PRAIRIE NEIGHBORS

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Edith M. Patch

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PRAIRIE NEIGHBORS

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YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS

ITHACA, NEW YORK

This edition, first published in 2022 by Yesterday's Classics, an imprint of Yesterday's Classics, LLC, is an unabridged republication of the text originally published by The Macmillan Company in 1940. For the complete listing of the books that are published by Yesterday's Classics, please visit www.yesterdaysclassics.com. Yesterday's Classics is the publishing arm of Gateway to the Classics which presents the complete text of hundreds of classic books for children at www.gatewaytotheclassics.com.

ISBN: 978-1-63334-1-071-8

Yesterday's Classics, LLC
PO Box 339
Ithaca, NY 14851

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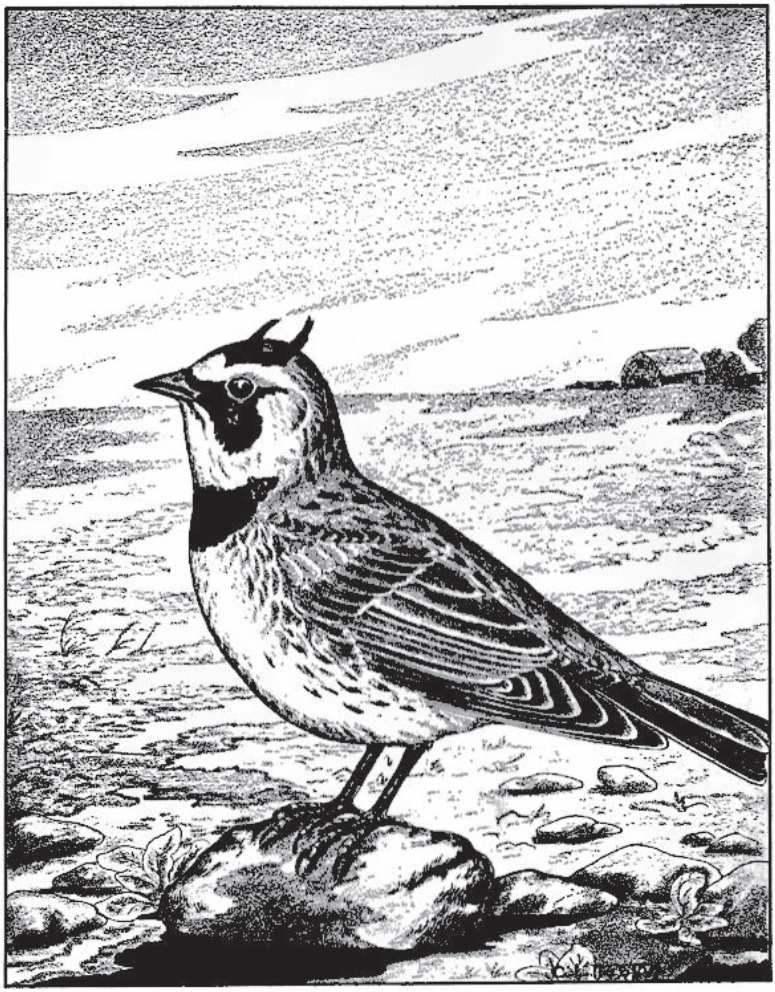


Prairie Horned Lark

CHAPTER I

PRAIRIE DAYS

You could have a happy time if you went on a long "treasure hunt" to see how many beautiful flowers you could find growing on the prairie.

The pasqueflower blossoms early in the spring—so early that often there still is some snow left on the ground. Its purplish-blue flower has no petals, but the colored sepals are large and petal-like.

The Indians, who lived on the prairies before the white men came, loved the early pasqueflowers. They said that these blossoms tried to show how friendly they were by nodding their pretty heads in the chilly spring wind.

The leaves and stem of the plant are covered with short silky hairs. Its seed head has long feathery white plumes. People sometimes call it the "gosling flower" because it is so downy.

