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Chapter 1

Playing Possum

Esther was a little girl with a big imagination. With a flick of her imagination, she could turn ordinary objects into things she had seen only in books. Sometimes Esther felt sorry for herself because she had been born more than a hundred years too late to travel west in a covered wagon

with Laura Ingalls. She loved to wear a sunbonnet and pretend she was a pioneer girl.

Esther named a kitten "Baby Carrie." She trained it to wear doll clothes and drink milk from a doll bottle held with its own paws.

"You're going west in a covered wagon," Esther told Baby Carrie one day. "You must put your sunbonnet on or you'll be as brown as an Indian." She put a doll dress on Baby Carrie and tied a little cap on her head. Then Esther put her own sunbonnet on and pinned a towel around her shoulders for a shawl.

Esther laid Baby Carrie in the little red wagon and put a bottle of milk into her paws. Baby Carrie held the bottle and drank the milk as Esther pulled the covered wagon across the porch toward the prairies in the West.

After lunch Esther climbed over the meadow fence and ran to the row of trees at the edge of the meadow. A crooked limb on one of the trees had grown straight out and then curved down almost to the ground. Esther mounted the end of the limb and bounced up and down. Her brown pigtailed flapped on her back as her horse galloped away to the west.

Esther gazed across the prairie. The flock of sheep grazing in the meadow looked exactly like a herd of buffalo to her. She hoped her horse would

not get caught in a buffalo stampede. She traveled on until her horse grew too weary to take another step. Then she set off across the prairies on foot. Being a pioneer was not easy.

If I had a tin cup I could get a drink, Esther thought when she came to the creek. *I guess I'll have to find a town and buy one.* She climbed over the meadow fence and headed toward the house.

"There you are!" Mom said when Esther stepped into the kitchen. "Go and wash up for supper. We need to eat early so we can go shopping."

"Is this Friday?" Esther asked.

"Yes," Mom said. "Daddy will be here any minute."

Esther splashed water on her face and washed her bare feet. After supper she put on a clean dress. She was ready to go when Daddy backed the car out of the shed.

Esther stayed close to Mom as they walked through the Farmer's Market. The narrow aisles were so crowded with people that Esther could hardly see the wonderful things the farmers and butchers were selling on their market stands. The market house smelled of fresh and smoked meats, cheese, fruits, vegetables, baked goods, candy, cookies, and many more things.

After they left the Farmer's Market, Daddy drove to town where Mom finished her shopping.

When they finally got into the car to go home, it was past Esther's bedtime. Her feet were tired from walking. She was tired all over. She stretched out on the backseat of the car and was half asleep when the car stopped inside the shed.

I'll pretend I'm sleeping again, Esther thought. *Maybe Daddy will carry me to the house like he did before.* Esther lay very still and did not open her eyes. She heard Daddy open the trunk, take all the packages out, and slam the trunk shut again. She did not move.

"It looks like Esther might have fallen asleep," Mom said to Daddy.

"I think she is playing possum again," Esther heard Daddy say. "Come on, Esther. Quit pretending and come into the house."

Esther did not move. If she could make Daddy believe she was sleeping, she was sure he would carry her to the house.

Esther felt Daddy's strong arms lift her. She felt herself moving up and down in his arms as he walked to the house. Suddenly she felt herself falling.

"Yaaahhhh!" Esther screamed. She grabbed for Daddy's neck just as he caught her again.

"Ah-hah!" Daddy said firmly. "I *knew* you were playing possum." He set her down on the porch

and went out to the shed to bring in the rest of the things they had bought.

“What did he mean, I was ‘playing possum’?” Esther asked Mom.

“When a possum is hurt or scared, it gets stiff and acts like it’s dead,” Mom said. “A possum protects itself by fooling its enemy. Daddy said you were ‘playing possum’ because you were only pretending to be sleeping.”

“Oh,” Esther said.

“That was acting a lie,” Mom said. “That kind of pretending is not the same as using your imagination when you’re playing. You were trying to deceive Daddy by pretending something that was not true. When he told you to come, you should have obeyed. Even if Daddy had been fooled, God always knows the truth. Don’t try that trick again.”

“I won’t,” Esther said. “I’m sorry I played possum.”

“You’re forgiven,” Mom said. “Now it’s time to head to bed.”

“I will,” Esther said with a wide yawn. “And I’ll sleep for real!”