

THE MISADVENTURES OF MAUDE MARCH

Audrey Couloumbis

Yearling



THE MISADVENTURES OF MAUDE MARCH

Audrey Couloumbis

Yearling





For more than forty years,
Yearling has been the leading name
in classic and award-winning literature
for young readers.

Yearling books feature children's
favorite authors and characters,
providing dynamic stories of adventure,
humor, history, mystery, and fantasy.

Trust Yearling paperbacks to entertain,
inspire, and promote the love of reading
in all children.

OTHER YEARLING BOOKS YOU WILL ENJOY

SILVER DOLLAR GIRL, *Katherine Ayres*

STEALING FREEDOM, *Elisa Carbone*

MAGGIE'S DOOR, *Patricia Reilly Giff*

THE BUCCANEERS, *Iain Lawrence*

TADPOLE, *Ruth White*

OVER THE RIVER, *Sharelle Byars Moranville*

AUDREY COULOUMBIS

The Misadventures of
MAUDE MARCH

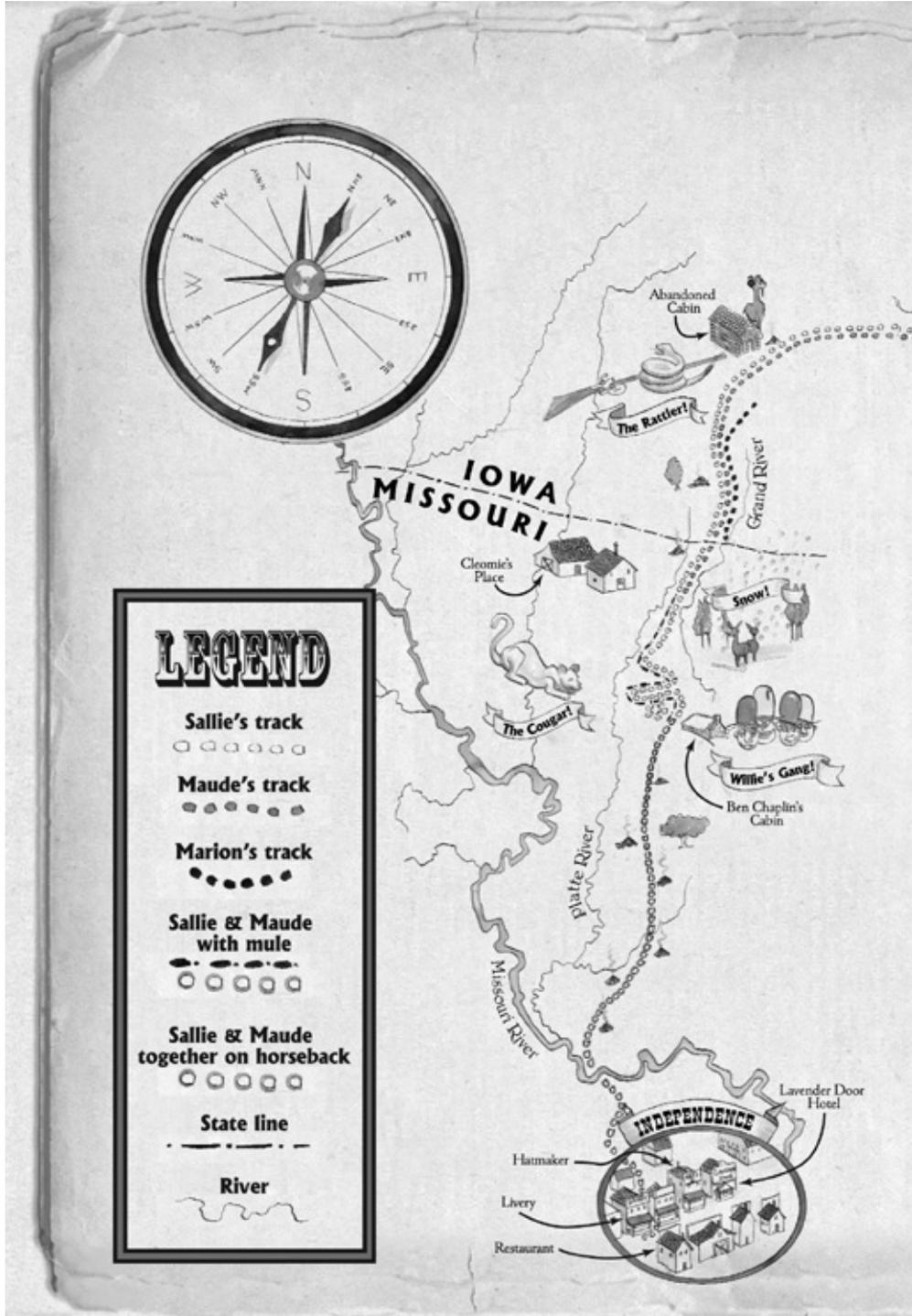
or

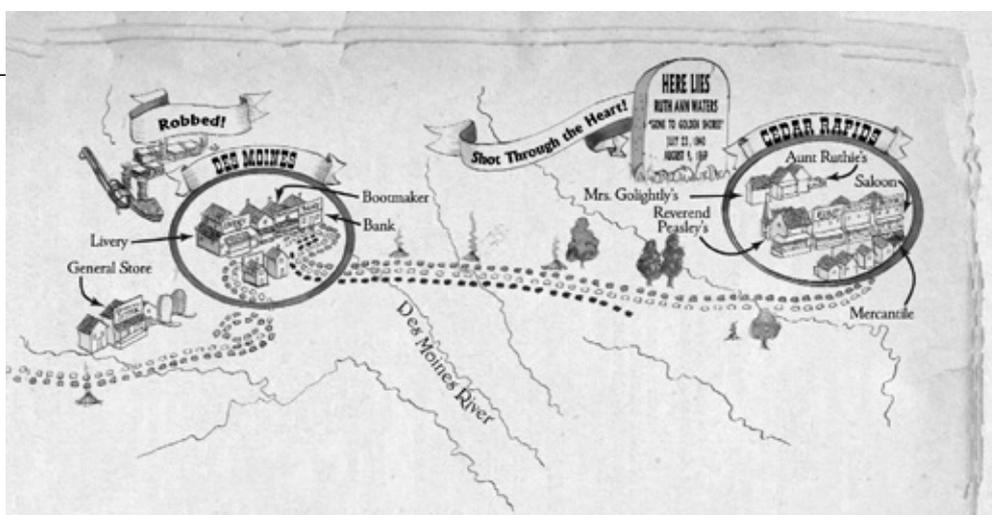
*Trouble Rides
a Fast Horse*

A YEARLING BOOK

My husband is, as ever, my greatest supporter and champion.

Put your feet up, honey,
and let Maude and Sallie bring you a sarsaparilla.





TRAIL OF THE
NOTORIOUS

"MAD" MAUDE MARCH

AND HER GANG OF

ROBBERS, MURDERERS, AND HORSE THIEVES

ACROSS

IOWA & MISSOURI

-1869-



THE HEAT WAS AWFUL.

The breeze, when we got one, felt like it came out of an oven. Aunt Ruthie hoped to take our minds off our misery by taking us to town. Even in the dim cool of the mercantile, sweat made our clothing cling to our skin.

My dress was the worst, made out of some kind of muslin that got itchy once it stuck to me. Every two minutes, Aunt Ruthie would say, "Stop scratching, Sallie, it isn't polite."

The shooting didn't start until we'd stepped outside of the mercantile. The screen door whacked shut behind us, and we were greeted by a volley of shots. It was stunning really. Then it was scary. The noise was too great to take it all in at once.

It's strange the way time stretched in that moment and seemed to go on forever. The entire morning passed through my mind, starting when my older sister Maude ate my biscuit with jelly that I had left over from breakfast.

When I complained there were no more biscuits, and that was the last of the black currant jelly, she said, "If you wanted it, you shouldn't have left it laying around." So while Aunt Ruthie said it was the heat, I knew it was that biscuit that had me squabbling with Maude all day.

As we neared the barbershop, walking to town, Maude pulled Aunt Ruthie toward a stone bench, saying, "You're tiring yourself. Come sit down for a minute," and I dragged on Aunt Ruthie's other arm, saying, "It gets too hot to sit on that rock in the sun. Let's go someplace cooler."

Aunt Ruthie said, "I've had enough of being pulled apart."

In the mercantile, she showed her teeth at us and whispered, "You are to keep your distance, both of you. I don't care to listen to you bicker for another minute." We promised to be good. To this, she said, "Stay over there by the farm goods."

