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**HOPE  
HATHAWAY**



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***HOPE  
HATHAWAY***

**A Story of  
Western Ranch Life**

***BY  
FRANCES PARKER***



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## HOPE HATHAWAY

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### CHAPTER I

Hathaway's home-ranch spread itself miles over an open valley on the upper Missouri. As far as the eye reached not a fence could be seen, yet four barbed-wires, stretched upon good cotton-wood posts, separated the ranch from the open country about.

Jim Hathaway was an old-time cattle-man. He still continued each summer to turn out upon the range great droves of Texas steers driven north by his cowboys, though at this time it was more profitable to ship in Western grown stock. He must have known that this was so, for every year his profits became less, yet it was the nature of the man to keep in the old ruts, to cling to old habits.

The old-time cowboy was fast disappearing, customs of the once wild West were giving way before an advancing civilization. He had seen its slow, steady approach year after year, dreading—abhorring it. Civilization was coming surely. What though his lands extended beyond his good eyesight, were not these interlopers squatting on every mile of creek in the surrounding country? The open range would some time be a thing of the past. That green ridge of mountains to the west,—his mountains, his and the Indians, where he had enjoyed unmolested reign for many years,—were they not filling them as bees fill a hive, so filling them with their offensive bands of sheep and small cow-ranches that his cattle had all they could do to obtain a footing?

On one of his daily rides he had come home tired and out of humor. The discovery of a new fence

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near his boundary line had opened up an unpleasant train of thought, and not even the whisky, placed beside him by a placid-faced Chinese servant, could bring him into his usual jovial spirits. After glancing through a week-old newspaper and finding in it no solace for his ugly mood, he threw himself down upon his office lounge, spreading the paper carefully over him. The Chinaman, by rare intuition, divined his state of mind and stole cautiously into the room to remove the empty glasses, at the same time keeping his eyes fixed upon the large man under the newspaper.

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Hathaway generally took a nap in the forenoon after returning from his ride, for he was an early riser, and late hours at night made this habit imperative. This day his mood brought him into a condition where he felt no desire to sleep, so he concluded, but he must have fallen into a doze, for the sharp tones of a girl's voice directly outside his window brought him to his feet with a start.

"If that's what you're driving at you may as well roll up your bedding and move on!" It was spoken vehemently, with all the distinctness of a clear-toned voice. A man replied, but in more guarded tone, so that Hathaway went to the window to catch his words.

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"You don't know what you're talking about," he was saying. "This is my home as well as yours, and I'd have small chance to carry out my word if I went away, so I intend to stay right here. Do you know, Hope, when you get mad like that you're so devilish pretty that I almost hate you! Look at those eyes! You'd kill me if you could, wouldn't you? But you'll love me yet, and marry me, too, don't forget that!"

"How can you talk to me so," demanded the girl, stepping back from him, "after all my father has done,—made you his son,—given you everything he would have given a son? Oh!" she cried passionately, "I can't *bear* you in this new rôle! It is terrible, and I've looked upon you as a *brother*! Now what are you? You've got no right to talk to me so—to insist!"

"But your mother——" he interrupted.

"My *mother*!" wearily. "Yes, of course! It would be all right there. You have money—enough. A good enough match, no doubt; and she would be freer to go,—would feel better to know that she had no more responsibility here. You know your ground well enough *there*." Then with growing anger: "Don't you ring in my mother on me! I tell you I wouldn't marry you if I *never* got married! I'm strong enough to fight my own battles, and I will, and you'd better forget what you've said to me and change the subject forever!" She walked away, her strong, lithe body erect.

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"But you're handsome, you brown devil!" he cried, taking one step and clasping her roughly to him. She tore herself loose, her eyes blazing with sudden fire, as Hathaway, white with anger, came suddenly around the corner of his office and grasped the offender by the coat collar. Then the slim young man was lifted, kicked, and tossed alternately from off the earth, while the girl stood calmly to one side and watched the performance, which did not cease until the infuriated man became exhausted. Then the boy picked himself up and walked unsteadily toward the building, against which he leaned to regain his breath while Hathaway stood panting.

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"Here, hold on a minute," roared the angry father as the young man moved away. "I ain't done with you yet! Get your horse and get off this ranch or I'll break every bone in your damn body! You will treat my girl like that, will you? You young puppy!" The young fellow was whipped undoubtedly, but gracefully, for he turned toward Hathaway and said between swollen lips:

"You don't want to blame me too much, Uncle Jim. Just look at the girl! Any man would find it worth risking his neck for her!" Then he moved slowly away, while the girl's eyes changed from stern to merry. Her father choked with rage.

"You—you—you——Get away from here, and don't talk back to me!" he roared at the retreating figure.

The girl moved forward a few steps, calling: "That's right, Sydney, keep your nerve! When you're ready to call it off we'll try to be friends again." Without waiting for her cousin's reply she ran into the house, while he lost no time in leaving the ranch, riding at a rapid gait toward the nearest town. Hathaway watched him out of sight, then with a nervous, bewildered shake of the head joined his wife and daughter at luncheon.

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"At last your father has come," sighed Mrs. Hathaway, as he appeared. "Hope, ring for the chocolate; I'm almost famished. It seems to me, James," turning to her husband with some impatience, "that you might *try* to be a little more prompt in getting to your meals—here we've been waiting ages! You know I can't bear to wait for anyone!" She sighed properly and unfolded her napkin.

"My dear," said Hathaway blandly, "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but I've been somewhat occupied—somewhat."

"But you should always consider that your meals come first, even if your wife and family do not," continued the lady. "Where is Sydney? The dear boy is generally so very prompt."

The effect of her words was not apparent. Her husband appeared absent-minded and the meal began.

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The daughter, Hope, with quiet dignity befitting a matron, occupied the head of the table, as she

had done ever since her mother shifted the responsibilities of the household to her young shoulders. When this question was asked she gave her father a quick glance. Would he acknowledge the truth? Evidently not, for he began immediately to talk about the new fence near his boundary line. It was a shame, he said, that these people were settling in around him.

"The land's no good," he declared. "Nearly all the water around here that's any account is on my place. All on earth these hobos are taking it up for is in expectation that I'll buy them out. Well, maybe I will, and again maybe I won't. I'd do most anything to get rid of them, but I can't buy the earth." At this Hope smiled, showing a flash of strong, white teeth.

"And if you could buy the earth, what would you do with these people?" she asked, her face settling into its natural quiet. Her mother gave her the usual look of amazement.

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"Hope, I must ask you not to say impertinent things to your father. You no doubt meant to be witty, but you were none the less rude. Why do you allow her to say such things to you, James? You have succeeded in spoiling her completely. Now if I had been allowed to send her away to school she would have grown up with better manners."

Hathaway passed his cup to be refilled, making no answer to his wife's outburst. Perhaps he had learned in his years of experience that the less said the better. At any rate he made no effort to defend his daughter—his only child, and dear to him, too. If she had expected that he would defend her it was only for a passing instant, then she returned to her natural gravity. Her face had few expressions. Its chief charm lay in its unchanging immobility, its utter quiet, behind which gleamed something of the girl's soul. When her rare smile came, lighting it up wonderfully, she was irresistible—in her anger, magnificent.

Ordinarily she would not have been noticed at first glance, except, perhaps, for the exceptionally fine poise of her strong, slim body. She was a true daughter of the West, tanned almost as brown as an Indian maid, and easily might have passed for a half-breed, with her blue-black eyes and hair of the darkest brown. But if she had Indian blood she did not know it. Her mother, during the season, a flitting butterfly of New York society, a Daughter of the Revolution by half a dozen lines of descent, would have been horrified at the mere thought.

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The girl herself would not have cared had she been born and raised in an Indian camp. She had what Mrs. Hathaway termed queer ideas, due, as she always took occasion to explain to her friends who visited the ranch, to the uncivilized life that she had insisted upon living.

Hope had been obstinate in refusing to leave the ranch. Threats and punishments were unavailing. When a young child she had resolved never to go away to school, and had set her small foot down so firmly that her mother was obliged to yield. Hathaway was secretly glad of this, for the ranch was home to him, and he would not leave it for any length of time.

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The little girl was great company to him, for his wife was away months at a time, preferring the gayety of her New York home to the quiet, isolated ranch on the prairie. Some people were unkind enough to say that it was a relief to Hathaway to have the place to himself, and certain it is that he never made any objections to the arrangement. Their only child, Hope, was educated on the ranch by the best instructors procurable, and readily acquired all the education that was necessary to her happiness.

At Mrs. Hathaway's outburst the girl made no effort to defend herself, and was well aware from former experiences that her father would not come to her aid. That he was afraid of her mother she would not admit. It seemed so weak and foolish. She had exalted ideas of what a man should be. That her father fell below her standard she would not acknowledge. She loved him so, was proud of his good points, and in many ways he was a remarkable man, his greatest weakness, if it could be called that, being his apparent fear of his wife. Her dominion over him, during her occasional visits at the ranch, was absolute. Hope shut her eyes to this, telling herself that it was caused by his desire to make her happy during these rare opportunities.

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Hathaway did not respond to his wife's somewhat uncalled-for remarks, but after a moment of silence adroitly changed the subject by inquiring of Hope who it was that had ridden up to the ranch just as he left that morning.

"It must have been Joe Harris, from the mountains," she replied, "for he was here shortly after you rode away. I thought he was out hunting those cattle of his that I saw over on Ten Mile the other day, but he informed me that it was not cattle he was hunting this time, but a *school-teacher*. They have some sort of a country school up there in his neighborhood, and I think, from what he said, and what some of the boys told me, that he must be the whole school board—clerk, trustees, and everything. He was on his way over to the Cross Bar ranch to see if he could secure that young fellow who came out from the East last fall. One of the boys told him that this young man had given up his calling indefinitely and was going on the round-up instead, but Harris rode on to try what persuasion would do."

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"That *dreadful* man," sighed Mrs. Hathaway. "He is that *squaw-man* with those *terrible* children! Hope, I wish you wouldn't talk so intimately with such people; it's below your dignity. If Sydney were here he would agree with me. Where *is* Sydney? Do you know where he went? He will miss his luncheon entirely, the poor boy!"

Hope looked searchingly at her father, but he ignored her glance. Surely he would say something now! The question trembled upon the air, but she waited involuntarily for him to speak.

"I've asked you a question, Hope. Why don't you answer; are you dumb?" said her mother, with a show of impatience. "Where *is* Sydney?" [Pg 14]

"I don't know *just* where he is," replied the girl at length, "but I think it would be safe to say that he is riding toward town; at least he was heading that way the last I saw of him."

"Toward town!" gasped her mother. "Why, he was going to drive in for the Cresmonds to-morrow! You must be mistaken. Please do not include me in your jokes!" Then, turning to Hathaway, continued: "James, where *did* he go?"

Hathaway moved uneasily under the direct gaze of his daughter. "I haven't the least idea," he finally answered. "I can't keep track of everyone on the ranch." The girl's face turned pale under her tan. She rose from the table and stood tall and straight behind her chair, her clear eyes direct upon her father.

"Why don't you tell her," she cried with passion. Then the usual calm settled over her face. She turned to her mother. "I may as well tell you that we had a little scene this morning, Sydney and I. He proposed to me." She hesitated an instant, turned and caught her father's nervous, anxious look direct. He was watching her uneasily. She continued deliberately: "I refused him—and sent him away from the ranch. You may as well know all about it." [Pg 15]

"*You* sent him away from the ranch," gasped Mrs. Hathaway.

"Yes," answered the girl quietly. It was her first lie.

"*You dared* send him away—away from his own home!" almost screamed Mrs. Hathaway, her rage increasing with every word. "*You dared!* *You*, my own daughter—ungrateful, inconsiderate—*You know* how I love that boy, my poor Jennie's son! What business had you sending him away, or even refusing him, I'd like to know! What if he is your cousin—your second cousin? Oh, you have no consideration for me, *none*—you never had! How can I ever endure it here on this ranch three whole months without Sydney! It was bad enough before!" She wrung her hands and rose sobbing from the table. "James, do go after that poor boy. Say that I am willing he should marry Hope if he is so foolish as to want her. Tell him not to mind anything she says, but that he *must* come home. You will go at once, won't you?" [Pg 16]

She placed both hands imploringly on his arm.

"Yes, I'll go after him to-morrow, so stop your worrying," he answered soothingly. "Hope, fetch your mother a glass of wine, don't you see she's all upset?"

The girl brought the wine and handed it to her father, but his eyes shifted uneasily from her clear, steady ones. He led his unhappy wife from the room, leaving Hope alone with the empty wine glass in her hand. She stood so for a moment, then walked to the table and set the tiny glass down, but, oddly, raised it up again and looked at it closely.

"As empty as my life is now," she thought. "As empty as this home is for me. I have no one—father, mother—no one." A queer look crossed her face; determination settled over her, as with a sudden, vehement motion she shattered the frail glass upon the floor. A single thought, and a new life had opened before her. [Pg 17]

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## CHAPTER II

Upon the slope of a great grass-covered hill, among other hills, larger and grass-covered also, stood a small log school-house. A hundred yards away, between this isolated building and the dingy road stretched through the mountain valley, grew a scrubby clump of choke-cherry brush. Some boys crouched low upon the ground behind these bushes, screened from sight of possible passers-by, and three pairs of eyes looked through the budding branches, intently scanning the road at the crest of hill to the left. Finally a dark speck appeared upon its gray surface. The youngest boy shivered, a tightening of expression came over the leader's face. He drew his shotgun closer to him, resting it upon his knees. Suddenly he laughed unpleasantly and kicked the child who had shivered. [Pg 19]

"You ninny, quit your shakin'! Can't you tell a steer from a man? You'll make a nice feller when you grow up, 'fraid of your own shadow! You'd better git into the school-house an' hide under a bench, if you're goin' to be scared out of your skin. Baby! Umph, a *steer*, too! That blame black one that won't stay with the bunch!" The big boy brought his awkward length down upon the ground, continuing in a lower tone: "I'd a darn sight ruther be on my horse drivin' him back on the range than waitin' here for any fool school-teacher! But we've got this job on hand. No schoolin' for me—I'm too old. It'll do for babies that shiver at a steer, but I've got other business, an' so's Dan. I'm thinkin' if the old man wants school up here he'll have to teach it himself! What does he think we'd go to the trouble of running away from the Mission for if we wanted to go to school? Umph, he must think we're plumb locoed!"

"If father catches us in this he'll lick us to death," interposed the youngest boy.

"Not much, he won't. He'll have to ride a faster horse than mine or Dan's if he catches us! We'll ride over to the Indian camp, an' you can stay here an' take the lickin'! He'll be glad enough to [Pg 20]

see us come back in a month or two, I'll bet! And he's goin' to find out right now that it ain't no use to bring any doggoned teacher up here to teach this outfit. Ain't that so, Dan? We know enough of learnin'. I bet this new fellow won't stay long enough to catch his breath!"

A boy, who in looks and size was the exact counterpart of the speaker, asked in a sweet, soft-toned voice: "What if the old man takes a notion to come along to the school-house with him—what'll we do then, Dave?"

"Do! why, what do you suppose we'll do?" answered his twin, settling down closer to the ground. "Why, we'll hide these here guns an' walk up to the school-house like little sheep, and *then* lay low and watch our chance when the old man *ain't* around. I ain't figurin' on any lickin' to-day, you can bet your boots on that, but I'll take a darn good one before any more schoolin'! We've got the medicine to fix school-teachers for him this year, I reckon!" And patting his gun, the breed boy gave a satisfied grunt and settled down nearer to the ground. [Pg 21]

"You bet we have," softly assented his twin. "But what if the fellow don't scare at them blank cartridges?"

"Then we'll try duck-shot on him," answered the first readily. "What'd you think—we're a lot of babies? I reckon we've got fight in us! You've got to stick to us, Ned, even if you ain't as old as Dan and me. Ain't that so, Dan?"

"Yes, unless he wants to get whaled half to death," sweetly answered the soft-voiced twin.

"I'm no coward," exclaimed the sturdy little fellow. "If you boys *dare* lick me I'll shoot the two of you!" His small black eyes flashed ominously. For an instant he glared at the older boys, all the savagery in his young soul expressed in his countenance. The soft-voiced twin gave a short laugh. Something like admiration shone in his eyes for the young lad, but he retorted sweetly: "You shivered! Don't you go an' do it again!" At that instant his sharp eyes sighted an object just appearing at the top of the hill. He punched the leader vigorously: "Now down on your knees, he's comin' sure this time!" [Pg 22]

"And he's alone," said the bold leader joyfully. "We won't have no trouble with him. He rides like a tenderfoot, all right. Wait till he gets down by that rock there, then let him have it, one after the other—first me, then Dan, then you, Ned. I'll bet my horse an' saddle that he'll go back quicker'n he's comin'!"

"What if that ain't the feller we want?" gently asked Dan.

"We'll wait till he turns in here, an' then we'll know. They ain't nobody else goin' to come along this way just now. Lord, don't he ride slow, though! Now I'll shoot first, don't forget."

"His saddle blanket's flying on this side, and he's got a red shirt on," said the other twin. "He's lookin' over this way. Yes, he's comin' here all right. Let him have it, Dave, before he gits any closer!" [Pg 23]

As he spoke, the approaching rider left the main road and turned up the dimly marked trail toward the school-house. The forward twin waited an instant, then, aiming his shotgun carelessly toward the stranger, fired. At the signal a volley rang out from behind the bushes. As quickly the horse took fright, stopped stock still, then wheeled, and bolted with utmost speed directly toward the patch of brush, passing so near that the boys drew in their legs and crawled snake-like under the protection of the branches.

"Good Lord," gasped the leader, as the horse raced past, on up the grassy slope of a hill, "it's a girl!"

Two minutes later the bushes were quickly parted over three very uncomfortable boys, and a red shirt-waisted girl looked sternly in at them.

"You boys come out of there this minute! Who did you take me for that you were trying to frighten me to death? Or is that the way you treat ladies up here in the mountains? Come out immediately and explain yourselves!" [Pg 24]

The soft-voiced twin crept out first, and before scrambling to his feet began apologizing: "We didn't know it was *you*. We thought it was a man. Don't hurt us! We wouldn't a done it for nothin' if we'd thought it was you. We were layin' for a school-teacher that father got to teach this school, an' we took you for him." Then more hopefully as he regained his feet: "But our guns wasn't loaded with nothing but blank cartridges. We was just goin' to frighten him away so that we wouldn't have no school this summer. It's too fine weather to be in school, anyway." He looked up into the girl's uncompromising face. "But now I reckon our hides are cooked, for you'll tell your father." This last questioningly.

"And you wouldn't like my father to know about this—or *your* father either, I suppose?"

"We'd do most anything if you wouldn't tell on us, Miss Hathaway!"

"Do I look like a girl that would tell things?" she flashed back. "I usually fight my own battles; if necessary, I can use *this*." A quick movement and she placed before their faces a reliable looking six-shooter. [Pg 25]

"We know all about that! You ain't a-goin' to hurt us, are you?" exclaimed Dave.

"You know all about *that*, do you? Well, that's good. Now tell me your names."

"We're the Harris kids," answered Dave quickly.

"I know you're the Harris kids, but I want your first names. *Yours*," she commanded, looking at the soft-voiced twin and absently fingering the weapon.

"Mine's Dan. *He's* Dave, an' that one's Ned," answered the boy in one soft, quick breath; then added: "We know all about how you can shoot. You're a dead one!" His face took on a certain shrewd look and he continued divertingly: "I'll throw up my cap an' you shoot at it. I'd like to have the hole in it."

Miss Hathaway seemed suddenly amused.

"You are a very bright boy! And your name is Dan—Daniel. You want a souvenir? Well, all right, but not just now. I've got other business. I came to teach your school." She hesitated, looking keenly at their astonished faces. "Yes, your father has engaged me—hired me, so I think we'd better go inside and begin work, don't you? We'll overlook this shooting affair. I don't know as I blame you very much for not wanting a man teacher, but of course the shooting was very wrong, and you shouldn't have tried to frighten anyone; but we'll forget all about it. But you are not going to have a man teacher, and I am different. I am going to live at your house, too, so of course we'll be good friends—ride together, hunt, and have great times, *after school*. During school we *work*, remember that! Now one of you boys please stake out my horse for me and then we will go inside and start school. You boys must help me get things to working."

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Before she had finished speaking the soft-voiced twin caught her horse, which was grazing near. Dave, more clumsily built, followed him, while the girl took the small boy by the hand and started toward the school-house. At the door she turned in time to see the twins struggling at her horse's head. They were about ready to come to blows.

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"I'll take care of that horse myself," said Dave gruffly, attempting to force the other boy's hand from the bridle.

"Don't fight, boys, or *I* will take care of the horse," called the new school-teacher severely; thereupon the soft-voiced twin released his hold and walked demurely up to the school-house.

"Anyway," he explained as he went inside, "Dave's the youngest, and so I let him have the horse."

"I never was so frightened in my life," thought the girl, as she arranged the small school for the day. "But the only way to manage these little devils is to bluff them."

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## CHAPTER III

A group composed principally of cowboys, squaw-men, and breeds squatted and lounged outside of Joe Harris' house. Numerous tousley-headed boys, with worn overalls and bare feet, played noisily on the outskirts, dogs and pigs scurried about everywhere, while in the doorway of the dingy, dirt-covered kitchen in the rear hovered a couple of Indian women and several small dark-skinned children. Somewhere out of sight, probably over the cook-stove, were two or three nearly grown girls. Such, at supper time, was the usual aspect of Joe Harris' cabins, varied occasionally by more or less Indians, whose tepees stood at one side, or more or less dogs, but always the same extraordinary amount of squealing pigs and children.

The huge figure of Joe Harris, squaw-man, cattle-man, and general progressive-man, was prominent in the center of the group. He was by all odds the greatest and most feared man in that portion of the country. His judgment as well as his friendship was sought after by all the small ranchers about, and also, it was rumored, by a certain class of cattle owners commonly called rustlers. To be Joe Harris' friend meant safety, if nothing more; to be his enemy meant, sooner or later, a search for a new country, or utter ruination. He brought with him, years before from the north, a weird record, no tangible tale of which got about, but the mysterious rumor, combined with the man's striking personality, his huge form, bearded face, piercing blue eyes, and great voice, all combined to make people afraid of him. He was considered a dangerous man. At this date he possessed one thousand head of good cattle, a squaw, and fifteen strong, husky children, and, being a drinking man, possessed also an erratic disposition. He was very deferential to his Indian wife, a good woman, but he ruled his offspring with a rod of iron. His children feared him. Some of them possessed his nature to such a marked degree that they hated him more than they feared him, which is saying considerable. Even as they played about the group of men they watched him closely, as they had learned by instinct at their mother's breast.

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In the midst of loud talk from the assorted group, a tiny girl, the great man's favorite child, was sent out from the kitchen to tell them that supper was ready. The little thing pulled timidly at the large man's coat. He stooped and picked her up in his arms, leading the hungry throng into the house, where a rude supper was eaten in almost absolute silence. Occasionally a pig would venture into the room, to be immediately kicked out by the man who sat nearest the door. Then the children that played about the house would chase the offending animal with sticks and shrill cries.

In a room adjoining this one a girl sat alone in dejected attitude, her face buried between two very brown hands. As the men tramped into the house she rose from the trunk upon which she had been sitting and crossed to the farther side of the room. There, with difficulty, she forced up a small dingy window looking out upon the mountains at the back of the ranch—a clear view, unobstructed by scurrying dogs, pigs, or children. She leaned far out, drawing in deep, sweet breaths, and wondering if she would follow the impulse to climb out and run to the top of the nearest hill. She thought not, then fell again to wondering how she should ever accustom herself to this place, these new surroundings. She heard the men tramp out of the house, followed soon by a timid rap upon her door, then moved quickly across the room, an odd contrast to her rude surroundings.

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"You can have supper now," said a tall girl in a timid voice. "The men are through. We ain't got much, Miss Hathaway."

"A little is enough for me," said the girl, smiling. "Don't call me *Miss*, please. It doesn't seem just right—*here*. Call me Hope. It will make me feel more at home, you know. You're *Mary*, aren't you? *You* haven't been to supper, have you?"

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"Mother said you were to eat alone," answered the breed girl.

"Oh, no, surely I may eat with you girls! I'd much prefer it. You know it would be lonely all by myself, don't you think so?"

"We ain't going to eat just yet, not till after the boys get theirs," said the Harris girl a trifle less timidly.

"Then I will wait, too," Hope decided. "Come in, Mary, and stay till I unpack some of these things. Just a few waists and extra riding skirts. I suppose I am to hang them up here on these nails, am I not?" When she had finished unpacking she turned to the breed girl, who had become quite friendly and was watching her interestedly, and explained: "Just a few things that I thought would be suitable to wear up here, for teaching; but, do you know, I'd feel lots better if I had a dress like yours—a calico one. But I have this—this old buck-skin one. See, it has bead-work on it. Isn't it pretty?"

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"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, as Hope held it up for inspection. "*Isn't* it lovely!"

"Very old and dingy-looking, but I'll put it on and wear it," she decided.

A few minutes later, when they had arranged the small, barren room somewhat more comfortably, Hope Hathaway, attired in her dress of Indian make, joined the Harris girls at their frugal meal. Her dark hair was parted in the center and hung in two long braids down her back. That, combined with the beaded dress, fringed properly, her black eyes, and quiet expressionless face, made a very picturesque representation of an Indian girl. Truly she was one of them. The breed girls must have thought something of the same, for they became at their ease, talking very much as girls talk the world over. There were three of them between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, and Hope soon found herself well entertained and almost contented. The loneliness soon wore away, and before realizing it she began to feel at home—almost one of them, true to her spirit of adaptability. But yet for her supper she ate only two hard boiled eggs.

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After the meal the breed girls walked with her down to the spring-house where the milk and butter was kept. From underneath the small log building a large spring crept lazily out, spreading itself as it went into a miniature lake which lay between the house buildings and the stables. It was the only thing on the ranch worthy of notice, and, in a country barren of water excepting in the form of narrow winding creeks, it was pleasing to the eye.

The men and boys had disappeared, the younger children were with their mother, and even the pigs had drowsily gone to their sleeping quarters. The place seemed strangely quiet after its recent noise and commotion.

Finally the girls returned to the house to help with the small children, while in the deepening twilight Hope remained alone beside the lake. The water into which she looked and dreamed was shallow, but the deepening shadows concealed that fact. To her fancy it might have been bottomless. Someone rode up on horseback, but she paid no attention until a pleasant voice close beside her startled her from her reverie.

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"Can I trouble you for a drink of that water, please? I have often wished for one as I rode past; it looks so clear and cold." She bowed her head in assent, and, bringing a cup from the spring-house, stooped and filled it for him. He thanked her and drank the water eagerly.

"It is good, just as I thought, and cold as ice," he said; then, noticing the girl more closely, continued: "I have been talking with your father over there at the corral, and am returning home."

"With my *father*," emphasized the girl. The young man noted with wonderment the richness of her voice, the soft, alluring grace of every movement. Someone had jokingly told him before he left his old-country home that he would bring back an Indian wife, as one of historical fame had done centuries before. He laughed heartily at the time—he smiled now, but thought of it. He thought of it again many times that evening and cursed himself for such folly. Perhaps there was Indian medicine in the cup she gave him, or perhaps he looked an instant too long into those dark, unfathomable eyes. He found himself explaining:

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"Yes; your father has agreed to sell me that team I have been wanting. I am coming back for the horses to-morrow."

"My *father*," she began again. "Oh, yes, of course. I thought—Would you like another drink of the water?"

"Yes, if you please." It seemed good to stand there in the growing darkness, and another drink would give him fully a minute. He watched her supple figure as she stooped to refill the tin cup. What perfect physiques some of these Indian girls possessed! He did not wonder so much now that some men forgot their families and names for these dark-skinned women.

"I am coming to-morrow for the horses—in the morning," he repeated foolishly, returning the cup. She did not speak again, so bidding her a courteous good-night he mounted his horse and rode slowly into the gathering dusk. [Pg 37]

Hope stood there for a moment, returning to her study of the water; then two of the breed girls came toward her. One of them was giggling audibly.

"We heard him," said Mary. "He thought you was one of us. It'll be fun to fool him. He's new out here, and don't know much, anyhow. He's Edward Livingston, an Englishman, an' has got a sheep ranch about three miles over there."

"A *sheep-man*!" exclaimed Hope, "Isn't that too bad!"

"You hate sheep-men, too?" asked the older girl.

"No, I don't know that I *hate* them, but there's a feeling—a sort of something one can't get over, something that grows in the air if you're raised among cattle. I despise sheep, detest them. They spoil our cattle range." Then after a short pause: "It's too bad he isn't a cattle-man!" [Pg 38]

"That's what I think," said Mary, "because the men are all gettin' down on him. He runs his sheep all over their range, an' they're makin' a big talk."

"You shouldn't tell things, Mary, they're only talkin', anyway," reproved the older girl.

"*Talkin'*! Well, I should say so, an' you bet they mean business! But Miss Hathaway—Hope—don't care, an' I don't care neither, if he gets into a scrape; only he's got such a nice, pleasant face, an' he ain't on to the ways out here yet, neither—an' I don't care *what* the men say! Tain't as if he meant anything through real meanness."

"That's so," replied the older girl, "but maybe she don't want to hear such talk. It's bedtime, anyway; let's go in."

"Yes, I'm tired," said Hope wearily, adding as she bade Mary good-night at her door: "I do hope he won't get into any trouble." [Pg 39]

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## CHAPTER IV

The three months' school had begun in earnest. Each day Hope found new interest in her small class and in her surroundings. She readily learned to dispense with all the comforts and luxuries to which she had been born, substituting instead a rare sense of independence, an expansion of her naturally wild spirit. She dispensed also with conventionalities, except such as were ingrained with her nature, yet she was far from happy in the squaw-man's family. She could have ridden home in a few hours, but remembered too keenly her mother's anger and her father's parting words. He said to her:

"You have hurt your mother and spoiled her summer by the stand you have taken. You are leaving here against my wishes and against your own judgment. The only thing I've got to say is this: don't come back here till you've finished your contract up there, till you've kept your word to the letter. No one of my blood is going back on their word. A few rough knocks will do you good." [Pg 40]

He probably discovered in a very few hours how much he loved his girl, how she had grown into his life, for the next day after she had left he drove to the distant town and hunted up his wife's nephew, who had caused all this trouble.

"You deserve another thrashing," he said when he had found him, "but now you've got to turn to and do what you can to bring things back to where they were. Hope's left home and 's gone to teaching school up in the mountains at Harris'. Now, what in thunder am I going to do about it? She can't live there with those breeds. Lord, I slept there once and the fleas nearly ate me up!"

The boy's face turned a trifle pale. "I'm sorry, uncle, about this. I never thought she would do such a thing, on my account—not after I left. And she's gone to Joe Harris' place! I know all about that, a regular nest of low breeds and rustlers. She can't stay there!" [Pg 41]

"But she will, just the same," announced the man, "because when she told me that she'd promised Harris, and that she was going, anyway, I told her to go and take her medicine till the school term was ended."

"But surely you won't allow her to stay, to *live* at Joe Harris'! There are other people up there,

white people, with whom she could live. Why, uncle, you can't allow her to stay there!"

"Why not? She's made her nest, let her lie in it for awhile—fleas and all. It won't hurt her any. But I'm going to keep a close eye on her just the same. I couldn't go up there myself on account of your aunt's being here, but I was thinking about it all last night, and I finally concluded to send a bunch of cattle up there, beef cattle, and hold 'em for shipment. Now I came here to town to tell you that your aunt wants you to come back to the ranch, but you're not going to come back, see? You're going up there and hold those cattle for a spell, and keep your eye on my girl. I don't give a damn about the steers—it's the girl; but you've got to have an excuse for being there. Your aunt's got to have an excuse, too. These cattle—there's two hundred head of 'em—they're *yours*—see? I'll have 'em all vented to-morrow, for in case Hope thought they wasn't yours she might catch on. You can ship 'em in the fall for your trouble. She won't think anything of you holding cattle up there, because the range is so good. So you look out for her, see how she is every day, and send me word by McCullen, who I'll send along with you. You can take a cook and another man if you need one. And now don't let her catch on that I had a hand in this! Seen anything of them blame New Yorkers yet?" Young Carter shook his head absent-mindedly. He was filled with delight at this clever scheme of his uncle's. "No? Well, mebbe there's a telegram. Your aunt expected me to take them back to the ranch to-morrow. Never mind thanking me for the cattle. You do your part to the letter. Send me word every day and don't forget. And another thing, just quit your thinking about marrying that girl, and keep your hands off of her! Remember she's in a wild country up there, among tough customers, and she probably knows it by now, and the *chances are* she's got a gun buckled onto her!"

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He was right. Hope found herself among too many rough characters to feel safe without a gun concealed beneath her blouse or jacket, yet rough as the men were, they treated this quiet-faced girl with the utmost respect, perhaps fearing her. Her reputation as a phenomenal shot was not far-fetched, and had reached the remotest corners of the country. She had played with a gun as a baby, had been allowed to use one when a wee child, and had grown up with the passion for firearms strong within her. Shooting was a gift with her, perfected by daily practice. In one of her rooms at the ranch the girl had such a collection of firearms as would have filled the heart of many an old connoisseur with longing. It was her one passion, perhaps not a more expensive one than most women possess; yet, for a girl, unique. Her father gratified her in this, just as other fathers gratify their girls in their desire for music, art, fine clothes, or all, as the case may be. But the things that most girls love so well had small place in the life of Hope Hathaway. She cared little for music, and less for fine clothes. Society she detested, declaring that a full season in New York would kill her. Perhaps if she had not been filled with the determination to stay away from it, its excitement might finally have won her; but she was of the West. Its vastness filled her with a love that was part of her nature. Its boundless prairies, its freedom, were greater than all civilization had to offer her.

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She brought with her to the mountains a long-distance rifle and a brace of six-shooters. A shotgun she seldom used, for the reason that to her quick, accurate eye a rifle did better, more varied work, and answered every purpose of a shotgun. It was said that each bird she marked on the wing dropped at her feet in two pieces, its head severed smoothly. This may not have been true always, but the fact remains that the birds dropped when she touched the trigger.

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She was an odd character for a girl, reserved and quiet even with her most intimate friends, rough and impulsive as a boy sometimes, in speech and actions, again as dignified as the proudest queen. Her friends never knew how to take her, because they never understood her. She left, so far along her trail in life, nothing but shattered ideals and delusions, but she had not become cynical or embittered, only wiser. After her first week's stay at Harris' she began to realize that perhaps she had always expected too much of people. Here were people of whom she had expected nothing opening up new side lights on life that she had never thought to explore. Life seemed full of possibilities to her now, at least, immediate possibilities.

She had not met again the courteous, smooth-faced young man who had mistaken her for an Indian girl, though he had come the next morning for the horses, and had ridden past the ranch more than once. Yet she had not forgotten the incident, or what the Harris girls had told her, for daily as she passed the group of loungers on her return from school she heard his name gruffly spoken, intermixed with oaths. They certainly meant mischief, and she was curious to know what it was.

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The first school week had ended. On Friday night she wondered how she could manage to exist through Saturday and Sunday, but Saturday morning found her in the saddle, accompanied by the three largest Harris boys, en route for the highest peaks of the mountains.

"This is something like living," she exclaimed, pulling in her horse after the first few miles. "How pretty all of this is! What people call scenery, I suppose. But give me the prairie, smooth and level as far as the eye can reach! There's nothing like it in all the world! The open prairie, a cool, spring day like this, and a horse that will go till it's ready to fall dead—that is life! Who is it that lives over there?" she asked, pointing toward some ranch buildings, nestled in a low, green valley.

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"That's the Englishman's place," answered the soft-voiced twin.

"Sheep-man," explained Dave disgustedly. "See them sheds?"

"Oh, the new man by the name of Livingston. Do you boys know him?" asked the girl curiously.

"Nope! Don't want to, neither. Seen him lots of times, though," answered Dave.

"He's come in here without bein' asked, an' thinks he can run the whole country," explained the soft-voiced twin.

"Is he trying to run the whole country?" asked Hope.

"Well, he's runnin' his sheep over everybody's range, an' they ain't goin' to stand for it," replied the boy.

"But what can they do about it? Have they asked him to move his sheep?"

"No. What's the use after they've been over the range—spoiled it, anyhow. No, you bet they ain't goin' to ask him nothing!"

The girl thought for a moment, absently pulling the "witches' knots" from her horse's mane, while it climbed a hill at a swinging gait, then continued as though talking to herself: [Pg 48]

"Once upon a time a young man took what money he had in the world, and going into a far-away, wild country started in business for himself. He had heard, probably, that there was more money in sheep than in cattle. A great many people do hear that, so he bought sheep, thinking, perhaps, to make a pile of money in a few years, and then go back to his home and marry some nice, good girl of his choice. It takes money to get married and make a home, and to do mostly anything, they say, and so this young man bought sheep, for no one goes into the sheep business or any other kind of business unless they want to make money. They don't generally do it for fun. And, of course, he thought, as they all do, to get rich immediately. He made a great mistake in the beginning, being extremely ignorant. He brought his sheep to a cattle country, where there were no other sheep near his own. All the men around him hated sheep, as men who own cattle always do, and hating the sheep, they thought they hated the sheep-man also, who really was a very harmless young man, and wouldn't have offended them for anything. But these men's dislike for the sheep grew daily, and so their fancied dislike for the young man grew in proportion. [Pg 49]

"The men in the country would meet together in little groups, and every day some man would have some new grievance to tell the others. It finally got on their brains, until all they could think or talk about was this new man and his sheep. The more they thought and talked, the more angry they became, until finally they forgot that he was another man like themselves—in all likelihood a good, honest man, who would not have done them wrong knowingly. They forgot a great many things, and all they could think about night or day was how they could do something to injure his business or himself. They got so after awhile that they talked only in low whispers about him, taking great pains that their families, children, and even their big *boys*, should not know their plans. They made a great mistake in not taking their boys into their confidence, because *boys* are very often more reliable than men, and can always keep a secret a whole lot better. But perhaps the fathers knew that the boys had very good sense and would not go into anything like that without a better reason than they had, which was no reason at all. [Pg 50]

"I never heard just what they planned to do to this newcomer to get rid of him and his sheep, but I know how it had to end." She looked up, searching each boy's intent, astonished face.

"Say, what're you drivin' at, anyway? You can't fool me—it's *him!*" exclaimed Dave, pointing toward the sheep-ranch. "You're makin' up a story about him!"

"How'd you know all that?" asked the quicker, soft-voiced twin.

"Know all that. Why, how did you boys know all that? I suppose that I have ears, too—and I've heard of such things before," she replied. [Pg 51]

"But you don't know how the end'll be. That's one thing you don't know," declared the soft-voiced twin. "You can't know that."

"She might be a fortune-teller like grandmother White Blanket," laughed the other.

"Is that old squaw in the farthest tepee from the house your own grandmother?" asked the girl.

"Yep, an' she ain't no squaw, either! She's a French half-breed," he said, with an unconscious proud uplifting of the shoulders.

Hope laughed slightly. "What's the other half?" she asked. The boy gave her a look of deep commiseration.

"I thought you had more learnin' than that! Why, the other half's white, of course."

