Honorable Mention in the 1987 D.K. Brown Fiction Contest

WHAT COMFORT THIS SWEET SENTENCE

By Margot Ellen Cheney

The single shot split the thin December air like a sharp knife. Even after all the years since Lucy's death, its trenchant crack pierced Emmeline's consciousness and stirred embers of fury which she hastened to quench, as always, with a heavenly supplication. He lives to silence all my fears, He lives to wipe away my tears, number 145, she whispered into the darkness.

If her children had been awake, such a holy intonation, coming as it did from the hymnal, would not have startled them; Mum's running conversations with God were often vocal. She might recite a hymn or a verse of scripture but she seldom neglected citing its source. Sometimes she pondered a problem in much the same tone she would use if speaking with a loving sister-friend. But when it became necessary, she spoke to the heavens with the devout fervor of a prophet.

It was 1910, and Colonia Guadalupe, in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, had grown from a single dwelling into a small village of Mormon settlers. Guadalupe was a pleasant place; fully grown trees lined the one main street and well-tended gardens and orchards had a prosperous, settled-in look.

This morning, although every rooster in town raucously proclaimed the new day, the night's blackness still lingered in Emmeline's one sleeping room. She was shivering and quickly pulled her calico dress over her long flannel petticoat and wondered what sort of game the early morning hunter had bagged. Her terror of guns and the constant necessity of finding fresh meat posed only a little conflict. Emmeline was a practical woman.

She paused a moment at the door and listened to the quiet breathing of her youngest three children before tiptoeing into the main room of the small adobe home. At the fireplace, she stirred last night's carefully banked coals, added kindling and some small logs; the small blaze would soon begin to heat the room. At the kitchen stove, she heaped dry splinters on the previous evening's supper embers; soon the cheerful pop and snap of the fire began orchestrating Emmeline's "kitchen morning music," as it was called. A large pot of well-water, carried in the evening before by ten-year-old Joshua, would soon begin to whistle. She turned her attention to personal needs.

Slipping on her woolen cloak as she walked, she hurried out of the kitchen door. The path to the privy went through her garden. Even though the ground now lay fallow in its winter's nap, she gave each section a quick inspection as she strode past.

Ordinarily, she loved this season of the year. While her garden and small orchard rested, she had time to tend to projects saved for fall, and to prepare for Christmas. But lately she'd felt some unidentified inner prompting, a vague sense of urgency. This morning her anticipation was high; with a little bit of luck she could be finished by nightfall.

Back in the kitchen, she slipped out of the cloak, hung it on its peg next to the door, and began to roll up her sleeves. A bone-china washer set, inherited from her mother, sat on a small wash-stand against the far wall of the kitchen. Just above it hung an oval, framed mirror given to her by Thadeous on the day they were married. 1884. Almost twenty-five years ago. She carefully fingered the hand-carved roses in the frame, their touches of gold-leaf still bright. She gazed, then, at her reflection, trying to remember what she'd looked like when she was seventeen and first saw her flushed, radiant face within this lovely garland of wood. Impossible. All she could see was a 42-year-old woman with tiny lines deepening at the corners of her eyes and mouth, and cheeks flushed by the morning's chill instead of by thoughts of having just become the second wife of Thadeous Matteson.

Well, Mother darling-in-heaven, she thought, the vale of years doesn't hang heavy yet. And, like you often said, I'll always be younger and prettier than Helena. Father, please forgive that thought, she intoned automatically, although she felt this was a private little merriment she shared with God. She even imagined he smiled at this whimsy; after all, he could see inside her heart and knew that she truly loved Lena as much or more than she loved her own sisters.

The morning's toiletries always included a sparing application of rose water and glycerine, applied carefully over her face...
and hands. That is, if she were lucky enough to have a bottle of the precious liquid. Not that its price was so dear; it could only be purchased in the States. El Paso and Deming, both over 100 miles away, were their closest American neighbors. When Thadeous drove a wagon load of apples to market earlier in the fall, he'd traded bushels of apples, from Emmeline's and Helena's orchards, for rose water bottles for each of them. The two women had learned early on, if Thadeous was to be their agent, to conduct their business transactions equally. He never did less for one wife or gave more to the other. He was a thoughtful, considerate man.

As she vigorously brushed her long chestnut hair, she heard a small rustle at the door to the living room and smiled. She'd anticipated Amanda's newest game: creeping up and surprising Mum with a big "Boo!" But this morning, Emmeline turned the game around. She swirled suddenly, quickly catching the four-year-old and pulled her close in a big hug.

