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The God Seeker

By Sinclair Lewis

Synopsis: In the year 1848 Aaron Gadd made up his mind to leave his native New England and go to Bois des Moines to become a missionary to the Dakota Indians. Squire Hargre, the minister in charge of the mission, has told him how to reach the mission, and he has come by ferry, river-steamer, canal boat, railroad and stagecoach for 17 days to reach the muddy village of St. Paul. He hopes that "Princess" Selene Lanark, daughter of a rich fur trader of the region, will soon be returning from the East where he met her and fell immediately in love. Now go on with the story—

CHAPTER SIX

THE S. B. DR. FRANKLIN, with its whistle unhappily blating, came in a cold rain up to the muddy landing at St. Paul. The only buildings on hand were Louis Robert's old log store and a Catholic chapel, like a rough stable. A couple of log stores were up there, and a few frame houses, but most of St. Paul was composed of disheveled cabins roofed with bark or with damp, discolored hay.

A few citizens, all male, had ambled down to meet the boat. Most of them were clerks of farmers in greasy caps and coats, and a few were missionaries, talking in Canadian French. There were one soldier and one Indian—the first Sioux that Aaron had ever seen nearby.

The St. Paul House, the only hotel in the settlement, was astonishingly large and very old for the time and period: two years old and two full stories high. It was built of tamarack logs elegantly hewed square, and its barroom was the most fashionable drinking place in town.

Jake Bass, the proprietor, was a Vermont, a Brainerd man, and a missionary. Aaron had struggled up the hill to the St. Paul House, with his small tin trunk on his right shoulder, his carpetbag in his left hand, and mud seeping up the leg of his clerical new black trousers. Mrs. Bass, at the pine desk in the dining room office, waited, "Oh, now Reverend, that's a shame. Every room is taken—six people sleeping in Room One. But I can give you a nice clean mattress on the floor of the dining room here for tonight—just a few other people sleeping here."

He sat at a pine table, alone, unloved, unwanted. He was no longer a good companion, but a missionary. Counselor Billy Phillips had thrown open his coat, the better displaying a watch charm which was a golden dog with ruby eyes, and he was shouting, "Gentlemen and friends, I now entertain this court by reciting 'Marco Bozzaris,' or by melodiously rendering 'Flow Gently Sweet Afton!'"

They bellowed for "Afton." Billy Phillips had a true tenor, and he sang imploringly, like one remembering other days: "How lofty, sweet Afton, thy neighboring hills."

IN THIS raw barroom, Aaron thought with anguish of the burying hills of Berkshire County, kind with beech and elm and maple, of unexpected, nestling valleys, of white houses with the tolerance of age, and of Selene at the center of it all. He had wilfully given up all this for a flat and ragged and unseasoned land.

Aaron wondered of what Farmer Hiram Gunstead, across from him, was sadly thinking: Salt marshes and lobster pots, or the prickly Blue Mountains? Without any clear intention, Aaron said suddenly, "But this'll be a better land—no rocks—and it'll be ours, not the bankers!"

"That's it!" Gunstead said gratefully. Looming into the room like a

at it and seen that they must be wrong. Its two stone towers and masonry walls looked down on the junction of the Mississippi with the Minnesota River, which would be Aaron's future highway westward.

The log council-house, the agent's story-and-a-half stone dwelling and the armorer's hut, where blacksmithing was done for the Indians, lay a quarter of a mile west of the fort, on the prairie.

The agent was called Major Murphy. Indian agents were called Major automatically, as the owners of newspapers and racehorses have always been called Colonel and Congressmen against whom it has never been quite proven are called Honorable.

While Aaron was humbly waiting on a wooden bench outside the Major's office, a gentleman in clerical garb rushed up to him, bubbling, "Mr. Gadd? I'm Ezekiel Gear, chaplain at the fort—Father Gear they call me, though the Dear Lord knows why, because I'm not at all fatherly. Dr. Williamson, the moderator of the Dakota Presbytery, sent me word on Elder Hargre's behalf to keep an eye out for you. Splendid people, the Presbyterian missionaries."

"Riggs and Williamson are worthy leaders and Mr. Hopkins, who's stationed at Traverse des Sioux, is a fine athletic young fellow, splendid swimmer, not much older than you but a veteran of five years' service in Minnesota missions. But the Ulysses and Achilles of these war-

"And right in the center of all this magnificent wealth stands St. Paul, which the good Father Gallier prophetically named, after the greatest of the disciples. The ineluctable power of destiny had chosen it to be the most mammoth, gorgeous and powerful metropolis on this globe."

"And I'm damned, gentlemen, if I don't think I mean very nearly a quarter of this; Oh, it's a good country—Minnesota. You can plow your own honest earth, cut your own trees, swim in your own lakes as joyful as a king in fairyland."

Years afterward, when he read Martin Chuzzlewit, Aaron realized from his memory of Joe Brown that half of the oratorical rambunctiousness which that British tradesman of genius, Mr. Dickens, had heard and indignantly noted down had been mocking exaggeration intended to mislead the innocent Victorian tourist.

No more, at least on that first evening, did Aaron long for the tight valleys of Massachusetts. This was his own West, to create or to destroy, in freedom.

He was stumbingly saying his prayers that night before it came to him confusingly that all his freedom now was supposed to lie in joyful obedience to the supreme will of God.

BEFORE he could settle at the Mission, in Sioux territory, Aaron had to have permission from the Indian agent, at Ft. Snelling. He tramped to the fort, through the oak and tamarack, and crossed in a boat ferry, rowed by a wild-looking French half-breed, to the west bank of the Mississippi.

The fort had never fired a gun. The stripped Indians had looked

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