

# The Long Road Home

By Bonnie Hobbs



“MISS OLETA, COME QUICK! They’re fixing to hang Frank Perry.”

The words stung Oleta Frye like a handful of sand. She flinched and turned from casting grit and grain to the six scrawny hens bathing in the dust in the yard. Setting the basket down carefully, she strode to the shanty’s doorway, every breath controlled. She knew she stood balanced on a knife blade and needed to calm her racing pulse, keep her hands from trembling. She would not show the depth of her fear, but the boy who had shouted out the news was already loping down the road, whipping up dust in his haste. She watched him through slitted

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eyes as she tugged a length of calico from where it hung off a peg by the door.

Since settling on this rolling Texas prairie, Oleta had taken to wearing Frank’s cast-off trousers of Union blue rolled up and cinched tight around her waist. She had left the hoop-skirted gowns, corsets and parasols far behind in war-ravaged Louisiana and was glad of it. Knowing the ways of the world, though, she’d fashioned a length of calico onto a band she could

fasten over the trousers so she might slip on the armor of a woman when occasion demanded.

This would be one of those occasions. She would need every female wile today. If angry men had laid hands on Frank Perry and were thinking to do him to death, she’d be hard-pressed to tear him free.

She grabbed her crumpled-crown Stetson, snugged it down against the glare of a noon-day sun, lifted her skirt in both hands and ran. Her boots flashed from beneath the faded calico and her breath tore from her chest in ragged rhythm.

She had begged Frank not to go to town alone. Begged him not to drink and cautioned him against spouting reckless words if he did. As always, he laughed at her cautious ways, giving her his answer, words loaded down with wit and sass. He would likely always be this way, but only if he lived long enough.

Oleta raced up a side street and stopped short, her boots sliding on the gravel, dust rising, heat pressing down. She lay one hand on a wall, bent over and caught her breath. Her sod shanty squatted just beyond the town’s last outlying street, so it hadn’t taken long to get to the center of town where the throaty growl of angry men came rolling toward her. She stumbled as she started off. Her heart pounded. She

longed to run away, but pushed forward, hearing spikes of rage come thrusting up through an undertone of dark menace. One voice urged the others on. Still, the buzz was like that of outraged hornets, unformed, not yet focused into murderous fury.

She took a breath and clenched her hands at her waist, her nails biting into her palms as she glided up behind the mob. Frank Perry forked a twitching, eye-rolling roan. He sat high above the men surging below him. They had tied his hands and slipped his head into a noose of new rope caught on a hook over the livery stable door.

Oleta splayed her fingers wide and willed them to be still as she swallowed the thickness in her throat. Then she made her hands smooth her skirt over her hips as she moved forward, desperate to recall the way a lady should walk. She struggled to remember how to speak in a soft, mellifluous voice, the kind that might cool any flaring fire of manly rage, for she had often watched her mother enter a drawing room, and using only her voice, calm the churning waters of political or commercial discord. Her mother’s example was now Oleta’s only weapon.

“Gentlemen,” she called, though she had to repeat herself, raising her voice each time until two men on the lip of the mob turned, snatched off their hats and stepped aside.

Head high, a smile stretching her lips, Oleta cut through the knot of men, murmuring and nodding gently, delicately. Most quieted and made a path. She eased up close to the horse and palmed its velvet nose, inched her hand higher and grasped the bridle's cheek strap. "Ho there, shh," she crooned. "Easy, easy, now." She knew this horse. It was hers, after all. The roan was of a skittish temperament and now on the edge of bolting. Oleta glanced about her, breathing slowly, pausing to hold the gaze of any man she could force to meet her eyes.

Frank craned his head around inside the noose, tilting his face down to give her a crooked grin. "Hey there, Miss Oleta," he said, his voice ragged and half strangled.

"Frank." Oleta nodded as if they'd just met at a church social. One of his deep-set green eyes was purpled and nearly shut, his fine, aquiline nose crooked and swollen and dribbling a string of bloody mucus. "I believe you have torn your shirt, Frank." She touched the garment hanging in tatters from one shoulder. "I believe we'll have to get Mrs. Olson to mend it."

Even as she spoke these workaday words, rage swelled within her. Rage at the sight of bruises blossoming along Frank's ribs and blood clotting above his ear, matting curly hair nearly the same dark red as that blood. She longed to scream and thrash every man there for what they'd done to Frank Perry, for none of them had his spirit, his heart, his courage.

