

## "Flickering Lantern This Way Comes"

A short story by H. Melvin James.

The old couple had endured a hard life. There was no better term for it, no words more descriptive. The farmer and his wife had aged two years for each year of their troublesome toil. The once young, strong, and optimistic middle-class European couple struggled to earn passage to America, to deserve entrance through Ellis Island, and to gain access to the teeming squalid streets of the city. After several years working torturous trying jobs, meandering generally westward, seeking a share of the promise, and saving pennies toward dollars, they finally arrived at the threshold of their destiny.

From a line of horse-back riders, wagons, buggies, and pedestrians along the thirty-seventh north parallel, at the south-western border of the state of Kansas, the couple raced their horse-pulled springboard wagon, contesting against tens of thousands of other pioneers, to claim a quarter section of Indian Territory prairie in the celebrated Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893.

After establishing their homestead and following their first good wheat crop three years later, their third baby was born. That baby would survive to become their only child.

By the year 1917, the farm-couple's son had graduated from high school, matured into a respectable and likeable young gentleman, had proven himself an able hardworking farmer, and provided his mother and father with pride, joy, and satisfaction with their lives. That year the Spanish pandemic began its deadly curse on the World. That was also the year America gallantly entered the pompous European's first World War.

When their son went off to war, the farm-couple's isolated homestead on that sparsely populated plain became lonely and quiet. The isolated farmhouse stood at the dead end of a dirt-road reaching straight and flat, twelve miles from town.

On evenings of fair weather, after chores were finished, following supper and dishwashing, the farmer and his wife usually sat on their porch to rest and gaze toward the open horizons. If they saw any wagon, buggy, or motor carriage coming down their dead-end road, they knew someone was coming particularly to see them. Sadly, that was a rare event for the lonely couple.

One late autumn evening they saw a lantern flickering in the dusk-dark distance, along the rutted dirt road. The light seemed to dance and bobble, the way a lantern flickers as it swings from a hook on the side of a wagon, a wagon joggling on a rough road.

Their spirits soared. A recent newspaper they brought home from their previous weekly trip to town told of the first shiploads of soldiers returning home from that horrible war. They thought, hope above reason, that their son, their only child, was finally coming home to them. He had written letters of the horrors of that war, the muddy trenches, the poisonous gas, the whistling bombs and tormenting cannon shelling, the hundreds of lives lost in many a day, to gain a few yards advance from one line of trenches to the next, and then to retreat again.

As they watched their hopes grew to exhilaration. The flickering faint lamp-glow seemed to slowly grow little brighter as if it were approaching. They believed they heard faint sounds of wagon wheels jolting against the rough road and horses' hooves clopping against the hard earth. They waited

speechless and entranced. Time was imperceptible. They speculated. It could not simply be a distant neighbor's porch light, for it seemed to gradually move along the road coming toward them. Mysteriously though, the light continuously approached while remaining consistently distant. It was a strange and perplexing observation.

They sat and watched as their tired bodies grew weary and their eyes closed bleary. Then they slumbered in their rocking chairs. In the pitch dark of the late night one of them woke and then awakened the other. The flickering light had disappeared. They dismissed the sighting as some ordinary circumstance, about which they might never know.

The next day their seldom seen rural postman cheerfully brought them a letter, instead of leaving it in the rural mailbox a half mile away. It was from their son. He wrote that he had a premonition that he would be coming home soon. He wrote of a vivid dream he had the night before. He dreamt that a neighbor farmer gave him a ride home from the train station, late in the evening, on his buckboard wagon.

The farm couple spent the day planning for Thanksgiving dinner, selecting a live turkey from their mixed flock, mostly of chickens but also including pairs of ducks, and geese, and four turkeys. They would fatten up the selected and pinned turkey with extra feed during the next three weeks. The farmer and his wife took inventory of their canned goods and dry goods. They made a list of what they would buy in town, come their weekly Saturday trip. Extra measures would be needed for a third person to rejoin the household. Their son would surely be home in three weeks, and he would have a hearty appetite. It was early November 1918, but not too early to plan a magnificent dinner for celebrating and giving thanks for their son's return home. But late that very evening the lonely farmstead couple received another visitor. A telegram told of their son's death on the battlefield in northern France.

Merely one week later, on November 11, 1918, armistice was declared. The war had ended. Their son was buried in a cemetery for American soldiers in northern France. But perhaps he did return home that night, to make one last visit to his beloved farm and one unheard last bid of fare the well to his mother and father. The same neighbor of their son's dream later told that he had indeed traveled to town for supplies that day. He then traveled home late in the evening with a lantern attached to his wagon. The neighbor admitted that he fell asleep as the horses slowly tugged the wagon home, assured that the animals knew the route even in darkness. But when he awoke it was late. The horses had missed the turn at the last intersecting road and had halted, dumbfounded, with their heading toward the couple's homestead.

About half of a mile from the couple's farmhouse, the horses sensed they were lost. It was likely that the horses had also been aware that their wagon driver was asleep. The horses thus stopped and slumbered too, the way horses do, sleeping while standing. When the farmer awoke, he turned his wagon around and went to his home.

But he withheld telling part of his story to the grieving old couple, for as he slept on the wagon that night, he dreamt. He dreamt that he met their son at the train station and that he was giving him a ride home, home from the war.