



## IV

**I**T was mid-May when Bob and Jerry—most dispassionate of oxen—dragged into the black mire of the Government Trail a canvas-covered wagon which announced in azure letters THE ANGEL FAMILY CONCERT TROUPE.

. . . mid-May, and cool as that may be in the land of many waters. The sky and its reflecting lakes were a chill and windy blue. Willows along the water's edge trembled in pale chiffons. Wild plums on the hills were frosty white and the hardwoods not yet leaved. But the robins, singing rapturously while they fluffed protective feathers, didn't give an owl's hoot whether it was cold or not. And that was just the state of mind of The Angel Family Concert Troupe, from Jenny Lind to Benjy.

Hovering over the fire which boiled their barley coffee, snuggling beneath their blankets through the raw spring nights, plodding up and down the hills which were slippery with muck and water, they one and all declared that there was never such a May. Jenny Lind threw kisses to it from her perch on the driver's seat. The kisses of all the rest of them followed hers in spirit.

They passed the time in various ways—travel was

slow and labored. A favorite diversion was to sing old rounds and glees. Sometimes they spelled each other down, a complicated proceeding, as each spelled worse than the one before and no spelling-book was at hand. When they halted, one or another of them practised on the melodeon. This was wrapped in grain-sacks and set back in the wagon box. Often for hours at a time they made plans and sketched out programs. That discouraged Benjy; it was the only thing that did.

“We don’t *know* the things we should,” he explained dejectedly. “We don’t even know their names—so how are we going to learn? Pa’s taught us all his ballads, and we’ve heard hymn tunes in church, and Steve’s forever picking up the songs of the rivermen. But there’s opera . . . oratorio . . . what do we know about them?” He slapped the oxen gloomily.

“I should know ‘Casta Diva’; I realize *that* at least. I wish I could hear some one whistle it,” Fanny answered thoughtfully.

“You can’t whistle things like that.”

“I’ll bet *I* could,” said Timmie.

“Well, you couldn’t,” replied Benjy.

“Dick Star went up to St. Anthony, a year or so ago. You all remember it, and the fine concert he heard. The violinist, Ole Bull, and a little girl named Patti, no bigger than our Jenny Lind, still wearing pantalets. Dick is a great one for music, and he knows it better than most. But do you suppose he

could whistle the pieces that chick sang? They were all trills and curlicues, way beyond *him*, he said. He took down the names of the fiddler's things, and I'll buy them in St. Paul."

"There's a music store in St. Paul!" Fanny bounced on a horse-hair trunk.

"And we all of us catch on quick," Steve consoled his brother.

"And think how I play the double jew's-harp!" Tommie added grandly.

The first concert was given before May had warmed into June. A blinding rain had halted them on a swampy stretch of land. After the downpour ceased, the roads looked ruinous, and as it was late afternoon they decided to make camp.

Steve had shot a goose, to the great delight of them all. Their supplies were winter stores, brought with them from Cloudman; they were heartily sick of barley pancakes and potatoes with molasses. The twins had been dispatched for wood on anticipatory feet. They were gone an unconscionable time, considering their appetites, and they came back empty-handed, glowing, on a run.

A stage coach had broken down a distance up the road.

"And it's in up to the hubs . . . and the driver's gone for help . . . and they want us to come and give 'em a show . . . we told 'em about us!" they whooped.

An answering whoop went up, only Fanny checked hers as it rose. She cautiously fingered her throat and essayed a scale or two. The older boys rushed for the oxen. The twins put out the fire. And Jenny Lind ran to the trunk.

“Please, Fan, my red calico dress!”

Bored and reluctant, the oxen dragged forth the covered wagon. Tense on the driver’s seat, Benjy maneuvered it, through the treacherous ooze, up the soggy roadside, to a point near the stranded coach where the passengers were gathered. This weary mud-splashed group found seats on a fallen tree; the curtained end of the wagon was backed deftly around; and between, on a bit of old carpet, the melodeon was placed, its grain-sacks proudly shed.

Fanny and Jenny Lind took frantic peeks through the flaps. They had been ordered to stay within and thus preserve their glamor. That portly man with sidwhiskers and lively flowered waistcoat? An hotel man from St. Anthony, the twins whispered reply. They had gathered, small-boy fashion, a budget of information, and this they excitedly shared as they struggled into jackets—doeskin jackets dyed and brightly beaded by their mother—cherished by their possessors above all earthly things.

There was an Indian agent, well known throughout the valley. There was a Protestant missionary, bound for Traverse des Sioux. The black-gowned

priest was a Frenchman from Sibley's town, Mendota. And the woman with children, of course, had come out to join her husband. The other men were doubtless of the season's settler crop. Boots instead of moccasins—one had a swallow-tailed coat. Every spring the opening rivers brought steamboats crammed with them—these eager eastern claimants of the west.

Here was an audience indeed! Tastes enough to please! Atop his slender stooping body, Benjy's face was white. He brushed and oiled his hair, pinned on a paper rose, lifted out his violin with the rabbit's foot tied to the scroll. He cradled this in his arms for a tense, reflective moment; then dropped it and went to the blanket which walled their dressing rooms.

"Fan, I want you to open the program with 'Chase the Antelope.' "

"You do?" He heard her bounce.

Around the blanket's edge came her little sparkling face. Each mole on it seemed to sparkle and the golden circles swung. A black braid ran like an arch from ear to ear over her head. From her pointed velvet bodice the checkered skirt sprang out.

"*You're* supposed to open the program," she protested in a whisper.

"I know. But this will be lucky. I can't stop to explain."

"You'll play for me on the melodeon?"