You would find roses. One common prairie rose has low, very prickly stems and large blossoms. The prairie climbing rose, or prairie queen rose, has climbing stems with stout prickles. It is found on the borders of prairies and thickets. These roses are visited by many

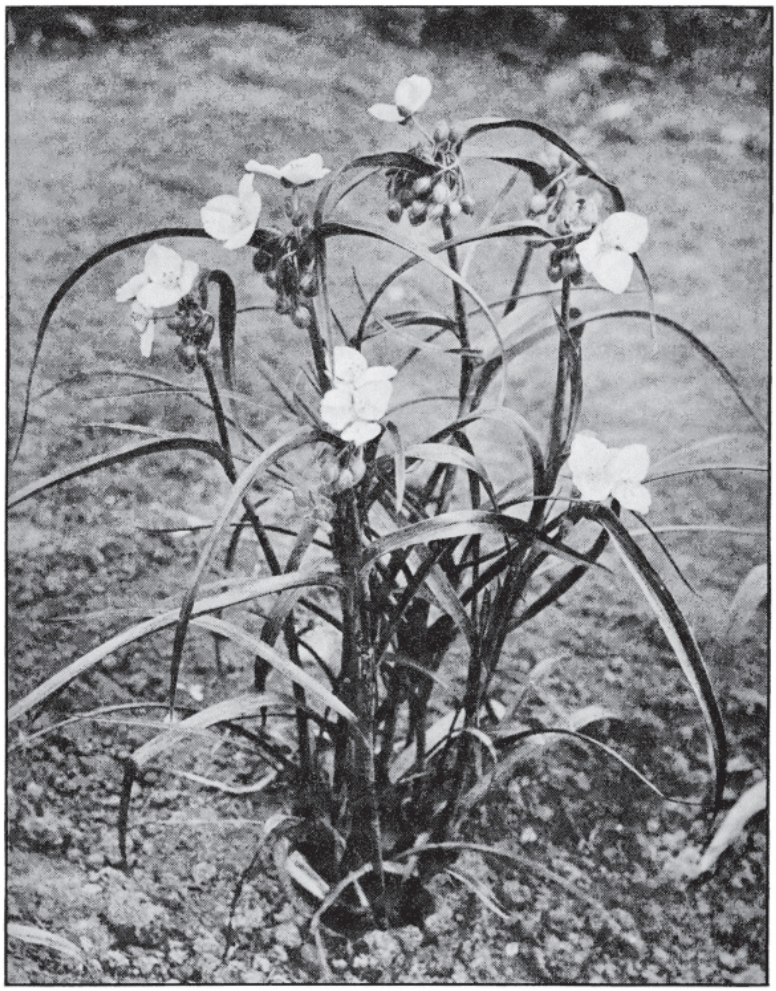
Pasqueflowers or "Goslings"

bees. The pink flowers have no nectar for their insect guests, but the bees busy themselves by gathering the yellow pollen. Later in the season birds enjoy the bright red fruit (called "rose hips").

You are likely to find so many wild strawberry blossoms that you will decide to come to the same place when the berries are ripe. You will not be disappointed in the taste of the small sweet berries.

The purple prairie clover and the white prairie clover do not have their flowers clustered in roundish heads like the cultivated red and white clovers. Instead, their flowers are crowded together in spike-shaped heads.

In May you will find the pretty violet-blue blossoms of the spiderworts and watch the big early bumblebees while they gather spiderwort pollen.



The spiderwort blossoms in May.

You may hear people talking about prairie plants with such strange names as alumroot, black-eyed Susan, blazing star, blue sailors, compass plant, crane's-bill, cruel plant—and so on through the alphabet to names beginning with such *z*, such as Zizia. A few closely related plants are called Zizia after a man whose name was Ziz. One of the Zizias is the early meadow parsnip with golden yellow blossoms.

Certainly there are very many interesting plants on the prairies and along their borders. But you would not be likely to notice nearly all of them. You would forget about your treasure hunt for blossoms every now and then because you would stop to listen to the prairie music.

An early flock of red-winged blackbirds might be giving their song of *"O-ka-lee!"* in a chorus of a hundred voices or more. Bob White might be whistling while he perched on an old fence post. Bob o' Link might be singing his favorite solo. A prairie chicken might be crowing his morning tune of *"Old-Mul-Doon."* If plovers were calling, you would notice how they were chattering.