"I beg your pardon!" gasped the girl. "My education along those lines must have been somewhat neglected. I had an idea that those were Indians camped down at your place. But French half-breeds,—a mixture of *white* and *French*,—that's a different matter!" She stopped her horse and laughed with the immoderation of a boy. "That is rich," she cried. "If ever I go to New York again I shall spring that on the Prince. '*Mon Dieu!*' he will exclaim. 'What then are we, Mademoiselle, we, the *aristocracy*—the great nation of the *French*?' " Her face sobered. "But this is not the question. *I* do know how this will end, and I am not a fortune-teller, either. I know that the ones who are in the wrong about this matter will get the worst of it. Sometimes it means states prison, sometimes death—at all events, something not expected. I tell you, boys, I wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of this for anything! And do you know, I am real glad that your father doesn't need your help. We will take a little side of our own and watch things—what do you say? It will be lots [Pg 52]

of fun, and we'll know all the time that we are in the right, and maybe we can prevent them from doing any real wrong to themselves." She watched them closely to see how they accepted the suggestion. Her inspiration might be considered a reckless one, but their young minds lent themselves readily to her influence.

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"The old man licked me this mornin'," growled Dave. "An' he can go straight to the hot place now, for all o' me! I'm goin' off on the round-up, anyway, next year."

"You boys know, don't you, that if your father ever found out that *I* knew anything about this thing, he would probably give me a licking, too—and send me out of the country?" This for effect.

"I'd like to see him lay hands on you," roared Dave. "I'd fill him so full of lead that—that——"

Words failed him.

"I'd kill him if he did, Miss Hathaway," exclaimed the small boy, Ned, with quiet assurance that brought a hint of laughter to the girl's face. The soft-voiced twin rode up very close to her.

"He ain't goin' to find it out, an' don't you worry; we'll all stand by you while there's one of us left!"

"All right, boys, we're comrades now. I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll form a band—brigade—all by ourselves. I am commanding officer and you are my faithful scouts. How's that?" Hope's fancy was leading her away. "Come on," she cried, "let's race this flat!"

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The self-appointed commanding officer reached the smooth valley far in advance of her faithful scouts, who yelled in true Indian fashion as they rode up with her.

"I'll run you a mile an' beat you all hollow," declared Dave. "But on a two hundred yard stretch like this here place my horse don't have no chance to get started."

"I'll bet my quirt against yourn that you lose," said the soft-voiced twin.

"Keep your quirt! I don't want it, nohow. One's enough fur me. But I *can* beat her just the same!" Dave was stubbornly positive.

"You'll have to ride my horse if you do beat her," continued the soft-voiced twin. Dave grew furious.

"Now, see here, that raw-boned, loose-jointed, watch-eyed cayuse o' yourn couldn't run a good half mile without fallin' dead in his tracks! What'er you a-givin' me, anyhow?" At that instant his attention was fortunately taken. "Where'd all them cattle come from?" he exclaimed.

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They had turned up a narrow gulch, the youngest boy and Hope taking the lead, and had traveled it for perhaps fifty yards when they found themselves at a stand-still before a drove of cattle that were making their way slowly down the narrow trail.

"We won't go back," called the girl. "Come on up here and wait till they pass." And followed by the boys she guided her horse up the steep, rocky side of a high bank, and waited while the cattle came slowly on. They counted them as they passed in twos and threes down the narrow valley. When nearly two hundred had gone by a rider came in sight around the bend of the hill. Hope's horse whinnied, and the man's answered back, then the girl gave a scream of delight, and, unmindful of the rocky bank, or of the appearance of two other riders, rushed down, nearly unseating the old cow-puncher in her demonstrations of welcome.

"*Jim! Dear old Jim!* Where did you come from? I am so glad to see you! Why, Jim, I'd rather see you than anyone in the world! How glad I am! Boys," she called, "come down here. This is Jim, my dear old father Jim!" Old Jim McCullen's eyes were dimmed with tears as he looked from the girl's happy, flushed face to the last of the cattle that were going out of sight around the bend of the gulch. "Where did you come from, Jim, and what brings you up here? Whose cattle? Why, they're ours, and rebranded! What are you doing with them?" Just then the two riders, whom in her excitement she had failed to notice, rode up. "Why, Syd, hello," she said. "And you're here, too! I thought Jim was alone."

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She changed instantly from her glad excitement, speaking with the careless abruptness of a boy. Her cousin rode alongside. She gave one glance at his companion, then wheeled her horse about and stationed herself a short distance away beside the breed boys.

"This is a happy surprise, Hope," exclaimed her cousin. "What are you doing up here so far away from home?" She regarded him a trifle more friendly.

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"Is it possible you don't know? Didn't you tell him, Jim, that I had gone away? Oh, I forgot, you weren't at the ranch when I left, so you couldn't tell him. Well, I am here, as you can see, Sydney—partly because I wanted a change, partly because they wanted a school-teacher up here. I am staying at Joe Harris'. What are you doing here with those cattle?"

"Oh, thought I'd go to work for a change. Just some cattle that I bought to hold for fall shipment." He turned to the man at his side, apologizing, then proceeded to introduce him to his cousin. The girl cut it short by a peculiar brief nod.

"Oh, I've met Mr. Livingston before!"

"Indeed?" said Carter in surprise, looking from one to the other.

"At Harris" explained the sheep-man. "She gave me one of the sweetest, most refreshing drinks of water it has ever been my privilege to enjoy." He spoke easily, yet was much perturbed. Here was his shy Indian maid, a remarkably prepossessed, up-to-date young woman. It took a little time to get it straightened out in his mind.

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"Of course I might have known that you two would have met. There are so few people here." Carter tried to speak indifferently.

"Well, good-by," said the girl, moving away.

"Don't be in a hurry! Where are you going, Hope?" called her cousin.

"Sorry, but can't wait any longer. We're off for a day's exploring. Good-by."

"I'll see you this evening. We're going to camp near Harris'," said Carter.

"No, not this evening," she called back to him as she rode on up the gulch. "I won't be back till late, and then I'll be too tired to see anyone. Good-by, Jim—I'll see *you* to-morrow." Old Jim watched her until she was lost to sight in the turn of the gulch. Livingston also watched her until she was out of sight. She rode astride, wearing a neat divided skirt, and sat her horse with all the ease and perfection of a young cowboy. Old Jim McCullen went on in trail of the cattle, while young Carter and Livingston followed leisurely.

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"Rather a cool greeting from a girl one expects to marry," said Carter, under his breath.

"Is it possible—your fiancée!" Livingston's face became thoughtful. "You are to be congratulated," he said.

Carter laughed nervously. "I can scarcely say she is *that*, yet—but it is her mother's wish. We have grown up together. Miss Hathaway is my cousin, my second cousin. I can see no reason why we will not be married—some time."

"*Miss Hathaway*," mused his companion. "And you love her?" he asked quietly.

"Certainly," answered Carter, wondering at the other's abrupt way of speaking.

"And may I ask if she loves you?" The sheep-man's tone was quiet and friendly. Carter wished that it might have been insolent. As it was he could only laugh uneasily.

"It would seem not," he answered. "To-day she is like an icicle—to-morrow she will be a most devoted girl. That is Hope—as changeable as the wind. One never knows what to expect. One day loving—the next, cold and indifferent. But then, you see, I am used to her little ways."

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"I wish you all the happiness you deserve, Mr. Carter," said Livingston a little later, as he rode off, taking a short cut to his ranch.

"*Hope—Hope Hathaway*; Carter's cousin. What an idiot I've been to think of her as an Indian girl! An odd name—Hope. *Hope Hath a way*," he mused as he rode homeward. "If only I had the right to hope!"

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## CHAPTER V

"I wish there was a shorter cut to get home," said the girl wearily. "I'm just about tired. Climbing mountains is a little out of my line. I wonder how long it will take to get used to it."

"There is a shorter way, Miss Hathaway," said one of the breed boys. "It's through that sheep-ranch there. We always used to go that way before they fenced it in, but there's gates to it if we can find 'em."

"Let's go through that way, then, if it's shorter. Of course it is shorter—I can see that, and we'll trust to luck to be able to see the gates. I suppose they're wire gates."

"Yes, just regular wire gates, an' it's gettin' dark pretty blame fast, but mebbe we can find 'em all right."

So they followed the fence, searching in the dim light for the almost invisible gate—the girl who had that day appointed herself commanding officer and her three brave scouts.

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Alongside the wire fence they followed a narrow cow-trail for nearly a quarter of a mile, then the path disappeared inside the field, and the side-hills along which they were obliged to travel were rough and dangerous. It was late, and darkness settled down around them, cutting from their vision everything but a small line of fence and the nearby hills.

They made slow headway over the rocky banks. Hope, tired with the day's exploring and hungry after her long ride and the somewhat slender diet of the past week, was sorry they had not gone the road, which, though longer, would not have taken such a length of time to travel. The boys were good scouts, yet it became evident that they had never followed the new line of fence before. Their horses slipped upon the sides of steep inclines which became more rocky and dangerous as they proceeded. Darkness increased rapidly. One horse in the rear fell down, but

the rider was upon his feet in an instant; then they dismounted and led their horses, traveling along very slowly in Indian file. Some time later they found the wire gate, much to the girl's relief. It was then quite dark. The moon had risen, but showed itself fitfully behind black, stormy looking clouds. Without difficulty they discovered a trail leading somewhere, and followed it until they rounded a point from which they could see the light in the sheep-man's house.

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"Why, we're almost up to his *house*!" exclaimed Hope. "This isn't the way. We don't want to go there!"

"I reckon we'll have to get pretty close up to it to find the road that goes to the other gate," said the soft-voiced twin.

"How foolish we've been," sighed the girl.

"Yep, a pack o' idiots," agreed Dave.

"But it's too dark for anyone to see us—or notice us," she said with relief. "I think we might go right up to the house and look through the windows without anyone seeing us."

"Let's do it," suggested Dave.

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"Well I should say not!" exclaimed the girl. "It's the last thing on earth I would do—*peek* into anyone's window! I am not so curious to see the interior of *his* house—or anyone's else."

"I'll bet they're just eatin' supper," said Ned hungrily.

"All the better," replied Hope; "there will be no one around to see us then. I wonder how much closer we'll have to go?"

"Not much further," answered the soft-voiced twin wisely. "See, there's the barns, an' the road ain't a great ways off." He led the way, while Hope and the boy, Dave, followed close, and the youngest boy trailed along somewhere in the rear. They passed between the stables and the house, then, aided by the fitful moon, found the road, along which they made better time.

Hope felt a great relief as they began to leave the house in the distance, though why, she could scarcely have explained. She said to herself that she was in a hurry to reach home, but as they neared the huge, flat-roofed sheep-sheds she slowed up her horse, which had gone on ahead of the others, and glanced back at her approaching scouts. The twins came up with her, then she stopped and looked behind.

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"Where's Ned?" she asked sharply, a sudden suspicion entering her head. "What's keeping him?"

"He went up to the house to see what's goin' on," replied Dave. "I saw him start for that way."

"How dared he do it! He will be seen and then what will they think! We will wait for him here." Then angrily to the boy: "If you knew he was going to do that Indian trick why didn't you stop him?"

"I didn't know nothin' till I missed him," replied the boy.

"No, we didn't know he was goin', but when we saw he was gone for sure it wouldn't 'a' done no good to 'a' gone after him. Anyway, we wouldn't 'a' left *you* alone!" The soft-voiced twin was a genius at finding explanations. He was never at a loss.

The girl recovered her temper instantly. "You did quite right, my brave scout," she cried. "I see you have learned the first and greatest principle of your vocation. *Never desert a lady, no matter what danger she may be in.* But what a temptation it must have been to you to follow him and bring him back to me!" There is no doubt but that the sarcasm was wasted upon the breed boys, who waited stolidly with her near some sheltering brush for the truant Ned, whose mischievousness had led him off the trail.

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At last he rode up with them, surprised out of breath to find them there waiting for him. The girl took him by the sleeve. "You're a bad boy. Next time ask me when you have an inclination to do anything like that. Now give an account of yourself. What did you see?"

"I just wanted to see what they had to eat, so I peeked in," apologized the youngster. "There was two men eatin' their supper. The boss wasn't there. I heard old Morris tell another fellow that he was out helpin' put in the sheep."

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"But here are the sheds, and surely there are no sheep here," she exclaimed anxiously.

"They're keepin' 'em in the open corrals down the road a piece," explained the soft-voiced twin. "They don't keep no sheep here in the sheds now."

The commanding officer breathed easier. "That's good; come on then," she said, riding ahead. They had not proceeded fifty yards when the low tones of men's voices reached them. Simultaneously they stopped their horses and listened, but nothing save an indistinct murmur could be heard. One of the twins slipped from his horse and handed the bridle reins to the girl, then crept forward. In the darkness she could not tell which one it was, nor did she care. She was filled with excitement and the longing for adventure which the time and place aggravated. Had they not that day formed a band of secrecy—she and her three brave scouts? It occurred to her that it might be the sheep-man returning with a herder, but if so he had no right to stand at such a distance and talk in guarded tones. The very atmosphere of the place felt suspicious. They drew

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their horses to one side of the roadway, waiting in absolute silence for the return of the scout. The voices reached them occasionally from the opposite side of a clump of brush not a stone's throw away.

They waited several minutes, which seemed interminable, then a dark form appeared and a voice whispered softly: "Somethin's up! Let's get the horses over by the fence so's they can't hear us." The twin led the way, taking a wide circuit about the spot from where the sound of voices came. They reached the fence quickly without noise, securing their horses behind a screen of scrubby willows.

"Now, go on," said the girl. "What did you hear?"

"When I crawled up close I saw two men. One of 'em said, 'Shut up. You're makin' too much noise! Do you want 'em to hear you up to the house?' The other said he didn't give a damn, that they might just as well make a good job of it an' kill off Livingston while they were getting rid of his sheep. These two fellers have just come over to guard the road from the house to keep the men there from interferin', but the mob's down there at the corral waitin' to do the work. I found that much out an' then I sneaked back. I reckon they're goin' to drive the sheep over the cut-bank."

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"The devils!" cried Hope, under her breath. "They're going to pile up the sheep and kill him if he interferes, are they? *We'll show them!*"

"We can't do anything," said the boy. "There's more'n a dozen men out there at the corrals, an' it's darker'n pitch."

"So we'll just have to stand here and see that crime committed!" she burst out. "No, not on your life! You boys have got to stand by me. Surely you're just as brave as a girl? We're going over there where we can see what's going on, and the first man that tries to drive a sheep out of that corral gets one of these!" She patted the barrel of her rifle as she pulled it from its saddle case. "Get your guns and come along." But they were not far behind her in getting their weapons. The older boys had revolvers, and little Ned was armed with a Winchester repeating shotgun.

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The twins were never seen without their guns, and had the reputation of sleeping with them at night. For wildness those two boys were the terror of the country. Their hearts sang a heathenish song of joy at this new adventure. Surely they were as brave as a girl! Her taunt rankled some. They would show her that they were not cowards! She had begun to worry already!

"Oh, what if it should be too late! What if we should be too late! Oh, it can't be! Let's go faster!" she cried.

The breed boys crept along close to the ground, making altogether much less noise than the girl, who seemed to think that speed and action were all that was necessary.

"Sh! Keep quieter. You musn't let them know anyone's 'round. Those fellers by the road 're just over there, an' they'll hear us," whispered Dan.

Then slower, more stealthily, they crept around the two men who guarded the road, and with less caution approached the corrals, the girl meanwhile recovering her composure to a great degree, though her heart still beat wildly. The night seemed a trifle lighter now to her straining eyes. What if the moon should come out, revealing them to the men waiting beyond the corrals? She grasped her rifle firmly, and her heart beat quicker at the thought. The soft-voiced twin must have felt the same fear, for he came close and whispered in her ear: "The corrals ain't more'n a rod, right over there. We'd better make a run for that bush there on this side of it, for the moon's comin' out—see!" He pointed upward. A rift had come in the black cloud from which the moon shone dimly, growing momentarily brighter. Before them the corral loomed up like a great flat patch of darkness, and to one side of this dark patch something taller stood in dim relief—a small clump of brush, toward which the odd little scouting party ran in all haste. Safe within its shelter, a fierce joy, savage in its intensity, filled the girl.

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"Come on, Moon, come on in all your glory!" she whispered; then, as if in answer to her command, it came in full splendor from behind its veil of black. It might have been a signal. Back in the hills a coyote called weirdly to its mate, but before the last wailing note had died away a sharp report sounded on the still air, followed by the groans of a man in mortal agony. Hope, upon her knees in the brush, clasped her hands to her throat to stifle a cry.

"Now drive his damn'd sheep into the gulch!" commanded a gruff voice.

Following the pain, a fierce light came into the girl's eyes. Over tightly closed teeth her lips parted dryly. Instinctively the breed boys crept behind her, leaving her upon one knee before the heap of brush. A man leaped into the corral among the stupid sheep, and as he leaped a bullet passed through his hand.

"God, I'm killed!" he cried, as he sank limply out of sight among the sheep. For a few moments not a sound came except the occasional bleating of a lamb, then the gate of the corral, which was ajar, opened as by some invisible hand, and the great body of animals crowded slowly toward the entrance.

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"They think there's only one man here, and they're not going to be bluffed by one," whispered Hope. "See, they must be coaxing the leaders with hay, and there's something going on back

there that will make them stampede in a moment, and then the cut-bank! But we'll bluff them; make them think there's a whole regiment here. There's four of us. Now get your guns ready. Good; now when I start, all of you shoot at once as fast as you can load. Aim high in that direction. Shoot in the air, not *anywhere* else. Now do as I tell you. Now, all together!" For two or three minutes those four guns made music. The hills gathered up the noise and flung it back, making the air ring with a deafening sound. "Shoot up! Shoot higher, or you'll be hitting someone," she admonished, as dark forms began to rise from the ground beyond the corral and run away.

"They're crawling away like whipped dogs," exclaimed a twin in glee. "I'd like to shoot one for luck!" [Pg 74]

"Shame on you," cried the girl softly. "That would be downright murder while they're running."

"I reckon there's been murder already to-night," said the soft-voiced twin. Hope turned upon him fiercely: "That wasn't murder! I shot him through the hand. Murder? Do you call it murder to kill one of those beasts? You mean—you mean that they killed *him*! I forgot for a minute! Oh, it couldn't be that they killed *him*—Mr. Livingston! Are you sure he wasn't up at the house, Ned? I must find out." She started toward the corral. Dave pulled her back roughly.

"See there! Those fellers that was on guard down there 're comin' back. They must have left their horses down by that rock. They'll ketch us sure!" She drew back into the brush again, waiting until the two men, whose voices first brought suspicion to their minds, had passed by, skirting the corral in diplomatic manner. [Pg 75]

Hope, who had been so eager to search the scene of bloodshed, crept from the brush and took the opposite direction, followed closely by the breed boys. When they reached their horses she spoke:

"Now you boys go home. Go in from the back coulee and sneak into bed. Don't let anyone see you, whatever you do, for if this was ever found out——" She waited for their imaginations to finish the sentence.

"We can sneak in all right," exclaimed Dave. "We know how to do that! They'll never find it out in ten years!"

"Then go at once. Ride fast by the Spring coulee and get there ahead of the men—if there should be any that belong there. I will come later. If they ask, say that I'm in bed, or taking a walk, or anything that comes into your head. But you won't be questioned. You mustn't be! Now hurry up!"

"But why won't you come along with us?" asked Dave.

"Because if we should be caught together they would know who did the shooting. If they see you alone they will not suspect you, and if they see me alone they will never think of such a thing. It is the wisest way, besides I have other reasons. Now don't stand there all night talking to me, but go, unless you want to make trouble." She watched them until they were lost to sight, then mounted her horse and rode back over the road that she had come, straight up to the sheepman's house. [Pg 76]

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## CHAPTER VI

It was fully half a mile to Livingston's house. The trail showed plainly in the moonlight, winding in ghostly fashion through thick underbrush, and crossed in several places by a small mountain stream through which the horse plunged, splashing the girl plentifully. She had an impression that she ought to go back to the corral and discover just what mischief had been done, but shivered at the thought of hunting for dead men in the darkness. A feeling of weird uneasiness crept over her. She wished that she had brought the breed boys with her, though realizing that the proper thing had been done in sending them home in order that their secret might be safe, and so prevent more evil. She knew that she would find men at the house who could take lanterns and go to the scene of the trouble. The past half hour seemed remote and unreal, yet the picture of it passed through her brain again and again before she reached the house. She could hear the first shot, so startling and unexpected, and the man's terrible groans rang in her ears until she cried out as if to drive them from her. Was he dead? she wondered. Perhaps he lay there wounded and helpless! Was it Livingston? If it should be! She thought that she should be there, groping over the bloody ground for him. She shook as with a chill. How helpless she was, after all—a veritable coward, for she must go on to the house for assistance! [Pg 78]

She slipped from her horse at some distance, and walked toward the ray of light that came from a side window. Her knees were weak, she felt faint and wearied. At the house her courage failed, she sank limply beside the window, and looked into the lighted room beyond. He was not there! One man was reading a newspaper while another sat on an end of the table playing a mouth harp.

In her mind she could see the body of Livingston in the corral, trampled upon and mangled by a multitude of frightened sheep. She stifled a cry of horror. Why had she not gone there at once? [Pg 79]



For no reason except the hope in her heart that it might not have been him who had been shot—that she might find him at the house. But he was not there! Then it must have been he; his groans she had heard—that still sounded in her ears. He had brown hair that waved softly from a brow broad and white. His face was boyish and sad in repose. She could see it now as she had seen it by the spring, and his eyes were gray and tender. She had noticed them this day. What was she doing there by the window? Perhaps after all he was not dead, but suffering terribly while she lingered!

She rose quickly with new courage. As she turned a hand touched her on the shoulder, and she fell back weak against the house.

"I beg your pardon! I did not know—could scarcely believe that it was you—Miss—Hathaway! Won't you come into the house?"

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"*You!*" she cried as in a dream. "*Where* have you been?"

His tone, quiet, polite, hid the surprise that her question caused.

"I've been back there in the hills hunting chickens. You see I have been fortunate enough to get some. I followed them a great distance, and night overtook me up there so suddenly that I've had some difficulty in finding my way back. Now may I ask to what I owe the honor of this—visit?"

All fear and weakness had gone. She stood erect before him, her head thrown back from her shoulders, her position, as it must appear to him, driving all else from her mind.

"In other words, you want to know why I was peeking into your window at this time of the day!"

"Just so, if you put it that way. At least I should be pleased to know the nature of your visit." He threw the prairie chickens down beside the house, watching meanwhile the girl's erect figure. The soft, quiet grace he had seen at the spring had given place to something different—greater.

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"Not a very dignified position in which to be caught—and I do not like you any better for having caught me so!" she finally flashed back at him. "I have no apologies to offer you, and wouldn't offer one, anyway—under the circumstances. I'll tell you what brought me here, though. While passing by your corral, down the road, I heard a great commotion, and some shooting, so I came over here to tell you. Perhaps I was afraid to pass the corral after that." She smiled wickedly, but he, innocently believing, exclaimed:

"Why were you alone? Where were the boys that I saw with you this morning? It isn't right that you should be out alone after night like this."

"They went on—ahead of me. I rode slowly," she replied hesitatingly. He did not notice her nervous manner of speech.

"They ought to have stayed with you," he declared. "You should never ride alone, particularly after dark. Don't do it again."

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"But the shooting," she interrupted. "I came to tell you about it. Someone may have been hurt."

"It was kind of you to come. There may be trouble of some sort. I heard shooting, too, but thought it must be down at Harris'. There is very often a commotion down there, and sometimes the air carries sound very clearly. You are sure it was at the corrals?"

She became impatient. "Positively! I not only heard the shots plainly, but saw men ride away. Please lose no more time, but get your men and a lantern, and come on. There's evidently been trouble down there, Mr. Livingston, and your herder may have been hurt. They are not all good people in these mountains, by any means."

"Is that so? I had not discovered it. Probably some of them thought they would like mutton for their Sunday dinner. It seemed to me there was considerable firing, though. You are perfectly sure it was at the corrals?"

"That was my impression, Mr. Livingston," she replied briefly.

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His face suddenly became anxious. "They may have hurt Fritz. If anything has happened to that boy there will be something to pay! But unless something occurred to delay the sheep they should have been put in before dark. I will go at once. Will you come in the house and stay until my return? It might not be safe for a lady down there."

"No!" Then, less fiercely: "Have your men bring their guns and hurry up! I'm going along with you;" adding: "It's on my way back."

She waited outside while Livingston informed his men, who secured rifles, and started at once for the corrals; then leading her horse she walked on ahead with him, followed closely by the two men, who carried lanterns, which they decided not to light until they reached the sheep.

Hope never could define her feelings when she found Livingston safe and unhurt, though she made a careless attempt at doing so that night, and afterwards. She walked beside him in absolute silence. They were going to see if the herder had been injured in any way. She knew that he was not only hurt, but in all likelihood fatally so. His groans rang continually in her ears, yet it brought her not the least pain, only a horror, such as she had experienced when it happened. It was a relief to her that it had not been Livingston. She felt sorry, naturally, that a

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man had been shot, but what did it matter to her—one man more or less? She had never known him.

When they reached the sheep-corrals the moon still shone brightly, and Hope was filled with a new fear lest some of the ruffians had remained behind, and would pick off Livingston. After the lanterns were lighted she felt still more nervous for his safety, and could not restrain her foolish concern until she had mounted her horse, and made a complete circuit of the corrals, riding into every patch of brush about; then only did this fear, which was such a stranger to her, depart. She rode in haste back to the corrals, satisfied that the men had all left, probably badly frightened.

To one side of the paneled enclosure the men held their lanterns over an inert figure stretched upon the ground. Livingston was kneeling beside it. The girl got down from her horse, and came near them.

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"Is he dead?" she asked.

"*Dead*—yes! The poor boy! May God have mercy on the brute who committed this crime! It is terrible—*terrible!* Poor faithful Fritz! Scarcely more than a boy, yet possessing a man's courage and a man's heart!" He looked up at the girl's face, and was amazed at her indifference. Then he spoke to the men: "Go back and get a wagon and my saddle horse. I will stay here until you return. Leave one of the lanterns."

They hurried away, while the man continued to kneel by the side of the dead herder. Hope watched him, wondering at his depth of feeling. Finally she asked: "Was he some relative of yours?"

"No, only one of my herders—Fritz, a bright, good German boy. Why did you ask, Miss Hathaway?"

"I thought because you cared so much,—seemed to feel so badly,—that he must be very near to you."

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"He is near to me," he replied, "only as all children of earth should be near to one another. Are you not also pained at this sight—this boy, in the very beginning of his manhood, lying here dead?"

"Not *pained*—I can't truthfully say that I am pained—or care much in that way. He is dead, so what is the use of caring or worrying about it. That cannot bring him back to life again. Of course I would rather he had lived—that this had never happened, yet I do not feel pain, only an abhorrence. I couldn't touch him as you are doing, not for anything!"

"And you are not pained! *You*, a woman with a white soul and a clean heart—one of God's choicest creations—*you* stand there without a pang of sorrow—dry-eyed. Haven't you a heart, girl?" He rose to his feet, holding up the lantern until it shone squarely in her face. "Look at him lying there! See the blood upon his clothes—the look on his face! What he suffered! See what he holds so tightly in his hand,—his last thought,—a letter from his sweetheart over in Germany, the girl he was to have married, who is even now on her way to him. He had been reading her letter all day. It came this morning, and he held it in his hand planning their future with a happy heart, when some brute sent a bullet here. If it could have been me, how gladly I would make the exchange, for I have nothing that this poor boy possessed—mother, sweetheart—no one. Yet *you*, a girl, can see him so, unmoved! Good God, what are you, *stone*? See his face, he did not die at once, and suffering, *dying*, still held that letter. If not his story, then does not his suffering appeal to you? His dying groans, can you not hear them?"

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"Stop!" she cried, backing away from him until she leaned against her horse for support. "Stop! How *dare* you talk like that to me! His *groans*—" She sobbed wildly, her face buried in her saddle, which she clutched.

He came close beside her, touching her lightly, wondering. "I am so sorry, forgive me! I did not realize what I was doing. I did not wish to frighten you, believe me!"

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The sobs were hushed instantly. She raised her head, and looked at him, still dry-eyed.

"You were right," she said. "I do not even now *feel* for him—perhaps some for the little girl now on her way to him; but it is all unreal. I have seen men dead like this before, and I could not feel anything but horror—no sorrow. I am as I am. It makes no difference what you say,—what anyone says,—I cannot change. I am not tender—only please do not terrify me again!"

"I was a brute!" he exclaimed, then left her and returned to the dead man's side.

The girl stood for some time quietly beside her horse, then began to loosen the cinch. Livingston watched her wonderingly as she drew out the blanket, and secured the saddle once more into place. He did not realize her motive until she stood beside him, holding in her hand the gayly colored saddle blanket. Kneeling opposite him, beside the body of the boy, she tenderly lifted the long hair from his forehead, spread over his face a white handkerchief, then stood up and unfolded the blanket, covering the rigid form with it.

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"You have a heart!" exclaimed Livingston softly. "You are thinking of him tenderly, as a sister might, and of his sweetheart coming over the water to him!"

"No, not of that at all," said the girl simply, "nor of him, as you think; but of one who might be

## CHAPTER VII

She stood up, listening. From the distance came the low rumble of a wagon. The men were returning. For some time she kept her face from him, in attitude intent upon the distant rumble. She was thinking hard. She could not be rude to Livingston, she could not very well explain, yet she dared not allow him to accompany her back to Harris' ranch. What should she do? Naturally he would insist, yet how could she tell him that she feared for his safety? That would sound idiotic without a complete explanation, for she was almost a total stranger to him. She was concerned, that was the worst of it; but not without reason. To-night the men were in a fever of revenge. If he were seen that would settle it. To-morrow not one of them but would hesitate a long time before committing such a crime; so, she argued, she had a right to be concerned. But, after all, how foolish of her! Surely he was not a baby that he could not protect himself! Did she expect to worry about him during the whole summer? As she stood there gazing into the darkness, he watched her, speechless, something that was not sorrow piercing his heart with a greater pain. In her moment of tenderness she had become to him a woman divine. He not only loved her, and knew it, but felt the hopelessness of ever winning her. It was not exactly new, only revealed to him, for it had come upon him gradually since the evening that she had given him the water at the spring. He had cursed himself that night for thinking of an Indian girl, he, a man with a name to sustain—a name which counted little in this new country of the West. He tried to imagine her as married to Carter. The thought sickened him. Carter might be all right,—he had met him when he first came into the country; he undoubtedly was all right,—but married to this girl! As he thought, bitterly, forgetting even the dead young German at his feet, Hope was alternately calling herself a fool and wondering what she could do to prevent him from taking her home. But her fertile brain could not solve it. She turned toward him with manner constrained and frigid. It was shyness, nothing less, yet it affected him unpleasantly.

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"The wagon is coming." Relief sounded in her tone, giving the lie to her moment of tenderness. "You can hear it quite plainly. These corrals should not be so far from the house. It must be nearly a mile. I suppose you've not been in the business very long or you wouldn't have put it here, on the edge of this cut-bank."

"You are right, Miss Hathaway, I have not been long in the business nor in your country. This is quite new to me. Any place seemed good enough for a corral, to my ignorant mind. Are you interested in the sheep industry?" He spoke pleasantly. She threw back her head as she always did when angered or excited.

"*Interested in the sheep industry?* Well, I should say not! It never occurred to me before as an industry, only as a nuisance. I hate sheep. They ruin our range. One band can eat off miles and miles in a season, and spoil all the water in the country. I would go miles out of my way to avoid a band of them."

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He began slowly to comprehend. "Your people have cattle, I understand. Everyone up here seems to have cattle, too. I have heard that a strong feeling of antagonism existed between sheep and cattle owners, but thought nothing about it. I see that the feeling is not confined to the men only. Does that explain this—outrage here to-night?"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly and turned away.

"You can draw your own conclusions. Why do you ask me? I am neither a cattle-man nor a sheep-man, yet I could advise that you look about the place and see, if you can, what is meant by it all—what damage has been done. The wagon is still some distance away." Her shyness was fast disappearing. The ground she trod now was her own. He smiled down at her, finding her more natural, more prepossessing in that mood.

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"I should have thought of that myself before this. After what you have told me of your dislike for the animals, I can hardly ask you to go with me, but I do not like to leave you here alone in the dark, for I must take the lantern; however, I can wait until the men get here."

"You don't need to wait at all," she said quickly. "I'll go with you, for I am curious to see what has been done—the cause of all this."

"Then come on," said the man briefly, turning toward the corral. She kept near him, her eyes following the bright rays of the lantern that swung in his hand. She feared that the boys had aimed too low, and was nervously anxious to see just what mischief had been done. Almost anything, she thought, would have been better than permitting those thousands of sheep to be piled up at the bottom of the cut-bank and the brutes of men to ride away satisfied with their dirty work.

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Livingston examined the sheep while Hope, with a glance here and there about the enclosure, went to one side and looked at the panels carefully, discovering many bullet holes which told that her brave scouts, more bloodthirsty than she suspected, had aimed too low.

"I think this one is dead," said Livingston, dragging out a sheep from the midst of a number

huddled in one corner. "Judging from the blood, I should say it is shot. A few are piled up over there from fright, but so many are sleeping that it will be impossible to determine the loss until morning. The loss is small; probably a hundred piled up and hurt, not more, from the looks of the band. I heard considerable firing, which lasted about a minute. I wonder if my friends about here thought they could kill off a band of sheep so easily."

Hope had not been searching for sheep, but for dead or wounded men, and finding none breathed easier. She thought of the man whose hand she had marked and who fell in such a panic among the sheep. It struck her as being a very funny incident, and laughed a little. Livingston heard the laugh and looked around in wonderment. He could see nothing amusing. This Western girl was totally different from any girl that he had known, English or American. She must possess a sense of humor out of all proportion with anything of his conception. He thought a few minutes before that he loved her, but she seemed far removed now—an absolute stranger. The boyish laugh annoyed him. His manner as he turned to her was quite as formally polite as ever her own had been. She resented it, naturally.

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"Step outside, please, until I drive in the ones near the gate, so that I may close it."

Instinctively she obeyed, with a defiant look which was lost in the dimness of the night, and hurrying past him never stopped until she drew back with a shudder at the blanket-covered form of the dead herder. A deep roar of thunder startled her into a half-suppressed scream. In the lantern's light she had not noticed the steadily increasing darkness, or the flashes of lightning. She felt herself shaking with a nervous excitement which was half fear.

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Thunderstorms often made her nervous, yet she would not have acknowledged that she feared them, or any other thing. But her nervousness was only the culmination of the night, every moment of which had been a strain upon her. Another peal of thunder followed the first, fairly weakening her. She ran to her horse and, mounting, rode up near the corral. At the same instant the wagon came up, and Livingston, having placed the panel in position, turned toward it. He was close beside the girl before he saw her, and she, for an instant at a loss, sat there speechless; but as he held up the lantern, looking at her by its light, she blurted out, in a tone that she had little intention of using: "I'm going. Hope you will get along all right. Good-night."

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "I will accompany you. My horse is here now. Just a moment——"

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"You don't need to go with me. Someone is waiting for me down there. I think I hear a whistle."

"Then I will go along with you until you meet the person whose whistle you hear. You do not imagine that I will allow you to go alone?"

She leaned toward him impulsively, placing her hand down upon his shoulder.

"Listen," she said softly, "I heard no whistle. There is no one waiting for me. A moment ago it seemed easy to lie to you, to make you believe things that were not absolutely true, but I can't do it now, nor again—*ever*. You think I am heartless, a creature of stone—indifferent. It isn't so. My heart has held a little place for aching all these years. Think of me as half-witted,—idiotic,—but not *that*. Listen to me. You have such a heart—such *tenderness*—you are good and kind. You will understand me—or try to, and not be offended. I want to go home by myself. I *must* go back *alone*. There is a reason which I will tell you—sometime. I ask as a favor—as a friend to a friend, that you will stay behind."

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"But are you not afraid?"

She interrupted him. "Afraid? Not I! Why, I was born here, and am a part of it, and it of me! Ask your men there, they know. I want to ride like the wind—alone—ahead of the storm, to get there soon. I am tired." Her low, quick speech bewildered him. Her words were too inconsistent, too hurried, to convey any real meaning.

"Will you ride with one of my men?" he asked.

"Oh, why *can't* you let me do as I wish!" she cried impatiently. "I want to go alone."

"It seems quite evident that you do not want *my* company, but one of the men must go and take a lantern. It's too dark to see the road." His tone was decisive.

She leaned toward him again. This time her words fell harshly.

"You are a man of your word?"

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"I hope so; but that is not the issue just now."

"Then promise you will not go with me to-night."

"No need of that. I have decided to send one of my men—and I think," he added briefly, "that there is no necessity of prolonging this conversation. Good-evening."

"Then you will not come!" she exclaimed, relieved. "And never mind telling your man, for I shall ride like the wind, and will be halfway home before he can get on his horse." She turned like a flash. The quick beats of her horse's hoofs echoed back until the sound was lost in the distance.

Livingston stood silent, listening, until he could no longer hear the dull notes on the dry earth—his thoughts perturbed as the night.

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## CHAPTER VIII

Captain Bill Henry, foreman of the Bar O outfit, and head by choice of the season's round up, had just ridden into camp. Most of the men were in the cook-tent when he turned his dripping bay horse in with the others. Then he picked up his saddle, bridle, and blanket and carried them up to the cook-tent, where he threw them down, hitting one of the stake-ropes with such violence as to cause the whole tent to quiver, and one of the boys inside to mutter under his breath:

"Lord, the Cap's on the prod! What in the devil's he got in his gizzard now?"

"Don't know," answered the second, returning from the stove, where he had loaded his plate with a wonderful assortment of eatables and seated himself on a roll of bedding beside the first speaker. "Too bad he couldn't knock the roof off'n our heads. He's sure enough mad, just look at him!" he whispered, as Captain Bill Henry stooped his tall, lank frame to come into the tent. [Pg 102]

The men, sitting about inside, glanced up when he entered. Some of them grinned, others went on with their supper, but the "Cap" from under his bushy red eyebrows hardly noticed them as he took the necessary dishes from the mess-box and strode over to the stove, around which old Evans, the cook, moved in great concern.

"Now just try some o' them beans. Regular Boston baked, Cap, they'll melt in your mouth. An' here's a kidney stew I've been savin' fer you," taking from the oven a well concealed stew-pan. "If any o' them boys 'ud a found it they'd made short work of it, I reckon."

He removed the cover and held the dish under Bill Henry's nose. The "Cap" gave one sniff. "Phew! Take it away! Don't like the damn'd stuff, nohow!"

A dazed look passed over old Evans' face, giving way to one of mortal injury. Not a man smiled, though several seemed about to collapse with a sudden spasm which they tried in vain to control. Away went the contents of the pan, leaving a streak of kidney-stew almost down to the horse ropes. "If it ain't good enough fer you, it ain't fer me," said the cook, his bald head thrown well back upon thin shoulders. [Pg 103]

The "Cap" glared at him as he poured out a generous measure of strong coffee into a large tin cup, then ran his eye about the tent for a possible seat.

A quiet-looking fellow, a youth fresh from the East, got up, politely offering him the case of tomatoes upon which he had been sitting. Bill Henry refused it with a scowl, taking a seat upon the ground near the front of the tent, where he crossed his lank legs in front of him. The cow-puncher sank back upon his case of tomatoes while the "Cap" ate in great, hungry mouthfuls, soaking his bread in the sloppy beans and washing it down with frequent noisy sips of hot coffee. Finally he began to speak, with a full Missouri twang: [Pg 104]

"This beats hell! Not a dang man around this part of the country wants to throw in with this here outfit. Never saw no such luck! Here we are with two months' steady work before we make town, an' only ten men to do the work o' fifteen! I'll hire no more devilish breeds. You can't trust 'em no more'n you can a rattler, no, sir! All of 'em quit last night, an' Long Bill along with 'em! I'd never thought it o' Bill. Been ridin' all the evenin' an' couldn't find hair or hide of him. It's enough to make a man swear a blue streak, yes, sir! Well, I rounded up one breed limpin' 'round Harris' shack, an' he said his gun went off by accident an' give him a scratch on the calf o' the leg. Bet ten dollars he's been in a fight over there! Damn'd nest o' drunken louts! I'll be glad when we're away from these here parts!"