"Amanda giggled. "Oh, Mum, you scared me!"

"So! It's not all right for Mum to scare Mandy, eh? At least I didn't 'boo' at you!" She put the child on her feet and turned back to the mirror.

"Mum, why do you brush your hair like that?"

"For the same reason I brush yours, love. To keep it healthy and shiny."

"Why does it have to be healthy and shiny?"

"Just because."

Amanda began again. "Why do you braid your hair like that?"

Emmeline sighed and changed the subject. "Would you go wake Josh and tell him ol' Hildy wants to be milked and fed?"

"Oh, Mum, Josh doesn't wake up for me like he does for you!"

"Give his ears a good pull then. And tell him to hurry because I said so!"

Amanda sighed heavily and headed for the bedroom. Knowing the child would need reinforcement, Emmeline quickly finished her single braid and pinned it into a coil at the nape of her neck.

"Come along, Josh," she commanded when she saw him snuggling deeper into the heavy quilts. "And you, too, young man," she said as she gently shook the shoulder of eight-year-old Thomas. "The chickens have been waiting since sun-up for their corn. And give Josh an extra hand. Ever since Hildy freshened, just feeding the calf has doubled Josh's chore-time."

She found herself thinking of young Thad and how she missed him since he'd left for the fall semester at the Academy over in Colonia Juarez. He'd not only been dependable at chore-time, but directed the two younger boys well.

"When will I be old enough to milk Hildy?" Mandy was hopping from one foot to the other on the cold wooden floor.

"Never, lamb, never." Emmeline said firmly. "Girls have no
business learning how to milk cows."

"Aunt Lena's girls know how," Mandy replied petulantly.

"If that's the case, they'll soon be left with all the milking while the boys get into mischief."

"Why?"

"It just works that way, Mandy. Now give Mum a hand with these beds. Then you and I will do our chores: you gather eggs while I fix breakfast."

"Father, please remind Thad to help Lena more than what's required for his room and board, she thought, and then began to hum. Number 151. "Do what is right, the day dawn is breaking. . . ."

Emmeline, although well-versed in the scriptures, had never been as comfortable with them as she was with the hymns. As a child in Manchester, England, she had taken her first reading lessons in the Bible. But after she and her family had been converted to Mormonism, she'd come to love the small hymnal. She had a good ear for music, so didn't need to see musical scores which were missing from the tiny book. There were no titles for the hymns, only numbers. She also took a quiet pride in the book's origin: 1840, Manchester, England. The same collection had survived many reprints, and although it was now published in Salt Lake City, it remained in her consciousness as uniquely hers. A small piece of a very early home.

Today, as she hurried her boys, she set out their breakfast of bread, milk and bottled peaches. Amanda, carefully standing a cup at each place, caught her mother's mood and chastened her brothers.

"Can't you see Mum's in a rush?" And then, thoughtfully, "Mum, are we going some place?"

Emmeline smiled. "No, love. I just have a lot of things to do before bedtime tonight."

"Why?"

"Just because." Firmly, "Come, boys, time for prayer!" As the family knelt by the chairs, she hesitated a moment. "I will lead the prayer this morning, children."

She usually called on one of the boys to begin the morning supplications, with each family member taking turns around the table. But on this morning, she felt prompted to break the pattern. She deliberately slowed her words. "Dear Heavenly Father," she began, "We are very . . . especially . . . grateful to pause in our labors of the morning in order to offer up our thanks to thee for thy tender care through the night and for our fine home in which we find warm, dry shelter from the elements. . . . I am filled with gratitude this morning, Father, for my four healthy children and for the knowledge that my other four are in your tender care.

"We ask thee to bless our beloved father, husband and your willing and obedient servant Thadeous. Please bring him safely to us on the morrow. Please guard our Thad and remind him to be earnest in his labors at the Academy and to ever remember and be proud of his fine name. . . ." Amanda's prayer was last. She sighed; all topics and situations seemed to be well covered by then. "Heavenly Father . . . thank you for our house . . . and our chickens and help them lay more eggs for me to find . . . and for Mum and me to sell. And bless Mum . . . she is so busy today. . . ." A long pause. "Name-of-Jesus-Amen!" Triumphantly.