Perhaps your favorite prairie bird would be the Western meadowlark. The Eastern meadowlark would be there, too, and you could not tell which was which by looking at them. But you could tell by listening. The Eastern meadowlark would sing only short tunes sounding as if the words might be "Spring is here!" [1] The Western meadowlark would sing a longer tune—a

[1] See "Spring Is Here," a chapter in *Holiday Meadow*.

wonderful ringing, whistling sort of song. He might perch on a post and sing for a while. Then he might fly and warble joyfully as his fluttering wings took him up.

Another bird you would be happy to hear is the prairie horned lark. He soars much higher than a meadowlark for his flight song, and he seems like a tiny speck against a white cloud as he hovers and repeats his short musical tune. Then perhaps you will hear him sing again while he is on the ground perched on a stone. His "horns" are two tufts of black feathers, one on each side of the crown of his head.

Where can you find a prairie with flowers and birds like these?

Prairie is a French word meaning "meadow," but you do not need to go to France to visit a prairie. About two hundred and sixty years ago French explorers came to America and traveled through the country near the Mississippi River. When they came to any nearly level, treeless land that stretched out as far as they could see, they called it a "prairie." This name has stayed with us ever since those early days.

When people now speak of the prairie region of our country, they usually mean about the same part that is also called the Central Plains. They do not mean the Great Plains that are farther west.

Two hundred and sixty years ago there were fewer people and more wild animals living on the prairies than there are today. But even now the birds and little furry beasts that we tell about in the following chapters are still to be found in some prairie places.

Many of these prairie neighbors live in other regions, too. For instance, dainty mice like Whitefoot, or nearly like him, may be found in all of the United States and in the southern half of Canada. Horned larks may be found in most parts of North America; in northern South America; in Europe, northern Africa, and Asia. The prairie climbing rose grows in thickets from Ontario to Florida and westward as far as Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Texas. Indeed, you may meet very many of the "prairie neighbors" without going to the prairies at all.

Since a prairie is a meadow, you may think that there would be only grassy fields in the prairie region. If you think that, you will be surprised. Rivers and smaller streams run through the prairies and there are lakes and swamps here and there. Trees grow near these wet places.

An oak grove on the prairie.

So in the prairie country you may find ducks and muskrats and other birds and furry animals that like to live near water. You may find forest creatures, too, in the bordering woodlands.

In other parts of the country the small streams that flow into rivers often are called "brooks." But the prairie streams usually are called "creeks," or sometimes "cricks." Prairie swamps and marshes and bogs are likely to be called "sloughs." The woods are commonly called "groves" or "openings."

If you go to that part of our country known as the Central Plains, we think that your prairie days will be happy—whether you wander along a creek or visit an oak opening or stay in the wide-stretching fields where the waving grass ripples in the wind as far as you can see.

CHAPTER II

BOB O' LINK

THERE was a laughterlike lilt in Bob's song when he reached his northern meadow home. It was May—a gay time of year—and his merry melodies could be heard by all who passed that way.

For a while Bob and his traveling companions sang in choruses. They had been good comrades all the way from South America while in a large flock. Now groups of a dozen or so might be heard singing cheerful tunes from the high branches of an oak grove at the edge of the prairie. Or their music might come from the tops of tall meadow weeds or from the air while they dashed about in exciting flights.

These singing bobolinks were dressed in black and white and pale buffy yellow: black on the crown and sides of the head, on the throat and other under parts; white on the shoulders, rump, and lower part of the back; yellow on the back of the head and neck.

After a week or more something very important happened in Bobolink Meadow. Another flock of bobolinks arrived. They were dressed in ordinary streaky suits that were yellowish-brown above and

brownish-yellow below. They did not come singing. The only word of greeting they spoke was *"Chink!"*

Although these later arrivals were quiet in dress and manner, they attracted a great deal of attention from Bob and the other singers. Indeed, the songsters changed their habits. They no longer sang in choruses. They did not even have quartets or trios or duets. Each of the musical bobolinks still sang, and his tune was as jolly as before; but he was singing a solo now.

Bob's solo was his love song. He tried to make one of the streaky yellow-brown, brownish-yellow birds like him so well that she would become his mate. Much to his joy, she was quite glad to be Mrs. Bob.