At this point one of the cowboys got up, threw his dishes into the pan, and strode outside.

"You on night-herd to-night?" asked the Captain. [Pg 105]

"Yep," answered the cow-puncher. "Going to relieve Jack."

"Tell them other fellers to come along in an' git their chuck; it's mighty nigh time to turn in now. Got to make Miller's crossing in the morning."

"All right," answered the man from outside. Then putting his head back into the tent, exclaimed in a loud whisper: "Here comes Long Bill!"

"The devil he is! It's about time," growled Bill Henry. He had no more than got the words out of his mouth before a man, head and shoulders above any cow-puncher there, stalked in.

"Well, Cap, I've come round to git paid off, fer I reckon I'm knocked out of the ring fer a little spell." He stooped and held down for inspection a hand bandaged in a much-stained bandanna handkerchief. "One o' them damn'd dogs o' Harris' run his teeth all the way through it," he explained.

The captain grunted, threw his well cleaned plate over into the dish pan, and rose stiffly to his feet. "What'd you do to the dog?" he asked. [Pg 106]

"That was his last bite," roared out Long Bill. "I sent him flyin' into Kingdom Come!"

"Let's see your hand," demanded his chief; thereupon the tall cowboy hesitated an instant, then

removed the bandage, and, with an air of bravado, held out his hand for inspection. Some of the men crowded about curiously, throwing careless jokes of condolence at the sufferer, while others passed by regardless.

Captain Bill Henry examined the wounded member carefully, then grunted again, while his eyelids contracted until only a sparkle of liquid blue showed beneath his bushy red brows.

"A mighty bad bite! You'll have a hell of a time with that hand! What were yo' tryin' to do, anyhow—makin' a mark out o' it? Was you holdin' your hand up, or down, or what? That *dog* must 'a' had a pretty good eye. Do you know what that looks like to me? Well, sir, it looks mighty like you'd held up your hand to the muzzle of your gun an' pulled the trigger! Yes, sir, only there ain't no powder marks; so I calculate the *dog* must 'a' been some distance away when he took aim! The hole's clean through, just as slick as any bullet could 'a' made it. That dog must 'a' had a powerful sharp tooth! Well, you ain't goin' to be able to handle a rope very soon, dog or no dog, that's plain as the nose on your face. You'd make a mighty good ornament to have around camp, but I reckon I'll pay you off." Later: "Know of any men I can git around here?"

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"Nary one but them breeds over to Harris'," replied Long Bill. "They're drunker'n lords now, but they'll be wantin' a job in a day or so when they sober up, an' I'll send 'em 'round here. I'll be huntin' a job myself in about a month, when this here paw o' mine gits well. It's mighty painful."

"You'd better go to town an' see a doctor," drawled the "Cap." "An' while you're on your way stop at Hathaway's an' give him or Jim McCullen a letter fer me. I'll have it ready in a minute an' it'll save me sendin' a man over."

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Without waiting for a reply from the tall cow-puncher, Captain Bill Henry stalked over to his bed, took from the roll a pad of paper, and was soon lost in the mysteries of letter-writing.

He was an awkwardly built man, but his whole appearance gave one the impression that he meant business—and he was crammed full of it. Seated astride his tarp-covered bed, with his back to the few straggling cow-punchers about the tents, he proceeded in a determined, business-like way to write the letter. Before he had finished the difficult operation some men rode up to the camp—the men who had been on herd, hungry for their supper, and two outsiders.

Around the mess-wagon, which had been backed into the cook-tent in the usual order, lounged a group of cowboys whose appetites had been satisfied and whose duties for the time being were over. Two of the men who had just come up on horseback joined these, while Captain Bill Henry, without looking around, continued his somewhat difficult task of composing a letter, which, when accomplished, he folded carefully.

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"Hello! Where did you'ns drop from?" he drawled as he approached the newcomers. "I was just goin' to send word over to have your wagon join me at west fork o' Stony Creek. I'm too short o' men to work Stony Creek country, anyhow. Hathaway's reps all left me awhile back, an' Long Bill, he's leavin' to-day—got bit by a mad dog over here. Jackson's wagon an' the U Bar ain't goin' to join me till we git down in the Lonesome Prairie country, so I was just goin' to send a letter over to your place, for if he wants a good round-up on this range he'd better send over that extra wagon o' his'n. You'ns goin' right back?"

"I'm not," replied Carter. "But McCullen can take word over to the ranch. He's going the first thing in the morning."

"Cert. Got to go, anyway, an' I reckon my horse can pack your message to the boss if it ain't too heavy," said McCullen.

Old Jim McCullen had been Hathaway's right hand man as long as anyone could remember. He had put in many years as wagon-boss, and finally retired from active life to the quieter one at the home-ranch, where he drew the biggest pay of any man in Hathaway's employ, and practically managed all the details of the great cattle concern. He saw that the wagons were properly provisioned, manned, and started out in the spring, that the men who brought up the trail-herds were paid off; he attended to the haying, the small irrigating plant that had been started, and to all the innumerable details that go toward the smooth running of a large ranch. Now the "boss" had sent him on a mission whose import he understood perfectly—something altogether out of the line of his usual duties, but of greater importance than anything he had ever undertaken. He was going back to the ranch in the morning to tell Hathaway that his daughter was apparently all right. He and Carter had pitched their tent not far from where the round-up was camped, and had ridden over for some beef. One of the men cut them a liberal piece from a yearling that they had just butchered. Carter tied it upon the back of his saddle and rode off toward camp, while old Jim McCullen sat down, lighted a cigarette, and listened to the gossip of the round-up.

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"Right smart lot o' dogs round them breeds down there," remarked Bill Henry, nodding his head toward Harris' ranch. "Long Bill, here, he's been unfortunate. Went up there a-courtin' one o' them pretty Harris girls last eyenin', an' blamed if she didn't go an' sick the dogs on him!"

McCullen sized up his bandaged hand. "Mighty bad-lookin' fist there," he chuckled. "Must 'a' bled some by the looks of that rag. When'd it happen?"

"This mornin', just as I was startin' to come over to camp."

"You don't tell!" consoled the visitor. "That's mighty bad after sitting up all-night with your best girl!"

"Long Bill's pretty intent after them breed girls," remarked Captain Bill Henry; thereupon the cowboy flushed angrily.

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"No breed girls in mine! The new school-marm's more to my likin'," he boasted. "An' from the sweet looks she give me, I reckon I ain't goin' to have no trouble there!"

The next instant Long Bill lay sprawling in the dust, while old Jim McCullen rained blow after blow upon him. When he finished, Long Bill remained motionless, the blood streaming from his nose and mouth. Old Jim straightened up and looked down at the fallen giant with utmost contempt, then he pulled his disarranged cartridge belt into shape and glanced at his hands. They were covered with the cowboy's blood.

"Reckon I'd better wash up a bit," he remarked easily, and went into the cook-tent.

The men lounged about, apparently indifferent to the scene which was being enacted. It might have been an every day occurrence, so little interest they showed, yet several stalwart fellows gave old Jim McCullen an admiring glance as he passed them.

On the crest of a near divide stood a group of squaws. After a short conference they proceeded slowly, shyly toward the round-up camp. Some distance from it they grouped together again and waited while a very old woman wrapped in a dingy white blanket came boldly up to the group of men, and in a jargon of French and Indian asked for the refuse of the newly killed yearling. The foreman pointed to where it lay, and gruffly told her to go and get it, but she spied the unconscious figure of Long Bill stretched out upon the grassy flat, and with a low cry of woe flung herself down beside him.

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"Who done this?" she cried in very plain English, facing the cowboys with a look of blackest anger. No answer came.

"Better tell her," suggested a cow-puncher who was unrolling his bed. "She's a witch, you know."

"If she's a witch she don't need no telling," replied another, at which they all laughed.

"A witch?" said one. "I sure thought witches were all burned up!"

The old squaw was examining the fallen man, who began to show signs of consciousness. She bristled like a dog at the cowboy's remark.

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"*I see beyond!* I know the future, the past, *everything!*" she cried impressively. "I read your thoughts! Say what you like, you dogs, but not one o' you would like me to tell what I read in your lives. *I know! I know! I know everything!*" Her voice reached a high, weird cry. Her blanket had slipped down, leaving her hair in wisps about her mummified face. To all appearances she might have been a genuine witch as she groveled over Long Bill.

"Ask her how she tells fortunes—cards or tea-leaves," said one.

"Or by the palm of your hand or the stars above," suggested another.

"Wonder where she keeps her broomstick," mused a third.

Just then McCullen came out of the cook-tent and faced the spectacle.

"I see he's found a nurse," he remarked, and walked over to his horse.

The old woman stood and gesticulated wildly, throwing mad, incoherent words at him. Finally her jargon changed into fair English.

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"You dog, *you* did this! And why? Ah, ha, ha! *I know!* I know all things! Because of the white girl! So! Ha, ha! Must you alone love the white girl so that no man can speak her name? Oh, you can't deny you love her! *You*, who ride and hunt with her for fifteen years. Cannot another man open his mouth but that you must fly at him? Ha, ha! *I know!*"

"I'll wring your neck, you old——!" said McCullen at his horse's head.

"You will stop my tongue, will you! I'll show you! You are up here to watch that girl—but where's your eyes? What are you doing? This is my son-in-law, and you'd like to wipe him from the face of the earth! You beat him in the face—him with one hand! See! How did he get it? Why are some of my other son-in-laws limping about with bullets in their legs? Why is a man lying dead up in the mountains? Why all this at once? Ask that white girl who teaches little children to be good! Ask that devil's child who can put a bullet straight as her eye! *Ask her!* She would destroy my people. Curse her soul, I say!"

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Suddenly the witch-like spirit in her seemed to shrivel into the blanket which she wrapped about her, then with placid, expressionless face she made her way to where the yearling had been butchered and hurriedly stuffed the refuse into a gunny sack which she dragged to where the other squaws were waiting, then they all made off.

Long Bill sat up and looked about him. "Curse who?" he asked. "Curse me, I reckon fer not knowin' enough to keep my mouth shut!"

McCullen, with face and lips pallid, had mounted his horse. Long Bill pulled himself together and walked over toward him.

"I'll take that back," he said. "I didn't mean it, nohow."

"I reckon I was over-hasty," McCullen replied. "But that was our little girl you were talkin' about—little Hope; an' no man on earth, let alone a common squaw-man, ain't goin' to even breathe her name disrespectfully. She's like my own child. I've almost brought her up. Learned her little baby fingers to shoot, an' had her on a horse before she could talk plain. Don't let her find this out, for I'm plumb sorry I had to hurt you; but the man who says more than you did *dies!*" He rode away and soon was lost in the deep falling shadows. The men in the cow-camp unrolled their bedding, and all was soon one with the stillness of the night.

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## CHAPTER IX

All the small ranchers and disreputable stragglers about that immediate vicinity were of one opinion in regard to the new sheep-man. This particular section of the country promised to be soon over-crowded with cattle and horses. There was no room in their mountains for sheep. Livingston, the interloper, must vacate. That was the unanimous decision of the whole Harris faction. This gang was a mixture of badness, a scum of the roughest element from the face of the globe, which in new countries invariably drifts close upon the heels of the first settlers. It is the herald of civilization, but fortunately goes on before its advance to other fields or is deeply buried in its midst. The breeds, pliable to the strong will of Joe Harris, were not an unimportant factor, and among these, old Mother White Blanket was the ruling spirit.

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She lived in a tepee not a rod to the left of Harris' squalid log buildings. Her daughter was the cattle-man's wife, therefore the old woman had particular rights about the premises, a mother-in-law's rights, more honored and considered among Indians than among civilized whites.

Her tepee was the usual Indian affair, its conical, pointed top, dingy with the smoke of many camp-fires. Back of the old woman's tepee, at various distances, stood a few ordinary wall tents. These were occupied by the families of some breeds who were working for Harris. The whole, heightened by numerous dogs and the old squaw stooping over her fire, presented the appearance of a small Indian camp, such as may be seen about any reservation. The old woman's rattle-trap cart stood beside her lodge, for she had her periods of wandering, after the manner of her race. The running gears of a couple of dilapidated wagons were drawn up between the other tents, and not far away two closely hobbled horses, unmistakably Indian, for horses resemble their human associates, fed eagerly upon the short, new grass.

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At an early hour, when the rising sun cast rosy lights upon every grass-covered mountain top, when bird notes from the distant brush sounded the most melodious, when the chancleer in the barnyard became loudest in his crowing, when the dew of night began to steam upward in its vitality-giving stream, when the pigs with a grunt rose lazily upon their fore-legs, and old Mother White Blanket bent over the smoke of her newly built camp-fire, the girl school-teacher came out of her room and leaned against the smooth rain-washed logs of the building. She drew in with every deep breath new vitality to add to her plentiful fund of it, she saw the rosy glow upon the mountains, listened in awe and rapture to the bird notes from the brush, and finally brought herself back to more material things; to old Mother White Blanket and the Indian scene spread out before her.

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The old woman was bending over the fire apparently unconscious of the girl's presence. From the school children Hope had learned something of the wonderful perceptive powers of Mother White Blanket. They had innumerable stories of witchcraft to tell, as various as they were astonishing, and, while crediting nothing, she felt a quickened interest in the old squaw. But she had so far no opportunity to cultivate her acquaintance. Generally the spaces between the tents were filled with groups of breeds, and these she had no inclination to approach. Now, quiet pervaded the place. No one except the old woman and herself were about. She knew full well that the squaw had seen her, but on an impulse walked over beside the tepee, spreading out her hands to the warmth of the fire.

"Good-morning!" she exclaimed. Mother White Blanket made no reply, and turning her back proceeded to fill a large black kettle with water.

"Good-morning!" repeated Hope in French, to which greeting the old woman grunted, while she placed the kettle over the fire.

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"I beg your pardon," continued Hope. "I forgot for the moment you were French."

At this old White Blanket stood up, anger bristling all over her.

"What you come here for? You stand there and make fun. You think I don't know you make fun at me? Go away, girl, or you be sorry! You call me French and laugh to yourself. Go away, I say!"

"No," said the girl, "I shall not go away until it pleases me. I have heard that you are a great woman, a witch, and I want to find out if it is true." She had not one particle of belief in the old woman's generally credited supernatural powers, but she thought she must possess sharp wit to so deceive the people and was curious to know more about her. This she was destined to do.

"I have heard," she continued, "that you can bring the wild deer to your side by calling to them,



that a horse or cow will lie down and die when you command, and that little children who annoy you are taken with severe pains in their stomachs. I have heard that you can say 'go' to any of your men or women and they go; that if anyone is sick you can lay your hand on them and they are well, and that you can tell the future and the past of anyone. If all these things are true you must be a very great, remarkable woman. Is it true that you can do all these things?" She waited a moment and, as the old woman offered no reply, went on: "Whether you can do these things or not, you still remain, in my eyes, a remarkable woman in possessing the ability to make people believe that you can." [Pg 123]

"You shall believe them too, *you!*" said the woman, suddenly rising and confronting the girl.

As she spoke two yellow fangs of teeth protruded from her thin lips, and on her face was the snarl of a dog. She drew up her mummified face within two inches of the girl's own. Hope shuddered and involuntarily moved backward toward the house. With every step she took the squaw followed, her weazened face and cruel, baneful eyes held close to hers. [Pg 124]

"You murderer of men, you teacher of little children, you butcher, I will show you my power!"

The girl recoiled from the frenzied woman, shutting out the sight with her hands and moving backward step by step until she leaned against the smooth logs of the building. There the foolishness of her sudden fright presented itself. Should the grimaces of a weazened old squaw frighten her into a fit, or should she pick up the bony thing and throw her over the top of the tepee? An impulse to do the latter came over her—then to her fancy she could hear the crashing of brittle bones. What she did do, however, was to take her hands away from her eyes and look at the old witch fearlessly. At this old White Blanket broke into a terrible jargon, not a word of which was intelligible. Her voice rose to its utmost pitch. The crisp morning air resounded with its sharp intonations.

Hope leaned against the logs of the house, lashing the squaw into greater fury by her cool, impertinent gaze. She began to be interested in the performance, speculating to just what degree of rage the old woman would reach before she foamed at the mouth, and as to how much strength she would have to exert to pitch the frail thing bodily into the top of the tepee. [Pg 125]

At that instant a man, apparently hurriedly dressed, rushed from the lodge and grasped the old woman by the arm.

"What're you doin'? Go over there and git my breakfast, and don't be all day about it!"

The old woman's face changed marvelously. She calmed like a dove, under the hand of her son-in-law, but before turning away began muttering what might have been intended for an apology.

"I no hurt her. She think I know nothing. I *show* her."

The man laughed good-naturedly.

"Well, you show me some grub an' that'll be enough fer one day, I reckon. Wimmen folks should be seen an' not heard, an' you make as much noise as an old guinea hen." Meekly the old woman continued her interrupted task, showing that in spite of his gruff speech she entertained great respect for her tall son-in-law, Long Bill. [Pg 126]

"Hope the old woman didn't frighten you, Miss. She don't mean nothin' by it, only she gits them spells once in a while," apologized Long Bill politely. Hope gave a short laugh, while the man continued: "Seems like all Hades is turned loose when she does git on the rampage, though."

"Probably I aggravated her. If so, I am sorry. But I wouldn't have missed it—not for anything. Her rage was perfect—such gestures, and *such* expressions!"

At her words the man smiled, holding up to his face as he did so a bandaged hand. In an instant her eyes were riveted upon it. She had searched for that hand since Saturday evening among all the men she had chanced to see. That this great, strong fellow possessed it eased her conscience, if, indeed, it had greatly troubled her. She wanted to get him to talk about the hand, but shifted her eyes from it to the old woman moving slowly before the tepee. [Pg 127]

"She seems a very interesting woman," she remarked casually to Long Bill, who through sheer awkwardness made no attempt to move away.

"Oh, she's a little locoed, but barrin' that she's smarter'n a steel trap. They ain't nothin' goin' on but she's got her eye peeled. If she takes a likin' to anyone she'll just about break her neck to please, but," he added in a lower voice, "if she ain't a-likin' anyone she's just about the *orneriest*, *cussedest*—" Words failed, in view of the critical eyes before him.

"Do you belong to the family?" asked Hope, observing: "I noticed you came from the tepee."

"Well, you see," replied the man awkwardly, "I sort of do—that is, I did. I married her youngest girl awhile back, but I ain't sure now we're goin' to make it a go. You see I 'lowed to meet her here when the round-up come 'round to these parts, but here's she's done run off to Canada with some o' her folks, and I ain't set eyes on her fer nigh on to four months. But we've been spliced all right 'nough, an' the old woman's mighty fond o' me." [Pg 128]

"I should think you would be glad of that!" exclaimed Hope. "It would be too bad if she didn't like you. I am sorry she is not in a more amiable mood, for I'd really like to talk with her; but perhaps I will be permitted to approach her later in the day."

"Oh, she'll be all right, now she's had her spell out," assured Long Bill.

"You speak of the round-up; why are you not with it?" queried the girl, with cool intent.

Long Bill brought his huge bandaged fist up before him, resting it upon the well one.

"I had a little accident th' other day," he explained, "an' hurt my hand powerful bad. It ain't goin' to be much use fer handlin' a rope fer quite a spell. Had to let the round-up move away without me." His voice grew plaintive.

She spoke quickly, with great compassion. "I am sorry! It seems too bad to see a great big fellow like you disabled. How did it happen?" [Pg 129]

"Well, it was like this: I come over here th' other night an' got to settin' 'round here doin' nothin', so I thought I'd improve th' time an' clean this here gun o' mine. It's been a-needin' it powerful bad fer awhile back. I didn't know there was nary load in it until the blame thing went off an' I felt somethin' kind o' sudden an' hot piercin' my left hand. It was a fool trick to do, but it's the gospel truth, Miss."

"I heard—that is, the boys said something about a shooting affair up the road." She pointed toward the sheep-man's ranch. "I thought for a moment that perhaps you had been mixed up in that. I'm very glad to know that you were not, because you know it wasn't a very nice, manly thing to do to a defenseless stranger." Her cool eyes watched his nervous shifting. "You see I can't very well help hearing a lot of things around here. The girls hear things and they tell me, and then I am often forced to overhear the men and boys talking among themselves. It's none of my business, but yet I am glad to know that you were not one to set upon an innocent white man. I scarcely know this Mr. Livingston by sight, but he is a friend of Sydney's, my cousin, and they say,"—here she drew out her words slowly and impressively,—"that over in his country he has been in the army and is well versed in firearms; also that he has a small Gatling gun with him over here that shoots hundreds of shots a minute. So he really isn't so defenseless as he seems." This startled the man into open-mouth astonishment. [Pg 130]

"I thought there was something!—I mean I thought, when I heard tell about the fracas over there, that there was somethin' like that in the wind," stammered the man.

Apparently Hope had told a deliberate untruth to force a confession from Long Bill, but yet it was a fact that she had heard something very similar. On the day before, Sunday, Jim McCullen had come to visit her. From his camp the noise of the shooting had been plainly heard, and through curiosity he and Carter had ridden to Livingston's ranch to inquire into it, but the sheep-man had been very reticent about the matter. Had told them only that there had been trouble with some breeds, and his herder had been killed. This old Jim repeated to Hope, adding that Livingston must have a Gatling gun concealed on his place, judging from the sound of the firing. So Hope in her effort to impress the tall cow-puncher had not used her imagination wholly. [Pg 131]

"I am glad you had nothing to do with it," she concluded, walking slowly away toward the kitchen end of the house. "And I hope your hand will soon be well."

"That's right," said Long Bill. "I didn't have nothin' to do with it. No Gatlin' guns in mine, Miss!" [Pg 132]

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## CHAPTER X

"We'll beat any cow-pony workin' on the round-up," declared the soft-voiced twin as he coiled up the stake-rope and tied it on to his saddle.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day. School had been dismissed and the dozen children of various sizes were straggling homeward. Hope stood beside her horse patiently waiting for the twins to go, but they seemed in no particular hurry. She listened absent-mindedly to the boys' conversation.

"An' another thing about this pony o' mine, he'll never slack up on a rope," continued Dan. "Once you've got a rope on a steer he'll never budge till the cinch busts off the saddle. He'll just sit right back on his haunches an' *pull*. Yes, sir; you'd think he knew just as much as a man!"

Dave grunted. "He's all right 'nough, only he'll bust the bridle if you tie him, an' he won't stand without bein' tied. He'll buck if he's cinched too tight or gets too much to eat, an' he ain't fit for a lady to ride, nohow. He's an Indian pinto to boot, a regular fool calico pony! Now *my* horse is an all 'round good one, an' so gentle any lady can ride him, just like any sensible horse ought to be." [Pg 133]

"Yes, that's all he's good for, is to stand 'round an' look pretty, like some o' these here bloods—an' them pretty soldiers over to the post. I notice when there's any real work to be done, Mr. Dude ain't in it. Oh, he can stand 'round an' look pretty all right, but the pinto's the best all 'round, an's got the most sense!"

Their discussion seemed at an end, for the soft-voiced twin having fastened the rope securely, walked around to the other side of his pinto and had just turned the stirrup toward him, preliminary to mounting, when the other boy grasped him roughly by the collar, throwing him backward to the ground.

"That's my lariat; you hand it over here!" he exclaimed gruffly; thereupon the soft-voiced twin picked himself up, very carefully brushed the dust from his sleeve, and answered slowly, in a particularly sweet tone: [Pg 134]

"I ain't a-goin' to fight you here in front of the teacher. That's my rope. Go an' get it if you want it! But *she's* got yourn. I saw her pick it up by mistake this mornin'. You've tied up your dude cayuse twice with her'n to-day. Must have somethin' the matter with your eyes. I ain't a-goin' to lick you er fight with you, but I'm goin' to get even with you for this!"

"Here's your rope," said Hope, taking it from her saddle and handing it to the boy. Dave took it shamefacedly, throwing her rope on the ground, then hid himself on the opposite side of his pony. In an instant the soft-voiced twin picked up the teacher's stake-rope, coiled it, and tied it on to her saddle.

The girl stood to one side watching him. She wondered at his quickness. He must have inherited something of his grandmother's acuteness. But her sympathy turned to the other boy—big, clumsy, rough Dave. He was standing out of sight behind his horse, embarrassed by his own error. Hope felt sorry for him. She had already found it very difficult to keep peace between these boys and herself. Each day brought some new ruffle that required all her wit to smooth over. [Pg 135]

The soft-voiced twin handed the bridle reins to her, then turned to his own horse, which had wandered away toward more tempting pasture. The girl thanked him, and walked over to Dave. He looked at her sullenly, a certain dogged obstinacy in his eyes. She had intended to say something kind to him, instead she spoke indifferently, yet to the point.

"Go home with Dan the same as usual. Say nothing about it, but get my rifle and meet me here at the school in two hours—six o'clock. There is a big flock of chickens that fly over that point every evening."

The boy made no reply, but his face changed noticeably, and he jumped on his horse, calling his twin to hurry up; but the soft-voiced boy had no notion of leaving his teacher, so Dave, with a savage whoop, ran his pony to the top of the hill, leaving the school-house and his uncomfortable feelings far in the background. [Pg 136]

"Why don't you go with him?" asked the girl.

"I'm waitin' for you," replied the boy.

"But I'm not going just now. You'd better run along with Dave."

"I ain't in no hurry."

"Aren't you? Well, that is good, for I just happened to think of something. I want you to go down to Pete La Due's place where they are branding, and hang around awhile and keep your ears open. There will be a lot of breeds there, and some of those men over on Crow Creek, and maybe something will be said that we ought to know about. You understand. You are my faithful scout, you know. And another thing—don't try to pay Dave back for what he did. He's sorry enough about it."

The boy's face took on a shrewd, determined expression, causing him at once to look years older. For an instant Hope imagined that he resembled his aged grandmother, old White Blanket, the "witch." [Pg 137]

"I'll go over there," he replied, "an' I'll see what I can find out, but about Dave—I'll get even with him if it takes me ten years. He needs teachin'."

"We all do," said the girl thoughtfully. "I have begun a series of lessons myself—on humanity. No, on sympathy, on what is expected of a womanly woman. We're lucky when we have a good teacher, aren't we? But it's pretty hard to learn what doesn't come natural. Remember Dave isn't like you. He wasn't made like you, and never will be like you. Think of this, and don't be hard on him, that's a good boy."

The soft-voiced twin smiled sweetly, and mounting his horse, remarked:

"I expect I'd better be movin' over there if I'm goin' to find out anything to-day."

"Yes," said Hope, pleased that he should leave her at last. "I think you're right. Be sure to come home before bedtime and *report*." [Pg 138]

The boy dug his heels into the pinto's sides, starting off on a bound. She watched him, absent-mindedly, until he disappeared over the hill-top, then she rode away at a lively canter toward the sheep-man's ranch.

A horseman came rapidly toward her before she reached Livingston's gate. It was a slender, boyish figure, who sat his horse with remarkable ease and grace. The girl frowned savagely when she saw him, but only for an instant. He waved his hat above his dark head and called to her from the distance. His voice possessed a rich musical ring which might have stood for honesty and youthful buoyancy.

When Hope met him she was smiling. In fun she passed rapidly, seeing which he wheeled his horse about, caught up with her, and leaning far over, grasped the bridle, bringing her horse to a stand-still beside him. It was an old trick of his boyhood. The girl's ringing laughter reached a

small group of men at work with shovels upon the rise of a green knoll not far away. They stopped work and listened, but the notes died away and nothing more could be heard.

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"That wasn't fair, Syd!" she cried. "I thought you'd forgotten it. I was going to run you a race."

"Rowdy's thin, he couldn't run. A stake-rope don't agree with him, and I'll bet he hasn't seen an oat since you've been here," he answered, growing sober. "Hopie, dear, leave these breeds and go home, that's a good girl! I can't bear to have you stay there. You've been up here a week and you look thin already. I'll bet you're starving right now! Come, own up, aren't you hungry?"

"I hadn't thought of it," replied Hope. "But now that you remind me, I believe I am—the least bit. A steady diet of eggs—boiled in their *own* shells, is apt to make one hungry at times for a good dinner. But what's the difference? I feel fine. It certainly agrees."

"But that's terrible! Eggs! Eggs only—eggs in the shell. Haven't you brought yourself to meat, bread, and potatoes yet? Eggs only! It's a joke, Hope, but somehow I can't feel amused. I've eaten eggs for a meal or two, around those places, but a week of it! Hope, your father wants you. Go home to him!"

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"No; you see it's this way, Sydney, I couldn't if I would, and I wouldn't if I could. I couldn't because father told me to stay until the school term ended, and I wouldn't because—I like it here. It's new and exciting. I feel just like a boy does in going out into the world for the first time. You know how that is, Syd, how you roamed about for months and months. You had your fling and then you were satisfied."

"I know," said Carter softly, stroking her horse's neck. "But you had such a free 'fling' there at the ranch, what else could you want? You had your choice between the ranch and New York. You could travel if you wished. Surely there was nothing left to be desired. You can't make me believe that you really like it up here among these breeds, teaching a handful of stupid children their A B C's! I can't see the attraction. Clarice Van Rensselaer with the Cresmonds and that little jay Englishman, Rosehill, are due at the ranch this week. You like Clarice; go home, Hope, and look after things there. You're needed, and you know it. Do go, that's a good girlie!"

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"Don't say anything more about it to me, Sydney. I can't go, I'm not going, and I want to forget for this one summer about the ranch and everyone on it."

"I am wasting my breath, but yet," he looked at her searchingly, "I don't understand you in this. I see no attraction here for you. Why, even the hunting isn't good! I'll not admit that there is any attraction for you in this Englishman over here. You've known dozens of them, and you've always expressed an aversion to every one. I'm not going to be scared of one lone Englishman!" He grasped her hand and his face darkened. "Hope, if I thought you would ever care for him I'd——"

She interrupted:

"You need not finish that! Show a little manhood! Oh, Syd, a moment ago you were my dear old companion—my brother, and now——If you knew how I detest you in this! It is not yourself—your dear self, at all, but the very devil that has taken possession of you. Sydney, are you sure there isn't something the matter with your brain? Do you realize how awful it seems? Doesn't it make you feel ashamed of yourself when you think of all the sweetness of our past life? It makes me, Syd. Sometimes at night before I go to sleep I think of the way you've acted lately, and I can feel a hot flush creep all over my face. It makes me so ashamed! I've grown up with you for my brother, I think of you always as my brother, and this makes a new person out of you—a person whom I neither love nor respect. Syd, dear Syd, forget it and I will never think of it again, for I will have my brother back. I loved you, Sydney, you and father, better than anyone else in this world. And now——" She turned her head away from him and began to cry quietly. In an instant he was filled with commiseration and tenderness.

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"Don't, Hope!" he exclaimed, bending close to her. "I can't stand anything like that! Don't cry. I'm sorry, girlie. I've been a fool, a brute, a low-lived beggar, but I can't stand tears from *you*! Here you're hungry, starving, living among a lot of breeds, and I've added more to your misery. It's all a mistake. I know now when I see you crying—don't do it, dear! You've never cried since you were a baby, and now you're such a great big girl. The other feeling's all gone. I guess it must have been because you were the only girl out here and I let myself think of you that way until it grew on me. But you are my sister—my dear little pard!"

He had dismounted and stood beside her. Now he reached up and took her hands away from her face. She was ashamed of her tears, as people are who seldom cry, and hastily mopped her face with her handkerchief.

"I'm so glad, Syd, dear!" she exclaimed in a moment, then reached down and kissed him. "What a baby you must think I am!"

"Your tears woke me up, dear; don't be sorry. Maybe some time they'll make a man out of me."

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"Nonsense! you were a man all the time, only you didn't know it. You don't know how happy I was all at once when you called me 'pard' again. I knew then I had my brother back."

The young fellow mounted his horse again. His own eyes were suspiciously moist.

"And I have my sister, which seems better than anything to me," he said. Then they both laughed.

"I was going to the Englishman's," said Hope, "to see if I could help any about the poor herder who was shot."

"They're burying him now," announced her cousin, "right around the bend of this hill just inside the fence. Do you want to go over there?"

"Yes, I think I do," she replied. "I want to ask Mr. Livingston when the little German girl is expected to arrive and what is going to be done about her."

"The herder's sister?" asked Sydney.

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"No, his sweetheart. Just think, Sydney, his little sweetheart, who is on her way to marry him! Isn't it sad? Who will meet her and who will tell her, I wonder, and what will she do? How are such things managed, I wonder. Isn't it terrible, Syd?"

"Some beggars around here shot the poor fellow, Livingston told me. The whole bunch ought to be hanged for it."

"It was a cowardly thing to do!" exclaimed the girl.

"Sheep in a cattle country, the same old story. I imagine old Harris is a pretty strong element here. They've driven out a couple of bands already. Someone ought to put Livingston next. But he probably scents the situation now from this occurrence. He is one of the kind who trusts everyone. I met him last fall in town when he first came out here. He has put a lot of money into this business, and I'd like to see him make it a go. He'll have something to learn by experience."

"Isn't it too bad he didn't invest in cattle?" deplored Hope.

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"Yes, though they say there's bigger returns in sheep." He pointed ahead. "You can't see the men, but they're just around that point of rocks, though they must be about through with the job by now."

"You'll go along, won't you? Then you can ride back to the school-house with me. I'm going to meet one of the twins there at six o'clock, and we're going to see if we can get some chickens."

"If you will promise to bring the chickens over to the camp and let the cook get you up a good, square meal," he replied. "Jim will be back before dark."

"If I shouldn't happen to get any birds," she asked, "does the invitation still hold good?"

"Pard!" he reproved.

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## CHAPTER XI

Livingston stood alone beside the fresh mound, hatless, with head bowed in deep meditation. His men had returned to their respective duties, having shown their last kindness toward the young herder gone on before them to the great, mysterious Beyond.

When Hope and her companion rounded the point of rocks inside the pasture fence they came directly upon the sheep-man and the newly made grave. The girl reined in her horse suddenly.

"Syd," she said softly, wonderingly, "he's *praying!*" She had an impulse to flee before he should see her, and with a look communicated the thought to Sydney, but Livingston turned around and came quickly down the grassy slope toward them. He greeted them cordially, heartily shaking hands with each.

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"Is this not a beautiful day? I am glad you have come, Miss Hathaway. I wanted you to see this spot. Could any place be prettier? See this green slope and the gigantic ridge of rocks beside it."

"It's magnificent!" she exclaimed. "What a monument!"

"I had an idea he would like it if he could know," he continued. "Day after day he has stood up there on that point of rocks and watched his sheep."

Hope pointed across the valley to where the grassy slope terminated in a deep cut-bank, exclaiming:

"There is the corral!" It came involuntarily. She shot a quick glance at her cousin, but he was gazing thoughtfully at the magnificence of the scene before him, and had not noticed the words, or her confusion which followed them, which was fortunate, she thought.

If asked she could not have explained why she felt in this manner about it, and it is certain that she did ask herself. She had probably saved Livingston's sheep. Well, what of it? She only knew that she wanted no one to find it out, least of all Livingston himself. She had a half fear that if Sydney ever got an inkling of it he might sometime tell him, and Sydney was very quick; so she adroitly eased her involuntary exclamation by remarking:

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"That is a queer place to put a corral! Aren't you afraid of a pile up so near the bank?"

"I am not using it now," he replied. "I put it there because Fritz ran his band on that side and it

was more convenient not to drive them so far. I am using this shed below here, at present."

Sydney looked at Hope and began to laugh, then leaned over toward Livingston and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"She'll be telling you how to run your sheep next. You mustn't mind her, though, for she's been teaching school a whole week, and dictating is getting to be sort of second nature with her, isn't it, Hopie? And besides that she isn't responsible. A steady diet of hard-boiled eggs isn't conducive —"

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She stopped him with a gesture, laughing.

"That's awfully true, only I haven't eaten even hard-boiled eggs since breakfast, and I'm famished! It was cruel of you to remind me, Syd!"

"You poor youngster!" he exclaimed in real commiseration. "Is it as bad as that? I'm going over and start supper at once. The camp is just over the hill there, up that next draw." He pointed ahead, then looked at his watch. "It's after five now. You keep your appointment with the half-breed, but never mind the chickens till you've had a square meal."

She nodded in answer, smiling at him.

"They're starving her over there," he explained to Livingston, who looked at them in some wonderment. "They don't feed her anything but boiled eggs. Tell him why you don't eat anything but eggs, Hope, boiled,—hard and soft,—in their *own shells*. Maybe you can get them to bake you a potato or two in their *own jackets*!"

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"What an idea! I never thought of that," she exclaimed. "You're a genius, Syd. But go home or I shall famish! I'll meet Dave and come right over there. I think the chickens will fly that way to-night, anyway, don't you?"

"Of course they will," replied her cousin, "they fly right over the top of my tent every evening!" Then he started away, but turned about quickly as though he had forgotten something, and asked Livingston if he would not come over to camp for supper, too.

Livingston looked up into the dark eyes of the girl beside him, then accepted.

"Good!" said Sydney. "Come along with Hope."

"Be sure and see that there's enough cooked," called the girl as he rode away.

"Don't worry about that, pard," he answered, then, lifting his hat, waved it high above his head as he disappeared around the reef of rocks.

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Hope looked after him and was still smiling when she turned to Livingston. It may have been something in his face that caused her own to settle instantly into its natural quiet.

"I'd like to go up there for a moment," she said, then dismounted, and leaving her horse walked quickly up the grassy hill until she stood beside the grave. Some sod had been roughly placed upon the dirt, and scattered over that was a handful of freshly picked wild flowers.

"*You* picked them!" exclaimed the girl softly, turning toward him as he came and stood near her. "And *I* never even thought of it! How could you think of it! I had supposed only women thought of those things—were expected to think of them, I mean," she added hastily. "You make me wonder what—"

He looked at her curiously.

"Make you wonder what?" he asked in his quiet, well modulated voice.

A flush came over her face. Her eyes shifted from his until they rested upon the grave at her feet. The breeze threw a loose strand of dark hair across one eye. She rapidly drew her hand over her forehead, putting it away from her vision, then looked full and straight at the man beside her.

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"I beg your pardon; I cannot finish what was in my mind to say. I forgot, Mr. Livingston, that we are comparative strangers."

"I am sorry, then, that you remember it," he replied. "It never seemed to me that we were strangers, Miss Hathaway. I do not think so now. There is something, I know not what, that draws people to each other in this country. It does not take weeks or months or years to form a friendship here. Two people meet, they speak, look into one another's eyes, then they are friends, comrades—or nothing, as it sometimes happens. They decide quickly here, not hampered by stiff conventionalities. It is instinct guides. Are you different from your countrymen?"

"No," she replied quickly. "Not in that one thing, at least. To be honest, I have never *felt* that you were a stranger to me; but a girl, even a rough Western girl, must sometimes remember and be restricted by conventionalities. I know what you are thinking, that conventionalities include politeness, and I have been rude to you. Perhaps that is the reason I wouldn't let you go back to Harris' with me the other night—I had not known you long enough."

