An excerpt from

The Wind Blows Free

by Loula Grace Erdman

MELINDA PIERCE sat on the green plush seat of the railroad car, listening to the mocking song the wheels of the train were singing. All the way up from East Texas they had said the same thing—

"Going away. Going away. *Going away*," they wailed. And sometimes they added, "Poor Melinda. Poor, *poor* Melinda."

Katie sat beside her, and just across the aisle were Mama and Carolyn, who rode facing Bert and Dick. Most of the time the twins squabbled about which one was to sit next to the window. This, however, they did with quiet determination, for whenever they grew too loud, Mama looked at them.

"Boys—" she warned.

She got a lot into that single word. It said that she had a long memory, and that Papa was waiting for them in Amarillo, where he had already gone in the emigrant car with the household goods and the stock. But for the most part she was patient with them, knowing how excited they were over going to their new home, this claim in the Texas Panhandle. They wanted to see real cowboys and learn to ride and hunt buffalo, and maybe even shoot a few Indians. They had all sorts of ideas about what the country would be like. They were headed West and toward adventure, and their hearts raced ahead of them.

For Melinda, things were different. Her heart had stayed behind her in the loveliness of East Texas, where already, even though it was only March, the bluebonnets were an azure wash of beauty across the hills and the trees and grass were lush and lovely. Back there, too, were her friends— Mary Elizabeth and Jennie Sue and Martha and the rest of the girls she had played with all her life until now.

"Oh, Melinda," they had wept as they told her good-bye, "it's so far—so *awfully* far to the Texas Panhandle. We'll never see you again. Just never! Maybe you'll get scalped by Indians, or run over in a stampede, or something."

"Oh, nonsense!" Melinda had tried to answer them rightly, in spite of the fact that her heart was aching so she could scarcely speak at all. "There aren't any Indians loose up there. They're all on—well, on reservations, and act as civilized as we do. Papa said so."
There was a sort of pride in Melinda that made her reluctant to admit to anyone just how much she did hate to go to this new home of theirs, so far away and so different from anything any of them had ever known before.

"And here in just a little over a year we'll be sixteen and ready for the Academy and all. Oh, Melinda—you just *can't* go!"

But she had gone. The train was slipping along now, each turn of the wheels carrying her farther away from all her friends. The country unrolled ahead of them, the way Papa used to unroll a carpet for a customer, back in the store in East Texas. There was nothing but land, no matter which way you looked. No trees. No houses. Just land. Melinda found herself wondering how Papa was ever able to make up his mind which section to choose, with all these endless dun miles stretching out before him. And how would he know which was theirs, once he had picked it, when it all looked so much alike. There wasn't even a hill to tell you whether you were where you wanted to be or twenty miles from there.

The boys had quieted down, but they continued to jab each other with their elbows. By and by, one of two things would happen—either the inside boy would give up his seat next to the window, or Mama would see that he did. Generally, though, the twins worked out things for themselves. They didn't look alike, for Dick (named Richard for Papa) was dark like Mama, and Bert (named Robert for Grandfather) was redheaded. But they thought alike; even their squabbles were usually caused because they both wanted the same thing at the same time. "Look, M'linda," Katie said now, nudging her sister as she spoke.

Katie's blue eyes were full of wonder, her yellow curls were soft around her little face. She looked like a wax doll. Melinda, whose dark, straight hair was combed into pigtails, often wished she had hair like Katie's.

"M'linda," Katie asked, "what are they?"

She pointed toward some animals running fleetly at a distance from the tracks. Their heads were high; their little pointed horns stood straight up in the air, as if they sensed some great danger in the presence of the train and must flee from it.

"Where—where—?" the boys cried together. They both leaned out of their seats, looking across the aisle and out of the window where the girls were seated.

"Quit that," Bert protested. He was next to the aisle and Dick, in his eagerness to see out of the window, was leaning heavily against him. "You get off my arm—."

"Boys—" Mama warned.

Melinda didn't know what the animals were, but she hated to admit it. Katie, who was only eight, thought Melinda should know everything just because she was almost fifteen. The child was always full of shy questions, invariably directed toward her older sister. She was timid and afraid to find out things for herself. The twins, who were eleven, were always teasing her, which made her even more uncertain about things. Melinda hated to fail her now.

"Antelope," Mama said, looking around at the boys half sprawled in the aisle.

"If I had a gun, I'd shoot one of those old antelopes," Dick bragged. "I'd shoot him dead."

"I'd shoot myself," Bert retorted. "I'd shoot him before you got your gun out."

"The boys would both shoot the elenphunt," Carolyn said firmly.

That was the truth. They would do that together, as they did everything else.

