

Excerpt from—
A Bride for Buckskin



John Spaulding noticed his hands were shaking slightly as he rode his horse across the frozen Missouri River on the morning of March 1, 1874, leading his pack animal behind him. At twenty-five, he was headed west to test his hand at hunting buffalo and staking a claim in western Nebraska. The tremor was evidence of the excitement he was feeling in anticipation of great days ahead.

He felt a surge of confidence as he came off the ice and trotted up the bank of the river. The plan that he and Nettie, his fiancée, had agreed on was for him to go ahead alone to find a suitable place to settle, file a homestead claim, and build a cabin, while hunting bison for their hides.

At first, Nettie was terrified by the dangers of such a venture. She worried about the Indians and the buffalo, too. John assured her that he would never let a two-thousand-pound bison to hurt him. As for the Indians, well, he had spent most of his childhood playing with Winnebago boys who taught him all they knew about living in the woods, hunting, trapping, animal lore, running, and wrestling. He had learned to speak and understand their language skillfully, too.

By the time he was fourteen, John had exhausted all of the educational opportunities offered by the one-room schools of Bad Axe (now Vernon) County in the southwestern corner of Wisconsin. He had heard of an academy located across the Mississippi River in Minnesota that offered advanced courses in literature and liberal arts.

When he inquired about the academy, John learned that the main stockholder was a man named Mr. Dobbs, who told him that if he wanted to attend the school, he could live with the Dobbs family, which had a large house and took in boarders. John agreed to take care of any chores that needed to be done around the stables and farm yard in exchange for his board and room. He jumped on this opportunity to continue his education.

John found the Dobbs to be a delightfully warm-hearted family, consisting of mother, father, three daughters, Nettie, Anna and Ida, and two sons, Ben and George. Nettie was the oldest sister, who at ten was a playful, light-footed sprite. She was ten years old the year he turned sixteen.

During the short Minnesota summers, John often joined crews that rode rafts of saw logs on the Mississippi River from the North Woods to Saint Louis, Missouri. Many a night on the river he would wrap his blanket around his shoulders and listen to the night birds calling and the nearby animals foraging for food as the big raft glided by silently.

The years passed swiftly. Mr. Dobbs saw that John had a noticeable skill of caring for the livestock, especially those that were sick or injured. Consequently, he told John he would be happy to help him enroll in an Eastern medical school. But the young man declined, saying he couldn't pursue a profession that would keep him indoors.

Meanwhile, in the six years that he had known Nettie, she had grown from a perky little girl to a most attractive and personable young woman. Most disturbing to John was the fact that he had fallen completely in love with her. But did she have any similar feelings for him? He just didn't know. Moreover,

he wondered what her parents might think. Would they believe that he had taken advantage of their friendship and many kindnesses as an underhanded means of winning Nettie's affection?

The turmoil in his mind and heart led him to try a change in scenery to test his feelings and evaluate his situation from a different perspective. So he saddled one of his horses and loaded his gear onto the other and made a vague excuse for going to visit his sister, Lucinda, at Mondamin, Iowa. He was on the road for two weeks. The quiet nights on the trip were his most enjoyable times. He especially liked watching the dancing flames of his campfire burn down to glowing embers that turned into gray, ash-covered coals.

Lucinda and her family welcomed him with open arms and her husband, Tom, appeared to be putting his farm on a profitable path, unlike a couple of false starts he suffered after mustering out of the Union Army at the end of the war between the states.

John shared his feelings with his sister about Nettie and his doubts of winning the approval of her father and mother as a prospective son-in-law.

"Young man," she declared, "you're welcome to stay with us as long as you like until you're ready to ride back up the trail that brought you. When you get back to your Nettie, if she looks like she does now in your mind's eye, tell her how you feel. And follow that up by telling her father you hope to be the best son-in-law anyone ever had."

John wasted no time riding back across Iowa and the southeastern corner of Minnesota to return to Nettie and the rest of the Dobbs family. He arrived on Sunday and Mr. Dobbs told him to feed his horses quickly and come in for dinner. John told the father,

“I don’t want to be your guest under any false pretenses. I hope you will give your consent to ask Nettie to marry me.”

“John,” replied, “I trust you and admire you as if you were one of my own sons. I know that you and Nettie will be very happy together.”

Sitting once more at the family’s fireside John realized with conviction that Nettie was the kind of a girl he had always hoped to find and that as a potential mate she was without an equal on earth. And thus they became engaged with her parents’ consent and blessing.

