

IRENE HUNT

# ACROSS FIVE APRILS

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***ACROSS FIVE APRILS***

*by* IRENE HUNT

Sample



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ELLEN Creighton and her nine-year-old son, Jethro, were planting potatoes in the half-acre just south of their cabin that morning in mid-April, 1861; they were out in the field as soon as breakfast was over, and southern Illinois at that hour was pink with sunrise and swelling redbud and clusters of bloom over the apple orchard across the road. Jethro walked on the warm clods of plowed earth and felt them crumble beneath his feet as he helped his mother carry the tub of potato cuttings they had prepared the night before.

"It's damp fur down and warm on top," he remarked, poking a brown hand deep into the soil. "Once we git these planted and a soft rain comes, we'll hev a crop to make people up north call us 'Egypt' fer sure."

He filled a burlap pouch with the potato cuttings and hoisted it expertly to his thin shoulder where a batch of new freckles was just beginning to appear. The world seemed a good place to him that morning, and he felt ready to stride down the length of the field with a firm step and a joke on his lips.

"Do you reckon we'll be through by the time ham and corn bread is ready fer dinner, Mis' Creighton?" he asked

grinning. He called her "Mis' Creighton" sometimes as his older brothers did when they teased her; it was just a step from the too-bold joke of addressing her by her given name.

His mother smiled back at him, acknowledging his mood, but she shook her head at his words.

"Yore hopes is makin' a fool of yore reason, Jeth. We're lucky if these 'taters is bedded by noon tomorrow."

She made short, quick cuts with her hoe in the mellow soil and waited until Jethro placed a cutting, eye upward, in the spot hollowed out for it, after which she raked a covering of soil over it and moved down the long furrow.

She was a small, spare woman with large dark eyes and skin as brown and dry as leather. She had been a pretty girl back in the 1830's when she married Matthew Creighton, but prettiness was short-lived among country women of her time; she didn't think much about it anymore except now and then when Jenny's fourteen-year-old radiance was especially compelling. Even if she had been concerned, there were reverberations of Calvinism strong within her, which would have protested vigorously against the vanity of regret for a passing beauty. She had borne twelve children, four of whom were dead—perhaps five, for the oldest son had not been heard from since he left for the goldfields of California twelve years before; she had lived through sickness, poverty, and danger for over thirty years; the sight of a pretty face might bring a tired smile to her lips, but it was a thing of little value in Ellen's world.

Jethro was her youngest child, born in the year of '52, a year in which three of her children died within one week of the dreaded disease they called child's paralysis, a disease which struck the country that year, people said, like the soldiers of Herod. Ellen knew that she favored her youngest son, that she overlooked shortcomings in Jethro for which her older children had been punished. It was a weakness of her advancing years, she supposed, but this was the son who had been spared that summer when children all around were dying of the agonizing sickness; it

looked as if, somehow, Destiny had marked him. One didn't talk about such things; the world, she knew, was impatient with women who value their own children too highly. Ellen kept her silence, but she saw signs of special talents in Jethro, and she watched over him with special tenderness.

They worked together for an hour or more without speaking. Ellen was grave and absorbed in the anxious thoughts of that spring; Jethro was accustomed to adapting himself to the behaviors and moods of older people, and he found enough in the world about him to occupy his interest as he worked. A south breeze brought the scent of lilacs and sweet fennel to his nostrils and set all the frosty-green leaves of a silver poplar tree to trembling. There was a column of wood-smoke feathering up from the kitchen chimney, a sign that Jenny was already making preparations for a hearty noon meal. From the neighboring field across the creek he could hear the shouted commands to the plow horses as Matt Creighton and his two older sons got on with the spring plowing. It was a fine morning; many people around him were troubled, he knew, but that was a part of the adult world which he accepted as a matter of course. Adults were usually troubled. There were chinch bugs and grasshoppers, months of drought, elections, slavery, secession, talk of war—the adult world of trouble, though, was not real enough to dim the goodness of an April morning.

