs were too heavy for them.

"Then haying time came. My father bought a team of oxen and a mower. He had no wagon yet. The hay was carried over in huge bundles slung with ropes. Mother and I did just as much, together, as my father.

"But don't think for a moment that I am complaining about the work. I liked it. I was strong. Already I dreamt of one day having a farm all by myself, with mother to keep me company.

"Then the stable was built; just as it stands today. My father hated make-shifts. When it was up, we moved into one end of it, the other being occupied by the cows and oxen. Late in the fall, when my father had bought a wagon, he hauled some cheap lumber and built the implement shed, just as it stands to-day. We can make out where we are, he said; but oxen and machinery cost money.

"In winter he went to town again; and we were left alone in the bush. Not a soul knew we were there. The school had not been built.

"Mother cried a good deal; more and more she confided in me, treating me as an equal. Oh, he is hard, she would say of father; as hard as God! And to think that I shall never see my little ones again!

"And she began to speak of me. You are big and strong, she said. You are as good as a boy. Don't ever marry. Marriage makes weak . . .

"And in my childish understanding I promised fervently.

"I remember how I used to sit on the bare, frozen ground and to press my head against her knees where she sat, close to the little stove, on the only chair in the place. At night I sprang up every hour or so and replenished the stove, or we should have frozen . . .

"Towards the end of winter my father came home and began to clear land. From then on we worked with him in the bush, piling the wood and the brush, often wading through snow knee-deep. The work was much too hard for my mother; but I thrived on it. My father often praised me; but already his praise had become distasteful. There was a note of reproach in it for mother. I tried to hide how much of the work I did, how little mother.



"In spring he broke a patch of ground; and we picked the stones and piled the roots.

"That year the school was built. A teacher came out and boarded with Sterners, straight north from it . . .

"As soon as my father had seeded his patch, mother began to beg that I should be sent to school. But my father would not let me go; he wanted to build a house. Not that he thought the house so necessary; but he intended to buy a team of horses--the two old mares that I still have; it's only ten years ago, you know--so he could haul cordwood in winter and make more money.

"The house, a one-roomed shack--it is the granary now--was not quite finished when harvest time came; there was no roof on it, no floor in it yet. My father went away; and mother and I cut the barley with the mower and tied it by hand. The cattle and oxen could still stay outside; so we carried the bundles into the stable, to be threshed by hand when my father came home.

"Still, mother insisted on my going to school now. I went. The teacher was a young girl, not more than eighteen years old; but she let me come whenever I could. She treated me as a grown-up, as indeed I was. When I was at school--for an hour a day at most--she gave me all her time. And one day she came to see mother and told her she would put me through my entrance if I could attend for one full year; I should become a teacher myself because I was so gifted.

"But I had already made up my mind to become a farmer, though not a farmer's wife. I liked horses and cows and pigs and chickens and could handle them. I was strong; and I was not afraid of work . . .

"When my father came home, I stopped school, of course. He brought horses along.

"It's no use to detail to you any further the growth of the farm; you know as much of that as I do . . .

"I remember one day in the spring of the following year. Mother had been very ill for several days. She had again been lifting things; and my father had taken a little box into the bush to bury. But she had got up and made breakfast, in spite of my protest. You go and help father, she had said; and I had gone out. And when I returned to the house, my father followed me.

"This shack looks a disgrace to the place, he said in a matter-of-face tone when he entered. You better go at white-washing it to-day.

"Mother looked a protest, appealingly.

"But he shrugged his shoulders. Poor people have to work, he said. We'll spare you from the field. Ellen and I will attend to the seeding. I'll mix the white-wash for you before we go.

"We had breakfast; and when my father had left the room, I lingered behind and whispered, Don't you do it! You go to bed!

"Oh, mother moaned, I hate him! I hate him!

"But the worst is to come. The thing that makes marriage for me an impossibility; that makes the very thought of it a disgust which fills me with nausea.

"I know, Niels, if I tell it, it will ever after stand between us. I hope it will change your feelings towards me into those of a brother. I feel sure that no man can still be the lover of a woman who has spoken so plainly to him about such things.

"This house had been built meanwhile. I had grown. I was seventeen years old by that time. Mother had become a mere ghost of herself. She was dragging herself about; she could not get up for weeks at a stretch. Always she suffered from terrible backaches.

"One night when I had gone to bed in that room there I could not sleep. I was so worried that I was almost sick myself.

"Mother came in and dragged herself to the bed. It took her half an hour to undress; she lay down with a moan.

"My father followed her. I acted as if I were asleep; not in order to spy on my parents; but to save mother worry about me. My father got ready to go to bed himself. As a last thing before blowing the lamp he bent over me to see whether I was asleep. Then he knelt by his bed and prayed, loud and fervently and long.

"Suddenly I heard mother's voice, mixed with groans, Oh John, don't.

"I will not repeat the things my father said. An abyss opened as I lay there. The vile, jesting, jocular urgency of it; the words he used to that skeleton and ghost of a woman . . . In order to save mother, I was tempted to betray that I heard. Shame held me back . . .

"Once she said, still defending herself, You know, John, it means a child again. You know how often I have been a murderess already. John, Please! Please!

"God has been good to us, he replied; he took them . . .

"And the struggle began again, to end with the defeat of the woman . . . That night I vowed to myself: No man, whether I liked him or loathed him, was ever to have power over me!

"A few months later haying time came again. Mother went on the stack. Soon after she went to bed, never to rise again . . .

"And now, Niels, if you still can, ask me once more to be your wife. But if you do, it will cut our friendship even."

Niels stood up.

"When death came," Ellen went on, "as a great relief to her, you may believe it came as a relief even to me.

"Three or four days before the last my mother--to me she had become a tender, sweet, and helpless creature; to him a living indictment, I hope--mother, I say, called me and whispered, Ellen, whatever you do, never let a man come near you. You are strong and big, thank God. Make your own life, Ellen, and let nobody make it for you!

"I sank down by the side of her bed; and I lifted this hand up to God and said, mother, there is one man who is different from the others. I hope he will be my friend and brother. But I swear to God and to you he shall never be more!

"Her head sank back on the pillow; and her thin, transparent hand lay on my head."

Niels turned and went to the door. For a moment he held the knob; then he shrugged his shoulders convulsively and went out.

Ellen sprang up and ran to the door. "Niels!"

He stopped without looking back.

"Niels," she repeated, "promise that you will come back. Not now. Not within a day or a week. I know you can't. But I shall be so lonesome. You must fight this down. Don't leave me alone for the rest of my days. Promise that you will come back . . ."

"I shall try," he stammered and left the yard.

He did not see that over that farmyard there followed him a girl, her hand pressed to her bosom, tears in her eyes; nor that, at the gate, she sank to the ground and sobbed . .

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