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THE BRAND.



HN



A STORY OF THE
FLATHEAD RESERVATION



Therese Broderick
(The Author)

To Mr. + Mrs. Browne

With sincere regards
from the author.

Theresa Proderick
Jan. 27, 1921

THE BRAND

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THE BRAND

A Tale of the Flathead Reservation

By

THERESE BRODERICK
(Tin Schreiner)

HW

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Bess

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*To all who know the Golden West,
And those who fain would feel
Its charm and mystery, and test
Its worth, which is so real;
To all who love God's mountains,
His vast expanse of plain,
His forests, lakes and fountains,
And the secrets they contain—
This book is humbly given.*

—TIN SCHREINER.

CHAPTER I

BESS FLETCHER'S FIRST WESTERN ACQUAINTANCE

For two days the westbound train had hurried over the prairies as if it understood the heart of the girl and strove to gratify her impatience for a glimpse of the mountains. She sat at the car window and gazed fascinated at the scenes which were so new and strange that she forgot the coach with its tired people—forgot even her brother, who sat with his book, bored and indifferent to the flying panorama.

Her soul left the plush-covered seats and suit-cases to follow the wild creatures that moved in the gorges or climbed the wonderful mountain slopes. She did not hear the repeated "I'm going for a smoke, Bess." Her soul was without, her eyes following a mysterious, half-hidden form.

"It's a deer! Oh, Jim, it's a deer!" she exclaimed excitedly, turning to her brother for corroboration. But the flashing brown eyes looked into the face of a stranger.

"Oh, I beg pardon," she breathed, her cheek flushing. "My brother sat there only a moment ago, and I thought I was addressing him."

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The stranger smiled. "Then I infer that you are Miss Fletcher. I just now saw Mr. Fletcher going into the smoking room. Two years ago I had the pleasure of making his acquaintance when he was in the Flathead country."

While he was speaking, she noted what a large man he was, how deliberately he spoke and in what an unusually musical voice. She saw the flush of health and strength in his face, contrasting so greatly to her brother's pale, emaciated countenance. She wondered what color his eyes were, but as he looked at her with fleeting glances she could not tell. The thought flashed through her mind that he would be very handsome if only he would open his eyes frankly. In fact, so preoccupied was she reading the young man that she was scarcely aware of what he was saying to her. Just then she saw James coming.

"Well, well, Mr. Davis! I'm glad to meet you once more." Fletcher reached forth his hand in friendly recognition.

"Permit me to introduce my sister, whom I am taking to the Flathead with me."

With a nod the stranger explained how he had already had the pleasure of speaking with Miss Fletcher.

"You are not looking like the hale and hearty cowboy whom I saw two years ago riding over the range on the reservation," he continued. "It must be the return to civilization did not agree with you."

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"I was very well until a few months ago," said Fletcher, "but the worry and strain of settling my father's affairs used me up generally, and I am now going West to recuperate. I love the Western life, with its sunshine, its out-of-doors, its fresh air and vast breathing space. I wouldn't exchange the three summers on the range for all my life in the city."

"Do you know, Mr. Davis, I have become so fascinated with tales of the cattle country that I feel almost as enthusiastic as my brother," said Bess, brushing the stray lock of fluffy brown hair out of her eye. "Do you think," she continued, "that I shall love the West as he does?"

"I hope so," said Davis, with a swift glance.

"I already know what a cayuse is, and also a lariat, though I am not so sure as regards a teepee; still, if I remember correctly, it is something good to eat."

Simultaneously both gentlemen burst forth in hearty laughter, and when Davis could speak he said: "I am afraid, Miss Fletcher, your appetite will be gone when you see or even smell one."

Bess wrinkled her brow in perplexity. "Oh," she said, "James has told me so many tales of the Indians and cowboys and all, that I scarcely know what to believe. Nevertheless, it won't be long now before I shall have solved a few of the mysteries at least."

Davis began carefully to roll a cigarette, shaping it daintily with his thumb and index fingers; then poising it carefully between his lips, he sought a match in his vest pocket and excused himself, hoping to meet them both very often during the summer. Bess watched him as he slowly sauntered toward the end of the car with a look of inquiry.

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"I think I would like him better if he would look directly at one. Who is he, James? A cattleman or cowboy, or what is it you called them—oh, yes, squaw man?"

"You'll have to guess again, Bess. He is Dave Davis, the Indian agent of the Flathead Reservation. He is probably on his way to the sub-agency at Ronan."

She gave a little sigh in answer, and asked how long it would be before the train reached Selish.

"I fear you are nearly worn out, James. You had better lie down and rest. It is now four o'clock, and at five you say we will reach the end of our train journey. It's been rather long and tedious. How far away New York begins to feel, doesn't it? Oh, I wonder if I shall really like it away out here in the West?"

James quietly settled down for a nap, and Bess went on with her mental soliloquy. The West! What had she not dreamed of the West! Its wonderful mountains, so great and bold, rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun, verdant with the towering pines, and again, white and softened by the crown of winter. In fancy she had seen their rugged sides caressed by crystal streams, and had stooped to drink where deer had splashed. Then forth stretched the plain, far into the blue horizon. On she dreamed, till the porter warned her it was nearly time for them to leave the train.

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Hurriedly awakening her brother, he hastily gathered together their numerous grips and boxes. So busily engaged were her hands that she had to blow the persistent wisp of hair out of her eyes.

"For pity's sake, Bess, can't you pin that bunch of hair up?"

"It won't stay up, James. I get so annoyed at the old forelock that sometimes I feel like pulling it out," and all unconsciously she repeated the motion, at which they both laughed.

"Here we are, dearie, at last. I wonder if anyone will meet us. Come, let the porter help you off with a few of those bird cages."

As they stepped from the train she felt to everything which came within her range of observation like a huge interrogation point. She glanced hurriedly about, hoping to see Henry West, and wondering if she would know him. Just then she saw Mr. Davis lifting his hat to her, both in recognition and farewell, as he walked to a man holding a beautiful saddle horse. The Indian agent glanced back at the tall, graceful girl, with her pretty traveling dress and hat of brown. She could not know that he noted with what an air she walked, head and shoulders erect, chin up aggressively, nor that he thought:

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"Gad! but she is great! And what a treat after three years of Indians. I shall certainly see you often, Miss Fletcher."

"Do you see him anywhere, James?" Bess was all animation.

"West? No, sister. We better hurry over here where there is the best little hotel you ever saw or heard tell of; so immaculately clean, and excellent food—plain, but cooked to the queen's taste. That is, if it's run by the same party who used to be here. My mouth still waters in recollection of some of the good trout and muffins which I have had at Mrs. Strong's."

Nestled closely to the hillside was the hotel, and as Bess was greeted by a sweet-faced girl and her mother she wondered if all Western hospitality were as cordial.

James had ordered their trunks brought over, and soon Bess came from her room fresh and clean and rested, dressed in a becoming tan-colored riding suit of corduroy.

It was early May. In the mountains the evenings were still cold, and a blazing fire crackled as they sat down to dinner. It seemed to Bess that she never was so hungry in all her life. Biscuits never tasted so good before. She saw, with gratification, that James ate as he had not in weeks.

"Did you ever feel, James, that you could eat everything in sight? That's just the way I feel now, but I'll try to leave enough for you, dear."

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This brother and sister were all the world to each other. The mother died while Bess was still young, and most of her life had been spent in the convent school. During her summer vacation she was often with her father and brother in New York. The past year and a half, since the death of their father, Bess and James had been together constantly. He had hoped to carry on his father's law business, but a severe illness necessitated his leaving the city, and so he gladly accepted the offer of Henry West to come to his ranch and assume the foremanship.

James and Henry West had been in school at Harvard together, and later both began the study of law. The close association of years caused the insoluble bond of friendship between them.

Colin West, the father of Henry, was a Scotchman, of education, tact and good judgment; a man respected by everyone with whom he came in contact. Fate or fortune had placed him in the West while still a young man. His wife was half Indian blood, and yet one of the most refined and intellectual of women. Her son was proving himself an able manager of the vast herds of cattle and buffalo which Colin West had accumulated, and since his death four years ago Henry had had the entire management of the ranch.

Here James spent three long, delightful summers. Here he learned to ride and "rope" like any of the cowboys on the range. It was always with reluctance that he left, after the fall round-up, to take up his studies again. How glad he was to return now, in hopes of soon regaining his health and strength. He had hesitated in bringing his sister into this new life, and yet he could not leave her alone in New York.

[18]

She was wild with delight when he asked her to come, for ever since she had listened to his never-ending, interesting tales of the West had she hoped that she, too, might come to know its lure. She loved out-of-door life, and the few months of her vacation in the city were usually spent riding, so that she had become a very good horsewoman, and, best of all, had grown to strong and perfect womanhood. She was girlish, and her twenty years rested lightly on her shoulders. Her optimistic and sunshiny disposition won for her the love and admiration of all her friends, and even strangers smiled at her happy face. As most of her life had been spent at school among sweet-faced nuns, she had grown up uncontaminated by the world, pure-minded and whole-souled. Her faith was implicit, and never yet had she had a rude awakening to the fact that all were not true nor good, nor even sincere.

Several times she had considered seriously becoming a nun herself, but her love of nature, of out-of-doors, of friends, of her father and brother, of the world generally, made her pause. Then, too, she knew her bright and merry nature could never endure the strict confines of the cloister and the shadow of the somber black robes. "No, I cannot, for I am not good enough," was always her mental decision. And now that her father was dead and she and James were alone, she had put the thought from her mind entirely.

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The nuns realized what her work would be, for her talents in music and painting were extraordinary; and she also had that gift, which few possess, of making a success of anything she undertook. Failure was not in her vocabulary, and she never used the word, either mentally or audibly.

"Why in the world, Bess, have you put on your riding togs?"

Bess looked up with surprise and replied: "Why, James, are we not going horseback to the *HW* Ranch?"

"We can't start for the ranch tonight. It is at least thirty-five miles, and besides you can never

ride so far, even though Henry West should bring saddle horses. The stage leaves here for Polson early in the morning, and we will, in all probability, meet him there. Still, he wired he would meet us here at Selish. It is early yet, and he may come soon."

With a little impatient gesture of putting back the hair from her forehead, and with her eyes sparkling, half defiantly and half in fun, Bess said: "My dear, solicitous brother, let me tell you a few things right now. I am here in the great West where you have told me there is perfect and untrammelled freedom. Don't begin using a lot of don'ts and can'ts, for I am going to ride—'and ever to ride', when and where and with whom my fancy dictates; I am going to talk with anyone who interests me, be he white or full-blood Indian. I am going to—Oh, what am I not going to do!—even shock my dear, old brother, half to death, every day—you dear"—She jumped from her seat at the table and after flinging her arms around his neck, she was out of the room, her merry laugh ringing in his ears, before he had time to remonstrate.

"My dear little sister," he thought, "I pray there may no harm come to you, and that your frankness may not be misconstrued by those *who are ever ready to criticise.*"

CHAPTER II

THE GOLDEN GLIMPSE

Bess had donned her fluffy brown tam-o-shanter and stood on the veranda. Shadows of evening were silently gathering in the valley, and yet she could see that beyond the hill the sun still shone. "That hill looks rather high," she said briskly, "but I do so long to see what lies beyond it. I think I'll go up the road and take a glimpse before the sun sets. Brother won't miss me and I'll only be gone a minute."

As she walked she stooped to pick some shining butter-cups, and to thrust in her hair waxen leaves of the Oregon grape, with its bright yellow clusters of blossoms. So interested was she in each new leaf and stone that the crest of the long, winding road had been reached before she was aware. Lifting her eyes she caught her breath, and unconsciously lifted her hands in silent adoration of the glorious panorama spread out before her, her first real look at the "golden West."

It was golden indeed, for the sun had just dipped beyond the purple mountains and the scene was flooded with golden light. Away, away to the North and East and West stretched the vast rolling valley of the Indian Reservation, the Little Bitter Root mountains guarding it on the left and the Mission Range rising modestly on the East. She could see but the faint purple outline of the low hills to the northward. Dotted here and there were soft greens, of irrigated reaches, and trees, showing where the waters flowed and at which the grazing herds quenched their thirst. Bess was filled with awe at the magnificent scene, and reverently clasped her hands and lifted her eyes as she realized the immensity of it. When the Lord of Hosts should upon the last day assemble all the people of the earth together in judgment, what more fitting place could he choose! There he might sit on the crest of yonder mountain, with his host of angels about him, and below in the expanse of sweeping prairie, unmarred by the hand of man, adorned only by the divine touch of bountiful Providence, might convene all,—the good might here find a foretaste of heaven, and the less fortunate could hope for mercy of which they had not dreamed nor even dared to hope. Surely the Creator of all this beauty would condone the faults of poor, frail humanity who had fallen from grace in the hard and bitter struggle of life.

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So she stood, entranced, in the fading light of day, unheeding the last thrilling notes of meadow lark, or the balsam-laden air wafted to her from the evergreen slopes of the mountains. Closing her eyes in a softly murmured prayer, she stood silent and motionless, and when she again looked upon the scene the grayness of early night had settled over all, softening every outline with indistinctness.

[23]

Abruptly she turned to hurry back to the hotel, when, in the distance, she heard the clatter of approaching hoofs. A little alarm of fear and loneliness stirred in her breast and she hurried down the road. All the bravado with which she had left her brother had suddenly deserted her, and she could feel the heart-throbs in her throat nearly choking her. She did not even glance up the road, although she heard the hoof-beats ever coming nearer. "What if it should be Indians!" The thought filled her with ever-increasing alarm. On she sped, as rapidly as the gradual descent permitted, then she struck a rock, and ere she could regain her footing she fell on her knees. Scarcely had the damp earth left an imprint on her skirt when she regained her feet, and now glanced behind her.

Silhouetted against the evening sky, on the very crest of the hill, she saw, in her momentary glance, a lone horseman leading a second horse. The next instant they had begun slowly to descend the hill.

Bess, seeing a huge, flat boulder to the right of the road, stepped out upon it so that she could be distinctly seen, even tho it was now rapidly growing dark. She looked up the road at the approaching trio, her face raised fearlessly and confidently, although her knees were still trembling.