Emmeline hid her smile and busied herself with the fresh eggs over which Amanda had just prayed. Brother Kingsford had promised to take their basket to market in Colonia Dublin today. As she carefully packed them on top of the eggs she'd been collecting all week, she realized again that, for such a tiny settlement, they were fortunate to have at least one man within shouting distance each night. She wondered idly if this was prearranged by the eight men who had families there. Brother Kingsford was the only man of the eight who had two of his families in Guadalupe; his third family lived up the river in Juarez.

Later, as she hurried the boys out the door to school, she lingered a moment at the doorstep. Thank you, Father, for my own small home in such a lovely part of Your vineyard. She vividly remembered the day that Thadeous had moved them there and she had seen that the small house was right next to the one-room grade school. What luxury! But she wanted more for her children than eight grades; while she was grateful that she'd gotten seven herself, her children would all go to the Academy. She'd been putting small amounts of money into her old leather purse for years. Ever since Thad was born.

She watched her two tow-headed boys until they entered the school-house, then she quickly closed the door against the morning's cold breeze.

_She'd_ had so many homes. Taylor, Arizona, where Lucy, her first, was born, even as she'd begun to pack for the exodus to Mexico. In the Colonies, there'd been more homes; Thadeous Matteson and his crews were road-builders and Emmeline had often been their chief cook. Although she'd had to move with the construction, she'd loved the life because it had given her more time with Thadeous.

But she could count almost as many cemeteries as homes. Lucy had been buried in Hidalgo the day after the accident; Owen and Stewart had been laid to rest in Dublin, and Sarah was in the family plot in Juarez.

"Mum!" Amanda interrupted the reverie. "Brother Kingsford's wagon is coming up the road!" She beat Emmeline to the kitchen to get the heavy basket. "We did real good this week, didn't we?" She felt she had a big role in egg production and had almost learned to count the _pesos_ and _centavos_ that Able Kingsford brought back to them by early evening.

"Yes, we did, Mandy, and so did the hens. We have to have their help, you know! Come now, help me carry in water enough to scrub the floor. Father got me a new splint broom in El Paso that's never been introduced proper-like to this wood flooring and it will look so bright and be ever so happy for having met that broom!"

Amanda giggled. "Oh, Mum, floors can't be happy!"

"Why sure they can, Mandy. Anything can be happy, just like people can always be happy if they want to bad enough."

"Why?"

But Amanda got no answer. Emmeline was staring deject-
edly into the home's one large closet.

"Just because," Mum?

"Yes, love," Emmeline answered flatly. Why hadn't Thadeous taken the gun with him? That was two weeks ago! She'd grown so weary of sweeping around the corner where it stood although the children had been forbidden to touch it, she still worried that they might. And now, in spite of all her nagging, it had only been moved to the far corner of the closet! Well, she wouldn't let it ruin her day. She'd just scrub around it—again.

Things went well until mid-afternoon. She'd moved steadily down her mental list of things to do even though neighbors had unexpectedly needed some of her time. Amanda had been at her side and underfoot all day, but the boys included her in a game of stink-base after school. It was the churning spoken at Brother Wilson's funeral on Tuesday. But she could quickly rearranged the items left on the list. She hadn't yet worried that they might. And now, in spite of all her nagging, it had only been moved to the far corner of the closet! Well, she wouldn't let it ruin her day. She'd just scrub around it—again.

Sam Wilson's murder had shocked them all, and the small communities of Mormon settlers had finally realized that Pancho Villa's vagabond groups of ruffians were not impressed by their neutrality and desire to stand clear of Mexico's political struggles.

As choir director, she had led the large congregation that assembled on Tuesday in Colonia Dublan. The hymnal had many funeral songs; they'd been sung so often that the words were known from memory. On Tuesday, she'd chosen Number 202. Unveil thy bosom, faithful tomb / Take this new treasure to thy trust / and give these sacred relics room / to slumber in the silent dust. And then they laid Samuel Brigham Wilson in an unmarked grave, in fear the killers might return and violate the sanctity of the burial ground.

