

# Potatoes

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MRS. BELTON was driving the milk cows to pasture in the early morning. They walked up the trail in single file, the three cowbells flooding the air with their clatter; to the woman on the white horse it was singing music, as pleasant as the spring sunshine.

The trail sloped up from the barn, thru a patch of timber and out onto the flats. Along the trail-edge young grass stood in scattered bunches and the cows made hasty reaches for the green blades, licking them in with long tongues.

“Hiya, there, Crescent. Nig! Move along,” Mrs. Belton shouted, to keep them moving, then sat easy in the saddle, looking over the backs of her milkers or searching the trailside for early flowers.

She drove the cows thru the pasture fence, shut the bars and let Bess run back to the corrals. At the barn Bess slid to a halt as Mrs. Belton swung off.

Between the house and the creek Dan, her husband, and Pete, the hired man, were plowing. The smell of damp, fresh earth filled the atmosphere. She breathed deeply of it, stopping a moment to watch the sod twist over and lie in shiny black ribbons, and then went on to the house.

In the kitchen it was different. Egg-smeared breakfast dishes were piled on the table and the floor was littered with boots, socks, Dick’s clothing and an ax handle Dan had been shaping. With a last look outside she began the housework.

At eleven o’clock she went to the root house after meat for dinner. Groping thru the darkness for the pork barrel, she found it and stuck her hand into the cold brine. Her fingers touched bottom and she slid her hand around, weaving it back and forth. The brine slopped emptily.

“Oh, goodness,” she exclaimed. The salt pork was gone and only yesterday Dick had said there was more. But she had told Dan to kill a pig a week ago.

Angrily kicking a potato from underfoot, she went outside. A clear, sweet whistle quivered thru the air. She stopped there, biting her lip, and glared at Dan. If it were the middle of July he would still whistle “Annie Laurie” and still believe he could raise crops before winter.

As she went to the wood place Mrs. Belton noticed the pile of logs Dan had got out two winters ago for a new barn. They were rotting. Dan was that way—start something with great energy, work himself out in a few days, and drop it. Disgusting. She picked up the ax and chopped viciously at a cottonwood log. Dan always kept a sharp ax, but

that was because a woman couldn't do anything with a dull one. When out of breath she gathered a bucket of chips, picked up the wood and went in to renew the fire.

Dick would be home from school for dinner, so she would have to have it on time. When it was ready she went to the door and sent a long who-o-we-eg-e echoing across the field. She looked up the road and saw Dick coming. He left his pony at the barn and ran to the house—a husky youngster of thirteen, quiet.

“Ma, is dinner ready? I got to be back.”

“Yes. Hurry and wash before the men get here.”

Pete took the team to the barn; Dan came in, his face damp and dirty.

“Well, my love, have you got lots to eat?” he shouted boisterously. “I’m ravenous.”

“Dan! Quit—your dirty hands. How can I when I haven’t anything to cook?”

What! Pork, chickens, eggs, beef! Woman, talk sense.”

“I told you to kill a pig.” She slapped a big spoonful of potatoes into a serving dish. “The salt pork’s gone.” She slid the dish onto the table. “Next winter you’ll want eggs—don’t wash your face on that towel—where would we be without egg money? You talk sense!”

“Oh, that’s all right.” Dan held up the towel. “It’s dirty anyway.”

“I told you to kill a pig.”

“Ho, never mind,” he squeezed her arm. “Next fall we’ll be well fixed. Bushels and bushels of potatoes. We have rich ground, woman, rich ground: best in Montana. We’ll keep Dick home tomorrow.”

She knocked his hand away. “Yes, that’s the way. You should have planted Saturday so he wouldn’t miss school. You never plan things. You’re planting too many potatoes. Everybody is putting in acres of them. . . . I don’t see why you didn’t kill that pig when I told you to.”

Mrs. Belton poured the tea. “Dan, I want those raisins!”

Dan filled his hand and set the raisins back in the pantry. “Now you keep still. You don’t know anything about it. You always run everything I do into the ground,”

“If you’d take my advice once in a while. . . . I told you to kill a pig. Dinner’s cold. Dinner’s getting cold, I said.”

“Oh, damn the pig.”

Dan slammed the raisins to the floor and started out kicking a chair out of the way. It crashed against the table, narrowly missing his wife. Almost running, he dashed thru the door, grabbed the ax as he went by the wood place and headed for the pig pen. He leapt inside and Mrs. Belton saw the ax flash up and down. A pig squealed. Dan threw the ax out and a young shoat after it.

Dick had been eating but laid down his fork. “Ma—I-I ain’t hungry.”