As the man passed he courteously lifted his broad sombrero, speaking at the same time in a low, commanding voice to the horse he was leading. "Mauchacho, I am ashamed of you! Did you never see a lady before? You certainly—"

[24]

But his voice grew indistinct in the distance and Bess did not hear the end of the chiding the dainty animal had received for pricking up his ears and pulling back on the hackamore.

"Thank goodness, it was not an Indian after all," she said aloud, as she hurried down to the hotel.

The lone rider had already reached the steps, and she saw James heartily shaking both his hands. She stopped a moment watching the pair standing in the flood of light which poured out of the open doorway. The stranger was tall and straight as an arrow, even though his shoulders had a tired droop. Heavily fringed leather "chapps" covered his trousers, a mackinaw coat, carelessly fastened and a white silk handkerchief knotted loosely about his throat completed his unpretentious costume. She could see that his face looked dark and swarthy, but it was lighted by a smile of greeting, displaying a row of firm, even teeth.

"Well, old boy, it seems mighty good to see you once more, and to breathe this air again. I had just started to find my sister, who has strayed off somewhere, when I heard you coming," Bess heard her brother saying, "and I hope I may find her before someone lariats her for a maverick and sticks his brand on her."

[25]

The stranger laughed. "You have not forgotten all your Western jingle, even though you have been gone a year and a half. I saw a young woman up the road a way. Perhaps she is the sister you are searching."

Just then James caught sight of the girl, and hastily summoning her to come forward, introduced her to his old friend and comrade, after scolding her, half seriously, for staying away

so long without telling him where she was going.

Smiling at her brother, Bess Fletcher turned to look into one of the strongest faces and the most unfathomable eyes she had ever seen. The features were unmistakably Indian, and it was hard to believe that the man was only a quarter-blood, as she knew. The square chin and wide, sensitive mouth, the dilated nostrils and prominent cheek bones stamped the face with character, strength and determination. One could see in the gloomy depths of the eyes a strange intermingling of sympathy, with the truculent gleam which had shone for centuries in the eyes of his ancestors. They impressed one, that he would either be wholly white, or entirely Indian, according to circumstances or environment.

As Bess turned to acknowledge the introduction, her hand, half raised, paused as she measured this man.

"Mr. West. But—but," she added hesitatingly, "you do not look one bit as I—"

West's lips parted in a smile as he replied, "Had you expected to see me with a blanket on and a feather in my hair? I hope you are not greatly disappointed."

For a moment she was nonplussed. "Oh, no! But you are different somehow, and if there is any disappointment it is a happy one."

"Thank you, Miss Fletcher," came in a low and almost inaudible voice.

James had been listening with interest. "I guess I had impressed her that you looked more like—" he floundered and ended tactlessly, "well, like me, than an Indian, Henry."

The "breed's" eyes closed spasmodically and his teeth shut hard before he replied. "Jim, sometimes I feel that I could willingly be skinned alive, if it would make me—like you."

Never before in all their relationship had this outburst of confidence escaped him; yet here in the presence of this beautiful, fair woman, his usual reticence and reserve for the moment left him, and the secret desire of his heart and soul escaped his lips. Angry at his loss of control, he turned and said, "I had entirely forgotten the horses. We came at a pretty swift pace from Polson. I would have reached here before train-time, but Eagle got a stone in his shoe, and I had the devil's own time getting it out. I must go and attend to their beds and supper." With this he stepped out into the gloom.

Bess had gone into the house and was standing warming herself near the stove before her brother also entered and with a shiver hastened to the fire.

"Oh, Jim, isn't he just splendid!" cried the girl. "I had no idea there were such men as he away out here in the West! No wonder you rave over him and always sing his praises."

"Do you know, Bess, if he were my own brother I could not honor and love him more. At college he was so superior in mind, ability, and morals to the majority of his colleagues, that everyone looked up to him. He was one of them and no gathering was quite complete without Henry West. I never thought of him as an Indian, and anyway—that is his greatest charm. Whatever else he may be, he certainly is a gentleman."

Bess threw her arms impulsively about his neck. Then, "Good night, dearie, I am half jealous of him already. Tell him good-night for me. I want to retire so as to be up for our early start in the morning. I am tired, more tired than I knew. Don't stay up late. You must be worn out. Brother, I believe I love this new, strange land!" With a kiss she left him and went to her room.

Hastily undressing, she was soon ready for bed. Going to the window she put up the shade, and placing her hands between her brow and the window she peered into the night. Her bosom stirred with a tremor of excitement as she whispered, "The West! The mysterious West! And he—Henry West." She flung the window wide open, and hastily getting into bed was soon asleep.

[26]

[27]

CHAPTER III

HENRY WEST'S IDEAL

The aromatic smell of coffee and bacon filled Bess' nostrils as she awoke to a glorious morning. At first she looked about in wonderment, trying to think where she was. With the sudden realization she sprang out of the snug bed, and going to the open window, filled her lungs with deep draughts of pure, mountain air. It did not take her many minutes to dress and place her belongings in the trunk, which she fastened so it would be all ready and cause no delay. One of her habits was punctuality, and she never felt that she had a right to infringe upon the time of others by keeping them waiting. She came downstairs, and going into the sitting-room to see if her brother was there, was greeted by a cheery "good-morning" from Mrs. Strong.

"Breakfast is nearly ready, Miss Fletcher. The boys are out getting the horses ready and putting the trunks on the stage."

Just then they came upon the porch, and Bess hastened forward with pleasant greetings. "James, your cheeks are getting tanned already." Turning to Henry West, she continued, "You are certainly good medicine to have such a marked effect upon my brother so soon."

"I have never aspired to the dignity of the Medicine-man, Miss Fletcher, but with your permission I shall certainly consider the matter," he replied facetiously. [29]

The flush of shyness mounted to her cheeks. "Really, Mr. West, you—I—I did not mean it in that way," she said, trying to cover her confusion.

He felt sorry for her and assured her that she might say anything she wished concerning the Indians, as neither his mother nor himself were at all sensitive on the subject.

However, Bess was greatly relieved when just then Mabel Strong came to announce breakfast. Again their appetites seemed abnormal, and the rainbow trout, caught not an hour before in the stream which skirted the mountains, together with the delicious muffins, bacon and eggs, golden-browned potatoes and coffee, disappeared as if by magic.

Henry West ate sparingly, and watched James with gratification as he enjoyed his meal. "Jim, old boy," he said, in his low, softly modulated voice, "you'll be ready for the June round-up if you keep up that clip at grub."

"How about me, Mr. West?" asked Bess, as she helped herself to the third muffin and the second egg.

James threw up his head with a hearty laugh. "If you keep up your 'clip' there won't be a cayuse on *HW* ranch that could carry you a mile."

They all joined in the laugh, and then Henry West asked if he might be excused and go fetch the horses. [30]

"Mr. West, why did you bring two horses?" asked Bess, later, as she watched the animals brought up to the porch.

"Why, I thought perhaps that James would like to ride, but I am afraid he better not attempt it just yet."

"Oh, let me! Now James," as he raised his hand in remonstrance, "you know it doesn't tire me in the least."

"Yes, dearie, but riding a few hours on the smooth pavements of New York is entirely different from a thirty-five mile trip across an Indian reservation."

A look of disappointment clouded her face, and Henry West hastened to speak: "Mauchacho is perfectly safe, and when she gets tired we can stop and wait for the stage."

Bess looked at him with grateful eyes and cried impulsively: "You de— oh, thank you, Mr. West," correcting herself hastily.

Henry West looked at her with a sympathetic glance, and had she looked she might have read with what eloquence his eyes asked her to speak that word—dear.

James saw that any further expostulation would be useless, so he helped West adjust the stirrups.

Suddenly the 'breed looked at Bess. "But perhaps you use a side-saddle, Miss Fletcher? In that case I fear you'll have to be disappointed, and go in the stage after all." [31]

"Oh, my, no!" she cried before the words were out of his mouth. "James taught me to ride like a boy, and besides I know how a horse should be guided across the neck." Her chin went up with a saucy tilt at her superior knowledge as she went around in front of the horse to "get acquainted," as she called it. West watched her as she rubbed her nose against the dainty animal's, unconscious of his interest.

"So your name is Mauchacho? I wonder what that means? And you have a forelock which bothers your eyes, the same as mine does. I wonder if you are used to skirts?"

West came around where she was standing, and as if in reply to the questions which she had been asking the horse, he said, "Mauchacho was my sister's horse. He has never been used at any of the round-ups. No one has been on his back, excepting myself, since—since Helen—" After a moment he went on: "I named him Mauchacho because it is the Indian word for bird. He is very swift, and in a race always takes the lead." He snapped his fingers, and the horse lifted up his front foot and daintily placed it in his master's hand.

"Shake hands with your new mistress now." Then he added: "Take him. He is yours to keep, Miss Fletcher." Before Bess could recover from her astonishment and embarrassment he added: [32] "I notice that you have the same idiosyncrasy that Mauchacho has." Bess tried to think if his remark was a reflection on her unruly foretop, and was about to ask him, when he left her and walked to James, already seated in the stage.

Presently, when he turned, he saw Bess already in the saddle and adjusting her skirts. With a smile at her independence, he swung into his own saddle and started up the road, saying: "We'll

lead, as the stage may be a little slow and the dust is annoying."

Bess turned to wave her hand and throw a kiss in farewell to Mrs. Strong and Mabel, who had come out on the porch to witness the departure. With a parting "Don't get lonely nor tired, brother," and a wave of her handkerchief toward the stage, she urged Mauchacho forward to join Eagle and his rider.

The horses started steadily up the road which wound around the hillside. West had not spoken since she joined him, but silently made notes of her graceful seat in the saddle; how she held the reins firmly, yet lightly, in her left hand; how her shoulders were flung back; how her nostrils were dilating and her chest was moving in rhythmic, full breathing. Once, as she breathed long and deep, she cried out, "Oh, it seems as if I never shall get all this delicious air I want! What a glorious morning! See, the sun is only just peeping over the hills! Oh, the lazy old fellow! What time is it, I wonder?"

Henry West replied without first glancing at his watch, "It is about half after seven," but to assure her he opened his watch and simply added, "Yes."

"You stood there last evening," he said, pointing to the flat boulder upon which Bess had stood so tremblingly in the twilight. "I felt that it was you."

The horses were breathing hard when they reached the summit, and West drew rein that they might recover from the exertion.

"Why don't you wear spurs?" inquired Bess. "I supposed no cowboy's costume was ever complete without them."

"I do wear them when I am riding a cayuse and after cattle or on the round-up," he explained, "but Eagle nor Mauchacho nor my other thoroughbred doesn't need them. Do you, old boy?" he interrogated, bending over and giving the beautiful horse a sound "love-pat" on the neck.

Again Bess had become entranced at the wondrous scene which lay before her, even more glorious than the one of the night before. A song arose to her lips. As the first few notes unconsciously escaped her, and the rich, full melody floated out upon the morning air, she suddenly collected herself. "Oh, I could not help it," she apologized.

Henry West looked at her with pleading eyes as he begged her to go on. "Please don't mind me. Sing out the joy in your heart," he said, gently.

As side by side the horses began the stony ascent of the opposite side of the hill, she sang, at first softly, then forgetting all else in the world except that she was young and happy and glad to be alive, the music became full, sweet and strong, and in her rich, sympathetic voice she poured forth her heart.

"The sun is rising o'er the ocean,
The smiling waters greet the day;
The joyous winds to dancing motion
Wake the billows and the spray.
See where the clouds roll up the mountains!
Night has her misty banner furled,
And springing from a thousand fountains
Light and joy o'erflow the world!"

Here she paused, her heart too full to go on. Neither spoke, and when they had reached the foot of the hill and the long, level stretch of road lay before them, the horses started into a swift pace across the plain. On, on they went, gradually slowing into a steady, swinging gait. Both horses were single-footers, and they moved along without any apparent effort. How delightful it was! How Bess enjoyed every moment! The brisk morning air painted her cheeks rosily and filled her large, brown eyes with sparkling excitement. Occasionally a little cry of keenest pleasure escaped Bess' lips.

Henry West was apparently oblivious to all about him; his eyes were looking straight ahead and his lips were closed firmly, as if with an effort to restrain his thoughts. All his life he had thought of the day and dreamed of the time when his ideal might be by his side. On his lonely rides across the plains or hills in quest of cattle or looking after his horses, his heart and soul had been filled with thoughts of Her. Never had he found her among the girls of his own people. Never had he seen her in all his years at school and college, although many who were fair and sweet would gladly have accepted his attentions. Always a welcome guest at the homes of his acquaintances, entertained and feted until he had become surfeited with it all, his heart was still an empty void, and his soul still longed for her of whom he dreamed.

Last night she came! The moment he heard her voice he knew it! The instant he saw her eyes, her face, her hair, her form, he felt like crying out in his exquisite pain of unbearable joy, "At last you have come; you for whom I have hoped, longed, sought, waited through all the ages of time! Oh, my love, my life! And yet I can not, dare not even presume to touch your hand! Oh, the irony of fate! You are so fair, so white—I, O God! I am but an Indian! They say we know how to hate! We know, too, how to love; but how much, how hopelessly, I never knew till now! And yet"—a swift thought came—"and yet—my mother! How I love her! What an honor to be my mother's son!"

Bess stole a shy glance at the set face of her companion and wondered what he could be pondering so deeply. He had not spoken for a long time, and she half feared to break the silence. Miles passed under the horses' hoofs, and yet he was silent.

Suddenly he looked at her with self-reproach. "Pardon me, Miss Fletcher, but you certainly must be getting tired." He hastily leaped from his horse, throwing the reins over the beautiful creature's head.

Eagle shook himself as if glad to be relieved of his burden. West came to Bess' side and assisted her to dismount. He had anticipated that her knees would not sustain her weight, and

clasped her in his arms to keep her from falling. Immediately the horses, with reins trailing on the ground, began munching the soft green grass, slowly picking here and there.

"Ouch!" said Bess, as her feet touched the earth. "How funny one's knees feel after riding so far," and she awkwardly began to move forward.

As her soft hair brushed his face when she dismounted West could scarcely refrain from placing his hand upon the fluffy and wind-tossed tresses. Taking off his mackinaw, he spread it on the ground, telling her to be seated for a moment, and strode to the feeding horses. Presently he returned, and Bess, having risen, looked up at him with a bright smile.

