

Clinton F. Larson

## *HOMESTEAD IN IDAHO*

### I

“Solomon? Since I talked with him I’ve thought  
Again about trying to make a go of it  
In Idaho. As I say, this rainy weather  
In Oregon is looking better and better to me.  
The first time I met him, it was in Al’s Bar,  
Down the street. Five years ago, I think.  
Well, you know, Al keeps a friendly place,  
One where you don’t mind stepping in  
And acting neighborly. And, there he was,  
Down at the end of the bar. I noticed him  
Because he was shaking, folding and unfolding a clipping.  
‘You from these parts?’ I said. With all this space  
In the West, it doesn’t hurt to close it up  
Whenever you can. He said, ‘Well, no, not really,’  
And kept folding and unfolding the clipping and looking  
Down at his hands. When he stopped, I could hardly  
See it, his hands were so square and big,  
Like the farm work of his time. Besides, he took  
His hat off, and you could see the white skin  
Of his head, particularly near the part,  
Where his hat took a settled, permanent place.  
But his face had lightened to a buckskin color.  
He had the look of a farmer who had seen a lot  
Of land that needed working. Then it rose  
From him. ‘I suppose you would say from Idaho.  
I wanted to homestead there,’ he said. ‘I tried it  
Last year, or was it then? Not much money  
To start with, but my wife Geneva and I and our children  
Found our place. It seemed a thousand miles  
From nowhere, at least two weeks east from here.

I built a cabin from the boards I had brought  
Along.' Geneva said, 'Solomon, we can make it,  
But we need money for spring. Go back to Tamarack  
And leave us here.' Then I told her how I felt.  
But she said, 'We can make it with the provisions we brought.  
Go back, Solomon. By spring, we'll have a start,  
Then a barn by those trees, cows grazing there,  
And a house like we've wanted, beside a stream.'  
Well, the way she looked, her eyes imploring,  
And her soft brown hair, and her hope, how could I  
Say no? So off I went, Geneva waving to me  
Until I was out of sight. It was the hardest thing  
I have ever done to look around and see  
Where I was going. I worked at Tamarack  
Autumn and winter, numb from wondering  
How they were, all alone out there, and wanting  
To get back to them. April finally came,  
And I loaded the wagon with everything we needed,  
Dresses and dry goods, shoes and ribbons besides.  
I travelled as hard as I could, considering the horses,  
And kept looking and looking for smoke far off  
In front of me, coming from the chimney,  
To tell me I was near. But I never saw it.  
He looked again at the clipping in his hands,  
Smudged and yellow, and said, 'When I got there,  
It looked like autumn and winter had never left,  
The snow still hanging on the roof, the door  
Open, nothing planted, nothing done,  
And then I went inside, to see the dusty cribs  
And Geneva, still against them . . . and the floor  
Red and dusted with shadows. And I was here,  
Trying for money so we could get started . . .  
I couldn't stay out there.' And he looked at me  
As if pleading for help, then down into his hands,  
Unfolding and folding the clipping as if by doing it  
He could wear out his sorrow.'

## II

The colors of the sun against the hills  
In the evensong of life, and yet another  
Year had gone. The colors crept down  
Like frost and the glory of God, intermingling  
In them night and day. All was over  
When the family saw them, over like the evening  
Wind. In the meadows and clusters of pines  
It whispered to the edge of the sullen earth,  
In the seethe of knowing, under the shaken plume  
Of knowledge. Solomon and Geneva saw  
The land cut, as it were, for them, a place  
For them between the great divide and the sea.