Those funeral hymns, they etched into the very soul. For Lucy and Sarah, Number 139. Your little rose-bud has left you / To bloom in a holier sphere / He that gave it, in wisdom bereft You / Then why should you cherish a tear? For Owen and then Stewart, she had requested Number 131. Weep not for him that's dead and gone / Nor to despair be driven / Your child is saved through Jesus Christ / He now has gone to Heaven. She pondered the murder again, after supper, while she was pressing Thadeous's trousers. That such a senseless act in the name of liberty could bring so much pain to so many innocent people was incomprehensible to Emmeline. While she never doubted that God, indeed, moved in mysterious ways to perform his wonders, at times much conversation passed between Emmeline and Deity before she felt she'd satisfactorily reconciled the nature of God with misfortune or disaster. I know that you know, Father, why this thing is working at me so... I'm still sorrowing too much over Brother Sam's three widows, who I know and love, and those seventeen children... and I worry over them and wonder who will provide for them when they get back to Utah. She paused to change hand-irons.

Now, Father, I admit those three women were often hateful to each other, always fighting over who Sam loved the most and other such nonsense, but that sort of thing isn't uncommon, you know. Was it enough, though, to earn your wrath and punishment? (My cheeks often burn in embarrassment when I hear some of these wives... and I know you see it far better than me... but I always put their pettiness aside and call it "human nature." I know I make allowances, too, because I feel I probably don't really understand the problem since Lena and I get on so good with each other.)

But, Father, the oldest child in that whole bunch isn't more than sixteen... what do they do now without their loving papa... She slowly set the cool iron back on the stove, but hesitated before she picked up another hot one. Oh, I guess I'm finally listening to you now... it's just come time for me to begin my understanding, isn't it? She carefully hung the trousers over the back of a kitchen chair and picked up the coat. Those youngsters may have lost a fine earthly father, but they'll never lose you, no matter what befalls them. And all of them... yes, even those women who have already strengthened their shoulders with years of heavy burdens, will only grow stronger with an added one. It's just up to the rest of us to be your hands now... Placing the coat on the padded table cover, she saw and immediately recognized the lump in the right pocket: Thadeous's small hymnal. She carefully removed it and ran her fingertips over the gold engraved name: Thadeous S. Matteson. She had been able to order the book with money earned from her first spring crop two years earlier.

She smiled then, holding the small book close to her heart. And now here's this dear hymnal come to bless and comfort me and tell me you don't mind that I was being stubborn in my understanding. Thank you, Father! So, with a freshly dampened steam-cloth and another hot iron, Emmeline began, with renewed energy, to press the coat. She also sang. A great song of rejoicing. Number 145. "I know that my Redeemer lives! What comfort this sweet sentence gives!" Joshua, coming in with the evening's milking, caught the last lines of the verse, already spoken that morning when the grey gossamer of dawn was ripped by the hunter's blast.

"He lives to calm my troubled heart, He lives, all blessings to impart!" Josh carefully set the pail down before he gave his mother an impromptu, impulsive hug that surprised and embarrassed him so much, he turned and ran outside.

And thank you most of all for that blessing right there, Father! You just never quit sending your love our way! She'd finished the coat and was lighting the big oil lamp when the rest of the children returned from evening chores. Another quick mental survey and she knew she was back on her schedule. She'd even have time to tell them a story before they went to bed, with plenty of evening left to bring her journal up-to-date. She'd been feeling guilty about that journal. The last few quiet evenings had been spent on a new Christmas dress for Amanda, but she'd been able to complete it that afternoon when Mandy went out to play with her brothers.

As soon as Thomas found out there would be time for
Joshua teased.

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of bemes went calling on Sister Phoebe. Molasses doing it, that I'd known she'd just love those berries milking. Then I put on my best bonnet and me and that bowl whenever there was no baby left to hold.

little eyes, I knew we weren't going to get along real well. Rooster that belonged to Aunt Phoebe Rasmussen, but that cocky in my garden, looking for the juiciest of the lot, you know. Noth-

you and Thomas go get the net and went calling on Phoebe.

It was a tale she rather enjoyed herself. "Mum!" It was Amanda, pulling at her skirt. "Brother Kingsford forgot to bring us our egg money!"

So he did. I've been so busy I even forgot we were expecting him. Perhaps he's late getting back. If he hasn't appeared by morning, you and I will walk over to Aunt Susie's house and see if we can collect it ourselves."

"Just like we collect the eggs," Mandy said righteously. "Mandy counts her money before the eggs is even been sold!" Joshua teased.

"Have even been sold,' Josh," Emmeline corrected. "Now you and Thomas go get the kitchen wash-bench and put it in front of the fire."