"Mr. West, why do the horses walk like crawfish?"

He smiled at her comparison, and told her, to avoid stepping on the reins and the attendant jerk to their mouths.

"Do you think I will soon be toughened like you?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," West replied. "You soon will be able to ride half a day, or even more, without becoming much fatigued. At first you must go easy and not ride too long at a stretch."

She stood gazing about her at the vast herds of cattle and horses grazing all about the valley and the gentle slopes. In front she could see the heavily willowed banks of a stream, and secretly rejoiced, for she was longing for a drink.

West was looking behind him over the road they had just come. "Well, the stage is not so slow today. Old Charley must be pounding them on the back."

CHAPTER IV

THE HESITATING LARIAT

Bess could discern in the distance the stage with its little, trailing cloud of dust. "Please let us mount again. I'm quite rested, and want to reach the stream before the stage arrives."

"You are thirsty, Miss Fletcher?" he asked, solicitously, hastening to assist her to remount.

The horses started eagerly forward, the scent of fresh water in their nostrils.

"We are nearly half-way home. The bridge yonder is about half the distance," said West.

Suddenly he was so alarmed by a shrill cry from the girl that he brought the surprised Eagle almost to his haunches with a sudden stop.

"Look!" she cried, pointing to the right of her. Instantly West turned his horse. "My God!" he cried, starting Eagle across the rolling land. She saw a horse throw his rider, and in a moment more drag him by the foot, which in some way had become fastened in the stirrup.

Bess tried in vain to restrain Mauchacho, who insisted upon following his companion. Scarcely a half mile intervened, and Bess could see Eagle speeding like a veritable bird. She saw West swinging his lariat about his head with measured movements. Suddenly he hesitated, holding his hand for the instant still—then with one more vigorous swing the rope shot out, hissing and uncoiling like a huge snake, and in the instant it caught the fleeing horse firmly by both front feet and threw him with a crash to the ground. At the same moment Eagle braced himself like a rock, and West secured the lariat about the pommel of the saddle. So swiftly had it all happened that Bess cried out in amazement and wonder.

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West reached the frightened horse, now struggling wildly, in time to save the man from being kicked to death. The foot had been wrenched from the stirrup, and the man lay silent and motionless upon the ground.

When Bess reached the spot she sprang from her horse and hastened forward to be of assistance.

"I cannot see how anyone who knows a horse could possibly have such an accident," West was saying, as if to himself. "The horse surely could not have seen a 'rattler,' as it is too early for them; and, besides, I have never seen one down on this flat. Looks to me like confounded carelessness!"

"Oh, is he hurt?" she inquired, but West had mounted Mauchacho and was speeding to the stream. Bess lifted the bruised and bleeding head into her lap. As she carefully wiped the dirt from the eyes and face she discovered to her surprise that it was the same Mr. Davis whom she had only met the evening before on the train at Selish.

"See—look!" she exclaimed excitedly, as West returned, his hat dripping with the water it contained. "It is Mr. Davis!"

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Henry West nearly spilled the precious liquid. His eyes flashed with hatred, and his teeth clenched so hard that she could scarcely hear his words. "You—know—that—that—devil!"

Bess was so confounded at the look of enmity and hate that she turned pale with fear.

The next moment, with trembling hands, she was helping Henry West to resuscitate the unconscious man. Cool, dripping handkerchiefs bathed his brow and temples. Upon examining the foot which had caused so much mischief, West saw that it was swelling rapidly, and soon dexterous fingers had unfastened the laces and were tenderly removing the shoe. All the passion was gone from his face, leaving it pale and anxious. Again he hastened to the stream, quickly returning with the hat filled with water. How they worked, these two! Perspiration streamed from their faces as they chafed his arms and hands and bathed the bruised and swollen ankle. Once they caught a fleeting twitch of the eyelids, and, encouraged by the knowledge that there was still life, they renewed all their efforts.

Suddenly West put his hand upon the man's breast, Bess thought to feel his heart beats, but instantly she understood as he drew a flask from the inside of the coat. West forced the lips apart and succeeded in pouring some of the brandy into Davis' mouth. The effect was almost instantaneous. The eyelids fluttered and a groan of torture escaped the lips. Again he relapsed into unconsciousness, but for only a few minutes, for soon he opened his eyes and looked into the girl's face. Then a spasm of pain contracted his face frightfully, and even West turned aside that he might not see. They gave him more of the brandy, which seemed to strengthen the man, and also made the suffering, for the moment at least, less acute. Not a word had they spoken since that first moment.

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West now watched for the stage, standing near Mauchacho, first releasing the horse which he had thrown. With trailing reins the animal now stood quietly beside Eagle, who seemed to be looking at him with "horse" contempt.

Just then the stage came in sight from behind a rise, and West swung upon Mauchacho, hastening to hail it. Soon Bess could see the men hurrying to where she sat with her again unconscious burden. With a strong blanket for a stretcher, four of them carefully placed the wounded man upon it, and bore him to the stage. James brought Eagle and Davis' horse, while Bess walked behind, leading Mauchacho. Carefully they placed Davis in the stage. James insisted that his sister continue her journey in the vehicle while he rode with West. They stopped at the bridge to water the horses, and then proceeded slowly on their way.

Bess was doing everything in her power to alleviate the pain of the man, whose head now rested against her shoulder. She did not move, and scarcely dared to breathe, lest she should disturb him. She could feel the damp, cold drops of perspiration standing out like beads on the white forehead and the bruised cheek. So great was her sympathy that she, too, seemed to be in the torture of pain. The other occupants of the stage watched her with interest and appreciation.

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West rode near to tell her that James and he would hasten on and have a more comfortable

conveyance at Polson by which to bring Mr. Davis to the *HW* Ranch.

THE MOTLEY SPECTATORS AT POLSON

It was nearly one o'clock when the stage reached Polson, at the foot of the Lake. As it drove up in front of the hotel Bess saw that James and Henry West had already arrived. A curious and anxious crowd were gathered in the road and on the porch, each one striving to get a look at the Indian Agent, of whose accident they had already heard. It was a motley crowd; here and there were blanketed Indians with their squaws and papooses and numerous mangy curs; in groups were standing the lighter colored half-breeds, some in white men's clothing, others with blankets carelessly folded about them. Some were fastidious in their beaded leggings and wide-brimmed hats, their gay-colored 'kerchiefs and shirts, while others were scarcely able to hide their copper-colored bodies with their scanty possessions, so unfortunate had they been in their last gambling game. Several white men and women could also be seen intermingling with the Indians or standing aloof beside the buildings. They were evidently passengers en route across the reservation, or waiting to go up the Flathead Lake and river to Kalispell.

The *Klondyke* had been steamed up and ready to leave for more than an hour. The passengers hurried to get aboard, the whistle blew and the boat started slowly to steam out into the Lake. [44]

The while, Henry West, assisted by a number of the spectators, was making Mr. Davis as comfortable as he could with numerous blankets on a buckboard. The men watched him with incredulity, for they all knew the animosity which existed between these two men. How any man could show such consideration and feeling for another who was his mortal enemy they could not understand! Neither did they know the cause of the hatred. Some said that Henry West knew of some 'crooked work' Davis had been carrying on, yet he could not say a word while he lived on the reserve and was under the authority of the Indian Agent. But this was conjecture. No one but Henry West and his God knew the circumstances which made him hate the man with all the powers of his soul.

West had asked Mrs. White, the post trader's wife, if she would kindly take care of Miss Fletcher until he should be able to return for her. Bess, utterly exhausted, permitted herself to be led into the dark, cool sitting-room of the hotel. Tenderly Mrs. White unfastened her jacket, removed her fluffy tam and brushed back the soft brown hair. "You poor dear," said Mrs. White sympathetically.

Bess threw her aching arms about the little woman's neck and wept her tired heart out. Now that it was all over and she could relax, nature opened the floodgates of pent-up feeling and healing tears flowed. [45]

Mrs. White, seeing that the girl was physically exhausted, as well as under a great mental strain, led her over to the couch. She knew better than to speak to her now, and held her tenderly in her arms till at last only little sobs escaped the girl, and soon her head sank low upon the broad shoulders in sleep. Quietly Mrs. White laid her upon the couch, placed a cover over her, and left her to sleep. The woman came into the room every few minutes to see if she were still asleep, and when at sundown Henry West returned with the buckboard for her, Bess was still sleeping.

"Do not waken her, Mrs. White," he said, gently. "I will wait until she has had her sleep out."

Then he went into another room, where he gave the little woman all the details of the Davis accident. His praise of Bess and the assistance which she gave was great indeed, and the heart of Mrs. White went out to the sleeping stranger, whose first experience of the Western life had been such a trying one. They were to become the closest of friends, and Mrs. White already felt an indescribable affinity for the girl.

HWRANCH

The drive through the cool of the early evening to the ranch, which lay only three miles from the trading post, fully awakened and refreshed Bess. She was longing to ask the reticent man by her side a hundred questions regarding the injured one, but she refrained, intuitively feeling that she would be touching a heart-wound. The slight hesitancy of the lariat, the sudden outburst of passion, revealed to her woman's instinct the secret hatred of Henry West, which all his sympathy and tenderness afterward could not hide.

At last he spoke: "Mother will not have dinner until we return. You must be nearly famished, for Mrs. White told me that you had fallen asleep before she could offer you any refreshment. I cannot tell you how sorry I am that you should have experienced such an ordeal. Mr. Da—the Agent," he said, with a marked effort at composure, "has been made comfortable, and when I left the ranch to come after you, mother said he had fallen asleep. My mother, years ago, had a thorough course of training in professional nursing, and the knowledge has been invaluable to her. The doctors at the agency or at the mission are so far away that in emergency cases she is always sought. I sent one of the men after a physician, but he can do no more than mother has already done."

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"There is my home, Miss Fletcher," he continued, as they came in sight of the ranch. "How I love it! I hope you may be contented and happy as long as it is to be your home and James'." True hospitality sounded in his deep voice and shone from his now grave yet friendly eyes.

"Oh! Thank you, Mr. West. Anyone who could not find both happiness and contentment amid all this beauty would be very hard to please. It will be the first real home I have ever known—nearly all my life has been spent at school. Dear me! I expect you think I should have unlimited knowledge," she added lightly.

She gazed with interest about her. There stood the large, square, white house, with its wide porches and many windows, within a stone's throw of the deep, blue water of Flathead Lake. Up the hill a short distance from the house in a clump of willows was a magnificent spring, whose cool, crystal water was made to flow down to the house and into the corral. Great barns, hay sheds and granaries were back of the house, and comfortable poultry houses and roomy ice-houses were also to be seen. Even a blacksmith shop with its glowing fire caught Bess' interested gaze, and she wondered at the completeness of the ranch and marveled at the brains that could manage such a large and varied establishment. Quite near the house stood a teepee, and Bess could not repress a smile as Henry West told her what it was and that the old Indian and his wife who assisted his mother could not be induced to sleep indoors, so pitched their teepee in the yard for their greater comfort.

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As West drove up to the house the door opened, and Bess was soon clasped in the arms of his mother. Happily he watched her as she welcomed the sister of his dearest and best friend.

"Mrs. West," said the stranger, "I cannot tell you how happy I am to know you. James has told me so many dear, sweet things of you that somehow it feels as if you were my own mother, and I do need a mother so," added the girl, with eyes that could not hold back the tears.

"God bless you, my dear," she heard a gentle voice saying. "I, too, need a daughter to fill the place made vacant nearly a year ago." She lifted the girl's face tenderly with both her hands, and looking into the clear eyes told her how much she seemed like the daughter who had been lost.

"Helen was fair," she explained. "Her hair was even lighter than yours, dear; she was quite as tall and about your age. She was like her Scotch father, while Henry looks like me."

Bess gently kissed the tear-stained cheek of the tender mother, and pressed her lips against the soft, white hair, as together they went into the house. How cozy everything seemed! The cheerful fire in the grate, the comfortable chairs and couches, the beautiful pictures and rugs, gave everything a 'homey' look. Bess was surprised to find such evidences of refinement, wealth and comfort here—away out in Montana and on an Indian Reservation! Her surprises were not to end here, however, for she would soon discover that many, many of the families scattered all over this vast reservation were equally as comfortable and thrifty.

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Mrs. West led the way to Bess' room, and telling her that dinner would be ready in a half hour, left her.

Little ejaculations of happy surprises escaped the girl as she glanced about the room. Everything was creamy white and pale blue. The large brass bed was draped with soft blue and white, the furniture was white, and several comfortable willow rockers invited to rest. In one corner was a wide couch with numerous pretty cushions. A few choice pictures adorned the walls. Surely, the one who displayed so much taste in fitting up this dainty room must have been used to refinement! It was so different from what she had expected to find. James had told her of it all, and yet she was surprised. She surmised this had been Helen's room.

As she hurried about, getting on her fresh, clean clothes, she continued her appraisal of her room. "I love you already," she kept saying to herself.

During dinner not a word had been said concerning the patient, and Bess was interested in hearing James and Henry discussing the affairs of the ranch—how the wheat was growing, what a wonderful crop of hay was promised, the oats, too, never stood so well before at this time of year; the spring calves were all getting along fine; up to date there had been, as nearly as could be counted, about ninety colts.

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Several times the girl became so engrossed in these new, strange topics that she forgot her meal, and Mrs. West could scarcely refrain a smile at her wide, wondering eyes.

As Bess' hostess arose from the table she said: "You must all be worn out with your experience of today, and I advise early hours."

Henry came over to his mother's side, and kissing her gently on the brow, told her that he would spend the night looking after Mr. Davis.

But she said: "No, dear, you go to bed and rest, and when I need you I will call you." Finally she persuaded him to consent to retire, after he and James had had their smoke.

Bess' heart went out to this great, dark man, as she saw his gentleness. She thought that any man who so revered his mother must be worthy of greatest confidence and trust.

"I'll say good-night now," she said, for she was glad to get some rest. Her face and neck were smarting from the unusual exposure to the sun and wind, and she was trying to find something with which to alleviate the burning when Mrs. West tapped gently at her door.

"Are you asleep, dear?"