"Silly," Bert told Carolyn. "It's not an elephant. It's an antelope."

Tears came into Carolyn's eyes; her baby faced clouded over.

"I am *not* silly," she denied.

She would have been crying in another moment, if Mama had not taken matters in hand. "Look out the window, honey," she said.

They all looked. What they saw was a herd of cattle, perhaps seventy-five or a hundred in number. The cattle, too, were headed in the same direction in which the train was moving. Some men were driving them. These men wore brownish pants and blue shirts and big black hats and boots. They sat their horses as if they had grown there.

"Cowboys!" the twins yelled together. They would have stopped the train and jumped off, had they been able to. They waved at the horsemen, who saw them and waved back. The boys stood with their noses glued to the window as long as they could see the men and cattle. Carolyn, forgetting her recent grief, looked, too.

"Oh, see all the pretty cows," she said.

"Wonder if they'll be lots of cowboys close to our claim," Bert said.

"I expect so," Mama told him. "Papa says we aren't too far from a big ranch, you remember."

Of course they remembered. They had talked of nothing else since Papa came back from filing on the claim in the Texas Panhandle. Melinda had not felt so enthusiastic about the promise of ranches. It would take more than that to make up for leaving her friends and the white house in which she had been born. She did not want to leave Grandmother, who lived next door and spoiled her oldest granddaughter, who was also her namesake. But after Papa's store had burned, they seemed to have no other choice.

For days after it happened, Papa went around looking white and strained. Mama made the children be quiet and told them not to bother him. But even so, Katie asked timidly, "What are we going to do now, Papa?"

"I don't know yet," he told her. "But don't worry, honey. I'll think of something."

The thing he finally thought of was filing on a section of land up in the Texas Panhandle. He showed them where it was on the map. The map was small, but even so the Panhandle looked a long way off to Melinda.

"Isn't that awfully far?" she asked.

"Seven hundred miles, or more," he told her.

Seven hundred miles! That was a world away.

"Couldn't we just take the insurance money and buy another store here?" she asked.

No, Papa said they couldn't do that. There would be just enough insurance money to make a down payment on the claim, buy the stock and things they'd need for it, and see them through the first year until they could raise a crop. That is, if they were careful, there'd be enough money.

So that was the way they had settled things. Papa and Mama sat down together and figured for a long time, using pages of paper, and finally Papa went out and bought a team and a cow and a calf and a few implements. These he packed into a railroad car—an emigrant car, it was called—along with the household things. He went on ahead in the car to make things ready. And here the rest of the family was, almost at the end of the journey. It was going to be good to see Papa again.

The conductor came through now. He was fat and jolly.

"How you children getting along?" he asked.

"Fine," the twins told him. "We just saw some cowboys." As if that made the trip worth while.

"And we saw some *beautiful* cows," Carolyn added.

"You may see some more before we get in," the conductor told them. "We are taking a train load down to Fort Worth tomorrow, and there'll be other bunches coming in today." "Oh—" Bert and Dick were all delighted interest.

"Yes," the conductor went on, evidently pleased at having so receptive an audience, "they'll drive the cattle in today and let them rest in the yards and get feed and water, and then tomorrow the train will take them off to market."

"Oh, golly," the boys cried, "we'll maybe get to go down and see them when we get to town."

"Could be," the conductor told them. "They'll be in the pens, quarter of a mile or so from the station. You'll hear them bellowing and carrying on."

"See the cattle in the pens," Carolyn chanted. "All the pretty cows—!"

"Well, here we are," the conductor announced. "Just a few minutes now, and we'll be in."

"Boys," Mama said, "you go wash your hands and comb your hair. Melinda, you make yourself

neat and look after Katie.

She set her own hat straight, pulled on her gloves. She smoothed Carolyn's hair and tied the baby's bonnet strings neatly.

"Amarillo," the conductor called, "next stop, Amarillo!"

They stood on the station platform. The train was pulling off, cutting a smooth, clean path through the landscape, tooting forlornly as it left. Melinda looked around the cindery platform. So did the others.

"Where's Papa?" the boys asked.

Papa was nowhere in sight.

The sky arched blue above them, looking bright and new-washed. Strangely enough, at the same time it seemed both near and far-away. The sun was warm, yet the air had a touch of brisk coolness, too. The wind was blowing. It caught at Mama's skirts; it tugged at Melinda's hat; it blew Katie's curls. For a while it sounded mocking, as if it were making fun of Mama and the Pierce children who had come to a strange land and had no one at the station to meet them. Then it began to wail, as if it felt a little sorry for them in their plight.

"Where's Papa?" Carolyn whimpered.