In these aisles, there were only smelly jars of lanolin and herbal salves to examine, and such things as curative oils for ear mites and wireworm to avoid, having nasty little pictures of the ills on the side of the bottles. This bothered me so bad that I pulled a dime out of my pocket and set to reading it instead.

But Aunt Ruthie was right in sending us there. It was not two minutes before Maude started up again. She told me that Joe Harden, Frontier Fighter, was never a real man. "Those books weren't meant for girls to read, either," she said.

"How would you know?" I said to her. Maude didn't like for me to read dime novels. So to say, Maude thought dimers were a waste of learning how to read.

"It's just a made-up name for made-up stories out of books," she said. "Boys probably look up to him, but Joe Harden is just a story figure."

"Like David?" I asked her.

"David who?"

"David who slew Goliath. Is he made up?"

"Of course not, Sallie," Maude said. "What a terrible thing to say. Don't you let Aunt Ruthie hear you talk like that."

I didn't think Aunt Ruthie would care all that much. She hardly ever cared about anything but whether the work was done right. Maude was the one who cared about such things.

Maude and me were orphaned when our folks took sick with the fever. Aunt Ruthie had already started out from Philadelphia to come live with us and teach school. By the time she got to Cedar Rapids, Aunt Ruthie had to take us in. Or rather, we took her in, and she took care of us.

I'm forgetting Uncle Arlen. He was Aunt Ruthie's, and Momma's, younger brother, but he had gone west not long after our folks died, and we had not heard from him in years. So he didn't count as kin. Aunt Ruthie herself said he was as good as dead to us.

She felt he ought to have stayed around to help her raise us, I guess. Around the middle of winter, she felt he ought to have stayed around to chop wood; that was when I heard his name mentioned most often. Aunt Ruthie could hold a grudge second to none.

"David's out of a book," I said stubbornly, "and I ain't never seen any giants."

"That's because he killed them all," Maude told me. "You have to stop reading those cheap stories. Your grammar is atrocious."

"You ever seen any Indians?" I asked her.

"Not around here," Maude said.

"That's because Joe Harden, Frontier Fighter, cleared them all out. Single-handed." That was what I said. But down deep, I believed Maude.

"Single-handedly," she said. Maude had in the past year begun to help Aunt Ruthie in the classroom, and she had become quite a stickler. "Kansas is a frontier, Sallie. Iowa is civilized."

"It didn't used to be," I said, but only because it grated on me sometimes that Maude knew just about everything.

Everything except what I had learned from those dime novels. I just knew that if I ever had to survive off the land the way the frontier fighters did, if I had to kill a bear or outsmart a wily Indian, I'd be better able to do it than my sister.

"Ask Aunt Ruthie about Joe Harden then," Maude said as Aunt Ruthie came our way carrying her purchases wrapped in brown paper that nearly matched her dress.