There, he said in the voice of conscience, there  
Is our home, or the hope of it. Geneva,  
Can it be that home if we settle here?  
A half of a year will make it ours if we stay,  
She replied in the moment of seeing him  
As she wished him to be. And then in resolve,  
Let me stay the winter with the children  
While you work in Tamarack, and so  
It was out, the only way of keeping  
The land. Where in the flicker of grey is death,  
The wandering light, release? I want this home,  
She said, in the tolerance of a breath, and I  
Shall stay. Where is the imperious will but fast  
Against the land that holds them? To Tamarack,  
He said, bright as possession, like the coin having  
Mastery. There is my knoll where home  
Shall be, not this cabin of our duration  
As we should not be, itinerants in hope of more.  
A winter more, she said, and it is ours,  
The gaze of meadows, the water and soil  
Urgent for grain, the quiet sky, and the light  
Lazy as spring. Our home! And I shall keep it,  
Winter through, she said as if it were no winter,  
But a day of rest. And then beside him, their children,  
Or in his arms, awake to happiness. The future  
Declined from that day and would not rest,  
But as a bole of pain grew into that tower  
Of resolve and broke it easily, sacred  
As a sacrifice. He said, then think of me  
In Tamarack, and turned to what he needed  
Away from home. Geneva? The subtle portrait  
On a stand beside a bed. The wisps  
Of hair she flicked to clear her face, brown  
As the veil of earth, eyes quizzical as worry,  
But light as a soft morning, her body lithe  
And restless, supple to the rule of God.  
And Solomon? A name like a fetish he tried  
To honor, but not as a patriarch, more  
Like a seer: angular as a fence or cross,  
Bending as he seemed to fit, concern  
Like an agony to please, a burden  
To his clothes that could not shape themselves,  
And altogether like the square largeness  
Of his hands. Together, they kept the cabin  
Like a tidy loom where they would weave  
The colors through their bright fidelity.  
Their children? Hard to presuppose or know,  
But theirs. Such small alliances, wont  
To shimmer with translucent light, a guess  
Of women that might have been, of course like her,

Or him, as others might suppose, not they.  
She whispered what he might take, advice  
Hanging from her words like surety.  
And he, the slight concerns of food and health  
Like the hundreds of miles that would intervene,  
And for safety the gun and knife in a drawer,  
Nearby. Then the wood for winter near the door,  
Neatly stacked, and provisions in the loft  
And ready. What else? What else but land  
Beyond their vision, the canyons, and peaks like clouds  
In the thin blue haze, and time. He turned, ready,  
Holding her with one arm, as he pulled  
His horse from grazing to the suggestion of the miles  
Ahead, and leaned to kiss his children, and then  
Away, easily in the saddle, gazing back at her,  
The children, cabin, everything diminishing  
As he moved, and he waved, and they, in the slow  
Desperation of goodbye. He could not turn forward  
For seeing them there, until they were taken from view  
By a vale beyond their meadow sinking into darkness,  
And they were gone. From that time on he pieced  
The events of time together like fragments he could not  
Understand, though the evidence impaled the past  
Like needles dropping suddenly through his inquiry.  
There must have been a disturbance beyond the door,  
And she left the cabin with the gun on her arm,  
The sharp wind of October against her frailty  
Where she shivered in the grey dusk. The rising  
Wind, then the thunder over the plain that shook her.  
She went into the darkness of a shed, wildly  
Gazing. Then the severe and immediate rattle  
Behind her, and the strike behind her knee, the prongs  
Of venom there that made her scream. Now  
The whirling thoughts for Solomon or help  
From anywhere. Bleed the poison out.  
Go slowly, she told herself, and bleed the poison  
Out. Stumbling to the cabin, she opened the door  
In the glaze of fright and found the drawer that held  
The knife. She sat, livid against the lightning.  
To find the place to cut. Nowhere to see,  
Behind and under, but she felt the red periods there.  
A piece of kindling for a brace, a cloth  
For tourniquet. She took the knife and swept it  
With her hand. But the chickens in the shed.  
They must not starve. A few steps back  
To the shed, and she emptied a pail of grain  
And opened the door. As she moved, she held  
The stick of the tourniquet numbly against her leg.  
Slowly, slowly to the cabin, then wildly in  
To seize the knife. She held it against her leg

And with a gasp twisted it in. But too deep!  
The blood pulsed against her hand, again,  
Again, no matter how tightly she twisted the stick  
To keep it in. It spread on the rough floor  
As she felt herself weaken, the waves of blackness  
Before her eyes. The children! What will happen  
To them? she cried to herself. The lamp flickered  
At the sill. What good is the need and planning now?  
Tears for dust. The girls will starve to death  
In the clatter of the wind, and the light of afternoon  
Will carve through their sallow loneliness.  
They will lie here and cry for food, and no one will hear.  
The waning fire, the gusts at the filming window.  
Solomon! Forgive me! What can I do?  
What else can I do? She took the gun again  
And turned it to the crib, propping its weight.  
She looked at them as they slept, arms lightly  
Across each other. You will be with me,  
She whispered to them. The trigger once, then again,  
The flat sounds walling her against the error  
That they would live beyond her careful dying.  
The gun fell from her. She crawled to the bed  
In the corner and, taking her finger, traced  
In blood on the white sheet, "Rattlesnake bit,  
Babies would starv—" and the land fell away  
Beyond her sight, and all that she was collapsed  
In an artifice of death that he afterwards saw.  
Solomon!