



CHAPTER I

THE BURNT PRAIRIE

On the great plain of Texas, about a hundred miles southward from the old Spanish town of San Antonio, the noonday sun is shining his beams from a bright blue sky. Under the golden light appear a few waggons, covered with snow-white canvas. They are slowly crawling across the prairie in the midday heat.

The owner of the waggons is an emigrant from Louisiana. His name is Mr. Poindexter. He was a sugar planter. He has lost most of his money and has left his home on the Mississippi river, so how he is not a poor Northern-States settler in search of a new home for his family and black slaves.

Woodley Poindexter is a tall thin man of fifty, with a slightly sallowish complexion, and aspect proudly severe. He is wearing rather expensive clothes and a straw hat.

Two horsemen are riding alongside – one on his right, the other on the left; a youngster is scarce

twenty, and a young man is six or seven years older. The first man is his son Henry. He is an open and cheerful young man.

The youth is dressed in a French blouse of sky-colored, cotton shirt, with trousers of the same material and with a Panama hat upon his head. He is Mr. Poindexter's son.

The other horseman is his cousin, Cassius Calhoun, an ex-officer of volunteers, who prefers a military dark blue cloth, with a cap.

There is another horseman riding nearby, who also has a very white skin. He is an overseer of the swarthy pedestrians. One of the travelling carriages has two occupants. One is a young lady of the whitest skin. She is Poindexter's daughter Louise, and there is another, a girl of the blackest. The black girl is Louise's maidservant.

The sun is upon the meridian line, and almost in the zenith. The travellers tread upon their own shadows.

There is no regular road. The route is indicated by the wheel-marks of some vehicles that have passed before. They are visible, having only crushed the culms of the short grass.

Suddenly they stopped. The man rode up to the planter. He was very worried.

"What is it, Mr. Sansom?" asked the planter.

"The grass is burnt. The prairie's been afire."

"Been on fire! Is it on fire now?" hurriedly inquired the owner of the wagons, with a fearful glance towards the travelling carriage. "Where? I see no smoke!"

"I suppose we can travel over a black prairie, as safely as a green one?"

"What nonsense of you, Josh Sansom, to raise such a row about nothing – frightening people out of their senses!" said the planter's nephew.

"But, Captain Calhoun," protested the man, "how can we find the way?"

"Find the way! What are you talking about? We haven't lost it, have we?"

"I'm afraid we have, sir. The wheel-tracks are no longer seen. They're burnt out, along with the grass."

"What does it matter? Can we cross a burnt piece of prairie without wheel-marks? We'll find them again on the other side."

"Ye-es," said Sansom, "if there is any other side. I don't see it."

"Start moving!" shouted Calhoun, "follow me".

The planter agreed with his nephew.

The wagons started moving again. They went a mile or even more, but then stopped. Over it the clear blue sky had changed to a darker blue; the sun, though clear of clouds, seemed to scowl rather than shine as if answering the frown of the earth.

"Do, uncle Woodley! What else but keep straight on? The river must be on the other side? If we don't hit the crossing, to a half mile or so, we can go up, or down the bank as the case may require."

"But, Cassius, have we lost the way?"

"We can't have, we must come out somewhere on one side, or the other."

"Well, nephew, you know best: I shall be guided by you."

"No fear, uncle. We should go in this direction. Keep straight after me."