We'd been orphans for six years. In that time, given the choice between Maude's answer and Aunt Ruthie's, when mulling over the knobbly questions of life, I'd found Maude's to be more to the point.

Maude said, "Go ahead, ask."

"Don't you dare ask me anything." Aunt Ruthie strode right on past us. "Some days it isn't even a good idea to get out of bed," she muttered as we left the mercantile. The screen door slapped shut behind us, and gunshots broke out in the alley between the barbershop and the saloon across the street. The noise was awful.

A stray bullet hit Aunt Ruthie in the heart and killed her dead.

“What's happening?” Maude said when Aunt Ruthie dropped like a stone. Although the shots were deafening, I heard this as if Maude spoke right into my ear.

There were several other people on the street who took no notice of Aunt Ruthie at all. They were scurrying madly for their own safety. The shooting went on in fits and starts even after Aunt Ruthie fell. Only Maude and I stood like wooden Indians in those first moments.

There was hardly any blood. On Aunt Ruthie's sacking-brown dress, it looked at first like only a dark wet spot, but still I couldn't take my eyes off it. After another moment I saw the hole in the middle of that spot and then the color, just a rim of blood-red at the edge of the dark wet. I don't believe I breathed, watching.

It's safe to say Maude had not noticed even this much when she dropped to her knees and stuffed a paper parcel under Aunt Ruthie's head like a pillow. Maude patted Aunt Ruthie's cheek rather smartly, believing her to have fainted. Yanking off her bonnet, Maude used the brim to ruffle the air around Aunt Ruthie's face.

“Aunt Ruthie,” Maude kept saying, scolding really, because she'd told Aunt Ruthie she was tiring herself. Aunt Ruthie wasn't all *that* old, but she'd had a long bout with the influenza the winter before that left her considerably weakened. However, it had not left her with a hole in her heart.

“Maude,” I said, and pointed.

Maude screamed and fell over Aunt Ruthie in a faint.

The gunshots stopped then, although probably not because Maude screamed.

Likelier, those stupid cowboys had run out of bullets, or killed each other. Maybe one of them shot out the mirror again, the way one of them did every so often, and had stopped to think about seven years of bad luck.

“I need help here,” I shouted into the mercantile, where everybody now lay on the floor but not because they were hurt. They were hiding. “Aunt Ruthie's been shot and Maude has fainted dead away.”

I tell you all this to make you understand that Maude was an upright young woman who never made mock of the truth or questioned the dark ways of justice until she saw how truth could be mangled to make a shape unrecognizable.

To have you know her for a rightly raised person who never complained about the awful twists of fate that made her life less comfortable than it might have been.

To show you how impossible it was for her to do the things everyone claimed that she did. For this is the true story of how my sister, Maude March, came to be known far and wide as a horse thief, a bank robber, and a cold-blooded killer.

AUNT RUTHIE DIED THERE ON THE BOARDWALK IN FRONT of the mercantile, and our lives changed overnight. We went out in the morning to choose a box at the undertaker's and came back to find a man from the bank locking our doors.

But I'm getting ahead of my story.

The sheriff came running at the sound of gunshots, and the shooter was arrested. We saw this happening, but again, it hardly seemed real. Maude cried over Aunt Ruthie in a ladylike way that Aunt Ruthie would have approved of.

I cried because Maude cried, that was how I felt right then. The terrible truth was, I was not so sad as surprised. Deeply surprised. Somehow hopeful that the school bell would ring and Aunt Ruthie would stand and say, "That's all the time we have. Put your pencils down."

Reverend Peasley and the undertaker arrived together. The blessing in this was that Maude and I had only to let them take things in hand. The reverend installed us in his buggy. It was a tight fit, being a one-seater, but we lived only a few streets away.

Although it was a very short ride, we were twice nearly overcome by a terrible odor. The first time, I thought Reverend Peasley must be the guilty party. I kept this notion to myself. The second time, I understood it to be his buggy pony.

Only the sudden gust of a breeze saved me from gagging. "A bit windy all of a sudden," he said.

"Thank the Lord," Reverend Peasley replied.

He took us to the home of an elderly neighbor lady. When she came to the door, Reverend Peasley told her Aunt Ruthie had passed over.

"Oh, poor thing," Mrs. Golightly said. She had to look up at him, as she wasn't any taller than myself. "Did she go quietly?"

We heard all this, the buggy having been drawn up near the door. Maybe Reverend Peasley thought he would only upset us further, because he didn't answer that question. Instead, he asked her if we could stay the night with her, if she would comfort us in the womanly way. That's what he said to her. What was the poor woman to say to him but yes?

I had not expected this, nor had Maude, I could see that. It came home to me in that moment that we were all we had, Maude and me. This time there was no Aunt Ruthie to take us in hand. This time we were orphans once and for all.

He left us there.

Mrs. Golightly did her best. She offered us cookies and cold buttermilk, but we weren't hungry. She suggested a lie-down, but we said, no, thank you. We sat in her parlor for several minutes, all of us silent, until Maude said, "I want to go home."

"And so you shall," Mrs. Golightly said so kindly that we cried some more. The feeling of surprise had left me, but still I didn't feel my tears were for Aunt Ruthie so much as they were for Maude and me. What were we to do now?

Aunt Ruthie was gone so quickly she hadn't even had time to wonder what happened. The

reverend told us she'd gone to a place where no one had need to be scared. I was glad for Aunt Ruthie; I was only sorry that Maude and me had to face this worry without her steady face to guide us.

By the time Mrs. Golightly got around to putting her night things into her knitting bag, some weather had blown in. We had to walk arm in arm with Mrs. Golightly or we might have lost her to the breeze. Not only was she no taller than me, she was strangely lighter, as if her bones had no weight to them at all.