Bess quickly opened the door for her to enter. "Mr. Davis is sleeping again, so I came to see what help I might be to our 'little stranger,'" she said gently, and noticing that the girl was suffering with the sunburned tender face, hastened to bring something to soothe her. "Let me put this on, dearie. Why, you are dreadfully burned!"

"I should have known better than to ride so far with only that tam-o'-shanter on my head," said Bess.

"You should have a light, soft sombrero, and then you will be a regular 'cowboy,' and we'll try to find a gun and spurs, too," laughed Mrs. West, as she gently bathed the flaming cheeks and brow.

When she had been tucked snugly in her bed, Mrs. West sat by her side, telling in her modulated voice of her own strange experiences in the West; of her days in school and college; of her teaching and her music; of her home life and her children; opening little secret chambers in her soul to the girl, who was already filling her heart. Bess listened in wonderment at all that was told so modestly, and then she readily understood the source and cause of the taste and refinement which she had already observed.

On they chatted, like two school chums who had not seen each other for years, until Mrs. West noticed the tired eyelids trying so hard to stay open, and kissed Bess gently on the brow. The girl aroused herself and said: "Please, little mother, wait until I pray. Put your arms around me tight and let me feel what it means to have a mother."

Together they mingled their supplications to the Great Common Father, and in the sight of God they were equal—though one pair of eyelids closed on cheeks fair as a lily and tears wet the face of one so dark.

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"I WOULD HAVE DONE MORE FOR AN INJUN"

With the twitter of birds outside and glorious sunshine streaming through the opened window, Bess awoke early, feeling that the refreshing sleep had completely restored her energy and light-heartedness. She breathed deeply of the fresh, cold air, feeling as if she could fly with the birds.

The thought of helping with breakfast prompted her to hasten, and soon she found the kitchen. An Indian woman was busily engaged getting the meal, as Bess entered, and she inquired of the woman where Mrs. West was. A slight motion of the hand upward was the only reply, and the woman silently moved out of the room.

Bess did not understand, and left the house for out-of-doors. At a little distance stood Henry West. Bess ran toward him with a cheerful "Good morning! Are you quite rested, Mr. West?"

"Oh, yes, indeed! It takes more than a day like yesterday to tire me. But may I ask how you are feeling this morning? You look well and happy, surely."

"I am, and completely rested, too; but my face still smarts," she replied, cautiously touching the pretty cheeks.

"You will suffer a good deal from the sun and wind for a while, then they won't have any ill effects at all."

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"Not after I get thoroughly toughened, you mean," she said with a merry twinkle in her eye. "Please, have we time to walk up there to the spring, before breakfast, Mr. West?"

"Yes, I think so," he replied, and led her to the willows bending gently over, as if to hide their treasure. Here was an immense trough hewn from a log, where the clear, cold water flowed through it, in a great stream.

Bess stooped to drink; when she lifted her dripping face, Henry West could not suppress a laugh at the picture she made. Even her stray locks had had a bath, and her brown eyes were alight like a water nymph's. His heart swelled with increasing love for this beautiful girl, and with the love grew a most bitter anguish as he realized more and more how hopeless it all must be. He fought hard to stifle his tender passion, and fully aware of the pain he must bear to be so near her day after day, to see her so unconsciously happy, to hear her merry laugh and soft, tender voice. He could at least seek solace away across the hills, or comfort in the company of his faithful Eagle, whose confiding ear had already heard many of his master's heartaches.

His mother summoned them from the house, and Bess, with a girlish challenge that she would reach there first, started to run swiftly down the gentle slope towards the house. Mrs. West caught the rosy, merry laughing girl in her arms as she said, "I am glad to see you feeling so well and rested this morning, dear."

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"Oh, I feel fine," Bess replied. "I want to cry out—to shout," she added, as she gave the older woman so vigorous a hug that it made her gasp for breath.

"Great guns! Bess, you better vent some of that superfluous squeeze on some of the rest of us. See! Mrs. West is still struggling to breathe," said James, as he placed Bess in her chair at the breakfast table.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, little Mother! Did I really hurt you? But I just had to squeeze someone or something; so after this when any of you see me coming with fire in my eye, I give you all fair warning." They laughed at her strenuousness and good spirits and the coffee was served.

"Bess, don't impress those people that you came from the Bowery," said her brother, and all through breakfast she tried to recall what she had said or done that should suggest such a thought to James.

Breakfast was nearly over when Mrs. West told Henry to go up to the sick man's room, as Mr. Davis had requested to see him. Henry shot a troubled glance at his mother and said, "I would much rather not go, mother."

"I cannot understand, Henry, why you have taken such a dislike to Mr. Davis; he has always treated us with courtesy and many times has shown us marked consideration. Surely you cannot have forgotten how attentive he always was to Helen—"

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"Hush, Mother! I will go to him at once. No, I have not forgotten anything,—and pray you may never understand," he added in a whisper. He arose abruptly from his chair and quitted the room before he had finished speaking, so the last words reached the ears of Bess alone.

She watched the man, and thought of his words the day before when she told him that she knew Mr. Davis. As he had not asked how nor where she had known him, she thought perhaps James had explained.

Henry West knocked softly at the door of Mr. Davis' room and entered at a faint "come in." He could not help feeling a twinge of pity as he saw the pallid brow and hands of the helpless man, and yet his very presence filled him with ever-increasing hatred and contempt. He put his hand to his throat as if his collar were choking him, as he said in a husky voice: "You sent for me, Mr. Davis. Of what service can I be to you?"

He could scarcely catch the faint words that came from the injured man's lips, and going nearer, bent over that he might hear what Davis was saying.

"Will you send one of my policemen here, West? There are several important matters which I must see about today." The Indian agent spoke with effort.

"I fear you are not strong enough to see anyone yet," Henry suggested kindly.

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The man glared at him and hotly said, "Oh, hell! Yes, I am! All that hurts is my ankle, and I don't have to talk with that."

With an abrupt, "Very well, sir," West moved towards the door.

"Say, West," said Davis, raising his voice; "I know you didn't give me that help yesterday

because you love me," with a slight sneer,—“but I thank you just the same.”

West suddenly wheeled and stood for a moment, rigid with clenched hands, looking at the man. “No, Dave Davis,” he said in his low, firm voice, “I did not save your neck because I even respect you. I would have done as much, or even more, for any old Injun.”

Bess met him as he went through the living-room, but he did not look at her as he passed outdoors. She wondered what could be the reason for his looking so sullen as he passed, and knew that it must be the man upstairs.

“Come here a moment, dear,” called Mrs. West to her; “I want you to take some breakfast up to Mr. Davis. One of my women is sitting there.”

Bess dreaded meeting him, yet she could not refuse to go. She carried the dainty and appetizing food into his room, and entered so softly that the man did not move. She thought he had fallen asleep, when a slight groan told her she was mistaken.

“Here is your breakfast, Mr. Davis,” she said cheerily.

“Oh, it is you, Miss Fletcher! I had begun to wonder why you did not come to see your patient.”

“I do hope you are better this morning, and that you may soon be strong again,” she said, beginning to help him with his meal.

“I am afraid this confounded ankle won’t be in any hurry getting well,” he replied bitterly, “and I shall be obliged to force my unwelcome presence here for too long.”

“Please don’t say that, Mr. Davis; I am sure you are perfectly welcome here. Mrs. West is only too glad to do all she can to alleviate your pain,” reassured Bess hastily.

“Yes, I understand,” he replied, as he sipped his coffee, “but Henry West has some sort of a grudge against me. Guess he thinks that at one time I cared for his sister.” Bess noticed a swift, sneering smile flit across his lips. He continued: “One never knows what to expect from these Indians.”

“S—sh,” warned Bess, glancing at the servant. She did not like what he was saying nor the tone of his voice, and as soon as he had finished his breakfast she hurriedly left him. Could the cause of all of Henry’s hatred be the sister whom he had loved so tenderly, she wondered.

CHAPTER VIII

BESS LEARNS THE REAL CAUSE OF THE ACCIDENT

The girl had begun to tidy up the living-room and the pretty library, with its shelves of choice books, when Mrs. West came in to remonstrate. "There are plenty of hands to do those tasks, Miss Bess," she said, as she held the girl's hands in her own. "You just go out and enjoy yourself, dear. It is such a pretty day that it is a pity to stay indoors."

"Oh, please let me help you, Mrs. West," pleaded Bess, "for I do enjoy working; and then, too, with your increased family you will be overtaxed." The girl spoke with such earnestness that Mrs. West relented, thinking perhaps Bess would feel more at home if she assumed some little responsibilities. "You see," Bess explained, "my father insisted upon the nuns at the convent teaching me all kinds of housework and serving, and it has been a great source of comfort to me to feel that I need not be dependent upon anyone to do these tasks for me."

Mrs. West's eyes followed the girl as she continued her task quietly and quickly, all the while busily talking.

"You'll be surprised, little Mother, when I tell you that I have made nearly all of my own clothes. You'll let me help you sew, too, won't you? It must be a great problem for you to find anyone here, is it not?"

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The deft fingers were putting little touches here and there, now arranging a vase of flowers or moving a picture, and Mrs. West noted with pleasure how soon the room bore evidence of her artistic taste.

As the days succeeded each other and the girl grew more and more into the home life of the ranch, she became a help and consolation to Mrs. West, in a thousand different ways. She relieved her of many little duties and assumed so willingly and competently the many cares that ere long Mrs. West began wondering how she had ever been able to get along without Bess, or how she had ever had the time or strength to look after the house alone. She now found time to rest and to read. She even took up her practice again, and many were the delightful hours which she and Bess spent together with their music. The lonely place in her heart was being filled by the presence of this sweet, lovable girl, and her tender, motherly love went out to Bess, as if the girl were indeed her own daughter.

The visitor was considerate of everyone. She was always seeing some kind thing to do or gentle word to say, and everyone, including the old Indians, who frequently came to the ranch, was treated with respect and given a kindly smile. Before the autumn had come her figure, riding on Mauchacho, sometimes with James or Henry West, or often alone, grew so familiar that the Indians named her "Bright Eyes," because of the happy face and beautiful eyes.

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Those first few weeks at the ranch were full of pleasure and delight for Bess. She took long rides of exploration over the vast acres, and each time, upon her return to the house, told of the wonderful things which she had discovered.

"There is the dearest spot up along the Lake shore," she told Mrs. West one afternoon as she and Mauchacho came up to the porch, returning from one of their pleasant rides. "It is up on a little knoll, with beautiful pine trees that looked as if they had been freshly scrubbed this very day; and such very comfortable rocks and logs lying about. I am going to take my crayons and sketch there some day. Such a magnificent view of the vast blue lake, the mountains all around and Wild Horse Island in the distance."

Then, as if she felt half guilty for leaving, she inquired how Mr. Davis seemed. "Really, I should not have left you to take care of him so long alone. I'll be in the house in a moment, little Mother, and relieve you."

As none of the men were about Bess unsaddled her horse and turned him loose to bury his nose in the soft, green grass of the pasture. She stood a moment watching Mauchacho as he sniffed to find a good place to roll. "Over Mauchacho, over again, two hundred! three hundred dollars; good, but we won't sell you for a thousand, will we, you beauty?" And with her hat and gloves she ran into the house and hurriedly dressed to take charge of the sick man.

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Davis had proved a quiet patient during his confinement and was now sitting up most of the day and soon would be able to be removed to his quarters at the agency. In his secret heart he knew that he was in no hurry to go; perhaps, had he made an effort, he could have gone some days ago. But he could not tear himself away from the girl who had helped to alleviate his suffering, and whose sweet voice had charmed him when she read during the long, tedious hours, and thrilled him while she sang, he lying quietly and watching her face, songs that were simple and sweet and full of deepest melody. But she always appeared abstracted; her brown eyes did not see the things about her, but gazed upon unknown visions which only her heart saw. Sometimes the brightest smiles played upon her lips and lighted up her face with joy; again, tears hung on her long lashes, and fell unheeded upon her hands.

If he could only divine the thoughts which caused her emotion! He could not, but was entranced and deeply moved. Was he growing to love this girl, he asked himself a dozen times a day. No, surely he was not. But, even if he were, did he dare? Could he, Dave Davis, make this beautiful, unsuspecting and pure child love him? Always, he would banish the thought, for he still possessed a conscience, and could not think of her in this relation without a twinge.

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Today as she came into the sick-room, all rosy and fresh after her ride, he looked at her with admiration. She had never looked half so charming to him before; the simple white dress made her girlish, and the bunch of yellow blossoms thrust into the loose knot of brown hair, just behind her ear, gave her a saucy air. She was brushing the hair from her brow as she approached the chair in which he was sitting.

"I envy you your ride and the fresh air, Miss Fletcher. It seems ages since I felt my horse

under me. I never shall forgive him for stepping in a hole that day. Guess if I had not been so intent watching the girl in the distance," he spoke as to himself, "trying to assure myself it was Miss Fletcher, he would not have thrown me."

"Oh, Mr. Davis! I hope I was not even the unconscious cause of your accident," Bess replied anxiously. "Are girls such a rare sight on the reservation that even horses run away when they see them?" she added, half jokingly.

"Well—girls like you are, yes," he replied, meaningly, but the girl would not understand.

"When I am well and able to ride, will you let me show you some of the interesting places on the reserve? We'll visit the Mission, with its school of Indians, and the church."

"Oh, I should be happy to go. Thank you, Mr. Davis; but I fear I cannot wait, for Henry and James have planned to go with me to the Mission next Sunday, and we expect to be there for mass. I can scarcely wait, and know the trip will be full of interest."

"Henry West seems to take quite a good deal of your time," he said pettishly, and Bess wrinkled her brow, amused at his displeasure.

"Let me finish the book," suggested Bess, but the man said he was tired and would prefer to rest. She regretted his petulant mood, and quietly left the room.

"HELEN" AT ST. IGNATIUS MISSION

Oh! the rarity of that early June morning when a trio of happy beings mounted their eager horses. The dawn was still in the east, where roseate clouds hung soft and low on the crests of the mountains. In the shadows the blueness of the fleeing night still lingered. The air was unusually soft for the early hour and birds twittered to arouse their tardy nest-mates.