Nettie was almost a foot shorter than John’s six feet two inches but he heartily agreed with whoever said priceless objects can most certainly come in small packages. She loved conversation and was excellent company. He had long ago learned to be on his guard to dodge the sharp turns of wit that delighted everyone.

However, her wit had a sparkling but gentle quality and she was careful never to use it to deride or belittle. Besides her vivacious personality, she had a compassionate understanding which children appreciated and adored.

Her sister Ida was younger, a little more sober and probably a little less self-reliant. Ida soon recognized that Nettie and John were strongly attracted to each other and she immediately became a conspirator in making complimentary remarks about him to her parents. The more John saw of his Nettie as she grew older—and that was virtually at every opportunity—the more convinced he became that she would always be the only girl for him.

He continued to work hard and save him money, and it wasn’t long before he was not only a skilled woodsmen and building

craftsmen, but he had also acquired a good wagon, a yoke of oxen, a sod-breaking plow, a milk cow, and a 20-pound muzzle-loading rifle that seemed to have eyes of its own. He practiced enough to develop skill with that "Shootin' Arn." And it wasn't long before he found himself barred from the community turkey shoots where marksmen paid their quarter and took their shot with the winner taking home a quarter of beef or other merchandise.

Nettie's mother passed away the summer after John and Nettie became engaged. Her death and the cold winter of 1872 and 1873 (in which so many people froze to death) motivated them to look around and try to find a less severe climate. He also attempted to buy more land nearby, as would befit a family man, but soon learned that all of the land in the neighborhood had been taken up. He couldn't could not afford to pay the prices that owners were asking for developed land. Certainly, his own small acreage was too small to support a bride even if he could find work regularly in spite of the growing scarcity of good timber in the area.

Nettie and John talked it over and he suggested going West alone to hunt buffalo for their hides. Her eyes immediately become misty pools: of apprehension as she stammered anxiously. *"But Johnny! . . . The Indians! . . . All that danger! We don't need a lot of money! Let's start out right here with what we have . . . Please, Johnny?"*

It was only by using his most convincing rhetoric that he was able to calm her fears and convince her that with her to come back to, no ton of enraged buffalo was going to run over him, and that the Indian hadn't been born with sharp enough eyes to see him before he spotted them first.

John knew that W. F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody had built up a ranch near North Platte, Nebraska, with money that he had earned hunting and selling buffalo meat to the track-laying crew of the Kansas-Pacific Railroad. It was about the same time that "Wild Bill" Hickok had left his job as marshal of Abilene or Hayes City, Kansas, to capture several buffalo calves and yearlings to stage a money-losing "buffalo hunt" at Niagara Falls, New York. Even at that, Hickok was no ice breaker in the field as P. T. Barnum had exhibited "wild bison" in the east as early as 1843.

John left the oxen and his farm implements with Nettie's father, assuring him that he would be back for them—and for Nettie—just as soon as he had located a site he could built up into a substantial farm or ranch. He sold his small plot of land and his cabin and bought a light rifle that fired fixed ammunition, and which he could carry conveniently be in a leather saddle scabbard.

He had supper with the Dobbs family the night before leaving. Nettie had very little to say but her large and questioning eyes followed him constantly and once in a while he thought that he could detect the glint of a tear which she would blink away rapidly after averting her eyes.

When he took leave that evening she came into his arms and sobbed, "*Johnny ... Please... don't let anything happen to... us.*" When he saw how apprehensive she was, he too, felt a foreboding sense of panic. As he brushed the tears from her eyes and kissed her goodbye, a chill clutched at his heart as if in some premonition of some deep sorrow to come.

John left early the next morning and rode south and west toward Mondamin, Iowa, and once more spent a few days with sister

Lucinda and family. The children were as sturdy as young trees, and his brother-in-law, Thomas, reminded him of the promise that he had made the last time John had seen him. He was to keep his eyes peeled and notify him at once if he found a place where a man could really make it big.

The days sped rapidly but John was anxious to be on his way west, so once more he swung up into his McClelland cavalry saddle and picked up the lead rope of his pack horse. He crossed the Missouri River on the ice on March 1st and rode west to the Platte. He continued up that river along its north bank until he came to the settlement of North Platte. From here he crossed the divide to the Republican River, a distance of some 75 miles, and continued up its valley to Culbertson at the mouth of Frenchman Creek. This was the last settlement to the west, and he rode up to the hitching post of the general store (and sometimes post office) on March 10, 1874.

John Spaulding was ready to start seeking his claim.

End of excerpt of A Bride for Buckskin.