Maude's hair and mine whipped and snapped around our heads, and by the time we got to our house, Mrs. Golightly's hair was doing the same dance. The wind had stolen her even her hairpin. We took turns brushing out each other's hair, which got us past the first rush of sadness over coming home without Aunt Ruthie.

Mrs. Golightly made us some hot cocoa to drink. I was none too enthusiastic about this treat. I realized she'd made it some sweeter than Aunt Ruthie would have. Mrs. Golightly had a firm hand with sugar. I had already known that about her, but I appreciated the fact all anew.

She even lit an extra lamp to make us feel more cheerful.

Mrs. Golightly was as kindly as could be, but she was something less than a comfort. Twice during the evening, she asked where it was that Aunt Ruthie had gone. Each time, we told her Aunt Ruthie had passed. Each time, she said, "Poor thing. She went quietly, did she?"

In the morning, Mrs. Golightly went with us to the undertaker's to choose a box for Aunt Ruthie. In this matter, she was very helpful. Even though she seemed to think the box would be for her sister. We didn't know anything about a sister. Maude simply passed Mrs. Golightly a hankie.

"I've been thinking about her stone," Maude said as we stood by the bench in front of the barbershop. The bench had a message carved in the back, REST YOUR WEARY BONES, but something had chopped the center out of the *o* in *bones*. "We ought to say something pretty. She deserves that."

"What do you have in mind?" I asked, although Aunt Ruthie had never cared for things pretty. She liked practical. To her, that was as pretty as things got.

On her stone, we said, HERE LIES RUTH ANN WATERS, GONE TO GOLDEN SHORES. JULY 23, 1840–August 9, 1869. Over this, Mrs. Golightly needed another hankie.

Aunt Ruthie might have thought it was wasteful to pay for any letters other than her name and dates. But then Maude said the words made her picture Aunt Ruthie as a boat with billowy white sails. That was better than picturing her dead on the boardwalk, and I thought even Aunt Ruthie could see the sense in that.

We went back to Mrs. Golightly's and made sure she knew it was not her sister, but Aunt Ruthie, who had passed. When we left her, we saw that a buggy had drawn up at our house. A man was nailing something to the door. We hurried over there to read the large print at the top: "First Bank of Cedar Rapids." And in red, the word "Foreclosed."

"What are you doing?" Maude asked him. "We live here."

"Your aunt was behind on the payments for this property," the man said, without so much as a glance in Maude's direction. "We need to sell it off to make our money back."

"Aunt Ruthie paid the bank only last week," Maude said.

"That payment covered last year's last payment," the man said, now on his way back to his buggy, with us on his heels. "That still leaves you nearly nine months in arrears." He gave us a doubtful look. "That means you still owe me money."

"I know what it means," Maude said angrily. "I'll make the payments."

The man said, "Where are you going to get the money?"

"I don't know just yet," Maude told him. "But I'll manage."

"Your aunt said the same thing, that she'd manage. And she wasn't any green girl. She knew how to work."

This appeared to strike Maude to the quick. "I know how to work," she said in a near breathless voice.

I understood how Maude felt. I was five when Momma and Daddy died, and Maude was nine. We didn't have anyone but Aunt Ruthie, and we didn't know any better than her. But that was the end of childhood as we knew it.

Aunt Ruthie worked hard, and she made us work right alongside her. Despite being a teacher, she didn't seem to know such a thing as a child existed. Just some people were shorter and more able to clean the floor under the table than others.

If someone was to have asked us, well, girls, do you want to work like oxen, give up playing with dolls, and wear brown dresses for the rest of your days, we'd have said, no sir, send us to the orphanage, where at least they'll let us keep our dolls. The sad fact was, Aunt Ruthie thought playing with dolls was foolishness.

She often said to mothers, "Those girls will have real babies soon enough. Let them learn to run fast. Let them learn to climb trees. Let them learn to shoot rabbits." I suppose she would have said, prepare them to work themselves to the bone, if she thought anyone would heed her.

To give the devil her due, Aunt Ruthie was a right fine cook, and she never worked us any harder than she worked herself. She was a stern woman, but she was never a cruel one. I never learned what shaped her that way; she wasn't much for talk once she'd told us what she wanted done.

She taught school the same way. She did not become a friend to her students. They did not love her, although they showed her all the respect she could have hoped for. She arrived with one small suitcase she called her "necessary," and she left this world with even less.

It didn't seem right to hand over all she'd worked for without a fight. "You can't take our house away," I said to the man from the bank.

"It isn't your house till it's paid for," he said, "and you can't pay for it."

"Just give us a chance to bury our aunt," Maude cried, clinging to his coat as he climbed into his buggy. "We'll find a way to pay the bank every penny it's owed."

I pulled her back just in time, for the buggy jolted as the man loosened the horse's reins. She would have knocked her flat.

"I'm sorry, miss," the man said, "but the bank can't wait any longer."

“Where are we supposed to go?” Maude wailed.

“See your minister,” the man said, looking ashamed of himself. Then he whipped up his horse and raced away.

I checked the front door. Padlocked, of course.

I walked around to the back and found that door had not been padlocked, but we had locked it ourselves the night before.

“What are you up to, Sallie?” Maude asked me, her face gone pale. She didn't look much more lively than Aunt Ruthie had that morning at the funeral parlor.

“I'm going in,” I said.

“You heard the man,” Maude said weakly. “It isn't our house anymore.”

“Our stuff is in there.” The pantry window had a crack in it, but we hadn't yet replaced the pane.

“Oh, Sallie, don't do that,” Maude cried as I picked up a rock.

“I am not leaving my dime novels and my one dress with some color in it and my good boots behind.”

Most of the glass fell when the rock hit, but I pounded another rock all around the frame to get rid of the last jagged edges. If we got so much as a scratch climbing through, I knew we would never hear the end of it.