She turned, looking for the man who led this mob, for there was always a leader, one with more bloodlust than the rest. "Mr. Cabot," she said, picking him out. His eyes were lit from within with righteous rage. He stood firm, holding a quirt raised high, ready to come whipping down across the roan's rump. His blue eyes narrowed and locked with hers.

Oleta forced a smile. "It seems you have my hired man at some disadvantage." Oleta let a syrupy Louisiana drawl seep out, let it honey her words and soothe the fury crackling the air around her. She imagined herself fluttering a fan in a ballroom from another world.

"Hired man?" The man snorted his scorn through pinched nostrils. "Is that what he is?"

Oleta cocked her head to one side, glancing up from under her lashes at Cabot,

then slid her hat off slowly, careful to avoid any sudden move that might provoke the horse into startling. Then, again with deliberate care, tugged at the ribbon holding back her hair, letting it tumble past her shoulders in a shining golden fall. She fixed a blue-eyed stare on Cabot, licked her lips and forced them into a sugared smile.

"Well, yes sir. He is that. He has a way with horses and is a hard worker. I surely don't want him hung." She glanced around the group. Some men were looking sheepish in her presence, kicking at the dirt with scuffed-toed boots. "Now you gentlemen know I can't run my place alone. Just me and Mrs. Olson. I need this man. So, what all has he done that's so bad?"

"It ain't what he done, Miss Oleta." The words came rolling at her from an unseen mouth at the back of the crowd. "Likely you don't even know and we ain't blaming you none. The lying son of a bitch, pardon me, ma'am. It's what he *is*." The words were cold things in this over-heated crowd. They stabbed through her like shards of ice. She had heard them in the last place they'd tried to settle and had hoped never to hear them again.

She breathed in and nodded, pressing her lips tight, then licked them again and tried to smile wider. "I do know he is a loud-talking man, a boastful fellow." She shook her head. "But surely that's not a hanging offense." She smiled at the man nearest to her, chuckling softly and raising one eyebrow. "Especially not in Texas."

The man and one next to him shifted their feet, looked away, but one smiled at her quiet jest.

Heartened, Oleta glanced up at Cabot again. "Please sir. Won't you free him from that noose? It appears to be rubbing the poor man raw." She shuddered. "Surely we can speak of his offense in a more civilized manner."

"We all knowed he was a Yankee." Cabot growled the words then bit them off short. "Still, cause of you, ma'am, we let him come among us." He spat on the ground. "What he never let on..." Roper paused and took a breath through flared nostrils, like he was about to be sick. "He never said what he was. Never said he was colored."

The words almost dropped her. She sucked in a breath, but couldn't form an answer to this, not right away.

Cabot went on. "He paid court to Jake Lawson's sister. Spent many a friendly evening. He ate a picnic lunch with Mr. Johnson's daughter, and the Widow Marsh has said he put his hands on her at the Fourth of July celebration dance. Swung her out into a waltz. Now she's nearly prostrate at the thought. That alone ought to get him hung."

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raised her eyes to Frank, made her gaze hard and hot. He shrugged and gave her a lop-sided grin. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, fearing to speak. Anger flared in her, anger she thought was bedded down deep, but it came rising up and she took a sudden notion to hang him herself.

She forced her lips to smile with a mouth gone dry from her surge of rage, so dry her lips stuck to her teeth and she had to lick them twice. "Frank Perry is a charmer, he surely is," she said. "I do hope those ladies in question were willing? I imagine there were no true wrongs done, no improprieties?"

"To be courted by a...by a..." Cabot's outrage was stuck in his throat, too quivering thick to form the word.

"Now, Mr. Roper," Oleta said. "Where on earth did you get such a notion about Mr. Perry? Does he look like a colored man to you?" She opened her arms and gestured around her. "To any of you all?"

One man shouted out. "Some of us ain't never really seen one."

Oleta forced herself to laugh, a lilting trill running up and down the scale. She shook her head. "Well, I assure you, sir, I have. I have owned them and worked them and been served by them all my youthful days before that time—that terrible time of bitter conflict." She blinked rapidly, lowering her lashes, then raising them to let her gaze roam helplessly from man to man. She sniffed and knuckled the side of her nose. But when she finally set her glare on Frank, her words spooled out colder than she'd planned. "And I assure you, gentleman, he's nothing like any colored man I've ever

known.”

The crowd stilled for a heartbeat, then stirred like a beast’s heaving belly. A low buzz of words made its way around from mouths to ears, and two men peeled off, grumbling some, and stepped up on the platform by the livery to let Frank Perry loose of the rope. They untied his hands.