“Now, Dick, eat your dinner and run to school. Don’t say a word and he’ll be all right.”

Dick took a piece of pie in his fists and went out to his pony. Mrs. Belton swept up the raisins.

Pete came from the barn and helped Dan butcher the pig. They hung it up.

"Aren't you going to scrape it?" Pete asked.

Dan jerked up the ax and started for the house. "Let her skin it herself, or feed it to the chickens—I don't give a rap."

Dan came in. "There's your darned old pig," he said gruffly, and without looking at his wife washed the blood from his hands. He rapidly consumed eggs, potatoes and pie and when filled snatched his hat off the hook and left. Pete followed his example.

Mrs. Belton did the baking and went out to cut seed potatoes. Dan would never get thru if she didn't help. The knife slipped rapidly, steadily thru the potatoes, one live eye in each piece.

At four-thirty Dick came home from school.

"Ma, can I have a cookie?" he said, sniffing the odor of fresh baking.

"Dear, this is tiresome," Mrs. Belton straightened up and scratched her back. "Yes, just one, and then get the cows."

Dick ran to the pantry.

An hour later the two men came in for supper. Dan was humming to himself as his wife hurried supper.

"You and Pete eat and then cut seed potatoes. Dick and I will do the chores. I did two sacks."

"Just as you say, my love, just as you say."

Pete washed and began eating. Dan absently trimmed his finger-nails with a jackknife. He smiled.

"I thot of a little jingle," he said, reaching on the shelf for a pencil and paper. He sat down to write.

Pete finished his supper and went out.

Mrs. Belton stood by the stove, one hand grasping the lifter. Her face was red. He was impossible!—writing silly jingles and keeping the work back.

"You're the most aggravatin' person!" she exploded, and slammed the door as she went out on the back porch. Leaning against the corner post she let her eyes follow the milk cows as they came down the pasture trail.

Seven years ago Dan had quit school teaching to file on the homestead. "In a few years we'll be well enough off to send Dick to college, then he can run the ranch while we enjoy ourselves," he had said enthusiastically.

She had entered the plan with high hopes, too, but things hadn't worked out right. Somehow their small herd of cattle didn't grow much; their cayuses were poor work horses; and Dan wouldn't do things right.

The cows filed into the corral. Mrs. Belton took the milk pans from the porch table and went back to the kitchen. Dan was still lingering over his supper.

Mrs. Belton started clearing off the table.

"Here, one little piece of bread yet."

"Dan! How do you expect me to get my work done! You won't be ready to plant tomorrow."

Dan swallowed his tea and jumped up. "I'm going now. Darn fool that I am. Here I sit, wasting time. Now I'll have to work by lantern light."

"And get up late in the morning," she retorted.

"Never mind, Duckie, we'll be rich someday," he encouraged her, grabbing his hat and rushing out.

Mrs. Belton picked up the piece of paper he left on the table.

*"You may ride, shoot or sing a song,  
And if you'll only come along,  
You'll grow both well and strong,  
In this life so wild and free.  
Over the prairie, this life's so free and merry  
The only place I care to be is riding on the range."*

There was only the one verse. Mrs. Belton smiled pridefully, everybody didn't have a husband who could write like that. After reading it again she laid it on the shelf and picked up the milk buckets.

The milk hissed against the bottom of the pail.

"We need a separator the worst way. We're losing money every day—so-o-o Nig—I could sell enough cream to pay for it in no time. Dan's so stubborn. It would be easy, taking care of the milk."

Thick foam crawled along the sides of the pail and bulged up in the middle.

"Yeah," said Dick. "I can turn it, Ma. It's fun. I turned Tony's." His tiny streams of milk didn't make foam.

Eight o'clock the next morning they were in the field. Dan and Dick plowed, Mrs. Belton and Pete planted. At ten o'clock Mrs. Belton went to the house and got a jug of buttermilk and a bucket of cookies. They lunched in the field, a happy bunch. Dick threw rocks at gophers. When no one was looking and he ran out of rocks he used seed potatoes.

Dan sat on the plow handles, one hand and his mouth full of cookies, the other holding a glass of buttermilk to wash them down.

"That ground," he said—"Here. I'll whip you, Dick, if you don't stop throwing potatoes."

"Aw." Dick protested but quickly dropped the potatoes from his hand.

"—Black and damp. There's no end to what it'll raise."

"Yes, but I wish they had been in a week ago," said his wife. "If we have a dry spring they won't get started."

"Ho, they'll grow in that ground," Dan laughed at her. "Well, this will never do. Come on, Dick."