The tamaracks were now the softest, tenderest green, and in the dawning light seemed like soft billows of sea foam which had been flung through the miles of space and caught in the outstretched arms of the tall monarchs of the hills. It was only a little after five o'clock, but the long ride of twenty-five miles to St. Ignatius Mission demanded an early start, so that the horses might be well rested before returning to *HW* ranch.

Henry West was cramming into the pockets of his mackinaw what later proved to be some appetizing sandwiches; for he knew Fletcher's returning health and vigor caused insatiable demand for "grub." Mrs. West had thoughtfully prepared the lunch as they were hurrying to get started. Now she stood in the open doorway, smiling good-byes to her family.

Bess looked beautifully charming in her well-fitted jacket and divided skirt of reseda green. A filmy white veil was tied over her sombrero and floated over her shoulder in long loops like a fleecy cloud nestling against her soft, brown tresses. At her throat showed the soft whiteness of her shirt waist, for, "was it not Sunday, and were they not going to church, and ought they not to be dressed in their best?" she argued when James asked why she had not worn her corduroy suit for the long, dusty ride. Bess wished secretly that she, too might wear the leathern "chapps" like the boys; as they seemed so much more comfortable than a lot of useless cloth about one. She vowed inwardly that some day, when no one was looking, she would try the "chapps," and if they proved satisfactory why should she not wear them too?

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The horses made good time at a steady gait, and all were so preoccupied that only a few desultory remarks were exchanged. As the miles grew in number the dawn became brighter and brighter, till now old Sol shot forth his streaming gold and a new and glorious day began.

"This will be a very warm day," remarked Henry West, after a deliberate survey of the sky. "It feels like a weather-breeder and I think we'll have a heavy rain by night." He unfastened his mackinaw, and the breeze blew out his soft, white, silk shirt in little fat puffs.

They passed groups of fine, sleek cattle and horses, the *HW* brand being the most conspicuous among them. Suddenly Henry West gave Eagle a swift turn on the bridle and sped across the grass till he came upon some strange calves. From the distance intervening Bess and James watched him wonderingly and with interest. When he returned to them his face was lowering. James was about to ask what was wrong, but thought if it were anything of interest to him that Henry would tell him.

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On and on they rode, now in a swift gallop, for the road was smooth and hard, and by this time the horses had their "second wind."

Bess' inquisitiveness got the better of her, and she cried: "For pity's sake, Henry, do tell me what is wrong! Can't you see I'm just bursting to know?" And she gave her contumacious hair a vigorous thrust under her sombrero.

West began slowly: "James, in your riding over the range, have you noticed among any of my cows a scrub, measly-looking red bull? Those calves, back there, show his ear-marks. Last year I told old Savaeau that if he did not kill that damned nuisance I would the first chance I got. And here this season's calves are again contaminated by scrub breeding."

Bess had grown so accustomed to hearing discussions of all kinds concerning the cattle and horses that she was deeply interested, and now, before James had time to reply, she spoke:

"Do you know that about three days ago when I was going over to Polson I came across several of your cows and a most terrible looking animal with them! He had a big head like a buffalo, and a dreadful hump; the rest of him looked like—well, like—just cow. Is that the one you are looking for?" She was surprised and hurt at the look the boys gave each other, and then roars and peals of laughter rent the air.

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Bess' cheeks flamed up red and hot, and she gave Mauchacho a cut across the flanks which caused him to leap forward in surprise, and he sped like a streak down the winding road and out of sight behind a low hill. Tears sprang into the girl's eyes, not so much perhaps at the exchanged glances and laughter, as at the thought that perhaps her unsolicited interest had been misconstrued. She now quietly checked Mauchacho and hastily pulled off her jacket. She brushed her wet cheeks with her sleeve in her haste to appear nonchalant to the approaching horsemen, whom she could hear hastening after her. To her dismay, she discovered that her immaculate sleeve was now all grimy and dust-streaked and knew that her face too must be streaked with dirt. Luckily she had just reached a stream of clear, cold water, and she slipped off her horse and was already bathing her face when Henry West reached her.

He stood silently behind her, watching the lithe, graceful girl, as she bent down to kiss the stream. She glanced over her shoulder, her face dripping with the cool water, her hair wet and falling over her eyes.

"I did not cry—so there—you need not look so sorry," she said, with half pouting lips that could no longer resist the pulsates of her happy nature, and involuntarily she burst into a merry laugh.

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"I am really sorry to have been so rude as to laugh at your remarks, Miss Fletcher," West was saying, and again he tried in vain to restrain himself.

"What's up, Sister; fall in the creek?"

"No, I was just trying to drown my sorrow when this gentleman interfered and I took a drink

instead," Bess replied facetiously, and when they again resumed their journey each was light-hearted once more.

"Please tell me, James, what was the thing I tried to describe, will you?" Bess asked, as she and James had fallen behind Eagle for a little way.

"Why, that was a cattelo, which is part buffalo and part cow. They are rather dreadful looking creatures, to be sure, and I can't see why West raises them, unless because the hides are valuable, and perhaps the meat has a rare flavor."

It was now after eight o'clock and West said that they would soon come in sight of St. Ignatius. A short distance ahead of them walked a hurrying priest. One hand tightly clasped a prayer book, while the other tried in vain to lift the already begrimed cassock out of the dust. The boys lifted their sombreros in salutation, and to Bess' cheery "Good morning, Father," the priest gave her a smile and a "God bless you."

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At last they saw the beautiful grounds of the Mission, with its church spire and the roofs of the many buildings, interspersed with the trees, whose fresh, green foliage was invitingly cool. The sun had grown unusually warm for early morning and eagerly the girl reined her horse in the refreshing shadows of the trees.

The bell suddenly pealed forth, and they hastened to dismount. West cared for the horses and James led Bess into the beautiful little church. The sight that met their eyes was strange to Eastern eyes. Indians knelt with their bright-colored blankets wrapped closely about them. The candles fluttered on the altar profusely covered with early spring flowers. James sought the Wests' pew and led his sister there. As she sunk on her knees to pray the organ sounded and in marched the somberly-clad nuns, followed by the many Indian children who were attending school. The entire service passed like a dream to Bess; and she was often distracted watching the children at their prayers, listening to their sweet, untrained voices in the choir, or analyzing some Indian, stoically moving his lips in prayer.

"*Mea culpa, mea culpa*—" murmured Bess, half audibly, as she heard others striking their breasts; and she half turned to see if Henry West had yet come into the seat beside them. He was not there, nor did he come. "He is perhaps in the rear," thought Bess. It was not long till they knelt for the blessing, and soon all were filing out of the church. Bess left James at the door, saying she wished to wander through the gardens.

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What a profusion of blooming shrubs! The air was sweet with the fruit blossoms, and all along the paths were wonderfully fragrant pansies, violets, and other early flowers. Near the church was the cemetery with its numerous white-painted crosses. As Bess looked through the enclosure she was attracted by an imposing monument, and, curious to learn what distinguished person had found his last resting place here, she entered God's Acre. As she neared the grave she saw Henry West kneeling in the shadow of the monument, his face buried in his arm as he leaned against the stone. Bess suddenly halted. Never in her life had she beheld such despair. Either he had heard her approach or intuitively felt she was near, for without lifting his head he stretched forth a hand to her. She could not resist the appeal. She grasped his hard and swarthy hand, and unconsciously clasped it to her breast.

In a moment a face, pale and drawn, was raised to meet her sympathetic gaze. He tried to speak, but could utter no word. Releasing his hand he pointed slowly to the tiny cross at his feet.

Bess dropped to her knees and read the word HELEN. That was all. That was enough. What could cold, hard words tell of her who was sleeping there? "Helen," the world might read, and perhaps give a sigh. "Helen," the man now read, and his heart yearned for his dear, lost sister and for the love that had been torn from him. What idle print could show the grief and misery that had broken that young heart?

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"Helen" was all Bess saw, and yet intuitively she read pages of love, sacrifice, heartaches, hope, pain and glory. She arose, and impulsively placing both her hands against the dark man's face, she said in a whisper of sympathy, "Henry—Henry! Why cannot I be your sister? Let me fill her place in your heart! Let me take up the broken thread and finish the weaving! Can I? May I?"

My God! What was she saying! What had he heard? "Henry, Henry" rang in the man's ears, sweeter than any music. She had spoken his name, now, today; and how he had longed to hear her lips frame that homely word. He re-caught the echo of her appeal. It was not love that prompted her then; it was only pity. Were love and pity akin? When he could collect his thoughts sufficiently to reply he clasped both her hands in his own for a brief moment. Then he stepped back and flung up his head. With set jaws he said, in such a low voice that Bess leaned forward on the tiny marble cross to catch the words, "I could not go into the church—I could not pray while hatred tore my heart in pieces—I could not forget her—her misery—I stayed here near her—to tell her again she shall be avenged—" Hastily collecting himself and smothering his passion, he continued, "Thank you, little girl—Bess, I may now say; thank you for your sympathy and your pity. I know you are sincere, but somehow—somehow—there is still a void here," as he clutched at his pounding heart. "Your words do not suffice—they cannot, will not. No, only she—Helen—could be a sister."

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Had Bess not been so unsophisticated she would have understood the subtle meaning of his words. As it was, she only felt her unworthiness, and was sorry her impulsive nature had thrust itself forward.

For a moment there was an awkward silence, which Henry West relieved: "Come, I will show you about the grounds and buildings. James is visiting with Father Damien, over there near the church," and he led the silent girl away.

Presently they were viewing with interest all the beauties of the place. Here were fine, substantial, brick school buildings, one for the girls and another for the boys, where they were taught all useful and instructive arts. The broad fields were in a high state of cultivation, and the trees of the orchard gave promise of an abundant harvest, so laden were they with lingering blossoms and fast-forming fruit. This seemed to be the very choicest bit of the reservation, where

years and years ago came the Jesuit priests, and where, during all this time, they had labored zealously for the temporal and spiritual welfare of the Indian children.

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Seated in a wheel chair, in a sunny exposure of the garden, they came upon a black-robed nun with another nun standing near her. As Bess and Henry West approached the one turned to meet them. What a dear, young face was that which upturned to meet Bess' interested look. What an expression of human understanding lighted up the deep blue eyes, as the girl said to her, "Good morning, Sister; are you enjoying God's beautiful sunshine?"

"Yes, dear; Sister Mary Joseph can scarcely be inveigled indoors now that the sun is becoming so fervent. Well! Well!" the nun interrupted, "if here isn't Henry West! See! Sister Mary Joseph, who has honored us with a visit today!"

Henry West stepped forward holding his sombrero in his hands. "This is Miss Bess Fletcher, James' sister;" he said, "and Bess, this is Sister Mary Joseph, and Sister Agnes."

Bess bent over the aged nun, who, with difficulty, lifted her hand. But, although the face was lined and seamed by the hand of time and the hardships of frontier life, the smiles of welcome and greeting were made of that kind of woof and warp which never show the ravages of age. Henry explained, "Sister Mary Joseph has been here ever since 1865, and has seen all the vicissitudes of St. Ignatius Mission."

Bess longed to hear the dear old woman relate some of the wonderful experiences which she had seen and in which she herself had been an important factor, but the bell was calling for the second mass, and as Sister Agnes was just then relieved from her duty by another nun, she asked Bess to accompany her to the church and sing.

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Henry West had gone on and joined James at the door.

At the offertory Bess sang Mascagni's *Ave Maria*, and as her soft, glorious voice arose and fell in beautiful tone waves, even Father Damien and the Indians held their breath for fear of losing a sound.

When Bess had finished Sister Agnes kissed her cheek, and left the imprint of her own wet one.

CHAPTER X

A WESTERN TRAGEDY

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"After all, we have not gained much by staying at the Mission over night, for another storm is coming and we better hurry to some place of shelter or we shall all be drenched to the skin," remarked Henry West, as he casually glanced over his shoulder toward the Southwestern horizon, where an ominous looking rain-cloud was rapidly rising. As he had predicted the day before, a heavy rain began just as they were about to re-saddle the horses to return to *HW* ranch. The morning dawned soft and warm; fresh from the washed hillsides came the ozone; the east was filled with fiery, red clouds, which warned them that the rain was not yet all spilled upon the thirsty earth. How green the stretch of grazing land looked; how verdant the distant pines and firs, fresh from nature's bath! The dust in the wagon road was all gone, and now occasionally the horses splashed with delight through mud puddles.

"Mauchacho, if you spatter my go-to-meeting riding togs you'll get your ears pulled," Bess said to her horse. She had not heard West's remark regarding the weather for she was in an abstracted mood.

"Hold on a moment, boys," she cried after the two. They had given their horses rein, thinking she was aware of the coming storm, and were riding swiftly to where they might be kept dry, for a time at least. Just then Bess noticed the light becoming dimmed. Hastily glancing back she saw the hurrying rain and was greeted by a splash of heralding drops.

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"Oh, so that's the hurry! Come, Mauchacho, it's up to you to keep me dry and save this green gown from making a blot on the already verdant landscape," she said whimsically, and the horse, as if he understood, in haste to overtake his fleeing companions, sped like the bird he really was and reached the sheltering, overhanging rock before the others.

As the trio dismounted each drew the reins over his horse's head, and so left them, where they stood as quietly as if they were tied. Quickly the saddles were taken off their steaming backs and placed under the shelter of the rocks. Bess and James were already safely out of the rain, and the girl was impatiently jumping up and down urging Henry West to "hurry for pity's sake" or else he would be drowned.

As West crouched under the ledge he took off his broad hat and shook the rain from it, saying: "These things are nearly as good as an umbrella; aren't they, James?"

"Come under here closer, Henry; you are not out of the rain yet," said Bess. She took hold of his arm and pulled him close to her. So they stood, the fresh, rosy, smiling girl, with wilful brown tresses over her face, clinging to the dark, stalwart man on one side and to her fair-skinned brother on the other. Silently they watched the rain, which fell in gusty sheets.

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The horses had shifted and stood dejectedly with their tails against the increasing onslaughts. "Poor old baby Mauchacho," said Bess, tenderly; "I wish there was room to crowd you in here, too." The horse replied with a knowing wriggle of his ear, as if to say he "wished so, too."