Oleta watched him twist his neck around and rub at a raw place beneath his left ear. She still fought the urge to strangle him herself. “Now, Frank,” she said. “If you’d kindly step down from what is, I believe, my horse, I shall point you toward home, for you have shirked your duties long enough today.” She caught and held his gaze. “I believe we had planned to geld that stud horse today, didn’t we?”

Frank went pale beneath his bruises, but was surely fighting a smile as he swung one leg over and dropped to the ground. He stood clinging to the saddle for a moment, swaying.

Oleta’s molten anger cooled at the sight of his distress. She clasped her hands at her waist, fighting the desire to steady him, to take him in her arms. “May we leave, gentlemen? Surely this misunderstanding is over?” She smiled, brightly, sweetly, letting the glow of that false smile light on every man, searching out their eyes, catching their gazes and holding them with her own as she once did in the ballroom and drawing room of Belle Hellene, the white-columned dream that was her youth.

These men had been caught and spell-bound. She saw it in their eyes. Southern boys, imagining the scent of magnolias and believing they saw moonlight caught and shining in her hair. Hardscrabble Texas farm boys, most of them, dreaming of another place, another time, a time that never really was, certainly not for them. Oleta struggled to keep contempt from frosting her gaze or tainting her smile, for men like these had plunged ahead into a war. They had fought for a cause that was not even their own, letting others convince them to die and kill for a way of life they could never know, a way of life that was already doomed by its own evil. They’d lived a dream, and now she had them caught up in that same dream, a fiction of her making. She held them all. All but one.

Cabot shoved forward and slammed a fist into Frank’s shoulder, knocking him

sideways. Frank coiled to spring but Oleta gripped his forearm. He held firm, though quivering in his stillness.

“Then why’d he say what he did?” Cabot said. “Me and some others was sharing a jug, talking about the war. He sits quiet for a spell, then he stands up and bows like a gent. He thanks us for being such piss-poor fighters, bragging on his unit, the 54<sup>th</sup>. The fighting 54<sup>th</sup>. Well, we all know what they was, don’t we, boys?”

Every man commenced nodding and muttering. A shout came from the back. “Nigger troops!”

Oleta, torn between anger at Frank’s childish boasting and womanizing, and her fear for his life, gathered her honeyed words. “Oh, but Mr. Cabot,” Oleta said. “They were led by white officers, surely. And didn’t Mr. Perry say he was a Union officer?”

Cabot ignored her and went on. “Then he says ‘Thankee kindly, gentlemen, for losing the war and setting my *people* free.’” Cabot nodded around. “Ain’t that what he said?”

A few men grumbled in agreement and the bodies surged and closed in again. Oleta felt her control of them slipping and smelled the stink of their outraged sweat. A bunch like this was mighty hard to hold with words and a smile and a faded calico skirt. She wished to God she had a pistol.

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All she could think to do was laugh and toss her head as if at some great jest while pulling on Frank’s arm, bringing him along with her, backing away. “As you said, Mr. Cabot, this man *is* a Yankee. They have a perverse way of speaking that neither you nor I, sir, might ever fathom.” She stopped and nudged Frank with one elbow. “Raise your head now, Mr. Perry, won’t you?”

Frank’s eyes glittered with a puckish humor she prayed would stay bottled for at least a few more seconds. It would be so like him to spew out some sarcastic word.

“Does this man look colored to you all? Look at his skin, there where it shows through the ragged shirt. Why, it is as light as mine. Lighter than yours, Mr. Cabot, I do

believe.” She shook her head and clicked her tongue off the back of her teeth, showing her despair at their ignorance. “I do hope this foolishness is settled. Why, I believe you gentlemen should save your drinking for the cool of the evening. The sun seems to have boiled the whiskey right into your brains and befuddled your thinking. Mr. Perry, shame on you for making such a foolish jest. Come along now, if you will.”

She glided by the still grumbling men, keeping Frank at her side. He stumbled twice and she resisted every urge to touch him, biting back tears, keeping her spine straight, her head high and swaying her hips no more than a lady should. She knew every man watched her, lusted for her and what they thought she represented just as they had been doing since the day she had come among them.

Frank leaned down as they walked, his breath hot on her face. “I suspect I should be thanking you, *Miss Oleta*.”