THE FAMILIAR SIGHT OF AUNT RUTHIE'S POLISHED-TO-A-gloss canning jars cheered me some.

They were brim-filled with sweet corn, pickled beets, bright green snap beans, damson plum jam and prune butter, and strawberry sauce for pancakes.

Not that my mind was on the food stores. I went straight to my room and tied my dime into a thick packet with Aunt Ruthie's saved-up string. I put my clothes into a carpetbag. Three dresses still hung in the wardrobe when I finished, all of them made for Maude by our mother's own hands, and long since outgrown by both of us. I still kept them, not because they held memories but because my eyes could never be tired of the blue gingham, the rose figured cotton, the green calico.

I found myself staring hungrily at them, reluctant to leave them behind. But there was no room for them in my bag. I went into Aunt Ruthie's room, once our mother's room, and found the sewing scissors. I went back to the dresses and cut big patches out of the skirts, folded those, and stuffed them into my bag.

Maude looked in as I shut the wardrobe. "I heard you in Aunt Ruthie's room. Saying your good-byes?"

I blinked. I hadn't even thought of it. For that moment that I stood in Aunt Ruthie's room, it was almost as if nothing had changed for us. Yes, I was cutting patches out of our dresses because we were leaving, but there was still a part of my mind that believed I had to put Aunt Ruthie's scissors back where I'd found them. As if she might come looking for them again.

I dropped the scissors into my carpetbag and said, "If you like, we can say our good-byes together."

"This is the only house we've ever lived in," Maude said as we stood in Aunt Ruthie's room. "We were both born in that bed."

I didn't remember that. I only remembered that Aunt Ruthie barely disturbed it when she slept there. Even when she threw the covers off herself in the morning, the greater part of the bed remained made up. Maude tried again, saying, "Momma used to read to you in that bed. With the curtains open and the sunshine falling on your heads."

That memory wasn't mine. I had tried time and again to remember our momma and daddy, but my mind always drew a blank. Maude's words called to something held deep inside me, but it didn't seem to have a thing to do with this bed.

What I noticed now, Maude had taken the quilt and woolen blanket from Aunt Ruthie's bed and stacked them with ours, ready to go. Wherever we ended up, we would not be going to sleep under somebody's old, thin blankets.

We went all around the house, with Maude touching things in each room. This was the great difference between Maude and me. She had sentimental values. I didn't have them much. I had this in common with Aunt Ruthie.

"You could take some of this stuff," I said. "Not something as big as the rocking chair

maybe, but that china cat on the hearth." Or the fancy candleholder that looked like a frog on a lily pad. I had always admired that.

She shook her head. "It won't mean anything once we take it away," she said.

"It would still be ours," I said. "It won't be ours for long if we leave it here."

We went back to Aunt Ruthie's room and Maude took the Bible. "This belonged to Momma," she said. "And there's something else."

She opened the secretary at which Aunt Ruthie wrote out her bills. She pushed some papers out of the way, pulled out a packet of letters, and set them aside so that she could feel around at the upper back corner. She yanked a panel out, exposing a secret compartment. I saw then it had a little cloth tab for a kind of handle. I had never known it was there.

I glanced at the letters. I couldn't picture Aunt Ruthie being much of a letter writer, but it appeared that someone had taken time to write to her. But then Maude pulled out a thick stack of bills, and I watched as she counted them.

She finished, saying, "Twenty-four dollars, that's all. Too bad Aunt Ruthie did pay the bank. If she hadn't, we'd have more of a bankroll to see us through."

"To see us through what?"

"I don't know yet," Maude said. "We're going to have to live somewhere if no one takes us in. This won't carry us for long."

"Mrs. Golightly would probably take us in," I said.

My thought was, she probably needed us as much as we needed her. Maude shot me a look that said she thought Mrs. Golightly was not suitable even as a last resort. I shot her a look back that said beggars can't be choosers.

Maude said, "Mrs. Golightly is too old. One bad winter cold will see her out. We would soon be back in the same boat."

To this I had no reply.

"There's the egg money," I said, and headed for the kitchen. The egg money was kept in a cracked sugar bowl. That came to something under three dollars.

"This and the two dollars I had saved up, that's all we have in the world," Maude said in a flat voice.

"We have each other," I said, but it sounded a little weak, even to me. I wished I was a saver, but I wasn't, and that was a fact. I spent all my money on dimers.

"This is the only house we've ever lived in," Maude said again. "It's going to seem strange to call any other house our home."

"People do it, though," I said as we left through the back door. "They leave one place behind and make their home in another all the time. They like it fine."

"People do it," Maude said. "I'm not sure it's fine."

I didn't argue with her. But I couldn't help the way I felt. A little sad that Aunt Ruthie couldn't come along, but I was excited too. Like a new life was starting for us. Like we were embarking on an adventure.

SEEING OUR MINISTER TURNED OUT TO BE A GOOD suggestion. It was not a suggestion that Aunt Ruthie would have made, or followed up on either. Aunt Ruthie often said that in hard times family helped family. What she meant was, don't even ask anybody else.

However, we were fresh out of family.

It was not even a suggestion Maude wanted to follow, which surprised me some. "He's already dumped us on Mrs. Golightly's doorstep. Where do you think he's going to set us down now?"

I didn't argue. Maude could take a notion, and once taken, her notions tended to be unshakable. Reverend Peasley had slid in her eyes, and he might just as well have tried to climb a glass hill. But he made a better showing the second time around.

"Miss Maude, and Sallie, dear, I am shocked to my marrow," Reverend Peasley said as we finished telling him about the man from the bank.