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He answered her simply: "I am not thinking of that night, but that you have just told me you are my friend—that you think kindly of me." She flashed him a look of surprise.

"But I *never* told you that!" she exclaimed.

"Not in just those words, true," he said. "But it is so. Didn't you say that you had never felt me to be a *stranger* to you? If you had not approved of me—thought kindly of me in the start, could you have felt so? No. When two people meet, they are friends, or they are still strangers—and *you have never felt me to be a stranger*. Is that not so?"

"I cannot deny what I have just said," she replied. "And I will not deny that I believed what I was saying, but your argument, though good, doesn't down me, because I honestly think that a person may see another person just once, feel that he never could be a stranger, and yet have no earthly regard or respect for that person." [Pg 155]

"Have you ever experienced that?" he inquired.

"N—no. You are trying to corner me; but that isn't what I came to talk about, and it is time to go," she said, turning away from the grave. He walked with her down the hill toward her horse.

"I wanted to ask you, Mr. Livingston, about the little German girl," she said, standing with her back against the side of her horse, one arm around the pommel loosely holding the reins, and the other stretched upon the glossy back of the gentle animal. "When are you expecting her, and what are you going to do about her?"

"She should be here the last of the week. Poor girl! My heart bleeds for her. There is nothing to do except to tell her the sad story, and see that she gets started safely back to her country and her friends," he answered. [Pg 156]

Hope stood upright, taking a step toward him.

"You would not—oh, it would be inhuman to send her back over the long, terrible journey with that cruel pain in her heart! Think how tired she will be, the thousands of miles of travel through strange lands, and the multitude of foreigners she will have passed! Think of the way she has traveled, those close, packed emigrant cars, and everything. It is terrible!"

"I never thought of that. She will be tired. You are right, it would never do to send her over that long journey so soon, though she is not coming through as an emigrant, but first class, for she is of good family over there. So was Fritz—a sort of cousin, I believe, but the poor boy got into some trouble with his family and came over here penniless. He was to have met her in town and they expected to get married at once. He was going to bring her out here to the ranch to live until he had hunted up a location for a home. If I am not mistaken she has some money of her own with which they were going to buy sheep. She has been well educated, and has had some instruction in English, as had Fritz." [Pg 157]

"I thought only of getting her back among her friends again and I never gave a thought about the long, weary trip and the poor, tired girl. She must rest for a time. You have shown me the right way, Miss Hathaway—and yet, what am I to do? I could bring her out here to the ranch, but there is no woman on the place. Perhaps I may be able to secure a man and his wife who need a situation, but it is not likely. There may be some good family about who would keep her for awhile. Do you know of one?"

"There are several families around here who might welcome a boarder, but none with whom a girl of that kind could be contented, or even comfortable. If only I were at home, and could take her there! I *might* send her over there. But, no, that would be worse than anything! There is no other way," she said suddenly, placing her hand upon his sleeve with a quick unconscious motion. "You must let me take care of her, up here, as I am, at Harris'!" Excitement had flushed her cheeks scarlet. Her eyes were filled with the light of inspiration and more than earthly beauty. She waited, intense, for him to speak, but he could not. He felt her hand upon his arm, saw the wonderful light in her face—and was dumb." [Pg 158]

"Tell me that I may take care of her. I must—there is no other way," she insisted. "And it will give me the privilege of doing one little act of kindness. Say it will be all right!"

"If she cannot find comfort and strength in you, she cannot find it upon earth," he said softly. "I have no words with which to thank you!"

She took her hand from his arm with a little sigh of content, turned around and stood at her horse's head a moment, then mounted as lightly and quickly as a boy.

"Where's your horse?" she asked, whirling the animal about until it faced him. The wonderful light in her face had given place to a careless, light-hearted look. [Pg 159]

"Up at the stable. Have you the time and patience to wait for me?" said Livingston.

"Plenty of patience, but no time," she replied. "I promised to meet one of the twins at six o'clock, so I've got to hurry up. I'll meet you over at Syd's camp in a little while."

Before he had time to either speak or bow she was gone. As she disappeared behind the ledge of rocks a clear boyish whistle of some popular air floated back to him.

Walking quickly through the pasture toward the ranch buildings Edward Livingston thought of many things—and wondered. [Pg 160]

## CHAPTER XII

At six o'clock on this afternoon in May the sun was still high above the mountain tops. By the time Edward Livingston reached his ranch buildings and saddled his horse to go to Carter's camp Hope had ridden the two miles or more between his fence and the school-house. There she found, idly waiting beside the isolated building, surrounded by several gaunt staghounds, not one of the twins, but both.

The soft-voiced twin was all smiles, but Dave with his back against the front of the building was scowling sullenly, giving vent to his ugliness by kicking small stones with the toe of his boot and watching them as they went sailing high into the air, then down the sloping stretch of young green below. At one of those stones Hope's horse shied, but the girl smiled, knowing full well the young savage's mood. She rode rapidly, and stopped beside the boys, but did not dismount. [Pg 161]

"Am I late?" she inquired of the scowling twin. "I see you are on time with the gun like a good boy, Dave, and you've brought your own along, too. We won't do a thing to those chickens if we get sight of them to-night!" She smiled at the boy, who became a trifle more amiable; then she turned to his soft-voiced twin. "How is it you're back so soon?"

He brushed a speck of dust from his overalls before replying, and his voice was particularly sweet.

"Had to come to report. You see when I got there they was just quittin', so I came along back with some o' the fellers. Didn't you meet Long Bill and Shorty Smith up the road there a piece when you come along?" The girl nodded. "Well, I come back with them's far as home; then I saw Dave getting the guns, so I thought I'd get mine an' come along, too. Say, what's a gating gun?" Hope looked perplexed for an instant, then laughed outright.

"Oh, you mean a Gatling gun!" She laughed, then very soberly: "It's a terrible weapon of war—a wicked thing. Why do you ask?" [Pg 162]

"Oh, I just wanted to know," replied the boy evasively. "I heard some o' the men talkin' about one, so I thought I'd ask you. Must shoot pretty fast, don't they? Long Bill was tellin' about one that fired two thousand shots a second."

"That must have been a terror of one!" exclaimed the girl. "But they don't shoot quite as many as that, not even in a minute, but they are bad enough. A few of them would simply perforate an army of men. They're a machine gun," she went on to explain. "Just a lot of barrels fastened in a bunch together and turned by a crank which feeds in the cartridges and fires them, too. They shoot over a thousand shots a minute."

"I wish we'd 'a' had one the other night," exclaimed Dave, waking at last to a new interest in life. "And I'd 'a' had hold of the crank!"

"Wasn't it bad enough!" remonstrated the girl. "Didn't you do enough damage to satisfy your savage soul for awhile?" [Pg 163]

"Shorty Smith's got a game leg," returned the boy gleefully, "an' so's old Peter. Long Bill, he's got his hand all done up in a sling, too, an' couldn't go back on the round-up!"

"I wonder how Bill done that," mused the other twin with a sweet, indrawn breath. Hope flushed scarlet, which faded instantly, leaving her face its rich, dark olive.

"Come on," she cried severely, "if we are to get any birds to-day!"

"I know where there's a coyote's den," said the soft-voiced twin. Dave was all attention immediately.

"Where?" he exclaimed eagerly. Hope, interested, too, leaned forward resting her arm upon the pommel of the saddle.

"Well," said the boy, deliberately, sweetly—too sweetly, thought the girl, who watched him keenly—"I was goin' to keep it to myself, an' get 'em all on the quiet, but it's in a kind of a bad place to get at, so mebber I can't do it alone. It's 'bout a half mile back there, between here an' home, up on that ridge behind old Peter's shack. There's a hole under the side of the rocks, but it's hard diggin', kind of sandstone, I reckon. I left a pickax an' shovel up there." [Pg 164]

"Let's go up there now," cried Dave, "an' get the whole bloomin' nest of 'em! We can get the chickens later."

"Now, look here," said the other quietly. "The find's mine. If you're in on this here deal, you'll have to work for your share. If you'll do the diggin' you can have half of the bounty on 'em. How's that?"

Dave grunted. "Supposin' there ain't any there," he demurred.

The soft-voiced twin shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"What'd you suppose *I'd* be diggin' there for if there wasn't none? There's a whole litter o' pups."

"Come on, then!" exclaimed Dave, convinced of his good fortune, for the bounty on coyotes was four dollars for each and every one. [Pg 165]



Hope looked dubiously at the soft-voiced twin, she thought of the supper at Sydney's camp, then fired with the fun of the thing rode gayly away with the boys.

The hounds leaped after them, clearing the ground with long, easy bounds. The girl watched them glide along, yelping, barking, filling the air with their voices. Her horse loped neck to neck with the soft-voiced twin's. She pointed at the dogs, drawing the boy's attention to them.

"Why did you bring them?" she asked. "They'll warn your old ones and they'll be far away by the time we get there. You're usually so quick-witted, Dan, I wonder you did not think of it!"

The boy made no reply, but gave her a look filled with cunning, cool intent.

So this was his revenge—his twin was to dig into a rocky ledge for an empty coyote's den! She marveled at the boy's deliberate scheming, and rode gayly along to see the outcome. To this sort of revenge she had no actual objection.

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They rode up over the top of a high divide, then followed down a narrow draw until it widened into a tiny basin, and there, in the center of vivid green, like a smooth, well-kept lawn, nestled old Peter's cabin. Surrounding this pretty basin were steep, high ridges and hills, smooth-carpeted, too, except the ever narrow terraced "buffalo trails," and here and there a broken line where sharp crags of sandstone jutted out. To the base of one of these ridges of rock, back of the old hermit's one-roomed log shack, the soft-voiced twin led the way, followed closely by his eager brother.

The twins left their horses at the foot of the hill and climbed up about thirty feet to a narrow ledge, where a shovel and pickax marked the small entrance of a coyote's den.

Dave set immediately at work plying the pickax with vigor, and shoveling out the stones and the hardened sand about the opening, while his twin superintended the job and occasionally offered words of encouragement.

Hope watched them from below. Evidently the soft-voiced boy was enjoying himself immensely. He sat on one end of the ledge, his blue-overalled legs dangling over the side, while Dave worked industriously, hopefully on.

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The hounds evidently had found a trail of some kind, for after sniffing about busily for a moment they made a straight line along the hill, disappearing over the high ridge. Hope watched them out of sight, feeling an impulse to follow, but changed her mind and rode over to old Peter's cabin instead. The old man limped to the door and peered out cautiously.

He was a squat-figured, broad-shouldered, grizzled little man, with unkempt beard and a shaggy sheaf of iron-gray hair, beneath which peered bright, shifting blue eyes. He added to his natural stoop-shouldered posture by a rude crutch of hasty manufacture much too short for him, which he leaned heavily upon. He opened the door only wide enough to put out his head, which he did cautiously, holding his hand upon the wooden latch.

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"How d'!" he said in a deep, gruff voice that seemed to come from somewhere between his shoulders.

She nodded brightly, remembering to have seen the old fellow around Harris'.

"You have no objection to our digging out a den of coyotes back here, have you?" she asked.

"Umph! There ain't no den 'round here that I know about," he replied, still retaining his position in the door.

"But see here," pointing toward the side hill, "the boys have found one and are at work up there right now."

"More fools they, then," declared old Peter, limping cautiously outside the door. "I cleaned out that den three year ago, an' I never knowed a coyote to come an' live in a place that'd been monkeyed with. Too much sense fer that. I always said a coyote had more sense 'n them boys! Better go tell 'em they'd as well dig fer water on the top o' that peak, Miss!" He shook his tousled head dubiously, watched the boys on the hill for a moment, then limped back again, taking up his first position, half in, half out the door. His attitude invited her to be gone, but she held in her uneasy horse and proceeded in a friendly manner to encourage some more deep-seated, guttural tones from the old man.

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"Do you live here all alone?"

"Humph! I reckon I do."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Reckon I have."

"Are those your cattle up on the divide?"

"I reckon they be."

"It must be awful lonesome for you here all by yourself. Do coyotes or wolves trouble you much? Whoa, Rowdy!"

"They're a plumb nuisance, Miss. Better kill off a few of 'em while you're here. I reckon you kin use yer gun."

"I *reckon* I can, a little," she replied.

"When I was in the war," he continued, "they had some sharpshooters along, but they wan't no wimmen among 'em. I reckon you're right handy with a gun."

"Who told you?" she asked suddenly.

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"I reckon I know from the way you hold that 'ere gun."

Just then the soft-voiced twin rode up to the cabin. Hope accosted him.

"Did you get the coyotes *already*?"

"Nope, Dave's still diggin'. I'm goin' home er the old man'll be huntin' me with the end of his rope."

"Oh, you'd better stay," she coaxed. "Think of the fun you'll miss when Dave gets into the den. It's your find; you ought to stay for the finish."

"I'll stake you to my share," said the boy. "He'll soon find all there is. But I guess I'd better be a-goin'."

"Perhaps you had," Hope replied, thoughtfully; then she rode over to the industrious Dave, while the soft-voiced twin wisely took a straight bee-line across the hills to his father's ranch.

This time Hope herself climbed the hill to the spot where the boy was digging.

"Dave, I'm afraid there are no coyotes in there, aren't you?"

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He stopped work, wiped his brow with something that had once been a red bandanna handkerchief, then gravely eyed the girl, who leaned against the rocks beside him.

"But he said," pondering in perplexity. "But he said——" He looked into the ragged entrance of the hole, then at his shovel, then up again at the girl. "What makes you think there ain't no coyotes there?"

She was filled with sympathy for the boy, which perhaps he did not deserve, and she had recollected the supper at Sydney's camp, and concluded that this foolishness had gone far enough. She coaxed the boy to leave it until morning, but he was obdurate.

"No, I'm goin' to *know* if there's anything in here er not, an' if there *ain't*——" His silence was ominous; then he set to work again with renewed energy and grim determination.

She watched him for awhile, then walked out to the end of the bulging sand-rocks and climbed the grassy hill. When at length she reached the summit, the jagged rocks below which labored the breed boy seemed but a line in the smooth green of the mountain, while old Peter's cabin and the setting of green carpeted basin looked very small. On the opposite side a fine view presented itself, showing, in all of Nature's magnificent display, soft lines of green ridges, broken chains of gigantic rocks, narrow valleys traced with winding, silvery threads of rushing water. Such a picture would hold the attention of anyone, but this girl of the West, of freedom and wildness, was one with it—a part of it, and not the least beautiful and wonderful in this lavish display of God's handiwork.

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She stood with bared head upon a high green ridge. A soft, gentle chinook smoothed back from her forehead the waving masses of dark hair. Myriads of wild flowers surrounded her, and from the millions below and about drifted and mingled their combined fragrance. The great orb of setting sun cast its parting rays full on her face, and lingered, while the valleys below darkened into shadow. As the last rays lighted up her hair and departed, the yep! yep! of the hounds attracted her attention, and turning about with quick, alert step she moved out of this picture—forever.

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Standing upon a rocky ledge a hundred feet below the summit of the ridge she watched another scene, not the quiet picture of Nature's benevolent hand, but a discord in keeping, yet out of all harmony with it, in which she blended as naturally and completely as she had in the first. It was a race between a little fleet-footed coyote and half a dozen mongrel staghounds; they came toward her, a twisting, turning streak, led by a desperate gray animal, making, to all appearance, for the very rocks upon which she stood. Not ten yards behind the coyote a lank, slate-colored hound, more gray than stag, was closing in inch by inch. The coyote was doing nobly, so was the mongrel hound, thought Hope, who watched the race with breathless interest. The yellow dogs were falling behind, losing ground at every step, but the blue mongrel was spurting. On they came—on—on, and the girl in a tremor of excitement lay flat down upon the rocks and watched them. Her heart went out to the dog. She had seen it kicked around the yard at Harris', noticed it as it slunk about for its scanty food, and now how nobly it was doing! She wondered if any of her thoroughbreds at home could do as well, and thought not. The others were straggling far behind, but now the blue hound was but two lengths from the coyote, and its chances seemed small, but on a sudden it turned and made direct for the rocks from which the girl watched. That instant the dog saw failure, and the light of determination, of victory, died from its eyes. That same instant the coyote saw salvation from a quick end in the narrow crevices of rock so near, and the next it lay stone dead with a bullet through its brain. The gaunt hound bounded over its body, then

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stopped short, bewildered, and eyed its fallen foe. Then with a savage snarl he seized it by the throat as if to utterly demolish it, but the girl called him off, and somehow, in his dog's heart, he understood that the game was not his.

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## CHAPTER XIII

In the deepening shadows of the evening Hope and the breed boy rode rapidly toward the camp, hungry for the long-delayed supper.

"Dan staked me to his share of the coyotes, so you may have them," said the girl.

"Seven pups an' the old one!" exclaimed Dave; "that's better'n huntin' chickens."

"And supper just now is better than anything," sighed Hope to herself. The boy heard, but did not reply, his mind being busy with a mathematical problem.

"How much is eight times four dollars, an' seventy-five cents for the hide?" he asked.

"That's a little example I'll let you work out for yourself," replied his teacher. "You're awfully stupid in arithmetic, Dave, and it's too bad, for in cases of coyotes' bounty and so forth it would be a pretty good thing for you to know. You hurry up and figure that out, for to-morrow you're going to get a hard one. It's this: If a Gatling gun fires two thousand shots a minute how many can it fire in half an hour?"

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"Whew! you don't expect anybody to answer *that*, do you?" exclaimed the boy.

"Oh, that's easy," she laughed. "If you can't figure it out yourself you might ask old Peter or Long Bill, maybe they'd know."

The boy rode along, his thoughts absorbed in a brown study. At length he sighed and looked up.

"Well, anyway, it'll be enough to buy a horse or a new saddle with." Then as though struck with a sudden thought he asked: "Say, what made Dan give you his share of them coyotes?" She suppressed a faint inclination to smile.

"Perhaps he gave up as I did, and thought there was nothing there. Old Peter said he knew there wasn't. But it's just possible Dan wanted to be generous. Don't you think so?"

"Not Dan!" exclaimed the boy. "There ain't one chance in a million *he'd* ever give such snap as that away! I reckon," he concluded after some studying, "he must 'a' thought that den was empty an' was goin' to pay me back. Ain't I got it on him now, though!"

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"And instead of being paid back you are getting both shares of the coyote bounty, and you know you don't deserve it. What are you going to do about it?"

"You bet *he* ain't a-goin' to get none of it!" was the emphatic reply; to which the girl had nothing to say.

In a few moments they came in sight of Sydney's camp. From out of the small stove-pipe of the first of the two tents rolled a volume of smoke, and across the narrow brush-covered valley came the delicious odor of cooking food. Simultaneously the two riders urged on their horses to a faster gait, for Hope at least was hungry. It is safe to say that the breed boy was in the same condition, and this invitation out to supper pleased him mightily. He was a large, stolidly built lad of fourteen years, and like all boys of that age, whether stolidly built or slender as a sapling, was always hungry.

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"I'll bet I can eat the whole shootin' match," he declared, actually believing that he spoke the truth.

"I think the meal is prepared for hungry people," replied Hope, heartily agreeing with the boy's sentiments. "And I hope they have waited for us. But for goodness' sake be careful not to make yourself sick, Dave!"

The camp was pitched in an open flat beside a small sparkling mountain stream. Upon one side of the creek was brush-covered bottom land, through which the riders followed a winding trail, dim in the semi-darkness. Then they splashed across the creek, and rode up its steep bank into the clear, grass-covered government dooryard of the campers.

"Well, at last!" called a voice from the tent. "The posse was just getting ready to go in search of you. Thought the chickens must have lured you away. Come right in, the feast is prepared!"

"All right, Syd," called the girl happily, dismounting almost in the arms of old Jim McCullen, her dear "father Jim," to whom she gave the heartiest handshake he had ever received.

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"Oh, I'm so glad you're back!" she exclaimed as he led her horse away to stake it out. "How's everything at home—the dogs and horses, and everything? Never mind the *people*! I don't want to hear a single thing about them! We're late, Syd," she apologized, as her cousin held open the tent flap for her to enter, "but oh, we've had such a stack of fun!"

She greeted the little English cook, an old acquaintance, who beamed with smiles as she entered. Then she cast her dark eyes about the tent and encountered those of Livingston.

"We were beginning to fear for your safety, Miss Hathaway," he said to her, then wondered why she should laugh. And she did laugh loudly, with a clear, sweet, reverberant ring that echoed through the little valley. Before it had died away her face settled back into its natural quiet. She threw her cowboy's hat into a far corner, and seated herself on a case of canned goods opposite Livingston, to whom she immediately devoted herself. [Pg 180]

She was not bold, this slender, well-built girl of the prairies,—no one who knew her could conceive such an idea,—but she moved with a forwardness, a certain freedom of manner that was her own divine right. Whatever she did, whatever she said, appeared right in her—in another less graceful, less charming, less magnetic, it would in many instances seem gross boldness. But with her wonderful, forceful personality whatever she did or said was the embodiment of grace and right.

Many of her acquaintances aped her ways and little peculiarities of speech, to the utter ruination of any originality or fascination they may have themselves possessed, for such originality cannot be imitated.

She leaned nearer to Livingston.

"You should have been with us—we've had a great time! Just think, we got eight coyotes! Isn't that fine for one evening?"

"Indeed," he exclaimed, "I think that remarkable! Your cousin said that something of the kind was keeping you. I take it that you are passionately fond of hunting." [Pg 181]

"Yes, it is the greatest sport there is in this country, and where the hunting is good, as it is at home along the Missouri River, there is nothing like it. But up here there is really no game to speak of, though the mountains at one time abounded with it. Even chickens are as hard to find as a needle in a haystack. We found a den of coyotes, seven little ones, and one of the old ones we got with the help of the dogs. You know," she said confidentially, "I shouldn't have delayed this supper for anything less than a den of coyotes."

"There won't be the sign of any kind of game left up here by the time she leaves," remarked Sydney, taking a seat on the ground beside her.

"I heard tell as how she was tryin' to make a clearance," said old Jim McCullen from the entrance.

She flashed him a quick look of surprise. He answered it with a barely perceptible squint, which she understood from years of comradeship to mean that he shared her secret. It meant more than that. He not only shared her secret, but his right hand—his life—was at her disposal, if necessary. Then, in acknowledgment of his silent message she gave him one of her rare, glorious smiles. [Pg 182]

"You did make a pretty lively clearing," said her cousin. "Eight coyotes isn't so bad. That means numerous calves saved, young colts, a hundred or so sheep, not to mention innumerable wild birds and barnyard fowl."

"Truly, it makes us feel like conquerors, doesn't it, Dave? But we're famished, Syd!" Then placing her seat beside the table she motioned the others to join her, and soon they were enjoying a remarkably good camp supper.

The cook bustled about the tent, pouring out coffee, apologizing, praising this dish or that, and urging them to partake of more, all in one breath.

Sydney and his friend Livingston kept up the conversation, to which Hope listened, too contented and happy with the meal, the hour, and the company to enter it herself. She finally pushed back her plate, congratulated the cook upon the success of his supper, and gave the twin a warning look, which he completely ignored. [Pg 183]

"Here, take another piece o' this pie," said the cook, who had intercepted the girl's glance. At this invitation the boy helped himself with alacrity, and with a broad smile the cook continued: "I never knowed a boy yet to kill himself eatin'. You can fill 'em plumb full to the brim, an' in a 'alf hour they're lookin' fer more. All the same, dog er Injun, halways hungry; an' a boy's just the same."

"Eat all you want, youngster, you're not in school now," said Carter. "I have a slight recollection myself of a time when I had an appetite."

"I failed to notice anything wrong with it to-night, Sydney," remarked the girl.

"There's nothin' like a happetite," observed the cook. "Did you's ever hear the meaning hoff the word? This is how hit was told to *me*." He stood before them emphasizing each word with a forward shake of his first finger. "H-a-p-p-y,—happy,—t-i-t-e, tight,—happy—tite—that's right, ain't hit? When you're heatin' hall you want you're *tight*, an' then you're happy, ain't you? An' that's what hit means,—happy-tight." [Pg 184]

Whether this observation of the small English cook's was original or not those present had no way of ascertaining. But since this was but a sample of the many observations he aired each day, it is reasonable to suppose that it originated in his fertile brain.

"I think there's no doubt about that being the true derivation of the word," said Hope. "In fact, I am sure it is. Isn't it, Dave?"

"I don't know nothin' about it," said the boy, looking up from his last bite of pie; then giving a deep sigh he reluctantly moved away from the table.

"Well, I can guarantee that you're happy," said Hope, "and that is a positive demonstration of the truth of William's observation. But now we must go," she said, rising abruptly and picking up her hat from the corner of the tent. [Pg 185]

"You haven't been here a half hour yet, Hopie, but I suppose I must be thankful for small favors," deplored Carter.

"I've had my supper,—a nice one, too,—and that's what I came for, Syd, dear," said the girl. "And if I may, I will come again, until you and dear old Jim both get tired of me."

"*Get tired—fiddlesticks!*" exclaimed McCullen, while Sydney laughed a little, and left the tent to saddle her horse. The breed boy followed him; then Livingston, too, was about to leave when McCullen stopped him.

"Just stay in here by the fire and talk to Hopie till we get your horses," he said, abruptly leaving them together.

The girl drew nearer the stove.

"It's quite chilly out this evening," she remarked.

"That is the beauty of the nights in this northern country," he replied, coming near to her. [Pg 186]

"Why, we're alone," she observed. "I wonder where William went!"

"I didn't notice his disappearance," he replied. "But we are alone—together. Are you not frightened?"

"Frightened? No!" she said softly. "Why?"

"A senseless remark. Do not notice it—or anything, I beg of you. I am quite too happy to weigh my words."

"Then you have proved the cook's theory correct; providing you have eaten—sufficiently," she replied. They both smiled, and darts of light from the stove played about their faces.

"Will you allow me—this night—to ride home with you?" he asked, watching the fantastic shadows upon her face and catching gleams of her deep eyes as they occasionally sought his own.

She hesitated a moment before replying.

"You think me a strange girl," she said. "I wonder what you will think of me now if I refuse this." [Pg 187]

"I think nothing except that you are the sweetest girl I have ever known—and the *noblest*. I thank my Maker for having met you, and spoken with you, and sat here in the firelight beside you! Your ways are your own. I shall not—cannot question you, or impose myself upon you. Our lives, it seems, lie far apart. But I cannot help it—the words burn themselves out—I love you, *Hope*—I love you! Forgive me!" He raised her hand to his lips and left her standing alone in the firelight.

"He loves me," she thought, far into the quiet hours of the night. "He loves me, and yet he ran away from me!" [Pg 188]

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## CHAPTER XIV

Late one afternoon during the following week Livingston drove up to Harris' ranch and helped from his buggy a small, fair-haired girl who looked with wonderment at the squalid log buildings, the squealing, scurrying pigs and children, and the usual group of roughly dressed men waiting for their supper. The pain in her eyes deepened, and she clasped Livingston's arm like a frightened child.

"*O, mein Freund, I fear!*" she cried, drawing back.

"Come," he urged gently. "There is nothing to fear. You must trust me, for I am indeed your friend, little girl. We will find the one who is expecting you—who will love you and be a sister to you."

A look of trustful obedience came into her sweet blue eyes, now disfigured by much weeping, and without hesitation she walked beside him past the group of rough-looking men, dirty, barefooted children, scurrying pigs and dogs, to the kitchen door. [Pg 189]

An Indian woman with a baby in her arms stood in the shadow of the room and motioned them to enter.

"Is Miss Hathaway here?" inquired Livingston.

At the sound of his voice the door of an inner room opened and Hope, her slender form gowned as he had first seen her, came quickly across the untidy room toward them.

"I am Hope," she said to the girl, taking both of her soft little hands in her own and looking in wonder at the childish face with its setting of wavy gold hair. Suddenly the broken-hearted girl was in her arms sobbing out her grief upon her shoulder. Hope led her to a seat, removed her hat and coat, and uttered words of endearment to her, soothing her as she would have done a child.

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Could this impulsive, loving girl be Hope, wondered Livingston, who still stood in the doorway. She smoothed back the bright hair from the pretty, childish face, exclaiming:

"How beautiful you are! And what a little thing to have such a grief! Oh, it is cruel, *cruel!* Cry, dear, cry all you want to—it will do you good, and the pain will sooner be gone."

"*O, Gott im Himmel!*" sobbed the German girl, "*gieb mir Muth es zu ertragen!*"

"But you are, oh, so much braver than I. Look at me, see what a great, big strong thing I am, and I moaned and cried because the world wasn't made to my liking! Oh, it makes me *ashamed* now, when I see such a little, frail thing as you suffer such a real sorrow! But I am your friend—your sister, if you will have me."

"How goot you are, *meine liebe Freundin!*" sobbed the girl.

"May you never have reason to change your opinion," replied Hope slowly, in German.

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"She speaks my language!" exclaimed the German girl, with something like hopefulness in her voice.

"But very poorly," apologized Hope, looking for the first time at the man standing quietly in the doorway.

"It will comfort her that you speak it at all," he replied. "But without any language you would still be a comfort to her. I will leave her in your hands, Miss Hathaway. She has had a long journey and—must be very tired." He bowed and turned to go, but, recollecting something, came back into the room. "I am going now," he said to the German girl, "but I will come to see you often. You need have no fear when you are with—Hope."

Hope turned to him impulsively.

"You will do as you say," she begged. "You will come often to see her." Then added, "You know she'll be terribly lonely at first!"

"It will give me great pleasure, if I may," he replied.

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She held out her hand to him.

"If you *may!* Are you not master of your own actions? Good-by!"

She took her hand from his firm clasp with something like a jerk, and found herself blushing furiously as she turned to the little German girl.

As far as anyone could be made comfortable in the Harris home Hope made her little charge so. She shared her room, her bed with her, took her to school each day and kept her constantly at her side.

She was a simple, trusting German girl, bright, and extremely pretty, and her name was Louisa Schulte. From the first she had loved Hope with an affection that was as touching as it was beautiful, and as she came to know her better, day by day her love and admiration grew akin to worship. She believed her to be the most wonderful girl that ever lived, in some respects fairly superhuman. She marveled at the skill with which she could ride and shoot, and her wisdom in Western lore. And behind every accomplishment, every word and act, Louisa read her heart, which no one before had ever known.

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So finding in the bereaved girl, who had so strangely come into her life, the sympathy and love for which she had vainly searched in one of her own sex, Hope gave her in return the true wealth of a sister's heart.

For some time after Louisa's arrival Hope was with her almost constantly, but the inactive life began to tell upon her. Her eyes would light up with an involuntary longing at the sight of the breed boys racing over the hills upon their ponies.

"Why don't you go?" asked the German girl, one morning, reading her friend with observant eyes as the boys started out for a holiday.

It was a beautiful warm Saturday morning. The two girls were sitting on a pile of logs by the side of the road sunning themselves, far enough away from the Harris house and its surroundings to enjoy the beauty of a perfect day.

"I would rather stay here with you," replied Hope, arranging a waving lock which the wind had displaced from Louisa's golden tresses. "When the horse comes that I have sent for, and you have learned to ride better, we will go all over these mountains together. I will show you Sydney's camp and take you to old Peter's cabin, and let you see where we found the den of coyotes. We will go everywhere then, and have such a good time!"

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Louisa looked at her tenderly, but her eyes were filled with the pain of a great sorrow.

"O, *Fräulein*, you are goot, so goot to me! If I may ask, not too much, I wish to see where lies *mein lieber Fritz*. I vill weep no more—then. Ven I sleep the dreams come so much. If I could see once the place it would be better, *nicht wahr?*"

"Yes," replied Hope, "it is a lovely spot and you shall see it. Mr. Livingston could not have found a more beautiful place. Just now it is all a mass of flowers and green grass as far as you can see, and behind it is a great high jagged wall of stone. It is beautiful!"

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"Mr. Livingston is a good, true man," mused Louisa, lapsing into German, which Hope followed with some difficulty. "He was very kind to my poor Fritz, who loved him dearly. His letters were filled with his praises. It was of him, of the beautiful country, and our love of which he always wrote. He was a good boy, *Fräulein*."

"Tell me about him," said Hope, adding hastily, "if you feel like it. I would love to hear."

Hope could not have suggested a wiser course, for to speak of a grief or trouble wears off its sharp edges.

"He was a good boy," replied Louisa. "I cannot see why God has taken him from this beautiful place, and from me. It has been a year, now, since I last saw him. He left in a hurry. He had never spoken of love until that day, nor until he told me of it did I know that it was real love I had so long felt for him. We grew up together. He was my cousin. I had other cousins, but he was ever my best companion—my first thought. He came to me that day and said: 'Louisa, I am going far away from here to the free America. It breaks my heart to leave you. Will you promise to some day join me there and be my wife?' I promised him, and then cried much because he was going so far. It was even worse than the army, I thought, and somehow it held a strange dread for me. But Fritz would not think of the army. His eldest brother returned, and as head of the family all the money went to him. My aunt married again. Her husband is a wholesale merchant of wines. He gave Fritz a position in his warehouse, but very soon they quarreled. He seemed not to like Fritz. Then there was nothing for the poor boy but the army, or far America. I could not blame him when he chose freedom. The lot of the youngest son is not always a happy one. A friend who had been here told all about this great country and the good opportunities, so he came. His letters were so beautiful! I used to read them over and over until the paper was worn and would break in pieces. For a whole year I waited, and planned, and lived on the letters and my dreams, then filled with happiness I started to him. To think that I have come to the end of this long, strange journey to a foreign land to see but his grave! Oh, God in heaven, help me be brave!"

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"There is no death," said Hope, rising abruptly from the log upon which she had been sitting and standing erect before Louisa, her dark commanding eyes forcing the attention of the grief-stricken girl. "I know there is no death. I feel it with every throb of my pulse—in every atom of my being! *I* and my *body!*—*I* and my *body!*" she continued impressively. "How distinct the two! Can the death of this lump of clay change the *I* that is really myself? Can anything exterminate the living me? Every throb of my whole being tells me that I am more than this perishable flesh—that I am more than time or place or condition or *death!* I believe, like the Indians, that when we are freed from this husk of death—this perishing flesh, that the we, as we truly are, is like a prisoner turned loose—that then, only do we realize what *life* really means."

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Louisa's innocent eyes were intent upon her as she strove to grasp the full meaning of the English words.

"*Ich weiss; es ist wahr;*" she replied softly, "*aber wenn der Kummer so frisch ist, dann ist es unmöglich in dem Gedanken Trost zu finden.*"

"I should have said nothing," said Hope in contrition, seating herself upon the log pile again.

"*Nein*, my dear, dear friend! I have now dis misery, but I belief you. Somedimes your vords vill help—vat you calls 'em—vill *soothe*, und I vill be better."

"Then it's all right," said Hope, jumping from the logs and giving her hand to Louisa to assist her down. "Let's walk a little."

They went slowly up the road toward the school-house, and had not proceeded far when they met Livingston driving toward them in an open buggy.

Hope waved her hand to him and hastened forward, while Louisa smiled upon him the faintest of dimpled greetings, then drew back to the side of the road while the girl of the prairies stepped up to the side of his buggy.

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"You haven't kept your word very well," she said. "We have seen you only twice, and Louisa has wondered many times what has been keeping you. Isn't that so, Louisa?" she nodded at the girl. "I am glad you have come this morning, because I want to ask you a favor."

"I am at your service," he replied.

"You know Louisa hasn't learned to ride yet, and Harris' have no other way of conveyance, so I wanted to ask you to take her in your buggy—to see Fritz's grave." The last few words were added below her breath.

"I came this morning to ask you if she did not wish to see it," he replied. "It might be good for

her."

"Of course *you* should be the first one to think of it!" she said quickly, shading her eyes with her hand to look down the long, crooked stretch of road. "I didn't think of it at all myself. She has just asked me if she might see it. All the virtues are yours by right," she continued, showing, as she again faced him, a flash of her strong white teeth. "And the funny part of it is, I think I am getting jealous of the very virtues you possess!" [Pg 200]

"You should see with my eyes awhile," he replied, "and you would have no cause for jealousy."

"I do not know jealousy in the ordinary sense of the word—that was entirely left out of my make-up, but for once I covet the attributes of thoughtfulness that should be ingrained in every woman's nature."

When she had spoken he seemed struggling for an instant with some strong emotion. Without replying he stepped from his buggy and walked to the heads of his horses, presumably to arrange some part of the harness.

Livingston struggled to keep back the words which sprang to his lips. He loved the girl with all the strength of his nature. Her whole attitude toward him artlessly invited him to speak, but his manhood forbade it. [Pg 201]

He was a puzzle, she thought, impatiently. Why did he not make a little effort to woo her, after having declared his love in no uncertain manner? She was not sure that she wanted to receive his advances if he should make any, but why did he not make them? She knew that she was interested in him, and she knew, also, that she was piqued by his apparent indifference. She knew he was like a smoldering volcano, and she had all a girl's curiosity to see it burst forth; but with the thought came a regret that their acquaintance would then be at an end.

"I can take you both up there now, if you wish," he said, coming around to the side of the buggy. "The seat is wide and I do not think you will be uncomfortable."

Hope had turned her eyes once more down the narrow, winding stretch of gray toward the Harris ranch.

"I think I will not go," she replied, still peering ahead from under the shade of her hand. "Yes, I am sure now that's Sydney. See, just going into the corral. Jim was to have brought me an extra saddle horse to-day, but Sydney has come instead, so I'll go back. Louisa can go alone with you." She motioned to the girl. "Come, Louisa, Mr. Livingston wants to take you for a little drive. I will be down there at the house when you come back." [Pg 202]

The girl understood enough of their conversation to know where she was expected to go. Obediently, trustfully, with one loving glance at Hope, she climbed into the buggy beside Livingston and was soon riding rapidly up the mountain road to the grave of her sweetheart. [Pg 203]

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## CHAPTER XV

Hope's anxiety to reach the ranch could not have been great, for she walked slowly along the dark, gray stretch of road, vaguely dreaming the while, and offering excuses to herself for not having accepted Livingston's invitation. She managed to find several reasons. First, it would have been too crowded; second, Sydney had brought the horse, and was probably waiting to see her; third, she had no particular desire to go, because he had so obviously wanted her to do so. Finally, after weighing all her excuses, she was obliged to admit that the only thing that really troubled her was Livingston's evident unconcern at her refusal to accompany them.

She had reached a point in her life where self-analysis was fast becoming an interesting study. At present it struck her as being amusing. [Pg 204]

The clatter of hoofs and a wild whoop brought her out of her absorbing study, as down the nearest side-hill the twins raced pell-mell, the pinto pony leading the stylish Dude by half a length. They drew up suddenly in the road beside her.

"Now you can see fer yourself that that Dude cayuse of Dave's ain't in it with my pinto!" exclaimed the soft-voiced twin.

"What'er you givin' us!" shouted Dave. "Just hear him brag about that spotted cayuse of his'n! 'Twasn't no even race at all. He had 'bout a mile the start!"

"Oh, come off your perch!" retorted the other sweetly.

"Where are you boys going?" asked Hope.

"Nowheres. We seen you from the top of the divide, an' I thought I'd just show you what was in Pinto. He's all right—you bet! Ain't you, old man?" said the boy, pulling his pony's mane affectionately.

"Oh, *I* wasn't tryin' to show off!" exclaimed Dave. "But just give me a level road an' I'll beat you all to pieces!" [Pg 205]



"Where have you been?" inquired Hope.

The boys looked at each other in a sheepish manner.

"I'm going to guess," said the girl suspiciously, "and if I am right you'll have to own up. In the first place your father sent you out to bring in those cows and calves over near old Peter's basin. Instead of that you went on farther and found a camp. You went in one of the tents and ate some dried blackberry pie, instead of bringing in the cattle. Now, isn't that so?"