"He'll be here in a minute," Mama promised.

The boys were momentarily diverted from their concern about Papa. "Look," they cried excitedly, "there are some cattle, going into the pens!"

Sure enough, the cattle were being driven into the stock pens, a quarter of a mile or so from the station. Even here, however, their bellowing was clearly audible. Melinda could see their horns, tossing about in the air.

"Oh," Carolyn said, cheering up immediately, "see all the pretty cows!"

The boys were all for following the railroad tracks that branches off to the stockyards, but Mama would have none of that. She said Papa would be here in a minute, and they must all wait for him.

They turned to look at the town to which they had come. For the most part, it seemed to be made up of small wooden buildings, scattered along on both sides of the dirt street. There were no sidewalks, except as the porches of the stores could serve as such. There were no trees—the wooden buildings of the town seemed set in levelness. While they were looking, a man came across the street and up on the platform to where they stood.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said, taking off his hat and speaking very politely to Mama. "Are you Mrs.

Pierce?"

"Yes, I am," Mama answered.

"Well, your husband sent word he'd be along in a little while. He's been delayed."

"He—he isn't sick, or anything, is he?" Mama asked uncertainly.

"No, ma'am, he's fine. He just had to ride for the doctor for some folks he knew, and it made him late. But he sent word in by the stage driver that he'd be here by six, for sure."

With that every one of them, even Mama, felt better.

"Are you a cowboy?" Bert asked the man.

"Well, Bub," the man answered, "I punch a few cattle. And now if you'll all just follow me, I'll take you over to Mrs. Harrigan's boardinghouse."

Mama hesitated. Melinda knew what she was thinking— that they hadn't planned to stay in a boardinghouse. Papa was to meet them and take them right on out to the claim.

Boardinghouses cost money.

"Your husband said you were to wait for him there, ma'am," the cowboy went on softly. He picked up Mama's valise in one hand, as if that settled the matter. With his free hand, he reached for Carolyn. She drew back shyly, clung to Mama's skirt.

"Come along, Sis," he said, grinning at her. This time she made no protest. He picked her up. "Let's get going," he told them.

Bert and Dick immediately lined up on each side of him. Mama and Melinda and Katie followed. He led them a few blocks down the street and when they came to the boardinghouse, entered without knocking. A big, fat, jolly woman came to meet them.
"You come right in," she cried. "You're the Pierces, and I have a room waiting for you. Soon as the stage driver told me the fix you were in, I got it ready."

They followed her down a long, narrow hall. Just before they came to the door of their room, the cowboy called after them.

"Ma'am, if you'd like me to take those two boys off your hands a while, I'd be glad to oblige."

"Oh, Mama!" Bert and Dick cried in a single voice. They turned, as if they were ready to take off with him whether Mama gave permission or not. Mama hesitated.

"Oh, let them go," Mrs. Harrigan urged. "Nick will take as good care of them as their own pa would." That settled it.

"Go on," Mama told them. "Be good boys, and don't bother." "We won't," the twins promised. "Oh, we won't." They were off down the hall, rushing toward Nick, before Mama and the girls even got inside the room.

Melinda looked out of the window of the room to which Mrs. Harrigan had taken them. Across all those miles of land, in a direction she could only guess, lay their new home. Out there, too, was Papa, perhaps even now on his way to meet them. But she could see neither of them. In fact, she could see nothing but earth and sky.

Mama lay on the bed, resting. Her eyes were closed, but, even so, she looked purposeful and alert. Melinda knew that she would lie there only so long as things went well; the moment there was a hint of trouble, she would be sitting up, wide awake.

Katie was cutting paper dolls out of a newspaper Mrs. Harrigan had given her. Over in a corner Carolyn sat, dressing and undressing her china doll, her own face serious and intent on the job at hand. She practically lived with this doll, dressing and undressing it so often it was a wonder she didn't wear out its clothes. And she was always giving it a new name, usually choosing a word she had just heard, or which, for the moment, interested her most.
"You be quiet, Sallie Cowboy," she crooned. "You mustn't wake Mama."

Katie looked up at the top of the paper from which she was cutting the ladies.

"March 3, 1893," she read slowly. "When was that, M'linda?"

"Yesterday," Melinda told her briefly.

"Oh, M'linda, isn't it wonderful that the paper can get all the way up from Fort Worth in one day!"

"Uh-huh—" Melinda agreed, only half listening.