I liked Reverend Peasley somewhat, considering I hardly ever saw him except on Sunday. He looked fatherly to me, and he was, in fact, a father several times over. Most times, although not as we sat there telling him our story, he was a smiling sort of man.

I liked smiles, and I liked to think that someday my life would have more of his smiling sort of people in it.

"You will simply have to stay here with Mrs. Peasley and myself until we get your business affairs settled," he added, and won my heart entirely.

Maude broke down and cried pitiful tears. She had cried before, of course, but she had never been so broken in spirit until that man from the bank got finished with us.

Mrs. Peasley and I patted Maude's hands and soothed her and made her lie down with a cold cloth on her forehead. But all the time, in the back of my mind, I heard the reverend's voice saying, "—until we get your business affairs settled."

Something deep inside me stood up and cheered at the notion of myself having business affairs. That they were a complete mess bothered me not at all. I had come to this house as a homeless waif, and I was not here for half an hour before I was a woman of means. More or less.

The next afternoon, after Aunt Ruthie's funeral, we sat in the Peasleys' parlor and allowed the church ladies to make us feel better with such remarks as, "I am saddened to hear that your Aunt Ruthie was in such dire straits. I never suspected for a moment."

And, "I suppose you girls could hire out. You know everything there is to know about running a house. Lord knows, I could use a hand. Of course, I couldn't afford to pay you. I have too many mouths to feed as it is."

"Did you hear that the man who shot off that gun and killed your Aunt Ruthie claims it was an accident?" And then to the gathering at large, "He's not a local. Name of Joe Harden."

At that, my heart rose into my throat. Joe Harden! I pinched Maude at the back of her arm hard. She yelped and jumped up off the settee like it was a hot stovetop.

“Now, Maude, I never meant to upset you,” one of the church ladies said. “I just thought you should know the name of the terrible man—” Maude ran from the room, brushing past Mrs. Peasley, who had been coming and going with little cakes and fresh pots of tea. The lid on the teapot rattled and a spoon fell to the floor, but Maude did not turn back to pick it up. “—who shot your poor aunt down like a rabid dog.”

“I reckon we're feeling much better now,” I said, and stood up, inviting the ladies to do the same. We'd buried our aunt that morning, and it had saddened me more than I had believed it would. These women were not Aunt Ruthie's friends in life. Aunt Ruthie didn't have a good word to say for most people; she'd just as soon shut the door in their faces as say hello to visitors. This had often troubled me, but not just at that moment.

“Maude and I can't thank you ladies enough for spending the day with us.” They rose somewhat uncertainly, but I only let my chin jut out as I walked to the door and opened it.

“Aunt Ruthie would have thanked you,” I said, and it was probably true. She would have thanked them to leave. We had done our duty by the church ladies and if they did nothing else for us, they dropped that word about Joe Harden.

I had a man to see. I was nearly happy as I shut the door.

I STOOD AT THE BACK OF THE JAIL AND SHOUTED OUT HIS name. “Mr. Joe Harden!”

A face appeared in one barred window. The most I could make out was, it was a bearded face, and hairless on top, like maybe he'd gotten himself scalped in one of those frontier fights.

After he'd taken his time to look me over too, he said, “Who wants him?”

I held up a dime novel. “Are you this Joe Harden?”

“What if I am?”

I put my arm down. What if he was? He was still the man who shot and killed Aunt Ruthie. I couldn't be here to shake his hand. “Are they going to hang you?”

He went away from the window but came back again after only a moment. “If this doesn't just turn a man's stomach, I don't know what will,” he said. “Shouldn't a girl your age be home playing with her dolls?”

This struck me to the quick. “I don't have a doll.”

I had not had a doll since I was eight years old, when one day a dog grabbed it and ran off. Aunt Ruthie wiped my tears and said matter-of-factly, “You're too old for such things anyway.”

“Well, don't you have anything better to do than hope for hangings?”

I said, “You shot my aunt. She was my only kin, but for my sister, Maude.”

For a moment I thought he would leave the window again. He said, “I'm sorry, girly, I'm truly am.”

I stood there, not knowing quite what I wanted from him. I didn't know what I expected but not this fellow with whiskers.

He said, “If I could undo it, I would.”

“You can't, I know that,” I said, and walked away. I was sorry I'd come.

THE REVEREND HAD BROUGHT AUNT RUTHIE'S EGG layers and her little brown cow over to his own place. This was necessary, since we couldn't very well expect these animals to take care of themselves.

He also cleared Aunt Ruthie's pantry on Maude's say-so. On a laundry day, he took the older children with him and brought a wagonload of canned goods and flour and sugar, in addition to hams and part of a side of beef. There was an atmosphere of quiet good cheer about the family as we all helped to fill Mrs. Peasley's pantry to overflowing.

Maude acted as if she'd never seen these things before, as if her hands had never tightened the caps on these jars or helped to salt the ham. She made several trips between the wagon and the pantry without a word said to anyone, causing Reverend Peasley to comment, "Good worker."

If there was one thing the Peasleys could be said to need, it was another pair of hands. What with five children, all younger than me, I guess it would be fair to say Reverend Peasley and his wife were overworked at the get-go.

But there was far more than daily cooking and housework and wood chopping to be done. The church floor had to be swept twice a week, the pews needed a coat of wax, and wax took a lot of rubbing to make it shine. Two extra pairs of hands could not complain if they were put right to work.

Children were underfoot at every turn, running through the sweepings, dipping their fingers into whatever they were told to stay away from. Mrs. Peasley did not run what Aunt Ruthie would have called "a tight ship."

Maude's voice was deep, which scares small children sometimes, and besides that, Maude tended toward swatting people when they annoyed her severely. I had taken my fair share of swats and stood immune, but the Peasley children had never dealt with the likes of Maude and in a week's time, they all stood afraid of my sister.