She picked up the pan of lukewarm soapy water they'd used to bathe with and tossed the contents out the back door; the splatter on the cold ground sent a cloud of steam into the night's chilled air. Then she carefully banked the fire in the kitchen for the night, picked up the oil lamp and carried it to the mantle above the big open fire. As soon as she sat down in the rocker, Amanda climbed into her lap.

"You know, Mandy? It's not going to be long until you're not going to fit on Mum's lap anymore. You're falling over the edges now!" Which made Amanda giggle and Emmeline's heart ache. She remembered keenly how empty her arms felt whenever there was no baby left to hold.

She looked at the eager up-turned faces and laughed. "Why, a body would think you'd never heard this story! You all know the ending better than I do!"

Thomas began giggling in anticipation.

"Well, Mandy here was too young to remember that old rooster that belonged to Aunt Phoebe Rasmussen, but that cocky rascal was the scourge of the neighborhood. The first spring that I set out the strawberry patch and saw that old devil strutting up and down Main Street and watching me with his beady little eyes, I knew we weren't going to get along real well.

And sure enough, first thing I saw when those berries began to ripen up a bit was that old son-of-a-gun moseying around in my garden, looking for the juiciest of the lot, you know. Nothing was too good for that fellow.

So of course there was a bit of discussion that went on around our table at mealtimes and Thad helped me work out the damnest contraptions we hoped would frighten Mr. Rooster Rasmussen out of the strawberry patch. And nothing at all worked, nothing. We always got outsmarted by that rascal. So one morning, I picked a lovely little bowl of berries and topped them with honey and some fresh warm cream from the early milking. Then I put on my best bonnet and me and that bowl of berries went calling on Sister Phoebe.

"When I got there, she was so friendly and so pleased with those berries, and I told her right off, though I was sweet as molasses doing it, that I'd known she'd just love those berries because her old rooster sure had taken a liking to them.

"She tittered around like she thought that was kind of cute of her little darling. One thing sure, she didn't think of him as Peck's bad boy, the way we did. So then I said, a little more firmly this time, 'You know, Phoebe, you and I aren't going to be able to continue to enjoy these fine berries if your rooster has his way in my garden much longer!'

"By that time, she'd eaten up her dish of berries and just couldn't stop telling me how good they were, and then she handed the bowl back to me and said she'd see what she could do to keep the thief at home. 'Course nothing came of it. That old villain had more berries to eat that summer than all the rest of us put together."

The children began to squirm and giggle; they knew the best part was coming.

"So one day, Thad was coming home from school and he happened to see Rooster Rasmussen in the patch, but that old fellow was so busy in the berries that he couldn't hear or see anything else, and Thad had time to pick up a rock and aim right at the creature.

"Now, I'm sure Thad only meant to frighten the old fellow, but, you know, Thad's a real good shot, always was. And somehow, whether he meant to or not, he smacked that rooster right in the head and killed him dead on the spot!

"All of this happened without any of the neighbors seeing it. I was over at Susie's house, helping her tie a patchwork quilt. But Josh here was standing in the yard and saw the whole thing. And Josh, being such a wee thing then, and all, well I guess Thad figured Sister Phoebe would feel more kindly about the incident if Josh was to return the recently departed's last remains."

Joshua laughed a little sheepishly. "I never shoulda done it; I just always did whatever Thad said to do! But I tell you, when Sister Rasmussen opened her door and saw me standing there, holding that dumb chicken by the neck, she let out a screech you coulda heard a mile!"

"And Joshie turned and runned for home!" Thomas, in a paroxysm of laughter, was rolling around on the rug at Emmeline's feet.

She was enjoying the fun herself, but then she made her face and voice become very serious. "Now think on it: those Rasmussen kids were your best friends, and when Sister Phoebe wouldn't let them play with you anymore, it got pretty glum around here. When I told your father what had happened, he said well, Phoebe Rasmussen would make our lives miserable for awhile, but she'd get over it. He wasn't too happy with Thad, of course, but Father was missing those berries, too! I think he was glad the old bird was gone.

"But things between the two families just got worse. The whole town started choosing up sides and someone or other thought that Bishop Hale should get involved in the dispute. So one day, early, standing there in the kitchen, I decided it was time for someone to try and make peace. I put on my bonnet and went calling on Phoebe."

"And . . . and . . . we were all peeking out from behind the
curtains!” Thomas squealed. “We couldn’t hear what Mum was saying, but we could hear Sister Rasmussen all the way across the road!”