"Here, here, James, cheer up," said the sister, giving him a vigorous shake. "Don't you know that behind the clouds is still the blue sky?" He was looking nearly as lowery as the rain-clouds, and even West came from his reverie, asking what was the trouble.

"You see," said James, "this will delay us nearly two days in rounding up the beef for that shipment, and I doubt if the men can have them at Selish in time."

Young Fletcher had proved his mettle on the ranch.

"Oh, well, Jim! I'll help, and I think we can manage all O. K." answered Henry West, optimistically. "Here, Bess, sit down awhile," he added, quickly drawing off his mackinaw and spreading it on the bed of pine needles. The girl could offer no remonstrance, as he gently placed her on the coat.

"Do you think I can be comfortable here while I know you will get cold? You'll surely be ill!" She started to rise, but as he placed her on the seat again he assured her that when he grew cold he would ask for the coat. So she sat with her hands clasped about her knees, and her chin buried against them; her soft, liquid eyes gazing longingly across the rain-dashed landscape.

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The men, too, grew silent, and the time dragged. Bess gave a sigh and made a tentative effort to rise, but a gentle, restraining hand on her shoulder told her that though the man at her side was silent, he was still solicitous. James, becoming weary of standing, seated himself with his back pressed tight against that of his sister.

How the thoughts began chasing each other through the girl's brain! Little incidents of her girlhood days, or perhaps some memory of happy companionship at school would cause her to smile. Then, again, a sigh at some memory came unconsciously from her lips; and once, as she recalled a humorous episode, a little ripple of laughter escaped her.

"Enjoying yourself, Bess?" asked James, irritably, at her jocular outburst. "I wish this infernal rain would let up so we could get home some time today," he added.

"It seems to be letting up some now," said West. "If you'll let me take the mackinaw, please, I'll go out and take a look over the hills and see how much longer we shall have to wait."

When West had gone out into the rain, Bess asked her brother what time of day it was. "We've been here two infernal hours," he said, "and it is nearly noon. I wish we had some lunch, for we'll all be mighty hungry before we reach the ranch."

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"Please, James, don't be cross. That won't drive the rain away, and it only makes us feel more uncomfortable. Ah! Here comes the weather man! I can tell by the looks of his face that there is soon to be a rainbow!" cried the girl, joyfully, as West re-entered the shelter.

"Yes, the clouds are lifting, and it will soon be safe to start. I fear you'll suffer from the mud, Miss Bess."

"It will be a shame to spoil this green," she replied, "but I fear I must bear it for my

stomach's sake. Since James mentioned being hungry I have developed such an alarming craving for something to eat that it seems as if I had not tasted food in days. Oh! I wish there were some place where we could get our dinner!"

"There is," answered West; "over at Joe Nedreau's, about eight miles further on."

Soon the rain ceased, and the men hurried with the saddles. They picked their way carefully through the water-soaked sod till they reached the road, where the water was running like miniature rivers. At first Bess tried to guard her skirt from the muddy onslaughts, but soon saw that her efforts were of no avail and urged her horse into a faster gait.

The miles intervening between them and a prospective meal grew less and less. West, riding ahead, scanned the grazing herds at either side in a desultory manner. Suddenly he brought Eagle to a stop, raised himself up in the stirrups, and, with his hand shading his eyes, gazed intently across the range. Quickly he turned. "Jim, over there near the stream is that scrub bull of Savaeau's! Get your rope ready and come with me! You keep Mauchacho here," to the girl, who was now wide-eyed, and wondered what was going to happen.

With difficulty she restrained her horse, who was bent on following the fleeing companions. Bess released her feet from the stirrups and sprang quickly to the ground to hold the animal by the bit; and by patting and talking softly to him succeeded in quieting him.

Over the green expanse sped the two horsemen. West bent low over his horse's neck, riding madly. A rise in the ground for a moment concealed them, when up they shot, like two huge birds.

The herd had already seen the oncoming men, and instinctively felt that harm was approaching. With a loud snort and his tail in the air, the leader galloped over the range, followed by all the other cattle. On came the horses, now charged with excitement and knowledge of what was coming. James swerved to the right and artfully separated the bull from the rest of the herd. When the creature discovered he was divided from the other cattle, he turned swiftly and unexpectedly, which nearly resulted in throwing James from his horse. West had ridden across from the herd, and with his rope already swinging in the air would have captured the animal then and there had he not hesitated when he saw that James was nearly unseated. The hesitancy gave the animal a fresh start and on he ran and ran, ever evading his pursuers. Snorting horses and relentless pursuers drove him from every shelter. Each man knew that the only way to capture him would be to tire him out.

Bess was still standing at her horse's head, engrossed in watching the distant chase. They were so far away that at times she could not distinguish the men. At first she was excited, but as she saw the persistent pursuit and the vain attempt the animal made to reach a place of safety, she felt a wave of indignation surge over her and fill her with hot anger. Stamping her foot upon the ground, she cried out in vain: "Oh, you two horrid men! Leave that poor creature alone! What will you do when you do capture him? Murder him, of course! James, have you lost all your sense, to follow that—that—Indian! Yes, that is all you are now—an Indian thirsting for the blood of your victim!"

She burst into uncontrollable tears and hid her face against her horse's neck, to shut out the vision of the tragedy. Mauchacho bent his head and touched his mistress with his nose, as if trying to console her. Could he have spoken he would have explained that these things were a part of Western life; how it was impossible to tolerate low-bred stock; how this affair would seem all right when she became accustomed to the ways and laws of the range.

So the girl stood, for ages it seemed to her, until she heard the approach of the horses. She did not lift her head when they came up, and West saw that she had been sorely affected by witnessing the capture.

In a soft, low voice he said: "I'm very sorry, Miss Bess, that this circumstance occurred just as it did. It was unavoidable."

The girl wheeled, with a storm of reproof upon her lips; but as she saw his seriousness, her parted lips closed slowly, and she left unsaid what she thought to say. She shuddered at the remnant of blood stains which she saw upon his hands and bespattered white silk shirt, and springing into the saddle turned her horse away with an unreasoning jerk.

James saw her displeasure and only aggravated it by saying that she would grow accustomed to such things if she stayed in the cattle country.

West followed Mauchacho in silence and only spoke when they reached the Nedreau ranch. He hurried forward to help the girl dismount, but she scorned his assistance and sprang lightly to the ground.

"Did you—did you kill him?" she demanded, pushing up her hair with an angry gesture.

"Yes—I had to," he replied, looking into her eyes with decisive determination.

Just then an old Indian with his squaw came into view. West accosted them, and by numerous gestures and guttural sounds explained that down under the willows, near the creek, they would find "heap muck-a-muck."

Bess became deeply interested in the ambiguous and incoherent conversation; saw their stoic faces assuming a happy and expectant expression as their benefactor impressed upon them the fact that a supply of fresh beef was at their command. Before West had fairly finished explaining to them, they had started their old, wobbly cayuses into their swiftest paces, to reach the treasure before some other hungry "Injun" had discovered the prize.

When West again looked at Bess she could not resist a smile, and remarked that at least some one would enjoy the spoils.

The man was greatly relieved at the restoration of her good humor, and when they joined James he informed them that in a few minutes all could have something to eat, even the horses.

"I hope it won't be beef," suggested Bess. "I should think that you two would never dare to look a cow in the face again."

While at dinner James told his companions a story which was positively authentic. He

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remembered how, one day when he was about fifteen years of age, several of the grades, where he was attending school, met for the purpose of giving jointly a Longfellow programme. Everything went along smoothly and beautifully, and presently he heard his teacher announce that Miss Emma Lane would recite *The Wreck of the Hesperus*. He laughed now as he recalled how his heart thumped when the idol of his youthful dreams arose and walked nervously to the rostrum. In his swift yet ardent gaze at the object of his adoration, all he remembered seeing was a beautiful pink bow tucked snugly under a soft, generous chin, and two hands, fingering frantically at either side of her freshly laundered white dress. He did not dare look again for he felt himself too sympathetically nervous. Then he heard a tentative, quavering voice begin—"It was the schooner,"—a pause, a gulp, and again, "It was the schooner," etc., and this time the *Hesperus* was fairly and swiftly launched with the skipper and his little daughter aboard. On sailed the craft and on sailed Emmie ("as I called her," James explained), both rising and falling with the angry sea and rolling waves. With her ever-increasing confidence he felt his own courage returning, and presently he gazed with mouth wide open at the fair and fat girl on the platform. Oh, the joy he felt that she was his. If he could meet her on the way from school that afternoon he believed he would tell her how he loved her and thus relieve his overburdened heart. She, so simple, so fair, so plump (if a trifle too short), and withal so very modest! He did not hear a word now of the recitation, so engrossed was he in the living poem before him. But, as she made a frantic, sweeping gesture, he came back to earth with a thud as he heard:

"The waves looked soft as carded wool;
But the cruel rocks, they gored her side,
Like the horns of an angry—cow."

"Now, that settled me; that settled Emmie; for shame, Longfellow!" concluded James, laughing as he brought to his mind's eye the tragedy of that day at school. When the three were able to resume their meal after the merriment caused by his narrative, Bess remarked:

"And that fatal *Hesperus* wrecked all his faith in women. I have scarcely even found him looking at one, if he could avoid it. Poor, brokenhearted brother," she mocked, teasingly.

A few days later one of West's cowboys took a splendid Hereford bull across the hills to old Savaeau, with instructions for him to "stick his iron on the animal."

THE MIRACLE OF WOMANHOOD

Dave Davis, the Indian agent, had sent word that he wished to be removed to his quarters at Arlee as soon now as possible. Today, the day after Bess' return from her interesting visit to St. Ignatius Mission, he was expecting one of his policemen to come for him. His foot was far from strong, but he had managed since Sunday to hobble about with one crutch and a cane. The past two days had been tedious and long, and he had sorely missed the cheery presence of the girl. How he should miss her singing and her reading! He secretly wished he had further excuse to remain near her; yet, on the other hand, it was distasteful to him to be brought in contact with West. Thus far they had seen little of each other. Today at luncheon would be their first meal together. Each dreaded the meeting, yet Davis could not excuse himself, and if Henry West was at home, he was too much of a gentleman to allow a guest to note any displeasure.

Davis slowly and painfully found his way downstairs and into the living-room, in quest of Mrs. West, to apprise her of his expectant departure some time during the day, and to offer, if he might, some pecuniary settlement for all the comforts and attentions which he had received during his enforced stay at the *HW* Ranch.

No one seemed to be about, but presently he heard, coming from another part of the house, Bess' melodious voice. Wafted to him came the words, "And sometimes in the twilight gloom apart—" He passed through the dining-room and paused before the half-open door of the kitchen. "The tall trees whisper, whisper heart to heart," continued the girl, all unconscious of the alert ear at the door-casing.

"From my fond lips the eager answers fall—thinking—"

A pause, as Bess stopped to glance at a cookbook which lay on a table just before her, and into her song was woven, "(three eggs well beaten') thinking I hear thee call."

Then she closed her lips and softly hummed the air as she was vigorously beating a cream mixture in a huge yellow bowl.

The beautiful picture which she made held the eaves-dropper entranced, and he scarcely breathed lest his presence be discovered and the charming vision be gone.

Bess had on an immense blue and white gingham apron, the sleeves rolled high up above her dimpled elbows, exposing the creamy white of the fore-arm. A line of tan about the wrist showed that she had been thoughtless about exposing her hands to the sun and wind. A big floppy bow of black ribbon unsuccessfully restrained the soft knot of hair on her neck, and her "forelock," as she had denominated it, lay almost directly on her nose, all snowy white. A little unconscious puff at the obstruction sent a tiny white cloud of flour into the air, which elicited an audible smile from the figure at the doorway. Bess quickly turned and faced the visitor.

"Oh! Mr. Davis, aren't you dreadful to startle one so! The lady of the house is out," she said with a soft Irish twang to the words, "and 'tis against the rules an' regulations of this household to entertain any company in the kitchen." She artfully caught hold of either side of her apron and made a sweeping courtesy to him.

"Oh, please let me come in, little girl; I'm lonesome; I haven't seen you for three days, and now you would drive me away."

Davis came up to the opposite side of the table, and presented such a pathetic, pleading spectacle that Bess relented and permitted him to be seated. Cautiously he sank into a chair and tenderly rested his lame foot across the crutch. Bess again took up the big spoon and pounded away vigorously at the contents in the yellow bowl, trying to cover her confusion.

It is trying, at best, for even an expert in the culinary art, to be closely watched while engrossed in the intricacies of mixing a cake; but how much more so, when a girl has not "tried her luck" for months, and besides, when the table, the floor, the apron, her face, and even her hair, bear strong circumstantial evidence that the flour-sifter had leaked profusely. Furthermore, one dismal failure was spread out in full, accusing view on the table before her. Her cheeks burned with brilliant color, and her brown eyes flashed half nervously and half defiantly as she wielded the spoon.

"You see," began Bess, in an explanatory voice, "Mrs. West was called to see Mrs. White, who is quite ill at Polson, and she gave me full sway in the kitchen for today. Mary, the Indian woman, is on a protracted visit to some of her relatives, over on Dayton Creek, so I am to get the meals. It's great fun to come into the kitchen and cook 'just for today,' but I do not think I should care to assume the responsibility and the thinkability of twenty-one squares a week. I don't wonder that women grow desperately tired of unceasingly hungry people to keep satisfied."

On chatted the girl to the enthralled listener, and her composure returned.

"Were you trying to put your head in the flour barrel?" laughingly inquired Davis, as he noted the white, puffy locks.

"No," said Bess, assuming a dramatic attitude. She quoted,

'My hair is grey, though not with years,
Nor grew it white in a single night,
As men's have grown from sudden—'

"Oh, say," she cried, abruptly, "don't you love Lord Byron's poems! *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *Childe Harold*, *Mazeppa*—only that's so cruel!

"You see this," she changed the subject. "This which ought to be a delectation," pointing with scornful gesture at the remnant of the burned and flattened cake before her on the table; and then, giving her latest creation another whack or two before putting it into the baking-tin, "but it is only an abstraction for which Lord Byron is to blame. I had that book of his poems open, so

that I might be committing some of the lines while occupied in stirring the batter, and while I was repeating,—“There were seven pillars of Gothic mold—seven pillars of”—why, you see, I put seven teaspoonsful of yeast powder into the stuff and never noticed it until I had opened the oven, and the frothy, foamy mass went sizz-z-z—and hit bottom.”