When the first crop of alfalfa was stacked and the potatoes were cultivated for the second time, Dan got restless. He had been working pretty steady.

"The timothy isn't quite ripe. We've been working too hard, Duckie. Hmm—trout! Say, Pete, let's knock off and run up to the beaver dams for a couple days fishing."

Pete smiled. "Now, that's what I bin hankerin' for—a big mess of trout."

Mrs. Belton didn't say anything. Hunting and fishing were irresistible to Dan. A mess of trout would go good. She baked fresh bread and raisin cookies: they were Dan's favorite kind.

With a wistful face she watched them go, their horses loping steadily up the road toward the canyon and the beaver dams. It was a long time since she had gone. She sighed, thinking of the work to be done. Dan should be getting ready for haying. Now he would be behind all fall.

He was late with the haying and late with the potato digging, but they had a fine crop. The seed potatoes and enough for their own use were in the root-house. The rest were stacked in the corner of the cowshed, ready to haul. Dan threw a layer of straw on them for protection.

"Now, woman, you see I was right. That was foresight. Pretty soon you can buy all those things you've been wanting, like Fords and separators," he announced gaily.

Mrs. Belton was happy, too. "I'll have breakfast early. You can haul a load and be back before dark. I'll use the separator the next morning."

Dan sobered. "What? Will you never learn! I'd be foolish to sell now. They'll be five dollars a sack before long. You see, my love, I've got business sense: that's where you fall down. You can't see far enough ahead."

"Dan!" Mrs. Belton's hands dropped to her side. "You'd better sell those in the shed. The price is good and we've got to have money. A hard frost--"

Dan lounged to the doorway. "Great weather--Indian summer." He whistled. "Oh, I'll cover them. Charge what we have to have." He looked up at the McClellan range, wondering how many shells he had for the rifle.

"You better get our winter's wood then."

He counted the shells in the belt under the rifle.

"Eight's enough," said Dan. "What?--oh, yes, I'll get some wood. Looks like we'll have a late fall. Guess I'll take a little hunt. I can't resist the call of the hills, woman."

*"When the days of bright September  
Rest upon the mountains bold,  
And the sun in regal splendor,  
Turns the aspen leaves to gold:  
Then my heart is in the mountains,  
And that's where I long to be,  
Where the blacktail herd together,  
And the blue grouse wait for me."*

As Dan sang his jingle he took Betsy Jane off the hooks and looked thru the barrel.

"Betsy Jane and I will get you some venison, my love."

"You'd better get some wood to cook it with first."

"Oh, I'll let you do that. There's the ax."

"Pa, can I go?" Dick quivered like an anxious hound.

"Not this time. We might get snowed in." Dick blinked and turned away. Dan hastened on. "I'm only going for a hurry-up trip. I'll take you next year."

"I want to go now."

Dan was delighted. "He's just like I was when I was a kid," he told his wife, with a hearty laugh, "crazy to hunt."

He began cleaning the rifle. "You stay home and help your mother, this time, Dick."

Mrs. Belton worried after Dan was gone. She was afraid something would happen to the potatoes. The price might go down or they might freeze and then she wouldn't get the separator.

The second day after Dan went hunting it clouded up and the wind grew cold. Mrs. Belton watched the weather all day. In the evening she and Dick piled more straw on the potatoes.

"I'm so afraid we'll get a bad storm that'll freeze them," she said to Dick.

"Aw, they won't freeze, Ma. Look't all the straw on them." He stuck his arm into the covering.

"I hope not," she answered worriedly.

Mrs. Belton didn't sleep much that night. She got up several times to look at the thermometer, but it went down only three degrees. The next day was still threatening. She stood outside, looking at the low hung clouds, feeling the chilly wind from the northwest.

"Dick," she suddenly said, "you stay home today."

Dick looked at her in surprise.

"I'm going to sell the potatoes before it's too late. Go over to Tony's and see if you can borrow a team and wagon. Get the hired man, too."

Mrs. Belton harnessed their own team, hitched it to the wagon and drove up to the cow-shed. Dick arrived with Tony's hired man and a four-horse team. They made one trip that day and another the next, hauling all but forty sacks of the potatoes. The weather was still raw but no worse.

"If it will hold off another day," Mrs. Belton said, "I'll take the rest in tomorrow and bring out the separator."

"Maybe it won't get cold," said Dick.

"Oh, don't you think so?" His mother swallowed. She looked outside. "It will. I did best. Dan won't get more than three dollars a sack if he keeps them forever."