My voice was also deep, but I had the good sense to make it higher when I spoke to little ones, which made me seem friendlier, even if I was scolding. Also, the two oldest were boys, six and eight, and all I had to do to get them to go along with me was to promise to reward them a dimer later on. Joe Harden was their favorite hero, and they had both of them concocted an ending for the dimer that quits just as Joe sights a cave where a wounded killer has no doubt taken shelter.

Because she was judged to have little patience with small children, and because Mrs. Peasley was growing round with her next baby, Maude took on the work that needed hours of standing up. She baked cakes and pies for ladies' meetings, for the sick or elderly, and for Tuesday night box suppers.

Mrs. Peasley had gotten a good start on collecting clothing for the poor, and much of that needed ironing, if not a good wash as well. There were socks to be mended and sizes to be sorted. Finally I tied things together with bristly twine as full sets of clothing for the needy.

Just in time to begin the canning.

I worked mostly at preparing the vegetables. I was only grateful I was too short to stand the stove. That fell to Maude. When she wasn't baking, she was lifting steaming jars from the canning pots. It made me feel bad to leave her with all the work when I went back to school in September.

Maude didn't go, but I had to. A new teacher had been found to take Aunt Ruthie's place. It wasn't that I expected Aunt Ruthie to show up there. I hadn't really thought about it, not out loud in my mind like, but somewhere inside myself I did think her classroom would start empty, like our house.

I never mentioned it to Maude, who went on baking cakes and pies and doing the wash. In that room that stood empty in her mind, that was fine by me. But if I hoped to spare her sentimental values, that was not to be. Once I went back to school, it fell to Maude to tie up the old-clothing parcels.

Aunt Ruthie's clothes made their way into the pile of giveaways. It had given Maude quite a jolt to find one of Aunt Ruthie's few dresses there. She had tied it into the middle of the bundle to hide this fact from me, but I was the one sent to get the clothes when Mrs. Peasley was all set to ride out on an errand of mercy. I spotted the fabric, Aunt Ruthie's practical brown cotton, as I put the bundles in the buggy.

"I see she's given away Aunt Ruthie's clothes," I said to Maude, so she would know the secret was out. "I guess it's too bad for her that Aunt Ruthie wasn't partial to pretty calicoes or tartans."

"Don't bother about it, Sallie," was Maude's reply. But her mouth was held tight in the way she had copied from Aunt Ruthie.

Mrs. Peasley told us how fortunate she believed herself to be to have all this help with her duties. She said this as she wrote a list of things to be done by Maude and me, and another list of people who needed the balm of her visits to them.

As the days wore on, I wanted something more than a thank-you. It was not that I was not grateful to be taken in, but it did seem to me that we were also taken for granted.

It made me angry that Reverend Peasley would turn a smile on me as I helped to scrub his floors, or wiped up after feeding his youngest child, or peeled the potatoes he would be getting for his supper, and yet he did not think to help.

But he was not the one making up daily lists. I said to Maude, "That Mrs. Peasley doesn't know when to say whoa."

"I know, I know," Maude agreed. "But at least you get away some of the time. If Reverend Peasley calls me an 'answer to a prayer' one more time, I'm going to hit him on the head."

I didn't think this would improve matters much.

I said, "Don't you think we ought to just tell them it's not right to work us from morning till night? Even Aunt Ruthie let us play a game in the evenings. She let us pop corn and read by the fire. We got to visit with the other girls for an hour after Sunday service, instead of rushing back to the kitchen work."

I had never felt such an appreciation for Aunt Ruthie. I understood now; she didn't smile much, but she never used us either. Whatever we did, she did just as much.

"Maybe we should get ourselves taken in by someone who doesn't have so much work to do," I said.

"And maybe we'll get taken in by someone worse," Maude said with a dark look on her face. "They could have separated us."

So maybe I shouldn't have held it against the Peasleys that they made good use of us. But I did hold it against them.

I went in to make up the little children's cots one morning and found they had been without ever saying one word to us, covered over in Aunt Ruthie's quilts. Worse, these were not her everyday quilts, but the ones that had taken blue ribbons at the fair. I finished my chores with my lips atremble.

When Mrs. Peasley went out for a minute, I brought Maude to have a look. The matter was not lost on her. "She kept those in her cedar chest at the foot of her bed," she said. "They're going through all her things."

"What are we going to say?" I asked her.

"Nothing," Maude said.

It got to the point where Reverend Peasley would smile on me, and I would turn an upside-down smile with lots of teeth back at him. He'd look at me like his eyes couldn't be trusted and make a deliberate smile. "Sallie? You don't look like yourself. Sallie?"

And I would smile back just as nice as you please.

I hoped to wreck his mind.

It surprised all of us, I think, when the Toleridge boy tried calling on Maude. That is, he would call, and she would shut the door in his face, refusing to see him.

The reverend wondered if Maude felt it was too soon after Aunt Ruthie's death to think about marriage. He cleared his throat, then said, "Not that I would have you rush into anything, Miss Maude. But there is the matter of your house. The Toleridge boy..."

Had enough money to buy it back from the bank. Or his family did. That's what Reverend Peasley was too particular to say.

"I don't like the Toleridge boy," Maude told Reverend Peasley. At this, Mrs. Peasley's mouth pinched up like she was sucking on a lemon drop.

"He never was nice to dogs or cats or even little children in the schoolyard," Maude went on saying. "He couldn't be trusted. I would never think of marrying the likes of him."

"Maude, I thought you would do anything to get the house back," I said to her that night. We did most of our talking in the dark, in the few minutes between blowing out our candles and falling asleep.

"I thought so too," she said. "But that boy is too big a dose of 'anything' for me."