Davis became convulsed at her narrative and her manner of relating it.

“Now, sir; please do not move nor breathe for forty minutes, and I will show you a triumph,” commanded Bess, as she picked up the utensils which she had used in her work.

“If I may speak, ever so carefully,” said Davis, “I’d like to tell you a little experience I had with a cake, or rather, an experience of an old bachelor friend of mine, over east of the range.”

“Do go on! I’m sure it is interesting!”

“It was this way: Bill had been living all alone on his sheep ranch over there, and like many western men who live lonely lives, was rather out-spoken and uncouth, altho’ true as steel. He grew tired of just bacon and corn-dodgers for grub, so he decided he’d try his luck at making a cake. I happened to be riding the range that day and went out of my way to go over and say ‘How’ to Bill. As I neared the cabin a suspicious odor greeted my nostrils simultaneously with Bill’s appearance at the door. He had nearly as much flour over him as you have now,” added Davis, facetiously.

Bess glanced at her tell-tale apron and folded it across her lap as she sat on a low stool interested in the cake tale. [92]

“‘Hello, Bill,’ I called, ‘what’s up? Smells to me as if you had a cook! Been getting married and didn’t send me a card?’ I said to him, as if in earnest. ‘Aw hell, no, Dave, this haint no fit place for a woman, even if I could find one who would have such an onnery cuss as I am,’ he answered. ‘Better unsaddle and stop for grub; got some swell dope ‘bout ready. Come in pretty easy though ‘er she’ll fall.’

“Just as I crossed the threshold he had taken a cautious peep into the tiny oven. As he lifted his red face a radiant and expectant smile wreathed his seamy mug, and mouth-juice trickled down either side of his chin, anticipating the delight to be. Presently he took me by the arm, lead me cautiously over to the stove and opened the oven to let me see what it contained. ‘A cake, by thunder!’ he said. ‘Ain’t she a peach, Davy, old boy! Look at her foam! She is sure great stuff—and—but—Gee! She’s—what’s it doing—it’s—’ and just then there was a sizz-z-z—and ‘she struck bottom.’ Bill’s face fell with the cake and he banged the door with a vengeance. For a moment he stood with his hands thrust into his pockets, and then burst out:—‘Bake—damn ye—we’ll eat you anyhow!’ ‘What seems to be the trouble with it, Bill?’ I asked as consolingly as I could without roaring. ‘She ought to be good—I looked in the receipt book, and the first thing I read about cakes it said—the yelks of seven aigs—Sheep don’t lay no aigs, so I shut the book and fixed ‘er up to suit myself. I put in plenty of sugar and baking-powder and plenty of corn-meal to give ‘er body. I didn’t have no vanilly or lemon flavor, so I just put in a squirt of Perry Davis’ Pain Killer, and I guess that’s what knocked her out.’”

“Did you eat it?” asked Bess.

“N—no; we tried to scoop out the middle, but even Bill declined and said he guessed he’d flop her over and bake her again tomorrow.”

“Well, this time mine seems to be all right,” remarked Bess, as she peered into the oven.

What a chat the two were having, both enjoying it greatly.

“I came in here trying to find Mrs. West. I am going away this afternoon and am anxious to make a settlement with her before leaving.”

“This afternoon—you are going—away,” asked the girl in a tone more solicitous than she realized. Davis slowly rose from his chair and hobbled near Bess, standing with her hands clasped loosely behind her.

“Yes—do you care? Tell me you care. Tell me you’ll miss me, little girl,” he said, with a sudden outburst of passion, as he clasped both the girl’s hands in his own strong hold. He bent his head low. The fragrance from her hair intoxicated him and a great desire seized him to clasp her in his arms.

Bess, frightened at his unexpected and new attitude toward her, for a moment could not move. She felt his breath against her hair, and heard his heart as it beat loudly. She felt afraid to move lest she hurt his foot, and now the blood was throbbing in her throat painfully. The thought flashed through her mind that they were alone in the big house, and even could she have cried out for some one to come, she felt that it would be an insult to the man near her. What had she to fear? [94]

“Oh, please! Mr. Davis, you hurt my hands. Let me go, you must,” she said emphatically, as she wrestled her hands free and turned directly about. With a bewildered exclamation she put her hand to her cheek, and stared with wrinkled brow at the man who was standing so near her. For the first time in her young life she read in a man’s face the unspoken words of passion and love. In the moment she stood motionless the veil was lifted from her virgin soul, and the miracle of womanhood was wrought! Into that brief space crowded undreamed dreams; new and strange insights, wonderful knowledge! She felt herself grow old, as all these strange sensations crowded themselves into her unsophisticated mind. A look of mingled dismay, unintelligibility and terror crept into the girl’s face, as she was held spell-bound by the magnetic voice of the man, and by deep glowing eyes that held her fascinated against her will.

He drew nearer and nearer and breathed a torrent of passionate love into her ears. His face nearly touched hers, and she was wholly unable to move. The man knew that he was the first one to teach her of passion and he felt an exultant pride of possession, already.

“Don’t be frightened, little one,” he said to her in the softest, most endearing tone he could master. “Cannot you understand how wonderful it is to love and to be loved? Let me teach you all it means, dear. Let me tell you that you are essential now to my happiness and to my very existence. You all unconsciously have made me love you—love you, till I cannot breathe without [95]

you. Tell me, that you do love me. Tell me—tell me,” and his voice sank to an almost inaudible, yet imperative whisper.

“I—oh! Please, Mr. Davis—I—do—not even know you. Oh—do—not—please do not talk so to me!” her husky voice trembled, so choked with emotion that he could scarcely understand what she said.

He knew it would be sheer temerity to press his suit further for the present, so he stroked her hair with a soft caress, and said: “Never mind now, dear; think of all I have said, and when I come again you will understand. Good-bye now, for I shall not see you again before leaving,” and giving her hair another gentle touch, he adjusted his crutch and left the room.

Bess’ hands fell at her sides. Amazed, her eyes followed the man as he passed through the doorway. All her senses seemed to have been dulled by the recent avowal still ringing in her ears. She was lost to her surroundings, and stood still and silent.

“What’s burning, Bess?” called Henry West, as he stopped at the outside door of the kitchen, while passing. Bess was brought to earth with such a thud that she clutched at her heart to stop its pounding. Quickly she sprang to the oven and succeeded in partially concealing her confusion by peering into it just as West stepped into the room.

“Rather hot work, cooking, isn’t it?” he ventured, unsuspectingly, as the girl lifted her scarlet face to him.

“Dear me—it is nearly burned! I forgot—everything!” she said disconnectedly as she snatched the cake from the stove and placed it on the table.

“Oh! it’s hot!” she exclaimed, as she stuck her finger into her mouth; then looking at it she saw a large, white blister swelling upon the tender skin.

West saw at once that she had burned her hand and hastily applied some soda to relieve the pain. With tender care he wrapped it up, and when the smarting had ceased, told Bess he would help her to get the meal.

She was still ill at ease, and the incident of a few moments ago kept asserting itself in little spasms that would make her catch her breath. In her ears kept ringing the echo of Davis’ burning words, and she longed to flee to her room, to be alone, to think—to think—to cry. She surely would cry—she felt tears coming.

“Oh, Henry—I can’t stay—I want to go to—my—,” but by this time the floodgates of pent-up feelings had opened wide, and with tears streaming down her cheeks she fled to the silence and comfort of her own dear room.

“Poor little girl; she is nervous trying to do so much this morning,” soliloquized Henry, drawing off his coat and tying on a large apron. He then began to make preparations for the noon-day meal.

Just then, up the road leading to the house, drove one of the Indian police with a comfortable conveyance. By the time he could reach the porch, Davis, who had been watching the arrival, was already there dressed to go away.

“May I be of any service,” asked Henry West, with civility.

“Thank you. The man will fetch down my things.”

West walked out to hold the horses while the minor preparations were going on, and helped Davis to a comfortable position in the rig.

“I am sorry not to have seen your mother before leaving. Please tell her I shall be over here again, as soon as possible, to—to—remunerate her for all the inconvenience to which I have placed her,” said Davis; and then, without further addressing West, ordered the man to start.

West stood for several moments watching the departure; the only emotion which he betrayed being a convulsive closing of his hands and eyes.

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AN INDIAN IN THE MOONLIGHT

When Mrs. West returned to the ranch in the evening, she sought Bess in her room to learn of her experience in the culinary department during the day. As she tapped at the door and softly entered, a dejected, dishevelled and tear-stained figure arose and flung her arms about the "little Mother."

Impulsively and swiftly she poured into Mrs. West's astonished ears all that had transpired that morning, and when she had finished, she said, "Why, little Mother, I love so much already, I cannot find room for any more. I love you—I love James—the birds—the grass and flowers! I love the mountains and the wonderful lake! I love my music—my books and my pictures! I love Mauchacho—I love babies—and dogs. Where is there room for any more?"

Then Mrs. West led her to a seat, and taking both the girl's hands into her own, told her that the love of all these things was so entirely different from the love she would one day understand, that they would be crowded out and set apart when her heart was ready to receive the great and inevitable passion.

"But I do think, dear, that Major Davis was rather premature in his announcement. Perhaps selfishness prompted him, and he spoke before leaving you lest someone else would try to teach my little girl life's most wonderful and most beautiful lesson. He need not have been so anxious, however, as there are no eligible young men near here, except perhaps my own son." After a slight pause she added, "But he is—he is—only an Indian!"

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"Oh, little Mother! What difference need that make! He has the whitest heart! That is his greatest innate quality, the one which prompts him to be a—*man*! God does not make any discrimination between him and me; why should insignificant *I* presume to."

Impulsively Bess threw her arms about Mrs. West's neck, and looked deeply into her eyes. For a moment, neither could say a word, and when Mrs. West assumed control of her voice she said: "My dear child—thank you for your sympathy; it helps so much. But, there is all the world—outside there, who do not understand as you do, dear; who do not feel as you feel; who—," but she could say no more.

"Come, little Mother, let us go out by the lake and watch the moon rise. We each need God and nature tonight."

As they passed through the hall-way Bess gently placed a light shawl about Mrs. West's shoulders, and taking a wrap for herself, together they went out into the night.

As she passed the door of the living-room she saw Henry reclining on a cozy couch and knew, from the listless manner in which he held a book, that he had fallen asleep. Over his knees was spread a bright-colored Navajo blanket.

Together they walked, their hands clasped in loving pressure. Bess knew where a log, sheltered from any passing breeze, commanded a splendid view of both the lake and the mountains. It was quite a little walk from the house, and gladly Mrs. West seated herself to recover her breath.

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The scene was too beautiful to be marred by idle words, and each felt that to speak would be sacrilegious. All about them was the purple twilight, deep and silent,—immeasurable silence everywhere, except where the tiny waves splashed against a rock, or a tall pine whispered a tender sigh to a near-by tamarack. Myriads of quivering stars hung balanced in the far-off sky, and occasionally one shot out across the illimitable space, with a tiny trail of light, which suddenly became extinguished as if it had sunk into the sea. By this symbol, the shooting star, the world might know a soul had been released and found its way to heaven. Mrs. West reverently crossed herself, and Bess gave the hand a pressure of understanding.

"Bess, dear, I fear I am growing chilly. It will be some time before the moon shows over the hills. We better go indoors."

"Please, little Mother, let me remain a little while. I shall not be afraid. Why! I have been here several times alone before! All I have thought of is the stars! There are so many things I must think of before I could go to sleep. That's a dear—let me stay," she concluded in such an entreaty that Mrs. West allowed herself to be gently turned toward the house.

Bess stood watching till the retreating figure became fainter and fainter and was swallowed in the gloom of the willows near the spring.

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She was alone—alone with the stars, the sea—the moon. Alone with all the new and strange emotions which she had learned this day! "Hurry, oh, moon! Come over the tops, to help me to think! To give me light! To teach me to know and to understand!" she prayed.

The sky grew brighter, the rough and rugged tips of the mountains softened and glowed with luminous silvery light, and the tiny ripples on the lake caught the half-shed radiance, glistening like millions of jewels. The girl drew her wrap snugly about her and sinking into a seat on a rock with her back against the huge log, drew her knees up so that her chin rested against them on her clasped hands. Her ears rang with the words they had heard in the morning—"I love you—you made me love you!" till she knew no other thought.

"Yes, but how can anyone know—know, when they really love! How is one to be sure—sure—sure!" The girl's thoughts thronged. "All love seems to me the same! The degree may vary, but it all feels the same! How am I to know when I possess that other kind! Dear me, what's the use of trying to love any more when my heart is too crowded already! No—I guess I won't try—won't even try to love you, Mr. Davis." She straightened with a relieved sigh.

Just then, the moon, fair, round and full, shot up over the crests, and all the world was filled with beautiful, silvery light. One could distinguish the greens of the pines and firs as well as the browns and greys of the rocks. Even the girl's dress showed a softest pink in the tender

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moonlight. How glorious it was! The lake looked like the sea as it stretched across the miles to the far shore. The mountains towered loftily into the vault of heaven. The quietude of the forests, as the gigantic monarchs bathed in the glowing light. And above all, to *be*, to *breathe*, to *live* amongst all this sublimity of beauty. How glorious it all is! What more could one wish? What more could one love? What need of any other kind of love? On—on ran the thoughts of the girl, all unconscious physically, save to the wonder of the night.

A movement behind her, caused her to turn her head quickly. She smothered a cry of fear as she saw approaching through the trees, a tall form closely wrapped in a brightly-colored blanket. How clearly she could distinguish the colors as the man came from the shadows out into the brilliant moonlight. Bess held her breath and did not move as the man stopped and looked searchingly about. Silently he stood; then suddenly flinging out his arms and lifting his face to the witchery of the moon, the blanket fell off his shoulders to the ground about him and revealed Henry West.

What a picture he made! His upturned face, silhouetted against the trees, seemed in a halo of light—the arms lifted in an appeal to the sky. The garb of the white man enshrouded him, the robe of the Indian lay at his feet. Slowly he passed his hands across his brow with a despairing gesture, and held them over his eyes, as if they could no longer endure the lovely, if loveless, night.