Mrs. Belton went to bed and dropped into a restful sleep. She was humming through her nose when she opened the door on the grey morning. The humming stopped. Her eyes were wide open as she took a quick breath, raised one hand and put it against the door jamb. A warm, southwest wind pressed against her face.

For several minutes she stood in the doorway, then slowly went out to the cow-shed. Dick followed.

She threw the straw off the potatoes.

"What'll we do?" she said, looking at them.

Dick only shook his head.

"Here—I know. Drag them out as far as they were." She marked the point with her toe. They piled them in two rows across the empty corner, covering them and filling the corner with straw.

"Dan can't tell. You keep still. Dick. We'll wait and when the price drops it will be all right."

"Now we can't get the separator, darn it, Ma."

An inch of wet snow fell during the night. "That will cover my tracks," thought Mrs. Belton.

Late that afternoon Dan came in. He had two blue grouse tied to his saddle.

"I'm soaked to the skin," he said when his wife came out. "Poor luck. The deer are too high up yet. I'll get one later."

"Pshaw, and I'm hungry for steak." Her voice wasn't quite natural.

There was something wrong. Dan felt it. He looked at the wood place. The ax, sawbuck and one crooked cottonwood log showed him where it was. He hunched his shoulders as though suddenly chilled.

"Here, woman," he said quickly. "Don't stand gapping. Take these grouse in and cook them for supper. I'm starved."

She obeyed without a word. Dan cocked his eye at her, then thumped the horse in the ribs. "Cut her off that time," he said to the horse and began whistling loudly as he unsaddled.

Mrs. Belton was rolling biscuits and Dick was sitting by the stove drying his shoes. Dan came in, hung up his rifle and began unbuttoning his coat. It was half off. "Did you put more straw on the spuds?"

The rolling pin stopped.

Dick spoke quickly. "We put about two feet on." He bent over to see if his shoes were dry.

"Good enough." The coat came off.

The rolling pin revolved again.

Dan picked up the latest paper.

"Ho, Duckie, did you see this? Spuds went up two-bits. Now we'll see what we see. I knew it, I knew it all the time. They'll go up more, too. Wait and see."

"I noticed that," she said weakly.

By the first of December potatoes were four dollars.

"Too bad they didn't get to five," Dan said, "so we could have a good Christmas. I'd like to buy Dick a rifle. But we'll make it up. I tell you, woman, we're on the road to riches. If I can do this once I can do it again."

Mrs. Belton did not look up from the socks she was darning, yet she stuck her finger with the needle. She sucked the pain out. "Dan, I wish you wouldn't bother me when I'm busy."

Laying down his pencil, Dan looked long at his wife. "Bother you? Say, what's the matter? You're nervous as an old settin' hen. Been drinking too much coffee?"

"Oh, hush up." Mrs. Belton didn't look at him; her hand was shaking.

"Huh," he grunted, and started writing again.

Slower and slower Mrs. Belton pushed the darning needle thru the sock heel until she stopped altogether. Suddenly scooping the articles from her lap, she got up and went into the bedroom. Far back in the corner of the clothes closet, in a little box under a pile of rubbish, was the potato money. Pulling it out she looked at the roll of bills, clenching it in her hand. A noise from the front room startled her and quickly throwing the money back in the box she hurried to the kitchen, unconsciously wiping her hand on her apron.

By the middle of January the price of potatoes had crawled to four-seventy-five. Dan sang as he chopped wood and fed the cattle. Then he sat by the stove, chair tipped back, and dreamed of a rich future. His wife wasn't happy. She grew more nervous and reticent.

"You've spent that money a million times, and you haven't got it yet." She glanced toward the bedroom.

"It's lying out in the shed in sacks," was his cheerful answer.

Mrs. Belton caught her breath. "Well, that doesn't get any wood and the box is empty."

"Wood? What do you do with it all? I've brought in at least a cord today. I never saw such a woman to burn wood!"

"And I never saw such a man to get it!"

Dan went out and got a load.

"It's turning cold. Looks like a bad spell," he said.

Before long Dick came home from school, bringing the paper with him.

"Tony was to town and got it," he said. "I'm hungry, Ma."

Mrs. Belton gave him a doughnut. "I'll have to get my baking done ahead. Mrs. Tony will be needing me any day now. She wants a boy."

Dan took the paper and settled back in his chair.

"Women are always wanting something. She'll take what she gets, I guess. Dick, fix the fire."

Mrs. Belton stood gripping the back of a chair as Dan looked at the price quotations. Her back was to him. Suddenly the paper rattled. Dan's feet slapped the floor.

"Whoopee!" he leapt up. "Ho, ho. I knew it! I knew it! Five dollars. They're up to five dollars."