Dave looked dumfounded.

"I don't see how you knew that when you wasn't along! Gee, you must know things like grandmother White Blanket!" he exclaimed.

The soft-voiced twin began to laugh. "I told you that you was gettin' more o' that pie on your face 'n you was in your mouth!" he exclaimed, whereupon the other quickly turned away his besmeared countenance, proceeding to wipe it vigorously with the sleeve of his coat.

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"Have you got your bounty yet for the coyotes you dug out of the hill?" asked Hope, to allay his discomfort. She glanced sideways at the soft-voiced twin, who assumed his most docile, innocent expression, and rode on ahead. It had become a sore subject with him. Suddenly giving a wild whoop he spurred up his pinto and dashed in among the assortment of tents, bringing to the entrance of her abode old Mother White Blanket, who hurled after him numerous blood-curdling, Indian invectives. Then she covered her yellow prongs of teeth under a wrinkled lip and scowled fiercely at Hope as she passed along the road, causing the breed boy to say:

"The old woman's got it in fer you, I reckon. But don't you care, she ain't so all-fired smart as she makes out to be!"

"I'm not afraid of her," replied Hope. "She suspects me of having had a hand in the shooting that night at the sheep-corrals up there, and in consequence has a very bad heart for me. Now how could she think such a thing as that? I don't believe she's much of a witch, though, because when she gets in one of her fits of passion she'd ride off on a broomstick if she were."

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"She's got eyes like a hawk," said the boy, "always seem' everything that's goin' on."

"She don't miss much, that's sure," mused Hope, as they passed by the house and approached the corrals. There the soft-voiced twin was talking with Carter, praising, enthusiastically, the points of his pinto cayuse, and comparing it with the blooded saddle horse which Sydney had just brought from Hathaway's home-ranch at Hope's request. The boy never knew just how his statements were received, for at sight of Hope the young man went out into the road to meet her.

She welcomed him with a quick smile, which a year previous would have been accompanied by a sisterly kiss. Carter noted its omission this day with singular impatience. How long, he wondered, before she would forget his foolishness. It occurred to him then, that in spite of her girlishness she was very much a woman, and his actions toward her, which now he most heartily regretted, had ignited a spark of self-consciousness in her nature, raising an effective barrier between them that only time could wear away.

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"I expected Jim with the horse instead of you, Sydney," she said. "How did it happen?"

"A lot of men are up with the trail herds, and your father needed Jim to help pay them off, so I brought the horse instead. Jim will be back in a couple of days," he explained.

"You went down to the ranch, then, with him yesterday evening, I suppose," said Hope. "What are they all doing there?"

"It looks just as it did any evening last summer, if you happened to drop in on them. Little Freddie Rosehill thumping away at the piano and singing bass from the soles of his feet, that tallest Cresmond girl, with the red hair, yelling falsetto, and the others joining in when they got the chance. Then down at the other end of the room the usual card table—your father, mother, Clarice, and O'Hara, and father and mother Cresmond watching the game and listening to the warbling of their offspring."

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"Is *Larry O'Hara* there?" asked Hope in surprise. "I thought he was not coming this year."

"Don't you ever think O'Hara is going to give you up as easy as that," replied Sydney, laughing. "He just got there yesterday, and was in the depths of despair when he discovered you had flown. He told Clarice he was coming over here to see you as soon as he could decently get away. His mother's with him, which makes that proposition a little more awkward for him than if he were alone. It was late when I got there and I didn't have time to change my clothes, so I just walked in on them in this outfit. But they seemed pretty glad to see me."

"I'll bet they nearly smothered you with welcome! I can just see them," said Hope. "That Lily Cresmond with the red hair always was so demonstrative to you, Syd. I'm sorry O'Hara is there, and Clarice Van Renssalaer, too—or rather, I mean, I'm sorry only because they are there that I am not at home, for I like them; but I'm not very sorry either, Syd. I'd rather be up here in the mountains, free like this, with my poor little Louisa, and you and Jim camping over the hills there, than stifling in the atmosphere of those New York people."

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"You're a queer girl, Hope, but I don't believe I blame you much. I was glad to leave this morning and head my horse this way."

"Did father—ask about me?" she inquired hesitatingly.

"He didn't lose any time in getting me off alone and questioning me for about an hour," he replied. "He misses you, Hope."

"Poor father—poor old Dad!" exclaimed the girl softly. Then with a peculiar motion of her head and shoulders, as if throwing off a load, she remarked firmly: "But that makes no difference. I am glad, anyway, to be here. I have you and Jim so near, and my dear little German girl—and perfect freedom!"

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"And you have Livingston to take the place of O'Hara," he returned, "and there is nothing lacking, as far as I can see, except a good cook in the Harris family."

"Mr. Livingston is nothing to me," replied Hope quickly, "and he doesn't care anything for me, if that is what you mean to imply." Her eyes flashed and she spoke with unusual sharpness.

"We can't afford to quarrel, Hope," exclaimed Carter. Then, putting his hand upon her shoulder, said very earnestly: "I was just joking, and didn't mean to imply anything, so don't be angry with me. Besides, it won't do. It's near noon and I was going to suggest that we go over to camp and have William get us up a good dinner, and then we'll go fishing. What do you say? You can invite your breed brigade; they look hungry," pointing to the two boys sitting on the ground in the shade of a log barn, their knees drawn up under their chins.

"Oh, I don't mind what you say, Syd, dear," she said abruptly. "I believe I am getting to be quite as foolish as other people, to be offended so easily. I should as soon expect you to turn upon me in wrath if I told you to look out for little Louisa."

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"Poor little Louisa," he exclaimed. "Where is she?"

"We went up the road for a walk, and Mr. Livingston drove along and took her up to see her Fritz's grave," she explained.

"Now then, my girl, *you* look out for Louisa! There's nothing like consoling grief to bring two hearts close together. How did you ever come to allow him to carry her away up there and do the consolation act? You'll sure lose him now! I thought you had more diplomacy!"

She laughed a little.

"Unless a man loved me with every atom of his being, with his whole life, I couldn't feel the least attraction for him in *that* way," she said. "That is the way I have planned for the *one* man to love, my ideal man, Syd. When such a man comes along I shall love him, but I very much fear he does not exist."

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"Then you're doomed to die an old maid, Hope! But don't you think O'Hara entertains that kind of affection for you?"

"Do you know, I have a perfect horror of being an old maid. Probably I'll outgrow it. O'Hara? No, indeed! He'll get over it soon enough, and think just as much of some other girl. He's a nice boy, a good friend, but he isn't just my idea of what a man should be."

"I'm afraid you're doomed, Hope," said her cousin, shaking his head solemnly. "What will you do, spend your lonely maidenhood out here on the prairie, or take a life interest in some Old Ladies' Home?"

"Did you say something about going up to camp?" she asked. "But I ought to wait for Louisa; she should be back now."

"I've ridden twenty miles this morning, and the consequence is my appetite is rather annoying," replied Sydney. He called to the two boys, sitting drowsily in the shade. "Here, you boys, if you want to go out and get some grub with this lady, just run in her horse for her as fast as you can."

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"Well, I should say so!" exclaimed the soft-voiced twin, who jumped up with wonderful alacrity, followed more slowly by Dave. Another moment they were spurring their ponies across the large, fenced pasture toward a bunch of horses grazing quietly in the distance.

"Those boys are all right when there's anything to eat in sight," remarked Carter.

"Or any fun," added the girl.

"How in the world do you tell them apart?" he inquired. "I look at one and think I've got him spotted for sure, and then when the other one turns up I'm all mixed again. You seem to know them so well, you must have some kind of a mark to go by."

"They are so entirely different in their natures," she said, "that I almost know them apart without looking at them. Their faces look different to me, too. Dan has certain expressions that Dave never had; and their voices are nothing alike."

"I've noticed their voices," said her cousin, watching the boys as they deftly turned the bunch of horses and headed them toward the corral. "Well, they can sure ride to beat three of a kind! They're not losing any time with those horses, either."

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The corral was built in a corner of the pasture fence, near the stables. It took the breed boys scarcely five minutes to corral the horses, rope the saddle animal wanted, throw open the large

gate and lead out the horse. The other horses followed with a mad dash, kicking up their heels in very joy for their unexpected freedom.

Hope watched the road, as far as she could see it, looking for the return of her small German friend.

"We'll ride along," suggested Sydney, throwing the saddle upon her horse, "and we'll probably meet them. I don't think we'll have any trouble getting Livingston to drive over to camp, and we'll all go fishing together."

This seemed to take a load from the mind of Hope, and light-heartedly she rode away toward the camp with her cousin and the breed boys.

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## CHAPTER XVI

They met Livingston and his charge just as they reached the dimly marked trail that led up a gulch toward Sydney's camp. At the invitation extended for dinner the sheep-man drove up the coulee and followed the riders.

William, the cook, greeted his guests with a generous smile, then proceeded to do a great amount of hustling about preparing for the meal, which he promised would be an excellent one. Being a round-up cook of much experience, he soon set before them such an assortment of edibles as would have dumfounded the uninitiated.

The afternoon passed off pleasantly. Hope was unusually vivacious, and Sydney full of amusing small talk, principally concerning his sundry adventures and impressions during his brief absence from camp.

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They all felt the grief of the German girl, and each showed his sympathy in a different manner. Sydney talked, often in an aimless, senseless way, but obviously to divert the unhappy girl. Hope filled each pause, concluded every description with rich drollery and mimicry, while Livingston's quiet attentiveness betokened the deepest compassion. Even William gave her many smiles and made numerous witty remarks, which were wholly lost upon her.

"You're in a very bad crowd of people, Miss Louisa," said Sydney. "But after awhile you'll be so much like us that you won't notice how bad we are!"

"Shame on you, Sydney!" exclaimed Hope. "Louisa never could be bad!" Then to the girl: "The truth is, *he's* the only bad one in the whole outfit, so don't let him make you think that the rest of us are bad, too!"

"You are all *so* goot," said Louisa, in great earnestness.

"Now listen to that!" cried Sydney. "That's the first time anybody ever accused *me* of being good! I'll get a gold medal and hang it about your neck, Miss Louisa, and I'll be your faithful servant from now on."

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"And you'll bring her fresh flowers every day, and maybe you could borrow Mr. Livingston's buggy since you haven't one of your own. But don't soar too high, Sydney, she doesn't know you yet!" returned his cousin.

"But *you* like him," said Louisa, "and daat iss—vat you calls 'em—*recommend* enough!"

They were all surprised by this first flash of the real Louisa, the Louisa of sunshine and mirth, whom Sorrow had so soon branded.

It was the first time Sydney had heard her utter anything but the briefest monosyllables. He looked at her, astonished. For an instant silence reigned, then Hope, with sudden abandonment, threw her arms about her, exclaiming:

"Oh, you're the dearest thing I ever saw! Isn't she, Syd?" And then, as if ashamed of her impulsiveness, she jumped up and laughingly left the tent. A few moments later she put her head inside, remarking: "The trout haven't begun to feed yet. I'd like to know how we are going to put in the time waiting for them! It's too hot for anything in there, and it won't be a bit of use to try to fish for an hour, at least. All of you come outside."

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"Yes," said Carter, rising lazily to his feet. "I've discovered a small Eden down there under the willows, along the creek. All green and mossy and pepperminty, but the snake's never showed up yet. Come on, we'll all go down there."

He led the way along the steep bank of the small creek and down its opposite side until a parting in the willow brush revealed one of Nature's hidden glories, a small glen, shady and beautiful. From its very center sprang a tiny spring, forming a clear, glassy pool of water which narrowed into a tiny trickling rill that went creeping through the grass-carpeted arbor to the larger stream beyond.

It was beautifully inviting, and Hope sank down upon a mossy cushion with an exclamation of delight.

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"Now, how am I for an entertainer?" asked Sydney gayly. Hope turned her dark eyes upon him, then about the little arbor.

"Wait," she said softly, "don't talk for a minute—don't even breathe. This is glorious!" Then after a brief pause, continued: "There, the spell's passed! This place is no longer enchanting, but lovely and cool, just the same, and is a whole lot better than that roasting tent up there. What became of the twins? Probably they are more attracted by William's mode of entertainment than yours, Syd!" She turned to Livingston and smiled. "William has two regular customers already, you know. I am afraid to think what will happen if he camps here all summer."

"I am inclined to add my name to the list if he entertains such charming ones every day," replied the sheep-man.

"I meant the *boys*," said Hope in all seriousness.

Sydney laughed outright.

"How do you know but what he meant the boys, too?" he asked. She looked at him with an assumption of surprise. "A girl never makes such a mistake as that," she said. "It was a very pretty compliment." [Pg 221]

"Worthy of O'Hara," he put in.

"Worthy of Mr. Livingston," she declared. "O'Hara's compliments are not so delicate. They are beautifully worded, but unconvincing."

"I believe she's actually giving you credit for extreme honesty!" exclaimed Carter.

"I sincerely trust so," replied his friend heartily. "It would be a most pleasing compliment."

"Well, I should say it would be the biggest one *she* ever paid anyone! You're the first one Hope ever credited with honesty. You can sit for an hour and tell her a great long story and she'll never give you the satisfaction of knowing for sure whether she believes you or not. The chances are she don't. She'll take your assertions, weigh every word, and then draw her own conclusions."

"You only know from your own experience," demurred Hope. "All people haven't your habit of departing from the truth, you know." Then to Livingston: "Really, he can tell a terrible whopper with the straightest face imaginable! He only proves to you how well I know him. Last summer he told a girl a ridiculous story about snakes. It was her first visit at the ranch, and for several days I thought something was the matter with her brain. Every time she heard a grasshopper buzz anywhere near she would give a shriek and turn deathly pale. She finally told me that she feared rattlesnakes because Sydney had told her that that particular buzz was the snake's death rattle and that something or somebody was doomed for sure, that if the snake couldn't get the human victim it had set its eyes upon, it crept into a prairie-dog hole and got one of them. Of course that is only a sample of his very foolish yarns, which no one but an ignorant person would think of believing." [Pg 222]

"I remember," laughed Sydney. "That was that fair Lily Cresmond. She got up and had breakfast with me at six o'clock this morning. Poor girl! I'm afraid I've put my foot in it this time!" [Pg 223]

"For goodness' sake, did she propose to you?" asked Hope, aghast.

"Not that I'm aware of!" answered Sydney. "No, it's worse than that. She asked me to tell her really and truly why *you* weren't at home this summer. She crossed her heart, hoped to die she'd never breathe a word of it to a living, human creature, so I told her that it pained me to tell the sad story, but last season Freddie Rosehill had shown you such evident admiration that your father had become thoroughly alarmed and thought it best to keep you out of his way for the present. But I suggested that you might face paternal wrath and come back just for one look at the dear little boy."

"Sydney, you never did!" gasped Hope. "*How could you?*"

"Freddie came trotting out for his morning constitutional just as I was riding away," he continued, "and he waved his cane in the air and actually *ran* down to the corral to say good-by. I really believe he liked me for once because I was leaving, and he very gingerly asked about you, and naturally was visibly relieved when I assured him that you would probably not be home while he was there. Talk about your joshers!" he said to Livingston. "Hope had the little Englishman so he didn't know his soul was his own! She'd take him out on the prairie and lose him, have him pop away for an hour at a stuffed chicken tied to the top of a tree, shoot bullets through his hat by mistake, and about a million other things too blood-curdling to mention. He didn't want to refuse my aunt's invitation to join the party at the ranch every summer, but his days and nights were spent in mortal terror of this dignified daughter of the house. And I must say there wasn't much love lost between them." [Pg 224]

"A brainless little fop!" commented Hope.

"Well, it seems he had sense enough to catch that oldest Cresmond girl, Lily, whose ears I filled with the pathetic story; but I didn't know it then, that's the fun of it! He held out his fat little hand to me when I started out this morning and said: 'I want your congratulations. Lily has promised to be my Lady.' 'You don't say so,' I said. 'Lord, but what a haul you've made, Rosehill!' 'Yes,' said he, 'she's a beauty!' 'And a million or so from her papa'll set you up in housekeeping in great [Pg 225]

shape over in Old England. I certainly congratulate you!" said I. He didn't seem to have anything more to say, so I rode off, and do you know I never once thought of what I'd told that girl about him liking you until I was halfway here."

"Oh, Syd, what have you done!" cried Hope. "You ought to go right back to the ranch and fix it up for them. It might be real serious!"

"Don't worry; they'll fix it up between them, just give 'em time," laughed Sydney. "But then I shouldn't like to be the cause of breaking up such a match. I sure wouldn't!"

"I should say not! It would be terrible!" agreed Hope.

"No, I wouldn't like it on my conscience," continued Sydney, "to break up such a good match by my thoughtless words. It would be too bad to spoil two families!" [Pg 226]

"I quite agree with you, excepting the lady, whom I do not know," remarked Livingston. "But I have met Rosehill. He is, in my estimation, a worthless specimen of English aristocracy."

"Oh, they're mostly all alike, a mighty poor outfit all through, from the ones I've known! But I guess they'll manage to fix it up among themselves," laughed Hope.

At this remark Livingston looked oddly at the girl, then the brush crackled near them, followed by the appearance of one of the twins, who, smiling victoriously, held up for inspection a small string of trout.

"And here we've been wasting our time when we might have been fishing instead!" exclaimed Hope, springing up from her mossy couch and minutely examining the string of fish.

"You'll find fishing tackle, all you want, up at camp. William'll show you," remarked Sydney. "For my part I shall stay here and gather strawberry leaves for Miss Louisa to make into wreaths. Isn't this one a daisy? It's too warm to fish, anyway," he concluded. [Pg 227]

"You shall not decide for her, Syd," declared Hope. "Which would you rather do, Louisa?"

The German girl shook her head, smiling a little. "It is very warm," she said.

"Then you shall stay with Sydney," decided Hope. "But I am only going to fish a little while, anyway, because I've got something else I want to do." She looked up at Livingston, who had come near her, and laughed. "Yes, you may go with me if you will show me how to cast a fly. Sydney says you are an expert fisherman, but I don't know the first thing about it. We will walk up the creek and fish down, because the boys are fishing down here." She called to the boy, who was walking toward the stream: "I'll be ready to go home in about an hour, wait for me!" He nodded in reply. "Come on," she said to Livingston.

They had fished in silence some minutes, far up the stream at an open point where several other smaller streams joined this, forming a broad group of tiny, gravelly islands. [Pg 228]

"I do think," said the girl finally, "that this is great sport, though I cannot haul them out like you do. Now it must be luck—nothing more, for we both have exactly the same kind of flies."

"You leave your fly too long in the water," said the man. "You should cast more—like this."

"But I can't for the life of me get the hang of it," she exclaimed, making a desperate attempt.

"Not like that," said Livingston. "Look, this is the way. There, you've caught yourself!"

"Yes, how foolish," laughed the girl. "It's in there to stay, too!"

"Wait, I will assist you," he said, leaping across the stream which separated them, and coming to her side.

"I think I can get it out all right," she said, throwing down her pole, and using on the entangled hook more force than discretion. She laughed in a half-vexed manner at her attempts, while Livingston stood near watching, his eyes earnest, intent, his face illumed by a soft, boyish smile of quiet enjoyment. [Pg 229]

"If I had another hook I'd cut this off and leave it in there," she said, "but the fishing is too fine to leave now. No, wait a minute," motioning him back with the disengaged hand while she tugged vigorously at the hook with the other. "I can do it. If only the material in this waist wasn't so strong, I might tear it out. How perfectly idiotic of me to do such a thing, anyway!" Her cheeks were aflame with the exertion. "You see," she continued, still twisting her neck and looking down sideways at the shoulder of her gown where the hook was imbedded, "I don't want to break it because we'd have to go way back to the camp and start in over, and then it would be too late in the day. I don't see what possessed that fish to get away with my other hook! But this goods simply won't tear!"

"There's no other way," declared Livingston, with conviction. "You will have to let me help you. I'll cut it out. See," he scrutinized the hook very closely, while Hope threw down her arms in despair, "it's only held by a few threads. If you don't mind doing a little mending, I will perform the operation in a moment to your entire satisfaction." [Pg 230]

"Well, hurry, please, because we are certainly wasting good time and lots of fish."

"If all time were but wasted like this," he exclaimed softly, prolonging the task.

She knew that he was taking undue advantage of the situation and that she was strangely glad of it, recklessly glad, in her own fashion. She had never looked at him so closely before. In this position he could not see her. She noticed his broad, white forehead, and felt a strong desire to touch the hair that dropped over it, then admonished herself for feeling glad at his slowness.

From the hillside above them a man on a piebald horse watched the scene interestedly. Without warning the girl's eyes lifted suddenly from the soft, brown hair so near, and met those of the rider above. Livingston's head was bent close to her own, so that he did not see the leering, grinning face that peered down at them, but Hope caught the look direct, and all, and more, than it seemed to imply. Her eyes glittered with anger. Like a flash her hand sought her blouse and for an instant the bright sunlight gleamed upon a small weapon. As quickly the man wheeled his horse and disappeared behind the hill. With a deep flush the girl hid the little revolver as Livingston, ignorant of the scene, triumphantly held up for inspection the rescued fishhook.

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"Making love, by the holy smoke," chuckled Shorty Smith to himself, spurring up his piebald horse and heading off a stray calf. "So that's what she does 'longside o' teachin' kids!"

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## CHAPTER XVII

Upon the highest ridge between the camp and old Peter's basin Hope and the twins met Ned riding slowly along, his sturdy little legs drawn up into the straps of a man's saddle. He had an old, discarded felt hat of his father's, several sizes too large for him, pulled down until his ears laid flat along the brim. From under its wide, dingy expanse his sharp, little black eyes peered out inquisitively. In imitation of a certain French breed whom he greatly admired, a large red handkerchief was knotted about his waist.

He made a picturesque little figure in the bright sunlight as he rode leisurely toward them.

"Where've you all been?" he called at the top of his boyish treble. "You boys're goin' to catch it if you don't bring in those cows before dark!"

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"Who told you?" roared Dave.

"The old man told me to come an' look you fellers up. Where've you been?" inquired the child, riding up alongside and swinging his horse into pace with the others.

"Now you want to find out something," said Dan complacently.

"I don't *care* where you've been," said the child indignantly, "but you'd better be roundin' in them cows or you'll catch it!"

Hope rode up beside him. "I'm sorry you weren't home when we left. We've been over at my cousin's camp. The next time you shall go along."

"Let's go to-morrow," suggested the boy eagerly, to which amusing proposition she immediately agreed. "Say," he continued, "I seen Long Bill and some o' them fellers drive in a bunch of mavericks off'n the range, an' they're goin' to brand 'em back of old Peter's this evenin'. There was a cow with an O Bar brand on her, followed 'em all the way down, bellerin' an' makin' a big fuss, an' they can't get rid of her. They give me a half a dollar to drive her back, but she turned so quick I couldn't do nothin' with her, so I thought I'd just let 'em take care of her themselves."

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"Are you sure about that brand?" asked Hope quickly.

"Sure as anything," replied the boy. "Why?"

"I think you must be mistaken," she told him. "For it would be very queer if one of my father's cows should be following a stray maverick up to old Peter's place."

"I'll tell you something," whispered the boy, leaning toward her. "They wasn't yearlings at all, they was bringin' in, only big calves."

Her face darkened savagely. "Come," she exclaimed, "I'm going to see for myself!"

"Tattle-tale!" cried the sweet-voiced twin. "Now you'll get us into a scrape for tellin'. I'll lick you for this!"

The girl turned her horse sharply about, stopped it short, facing them fiercely.

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"You coward!" she exclaimed. "That child didn't know what he was telling! He's honest. If either of you touch him, or say one unkind word to him about this, I'll make you smart for it!"

"I didn't mean nothin'," declared the soft-voiced twin suavely.

"Well, I guess you didn't if you know what's good for you!" she exclaimed, still angry. "Now what are you going to do about it, go home like babies, or stand by me and do what I tell you?"

"You bet I'll stand by you!" roared Dave.

"I reckon you're our captain, ain't you?" said the other sweetly.

"I'm a scout, I am!" exclaimed the boy, Ned, riding close beside her.

She mused for a moment with darkening eyes, putting her elbow upon the saddle's horn and resting her chin in the hollow of her hand.

"It's all right," she said at length deliberately. "Ned will show you where the cow is, and you boys drive it up to old Peter's corral just as quickly as you can ride. Don't let anyone see you. When you have done that, go up to the school-house and wait there for me. Now hurry, and don't let anyone see you drive in that cow. Go around this other side of old Peter's."

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She motioned her hand for them to go, and waited until they were out of sight, then rode on to the school coulee which led into old Peter's basin. It was a long, roundabout way, but her horse covered the ground rapidly.

From the hill behind the school-house she saw Livingston driving back to his ranch. She stood out in full relief against the green hillside, and if he had glanced in that direction must surely have seen her. From that distance she could not tell if he had done so or not. She wondered what he would think if he saw her there alone. Then to get sooner out of sight she ran her horse at full speed up the school coulee toward old Peter's basin.

Livingston saw her quite plainly; from that distance there was no mistaking her. Then he proceeded to do a very unwise thing. He put his horses to their full speed, reached his stables in a few moments, threw his saddle on his best horse and set out in the direction the girl had taken.

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Hope made her way quickly up to the top of the divide, then skirmished from brush patch to brush patch, keeping well out of sight until she reached the brush-covered entrance of Peter's basin. There she had a plain view of the small cabin, the rude stable, and corral, without herself being observed by the occupants of the place, and there she settled herself to wait the appearance of the cow, whose queer actions had been reviewed to her.

It was difficult to believe that she was actually in the midst of cattle thieves, though the suspicion had more than once crossed her mind.

She held that class of men in the utmost loathing, and felt herself to be, now, in the actual discovery of the crime, a righteous instrument in the arm of justice.

The unmistakable figure of Long Bill loafed serenely in the doorway; old Peter hobbled about, in and out of the house, while back near the corral a man was carrying an armful of wood. This man the girl watched with particular interest. He took the sticks to one side of the corral, and getting down upon his knees proceeded to arrange them on the ground in methodical order, into the shape of a small pyramid. That done to his satisfaction, he lounged back to the cabin and took a seat beside Long Bill in the doorway.

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Presently all three men went back to the corral, and looked over the rails at several small creatures which were running about the enclosure.

"Them ain't bad-lookin' fellers," Long Bill was saying.

Hope, from her position in the brush, tried to imagine what they were talking about, for the distance was too great to carry the sound of their voices.

"I reckon we might as well git 'em branded an' have it over with," suggested Shorty Smith, the third man of the party.

"I reckon we might as well," replied Long Bill. Old Peter shook his head doubtfully.

"Go ahead," he grunted. "But remember I don't know nothin' about these here calves! You're just usin' my corral here to-day, an' the devil keep your skins if you git caught!"

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"Oh, I don't know!" drawled Shorty Smith.

"Well, I know!" roared the old man. "If you can't take my advice an' put this here thing off till after dark you kin take the consequences. Anybody's likely to ride along here, an' I'd like to know what kind of a yarn you'd have to tell!"

"Now you know them calves 're yourn," drawled Shorty Smith, in an aggravating tone, as he climbed up and seated himself on the top pole of the corral. "You know them 're yourn, every blame one, an' their mothers 're back in the hills there!"

"Your cows all had twins, so you picked out these here ones to wean 'em, if anybody should ask," said Long Bill, continuing the sport.

The old man uttered a string of oaths.

"Not much you don't pan 'em off onto me!" he exclaimed. "My cows ain't havin' twins this year!"

"Some of Harris' has got triplets," mused Shorty Smith, at which Long Bill laughed, exclaiming:

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"Been lary ever since them stock-inspectors was up here last fall, ain't you? Before that some o' your cows had a half a dozen calves. I should 'a' thought you had more grit'n that, Peter!"

The old man cursed some more. Shorty Smith jumped down from his high perch and fetched a

long, slender rod of iron from between two logs of the cow-shed.

"Might as well git down to business," he said as he threw the branding iron on the ground beside the symmetrical pyramid of fire-wood, which he proceeded to ignite.

"Let up, old man," growled Long Bill, "I'll take the blame o' the whole concern an' you ken rake in your share in the fall without any interference whatsoever."

"Don't git scared, Peter, you ain't got long to live on this here planet, nohow, so you can finish your days in peace. If there's any time to be served we'll do it for you," drawled Shorty.

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"That's what I call a mighty generous proposition," remarked Long Bill, as he coiled up his rope. "We'll just git the ornaments on these innocent creatures an' shut 'em up in the shed fer a spell."

"Yes, yes! Git the job over with if you ain't goin' to wait till after sundown," exclaimed old Peter nervously.

They set to work at once, roping, throwing, and putting a running brand on the frightened calves. As each one was finished to the satisfaction of the operator it was put into the cow-shed nearby—a rude sort of stable, where it was turned loose and the door securely fastened on the outside with a large wooden peg.

They had been working industriously for perhaps half an hour when old Peter glanced up from the calf upon which he was sitting and encountered Hope Hathaway's quiet eyes watching them interestedly. She stood beside the cow-shed but a few feet away, and held her horse by the bridle.

"Good God!" screamed the old man, nearly losing his balance. "Where did you come from?"

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The other men, whose backs were toward her, glanced about quickly, then proceeded in well assumed unconcern with the work upon which they were engaged.

"I hope I'm not intruding," said the girl.

"Not at all," replied Shorty Smith politely. "It ain't often we're favored by the company of wimmen folks."

"Those are fine-looking calves you've got there," observed the girl.

"Pretty fair," replied Shorty Smith, assisting the animal to its feet.

The visitor stepped to one side while he dragged it into the shed and closed the door, fastening it with the peg. Then Long Bill proceeded to throw another victim with as much coolness as though Hope had not been there with her quiet eyes taking in every detail.

Old Peter had not uttered a word since his first involuntary exclamation, and though visibly agitated, proceeded in a mechanical manner to assist with the branding, but he kept his head down and his eyes obstinately averted from the girl's.

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Nearly a dozen had been branded, and only one, besides the last victim already thrown to the ground, remained in the corral.

Hope's whole attention was apparently taken up with the branding, which she watched with great interest. Old Peter gradually regained his equilibrium, while Long Bill and Shorty Smith had begun to congratulate themselves that their spectator was most innocent and harmless. Yet as Hope moved quietly back to her position beside the rude stable building she not only observed the three men intent upon the branding, but noted the approach of a large cow which had appeared from the right-hand coulee about the time she left her hiding-place in the brush.

If the men had not been so busy they would undoubtedly have seen this particular cow coming on steadily toward the corral, now but a rod distant. They would have noticed, too, the girl's hand leave her side like a flash and remove the large, smooth peg from where Shorty Smith had hastily inserted it in the building. They would have seen the stable door open slowly by its own weight, and then the peg quickly replaced. What they did notice was that Miss Hathaway came very near to them, so close that she leaned over old Peter's shoulders to observe the smoking, steaming operation.

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For a moment she stood there quietly, then all at once exclaimed in some surprise:

"Why, your calves are all out!" Instantly the greatest consternation reigned, then old Peter hobbled to his feet with an oath.

"Every blamed one," said Shorty Smith. "How 'n blazes did that happen?"

"I reckon you didn't put that peg in right," drawled Long Bill.

"Look!" screamed old Peter, pointing at the large cow that had come nearer and had picked out from the assortment of calves one of which it claimed absolute possession. It was at this unfortunate moment that Livingston, quite unobserved, rode into Peter's basin.

"I'll help you drive them in," volunteered Hope, instantly mounting her horse and riding into their midst. Then a queer thing followed. Old Peter, with a cat-like motion, sprang toward her and covered her with a six-shooter.

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"Git off'n my place, you she-devil!" he cried, his face livid with rage and fear.

"Good God, don't shoot, you fool!" cried Shorty Smith, while Long Bill made a stride toward the frenzied old man.

Livingston's heart stood still. He was some distance away and, as usual, unarmed. For an instant he stopped short, paralyzed by the sight. Then the girl wheeled her horse suddenly about as if to obey the command. As she did so a report rang out and old Peter, with the flesh ripped from wrist to elbow, rolled over in a convulsed heap. It was all so sudden that it seemed unreal. Hope sat on her quivering horse, motionless, serene, holding in her hand a smoking revolver.

Long Bill and his companion stood like statues, dumfounded for the instant, but Livingston, with a bound, was at the girl's side, his face white, his whole being shaken.

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"Thank God!" he cried in great tenderness. "You are all right!"

"What made you come here?" she exclaimed in sudden nervousness, which sounded more like impatience.

Then their eyes met. Her own softened, then dropped, until they rested upon the gun in her hand. A flush rose to her face and her heart beat strangely, for in his eyes she had seen the undisguised love of a great, true soul. For an instant she was filled with the wild intoxication of it, then the present situation, which might now involve him, returned to her with all its seriousness. The danger must be averted at once, she decided, before he learned the actual truth.

"Poor old man!" she exclaimed. Then turned to Long Bill and his companion. "I'm awfully sorry I had to hurt him, but he actually made me nervous! I had an idea he was crazy, but I never believed he was perfectly mad. He ought to be watched constantly and all dangerous weapons kept away from him. Didn't you know he was dangerous?"

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Shorty Smith suddenly rose to meet the situation.

"I knowed he was crazy," he said, "but I didn't know he was as plumb locoed as that."

"Well, he's out of business for awhile," remarked the girl. "You boys better bandage up his arm and carry him into the house. I'll send over old Mother White Blanket when I get back. I guess you can get in the calves by yourselves all right, for really I feel very shaken and I think I'll go right home. You'll go with me, won't you, Mr. Livingston. But the poor old crazy man! You boys will take good care of him, won't you—and let me know if I can be of any assistance."

"Well, what do yo' think?" asked Shorty Smith, as Hope and her companion disappeared from the basin.

"What'd I think?" exclaimed Long Bill. "I think we've been pretty badly *done!*"

"Oh, I don't know," drawled Shorty Smith, "I reckon she ain't goin' to say nothin' about *me!*"

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## CHAPTER XVIII

"I'll tell you what I'd do 'bout it, if I was you," said Shorty Smith to the twins, several days later, as he handed back a folded sheet of paper. "I'd git your teacher to read that there letter. There's something in it she ought to know 'bout. Better not tell her first where you got it. Let on you don't know where it come from. There's somethin' there she'll like to hear 'bout, that you kids ain't old enough to understand."

"Oh, is that so!" interposed Dan.

"I ain't a-goin' to tell you nothin' about it, but like enough she will, an'll thank you fer givin' it to her," said Shorty.

"If that writin' wasn't so funny I'd make it out myself," replied the soft-voiced twin, "fer I think you're jobbin' us, Shorty."

"No, I ain't," he replied. "An' I'll back up my friendship fer you by givin' you this!" He took from his pocket a silver dollar and handed it to the boy, who pocketed it, and, followed by his brother, walked away without another word.

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Shorty Smith also walked away, in the opposite direction, without a word, but he chuckled to himself, and his mood was exceedingly jubilant.

"She done us all right, an' may play the devil yet, but I'll git in a little work, er my name ain't Shorty Smith!" Such was the substance of his thoughts during the next few days.

That afternoon Hope stood in the doorway of the school-house, watching her little brood of pupils straggling down the hill.

Louisa, who came daily to be with her beloved friend, had started home with the two eldest Harris girls, for Hope, in her capacity of teacher, occasionally found work to detain her for a short time after the others had gone. This teaching school was not exactly play, after all.

The twins lingered behind, seemingly engaged in a quiet discussion. Finally they came back to the door. [Pg 250]

"Here's somethin' for you to read," said the soft-voiced boy, handing her a folded paper, while Dave leaned against the building with an ugly scowl on his face.

"To read," asked Hope, turning it over in her hand. "Who wrote it, and where did you get it?" She stepped out of the doorway onto the green grass beside them.

"Read it," said the breed boy. "It's somethin' you ought to know."

"Something I ought to know? But who wrote it?" insisted the girl.

"A woman, I reckon," replied the boy. "You just read it, an' then you'll know all about it."

Hope laughed, and slowly opened the much soiled, creased missive. "Why didn't you tell me at once that it was for me?" she asked.

The writing was in a bold, feminine back-hand, and held her attention for a moment. The thought occurred to her that Clarice might have written from the ranch, but there was something unfamiliar about it. She looked first at the signature. "Your repentant Helene," it was signed. Helene,—who was Helene, she wondered; then turned the paper over. "My darling Boy," it started. In her surprise she said the words aloud. [Pg 251]

"Why, that's not for me! Where did you boys get this letter? Now tell me!" She was very much provoked with them.

The soft-voiced twin smiled.

"I thought you'd like to know what was in it," he remarked, in evident earnestness.

"That doesn't answer my question," she said with some impatience. "*Where* did you get it?"

"We found it," replied Dave gruffly, still scowling.

"And you boys bring a letter to *me* that was intended for someone else, and *expect* me to *read* it!" She folded it up and handed it back to the boy. "Go and give that to whom it belongs, and remember it's very wrong to read another person's letter. Tell me where you got it. I insist upon knowing." [Pg 252]

"Oh, we just found it up on the hill last night," replied the soft-voiced twin evasively.

"Why don't you tell her the whole shootin' match!" roared the blunt Dave. "You're a dandy! We found it up in the spring coulee last night near where Mr. Livingston's sheep're camped. He was up there before dark, cuttin' 'em out. This here letter dropped out of his pocket when he threw his coat on a rock up there, an' so Dan an' me an' Shorty Smith came along an' picked it up."

"Mr. Livingston's," said Hope, suddenly feeling oddly alarmed. "Not *his*—you must be mistaken! Why, it began—it was too—*informal*—even for a sister, and he has no sister, he told me so!"

"It's for him all right, for here's the envelope." Dan took it from his pocket and handed it to her. It left no room for doubt. It was directed to him, and bore an English postmark. He had no sister. Then it must be from his sweetheart—and he told her he had no sweetheart. A sudden pain consumed her. [Pg 253]

"I reckon it's from his wife," said the soft-voiced twin.

"He has no wife," said Hope quietly.

"Oh, yes, he has! That's what they say," declared the boy.

"They lie," she replied softly. "I *know* he has no wife."

"I'll bet you he left her in England," said the boy. "That's what the men say."

"Your repentant Helene," repeated the girl over and over to herself.

Suddenly suspicion, jealousy, rage, entered her heart, setting her brain on fire. She turned to the boy like a fury. "Give me that letter!"

Frightened beyond speech by the storm in her black eyes, he handed it to her and watched her as with a set face and strangely brilliant eyes she began to read. Every word branded itself upon her heart indelibly.

MY DARLING BOY: Can it be that you actually refuse to allow me to come there? Admitting I have wronged you in the past, can you not in your greatness of heart find forgiveness for a weak woman—a pleading woman—

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There at the foot of the first page the girl stopped, a sudden terror coming over her.

"*What have I done!*" she cried, crushing the letter in her hand. "*What have I done!*" Hysterically she began tearing it into small pieces, throwing them upon the ground.

"Now we can't give it back to him," deplored the twin, recovering from his fright.

"What have I done?" repeated the girl again, softly. Then in an agony of remorse she went down

upon her knees in the cool grass and picked up each tiny scrap of paper, putting it all back into the envelope. She stood for a moment looking down the long green slope below, shamed, disgusted—a world of misery showing in her dark eyes. "You're a mighty fine specimen of womanhood!" she exclaimed aloud; then turning about suddenly became aware that her small audience was watching her with some interest.