For some time this burbling bobolink was busy stating his claim to as much of the meadow as he would need for the use of his own family. It never would do to run short of tender green grasshoppers and other insects when he and Mrs. Bob had a nest full of young Bobs to feed. He didn't have any surveying instruments to help him find out how much land he wanted. He measured it by swinging over one large part of the field in rapid dashing flight—up and down, right and left, turning this way and that. As he flew, he sang his same rollicking tune, but it had a new meaning now: "All this part of the meadow belongs to me, belongs to me, belongs to me and my family! No trespassing, remember! No trespassing, remember!"

Early in June Bob and his mate found just the right place for their nest. The chosen site was beside a thick tussock, or bunchy tuft, of grass. Old brown grass

Bob o' Link and his mate.

blades, slender, broken weed stems and rootlets were used to build the frame of the nest in a little hollow on the ground. Finer materials of the same sort made a good lining.

There was no roof of woven grass over this nest. such as a meadowlark's nest has.[2] But some of the long, grass stems on the tussock bent over and helped hide it. A clump of black-eyed Susans stood near, too, sheltering one side of the nest. These plants were tall daisies with dark brown center disks surrounded by yellow ray flowers. In spite of their name, they had brown instead of black "eyes."

Not far away Prairie Creek flowed quietly through Prairie Bog on its way from Prairie Pond to Prairie Grove. Bob and Mrs. Bob often were thirsty, and they liked to have their home lot near a meadow creek.

Mrs. Bob o' Link laid five eggs in this nest. They were grayish-blue with brownish-purple spots. After her eggs were all laid, she sat on her nest almost all the time for ten days and nights. She left it only for a few minutes now and then when she needed to take a walk to catch a grasshopper and perhaps get a sip of water from the creek.

Bob did not help brood the eggs during those ten days and nights. But he did do his full share in taking food to the young as soon as they were hatched. The five little Bobs kept both parents busy bringing them grasshoppers, crickets, and caterpillars to eat.

[2] The nest of a meadowlark is described in the first chapter of *Holiday Meadow*.

The Bob daughters looked very much like their mother when they were grown and out of their nest and flying about. The Bob sons looked just like their sisters. None of them had a suit like that their father wore when he came north in May. Even Bob was not wearing those black and white and buffy yellow feathers in August when his sons and daughters were flitting over the meadow. He had shed them, and his new feathers were like those Mrs. Bob wore.

Father Bob had lost his gay song, too. He may have been just as happy as ever—but all he said was *"Chink!"* except when he sometimes gave a very few of his song notes, as if they were not yet quite forgotten. Those spring comrades of his who came north with him also had shed their black and white and buffy yellow feathers and had lost their songs. All the bobolinks, young and old, had on their fall traveling suits.

The father birds no longer acted as guards, each telling other bobolinks to keep off his home grounds. They all felt sociable again and gathered together in flocks. They still ate some insects; but they now took more cereal foods, and they didn't need to worry about having a special hunting ground for each family.

These birds soon were to start on a journey of four thousand miles or more—to a land that lies beyond the Amazon River in South America. And the only talking they did was to call *"Chink!"* to one another.

Do you know that there are bulletins and circulars and books giving maps of the trip that birds of this kind take? Their course is called the Bobolink Route,

The bobolink route.

or Route No. 3. Various publications tell about the different places where the birds may find rest and food. "Bobolink tourist camps," they might be called. The names of some of the most important of these along the southward trail are South Carolina, Florida, Cuba, Jamaica, and Venezuela.

Of course, neither Bob nor any of the bobolinks used the travel leaflets. They did not know that men had printed them. However, they didn't need maps or road signs. They found their tourist stopping places without any help.

The travelers liked the food that grew at their camping grounds, and they took their trip in a leisurely manner with plenty of time for picnics. They were hungry for seeds at this time of year and often stopped in swamps where tall reeds were growing. That is why one name for a bobolink is "reedbird."

Those bobolinks that had nested in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, southern Canada, and some other northern places had many of their first August feasts of the seeds of tall coarse swamp grass called "Indian rice" or "wild rice" or "water oats." They enjoyed the soft unripe seeds in the tender milky stage (as you like unripe sweet corn).

When the travelers reached cultivated rice fields in South Carolina or other places along their route, they ate seeds of this crop greedily—so greedily, indeed, that it is not strange that another name for a bobolink is "ricebird."