"Oh!" His wife sank into the chair.

Dan didn't see her. He jumped in the air and clapped his heels twice before landing. The house shook under the impact of his capers.

Big eyed and pale-faced, Dick stood by the stove and watched his mother. She was trying to smile.

"Gosh, it's awful cold," Dick said and pushed the draft open.

"We'll have to quit this foolishness and do the chores." Dan was out of breath. "Tomorrow, if it isn't too bad, I'll start hauling." He kissed his wife on the back of her neck and hurried out.



Mrs. Belton went to bed early because of a headache and Dick studied hard. Dan pranced around the house all evening, whistling and singing.

That night the thermometer traveled till it hit bottom. It was the coldest Dan had ever seen in Montana: fifty-four below and the wind knifing in from the east. The snow whirled and drove thru cracks in the windows and doors. The cattle crowded against the buildings, backs humped to the storm, tails curved between their legs.

"Say, my love, do you think the spuds will stand it? I never dreamed it would get so cold. They're well protected except on the inside."

"Oh, I don't know. Go see."

It was soon after dinner when Dan started putting on his coat.

"Come on, Dick, dress warm and we'll go out and take a look."

"What do you want me for, Pa? It's too cold. I don't want to go out there." Dick didn't look at Dan; he was busily whittling a match to toothpick size. "Come, come. Put on your coat." Dan was impatient. "I might need you."

Dick looked beseechingly at his mother, but her back was turned and she was very busy. He slowly put on his overshoes, coat and cap.

Mrs. Belton scraped the frost off a part of the window and watched them go. One hundred feet from the house they were covered by the blizzard, but she still looked out. Only forty sacks, but that was two hundred dollars! She wished she had told Dan before. If they were froze—She got the money, tucking it in her dress front, and tried to steady herself.

Dick watched Dan dig into the potatoes with one hand. He shifted from left foot to right foot and back, as he saw Dan's face set and whiten. Dan remained on his knees, quiet, looking at the straw. Dick imagined he could hear Dan's watch ticking the seconds off. He turned away, blinking. Gosh, it was cold! A cow bawled.

Dan felt of the potatoes again. "I—I guess we can't get you a gun this year."

He got up, brushing the straw from his coat.

"Froze, Pa?" Dick's teeth chattered.

"I hate like the very devil to tell your mother. I'll never hear the last of it."

Dan beat his hands together to keep them warm.

"Never mind, Dick, we'll do better next time. Blast the weather!"

With his chin pulled deep in his coat collar, Dick stood and shivered.

"Hey, you're getting cold. Run along." Dan got down again and began to dig farther in.

Hunching his shoulders higher, Dick remained where he was, wishing he had been in school that day. He kicked at the straw.

"It wasn't Ma's fault. I told her there was enough straw."

Dan jerked his head up, his temper flaring. "You here yet? Get the hell into the house." As he watched Dick go his face relaxed. Sticking up for his mother—the rascal. He went on with the inspection, feeling of the second row of potatoes. He began whistling as he got up and threw the straw back in the hole. The frost hadn't got that far.

Hurrying toward the house, he caught up with Dick and together they went into the kitchen. Dan closed the door and kicked the rag against the crack at the bottom. He slowly peeled off his coat.

“Brrrrr,” he shivered.

Dick slipped into the front room and sat quietly by the heater.

“Well, my love.” Dan took a deep breath.

“Froze?” Mrs. Belton stood rigid before him.

“We lost the whole—.” Dan was going to say “outside row” but she didn’t let him finish. Her face broke into a happy smile.

“Oh, Dan, then it was a good thing I sold them last fall!” She waited, her eyes bright.

“What?” Dan shouted.

The light began to fade from her face. She fumbled for the money, got it and pressed it into his hands. Dan’s shoulders sagged as he gazed stupidly at the bills.

“How many’s left,” his voice was thick.

“Forty sacks, just two rows.”

Dan licked his dry lips. Two rows? Twenty sacks frozen, twenty not—his mind struggled with figures—about a three hundred dollar loss. He looked up, smiling with one side of his mouth. Suddenly he leaned forward and kissed his wife on the right cheek.

“Woman, you do show a little sense at times,” he said.

She looked away.

Dan edged thru the door to the front room.

“Dick,” he whispered, his lips close to the boy’s ear. “We won’t tell mother only the outside row was frozen. When she goes over to Tony’s we’ll sneak them into town.”

“All right,” said Dick, with a warm smile.

In the kitchen Mrs. Belton hummed “Annie Laurie” as she drained the potatoes for supper.