She turned away from the window restlessly. Mama had told her to keep an eye on Carolyn, but that was no real job. She couldn't quite bring herself to cut out dolls with Katie. She was lonesome. She felt a great longing for Jennie Sue and the rest of her friends. Here it was two o'clock in the afternoon. They were all probably walking down the tree-shaded street by now, arms entwined, laughing and talking together, going for the mail or on errands for their mothers. If she were there, she would be laughing with them. It was almost too much to bear, thinking of her friends in Lewisville without her, going on doing the things she had always done when she was with them. She knew what she'd do—she'd write to them. That way, she could almost feel as if she were with them, too. She went softly to Mama's valise, found a pencil and some paper.

"Dear Jennie Sue and Mary Elizabeth and Martha," she began.

Then she stopped and nibbled the end of her pencil. What was she going to say to them?

That they were sitting in a low, unpainted boardinghouse, waiting for Papa, who hadn't come to meet them? That the town they had come to had one rutted mud street with wooden buildings on each side and no real sidewalks, and hitch racks with cowboys' ponies tied to them? She could tell them a cowboy had met them. That would sound fine and romantic.
"What's this word, M'linda?" Katie asked. She had stopped her doll cutting and was trying to read.

Melinda looked at it. "Velveteen," she said.

"Oh, Melinda!" Katie sighed enviously. "You are so smart. No wonder Grandmother wants you to come back to go to school."

"Oh, Katie!" Melinda blushed a little. But she was pleased, anyway.

Grandmother had, indeed, made Mama and Papa promise to send Melinda back to her the fall she was sixteen so she could attend the Academy, as she had planned to do since she was a little girl. It was called "The Lewisville Academy for Young Females" and all the girls in Lewisville simply couldn't wait to grow up and go there. Mama herself had gone. And now, just when Melinda was almost old enough to go, here the family was moving off into the Panhandle.

"Where you'll be miles from any school at all," Grandmother had said to Mama. "What are you going to do—let your children grow up in ignorance?"

"I'll teach them myself," Mama had told her. "After all—I taught before I married."

"You taught primary," Grandmother had reminded her. "Do you think you can teach Melinda what she needs to know?"

Mama hesitated over that.

"I tell you what," Grandmother had said. "You go on and teach her all you can, and then the fall she's sixteen—which will be a little over a year from now, won't it?"

"A year and six months," Melinda had supplied the information. "I'll be sixteen a year from this August."

"All right—a year from this September, then, you'll send Melinda back to me so I can put her in the Academy and make a lady out of her." "Oh, Grandmother!" Melinda's heart had known a great gladness. She felt she could stand going off into the Panhandle, leaving all her friends and the good times they had shared together, if only she had the hope of coming back to the Academy when she was sixteen. "Oh, Grandmother!"

"Well—" Mama had glanced at Melinda quickly. It was as if she had realized, for the first time, just how much her daughter hated to leave Lewisville. "We'll have to see," she had finished quickly. "I'll talk to Richard and see what he says."

Grandmother had looked at Melinda speculatively. "By that time it may be hard to make a lady out of her," she had said. "She's got a lot of her great-grandma Tillery in her. May go out into those Wilds and get so used to things she won't want to leave, even if she has a chance. When they tried to get Grandma Tillery to go back to Georgia after she'd lived in Texas twenty years, she laughed at them. And she'd gone through the Texas Revolution and Indian raids and heaven knows what all. There's no understanding some women in this family. Willing to go off to the Wilds and drag their families with them."

She meant Mama, of course. Grandmother hadn't wanted Mama to go to the Panhandle at all.

"It isn't the wilds," Mama had protested. "It's new country, it's true. But it's good country, and it has a future."

"Future or not," Grandmother had said, "I want Melinda to come back here to school."

In the end, Mama and Papa had promised that Melinda could come. It was the remembrance of that promise that made Melinda think of something to tell Jennie Sue and the others now.

"Just think," she wrote, "it will not be any time at all until I will be coming back. You must write to me often and tell me everything that happens."

And then Melinda felt, rather than saw, that something was wrong, there in the boardinghouse room. There was a stillness, a vacant feeling. She looked up quickly.
Carolyn was gone!

Melinda jumped up, scattering her letter and the pencil over the floor. At her first movement, Mama sat up straight in bed. "What's wrong?" she questioned.

Melinda could only stand, staring. And then Mama asked quickly, even as she swung her feet down on the floor and stood up.

"Where's Carolyn?"

"I—" It couldn't be true, but it was. "She's—she's gone—"

"Where?" Mama asked.

"I—I don't know."

"Melinda," Mama said, starting toward the door, "I told you to watch her. What were you doing?"

How could she tell Mama the truth—that she was dreaming about going back to Lewisville, and all the good times she would have there. That she hadn't been here at all, in the room with Carolyn, but back in East Texas. She didn't even try to answer. She just followed Mama down the hall, starting out to look for Carolyn.