"You boys get on your ponies and go right straight home!" she exclaimed in a burst of temper. "You're very bad, both of you, and I've a good notion to punish you!" She went into the school-house and slammed the door, while the twins lost no time in leaving the premises. Not far away they met old Jim McCullen.

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"Where's your teacher?" he asked, stopping his horse in the road.

"She's back there," said the soft-voiced twin, pointing toward the school-house. "But you'd better stay away, for she's got blood in her eye to-day!"

"No wonder, you young devils!" laughed Jim, riding on.

He knocked at the school-house door and, receiving no answer, walked in.

"Oh, Jim!" exclaimed the girl, rising from the small table at the end of the room. "I thought it was some of the children returning. I'm awfully glad to see you! You've been gone an age. Come, sit down here in this chair, I'm afraid those seats aren't large enough for you."

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"I'll just sit on this here recitation bench," replied Jim, "that's what you call it, ain't it? I want to see how it feels to be in school again. I reckon it'll hold me all right."

He seated himself with some care, while the teacher sank back at her table.

"You don't seem very pert-lookin', Hopie," he continued, noticing her more carefully. "What's the matter?"

She looked down at her papers, then up at him with something of a smile.

"I'm twenty years old," she replied, "and I don't know as much as I did ten years ago."

"You know too much," replied McCullen. "You know too much to be happy, an' you think too much. You wasn't happy at home, so you come up here, an' now your gittin' the same way here. You'll have to git married, Hopie, an' settle down; there ain't no other way."

"Mercy!" exclaimed the girl, "that would settle me sure enough! What a horrible proposition to consider! Just look at my mother—beset with nervousness and unrest; look at that poor Mrs. Cresmond and a dozen others—perfect slaves to their husbands. Look at Clarice—she never knew a moment's happiness until Henry Van Rensselaer died! Yes, I think marriage *settles* a girl all right! What terrible mismated failures on every hand! It's simply appalling, Jim! I've never yet known one perfectly happy couple, and how any girl who sees this condition about her, everywhere, can dream her own ideal love dream, picture her ideal man, and plan and believe in an ideal life, while she herself is surrounded by such pitiful object-lessons, is a wonder!"

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"I ain't much of a philosopher," said old Jim, "but it's always been my notion that most wimmen *don't* see what's goin' on around 'em. They think their own troubles is worse'n anybody's an' 're so taken up whinin' over 'em that their view is somewhat obstructed. Take the clear-headed person that *can* see, an' they ain't a-goin' to run into any matrimonial fire, no more'n I'm goin' to head my horse over a cut-bank. They're goin' straight after the happiness they know exists, an' they ain't goin' to make no mistake about it neither, if they've got any judgment, whatever."

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"What made my mother marry my father?" asked the girl, lifting up her head and facing old Jim squarely. "That's the worst specimen of ill-assorted marriages I know of."

Jim McCullen looked perplexed for an instant.

"I don't think that was in the beginning," he replied thoughtfully, "but your mother got to hankerin' after her city life, her balls an' theaters an' the like o' that. After she got a fall from her horse an' couldn't ride no more she didn't seem to take interest in anything at the ranch, an' kept gettin' more nervous all the time. I reckon her health had something to do with it, an' then she got weaned from the ranch, bein' away so much. It wasn't her life any more."

"And now even her visits there are torture to her," said Hope bitterly. "She is drunk with the deadly wine of frivolous uselessness—society!" Then sadly, "What a wealth of happiness she might have possessed had she chosen wisely!"

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"But she was like a ship without a rudder; she didn't have no one to guide her, an' now she thinks she's happy, I reckon," remarked McCullen, adding, after a pause, "If she thinks at all!"

"And poor Clarice was a baby when *she* married," mused the girl.

"And that Cresmond woman always was a blame fool," concluded Jim. "So there's hope for you yet, don't you reckon there is? That reminds me, here's a letter from O'Hara. There's a nice fellow for you, Hopie."

"Yes, he's a good boy, Larry is," she remarked absently, taking the letter he handed to her.

"Why, he says he is coming over here to stay awhile with Sydney, and he hopes I won't be——"

## CHAPTER XIX

"Your horse don't look very tired," remarked the girl as they rode easily up the gulch toward Carter's camp. "When did you start?"

"Left 'bout noon," replied McCullen. "No, he ain't tired; ain't even warm, be you, old man? Just jogged along easy all the way an' took my time. No great rush, anyhow. Cattle 're gittin' pretty well located up here now—good feed, fresh water, an' everything to attract 'em to the place. Never saw any stock look better'n that little bunch o' steers is lookin'. Market's way up now, an' they ought to be shipped pretty soon."

"Why *don't* you ship them, then?" asked Hope, leaning forward to brush a hornet from her horse's head.

"Oh, you see," said the man lamely, "them cattle ain't in such all-fired good fix but what they might be better, an' I reckon your cousin ain't in any hurry to ship, nohow. Pretty good place to camp up here in summer. Cool—my, but it was blasted hot down at the ranch this mornin', an' the misquitos like to eat me up! No misquitos up here to bother, good water, good fishin', good company,—an' who under the sun would want to quit such a camp?"

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"I'm willing," said the girl, looking at him with fathomless eyes, "I'm perfectly willing for him to camp here all summer. It's quite convenient to have you all so near. Of course I'm getting used to the grub down there—some, by this time. Don't think I do not appreciate your being here, dear old Jim! But you know I understand, just the same, why you are here! And I think," she added softly, "I couldn't have stood it if he hadn't showed that he cared for me just so."

"Cared!" exclaimed the old fellow. "Cared *for you!* Why, Hopie, your father worships the ground you walk on! He's a great, good-hearted man, the best in the world, and you mustn't have no hard feelin's agin' him for any little weaknesses, because the good in him is more'n the good in most men. There ain't no one that's perfect, but he's better'n most of us, I reckon. An' he loves you, an' is so proud of you, Hopie!"

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"Oh, I know it, I know it!" exclaimed the girl passionately.

"An' your mother's goin' East next month," concluded McCullen. "She's very anxious to get away."

"My poor father!" said Hope softly. Then more brightly: "I suppose Sydney's out with the cattle."

"Them cattle 're gettin' pretty well located," replied McCullen. "Don't need much herdin'. No, I seen him there at Harris' as I come along. He said he was goin' to take you an' that little flax-haired girl out ridin', but concluded, as long as you was busy at the school-house, that he'd just take the little one—providin' she'd go. He was arguin' the question with her when I rode by, an' I reckon he's there talkin' to her yet, er else givin' her a ridin' lesson. He'll make a good horsewoman out o' her yet, if her heart ain't buried too deep up there under the rocks."

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"Oh, Jim!" rebuked the girl. "It's *dreadful* to talk like that, and her poor heart is just *crushed!* It's pitiful!"

"I reckon that's just what Sydney thinks about it," replied Jim, his eyes twinkling. "You ain't goin' to blame him for bein' sympathetic, be you, Hopie?"

She laughed, but nervously.

"Louisa's the sweetest thing I ever saw, Jim! She's promised to stay and go back to the ranch with me in the fall when school is over. Isn't it nice to have a sister like that? But goodness, she wouldn't look at Syd—not in ten years!"

She was so positive in this assertion that it left Jim without an argument. She slowed down her horse to a walk, and he watched her take O'Hara's letter from her belt and read the lengthy epistle from beginning to end. Not a change of expression crossed the usual calm of her face. But for a strange force of beauty and power, by which she impressed all with whom she came in contact, her lack of expression would have been a defect. This peculiar characteristic was an added charm to her strange personality. She was rarely understood by her best friends, who generally occupied themselves by wondering what she was going to do next.

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It may be that old Jim McCullen, calmly contemplating her from his side of the narrow trail, wondered too, but he had the advantage of most people, for he knew that whatever she did do would be the nearest thing to her hand. There was nothing variable or fitful about Hope.

She folded her letter and tucked it back in her belt, her only comment being, as she spurred her horse into a faster gait: "Larry says he is coming over here one of these days."

They rode past the camp and on to the flat beyond, where grazed Sydney's two hundred head of steers. These they rode around, while Jim reviewed the news of the ranch and round-up, in which

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the girl found some interest, asking numerous questions about the recent shipment of cattle, the tone of the market, the prospect for hay, the number of cattle turned on the range, and many things pertaining to the work of the ranch, but never a question concerning the idle New Yorkers who made up her mother's annual house-party. In them she took, as usual, no interest.

She finally left her old friend and turned her horse's head back toward Harris' still as much perturbed in heart as when McCullen knocked at her school-house door. She tormented herself with unanswerable questions, arriving always at the same conclusion—that after all it only seemed reasonable to suppose Livingston should be married. It explained his conduct toward her perfectly. She wondered what the woman, Helene, had done to deserve such unforgiveness from one who, above all men, was the most tender and thoughtful. She concluded that it must have been something dreadful, and, oddly for her, began to feel sorry for him. She saw him when she reached the top of the divide, riding half a mile away toward his ranch buildings. Then a certain feeling of ownership, of pride, took possession of her, crowding everything before it. How well he sat his horse, in his English fashion, she thought. What a physique, what grace of strength! Then he disappeared from her sight as his horse plunged into the brush of the creek-bottom, and Hope, drawing a long breath, spurred up her own horse until she was safely out of sight of ranch and ranch-buildings. A bend in the road brought her face to face with Long Bill and Shorty Smith.

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"Hello," said Shorty Smith, drawing rein beside her. "I was a lookin' for you."

"Really," said the girl, stopping beside him and calmly contemplating both men.

"Yep," nodded Long Bill politely, "we was huntin' fer you, Miss Hathaway."

"You see it's like this," explained Shorty Smith; "the old man, he ain't a-doin' very well. I reckon it's his age. That there wound of his'n won't heal, so we thought mebby you had some arnica salve er something sort o' soothin' to dope him with."

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"I haven't the salve, but I might go over there myself if you want an anodyne," replied Hope, unsmiling at the men's blank faces.

"I'm goin' to ride to town to-morrow and I reckoned if you didn't have no salve you could send in for it."

"Oh, I see!" Hope's exclamation came involuntarily. "What do you want to get for him and how much money do you want for it?"

"Well, you see, he needs considerable. Ain't got nothin' comfortable over there; nothin' to eat, wear—nothin' at all."

"All right," replied the girl in her cool, even tone. "I'll see that he is supplied with everything, but will attend to the matter myself. Good-evening!" She rode past them rapidly, and they, outwitted in their little scheme for whisky-money, rode on their way toward old Peter's basin.

Sydney's horse stood outside of Harris'. He left a group of men who were waiting the call for supper, and came out in the road to meet the girl when she rode up.

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"I have been waiting for you," he said.

"And I have been over to camp and around the cattle with Jim," she replied.

"Then come on and ride back up the road with me a ways, I want to see you," said Carter, picking up the bridle reins from the ground.

"But Louisa—" she demurred.

"Louisa's all right," he answered. "I've had her out for a ride, and now she's gone in the house with that breed girl—Mary, I think she called her. So you see she's in excellent hands."

Hope turned her horse about and rode away with him silently.

"I want to talk with you, anyway," he said, when they had gone a short distance. "I haven't had a chance in a dog's age, you're always so hemmed in lately."

"Well, what is it?" she questioned.

"There's some rumors going around that I don't exactly understand, Hope. Have you been doing anything since you've been up here to raise a commotion among these breeds?"

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She turned to him with a shrug of contempt.

"You'll have to tell me what you're driving at before I can enlighten you," she replied.

"Wait a minute," he said, "I want to light a cigarette." This accomplished, he continued: "I saw one of the boys from Bill Henry's outfit yesterday and he told me that he was afraid you were getting mixed up in some row up here."

"Who said so?" she demanded.

"Well, it was Peterson. You know he'll say what he's got to say, if he dies for it." He waited a moment.

"If it was Peterson, go on. He's a friend, if he is a fool. What did he have to say about me?" She

flecked some dust from her skirt with the end of her reins.

Sydney watched her carefully.

"He didn't say anything, exactly, about you," he replied. "That's what I'm going to try to find out. He said there had been some kind of a rumpus up here when you first came—that shooting at Livingston's corral, you remember, and that it was rumored there had been some sharp-shooting done, and you had been mixed up in it."

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"Who told Peterson?" demanded the girl.

"Well, it seems that McCullen laid Long Bill out one evening over at Bill Henry's wagon, for something or other, and this old squaw back here, old Mother White Blanket, happened along in time to view the fallen hero, who, it seems, is her son-in-law. She immediately fell into a rage and denounced a certain school-ma'am as a deep-dyed villain."

"Villainess," corrected Hope serenely.

"Yes, I believe that was it," continued Sydney. "Anyway, she rated you roundly and said you had been at the bottom of all the trouble, that you had shot Long Bill through the hand, wounded several others, and mentioned the herder who was killed."

"She lied!" said the girl with sudden whiteness of face. "That was a cold-blooded lie about the herder!"

"I know that!" assured her cousin. "You don't suppose I ever thought for a minute you were mixed up in it, Hokie, do you? I only wanted to know how it happened that all these people are set against you."

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"Because they know I'm on to their deviltry," she replied savagely. "I'd like to have that old squaw right here between my hands, *so*, and hear her bones crackle. How dare they say *I* shot Louisa's poor, poor sweetheart! Oh, I could exterminate the whole tribe!"

"But that wouldn't be lawful, Hokie," remarked Carter.

She turned to him with a half smile, resting one hand confidently upon his arm.

"Syd, dear, I don't care a bit about the whole concern, really, but please don't mention it to anyone, will you?"

"You mean not to tell Livingston," he smiled.

"I mean not *anyone*. I shouldn't want my father to hear such talk. Neither would you. What wouldn't he do!"

"Of course not," he agreed. "You'd get special summons, immediately, if not sooner. But there's something more I wanted to ask you about. How was it you happened to shoot old Peter?"

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"How did you know?" she asked quickly.

"Now I promised I wouldn't mention the matter," he replied.

She studied for a moment.

"There's only one way you could have heard it," she finally decided in some anger. "That person had no right to tell you."

"It was told with the best intentions, and for your own good, Hope, so that I could look after you more carefully in the future."

"Look after me!" she retorted. "Well, I guess he found out there was one time I could look out for myself, didn't he?"

"He seemed to think that more a miracle or an accident than anything else, until I told him something about how quick you were with a gun. He told me the old man was crazy, and had pulled his gun on you, but that you had in some remarkable manner shot it out of his hand, shattering the old fellow's arm. I assured him that I would see that the proper authorities took care of old Peter, as soon as he had recovered sufficiently. Now what'll we do with him, Hope?" She did not reply. Then he continued: "I knew in a minute that you'd kept the real facts of the case from Livingston. But you're not going to keep them from me."

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"Now that you know as much as you do, I suppose I've got to tell you or you'll be getting yourself into trouble, too," she replied. Then impulsively, "Sydney, they're a lot of cattle thieves!"

"Why, of course! What did you expect?" he laughed.

"And I actually *caught* them in the very act of branding calves that didn't belong to them!"

The young man's face paled perceptibly.

"You didn't do anything as reckless as that, Hope!" he cried in consternation. "It's a wonder they didn't kill you outright in self-protection! Didn't you know that you have to be blind to those things unless you're backed up by some good men!"

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"You talk like a coward!" she exclaimed.

"Not much! You know I'm not that," he replied. "But I talk sense. Now, if they know that you have positive proof of this, you'd better watch them!"

"They all need watching up here. I believe they're all just the same. And, Syd, I wanted to know the truth for myself, I wanted to *see*." Then she reviewed to him just what had happened at old Peter's.

"I'll have them locked up at once," said Carter decisively. "That's just where they belong."

"You won't do anything of the kind, Syd—not at present, anyway, for I refuse to be witness against them."

"You're foolish, then," he replied, "for they're liable to do something."

"If they're quicker than I am, all right," she replied fearlessly. "But they are afraid of me now, and I've got them *just where I want them*."

He tried to reason with her, but in vain. She was obstinate in her refusal to have the men arrested, and though Sydney studied the matter carefully, he could find no plausible excuse for this foolish decision. [Pg 275]

As Hope rode back once more toward Harris' the face of Shorty Smith, insinuatingly leering, as she had seen it at the trout stream, came again to torment her. She leaned forward in her saddle, covering her face with her hands, and felt in her whole being the reason of her decision. [Pg 276]

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## CHAPTER XX

Larry O'Hara rode up to Sydney's camp late one afternoon, some two or three weeks later, and finding the place deserted went in the cook-tent and made himself at home. It had been a long, hot, dusty ride from Hathaway's home-ranch. He had experienced some difficulty in finding the place, and, having at length reached it, proceeded with his natural adaptitude to settle himself for a prolonged stay.

He was a great, handsome, prepossessing young fellow, overflowing with high spirits and good-nature. Though a natural born American, he was still a typical Irishman, retaining much of the brogue of his Irish parents, which, being more of an attraction in him than otherwise, he never took the trouble to overcome. All the girls were in love with Larry O'Hara, and he, in his great generosity of heart, knew it, and loved them in return. [Pg 277]

His affection for Hope Hathaway was something altogether different, and dated two or three years back when he first saw her skimming across the prairie on an apparently unmanageable horse. He proceeded to do the gallant act of rescuing a lady. For miles he ran the old cow-pony that had been assigned him, in hot pursuit, and when he had from sheer exhaustion almost dropped to the ground she suddenly turned her horse about and laughed in his face. It was an awkward situation. The perspiration streamed from his forehead, his breath came in gasps. She continued laughing. He mopped his face furiously, got control of his breath, and exclaimed in deep emotion:

"Sure and is ridicule all I get when I have followed you for ten miles on this baist of a horse, to offer you a proposition of marriage?"

Their friendship dated from that moment, and though Larry had renewed his proposition of marriage every time he had seen her, yet there had never been a break in their comradeship. [Pg 278]

He looked about the well-appointed camp with a sigh of contentment. This was something like living, he thought. His enforced confinement at the ranch had been slow torture to him. He missed the presence of Hope and Sydney, for to him they were the very spirit of the place, and he was filled with anxiety to get away from it and join them.

After washing the dust from his face and hands he went through the cook's mess-box, then, having nothing else to do, laid down for a nap on one of the bunks in the second tent and was soon sleeping peacefully.

He never knew just how long he slept, though he declared he had not closed his eyes, when a whispered conversation outside the tent brought him to his feet with a start. It was suspicious to say the least, and he tore madly at his roll of belongings in search of his revolver, which he found in his hip-pocket, after he had scattered his clothes from one end of the tent to the other. [Pg 279]

It was not yet dark. The whispers came now from the opposite tent. O'Hara's fighting blood was up. He gloried in the situation. Here was his opportunity to hold up some thieving rascals. It was almost as good as being a real desperado. It flashed upon him that they might be the real article, but he would not turn coward. He would show them what one man could do!

He peered cautiously out of the tent. Two horses with rough-looking saddles stood at the edge of the brush not far away. Larry O'Hara would not be afraid of two men.

He moved cautiously up to the front of the cook-tent, and throwing open the flap called out in thundering tones: "Throw up your hands, ye thieving scoundrels, or I'll have your loives!"

A pair of arms shot up near him like a flash, while a choking sound came from the farther side of the mess-box. Two startled, pie-be-grimed boys gazed in amazement into the barrel of Larry's gun, which he suddenly lowered, overcome with surprise as great as their own.

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"May heaven preserve us!" he cried. "I thought you were murdering thieves! But if it's only supper you're after, I'll take a hand in it meself!"

The soft-voiced twin recovered first.

"Say, where'd you come from? I thought that was the cook sleepin' in there an' we wasn't goin' to disturb him to get our supper. What're *you* doin' 'round here, anyhow?"

"I'm a special officer of the law, on the lookout for some dangerous criminals," replied Larry. "But I see I've made a great mistake this time. It's not kids I'm after! I'll just put this weapon back in my pocket to show that I'm friendly inclined. And now let's have something to eat. You boys must know the ins and outs of this place pretty well, for I couldn't find pie here when I came, or anything that looked loike pie. Where'd you make the raise?"

The boys began to breathe easier, although an "officer of the law" was something of which they stood in mortal terror. Yet this particular "officer" seemed quite a jovial sort of a fellow, and they soon reached the conclusion that he would be a good one to "stand in" with. The soft-voiced twin sighed easily, and settled himself into a familiar position at the table, remarking as he did so:

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"Oh, we're to home here! This camp belongs to a friend of ourn." He pulled the pie toward him. "Here, Dave," he said to the other, who had also recovered from his surprise, "throw me a knife from over there. I reckon I ain't a-goin' to eat this here pie with my fingers! An' get out some plates for him an' you. No use waitin' for the cook to come in an' get our supper. Ain't no tellin' where he's gone."

"You're a pretty cool kid," remarked O'Hara, helping himself to the pie. "I'll take a piece of pie with you for company's sake, though I'm inclined to wait for the cook of this establishment. A good, warm meal is more to my liking. Where do you fellows live?"

"Over here a ways," replied Dan cautiously.

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"Know of any bad men that wants arresting?" continued O'Hara. "I'm in the business at present."

"I reckon I do," replied the boy, lowering his voice to a soft, sweet tone. "There's a mighty dangerous character I can put you onto if you'll swear you'll never give me away."

"I'll never breathe a word of it," declared O'Hara; "just point out your man to me; I'll fix him for you!"

"What'll you do to him?" asked Dan, in great earnestness. O'Hara laughed.

"I'll do just whatever you say," he replied. "What's his crime?"

"Well, I'll tell you," said the boy deliberately, while Dave listened in open-mouthed wonderment. "He's a bad character, a tough one! He gits drunker'n a fool and thinks he runs the earth, an' he licks his children if they happen to open their heads! I never seen him steal no horses, er kill anyone, but he's a bad man, just the same, an' needs lockin' up for 'bout six months!" Dave, finally comprehending his twin, jumped up and down, waving his arms wildly above his head.

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"You bet you! Lock him up, that's the checker! Lock the old man in jail, an' we can do just as we want to!" he exclaimed.

"But you know," said O'Hara impressively, his eyes twinkling with suppressed merriment, "it's like this. There's a law that says if a man—a *family* man—be sent to jail for anything less than cold-blooded murder, his intire family must go with him to look after him. Didn't you ever hear of that new law? Now that would be a bad thing for his boys, poor things! It would be worse than the beating they get. But you just give Larry O'Hara the tip, and the whole family'll get sent up!"

"Not much you don't!" roared Dave to his twin, who for the instant seemed dumfounded by this piece of news from the "officer of the law."

"I reckon," said the soft-voiced schemer after a quiet pause, "his boys 'ud rather take the lickin's than get sent up, so you might as well let him alone. You're sure there ain't no mistake 'bout that? Don't seem like that's quite right."

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"Sure!" replied Larry, enjoying the situation to its full extent.

"Well, I ain't," decided the boy finally. "I'm goin' to ask the teacher. Mebby you're loadin' us. You bet she'll know!"

Larry O'Hara became suddenly awake to a new interest. "Where is she—your teacher?" he inquired.

"I dunno," answered the boy. "Mebby home."

At this juncture the flap of the tent was pushed open and in bustled the little English cook.

All three of the occupants started guiltily, while William looked from his visitors to the remnants of pie upon the table with some astonishment.



"Well, Hi'll be blowed!" he ejaculated. Then noticing that O'Hara was not an ordinary specimen of Westerner, he changed his expression and began wagging his head, offering excuses for his tardiness. [Pg 285]

"I had orders to get a warm bite at eight o'clock, so I went out 'untin' a bit on my own account. Did you come far, sir?"

"All the way from Hathaway's ranch," replied Larry. "And the way I took, it couldn't have been a rod less than a hundred moiles. Sure, every bone in me body is complaining!"

"Too bad, that," condoled William. "Hit's no easy road to find. I missed hit once, myself. I think I seen you about the ranch, didn't I? What's yer name?"

"I'm O'Hara," he replied. "If you haven't seen me, you've heard about me, which amounts to the same thing. I'm glad to see you, my good man, for I began to suspect that everyone had deserted camp. I was just going to question these young natives here, as to the whereabouts of the owners of this ranch, when you came in."

The twins were sidling toward the front of the tent with a view to hasty retreat when the cook fixed his sharp little eyes upon them. [Pg 286]

"Ain't I good enough to yous but you must come an' clean out all my pastry when my back is turned? Hi'll overlook hit this time, if you get out an' chop me some wood. 'Urry up now an' get to work! for they'll all be along directly!" The boys made their escape from the tent, while the cook continued: "They all went out 'untin' after some antelope, way up there on the big mountain. They'll be in after a bit for a bite to heat, so if you'll excuse me, Hi'll start things goin'."

The little cook put on his apron and hustled about, while O'Hara went out and watched the boys break up some sticks of wood which they brought from the nearby brush.

"Here, give me the job," the young man finally remarked. "It belongs to me by rights for keeping you talking so long. If it hadn't been for me you'd got away without being seen. Here, hand over your ax, and get along home with you!"

"Say, you're all right, if you do belong to the law," said Dave, gladly giving up the ax. They speedily made their escape, and none too soon, for as they disappeared a group of riders came in sight on the opposite side of the brush and soon surrounded the wood-chopper with hearty words of welcome. [Pg 287] [Pg 288]

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## CHAPTER XXI

"My dear boy, I'm glad to see you!" called Sydney.

"Larry O'Hara chopping wood! Impossible!" declared Hope, as Carter rode on past her. "It's an illusion—a vanishing vision. Our eyes deceive us!"

"But it is a young man there," said Louisa. "A big one like Mr. Livingston, not so slim like Sydney—your cousin."

"True enough," laughed Hope. "But it is the occupation—the ax, Louisa, dear. I never knew Larry to do a stroke of work!"

"Ach, but he is handsome!" whispered Louisa.

"Don't let him know you think so," returned Hope. "He's spoiled badly enough now." She turned to the man who rode on her opposite side. "He's from the ranch—one of the guests from New York. He's the *dearest* character!" After which exclamation she rode ahead and greeted the newcomer. [Pg 289]

"It never rains but it pours," said O'Hara, as he entered the tent with Hope and Louisa, while Sydney and Livingston remained to take care of the horses. "I thought awhile ago that I was stranded in a wilderness, and here I am surrounded by beautiful ladies and foine gentlemen!"

"Right in your natural element," commented Hope. "That's why I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you out there alone with the ax—Larry O'Hara chopping fire-wood!"

"Now, what's there funny about that?" asked Larry.

"I can't explain just now," laughed the girl. "But tell me, did you have any trouble getting over here? Jim started for the ranch this afternoon. Didn't you meet him on the road?"

"Not one living soul," replied Larry. "For I took a road nobody ever traveled before." [Pg 290]

"And got lost," said Hope.

"Yes, about four hundred toimes!"

"And yet you live to tell the tale! I'm awfully glad to see you, Larry! Let's have a light in here, William, it's getting dark," she said.

The cook hustled about, and soon two lanterns, suspended from each end of the ridge pole, flooded the tent with light.

"Now I can see you," exclaimed O'Hara to Hope, who had taken a seat upon a box beside Louisa. "You're looking foine! The mountains must agree with you—and your friend also," he added.

"Louisa is always fine! Are you not?" asked Hope.

Louisa laughed in her quiet little way. "The young man is very polite!"

Sydney opened the flap of the tent and looked in, then turned back again for an instant.

"That'll be all right there, Livingston. There won't a thing touch it up that tree! Come along in and get some chuck!"

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"All right!" came the reply from the edge of the brush. Then Carter came inside and drew up a seat beside the two girls.

"What's that you said, Miss Louisa?" he asked. "I didn't quite catch it. You surely weren't accusing Larry of *politeness!*"

The girl bit her little white teeth into the red of her lower lip. Her cheeks flushed and the dimples came and went in the delicate coloring.

"Was it wrong to say?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Not if it was true," he replied. "It's never wrong to tell the truth, even in Montana."

"Oh, Syd, don't plague her! Larry included her in a little flattery—a compliment; and she merely remarked upon his extreme politeness."

"And I am completely squelched," said O'Hara despairingly.

"Then you shouldn't try to flatter two people at once," declared Hope.

"American girls aren't so honest," said Carter, looking soberly into Louisa's blue eyes.

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She regained her composure with a little toss of her head.

"An American girl is my best friend—you shall say nodings about *dem!* Ah, here comes Mr. Livingston mit de beautiful horns which he gif to me!" she cried, clapping her hands.

"They're beauties, aren't they?" said Livingston, holding up the antlers to view. "I'll get some of the Indians around here to fix them up for you." He took them outside again, then came in and joined the others around the camp table.

"Mr. Livingston was the lucky one to-day," said Hope to O'Hara; "but we had a great hunt."

"I am not at all sure that I got him," said Livingston, seating himself beside her. "I am positive another shot was fired at the same time, but I looked around and saw no one. You came up a few moments afterward, Miss Hathaway, and I have had a sort of rankling suspicion ever since that there was some mystery about it."

"Then clear your mind of it at once," replied the girl. "I'll admit that I fired a shot at the same instant you did, but I was on the opposite side of the brush from where you were, and didn't see the antelope at all. What I aimed at was a large black speck in the sky above me, and this is my trophy." She drew from her belt a glossy, dark eagle's feather, and handed it to him.

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"May I have this?" he asked, taking it from her.

"Why, certainly," she answered carelessly.

O'Hara had been looking at Livingston closely, as though extremely perplexed by his appearance. Suddenly he gave a deep laugh, jumped up from his seat and began shaking him warmly by the hand.

"Well, if this isn't—"

"*Edward Livingston,*" interrupted the other briefly.

"But who'd ever dream of seeing *you* here in this country!" continued O'Hara. "It was too dark to see you distinctly when you rode up, or I'd have known you at once. I'm glad to see you; indeed, I am, sir!"

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"How romantic!" exclaimed Hope. "Where did you ever meet Larry, Mr. Livingston?"

"I had the privilege of meeting Mr. O'Hara at the home of an acquaintance near London two or three years ago. I am very glad to have the pleasure again." O'Hara was about to say something in reply to this, but thought better of it, and remained silent, while Livingston continued: "I never imagined that I should meet my Irish-American friend in this far country, though you Americans do have a way of appearing in the most unexpected places. This America is a great country. I like it—in fact, well enough that I have now become one of its citizens."

"But you have not left England for good!" exclaimed O'Hara.

"For good, and for all time," replied Livingston, the youthful expression of his face settling into

maturer lines of sadness. "I have not one tie left. My friend, Carter here, will tell you that I have settled down in these mountains as a respectable sheep-man—respectable, if not dearly beloved. Miss Hathaway does not believe there can be anything respectable about the sheep business, but I have promised to convert her. Is that not so?" he asked, turning to her.

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"He has promised to give me a pet lamb to take back to the ranch," she said, laughing. "I shall put a collar on its neck and lead it by a blue ribbon! At least it will be as good an ornament as Clarice Van Rensselaer's poodle. Horrible little thing!"

"Now just imagine the beautiful Mrs. Larry O'Hara trailing that kind of a baist about the streets of New York! I move that the animal be rejected with thanks!" exclaimed Larry. Livingston looked at him in quiet amazement, then at Hope and Sydney to see how they took his audacity.

"Don't worry, Larry, dear," replied Hope. "The pet lamb hasn't been accepted yet—or you, either! I shall probably choose the pet lamb, but rely on my good judgment, that's a nice boy, and don't let such a little matter bother you!"

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Larry heaved an unnaturally deep sigh, at which little Louisa laughed, and Sydney patted him upon the shoulder, exclaiming:

"Cheer up! You have an even chance with the lamb. You don't need to be afraid of such a rival!"

"But she says herself that the animal's chances are the best," said Larry dismally. Then with a sudden inspiration: "How much'll you take for that baist? I'll buy him of you—*Mr.* Livingston!"

"Now's your chance to make some money!" cried Sydney.

Livingston quickly entered the mood of the moment.

"Miss Hathaway has an option on the lamb," he said, looking at her. "If she wants to throw it up I shall be glad to sell it to you."

"She wants her supper mostly now," said Hope. "Come on, let's eat, for we must get back. See all the fine things William has prepared for us!"

After the meal, when the girls rose to depart, Larry insisted upon accompanying them home.

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"I am going along, too," laughed Sydney, "so I'll see that he gets back to camp all right! You might as well let him go, Hope."

"Well, if he is so foolish, after his hard day's ride," she said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "But get him a fresh horse, Sydney. At least we can spare the poor tired animal!"

Sydney and O'Hara both went a short distance away to get the saddle-horse which was feeding quietly on the hillside. Hope led her horse down to the water and while it was drinking Livingston came and stood beside her.

For a moment they remained there quiet, side by side, then the man spoke:

"It is of such as this that life's sweetest moments are made. It seems almost a sacrilege to break the spell, but I cannot always be silent. You know I love you, Hope!"

"Yes," she replied carelessly, "I believe you told me so once before." For an instant he did not speak. "It was here at the camp, another evening like this, wasn't it?" she continued, in quite a matter-of-fact tone.

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"I will not believe that you have forgotten it," he exclaimed softly. "It may have sounded foolish to you to hear the words, but I could not help saying them!" He stood so close to her that he could feel her warm breath. "It may be wrong to stand here with you now, alone. How quiet it is! You and I together in a little world of our own! How I love you, my girl, *love you!* I may not have the right to this much happiness, but there is no moral law that man or God has made to prevent a man from saying to the woman he loves, 'I love you!' Are you—do you care that I have said it?"

"You must not—tell me again," she said, in a voice so forced that it seemed to belong to some other person. Then she turned abruptly and led her horse past him, up the bank of the creek, to Louisa waiting before the tent.

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## CHAPTER XXII

In the cool of evening, between dark and moonrise, the time when night is blackest, and shadows hang like a pall over mountain top and crag, a small group of men might have been seen lounging before old Mother White Blanket's tepee, absorbing the genial warmth that came from her camp-fire, over which the old squaw hovered close.

In the background, away from the group, yet still with the light of the fire shining full upon him, stood the soft-voiced twin. Suddenly the hawk-like eyes of his grandmother swept the darkness and fastened themselves upon his inquisitive face. For an instant they pierced him through, then the shrill voice rang out:

"So! It's only the sneak-dog that dare not come near! You get out and hunt your bed!"

"I ain't doin' nothin'!" exclaimed the boy.

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"No! An' you'll live doin' nothin', an' die doin' nothin', with a rope about your neck, *so!*" She made a quick motion across her throat, and gurgled heinously, letting her blanket fall low upon her skinny, calico covered shoulders, revealing a long, gaunt throat and stiff wisps of black, unkempt hair.

"You don't need to think you can scare *me*," said the boy, moving boldly forward, impelled by fear. "I ain't sneakin' 'round here, neither! You'd better be a little politer er I'll tell the old man on you when he gets sober again!"

"Hear him!" roared Shorty Smith. "Politer! I reckon the school-ma'am's instillin' some mighty high-flutin' notions into your head, ain't she? Politer! Just listen to that onct, will yous! Say, don't no one dare breathe loud when *Mister* Daniel Harris, *esquire*, comes round!"

"You let your betters alone," rebuked the old woman, shaking a stick at Shorty, preliminary to throwing it upon the fire. "My grandson's got more in his head than all of you!" Then nodding at the boy who, emboldened, had come up to the fire: "Say what's on your tongue an' git off to bed with you!"

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The breed boy shook his head. "I ain't got nothin' to tell," he said. "Hain't been nowhere except over to Carter's camp awhile. Dave and me pretty near got nabbed by a special officer that's over there."

Shorty Smith raised himself up on his elbow.

"A special *what!*" he demanded, while a sort of stillness swept the circle.

"A special officer of the *law*," replied the boy, with cool importance. "Dave an' me had supper with him. He's a pretty good sort of a feller."

"Nice company you've been in," observed Shorty.

"Your grandmother always said you'd come to some bad end," drawled Long Bill. An uneasy laugh went around, then absolute silence prevailed for several minutes. The old squaw seemed to be muttering under her breath. Finally she shifted her savage gaze from the outer blackness to the faces about her camp-fire.

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"Turn cowards for one man!" she exclaimed scornfully.

"Well, Harris is in there dead drunk, and what're we goin' to do without him, anyhow?" exclaimed Long Bill.

"He might not approve," supplemented Shorty Smith.

"That's right; I ain't wantin' no such responsibility on my shoulders, *just now*," declared the large fellow.

"We'll postpone matters," decided Shorty. "I ain't after such responsibility myself, you can bet your life!"

The others agreed by words and grunts. Suddenly the old woman rose to her feet, grasping her dingy blanket together in front with one scrawny hand, while she outstretched the other, pointing into the night.

"Git out!" she snarled scornfully. "Git to your beds, dogs!"

The men laughed again uneasily.

"Come on, boys," said Shorty Smith. "We'll go an' see if the old man's left a drop in his jug." He moved towards the house, followed by the others. The soft-voiced twin still retained his position by the camp-fire.

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"You git too!" snarled his grandmother.

"I ain't no dog," replied the boy. The squaw grunted. "You told the dogs to go, not me! They won't find any demijohn, neither. I cached it for *you!*"

"Good boy," said his grandmother, patting him upon the head. "Go git it!"

When Hope and her companions returned that evening a couple of aged Indians hovered over the dying embers of old White Blanket's camp-fire, sociably drinking from a rusty tin cup what the riders naturally supposed to be tea. The soft-voiced twin, already curled up asleep beside his brothers, could have told them different, for had he not won the old woman's passing favor by his generous act? So he slept well.

So did the "old man" sleep well that night—a heavy drunken stupor. He had returned from town that afternoon in his usual condition, as wild-eyed as the half-broken horses that he drove, and for awhile made things lively about the place. At such times he ruled with a high and mighty hand, and even the little babies crept out of his way as he approached. He roused up some of the idle breeds and started a poker game, which soon broke up, owing to a financial deficiency among them. Then he roped a wild-looking stallion and rode off at a mad gait, without any

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apparent object, toward a peacefully feeding bunch of cattle. He rode around it, driving the cows and calves into a huddled, frightened group, then left them to recover their composure, riding, still as madly as ever, back to the stables. But the whisky finally got in its work, and Joe Harris, to the great relief of his Indian wife and family, laid himself away in a corner of the kitchen, and peace again reigned supreme.

Hope and Louisa very fortunately missed all the excitement.

The darkness was intense when they rode up to the ranch. Quiet pervaded the place, and not a light shone from the house.

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"These people must go to bed with the chickens," remarked O'Hara.

"Here's some matches, Hope," said Carter, standing beside her on the ground when she had dismounted. "Never mind your horses, I'll take care of them. Run right in. Such a place for you! Darker'n a stack of black cats! I'll stand here by the house till I see a light in your room."

Just then a group of men, led by Shorty Smith, came out of the dark passage between the kitchen and the other part of the house, and made their way toward the stables. The ones in the rear did not see the riders, and were muttering roughly among themselves. They had been making another fruitless search for the cattle-man's whisky, and were now going to bed.

"Come back here," said Sydney, drawing both girls toward the horses which O'Hara was holding. They moved backward under his grasp and waited until the men had passed.

"Hope, you'll either have to change your boarding place or go home," announced her cousin.

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"I'll do neither," replied the girl decisively. "Don't be foolish, Syd, because of a darkened house and a handful of harmless men! I'm not a baby, either. You'll make Larry think I'm a very helpless sort of person. Don't believe him, Larry! I'll admit that this isn't always a safe country for men, but there is no place on earth where a woman is surer of protection than among these same wild, dare-devil characters. I know what I'm talking about. Home? Well, I guess not! Come on, Louisa. See, she isn't afraid! Are you? Good-night, both of you!"

"Goot-night," called the German girl.