It was well that Bob and his companions ate and grew very strong before they came to parts of their route where there were no tourist camps—places where they could neither rest nor eat. They flew high over water from Florida to Cuba, from Cuba to Jamaica, and from Jamaica to Venezuela. But they did not lose their way either by land or by sea, either by day or by night.

Did you know that bobolinks do much of their traveling by night? They are not really night birds, of course, like owls, and they rest at night when they are not taking their long trips. But while on their migration journeys they are likely to be flying during the moonlight hours. The migrants do not stray from their flock while they are flying at night. They call *"Chink!"* very often, and keep within speaking distance of one another.

Some of the bobolinks that Bob and his comrades saw stopped near swamps south of the Amazon. Most of them went much farther—until they reached the marshes and plains near the Paraguay River. There they found summer in January. On the warm prairies of South America they stayed in sociable flocks while the prairies of North America were covered with snow.

Cottontail rabbit.

CHAPTER III

COTTONTAIL

We may read that the cottontail rabbit is one of the most widely known of North American mammals. It may be found almost anywhere in North America from Canada southward. The Cottontails of this chapter lived neither in the far-western nor in the far-eastern part of our country. Their home was in one of the central prairie states.

There were a lot of wild-rose and hazelnut bushes that made a good dooryard all around Mother Cottontail's room, where she spent the day alone. This rabbit could dig fairly well with her front paws, but she did not need to make her own hiding place. She found a deserted one all ready to use. A spotted skunk had dug this one by enlarging an old tunnel home made by a striped prairie squirrel. Neither the striped squirrel nor the spotted skunk needed it now, and it was a comfortable retreat where Mother Cottontail could rest during the day.

When evening came, this rabbit usually hopped out into the meadow to eat grass or clover blossoms or some other plants she liked. Sometimes she hopped still farther until she reached a garden which a farmer had

planted for his own use. She enjoyed very much, indeed, nibbling some of the things she found growing there.

While she was wandering about during the evening or moonlit night hours, she often met Father Cottontail and other rabbits who lived in that neighborhood. One summer evening she did not feel at all sociable. She did not even ask Father Cottontail to come to help her find a good place for a home for their babies. She didn't need any help. She could find a place herself and she could keep it a hidden secret, too.

Mother Cottontail went some distance from her own day room and found a sheltered spot where she could dig. She pawed out a hollow with her front paws, which served her as very good trowels.

The hollow she dug, though rather shallow, was deep enough to hold a good bed of dry grass, which she brought in her mouth. Grass alone, however, did not seem soft and comfortable enough for a rabbit's nest. So she added some fur which she pulled from the under parts of her body. This grass and fur served for a blanket as well as for a bed, since there was enough to make a thick cover over the top of the nest.

Soon after this bowl-shaped room was finished, the mother rabbit went inside and waited while her four babies were born. Four young were not too many for her to care for. Frequently there are as many as six babies, though sometimes there are as few as two in a cottontail family.

These babies were blind and naked at first. Mother Cottontail came to her young every night and fed

them as much milk as they could drink. They sucked so greedily then that they did not need any food during the day.

That was a very good habit for them to have, for their mother stayed away from them all day. She did not run the risk of attracting attention to her family by approaching the nest in broad daylight. Early each morning, after creeping out from under the cover of fur and dry grass, she pulled it carefully over the entrance to the nest. She left her helpless babies well hidden during her absence.

The young bunnies did not miss their mother. They slept and grew. There was nothing else for them to do while they were blind. They did not need to spend many days in such idleness, however, for they developed very rapidly. Their bodies were soon covered with soft fur, and their eyes were open when they were about ten days old. Soon after this they hopped off early in the morning to remain with their mother during the day. The morning they were two weeks old they celebrated by leaving the cozy home of their baby days, never to return to it. They did not wish to go back. They were not homesick.

You may have read about rabbits and hares that are not like cottontail rabbits. There is the hare called the black-tailed jack rabbit, for example. "Jack with three black tips" in *Desert Neighbors* was one of these. A hare of this sort is not a blind, naked baby at first, for he has a good coat of fur when he is born and his eyes open at once. A young "Jack" does not wait until he is

two weeks old before he is hopping about in a lively manner. He grows to be much larger than a cottontail rabbit, and he can take much longer jumps with his big strong hind legs.