“And the longer they stood there,” Joshua chimed in, “the wider that door opened and pretty soon there was space enough for Mum to squeeze into the house! And in just a few minutes the Rasmussen kids came whooping out their back door hollering ‘Hey, we can play with you again!’”

Mandy looked up at her Mother. “What did you say to her, Mum?” It was a new question; nobody’d ever asked that before.

“I just said things that women know how to say to each other, that’s all. We forget sometimes and have to be reminded.”

“No, I didn’t. I guess I did that for him. I knew he was miserable about the whole thing. Thad knows, like the rest of us, that killing fowl, unless you need it for food, is sinful. I... don’t think we ought to do it, even then. I’d as soon eat vegetables.”

“Is that why you don’t like Father’s gun?” Mandy asked softly.

“Emmeline looked down into the child’s eyes and wondered how she ought to answer.

“Mandy!” reprimanded Joshua. “Mum don’t like to talk about guns!”

“Why?”

“Oh, just shush-up, Mandy! It’s about Lucy... and all...”

His voice trailed off and there was silence.

Emmeline sighed and spoke. “If Mandy has grown old enough to ask the question, then I guess the time has come to talk... again... about Lucy.” She continued to gaze into Amanda’s eyes and prayed for the ability to tell the story so that the child would get a proper understanding. Amanda, last child of Thadeous and Emmeline Matteson, she thought. Lucy had been the first.

“Well, Mandy,” she began, “Lucy was born quite a long while before you were. She was even born before Thad. Your Father and I were living in Arizona back then.”

“What did she look like?”

“She looked a whole lot like you, love. Same blue eyes, same blond hair. And she was happy all the time and liked to laugh, just like you!”

“Then we moved on down here to the Colonies, you know, and Thad was born next, then Owen. Owen died a month after he was born; we never knew why. Then came Stewart. And he lived only a year.

“It’s a lot better now, Mandy, but back then, all mothers lost babies. Sometimes we knew why and sometimes we didn’t. We just had to have lots of faith like we do now.

“Then while we were living in Sabinal, we finally got another little girl!”

“Sarah,” Amanda said softly.

“Yes, you’ve heard us talk about baby Sarah, haven’t you?” She paused, deciding again how she should continue. “Well, the Kingsfords had moved to Sabinal by that time and Father and Brother Kingsford decided they’d like to look at some land over in the Galesana Valley. So the two families made a holiday out of it and set out in Father’s wagon. The men were riding in the seat up front, and Susie Kingsford and I, along with Lucy, Thad, and Sarah rode in the back. That was before the Kingsfords had any children.”

“Father had taken his rifle, as he always did, and had placed it across his lap. Then if he spotted a rabbit, he could take aim quickly. He’d already gotten a jack or two that day, but for some reason, the last time, he stood the gun up behind the seat, between him and Brother Kingsford, instead of resting it across his lap.”

“We were almost to Hidalgo, moving along through the gamma grass, when some antelope ran across the road. The men shouted for us to look and Thad and Lucy jumped up quickly to peer over the men’s heads.”

She had slowed her words so she could ponder each phrase before saying it out loud. Glancing for the first time at the boys, who were both at her feet now, she realized they’d probably never heard her tell the whole story in her own words.

“It all happened so fast... no one could rightly remember, but Lucy, trying to get up in a hurry, probably grabbed the... gun to steady herself. Of course it wasn’t hooked on to anything, and as she tried to get up, she pulled it toward her and then it went... off. She fell backwards... into my arms... dead...”

Emmeline was staring into the fire now, as she had done so many, many nights following Lucy’s death, remembering it all like it had happened yesterday. The blast had torn Lucy’s little face apart and shattered her skull. Thadeous died and said all he could; then, with tears streaming down his cheeks, he’d unhitched one of the horses from the team and headed for Hidalgo, leaving the Kingsfords to comfort her.

She had rocked Lucy for the two hours it took for Thadeous to make the round trip. She’d felt her skirts growing soppy with the child’s blood and brain tissue and she had screamed, then sobbed, and, at last, finally looked at Thad who lay on the floor of the wagon, convulsed in his own sorrow. She’d also finally felt Susie’s arm around her and Able Kingsford’s hands on her head, and he’d wept and blessed her and wept again. She’d asked them, then, to sing with her. He lives to comfort me when faint, He lives to hear my soul’s complaint. They’d sung every song she could remember and Thad cried himself to sleep and when little Sarah began to fuss, Susie rocked her and finally Thadeous returned with the Mexican authorities who conducted their investigation quickly and allowed the wagon to continue its sad journey into Hidalgo, where they buried Lucy the next morning.