Oleta heard the amusement in his voice. Her belly churned from her terror for him and her disgust at the show she’d had to put on to save him. She fought back the simmering anger at his reckless ways. “Hush,” she whispered and stepped off ahead. “Not yet.” She glanced back over her shoulder when they turned the corner. No one followed. No one could see them now. She stopped short and rounded on him, taking her fury off its leash. “Why, Frank? Why?”

He shrugged and squinted off into the afternoon sun. He rubbed at his chin. “I was drinking.”

“Don’t go blaming it on the whiskey. I’ve seen how it loosens your tongue, but it doesn’t make you so reckless as to push you toward suicide.”

“I couldn’t listen to them going on and on about...a bunch of ignorant farmers. Saying slaves had it good, saying...” He cut his words off short. “You know how they talk.” He smiled down on her, the heat in his gaze enough to melt any cold resolve she might have. “They talked like you just did back there, except you did it so much prettier.”

“But why the women, Frank?”

“They meant nothing.” He gripped her shoulders and pulled her close. “You know that.”

Oleta closed her eyes and let herself sag

and melt against his hard-muscled chest. “I had just started believing I could trust you,” she said. “It hurt me so when you abandoned us and ran north...”

He pushed her out to arm’s length. “I ran for my life. What else could I do?”

Oleta knew the tears were coming. “I trusted you all my life. To keep me safe from serpents and swamps and rabid dogs.” She smiled through the tears and swiped at her runny nose. “Isn’t that what Papa said for you to do?”

“Yes, ma’am. And I did just that, ever since your daddy set me to watching over you, Miss Oleta.”

“Was it just a chore to you? Did I never mean any more than that to you?”

“You need me to say it?”

Oleta twisted from his grasp. “Yes. Yes, I do. When we were young I watched you charm every girl on the place. You’d have gone after the daughters of my father’s friends if they didn’t know who you were. I used to laugh at your carrying on. It wasn’t until we were nearly grown and—and I knew I loved you that it cut me so deep.”

They stood in silence for a moment before Frank shook his head slowly. “We should have married after we got away from the old place, the old ways,” he said.

“I could not marry you,” Oleta whispered. “I will not.”

“No one knows about me out here. Why...?”

Oleta felt the tears rising again. “Oh, they’d know,” she whispered. “They’d know because you would boast of it. You can never let things be, Frank. Always have to spell things out.”

“I say what needs saying, but I wouldn’t say that. Not if you’d marry me. I wouldn’t do that.”

She shook her head. “I won’t marry you, Frank. Not as you are.”

He pulled her in against his body again. “As I am? I’ll never be any other way. You still think you’re the belle of Ascension Parish? You’ll always know there’s a few drops of color hiding down deep in me, won’t you? And then there’s the talk of who my daddy really is. Maybe we’re kin, you and I.”

Oleta screwed her eyes shut and shook her head. What to say, how to make him understand? She pushed herself back, out of his arms, stumbling while fighting sobs.

“I swear, Frank.” She swiped at her eyes, blotting the scalding fall of tears. “That is a tangled mess and best left unsorted. It’s none of that. It’s not because of what we were. That’s another world now. It’s because of what we are.”

“Now we’re free. Free to do what we want.”

“Not free of what you do, Frank. You can never be true to me, never be constant. I thought you had changed from the way you were in your youth and I was feeling sure of you, but after what I heard today it seems you’re just the same.”

“You watch me like I’m not fit to be out of your sight.”

Oleta choked down the wail she longed to loose upon him. “And you aren’t, it seems. Always getting up to something.” She pointed one finger, circling it near him. “I won’t be bound to a husband who sniffs around after other women. I won’t be pitied and laughed at.”

“Just a game to pass the time, Oleta. Since I couldn’t do what I longed to, since I couldn’t have you.” He squatted in the dirt and picked up a stone, then stood and flung it hard and high and far, scaring up a covey of quail.

“I need a man, Frank. Not a child who swaggers like a man.”

He drew himself up tall and straight; narrowed his eyes. “The ladies I’ve charmed don’t appear to have complaints.” He tamed his voice and twisted his lips into a smirk. “And those Yankee boys bestowed a medal upon me. Seems they believed me manly enough.”

“Medals don’t make a man. A man stands by those he loves. He protects them.” She caught her breath in a sob. “He doesn’t run off and leave them—leave them to face...” She stopped and took a breath.

“I had to go and you wouldn’t come. I couldn’t stay and love you from afar like in one of those fanciful books you liked to read.”

“How could I leave Papa? War was coming. And my sister? She was so sick. And yes, Frank, I know you had to go. But still, when war came and hunger and death came, I was all alone but for your mother.”