Carolyn was nowhere to be found in the boardinghouse, although they looked in every room and called her name each step they took.

"She can't be far away," kind Mrs. Harrigan reassured Mama. "She won't get hurt. Someone will find her and bring her back"

By this time the search had spread out into the street. Nick, the cowboy, came along, bringing Dick and Bert with him. The boys' faces were grave at the news of Carolyn's disappearance. Just then another cowboy walked up. Evidently the boys knew him, too.
"Hey, Herman," they asked, "you seen anything of our little sister?" They teased the child until they made life miserable for her, threatening to throw away her doll and mimicking her baby talk. But now they were as concerned as Katie or Melinda.

"What's she look like, Bub?" the cowboy asked.

"She's—she's just a little girl," Bert told him uncertainly,

"Pretty—?"

"Oh, yes!" The boys both spoke together, sounding so earnest and sure that even Mama had to laugh a little.

"Tell you what, ma'am," Nick offered, "we'll just sort of divide up into teams and comb the town. She's bound to be here somewhere. Don't you worry."

They turned to leave, the twins at their heels. Melinda ran after them. She was remembering something—the stock pens, filled with cattle waving those long, wicked horns, bellowing and filling the air full of dust as they tramped back and forth. What if Carolyn had wandered in with them!

"Nick!" she cried. "Wait a minute!"

Nick obligingly waited.

"The—the place where those cattle are kept," she said. "Down by the station. Could she—?"

"Not there, Sis," Nick told her gravely. "We just came from there, and she wasn't around anywhere."

Melinda went back to Katie. They were alone in front of the boardinghouse, for Mama and Mrs. Harrigan had gone together in the direction of some houses sitting off by themselves.

"Do you suppose they'll find her, M'linda?" Katie asked.

"Of course," Melinda said. That's all she could say. Her voice wasn't working right.

Katie was silent. The stillness was big and horrible. The wind blew, whistling around the corners of the boardinghouse, kicking up dust in the street.

"Do—" Katie tried again. "Do antelopes eat little children?" The last words came out in a rush of misery.

That was just like Katie to remember the fleet little animals they had glimpsed from the train window and fear they might bring harm to Carolyn. Katie was afraid of everything. Usually Melinda could laugh her out of her fears, but not today.

"Oh, no, Katie," Melinda spoke loudly and crossly. At her words, she saw two tears slip down her sister's round cheeks. "I'm sorry, Katie," she added miserably. "I didn't mean to be cross."

"Oh, that's all right, M'linda," Katie assured her. "You're all worried about Carolyn."

Melinda *was* worried. Antelopes didn't eat children, but there were other animals out here that might. Wolves. Coyotes. And there must be dangers besides animals, or why did the cowboys wear their guns at their sides. The one called Nick, and his friend Herman, both had a gun. Now that she remembered, Papa had packed a rifle and a shotgun in the emigrant car, along with the household things. There must be bad men out here; maybe there were even Indians. Grandmother had said they would have to watch out for the Indians, and Mama had laughed at her. Maybe Grandmother was right. She was a smart person, Grandmother was.

But whatever danger Carolyn was facing now, be it human or animal, was Melinda's fault. She had sat there dreaming of how much fun it would be to go back to East Texas and had not noticed the child slip out the door. Mama had trusted her, and she had failed in carrying out the work assigned to her. She was thinking so much about all the wonderful things she was going to do back in Lewisville a year and a half from now that she couldn't even take care of the simplest duty, the first duty, that was hers in this new home.

"Come on, Katie," she said firmly. "We're going to look for Carolyn, too."

Melinda walked down the street, Katie trotting along unquestioningly beside her. They both looked right and left, but there was no Carolyn to be seen. No little four-year-old, hugging a battered doll close to her. They walked up one side of the street, and then crossed over and walked on the other side. The board porches to the stores seemed to throw back hollow echoes of their steps. Now and then a horse, tied to the hitch racks or just standing there with the reins dropped down over his head, neighed to his neighbor at the racks. And everywhere there were people—both men and women —out joining in the search for little Carolyn Pierce, who had come to the Panhandle only a few hours ago and already was lost. With so many people looking, they would surely find her soon. They must!

But they didn't. An hour dragged by. And then another one. The sun was getting low; a coolness was creeping into the air; the wind was beginning to blow harder. Melinda and Katie continued walking up and down the street.

"Carolyn," Melinda called. "Carolyn, honey—"

She could have crawled off somewhere and gone to sleep. If they called her, it might waken her, wherever she was. But at the end of the second hour, Me