When Emmeline finally roused herself from the bitter memory, she realized that Amanda had fallen asleep in her lap and the two boys, each involved in his own thoughts, were growing heavy-eyed.

“Come, boys,” she said softly as she carefully rose to her feet, “it’s off to bed with all three of you.” She paused a minute then, and studied Amanda’s face in the firelight. She tenderly kissed each eyelid and each rosy cheek. “Goodnight, my love.”
In just a few minutes, she was back in front of the fire. She moved the oil lamp to the small table next to her rocker, then got her journal, inkwell and quill pen from the high shelf in the back of the closet where she kept the old leather purse. Her treasures. Then, settled at last in the rocking chair, she opened the journal and was dismayed to find she hadn't written in it since Thanksgiving night. Thadeous had come home early in the day, bringing Thad with him in the buggy. She'd been up since before dawn, basting the turkey and finishing children—a rare treat for all of them—and still ride back to arrangement left Thadeous enough time to relax with his ten in it since Thanksgiving night. Thadeous had come home letter must be formed carefully. If keeping the journal was not early in the day, bringing Thad with him in the buggy. She'd opened the journal and was dismayed to find she hadn't writ-

ten in the back of the closet where she kept the old leather purse. She moved the oil lamp to the small table next to her rocker, her treasures. Then, settled at last in the rocking chair, she

It couldn't have been more than a mile away. She glanced at the clock. It was almost nine. She willed herself to relax and eventually settled back into the chair cushions.

9 O Clock same evening I hav herd gunfire at som distance but not a sound since. I wil finish quickly and prepair for bed I know not what to do a bout the lamp & the fire lites not knowing how it mite turn May be one of our people needs help.

She was so startled by the next gunfire that both the journal and the pen slid to the floor. The shots had come from the direction of Bishop Hale's home at the south end of town. There were other sounds, too, now: shouting, glass breaking. When she heard the laughter and the Spanish she knew she should not have left even a sliver of light showing. Quickly lowering the wick turned off the oil lamp, but she didn't dare take time to bank the fire; the raucous sounds came closer every second.

She ran into the bedroom, and pulled the heavy curtain-door closed behind her, and forced herself to take a deep breath and clear her mind so that she could better assess the situation. There was an outside door in here, but no lock. She turned immediately and dashed back through the darkened house for a kitchen chair, which she used to prop against the bedroom door knob. She could hear harsh voices in the front yard; quickly she awakened the boys.

"Josh! Thomas! Shh! Don't say anything! Just help Mum lean very hard against this chair!"

"Who... who is it, Mum?" whispered Josh hoarsely.

"I don't know... some of Villa's men, I think. Don't worry, we'll be all right, I'm sure!"

The three of them listened together and now her worst fear was confirmed; the men were trying to get in through the locked front door. They cursed when they found it would not give and started around the house toward the bedroom.

"Lean and push very hard, boys. We have to hold this door! And the combined strength of the three of them kept it so tight that one of the men swore loudly and attempted to shoot through the lock. Amanda awoke and began to cry, but Emmeline felt the jolt and the numbness in her left elbow and knew that the bullet had been spent for something after all.

Although her left arm now dangled uselessly from her shoul-
der, she gave it no attention. "Hush, Mandy, hush. Be very, very quiet. Boys," she whispered, "keep up the good work! I'm going to try to speak to them." Father, please continue to bless our efforts here and help me now to reason with these men.

"¡Amigos! ¡Amigos!" They were talking loudly between them-selves and could not hear her. She leaned closer to the door.

"¡Alto, jalo! They began to grow quiet; they'd finally heard her. "¡Amigos! ¡Senores! ¿Quienes estan allí?" She was certain the words were coming out wrong and began again, "¿Amigos! ¿Que tiene ustedes?" ¿Donde esta Thad?" Thad! Why would they ask about Thad?

"Mum," whispered Thomas, "if they know Thad maybe they just want to see him."

"What if they don't like Thad... and they want him!" Joshua's whisper could hardly be heard, but the two boys had
vocalized the possibilities that plagued her now.

"¡Mujer! ¡Donde esta Thad?" “Mi ... hijo ... Thad ... es en Juarez!” For better or worse, they now knew she was a lone woman. She could hear their discussion, but could understand none of it. She cursed herself for learning so little Spanish.