“Ah, yes. Our dear Mrs. Olson,” he said, smirking.

“One by one everyone left. We were alone. Left all alone. And it started with

your leaving.”

He stared at her and his gaze softened. Oleta watched him worry his lower lip between his teeth as he did whenever unsettled. Then he sighed, threw back his head and closed his eyes. “I cut a heroic figure in that blue uniform.” He smiled, opened his eyes and fixed a gaze on her, then through her. “Almost didn’t let me in the 54<sup>th</sup>. Said by the look of me I should be in the Irish Brigade. Didn’t know whether to laugh or knock somebody down over such a joke. I listened to the officers talk of fighting for the union, how they didn’t care so much about slavery.” He shook his head and pulled his gaze back so it fell on Oleta’s face. The look he gave her loaded her down with such sweetness; nearly too heavy to bear. She stepped back, then forward again, unable to offer a word.

“I fought hard as I could, but a thought came to me, Oleta. Hit me like a lightning bolt in the thick of battle. I knew I’d never be truly free, not of you. God knows never free without you. I started for home.”

“You were lucky to find me alive,” she whispered.

“I’ve always been lucky. Lucky you’d have me at all.”

They stood still and silent for a time, searching each others eyes. “What a pair we are,” Oleta said, tears making tracks down her cheeks. She looked off toward the cor-

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ral that penned her stock and the willows shivering in a breeze down by the creek. She shivered too, taken by a sudden notion. “Why did you go chasing after those women in town?”

He shrugged and looked away.

“Why, Frank?”

“Figured I might as well. Clear you won’t have me.” His mouth twisted into a sneer. “Guess those old ways die hard in a man.”

Oleta felt giddy with a wild understanding. “You chase women because I won’t have you. I won’t have you because you go on chasing women. Frank, we keep stumbling around in a circle.” A laugh died in her throat. “It’s not what you are and who I was that’s keeping us apart. It’s the way we

are right now, just circling round and round.”

He stared, then reached out and stroked a tangle of hair back from her face. “We’re a pair all right.”

Oleta turned her face into his palm where it lay gentle on her skin. She breathed in his scent.

He stepped closer. “Oleta,” he whispered in her ear, the warm breath touching, lips just grazing, sending shivers down to the base of her spine and loosening the knot she kept there most of her days. A knot that only eased when Frank Perry was with her and being his sweet self. “Forgive me?” he said.

She nodded. She always had forgiven, always would. Home was a space carved out of time with this man, however she could come by it, whatever she had to do to keep it.

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Then she pulled herself away, crossed her arms and gripped herself above the elbows. “They’ll be watching. They won’t believe my little speech for long. They’ll come after you again.” Oleta’s lips trembled with the need to speak of love, her arms ached to hold him, but she stayed silent, fearing to say the wrong thing, fearing to hear the wrong thing.

A sparkle of mischief came back to his eyes. “Then before I go, should I tell those fine gentlemen that what they surmised was truth? Wouldn’t want them to go to their graves doubting their instincts.” He took a step away.

Oleta grasped his arm, spun him to face her, then pushed him away. She felt words come bursting up and out of her, stinging her throat. “Can you never be serious? What of me?” She took a breath. “Cabot won’t believe I didn’t know. At best they will all shun me. At worst—well, you know the worst. You know what happens to a white woman who...” She clamped her hand to her mouth.

He gave her a pained and piercing stare, all mischief gone. “I’d never leave you to that,” he said.

“How would you leave me, then?”

“Never,” he whispered, stretching out his

hand but turning away from her as he did so, his voice gravelly. “Never can. Never would.”

“Then let’s go home, Frank.”

“Is there such a place?”

“Any place we’re together. Been a long road to here, likely be a long road moving on. We’ll have to break out of that old circle of ours, learn to trust, but no matter what storm boils up and thrashes wild around us, Frank, we are the center, home to each other. I know that now.”

He reached out to stroke her face with the backs of his fingers. She closed her eyes at the touch. “Then let’s find a place where the waters are calmer,” he said, turning his face into the sun. It gave his eyes a glow. He jerked his chin at the sky. “Maybe that’s our road.”

Oleta nodded and moved ahead of him, trailing her open hand behind for him to catch hold of. “I don’t relish telling your mama we have to move again.”

Frank laughed. “I suspect she knows already, probably already packing.”

They left in the cool of evening some days later, and like the sun, headed west.