"It's just as she says," explained Carter, as he and O'Hara rode homeward. "It is perfectly safe for a girl out here, in spite of the tough appearances of things—far safer than in the streets of New York or Chicago. There isn't a man in the country that would dare speak disrespectfully to a girl. Horse-stealing wouldn't be an instance compared with what he'd get for that. He'd meet his end so quick he wouldn't have time to say his prayers! That's the way we do things in this country, you know."

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"It's hard to understand this, judging from appearances," said O'Hara. "I'm not exactly a coward myself, but I must own it gave me a chill all down my spine when those tough-looking specimens began to pour out from that crack between the buildings. I'd think it would make a girl feel nervous."

"But not Hope," replied Carter. "She's used to it; besides she's not like other girls. She's as fearless as a lion. You can't scare *her*. If she was a little more timid I wouldn't think about worrying over her, but she's so blame self-reliant! She knows she's as quick as chain lightning, and she's chockful of confidence. For my own part, I wish she'd never learned to shoot a gun."

"It strikes me she's pretty able to take care of herself," said O'Hara. "If I were you I wouldn't worry over it."

"Well, I want to get her back to the ranch, and I'm going to, too!" said Carter. Then to O'Hara's look of wonder, "I might as well be in Halifax as any real good I can be to her here—in case anything should come up. You see, there's been trouble brewing for months. All these men around here are down on Livingston, because he's running sheep on the range they had begun to think was their own exclusive property. He's as much right to run sheep on government land as they have to run cattle, though sheep are a plumb nuisance in a cow country. These ranchers around here haven't any use for his sheep at all, and have been picking at him ever since he came up here."

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He then went on to tell what he knew about the shooting at Livingston's corral.

"I'm pretty certain now that Hope was mixed up in it, though Livingston is as ignorant as can be in regard to the matter. He's too much a stranger to the ways of the country to learn everything in a minute. It was funny about you knowing him, wasn't it? He's a fine man, all right, and I hope this outfit won't bluff him out of the country. Harris is at the bottom of it. If it wasn't for him there wouldn't be any trouble. Now it's my opinion that Hope's trying to stand off the whole outfit for Livingston's sake, and doesn't want him to know it."

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O'Hara was silent for a moment, then replied:

"I'm not the fellow to make a fuss because a better man than me turns up. I knew in a minute he was dead in love with her."

Then he told something to Carter in confidence which caused him to pull his horse up suddenly in the trail and exclaim: "You don't say!"

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## CHAPTER XXIII

"It is a long road," observed Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "I had no idea it was so far. So these are the foot-hills of the mountains. Is this Harris place very much farther?"

"'Bout five mile straight up in the mountains," replied her companion.

"Then," said the lady decisively, "I am going to stop here at this spring, get a drink, and rest awhile; I'm about half dead!"

Jim McCullen made no reply, but good-naturedly headed his horse toward a tiny stream that trickled down a coulee near by. Mrs. Van Rensselaer followed, heaving a tired sigh of relief, as she slipped down upon the moist, flower-dotted meadows beside the stream.

"Oh, this is an awful undertaking," she declared, wetting her handkerchief in the water and carefully wiping her forehead. [Pg 311]

"I thought you was pretty brave to venture it," replied old Jim, from a short distance below, where he was watering the horses. "It's a hot day and a dry wind. I told you just how it'd be."

"I suppose it is some comfort to you to refer to that fact, but it doesn't make me any the less tired or cross. Yes, I'm cross, Mr. McCullen. It has been downright rude of Hope to stay away like this all summer. Of course it's possible she may have her reasons for that, but *I* never put in such a pokey time before in all my life! I couldn't go back to New York without seeing her, and then Sydney told me that if I went up there I might be able to coax her to leave the place. But she's been there so long now—a couple of months, isn't it?—that I can't see what difference it would make if she stayed a little longer. I did want to see her, though, before I went home, so I decided I'd undertake this journey. What about this protégée of hers—this German girl she's taken to raise? Sydney said she was a pretty little thing with hair the color of mine," shaking back her fluff of fair hair, "and eyes like a 'deep blue lake.' That's all I could get out of him—'eyes like a deep blue lake!' That settles it! When a fellow begins to rhapsody over eyes like a deep blue lake, it's a good sign he's cast his anchor right there. Well, it'll be a good thing for Sydney." [Pg 312]

"She's a right smart young lady," remarked McCullen. "Hope thinks a sight of her. She can ride a little, but she ain't goin' to learn to shoot worth a cent. Hand ain't steady 'nough. They ain't many wimmen in the world can shoot like Hope, though! She beats 'em all!"

"You ought to be awfully proud to think you taught her."

"Proud!" said old Jim, his voice deep with emotion; "I reckon I'm proud of her in every way—not just because she can shoot. They ain't no one like her! I couldn't think no more of her if she was my own, ma'am."

"It must be nice to feel that way toward someone," mused the lady, from the grass. "She thinks everything of you, too. It seems natural for some people to take a kindly, loving interest in almost everyone. There are only two people I have ever known toward whom I have felt in anything approaching that manner. Hope and Larry O'Hara. I have often fancied they would make an ideal couple." Jim McCullen shook his head doubtfully, but Mrs. Van Rensselaer, unnoticing, continued: "And even Larry deserted the ranch. He's been gone for two weeks. It's about time I came to look everyone up!" She pinned back the fluffy hair from her face, adjusted her hat, unclasped a tiny mirror and powder puff from her wrist, and carefully dusted every portion of her pretty face. [Pg 313]

McCullen, who had witnessed the operation several times before along the road that day, ceased to stare in wonderment, and very politely looked across the rolling hills in the opposite direction. It never occurred to Clarice Van Rensselaer that anyone could have found amusement in the proceedings. In fact, she never thought of it at all, but dabbed the powder puff quite mechanically from force of habit. [Pg 314]

After laughing to himself and giving her time enough to complete her toilet, he led her horse up, remarking:

"We'd better be movin', er like enough we won't get there till after dark."

Mrs. Van Rensselaer sighed, regained her feet, and suffered herself to be helped to the saddle.

"I reckon you won't find O'Hara up there," remarked Jim McCullen some time later. "Two evenings ago he rode over on Fox Creek, there on the reservation, where them soldiers are out practicin'. Lieutenant Harvey come over to camp an' he rode back with him, bein's he was acquainted. It ain't more'n eight mile from camp. Mebby you could ride over there if you wanted." This suggestion was offered with the faintest smile beneath his gray mustache. "It's a mighty fine chance to see them soldiers drillin' 'round the hills, playin' at sham battles and the like." [Pg 315]

"It would probably be a pleasing sight to see them," replied Clarice Van Rensselaer, "but I prefer an easy chair with plenty of cushions instead."

"I don't like to discourage you, but I don't reckon you'll find many cushions where you're goin'," said old Jim.

"How much farther is it?" demanded the lady.

"Oh, not very fur, 'bout three mile, er a little further," replied her companion; thereupon Mrs. Van Rensselaer rode on for some time in scornful, silent resignation.

When they reached the Harris ranch they found groups of men lounging about everywhere.

It looked as though most of the inhabitants of the mountains had congregated there on this especial evening. Mrs. Van Rensselaer gasped in astonishment, and even McCullen, used as he was to seeing men gathered about the place, looked surprised and wondered what had been going on to bring such a crowd.

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Mrs. Van Rensselaer gathered her skirts closely about her, as if in fear they would brush against some of the rough-looking men that moved back from the path as McCullen led her to the house. A couple of pigs chased by a yellow pup ran past her, then an Indian woman opened wide the main entrance of the abode and shooed out some squawking chickens, which flew straight at the visitor. Mrs. Van Rensselaer hesitated in dismay, and turned a white, startled face to McCullen.

"This ain't nothin' at all," he assured her. "Go right on in. I reckon we'll find Miss Hope to home."

She drew back still farther. "You go first," she implored fearfully.

McCullen smiled, and picked his way into the house, followed closely by his companion, who clung to his coat.

Reaching the interior he seated Mrs. Van Rensselaer upon a bench, and went in search of the Indian woman, who had disappeared at the first sight of the visitors.

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"She's out," he announced, returning after a moment. "They say she and the little German girl went out on their horses some time ago. I suppose you'll have to wait here till she gets back. You ain't afraid, be you?"

"Do you mean that I'll have to wait here *alone*?" she inquired, frightened.

"I'll stay around fer a spell," said McCullen kindly. "There ain't nothing to get nervous about." He opened the door of an adjoining room and beckoned to a breed girl, who was lulling a child to sleep in an Indian hammock. "Come in and keep this lady company. She's come to see Miss Hathaway," he said. The girl entered the room shyly—reluctantly. Jim McCullen pulled his hat over his eyes and turned to the door. "I'll look about a bit an' see if she's comin'," he said, then went out of the house.

The girl was shy, and stood awkwardly in the doorway with downcast eyes, not daring to look up at the visitor. Clarice fancied herself too tired to talk, so sat on the bench and leaned back against the white-washed logs. Quiet pervaded until a pig poked open the door and looked inquisitively into the room.

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"Oh, drive that animal out!" exclaimed Clarice, "he's coming straight at me!"

The girl gave the pig a poke that sent it grunting away, then closed the door and placed a box before it to keep it shut.

"Will you kindly take me to Miss Hathaway's apartment?" asked Mrs. Van Rensselaer.

The breed girl looked bewildered. "*To where?*" she asked.

"To her room," requested the lady, less politely. "I suppose she has a room in this place, has she not? I should like to rest for a few moments."

"It's right there," said the girl shortly, pointing at a door.

"Right there!" exclaimed Mrs. Van Rensselaer crossly. "Why didn't you tell me so before?"

Clarice opened the door and gasped in wonder. A vision of Hope's room at the ranch, with all its dainty accessories, came before her, and she thought of the girl's love of luxury and comfort. Everything was clean here, she assured herself with another glance around—spotlessly clean and neat, which could not be said of the room she had just left. There was a bed, a chair, a box and some boards covered with cheese-cloth, that served as a dressing table. Not a picture adorned the wall or an ornament of any description was to be seen.

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Mrs. Van Rensselaer walked all around the little room to satisfy herself that she had missed nothing. Some newspapers were fastened to the wall upon one side, and over them hung a few garments, which in turn were carefully covered by a thin shawl, with a view, no doubt, to keep out the dust. That was probably an idea of the German girl's, thought Clarice, and rightly, too, for to Louisa also was due the well scrubbed boards of the floor, the shining window panes, and the general neatness which pervaded the poor chamber.

Mrs. Van Rensselaer seated herself upon a box and gazed long and earnestly at her reflection in a small hand mirror which hung over the dressing table.

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"You haven't the features of a fool," she remarked to herself, "but you've added two new wrinkles by this tom-foolery to-day, and you ought to be satisfied by this time that you're not fit to take care of yourself! But I suppose it's satisfying to know you're doing missionary work. Missionary work, indeed, for a girl who hasn't as much sense for staying in this place as you have for coming! By the time you get home you'll have two more wrinkles, and it'll take a month to get back your good looks again! Well, you always were foolish!"

So saying she turned away from the mirror and looked longingly at the bed. Just then her eyes became fastened, wide and terrified, upon the head of a small gray animal protruding from the corner of the floor behind the bed. She watched it, spell-bound by fear, as it drew its fat body through a hole in the floor and ran across the room. Suddenly with a terrible shriek she threw herself upon the bed. The pack-rat ran back to its hole and made its exit without loss of time, but Clarice sobbed aloud in hysterical fear. Suddenly the door was thrown open, and a weather-browned, dark-haired girl knelt beside the bed and took the frightened woman in her arms.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

"Clarice, dear," said Hope, "what *is* the matter?"

"Oh," sobbed Mrs. Van Rensselaer, "*did* you see it—*did you see it?* A terrible thing! A terrible thing!"

"But *what?*" asked the girl wonderingly, "what could have frightened you so, *here?*"

Clarice, still hysterical, only sobbed and was quite incoherent in her explanation. Hope looked stern, as though facing an unpleasant problem which baffled her for the time. Louisa had entered the room and stood quietly to one side, looking in much surprise from one to the other. For a moment Mrs. Van Rensselaer's sobs ceased.

The German girl touched Hope gently upon the shoulder.

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"I tink it vas King Solomon," she said.

"Why, that was just it," said Hope. "You must have seen King Solomon, Clarice. It was only King Solomon; don't be afraid. I thought we had the hole well plugged up, but he must have made another one."

"You forget," interrupted Louisa, laughing softly.

"Oh, that's so!" exclaimed Hope. "We took the soap out and used it this morning because we didn't have any other."

"And who's King Solomon, and what's that to do with soap?" demanded Clarice, raising herself upon her elbow to the edge of the bed with a faint show of interest.

"King Solomon," explained Hope soberly, "is a friend who comes to visit us occasionally, and generally packs off what happens to be in sight. We named him King Solomon—not because of his solemn demeanor, but for reason of his taking ways, and propensity toward feminine apparel."

"What are you talking about, Hope? I do believe this terrible place has gone to your head! What makes all the noise in that other room?"

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Mrs. Van Rensselaer seemed extremely nervous.

"That's the men coming in to their supper," replied Hope. "I think you must have been nervous before you saw the rat. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you came, Clarice!"

"And so that horrible thing I saw was a rat!"

"Yes, just a common everyday wood-rat, for obvious reasons sometimes called a pack-rat. But how did you happen to come up here, Clarice?"

"If I had known how far it was, and what a dreadful place I should find, I am afraid my great desire to see you couldn't have induced me to attempt it. How *can* you stay here? I wish you'd go home, Hope!"

"Is that what you came to tell me?" asked the girl quietly. "If so, you might just as well get on your horse and go back. I wrote you not to come. You might have taken my advice—it would have been a heap better. You're not cut out for this sort of place. I don't know what in the world I'm going to do with you to-night! I'll send you back to-morrow, that's one thing sure. One of us will have to sleep on the floor, or else we'll be obliged to sleep three in a bed."

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"Oh, I'll make me a bed on the floor," offered Louisa quickly.

"You won't do anything of the kind—the idea!" exclaimed Mrs. Van Rensselaer, aghast. "Supposing that thing—that *rat* should come!"

"We'll put the soap back in the hole again," replied Hope. "And King Solomon will have to keep out. Before Louisa came I used to let him come in just for company's sake, but the poor fellow is a hopeless case. Clarice, I wish you hadn't come!"

"I wish so, too, if that will help you any," replied Mrs. Van Rensselaer, lifting her pretty face dejectedly from her hands and looking about the room in a woe-begone manner. "I'm awfully tired, Hope, and hungry, but I couldn't eat *here* if I starved to death! Is that room in there *always* so grimy and dirty? and what makes that terrible *odor* about the place?"

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"I think you'd better go back to the ranch to-night," suggested Hope.



Clarice moaned in deep discouragement: "Oh, if you knew how tired I am! But I can't stand it *here—I can't do it!* Let me get out in the fresh air, away from the odor of those pigs and chickens and *rats*, and sit down on the side of a mountain—anywhere, so that I can breathe again!" After a moment's pause she suddenly exclaimed: "Hope, there's something biting me! What in the world is it? I tell you there's an insect on me!"

"Fleas," said Hope briefly. "The place is full of them. They don't bite me, and they don't bother Louisa much either. Poor Clarice, what trouble you have got yourself into! I can't send you back to-night, that's one sure thing, you're too tired." She pondered a moment, deeply perplexed, then all at once a solution came to her. Her eyes brightened and she laughed.

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"I have it!" she cried. "I'll send one of the boys after Mr. Livingston's buggy and drive you over to Sydney's. They've got an extra tent and a stack of blankets. William will get you a fine supper, and you can be as snug as a bug in a rug."

"Hope, you're the dearest girl that ever lived!" cried Clarice. "I just dote on camping out in a nice clean tent!" But Hope had hurried away to find the twins before the sentence was finished. When she returned, a few minutes later, Clarice exclaimed:

"But you don't intend to send me over there *alone*, do you? You girls will go and stay with me? Come, you must! I'll not think of going alone. We'll have a regular camping-out party and I'll chaperon you."

"Old Father Jim and Sydney are chaperons enough," said the girl. "But we'll go along, since you happen to be our guest."

This decided upon, she made Mrs. Van Rensselaer lie down upon the bed, bathed her pretty, tired face with cool water, and commanded her to rest until the twins returned with the conveyance.

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Louisa clapped her hands in joy at the happy prospect of camping in a tent. She declared in her pretty broken English that it had been her one great desire ever since she had been in the country. Then she became sober again. Had not her Fritz spent months at a time in one of those small, white-walled tents?

Hope viewed the project with complete indifference. It mattered little to her where she spent the night, so that she got her allotted hours of good, sound sleep. At first she was greatly perplexed as to how she was going to make Clarice comfortable, but now that the matter had adjusted itself so agreeably she became at once in the lightest of spirits, the effects of which were quickly felt by both Mrs. Van Rensselaer and little Louisa.

By the time the roll of wheels was heard, announcing the arrival of Edward Livingston's conveyance, Clarice was fairly rested, and in a much more amiable mood than previously.

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"The only thing that's the matter with me now is that I'm hungry," she said.

"We'll soon fix that, too," replied Hope brightly. "The boys are back with Mr. Livingston's team and it won't take us long to drive over to camp. Get on your things, Clarice." She threw her own jacket over her arm and, picking up her hat, hurriedly left the room. "I'll be back in a moment for you," she said from the door. "Keep her company, Louisa, and don't let King Solomon in!"

At the entrance of the house she met the soft-voiced twin just coming in search of her.

"He's out there hisself with his outfit," he said disgustedly. "Thought it wasn't safe fer me to drive his blame horses, I reckon!"

She looked out and saw Livingston standing beside his team in the road. He was waiting for her. When she approached, his fine eyes brightened, but hers were gloomy—indifferent.

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"Come," he said, laughing, holding out his hand to her. "You did not think I would miss such an opportunity to get to see you! I haven't pleased you, but this time I thought to please myself."

"I was in such a predicament," she cried, ignoring his hand, but forgetting her momentary displeasure. "A guest from the ranch, and no place to put her. Then I thought of Sydney's, and that new tent, so we're all going over there. I sent for your buggy, because Mrs. Van Rensselaer has ridden a long ways, is all tired out—but I didn't mean to put *you* to so much trouble."

"Is it a *trouble* to see you?" he asked. "If it is, I want a great deal of just that kind of trouble."

"I'll go in and get her," she said quickly. "If you will drive her over there, Louisa and I can go horseback."

He assented in few words, happy to do her bidding.

She started toward the house, then turned back absent-mindedly, as though she had forgotten something that she was striving to recall. Finally she gave a little short laugh, and held out her hand. "You are very kind," she said, looking at him squarely.

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He did not reply, but held the proffered hand, drinking in the language of her eyes. She withdrew it slowly, as if loath to take it from his warm clasp, then flashing him one of her brilliant smiles turned once more and went quickly back to the house.

"You will ride over with Mr. Livingston, Clarice," she announced. "He wouldn't trust the twins with his team."

"And who's *Mr. Livingston, Hope*," inquired Mrs. Van Rensselaer, adjusting her veil carefully before the small mirror. "I didn't suppose you had a *Mr.* anybody up here in this terrible country! Why the prefix?"

"He's a white man," replied the girl, pulling down her hat to hide the flush that crept into her face. "An Englishman, Edward Livingston."

"An Englishman," mused Clarice, pulling on her gloves. "But what makes you *Mister* him, Hope? *Livingston*—wonder if he's any relation to Lord Livingston? *Edward Livingston*, did you say?" [Pg 332]

"Oh, such a *nice* man!" exclaimed Louisa, clasping her hands in rapture. "He is my goot, kind friend."

"And Hope's too, isn't he?" laughed Mrs. Van Rensselaer, at which remark Hope advised her to hurry up.

"But my dear, I *am* hurrying just as fast as I can," she exclaimed. "I assure you I am as anxious to get away from here as you are to have me. I don't see how you've ever stood it, Hope! The attraction must be very strong. Come, own up, is it this *Mister Livingston*? Why, I believe you are blushing. You're so black, though, I can't be certain. But it's a good name—Livingston. Come on; I'm ready to see this *Mister Edward Livingston*!"

The three passed out of the room and through the large living room beyond, on out of doors. The men had eaten their supper and gone out to the stables, where they congregated in numerous groups—quiet groups, that any other time would have seemed suspicious to Hope. [Pg 333]

Mrs. Van Rensselaer was led safely past the pigs and dogs without accident, but at the corner of the house she drew back, filled with surprise, and forgetful of all danger.

"Hope, I do believe that *is* Lord Livingston," she whispered. "I knew he was out in this country somewhere. Yes, I'm sure it is he. His wife lives in New York now," she rattled on; "but I don't know her except by sight. She goes in kind of a swift set, anyway, but he belongs to one of the best families in England. Isn't it surprising to run across him like this? I'll go up to him and say—why, how do you do, Lord——"

"Come on," said Hope, interrupting and taking her by the arm. "Lord or no lord, you'll never get any supper if you don't hurry up!" Her face had gone from red to white. She took Clarice by the arm and led her up to the buggy. "This is Mrs. Van Rensselaer, Mr. Livingston," she said quickly, before that lady could speak, then turned abruptly about and went to the stable for the saddle-horses. [Pg 334]

Livingston helped Mrs. Van Rensselaer into the buggy, while Louisa ran after Hope, quickly overtaking her.

"She says he hass a wife. I don't belief her!" she exclaimed indignantly, linking her arm through Hope's. "Don't you belief her eider!"

"I must believe it, little Louisa, because it is true!" said Hope. "But if it were *not* true, if it were *not* true, I think I should be mad with happiness at this moment!" [Pg 335]

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## CHAPTER XXV

In a short time the horses were saddled and the two girls dashed past the stable buildings and the rough assortment of men who stood silently about, past their watchful, alert eyes, on after the buggy, which had now become a mere speck high up on the mountain road. As they raced by the house and tepees the boy, Ned, cautiously raised his small body from behind a pile of logs which edged the road and beckoned to them frantically. Hope's quick eye saw him, but only as the flash of a moving picture across her mind, leaving no impression and instantly forgotten. But later, when she had entered the cook-tent at Sydney's camp and seated herself among the small company, the memory of the passing vision came back, annoying, troubling her. She scented danger more than she felt it. A sense of uneasiness possessed her. She condemned herself roundly for the wild thoughts that had carried her away from herself, and would have given much at that moment to have known what the breed boy had wanted to commune to her. [Pg 336]

Clarice was chatting volubly to Livingston. Sydney leaned upon the table, listening attentively. Outside, old Jim McCullen was staking out the saddle-horses, while about the stove and mess-box William, the cook, flitted in great importance. Sydney jumped up from the table when the two girls entered and arranged some extra seats for them, then took one himself beside Louisa, who flushed prettily at his attentions.

"We beat you by fifteen minutes!" exclaimed Mrs. Van Rensselaer, breaking off from her conversation abruptly. "But we just came along spinning. And I must tell you that I'm perfectly happy now, and don't regret coming one bit! Just think, isn't this luck—Mr. Livingston has promised to take me back to the ranch to-morrow, or whenever I decide to return! And you should see what a splendid dinner we are going to have! After all, I'm coming out the best in the deal—in spite of Jim's 'didn't I tell you,' and Hope's 'what made you come.' This is a regular taste of the real West—wild and rugged! You don't get it at the ranch—luxurious quarters, Chinese [Pg 337]

servants everywhere, even the people especially imported. You might as well be in New York for everything except the climate. This is great—this little gulch here and these fresh, sweet tents; but horrors, that place back there! Isn't there any way to go around it when we go back to the ranch, Mr. Livingston? I don't want even to catch sight of it. I never saw such a lot of looking men in all my life!"

They all laughed at the look of abject horror which she put upon her face—all with the exception of Hope, who sat silently in the shadow of Louisa and Sydney.

"We've been to supper," said Sydney, turning around to his cousin, "so this is an extra one for the special benefit of our guests. You'd better appreciate it, for it's going to be a jim-dandy one. Livingston's been to supper, too, so this is just for the ladies." [Pg 338]

"You're a good boy," murmured the girl, taking off her hat and pushing back the mass of dark hair from her forehead. "We'll soon show you our appreciation."

"I guess we'd better light up, it's getting dark a little earlier nowadays," he said, leaving Louisa's side to light the lanterns, which soon flooded the tent with soft radiance.

"I like the twilight," said Clarice to Livingston. "But then I like lots of light, too. Some people can talk best in the dark, but I have to see to talk."

"It's only eight o'clock," continued Sydney, from where he had left off. "Last month it was daylight at ten. It beats all how time flies, anyway!" He hung an extra lantern, lighted for the momentous occasion, right where the rays fell full upon Hope's face. From the far end of the tent Livingston watched her. He sought her eyes as usual. They were everywhere, anywhere, but did not meet his. Lately a new star had risen for him—a star of hope. O'Hara had told him, quite unsolicited, that there was no attachment between Hope and her cousin, much less an engagement, and suddenly a new world had opened for him. [Pg 339]

"I don't see why you are lighting the lanterns now. It isn't dark at all," said the girl, rising suddenly from her seat. "From the top of the ridge out there you can see the sunset, I know."

"Did you ever see a sunset as beautiful as the sunrise?" asked Livingston.

She stopped and pondered an instant, then glanced at him quickly, and as quickly away.

"No, I have not," she replied. "A sunrise is a baptism. It is like being born into a new world. There is nothing so beautiful, so grand, so promising, as the vision of a new day's sun. And to stand in the cool morning air with the dew beneath your feet and *feel* all the promise of that vast, golden glory—to feel it——" She stopped suddenly, lifting her eyes to his for one brief instant. "There is no moment in life when one is so near to God." [Pg 340]

"Admitting the sublimity and grandeur of the time," said Clarice. "Yet who ever heard of an enamored swain offering his heart at the feet of his fair lady at such an unearthly hour? It's preposterous!"

"In such a case he'd probably be sitting up too late the night before," said Carter. "But it's a pretty idea, just the same," he declared, looking at Louisa.

"I think a sunset is prettier," insisted Clarice. "I've never been able to rub the sleep out of my eyes to appreciate the sunrise as Hope describes it. But I think she is an exception."

"Would there were more then," said Livingston fervently.

His earnestness seemed to amuse Clarice, for she turned to him and laughed. Hope swung about quickly, stung for the instant.

"It is sacred," she cried softly, then opening the tent-flap with a quick movement she stepped out into the evening.

Jim McCullen was putting up a new tent down near the edge of the stream for the accommodation of the ladies. The girl went over to where he was at work and assisted him by steadying one pole while he fastened the canvas in position. [Pg 341]

"How's the ranch, Jim?" she asked. "Mrs. Van Rensselaer hasn't had time to tell me yet."

"Well, it's about the same as ever," replied McCullen slowly. "I reckon your father's gettin' pretty lonesome without you. Feels like a lost horse by now. That there little Rosebush—Rosehill, he and them Cresmonds have gone back East to get ready fer the great weddin' they're talkin' about. Them folks seem to think it's a mighty fine thing to catch a lord er an earl. But it always seemed to me that the Almighty left out a whole pile in order to give some o' them fellers a title. Forgot Rosehill's brains entirely, an' he ain't no bigger'n a minute, neither."

"I guess you're right, about him," said Hope, kneeling beside McCullen as he fashioned a stake pin more to his liking. "I hope that outfit won't come out here another year; I don't like them very well. It's nice and sweet out here on the grass, isn't it? I don't mind staying here at all to-night. I don't see what makes me feel so sleepy and drowsy though, but I do—sort of tired, as though I wanted to get away and go to bed. I haven't ridden far to-day either—only a few miles after school. Jim, I wish I were back to-night at the ranch—I wish I could go and say good-night to my father, and go away to my own room." [Pg 342]

McCullen looked up from the peg he was driving, and remarked: "I'll warrant you'll have as good a night's sleep out here in this tent as you would at home on the ranch. Plenty o' fresh air an' no misquitoses to bother. But I reckon your father'd like to see you just the same to-night."

"But he doesn't want me to go home until I've finished this school up here. I'm earning fifty dollars a month. How much are you?"

"A hundred," replied McCullen. "But, look a-here, your father *said* that, but he'd be mighty glad to have you drop in on him one o' these times. He's the sorriest father you ever seen!"

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"But I shall stay, Jim, just as long as there is school here," said Hope decidedly. "So don't *you* try to get me to go home. Everyone else is. Sydney all the time, then Larry O'Hara. I'm glad he's gone over to camp with the soldiers. They're farther away than I thought. Louisa and I rode over in that direction after school, but only got to the top of the tall butte over there. We could see them where they were camped on Fox Creek, but it was too far to go, so we went back to Harris'. Larry was all the time urging me to go home while he was here—and now Clarice has come. But I won't go, Jim, until the school ends."

"Well, you just make the best of it," replied McCullen. "I like your grit. I'm a-goin' to stay right here so's to be near you whatever happens."

"Jim," said the girl suddenly, "were you ever nervous?"

"I reckon I've been, a few times," replied McCullen. "Why, you ain't *nervous*, be you, Hopie? There ain't nothin' goin' to bother you out here to-night. Mebby you ain't feelin' well."

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She smiled at his consternation. "No, I don't think I'm nervous, Jim; just a little restless, that's all."

"I expect that woman's comin' has sort o' upset you. I didn't want to bring her, but she managed to overrule all o' my objections."

He finished driving the last peg, which made the tent secure against the strongest wind, then straightened himself up with his hands upon the small of his back as though the movement was a difficult one.

"Well, I reckon I'll bring in the beddin', an' you can fix it up to suit yourself," he said, looking down at the girl, who had seated herself on the grass before the tent.

"Listen," she whispered, holding up a warning hand, "I hear horsebackers."

"Sure enough," he replied after a moment's silence. "I reckon it's them breed boys o' yourn. Hungriest outfit I ever seen!"

"Yes," she said, rising suddenly to her feet and peering into the gathering dusk, "that's who it is. Go get the blankets, Jim."

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"Where're you goin'!" asked McCullen, as she moved quickly away down the bank of the creek toward the dark brush of the bottom.

"To tell them school's out," she replied with a short laugh, then disappeared from his sight.

"I reckon she's afraid them boys'll annoy that Van Rensselaer woman. You'd think she'd never seen an Injun before, from the fuss she made back there at Harris'," soliloquized McCullen as he brought a great armful of blankets and deposited them inside the new tent.

But Hope was not thinking of Mrs. Van Rensselaer as she stood in the narrow brush trail holding the bridle of an impatient Indian pinto, while the soft-voiced twin looked at her through the semi-darkness.

"There's a bright moon to-night till three in the mornin', then it's as dark as pitch," he was saying.

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"Who figured out all that?" demanded the girl.

The breed boy moved uneasily in his saddle. "I reckon Shorty Smith er some o' 'em did," he replied.

"And they're going to meet in the sheep-shed at the foot of the big hill," she said deliberately.

"Yes," replied Dan reluctantly, "the one just inside the pasture fence over there on this side. It's the nearest place to meet."

"How many men?" demanded Hope.

"'Bout a dozen, I reckon," replied the twin. "Mebby not so many." He leaned forward until his face was close beside the girl's. "Say," he whispered nervously, "if they ever found out I put you onto this, they'd finish me mighty quick."

"Are they aware you know about it?" she asked quickly. "Do they know?"

"You can't never tell," replied the boy deliberately, sweetly.

The bushes rattled and another horse pushed its way alongside the pinto.

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"If we only had that Gatlin' gun now we'd be all right," exclaimed the other twin enthusiastically,

as his horse nosed its way in beside them. "But if we get behind the big rock we'll scare 'em to death, so's they won't have the nerve to do nothin'!"

"But what are they going to do?" demanded Hope impatiently. "You seem to know nothing except that they're going to meet there for some devilishness."

"Goin' to make a raid on the shed, I reckon," replied Dave. The soft-voiced twin was silent.

"And you think we can stand off a dozen men?" she demanded.

"They can't do a thing to us from the big rock, anyway, an' we can watch the fun an' pick off everyone that leaves the shed. We can do that much," said the soft-voiced twin eagerly.

"How you thirst for blood! They deserve death, every one—the *dogs*! But I can't do it! There must be some other way! He must be warned, and his men too, and the thing averted. Before, it just happened so—this time we have a chance and warning." [Pg 348]

"It 'ud never do to tell him," exclaimed the soft-voiced twin nervously. "He'd put his own head right into the noose!"

"Never!" she cried. "You don't know what courage he has!"

The soft-voiced twin continued to demur. Suddenly she held up her hand to him commandingly. "Not another word! I'll manage this thing myself! It's for me to command, and you obey orders. Remember, you're my scouts—my *brave scouts*. Surely you want me to be proud of you!"

"You bet!" exclaimed Dave.

"Then do as I say," she commanded in a voice softly alluring, coaxing. "Go home, find out what you can, and bring me word here in an hour. If you are not back here then I will go down there and face them all, myself—*alone*."

"You wouldn't," whispered the soft-voiced twin excitedly.

"I *would*!" replied the girl. "Now go—and remember I'll expect you back in one hour. If you fail me, I'll go down there and face those devils single-handed! I could wipe the earth with forty such dogs!" [Pg 349]

The breed boys turned away in silent, stolid, Indian fashion, and the bare-headed girl stood in the still gloom of the willow-brush listening to the sound of their horses' quick hoof-beats until the last dull thud had died in the distance.

"Chuck-away!" called a voice from the creek bank.

"Coming!" answered the girl, turning about with a start and running back along the path.

At the bank she stopped, unnerved with a rush of thoughts, overwhelming—terrifying. She knelt down in the long grass, clasped her hands over her heart as if to tear it from her, and raised for an instant a strained, white face to the starlit canopy of heaven.

"The brave can die but once," her heart repeated wildly. "But I am a coward—I cannot bear it! Oh, God,—if you are the great, good God,—spare him from all harm, from suffering and death! Spare him now! See, I offer myself instead—freely, gladly! Take me, but spare him!" [Pg 350]

A dimly outlined face from the bank above looked down at her, followed by a soft, mellow laugh.

"The bank is so steep," said Livingston softly. "Here, give me your hand and I will pull you up."

She took a quick step upward, then stopped just below him and looked at him intently.

"God in heaven," she said wildly to herself, "I swear they shall not harm a hair of your head! I'll tear the heart out of every man of them that comes near you! I'll kill them all, the hounds, the sneaks, the low vermin!"

She looked at him an instant so, then laughed—an odd, mirthless, reverberant laugh, that echoed on the hills above.

"Come, let me help you," he urged gently, reaching down his hand to her. She laughed again, this time softly, more naturally. [Pg 351]

"My *lord*," she said with grave emphasis, "you honor me! I am overwhelmed for the instant. Forgive my rudeness!"

"You have heard," he exclaimed regretfully. "Your friend has told you—I am so sorry! But then it really doesn't make any difference—only I thought you might like me better if you didn't know it."

"Oh, my lord," she laughed mockingly. "I must needs *adore* you now!"

"Stop your fooling," he exclaimed impatiently. "And give me your hand and I'll pull you up here."

With a sudden movement he stepped down toward her, grasping her hand firmly, drawing her up beside him on the bank. She looked at him in some surprise.

"I always had an idea," she said, "that you were a very mild-mannered young man."

"But you've given me a title that I didn't want—you've put me out of humor, and now you must

take the consequences," he said.

"I tried to make you angry. Why aren't you?" said Hope seriously.

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"Angry with you!" he exclaimed softly. "With you, my girl! Look at me closely—in my eyes and see the reason!" He stood beside her. His hand grasped hers, his powerful magnetism drew her until her cheeks flamed, but not the flicker of downcast eyelids betrayed more than the faintest, friendliest indifference.

"Come on," she said, turning abruptly toward the tent, "I'm starved for my supper!"

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## CHAPTER XXVI

"You bad girl," cried Clarice Van Rensselaer from the table, "why did you run away? See this nice dinner spoiling for you! I've regained my good nature, which is lucky for you, but you'll have to give an account of yourself. Actually, I had to send Mr. Livingston to look you up!" She glanced with a well-bred look of quizzical amusement from Hope's brilliant, flushed face to the man who accompanied her. "Well, you see that I for one didn't wait for you," she concluded; "couldn't! I don't think I ever was so hungry before in my whole life. Everything tastes *perfectly* delicious!"

"William has outdone himself this time," remarked Sydney, as the girl drew up an empty box and seated herself at the table, taking a little food upon her plate and making a pretense of eating. Everything tasted like wood. She could scarcely swallow. It finally occurred to her that she must be acting very unlike herself. She made a violent effort to appear natural, succeeding fairly well.

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"You haven't given account of yourself, yet," said Mrs. Van Rensselaer, glancing from her end of the table to where Hope sat, still in silence.

"Don't ask me," said the girl. "My excuse would sound too trivial to you, Clarice. Perhaps I wanted to watch the first stars of evening."

"Or follow a frog to its nest in the weeds," supplemented Sydney, "or catch grass-hoppers that had gone to roost, or listen to the night-song of the cat bird in the brush or—or what, Hopie? Maybe you were writing poems in your mind, or preparing new lessons for school to-morrow."

"Yes, that's just it," she replied. "I was preparing new lessons—for to-morrow!"

"How funny!" laughed Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "I had forgotten you were a full-fledged school-teacher. Of course, I suppose you do have to think about your teaching some. Goodness, I wouldn't like it at all! It must be an awful task to bother with a lot of rough, dirty children! How many pupils have you?"

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"Seventeen enrolled—but only seven or eight who attend," replied Hope briefly.

"Mercy, I thought you must have at least fifty, from all I saw back there!" gasped Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "Well, I shouldn't think it would be much trouble to prepare lessons for that amount."

"*That many*," corrected Hope. "We don't measure them by the pound."

"No, we size them up by the cord," laughed Sydney; "but we don't handle 'em, because they're like that much dynamite."

"Dangerous pieces of humanity," said Livingston, smiling.

"Hope can handle them all right," declared Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "She can handle anyone, for that matter. She's got more tact and diplomacy than any politician. Trust her to manage seven or eight children! Why, if she can't manage a person any other way, she'll actually *bully* him. She can make you believe black is white every time."

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"Fräulein is so goot!" murmured Louisa, in rapture.

"Thank you," replied Hope gratefully. "You see Louisa knows me *last*, Clarice, and her remark should show you that I have changed for the better."

"I always told you there was chance for improvements, didn't I, Hopie?" laughed Sydney.

"Yes, you have said something about there being *room* for improvement, but I always supposed you judged me to be a hopeless case. I'm glad though you think there's a *chance*! I always did want to improve!" As she spoke she pushed back the box upon which she had been sitting, turning it over to make it lower, and seated herself near the corner of the tent, where she was shaded from the direct rays of the lantern's light.

More than a half hour had already passed, she thought nervously. Then she began to count the minutes before her messengers should return. The time seemed endless since she had decided to wait for more particulars before informing Livingston of what was about to take place. The twins had learned of it only that afternoon, and they, though filled with the foreboding of a desperate plot, could tell nothing positive about the actual plans. These she hoped they would be able to ascertain. She believed that the soft-voiced twin knew more than he was willing to divulge when he advised her so emphatically against informing Livingston of the plot. This, combined with a

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certain anxiety of her own, which she was unable to define, filled her with vague uneasiness and decided her instantly to do nothing until the boys returned with more particulars.

"You don't mean to say you've finished your supper, Hope," exclaimed Mrs. Van Rensselaer, as the girl settled herself comfortably in the dark corner. "I never was so hungry before in all my life!" She turned to Jim McCullen, who put his head inside the tent: "You see, Mr. McCullen, that good, hard, patient endeavor brings its own reward! I wouldn't miss this for worlds!"