"¡Mujer! ¡Tiene usted dinero?" She answered quickly. "Yo no tengo dinero!" They would not get the education money!

Her visitors laughed derisively.

"¡No hay nada en la casa! ¡Nosotros nada!" she shouted. Now the laughter was gone; anger filled its place.

"Es mentira! ¡Calle la boca!" said one, in disgust. "¡Vamos!"

The children were horrified; they'd never heard their mother called a liar or told to shut up. Emmeline had no time to think of insults. She'd just remembered that the kitchen door was unlocked. She turned to the children.

"Joshua, I'm leaving you in charge in here. None of you are to leave this room, no matter what happens. Is that understood?"

They nodded solemnly.

"Amanda, you crawl into bed with the boys. Keep covered and keep each other warm!" She left the room, pulling the curtain closed again behind her and ran to the kitchen; she rounded the corner just as the men entered.

As soon as she saw them, she understood more about the nature of their visit and began to entertain a bit of hope. There were only two men, boys, actually. Thadeous had employed them several times in the last couple of years. She also saw that they were drunk. She followed them into the living room and called out to the children.

"Don't be afraid! It's the Rodriguez boys who have worked for Father! Now go back to sleep!" That also explained how the laughter was gone; anger filled its place.

"Look, or be told, or understand their language."

They're deciding what to do with me, she thought, as she turned to put the pot back on the fire; she'd best not delay implementing her plan. She would tell them she was going to check on the children, but she would get the gun.

The crushing impact on her back was left and understood before she heard the gun's report. "Oh, my God!" her scream reverberated from wall to wall. She didn't hear it, nor did she feel the slam of her body against the floor. She didn't hear the cups and saucers break as the bench rolled over. She didn't sense the clatter of the heavy boots against the floor or the slamming of the kitchen door and the way that the wind whipped it back and forth because no one stopped to latch it. She knew only that her right side was pinned under her body; she would have to use that arm to help herself up. She called to the children to say she was coming, but she could not make her muscles obey.

The truth came to her slowly: she could move nothing. She was paralyzed from the shot in her back. Oh, God, have mercy! Even my lips don't move when I speak! They don't know I'm alive! And then she heard the children calling out loudly to ... Able Kingsford? Yes! Able had come to her rescue!

"Joshua, slow down now and speak calmly! What has hap ... " His voice had come from the yard, near the well, but he never got to finish his question. He'd walked into an ambush. The children began to cry again and every time they heard Able moan, they screamed.

Emmeline heard it all, too, but she had little left to mourn Able Kingsford's death. She knew she was dying and was awed by the fact that her mind was still functioning. She began her liturgy. I knew that my Redeemer lives, what comfort this sweet sentence... sentence? The fresh meaning of the word confronted her and filled her with outrage. How dare these drunken boys, not much older than Thad, violate the sanctity of her home, frighten her children, steal her money, and then pass a death sentence on her! This was no way to die! For some minutes, she didn't let herself think at all.

Oh, Father, I needed to rest a bit, here, and think on that. Sam Wilson hadn't wanted to die and Able Kingsford didn't even know what he was walking in to. You'll be with Susie and her children...
during this night of terror, just as you will now calm my own Joshua and Thomas and Amanda. I was very foolish in my pride to think I was the one to do the reassuring in that bedroom. And, Father, I can go with the comfort of knowing that my children have dear Lena now. They'll get to be with Thad. They'll like that.

Strange . . . I didn't know this rough floor could get to feeling so comfortable . . . did You know when you put me to scrubbing these boards just this morning that I was preparing my deathbed . . . is that the way you go about preparing us?

I'm getting a bit drowsy now . . . and I know why . . . but I'll not . . . sleep . . . before I thank you, Father, for all you blessed me with . . . I lived a rich, full life . . .

. . . You'll tell all this to Thadeous . . . and the children, won't you . . .?

Authors Note: Elizabeth Mears Hawkins Mortensen died 22 January 1911 in Colonia Guadalupe, Chihuahua, Mexico. My father, Leland, was age nine at the time of her death, and was the oldest child at home that night. She left no diary or journal; no memory of the day or evening exists except for the accounts of the children and the bloodstain on the floor in front of the hearth that today stands only as a ruin in the desert just outside Nuevos Casas Grandes. All of the names, as well as many of the events, depict in this story are fictitious.