Perhaps you have met, too, other hares, like those called "Little Snowshoes" in *Holiday Hill* and "Wahboos, the Snowshoe Hare," in *Forest Neighbors*.

Father Cottontail's fur was brownish-gray on his back and mixed with black on his sides. His under fur was whitish except for his buffy throat. His tail was rusty gray above, and the fluffy fur on the under side was as white as cotton. Mother Cottontail's fur was like that of her mate. They held their tails up when they hopped, and it is easy to see why rabbits of this kind are called "cottontails."

Does that "cotton" tail remind you of quite different animals that also show white tails when they hurry away? "Bannertail," the kangaroo rat, and "Whitetail," the deer, appearing in other books of this series, are two of these.

Rather late in the summer Mother Cottontail had four more bunnies to take care of. So there was a large cottontail family by that time. However, the older brothers and sisters did not need any further attention from their mother. They went off and played hopping games and found their own food.

All that fall there were plenty of good things to pack away to eat during the winter, but the Cottontails did not store up anything at all for the cold months that were coming. They needed food during the winter, for

rabbits do not have a long foodless sleep as do skunks and woodchucks and frogs and many other creatures. They do not go south to warmer places for their winter feasts, either, as do bobolinks and other migrants.

What did Father and Mother Cottontail and their eight sons and daughters do? Well, they ate all they could during the fall and were plump and strong when winter came. Then they just got along as best they could. After the leaves had fallen from the bushes and the heavy frosts had killed the annual plants (those that grow from seeds every year and do not live over winter), there was still some fruit to be found. There were bright red hips on the wild-rose bushes and on the rose bushes in the farmer's garden. They found apples, too, that had dropped from old trees growing at the side of the road.

One afternoon, Father Cottontail was hunting for food among bushes near Prairie Grove. A bluejay, perched on an oak twig, saw him and began to scream as if he never had seen a rabbit before. *"Look! Look! LOOK!"* he called, making so much noise that even the farmer wondered what was wrong. "Perhaps that bluejay has found an owl," he said. "Well, the owl can't chase him and he can't hurt it, so I'm not going to worry."

Father Cottontail did not worry, either, but he did not like so much noise. He tried to hop out of sight, but the bluejay kept on shouting. At last, Father Cottontail ran away and hid in some tall grass near a fence. There he stayed till the jay forgot him and flew to a tree far away.

When the ground was covered with snow, food

"Look! Look!" screamed the bluejay.

was much harder to find. But the rabbits did not starve even then. They ate the stems of some of the bushes whose tops showed above the snow and they nibbled bark from the trunks of many trees. This was good food for the rabbits, but it was not a good way to treat the trees. Some of the young trees died because the live inner bark, as well as the dark outer bark, was eaten off all around the base of their trunks. Of course, the Cottontails did not know that they were injuring the trees. They just felt hungry and ate what tasted good to them.

Different creatures made tracks on the snow—the dog and cat from the farm; the field mice who ran about to hunt for seeds dropped from weed tops and bushes; winter birds also seeking dropped seeds; and, of course, rabbits.

Though the Cottontails came out in the evening and during the moonlight hours, the children from the farm always could tell where they had been hopping. For there are no other tracks like those that rabbits make.

A rabbit leaves his tracks in groups of four for each hop—two small marks for his fore feet and two large marks for his hind feet. He throws his hind feet ahead of his fore feet as he hops, so the large marks in the snow are in front of the small ones. The faster he hops, the farther in front are the large marks of the big hind feet.

We have told you that Mother Cottontail had eight baby bunnies in one summer, four being in a later brood than the others. Half of them were daughters, and the others were sons. If each of these daughters

Tracks of a cottontail rabbit.

had eight baby bunnies the next summer, how many grandchildren did Mother Cottontail have that year?

Mother Cottontail didn't know. She wasn't interested in grandchildren. She had another shallow nest of her own hidden in a secret place in the midst of some blackberry brambles. So she filled that with a good soft bed of dry grass and covered it with a blanket of loose fur she plucked from the under side of her body. The little blind bunnies under that blanket needed her care. Her grown daughters could look after the grandchildren without any help from her!