"Do you still want the house back?" I asked her, wondering if there weren't some things she'd still want from it. Maude was sentimental that way.

"I do," she whispered. "I want it something terrible. I want Aunt Ruthie too."

I think it soured the reverend on us a little when Maude turned away the Toleridge boy. I'm not sure why. I only know he started to take a firm tone with us.

About that time, Mr. Wilburn took to coming to dinner every Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday evening. At first he brought small gifts to Mrs. Peasley. Then he began bringing them to Maude. An embroidered case for her scissors. A silver thimble. A comb for her hair.

Mr. Wilburn was a grandfatherly sort of man, and I was still of an age when I thought might like to have a grandfather. Especially one who brought me his already-been-read-twice dime novels, like Mr. Wilburn did, once he learned I liked them. He spared them out, once each week, which was fine by me; it made a Christmas of every Friday evening.

It took Maude till October to figure out that Mr. Wilburn was sweet on her. "I could never marry that old man," Maude said to me. "Why, he could be our grandfather."

I was sorry to have to be the one to say it, but Maude didn't have all that many charms. Not the kind men are said to go for. Maude was good, she was honest and true. But she was plain. Wren brown hair, ordinary brown eyes, and stick thin from neck to foot. It wasn't likely many others were going to come calling.

"Just be nice to him," I said.

Meanwhile, the leaves on the trees had turned yellow and orange and began to fall. The Peasleys were getting fewer and fewer pats on the back for having taken us in. The church ladies had begun to be sorry they hadn't taken us in themselves.

"Those five Peasley children must be a handful for you to look after," one of them said to me.

"They're all right," I said. "They're just little, is all."

I overheard another of them saying, "Mrs. Peasley used to pay me a little to bake bread, as well as all those cakes and pies." I gathered she was feeling the crimp in her coin purse now that Maude was doing the baking.

"We're working harder here than we did at home, with Aunt Ruthie driving us like sled dogs," I said to Maude as we cleaned up after a Sunday dinner.

"What kind of dogs?"

I'd read about sled dogs in *Wild Woolly, Lost in the Yukon*. There were several Wild Woolly books, I gathered, but I only had the one where Wild Woolly was lost, possibly to die of there in the blinding snowstorm the book left off with. It occurred to me that Mr. Wilburn might have the means to get the other books from somewhere. I desperately wanted to know what happened to Wild Woolly.

I remembered Mr. Wilburn had recently brought Maude a box of writing paper with little flowers painted in the corners of the pages. She had no one to write to, but the paper was so pretty Maude got a little misty at the surprise of it. I wondered if maybe she was softening a little in her opinion of him.

"Unless you get married, we don't have anything to look forward to but working for room and board in this house," I said.

"If you like him so much," Maude said, "you marry him."

"I can't marry him, I'm only twelve years old."

"You're eleven, and you can't expect me to marry him either."

DO YOU REMEMBER UNCLE ARLEN?" I ASKED MAUDE ONE night before we went to sleep.

"I remember he sang songs. He used to dance with Momma because Daddy couldn't dance at all." She stopped there, but I only gave her the look of, and what else? So she dredged her memory and came up with a little more.

"I think he was pretty for a man, but maybe he was only young. I was nine, after all, so I never gave these things much thought."

"You must remember more than that."

"He put sugar in our milk until Aunt Ruthie put a stop to that. He was around the house quite a bit, but maybe he lived somewhere else." She thought for a minute, then said, "That's about it. Not much, I know."

She was right; it wasn't nearly enough.

Even so, I said, "Maybe we ought to try to find him." I fully expected Maude to shoot the idea down. To my surprise, she looked at me like this was the first good idea she'd heard. The next morning, she brought the subject up with Reverend Peasley.

He laughed right out loud. "I can assure you that your uncle wasn't the kind to survive out west. His nose ran all the time. We gave him quite a hard time about it in the school-yard, and I remember."

He seemed to me to remember this very fondly. I had a sudden picture of the Toleridge boy come to mind.

"Where was he headed? Independence?" Mrs. Peasley said, like she was trying to remember something funny she'd heard. "'To ride the tail of the Oregon Trail.' He didn't even have a wagon, did he?"

"One mule," Reverend Peasley said in the unmistakable tone of, and good riddance.

"How far to Independence?" I asked. Independence was beginning to sound real good to me.

"It must be three hundred miles," he said, "maybe more."

"How long would it take to get there on a mule?" Maude asked.

"Weeks," said Reverend Peasley. "Far longer, walking."

"I thought you said he had a mule," I said.

"The mule carried supplies," Reverend Peasley said. "Your uncle walked."

"Here, let's stop talking about this," Mrs. Peasley said suddenly. "Independence is no place for young ladies to set their sights for."

"I suppose not," Maude said, and even Reverend Peasley heard the disappointment in her tone.

"He never was the kind to listen to good advice either," the reverend said, beefing up his argument. "He didn't do any planning; just one minute he was doing a little smithing, and the next minute he fancied he could set down his anvil out there in Independence and get to be

sample content of The Misadventures of Maude March

- [Pre-Calculus For Dummies.pdf](#)
- [Trusted Criminals: White Collar Crime In Contemporary Society.pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [download online Requiem \(Delirium, Book 3\) for free](#)
- [read online Birds of the Pacific Northwest \(Falcon Pocket Guide\) here](#)

- <http://unpluggedtv.com/lib/Pre-Calculus-For-Dummies.pdf>
- <http://nautickim.es/books/Trusted-Criminals--White-Collar-Crime-In-Contemporary-Society.pdf>
- <http://diy-chirol.com/lib/Android-Game-Recipes--A-Problem-Solution-Approach.pdf>
- <http://hasanetmekci.com/ebooks/En-De-Moord-In-Extase--De-Cock--Book-18-.pdf>