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"I'm very glad to hear it, ma'am," replied old Jim politely. "Reckon you'll sleep pretty well out there to-night, no misquitoses er nothin' to bother you. The tent's all ready fer you folks any time. Plenty o' blankets an' it'll be a warmer night'n usual. Well, so long!"

"Why, he's going away!" said Hope in surprise, as a horse loped down the creek bank and on through the brush trail. An impulse to run out and call him back seized her. Sydney's slow reply caused a delay, the impulse to do so wavered, and in another moment it was too late; yet she felt somehow that she had made a mistake.

"Yes," replied Carter, after listening to Mrs. Van Rensselaer's chatter for a moment, "he's going over to the round-up. It's camped about ten or fifteen miles, down at the foot of the mountains. It's as light as day out and much pleasanter riding in the cool of evening. He'll be back early in the morning. Had some mail from the ranch to take over to the boys."

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"The poor fellows on the round-up all summer! I bet they're glad to get their mail," murmured Clarice.

"What they get don't hurt them any," remarked Sydney. "Range riding isn't conducive to letter writing, and it doesn't take long before a cow-puncher is about forgotten by his home people, and his mail consists of an occasional newspaper, sent by someone who happens to remember him, and the regular home letter from his old mother, who never forgets. By the way, here's a lot of mail for O'Hara. Have to ride over with it unless he turns up pretty soon."

"Dear Larry!" said Clarice. "What made him leave just when I came up here? I'd love to see him! He's such a jolly good fellow. You didn't send him away on some wild-goose chase, did you, Hope?"

The girl shaded her eyes with her hand and answered languidly: "No, there wasn't enough excitement here, so he went over to the military reservation. They are out on drill over near here—Colonel Walsh, and a lot of West Point fellows Larry knows, and so he pulled stakes, just quit our company entirely, and turned old Watch Eye toward Fox Creek."

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She drawled her words out slowly as if to fill in time. Livingston, whose eyes constantly sought her face, thought she must be very tired, and rose suddenly to take his leave. She was upon her feet in a flash.

"Sit right down!" she demanded nervously. "Surely you wouldn't think of leaving us so early; why, we'd all get stupid and go to bed immediately, and Clarice wouldn't enjoy herself at all!" She laid her hand upon his sleeve entreatingly. "*Stay!*" she urged softly.

"As you say," he replied. "It is a pleasure to remain, but you must tell me when I am to go. I thought perhaps you were tired."

She drew her hand away with a sudden movement. He seated himself beside Mrs. Van Rensselaer, who began immediately to congratulate him upon his good sense in remaining.

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"But it was compulsory," he returned. "I didn't dare disobey orders."

"I should say not," agreed Clarice, laughing merrily, "we always mind Hope. Everybody does."

"She always knows the right," said little Louisa, looking lovingly at her friend.

"Why, of course," agreed Mrs. Van Rensselaer, "that's taken for granted."

Hope was again in her corner, silent, intent. Livingston could only conclude that she was tired. The rest of them took no special notice of her, nor did they hear the distant splashing of water which brought into activity all the blood in her body and fired each nerve. Clarice was giving an elaborate account of her day's experience, consequently no attention was paid to the girl's abrupt departure. She smiled at Louisa as she passed quietly out and made some remark about her horse, which gave the impression that she might have forgotten something. At least Livingston and Louisa received that impression; as for the others they were busy, and besides Hope was Hope, who always followed her own free fancy.

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The girl fairly flew along the trail that skirted the creek until she grasped the bridle of a small Indian pony that was nosing its way cautiously toward her.

"Oh, it's you!" exclaimed its small rider in a relieved tone, as he slipped to the ground and stood in the path beside the girl. "I was mighty scared it might be somebody else." Hope raised the boy's face so that the moon shone full upon it.

"Ned!" she exclaimed under her breath. "Why are you here? Where are the boys?"

"The old man's got 'em locked up in the granary," he announced. Then seeing the look of alarm that flashed into her face, added assuringly: "But that's all right, *I'm* here! They told me to tell

you they'd get out somehow 'fore mornin'. I cached their horses in the brush for 'em, and they're diggin' themselves out underneath the barn. Here," he said, handing something to her. "I got your rifle out o' your room an' hid it under the house soon's ever you left, an' all these cartridges. I just knew the old man 'ud go an' look fer it."

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"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, suddenly gathering child, gun, and all into her arms. "What a little *man* you are."

"Yep," said the boy, disengaging himself; "an' I've got a lot to tell you!"

"And you're *sure* about this," questioned Hope, after the boy had told a story so complete in detail as to fairly unnerve her. "You're *perfectly* sure that these men are going to meet at the shed—the big shed close to Fritz's grave, there below the ledge of rocks?"

"Sure's anything," replied the boy convincingly. "There'll be seven er eight from our place, some from Old Peter's an' some from up the creek."

Hope shivered as though it had been a winter's night.

"What *shall* we do! What *shall* we do!" she repeated almost frantically.

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"Why, *fight 'em*, of course!" exclaimed the boy. "Dave an' Dan'll get out by then, an' we'll all lay up there behind them rocks an' just pepper 'em! There's 'bout a million peek-holes in that wall o' rocks, an' they can't never hit us. Pooh, I ain't afraid o' twenty men! We'll make 'em think all the soldiers from the post is behind there!"

"The soldiers!" exclaimed the girl, filled suddenly with a new life, "and they *shall be there! They shall be there!*"

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## CHAPTER XXVII

"You must think me rude," apologized Hope, entering the tent as quickly as she had left it, and seating herself directly beside Livingston. "I surely didn't intend to be gone so long."

"So *long!*" exclaimed Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "Why, I hadn't missed you! Where in the world have you been?"

"Oh, *now* I'll not tell you!" laughed the girl, while her face flushed deeply.

"But you were missed," said Livingston. "You've been gone just ten minutes."

She looked at him and smiled at her own mistake. It seemed to her that she had been gone an hour. He was dazzled by the unusual brilliancy of her face, the strange light in her eyes. The smile, he thought, was for himself. "Did the moonlight transform you?" he asked. She only laughed in reply. Her heart was bounding in very joy of life now that she saw her way clear through the grave difficulty that had confronted her. A great tragedy would be averted, a lot of unscrupulous men brought to justice, and more than this—the boy beside her was safe. What mattered it to her at this moment that he possessed somewhere in the universe a wife, which irrevocably separated her from him by every social law and moral rule? This was nothing to her now in view of the great sense of his personal safety that lifted such a weight of fear from her heart. Nothing mattered much since he was safe. How desperate the chance had seemed, and now how easily the danger averted!

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Livingston knew little of the thoughts that played wildly in her brain while she, to all intents, was listening with eager, brilliant face to Clarice's light chatter. But Mrs. Van Rensselaer was tired. Her chatter began to fag. Outside the shadows settled down about the tents, until the moon rose above the mountain like a great ball of fire, casting over everything the soft radiance of its white light. The night was almost as bright as day. Livingston reluctantly said good-night, and went out with Sydney to get his horse, which was staked some little distance away. When they returned to saddle up a movement on the opposite side of the brush attracted Sydney's attention, and borrowing the horse he rode over to investigate. Livingston, wondering vaguely what had taken him away so abruptly, seated himself upon the tongue of the camp wagon and listened to the soft tones of women's voices from the white tent near the bank. Quite without warning a hand was laid upon his shoulder. "Where did Syd go?" asked Hope.

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"Over there," replied Livingston, rising quickly beside her, and pointing across the brush. "He took my horse to drive out some cattle, I think, and so I am waiting. I thought you had retired. Did you come to say good-night to me?"

"Yes," said the girl softly, "what of it?"

"Everything! That you should care that much—that you——"

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"But I wouldn't need to care—so *very* much—to come to bid you good-night—would I?" she interrupted.

"No—perhaps; but you *do* care! I seem to feel that you care for me—Hope!"

"No! I don't care for you a bit! Not at all—I mean——You haven't any right to talk to me like that!"



Certainly, I don't care for you, Mr. Livingston. Oh, I didn't mean to hurt you! I mean—This is no time for such things!"

"Hope!"

"Wait, listen! They will hear. See, Syd is coming!" She stepped back from him, pointing.

"What of it! You shall tell me! Look at me!" he commanded. "Do you know what you are making me believe—what you are telling me?"

"Nothing!" she insisted. "I am telling you nothing—only—*wait!*" She spoke hurriedly, catching her breath. "Before day-break I will be on that hill over there between your ranch and here—there above Fritz's grave, to watch the dawn of day—and the sunrise and——"

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"And I will be waiting for you! God bless you, dear." He kissed the brown hand, which was snatched hurriedly from his clasp just as Sydney rode up beside them.

"You mustn't believe *anything*," she gasped under her breath.

"*Everything!*" he insisted.

"Your horse is loose, pard," said Sydney, "I thought I caught sight of it over there, but couldn't see anything of it when I rode over. You're afoot! Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Walk," replied the girl, darting a quick look at Livingston. "Half a mile is *nothing*."

"Half a mile," laughed her cousin. "You mean two miles and a half, don't you?"

"Oh, the horse isn't far! We'll find it the first thing in the morning. Good-night, you two! It's time school-teachers were in bed—and everyone else. Good-night!" She turned around and waved her hand at them just before the flap of the white tent closed upon her.

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Clarice yawned dismally. "Will you never settle down, Hope? Isn't this lovely and comfortable? So cool after the hot, fatiguing day, I just love it! Whom were you talking to—Livingston? What a shame he's married! He's such a dear boy, why, I'd almost be tempted, *if* he wasn't married— But pshaw! Lady Helene Livingston is one of those frizzy-haired blondes that suggest curl papers and peroxide, and she affects velvet dresses, black or purple—but always *velvet*—and a feather! I've seen her loads of times, but she doesn't go in our set, because she's taken up with those Grandons. You know Harriet married an English peer, with a title, *nobody* over there recognizes. She was such a pretty girl that she might have done something for her family, but I don't think the poor man fared as well as he expected, for it's well known that old Grandon hasn't a half a million in his own name. But Harriet lives well, and entertains a lot of English people nobody else cares to have. Lady Helene Livingston is pretty enough in spite of her velvet and feathers to get on anywhere, if only she didn't follow in the train of Harriet's crowd. I wonder how it happens that she never comes out here?"

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"The curl papers and velvet may have something to do with that," said Hope, settling down beside Louisa, on the opposite side of the tent, with a motion as weary as if the only thought she possessed was to secure a good night's sleep. "Velvet and feathers," she yawned. "Clarice, do you know that it's nearly eleven o'clock?"

"Really!" exclaimed Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "I'd never have thought it. See how bright it is in here—almost like day."

"Full moon," observed Hope. "It will be light like this until almost morning, and then darkness for a little while before daylight."

"How well you understand such things, Hope! I should think it would be very difficult to keep track of the moon."

"Yes," yawned the girl, "it is. We'd better go to sleep, Clarice, because as soon as the sun is up it will be too warm to stay in here, so you won't get your morning nap. That's the worst of a tent."

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"What a shame!" sighed Mrs. Van Rensselaer. Then after ten minutes of silence: "Hope, I want you to go back to New York with me next week. Now, no joking, dear, I mean it."

"No," replied Hope. "It's too roasting hot there at this season. I couldn't think of it, Clarice."

"But we're going by way of the Lakes, and take in a lot of those cool summer resorts. Then I must get to Newport for the last of the season, and after that, you know, it will be decent weather in New York, and we can have no end of good times. Come now, Hope, just make up your mind to go!"

"You forget, I must teach my school for several weeks yet, so that settles it. Good-night, Clarice! Go to sleep like a good girl."

"What does this little school amount to, to you?" insisted Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "Not a thing, and you know it! You just don't want to go with us. Come on, please do go, that's a dear girlie!"

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"Impossible, Clarice," replied Hope. "There are many good reasons why I really couldn't. This school up here, and my little Louisa, and, anyway, I don't want to go. Aren't you very tired and sleepy, Clarice?" She thought Mrs. Van Rensselaer bid fair to remain awake all night, and was devising various schemes in her mind for getting away from her. But Mrs. Van Rensselaer had an

object in view, and disliked exceedingly to give it up.

"I really don't think you ought to stay up here, Hope. To be candid, I don't just like your position. Of course, in this country, conventionalities don't count for much, but honestly I think this Livingston is caring for you."

"What in the world put such an idea into your head?" asked the girl, flushing beneath her cover of blankets.

"Hope!" reproved Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "You know it, and I know it, so what's the use of denying it? But, of course, if you think it's right—Really, I have nothing further to say except that I wish you would return with me, and bring your little Louisa along."

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The girl was silent for a moment, forgetting her anxiety to get away, in thoughts Clarice had suggested.

"Has he any family?" she suddenly asked. "I mean—*children*, Clarice."

"I don't think so. But what difference would that make?"

"No difference in reality—but a heap of difference in my thoughts. If he had a family,—children,—it would seem more natural to think of him as being a married man, a family man. As it is, I will remember him as a true-hearted, free young Englishman."

"I think, Hopie, his being married has spoiled a very pretty romance. I wish it might have been different, dear!"

"You are too sleepy to know what you think. Go to sleep and dream that I shall join you in New York as soon as the school is ended."

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

It seemed an interminable time to Hope, although it was in reality less than an hour, before the breathing of the two sleepers assured her that she could leave the tent in safety.

When she stood outside, at the edge of the cut-bank, casting a quick glance over the tents behind, it seemed to her that the moonlight was brighter than ever. It was like a soft hazy day. She made her way toward a dark object on the opposite side of the brush, the same that had attracted Sydney an hour before. This time the small object did not conceal itself, but stood boldly forth.

"I thought you wasn't never comin'," said the boy softly. "It must be 'bout mornin' by now. Seems all night! We'll haf to ride like blazes if we get there now in time! They're over here," he said, leading the way along a winding trail around the side of a wooded hill.

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"You're a good boy," said the girl.

"You bet I had the awfulest time gettin' away with your saddle! Every time I'd get up near it that blame cook'd pop his head out of the tent. I like to never get it a tall!"

"But you did get it," said Hope. "I saw that it wasn't there."

"Yep, an' the blanket an' bridle. I've got 'em all cached up here in the trees—horses an' everything, an' your horse is saddled. Somebody rode up while I was waitin' down there on the bank for you, an' I just had to lay low, I tell you!"

"Come, hurry!" whispered the girl. "We've got to kill our horses to-night!"

"Oh, I've got Dave's pinto, so I don't care," replied the child. Then after an instant's pause in which they reached their horses: "You couldn't kill this pinto, nohow!"

Perhaps, thought Hope, it would not kill her horse either. She trusted not, for she loved the animal dearly. But it would be a ride for their very lives if the soldiers were to reach there in time to avert the mischief.

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It was a ride for their lives. Ten miles at night over a rough country, through tangled underbrush, and deep matted grass, across stony creek bottoms and rocky hills, ever onward toward Fox Creek at the speed of the wind.

Time and again the horses stumbled to their knees, but the riders might have been a part of them, so securely did they keep their seats. The pinto began to lag, at which the girl stopped for an instant, rode behind, and lashed it furiously with her strong quirt. Then for a time it kept up with the thoroughbred, but could not long continue the speed.

Upon a high knoll the girl reined up, horse and rider waiting, motionless as a carved statue, for the pinto, whose easy, graceful running gait had changed to short rabbit-like leaps.

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"Wish I had another string o' horses!" gasped the child, as he at length gained the top of the hill. The girl pointed down the dwindling foot-hills to something small and white in the distance.

"See, there are the tents—a mile away. The soldiers—two troops of them—out on a pleasure trip. I will go on—you take your time, and go back with the men."

"I want to go with *you*," declared the boy, half crying.

"No," said the girl coaxingly. "You must be their guide, and lead them to the ledge of rocks by the sheep-shed. Think how fine it will be to be a *real* soldier." Then appalled by a new thought: "Oh, but if you should get tired and *couldn't* lead them there, how would they ever find the place? *What shall I do!* I can't wait for them—I must go back ahead. *If* he shouldn't be there! If something should have warned or detained him! *What will I do!*"

"Oh, shoot it all, *I'll* take 'em there all right!" exclaimed the boy, in a very big voice. "Don't you worry. I ain't a bit tired, an' I ain't a-goin' to be, neither!" [Pg 379]

Hope reached over and clasped the child in her arms, a sob coming with her breath.

"*My little man!*" she said softly. Then instructing him to follow her, spurred up her horse to a fresh attempt, and so mad was her ride that she scarcely breathed until she dropped to the ground beside a sentinel who commanded her to halt.

How she roused the camp in the middle of the night was a story Larry O'Hara often delighted to relate. It was Larry who really came to the rescue, who shouldered the responsibility of the action, and led the troops when finally equipped to the scene of the disturbance.

And Hope rode back alone—rode so rapidly that her horse stopped, exhausted, at the foot of the big hill where she had planned the rendezvous with Livingston. There she left the noble animal and climbed up toward the summit, sometimes on her hands and knees, so tired had she become. And the moon still shone brightly along the horizon of the heavens. An hour of brilliancy, she thought, then darkness before the dawn. When she had dragged herself up the mountain side, hope and fear alternately filling her heart, and hastening her footsteps, a sudden weakness came over her as she saw on the summit the stalwart figure of Livingston. Then it seemed to her that the night had been a mere dream, or at least ridiculous. How could such a strong, brave-looking man require a girl's assistance? It was preposterous! She seemed to shrink into herself, in a little cuddled heap among the rocks. [Pg 380]

Then a clear whistle sounded on the still air. She knew it was for her. How like a boy, she thought. She tried to answer it, but could not make a sound.

Finally she rose from the rocks and approached him—not the Hope he had expected, but a frightened, trembling girl.

He went to meet her, after the manner of a boy, and clasped the hands she gave him in his own, then kissed each one, and gravely led her to the summit upon which he had been standing. [Pg 381]

"This rock is like a great throne," he said, "where we are going to wait our crown of happiness that is to come with the rising of the sun. Is it not so? See, you shall sit upon the throne and I here at your feet. How you are trembling, dear! And those heavy guns, why did you bring them?"

"To protect myself, perhaps, from one who is inclined to be over-bold," she replied, with a little nervous laugh as she settled herself comfortably on the throne-like rock.

"Hope!" he reproved. A red flush dyed the girl's face.

"And are you not the man?" she inquired.

"Tell me then," he said quietly, "who has a better right!"

She drew back into the very recess of the throne, away from his eyes, so convincingly near to hers.

"It's a long climb up this steep mountain," she remarked wearily.

"And you are tired! I can see it now. But it was good of you to come to meet me here like this, Hope—*sweetheart!*" [Pg 382]

"No, no! you must not talk like that!" cried the girl.

"You know I cannot help it when I am with you. I must tell you over and over that I love you—*love you*, Hope! Why not, when my heart sings it all the time? And have you not given me the *right*, dear?"

"Wait! Not now," she said more softly. "Talk about something else—*anything*," she gasped.

"And must I humor you, my queen," he said. "Look down and let me read in your eyes what I want to find there—then I will talk about anything, everything, until you want to hear what is in my heart!"

"Only daylight can reveal what is in my eyes," she replied. "The light of the moon is unreal, deceiving. Tell me how long you have been here, and where did you leave your horse?"

"You are evading me for some reason. If I did not believe it to be impossible, I should say that I am nervous—and that you are nervous. Can you not be yourself to me now—at this time? Why did you want me to meet you here?" [Pg 383]

"You say you love me. Then aren't you content to just sit here in silence beside me?"

"Pardon me, dear, but my love is almost too great for silence. You will admit that." Then with a touch of amusement in his voice: "Tell me, are you angry with me that I should speak so plainly to you?"

"No, no! Of course not—only talk about something else just now. How long have you been here?"

"An eternity," he replied. "Or perhaps longer. I'm not sure. When I left you there at the camp I went directly back to the ranch. The men were all in bed. I went in and got my rifle and started over here. You see we are both armed!" he laughed, taking a Winchester from behind the throne of rocks. She took it from him and examined it minutely.

"A good gun," she remarked, handing it back.

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"Then I started over here," he continued, "but had a brief interruption on the road in the shape of the old squaw that lives down in your community—old Mother White Blanket. She held me up in the road—positively held my horse so that I couldn't move while she told a story that would have brought tears to my eyes if I could have understood a word she said, and if my mind hadn't been so full of the most gloriously beautiful girl in the world.

"Finally I had sense enough to give her some money, and after repeating 'yes' innumerable times to her broken questions she finally gave me permission to proceed on my way. I left my horse down at the sheep-shed."

"Couldn't you understand anything she said to you?" questioned Hope eagerly.

"Not much," he admitted, and Hope, with a relieved little air, which he noticed, sank back among the rocks again.

A silence fell over them for a time, then Livingston raised his head and looked at the girl intently.

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"I think she was trying to tell me something," he said slowly. "She said it was a warning; but I paid no attention to her delirium. I believe she tried to impress upon me that I was in danger. But I was insanelly anxious to meet you. She said something that I had heard before, that you and the twins had driven away the men who attacked and killed poor Fritz that night. And this much more I think I understand now, that the 'old man,' whoever she meant, had given her a beating, that the twins were shut up in the stable or somewhere, and that you were a good girl because you had given her all your school money. That much is clear to me now. And also that she was very anxious that I should get out of the country immediately—which seems to be the sentiment of the majority of the people out here. The old woman is no doubt insane."

"Oh, yes," agreed the girl, "there's not a doubt but that she's plumb locoed! I'm glad you didn't allow anything she said to trouble your mind. She's a regular old beggar. The money was probably what she was after. You can't believe a word she says!"

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"Yet she spoke convincingly," mused Livingston. "If I hadn't been so absorbed in the meeting I would have taken more heed of what she said. As it was, I passed her off as a little out of her mind. Of course, I knew you had no hand in that shooting at the corral, had you, Hope?" he asked in a somewhat anxious voice.

"A ridiculous idea for that old squaw to get in her head," replied the girl, leaning in a weary fashion back upon the rock.

Whatever suspicion Livingston had entertained vanished for the moment.

"I am glad," he said. "I don't know exactly why, but I am glad that it isn't so. I shouldn't like to think that you had done such a thing—for me."

"The moon takes a long time to set, don't you think?" she remarked. "It must be almost time for daylight."

"Are you anxious?" he inquired pointedly. She sat erect in dignified silence and did not reply.

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"How much longer must you be humored, dear?" he asked, taking both of her hands within his own, and drawing her toward him. "I do not believe that the moonlight will tell lies. Look at me!"

She leaped away from him with all her young strength, and stood upon the throne of rocks, scornfully erect.

"How bad you are—how wicked to talk to me so, to even think that I would care for you one minute! Surely you must realize that I know your past, *Lord Livingston! Your past!*" she flashed.

"You know my past, and yet you can condemn me," he said, pain and wonderment in his quiet voice. "Perhaps you are right. I haven't always been perfect. But I am not bad—Hope! Not *that!* I am a man—I try to be, before God. Surely you do not mean what you say, my girl—*Hope!*"

"You know just what I mean," said Hope, in a voice strained and harsh. "And you know it would be absolutely *impossible* for me to love you!"

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"Then there is nothing more to be said," replied Livingston, turning away from her. "We will not wait for the sunrise. I will go now." He walked from her with long strides.

"Wait," she cried in absolute terror. "*Wait!* Oh, you wouldn't be so rude as to leave me here—*alone!*" He stopped short, his back still toward her. "Please come back!" she begged, approaching him, "I should die of fright!" Somehow she reminded herself of Clarice. "Surely you will walk back to camp with me!"

"Yes, certainly, pardon me," he replied huskily.

As they turned, a horse came slowly toward them. Hope gave a little nervous exclamation.

"Your horse," said Livingston, reaching for the bridle. "I thought you walked."

"No—yes," replied the girl. "I walked up the hill. The horse must have followed. We will walk down and lead it. It's too steep to ride down." [Pg 389]

But Livingston had stopped short beside the animal, his head bowed, almost upon the saddle.

"Come, shall we go?" asked the girl nervously.

Suddenly the man turned to her, sternness expressed in every line of his figure.

"Where have you been?" he commanded.

"For a ride," she replied, feeling for the first time in her life the desire to scream.

"*For a ride!* Yes, it must have been a ride! Your horse is nearly dead—listen to his breathing! Crusted with foam from head to foot and still dripping. You have been——"

"For the soldiers. To protect your ranch from the devils who would kill you and get rid of your sheep—this very hour!"

"And you have lured me here, away from danger—away from the side of my men, away from my *duty*, with all a woman's cowardice! *But what of them!* You have called me bad! That may be, but I am not bad enough to be grateful to you for doing this, that you may, perhaps, have intended for a kindness! Anything would have been kinder to me than what you have done to-night." [Pg 390]

"Where are you going?" she cried from the rocks where she had thrown herself. But he was running, with all his speed, down the mountain side. [Pg 391]

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## CHAPTER XXIX

Then she knew that he was going straight into the very jaws of death. If it had been a trap set for him it could not have been any surer. In a sheep-shed far below, close to the reef of rocks above Fritz's grave, a score of men were waiting, and he was rushing toward them, down the mountain side, lighted by the white moonlight. And what was she doing, groveling there among the rocks? Like a flash she was after him, but at a speed much less than his had been.

Before she was halfway down three shots rang out. The girl clutched her heart and listened, but not a sound could be heard save the long echoes in the valley, which sounded like a dying breath.

On she sped from rock to rock, keeping ever out of sight of the shed, her senses keenly alive to the one object in view—a bit of white far below. It might have been a bunch of flowers along the hillside, but white flowers never grew there—a heap of bones, then, she thought. She made a zigzag line along the jagged ridge of rocks, closer and closer to the white object below. She wondered if he lay on his face or his back. How calm she was in the shock and terror of her grief! The light of the moon was growing dim, she had reached the very tip of the rocks, the white object was not twenty feet away, but out in the open in perfect view of the sheep-shed and the score of men it hid. Another shot broke the stillness. The white object moved, and then a moan followed, so low that none but the ears of the frenzied girl could have heard. Like an enraged lioness she sprang out into the open and dragged the heavy body up toward the shelter of rocks. Several bullets rang about her, but the increasing darkness made her an uncertain target. A couple of men ventured outside the sheep-shed, encouraged by the stillness. The girl laughed savagely, as if in glee, and pulled the man's body close to the side of rocks, covering it with her own. [Pg 392]

"Come on," she cried to herself. "Come on, show yourselves! I shall have you all! For every pang you have made him suffer, you shall have twenty, and for his death you shall have a lingering one! Come on, come on!" Three stood outside. The addition pleased her. She laughed. Taking deliberate aim she fired again and again. Three wounded, frightened men crawled into the shelter of the shed. Then a score of bullets splashed against the rocks about her. She lifted the warm bleeding body closer under the rocks, drawing her own over it to protect it from all harm and talking frantically the while. [Pg 393]

"The hounds, the hounds! They murdered you right in my sight, dear, and I will tear out their hearts with my hands! See, they are hiding themselves again! I can wait, yes, I can wait! *My love, my love!* For everything they have made you suffer! Oh, you can't be *dead*, dear! You can't be dead! Open your eyes and let me tell you just once I love you! Only once, dear!" She put her mouth close to his ear. "*I love you, love you, love you!* Only hear me once and know, dear! Know how I love you! Why didn't I tell you? I don't care if you are married a thousand times, a *million*" [Pg 394]

times! I love you with all my life—my soul! See, he's trying to get away! But he'll never reach his horse! See! A hole right through his knee! Death is too good for them, dear. My love, speak to me just once—only know that I love you, that I am mad with love for you! Tell me that you feel my face against yours—and my kisses! See, they're crawling out like flies! and making for their horses—and now they're crawling back again so that I cannot get them. Oh, God, let me get them *all!* My love, my love, how I love you, and *never told you so!*"

With the first hint of dawn another volley came from the opposite side, and out of the gloom a rush of cavalry closed in about the sheep-shed, and ten men, most of them suffering from slight wounds, were taken captive. The man lying against the reef of rocks partially opened his eyes as Hope, with one last kiss upon his face, rose to meet a small group of riders.

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"I say, Hope, it's a blasted shame we didn't get here in time to save him!" exclaimed O'Hara, with grief in his voice. "I'll just send the doctor over here at once."

While the surgeon bent over Livingston the girl stood close by, against the rocks, quiet as the stone itself.

"A bad shoulder wound," he commented at length. "A little of your flask, O'Hara, and he'll be all right. Why, he's quite conscious! How do you feel? You're all right, my boy! A shattered shoulder isn't going to bother you any, is it? Not much!"

The girl moved closer.

"Is he alive and conscious? Will he live?" she asked.

"He's all right, madam," replied the surgeon. As he spoke Livingston turned his face toward her, his eyes alight with all the love-light of his heart—answering every prayer she had breathed upon him. Her own answered his. Then she drew back, farther and farther away, until she stood outside the group of riders. O'Hara tried to detain her as she passed him.

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"Why, you're wounded yourself, girl!" he exclaimed.

She looked at her sleeve, and the wet stream of blood upon her dress, and laughed. It was true, but she had not felt the wound.

"Not at all, Larry," she replied. "The blood came from *him*," and she pointed back to the rocks. She started on, but turned back. "Tell me," she said, "what became of little Ned."

"I sent him home," replied Larry. "The poor little chap was about all in. We met his uncle, Long Bill, riding like blazes for the doctor. It seems that those young divils of twins shot old Harris some time during the night, which stopped that faction from joining these fellows here as they had planned. A pretty lucky shot, I'm thinking! They ought to have a gold medal for it, bless their souls, but they'll both dangle from the end of a rope before they're forty, the devils, or I'll miss my guess!"

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Larry looked around to speak to an officer, and before he could realize it Hope had disappeared, climbing back toward the summit of the hill where she had left her horse.

In the gulch on the opposite side she fell exhausted into the very arms of old Jim McCullen, who had returned in time to hear the shooting, and was hastening toward the scene.

"My poor little Hopie!" he cried, carrying her to the stream, where the alarmed party from the camp found them a few minutes later.

"You will drown her, Mr. McCullen!" exclaimed Clarice Van Rensselaer, rushing up quite white and breathless. "The poor darling, I just *knew* she'd get into trouble with all those dreadful Indians! Someone give me some whisky, *quick!* That's right, Sydney, *make* her swallow it! Here, give it to me! *There!*"

Louisa, stricken with grief, pointed to the damp, stiffened sleeve of the girl's shirt-waist. "See," she sobbed, "they have shot her, too, like my Fritz!"

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Of them all, Mrs. Van Rensselaer was the most contained, and showed remarkable coolness and nerve in the way she ripped off the sleeve and bathed the wound, which was hardly more than a deep scratch, yet had caused considerable loss of blood.

"It's exhaustion, pure and simple," said Jim McCullen. Then he and Sydney drew away a short distance, and examined the horse.

Hope finally looked up into the anxious faces above her.

"I think, Clarice," she said, "I'll go back to New York with you."

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## CHAPTER XXX

Hope, a vision in white, leaned back resignedly in the soft embrace of the carriage cushions.

"I thought," she said, "you never visited the Grandons, Clarice, particularly since Harriet made

her alliance with the titleless duke." Mrs. Van Rensselaer smiled behind the laces of her muff. "I didn't suppose you were going there this afternoon," continued the girl, with a sweeping look along the solidly built street. "How does it happen?"

"Well, you see," replied Clarice, "*Larry* wished it; and you know his wish is law to me—*until* we're married. That's only right and as it should be—the *dear boy!*" Then impulsively: "I don't know how I've ever lived without him, Hope! Positively, he is the *dearest* thing that ever lived!"

"And you'll both be tremendously happy, I know. Both of you young and gay, and in love with life and its frivolities—both the center of your set, and both rattle-brained enough to want to keep that center and throw away your lives in the whirling, rapid stream of society." [Pg 400]

"You shouldn't ridicule this life, Hope. Don't you know we are the very pulse of the world! I had an idea you were taking to it pretty well. You are certainly making a tremendous hit. Even mamma smiles upon you in the most affectionate manner, and is proud for once of her offspring. You are simply gorgeous, Hope—a perfect *queen!*"

The girl's eyes darkened, her face flushed. "*A queen,*" she retorted. "A queen! Clarice, did you ever sit upon a throne and feel the world slipping out from under you? A woman is never a queen, except to the *one* man. But you are mistaken, Clarice. I simply cannot adapt myself to this life. If it wasn't for the continual monotony of it all—the never changing display of good points and fine clothes—where even one's own prayers are gilded and framed in consciousness and vanity—and these streets—the reflection of it all—these blocks and blocks always the same, like the people they cover—presenting always the same money-stamped faces—oh, it is this sameness that stifles me! It is all grand and wonderful, but it isn't *life.*" She paused, then smiled at Clarice's perplexed face. "Leave me at mamma's when you return, for I've got stacks of things to do, and I want the evening all to myself—Louisa and I, you know. And we'll say, Clarice, that I perfectly love dear old New York." [Pg 401]

"Oh, I don't mind, dear, not at all! I know you are no more fitted in your heart for this life than I am for the life out there with those *dreadful* Indians. But you've certainly been acting superb these last two months!"

"You are such a *dear,* Clarice," said Hope impulsively, stroking her gloved hand. "I have you and Louisa, and, of course, I am perfectly happy! I tell myself so a thousand times a day. My poor little Louisa! *She's* about the happiest girl I ever saw in all my life, but she doesn't know it. Here she is worrying her head off because Sydney is pressing his suit too strongly and won't take 'no' for an answer, and she thinks she ought to be faithful to poor Fritz, her cousin, who is really only a sweet, sad memory to her now, while all the time she is crazy in love with Syd. Isn't it a fright? But Sydney is way out in Montana, and his letters serve only as little pricks to her poor conscience. Her replies are left mostly to me, so that is what I must do to-night." [Pg 402]

"But your mother entertains this evening. Had you forgotten?" reminded Mrs. Van Rensselaer. "So how are you going to get away?"

"I suppose I will have to come down for awhile, but I simply will not remain long."

"Well, I will see you then. Larry and I are going to drop in for a little while in the early evening."

When they drove away from the Grandons' a half hour later Clarice searched the girl's quiet face for some expression of her thoughts, but found none. [Pg 403]

"So you have seen the Lady Livingston at last, Hope! What do you think of her?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders and looked into the street. "Your description tallied very well," she replied.

That evening Hope met the blond Lady Helene at her mother's musicale. This time it was Clarice, again, who brought the meeting about.

Mrs. Van Rensselaer was in her gayest, most voluble mood.

"I'm *so* anxious to have you two get acquainted," she said. "Dear Lady Helene, this is *Hope*—Miss Hathaway, and she can tell you everything you want to know about the West. Do, Hope, entertain her for a few moments until I find Larry." This the girl did in her gracious way, but adroitly kept the conversation away from the West.

After a few moments Clarice returned without Larry. A shadow of disappointment crossed her face as she joined the conversation.

"I thought you were going to talk about the West, Hope," she laughed, "and here you are talking *New York*—nothing but *New York!*" [Pg 404]

"New York is always an entertaining topic," said Lady Helene. "I do not seem to fancy the West particularly. You know Lord Livingston has recently been hurt out there, and so I do not enjoy a very kindly feeling toward that country. The poor boy! I have been so worried about him! Really, don't you know, I haven't had a good night's sleep since I heard of his injury! Yes, you know, it's a wonder he wasn't *scalped!* It's just fearful, really! He is so much to me, you know. Ever since my poor husband died and the title and estates fell to Edward, I have felt a *great* responsibility for him. He is so much younger than my husband, Lord Henry, and so, well, really, sort of wild, don't you know." Here Lady Helene smiled and wiped one eye with a filmy bit of lace. Perhaps she was

saddened by thoughts of the havoc she had wrought in the life of the late lord, and his fortunes.

Hope sat motionless, suddenly paralyzed. "Do you mean," she asked, in short gasps, "that Edward—Lord Livingston is not your *husband*?" [Pg 405]

"Mercy, no," replied Lady Helene, "my husband's brother! Indeed, Edward is not married! I doubt very much if he ever will be. I hope if he does, that it will be to someone at home, in his own class, don't you know! Really, he is a great responsibility to me, Mrs. Van Rensselaer! Why, where did Miss Hathaway go? She seems to be such a bright, dashing young woman. Really, one meets few American girls so royally beautiful! Yes, as I was saying, Edward is a terrible responsibility to me. Even now I am obliged to hurry away because he has just arrived here in town, and I must meet him at his hotel. That is the worst of not having a house of your own! To think of poor, dear Edward stopping at a *hotel*!"

"Which one?" gasped Clarice. Receiving the information, she abruptly excused herself from Lady Helene, who immediately decided that some Americans had very poor manners. [Pg 406]

While Clarice drove rapidly toward Livingston's hotel, Hope, in eager haste, was literally throwing things in a trunk that had been pulled into the center of the room. Little Louisa, no less excited and eager, assisted.

"To think, my Louisa," laughed the girl, "that we are going back to our West—*home*—again, away from all this fuss and foolishness! Oh, don't be so particular, dear. Throw them in any way, just so they get in! Our train leaves at twelve, and I have telephoned for tickets, state-room and everything. Isn't it *grand*? Mamma will be furious! But dear old Dad, won't he be glad! He's so lonesome for me, Louisa. He says he can hardly exist there without me! And Jim, and Sydney, and—everyone! Oh, I am wild for my horses and the prairie again! And you've got to be nice to Syd! Yes, dear, it's your *duty*. Can't you see it? If you don't, the poor boy will go to the bad *altogether*, and something *dreadful* will happen to him! And it will be all your fault!" Which statement sent Louisa into a paroxysm of tears, not altogether sorrowful. [Pg 407]

"You will spoil dose *beautiful* clothes!" she finally exclaimed, looking in dismay through her tears at the reckless packer.

"It makes no difference," laughed Hope. "What are *clothes*! We will have the rest sent on after us. I suppose we've forgotten half what we really need, but that doesn't matter, either, does it, my Louisa?"

Louisa dried her tears and assisted until the trunk was packed and strapped. Then they took hold of hands and danced like children around it. Suddenly Hope stopped, her face growing white and fearful.

"*If he shouldn't forgive me!*" she exclaimed softly.

"Ah, but he lofs you!" said Louisa.

At that moment Mrs. Van Rensselaer opened the door and looked in.

"My dear," she began, then stopped in amazement. "What in the world—Why, you are going away!"

"Yes," replied Hope, putting her head down upon Clarice's soft evening wrap. "I am going back to \_\_\_" [Pg 408]

"But he has come to you, dear, and he is waiting right here in the hall!"

"No, no!" breathed the girl.

"But he *is!*" exclaimed Clarice, gently pushing the girl, still in all her white evening glory of gown, into the great hall. "And he carries his arm in a sling, so *do* be careful!" she admonished, closing the door upon her.

From below came the indistinct murmur of many voices. Under the red glare of the lamp at the head of the broad staircase Livingston and Hope met in a happiness too great for words.

"Louisa," said Clarice Van Rensselaer, from her seat upon the trunk, "I hope you see it your duty to make a man of Sydney."

"*A man*," replied Louisa indignantly, "he is already de greatest man in all de whole world, and *I lof him!*"

**FINIS.**

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES:

Punctuation corrected without note.

page 48: "through" changed to "though" (as though talking to herself).

page 95: "bloodthristy" changed to "bloodthirsty" (more bloodthirsty than she suspected).



page 123: "protuded" changed to "protruded" (teeth protruded from her thin lips).

page 303: "upon" removed from text as redundant (patting him upon the head).

page 369: "close" changed to "closed" (just before the flap of the white tent closed upon her).

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HOPE HATHAWAY: A STORY OF WESTERN RANCH LIFE \*\*\*

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