At about seven o'clock a team and wagon pulled out of the barnlot, stopping for a minute before turning into the road while the driver spoke to a girl who came running out of the kitchen door.

Jethro chuckled. "Shad's leavin' fer Newton now, I guess. Jenny has to say good-bye like as if he was goin' to the North Pole."

He watched the wagon from the corner of his eye as he worked, and when the team started coming down the road toward the potato patch, he put the heavy bag of cuttings aside and raced across the field to the roadside. His mother

laid down her hoe and followed slowly, picking her way over the mounds of plowed earth that Jethro's feet seemed barely to touch.

The young schoolmaster stopped the team and climbed down from the wagon to stand at the fencerow waiting for Jethro and Ellen to come up from midfield. He was a tall, powerfully built youth of twenty, with a firm mouth and grave, dark eyes that gave him the appearance of an older man. He had come out from Pennsylvania three years earlier to study at McKendree College, where an uncle was professor of natural philosophy, a subject that later generations would call physics. Faced with insufficient funds to carry on his studies at the end of his first year, young Yale had turned to the country schools as a stepping-stone toward further work in college, and a series of circumstances had led him to the school for which Matt Creighton served as a director. Here he had stayed, not just one year as originally planned, but two, and now in 1861 he had hired himself out as a farmhand to Matt for the summer and contracted to teach still a third term that fall.

He had been stricken with typhoid fever during his first year of teaching, and Ellen Creighton had patiently nursed him back to health with the skill she had learned over the years. There was a strong tie of affection between the two of them; Ellen counted Shadrach as a part of her family and looked after him as she did her own, and Shadrach Yale, in turn, showed a thoughtful courtesy for her that few women of the prairies received from their own sons.

"Will you be back by suppertime, Shad?" Jethro called breathlessly as he approached the fencerow.

At school he addressed the young teacher as "Master," but now that Shadrach was so much a member of the family the necessary formalities of a schoolroom were forgotten.

"It's not likely, Jeth, not before nine or maybe later."

Shadrach smiled at the thin eager face turned up to him. He was mature enough at twenty to appreciate being a hero to a nine-year-old boy; besides that, Jethro's quick

mind and delight in learning had been a source of pleasure for studious young Yale, who had known the frustration of trying to penetrate the apathy and unconcern of a backwoods classroom. He had talked to both parents about the promise he recognized in the boy; Matt, in spite of his pleasure, had shaken his head and wondered if the praise for Jethro had not stemmed from interest in Jethro's sister, Jenny. But Ellen had felt no doubts; the praise was in line with what she herself believed firmly.

She stood beside the gray rails that morning with her hands folded beneath her apron. Matt had made a pretext of needing supplies from town, but she knew that this trip to Newton in the midst of a late planting season would have been unthinkable except for the urgency of getting word from the world beyond their own fields and woods pastures. Her face looked drawn in the bright sunlight.

"I wisht there was a telegraph in Newton, Shad," she said.

He nodded. "There's one in Olney; they'll send any important news on up to Newton as soon as it comes through. At any rate I'll bring the latest papers."

"Seems sometimes there's a deep silence all about us out here waitin' to be filled." She and the young man looked at one another, each pair of eyes dark with anxiety.

Jethro kicked a stone in the road. "Sure wisht I was goin' to town with you, Shad," he said finally, because it seemed that someone *must* say something.

"I know. Well, there'll be other trips this summer, Jeth."

Shadrach started to climb back into the wagon as he spoke; then, changing his mind, he turned back and placed his hands quickly on Ellen's shoulders. "Try not to worry," he said quietly.

The caress brought sudden tears to her eyes. She and Jethro stood watching as he drove away; when the wagon disappeared in a clump of trees at a bend in the road, Ellen turned back to her work slowly as if overwhelmed by a deep weariness.

"The Lord knows what news he'll bring back," she said.

# ACROSS FIVE APRILS

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