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When the object of her alarm had vanished, Bess startled West by springing quickly to the top of the log and saying: "Oh, Henry! How you frightened me! When I saw you stalking through the trees I thought it was an In—!" Quickly as she checked herself, she was not quick enough, for West ended her sentence for her.

"Indian! So I was—see, lying here at my feet!"

He stooped and picked up the Navajo blanket which he had hastily caught off the couch and wrapped about him when his mother awakened him.

He quietly walked over to the girl standing on the log, nonchalantly enfolded himself in the blanket, crossed it over his face to his eyes, and for a moment stood motionless. Bess placed her fingers against her parted lips as if to keep back any idle words.

"Sometimes—sometimes—now, I wish all I knew was how to wrap my blanket about me!" he said, with effort. "The great outside world does not want me, cannot understand me. What need or comfort are the things which the world has taught me, when after all, my winding-sheet will be but a blanket? What right has the world to give me a desire for knowledge, a taste of heaven, an understanding of the past, a dread of the future, and then hold up its hands to say, 'You are still an Indian.'"

Again he let the blanket drop at his feet and stood gazing into the moon, while written on his face were despair and longing and resignation. A chord in the girl's heart was touched at the sight of the strong man before her, and it was set attune to the one which had been awakened in the churchyard, where she once before saw his misery. She sprang lightly to the ground, picked up the blanket and placed it again about his shoulders.

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"I like to see you so. You are too often sad, Henry. Tell me something I may do to make you happy. Tell me!" Bess entreated.

West stood looking at her for a moment, the shadow of a fleeing cloud hiding the love-light which shone in his dark eyes, then said: "You placed my blanket about me, that's enough. Mother is anxious about you, Bess, and sent me to bring you into the house. Come—one may have too much moon you know."

A FRANTIC HERD

The next morning at breakfast, Henry West told his mother that he was going to meet James Fletcher and six of his cowboys, over at the ferry, as they came with a bunch of steers from the range about the Big Arm. Then they would drive them South to Selish, where they were to be loaded and shipped to a large stock ranch in Wyoming, to a man whose winter loss had been great.

Bess became at once deeply interested in the affair, and asked if she might go over to the ferry with him to witness the feat of swimming the bunch across the Pend d'Oreille.

"I am going to have half a dozen Indians take cattle across the river, and the boys will cross on the ferry with their horses so that they will be in shape to continue with the drive. Otherwise they would all be delayed by getting into dry clothing," explained West. "Yes, you and Mother both come. It will be quite a novel sight, for you, at least, Bess."

The girl was delighted and hastened to help straighten up the house, so that Mrs. West might go also. She stopped a moment in her task, as she watched West get into his riding togs. The heavily fringed leathern chapps, the belt, with its cartridges and gun, the spurs and quirt were all quickly and deftly adjusted by the experienced hand.

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"Let me tie that for you," suggested Bess, as Henry fumbled with his white silk 'kerchief, trying to fasten it about his throat without removing his gloves which he had already drawn on his hands. She tucked the dish-towel which she had been using under her arm, and standing on her tip-toes, tied the handkerchief about his neck.

As her soft, dainty fingers touched his throat he closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the sweet girl so near him lest they reveal the exquisite pain which thrilled his whole being. He gripped his hands together behind him, fearing, in spite of himself, they would snatch her to him and crush her in an embrace. Through his closed teeth he said, "Hurry, Bess," for fear he should yet lose control of himself; and once the floodgates of his passion be opened, there would be no pause till he had poured out all the longings and hopes and desires of his very soul. He knew the girl was entirely ignorant and unsuspecting of his love for her, and he did not dare frighten her by a confession, for fear the consequences might deprive him of even the comfort of being near her and seeing and hearing her.

"Oh," said Bess, as she gave him a saucy tap on the cheek, "can't you stand still a moment! Now see, you have undone it. Really, you are more impatient to start than Mauchacho usually is."

"Give it a half-hitch, Bess, and call it fixed," said West, as he backed away from the girl to free himself from her delicious touch. Snatching his sombrero and starting for the door, he continued: "You and Mother be at the ferry within an hour. One of the men will saddle your horses for you. Good-bye." Then hastily returning, as if he had forgotten an important item he called: "Oh say, Bess! How about your gun practice? Are you improving any?"

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"Do you know, Henry, that the last time I tried, I only had to hold one eye shut, and once I nearly hit the mark!"

"Nearly—how nearly?" laughed West. "Remember, when you can shoot with both eyes open and hit the bull's-eye three times in succession, then—then you are to have the 38 Smith and Wesson, you know."

With that he was gone to the gate, touched his foot in the stirrup, sprang with the agility of a cat into the saddle and started off quickly. Just then, however, Bess noticed that he had dropped his handkerchief, and saw the rider swing his horse quickly about, drop low over the side of the saddle, snatch the handkerchief from the ground, resume his position in the saddle and gallop on as though it were no feat at all. She cried out in her astonishment, so that Mrs. West came hurriedly in to learn the cause of her alarm. When Bess told her what she had just witnessed, Mrs. West smiled, and explained that at the July celebration she would have an opportunity to see some really wonderful feats in riding.

"Henry told me just now that I must hurry to win the new gun he promised me," said Bess, as she and Mrs. West hurried about, finishing the breakfast work. "Do you know," continued the girl, "it seems to me I would be very conspicuous with a gun stuck into my belt. James and Henry both agree that if I insist upon going about alone with my horse, that I must have a gun."

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"Yes, dear, one cannot tell what unexpected danger might arise. A drunken Indian, or an infuriated steer, or even a rattlesnake may molest one, and the boys are wise in insisting," answered Mrs. West.

At first, when Henry West brought out the 22 rifle to give Bess her first lesson, she ran behind a tree and thrust her fingers in her ears. After a little she would pull the trigger with both eyes shut tight, if he would hold the gun. At length she submitted to having it placed against her shoulder and to holding it unassisted.

"Oh, Bess! Don't be such a baby," said her brother to her one day, as she was trying to overcome her aversion to shooting the 22. Instantly her eyes *looked daggers* at the boys; snatching the gun, she thrust it up against her shoulder, pulled the trigger and banged away! When she opened her eyes she saw James peering from behind one tree and Henry from another. Both were smiling at her impetuosity, but James then and there told her that the first essential was to handle a weapon carefully.

"That is all right!! But don't you call me a baby again! I'll beat you shooting yet! See if I don't!" flung back the girl.

During the next week, while the boys were at Selish with the shipment of steers, Bess practiced with the little rifle at every opportunity, and her progress was marked indeed.

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"Mauchacho is feeling gay this morning, Bess," said Mrs. West, as she and the girl mounted

and started for the ferry at Polson. The dainty horse shook his head and side-stepped first one way and then the other. He seemed to know and feel that he carried a graceful rider, and was doing these little extra steps to add to the charming picture.

Bess' lithe body swung to each new antic, and the ruddy glow of health on her cheeks told how keen was the enjoyment.

"My! how dearly I love to feel a horse under me!" she cried as she leaned forward to smooth a strand in the horse's mane. "It seems to me that I shall hate ever having to go on wheels again."

Mrs. West rode like one thoroughly accustomed to the saddle, erect and well poised, with her right arm clinging down by her side, and the reins held firmly up in the left. She, too, rode astride, and her eyes were bright with as keen an enjoyment as the happy girl's by her side.

"It does put new life into one, dear, to be on a horse," responded the older woman. "I have not had a ride for ever so long, and this is surely a delight."

Just as they reached Polson they could see on the opposite shore of the river several cowboys and half a dozen Indians driving some fifty or sixty head of cattle. The water in the lake was still very high,—in fact it had risen two feet since the day before, and now came pouring into the river, its outlet, with terrific speed. The roar of the falls about a half-mile below the ferry was distinctly heard, and told of the immense volume of water which was pouring and bounding over the huge rocks and precipice.

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Henry West was watching with a troubled face the foaming stream and the reluctant herd on the opposite side. Bess saw her brother signal the cowboys to cross on the waiting ferry, and then instruct the Indians at which point to swim the cattle and their ponies across. The water was icy cold, and with greatest effort and urging were the steers forced into the stream. Such shouts, and yelling, and riding and driving! Finally the last steer was driven into the water as some of the others were already nearly half-way across. The Indians had flung off their blankets, and with wild and weird shouts, plunged their horses into the water. The snorts of the reluctant animals mingled with the song that went up from the bucks. How the cattle fought against the current which bore them down stream! How the ponies worked, with their burdens now swimming alongside and clinging to their manes! How the Indians shouted now to the horses, now to the cattle, and again to each other! A laugh, almost hideous in its bravado, rent the air, and again the song of courage could be heard above all the confusion.

Bess was wild with excitement. She was relieved to see James on the ferry crossing with the cowboys and their horses. She looked for Henry West and discovered him far down on the bank at about the place where the herd would come out. He paced up and down with anxiety, and the girl could feel his care. The first of the cattle had already gained the land, and another—another. Look! there was one which seemed to be losing wind and was being borne downward by the current. Instantly the animal was seen by an Indian, who, in his effort to head off the course, loosened his grip on his pony's mane and snatched frantically for the floating tail. He grasped it, but not firmly enough, and soon was swimming alone.

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"Come straight ahead," called West to the now dazed Indian. The rest, with their ponies and the steers, were clambering up the steep incline of the bank and were entirely oblivious to the danger of their companion, their bodies, all dripping, gleaming like burnished copper in the dazzling sunshine. Springing upon their ponies they rode hurriedly to the approaching ferry, to wrap their naked bodies in the blankets which Fletcher was bringing across. Only West was conscious of the peril of the one Indian, except those on the ferry who had seen the struggle, and Bess, who had ridden Mauchacho down to where West was standing. He kept urging and exhorting the swimmer, who was constantly gaining and nearing the shore. Bess noticed that West had removed his chaps and coat, as if preparing to go to the assistance of the man in the water.

"If it were not so icy cold he'd make it all right," said West, unaware of the girl dismounting near him. In the next instant he had jerked off his boots, flung his sombrero at Bess' feet and plunged into the foaming water some thirty feet further down the stream than where the Indian was.

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"Don't," shrieked Bess, but all too late, for he was already swimming with long measured strokes toward the now exhausted man. Oh! would he reach the spot in time? Could he force his strength against the current and save the Indian from being carried onto the Falls and dashed to pieces on the rocks? Bess held her breath as she watched.

Like a flash she saw his arm shoot out and firmly catch the Indian by one of his long braids! Now he was turning, now swimming back with his burden! By this time the excited men reached the spot and watched the rescue.

"You bet—West'll fetch him!" "Sure—he's great in the water!" "Here they are now!" "Keep'er up, old boy, you're coming!" Bess heard on all sides. James stood near, white-faced and trembling, lest at the last moment West's almost Herculean strength might desert him. Now he would surely make it! Together James and Bess stretched forth their hands as if to help West through the last few feet of water. When his feet touched the earth and he struggled with his now unconscious burden, he gasped,

"I'm all right. See to the other man!"

Bess looked at Henry's drawn and anxious face, and tears rushed into her eyes.

"Never mind, little girl, it's over now," he said softly, touched by her solicitude; and instantly flung all his savagery at the cowboy who ventured:

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"You're a damn fool, West, to risk your life for just an old Indian!"

"He—he is my brother!" retorted West, with eyes that might have killed with their intense fire.

Bess hastened away to seek Mrs. West, and was relieved to find that she had not known of the danger her son had been in.

"Get the bunch started, James," said West, "and I'll join you where we take up the rest of the herd."

It was evening on the following day, when the weary herd, urged by the still wearier men and horses, came to the foot of the hill near the shipping place. The dust raised by the hoofs of two hundred steers was suffocating, and the cowboys congratulated themselves that plenty of water and "grub" were in sight.

The drive had been without incident or accident, and West was silently commending the good judgment of his foreman. By constant shouting, urging and driving the steers gained the summit of the hill and began to descend. West saw a long freight train standing on the tracks ready to start, and he became filled with trepidation for fear the wild creatures would become frightened, and serious consequences might follow.

They reached the flat near the corrals. West breathed a sigh of relief when suddenly the engine gave two long, shrill whistles! The hills caught the sound and hurled it back and forth again and again, as if the very fiends of the mountains were exultant at the terror of the dumb beasts! With a snort every head and tail went up; all seemed possessed with the instinct of flight from some dreadful danger. Wheeling, they plunged up the steep hillside. Every man knew instantly what to do. Three sent their spurs into the tired horses and urged them up the hill to head off the bellowing, frenzied herd. The horses intuitively knew that there was trouble, and were filled with new vim. With red nostrils and wet flanks, out of breath they gained the position and successfully turned the terrified animals again down the hill. On they rushed, snorting, bellowing, plunging, completely enveloped in a cloud of dust. West and Fletcher rode on to head them off, and now saw, as the dust subsided a little, that the wild things had begun already to go 'round and round.' If they should now get to milling, doubtless many of them would be crushed to death!

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Fletcher, seeing an opening, made a desperate attempt to take it, but his wise pony wheeled, but not quickly enough to evade the scratch of a sharp horn. West, with a merciless dig of the spur that caused the blood to spurt from the horse's side, made it leap clear off the ground and come down on four stiffened legs in the only open space among the steers. Practiced rider tho' he was, he bounded high in the air, losing his hat and nearly losing the saddle. With swinging lariats, with hoarse shouts, with shots and yells, at last the circling herd were checked and slowly began to fall into line and through the openings into the corrals. When the last steer was safely behind the strong enclosure of the stockyards, West turned to his foreman with a face that showed desperate determination through the grime of dust and perspiration.

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"You better go with the boys and get ready for supper. I have a little matter of business to attend to first." Turning to the others, lifting his bare head high, and with a look of approval in his flashing eyes, he said, "Boys, you have proven yourselves equal to any occasion! I'm proud of each one of you!"

He waited till the cheers and waving hats of the cowboys had subsided, waited till he saw them lead the horses, with now drooping heads, to shelter and food, waited for James to follow the others, and then rode his horse over to the station platform. Riding up on the platform he rapped on the window with the loaded end of his quirt, and motioned to the man inside to come out. In a low, tense voice he asked: "Where's the shipping agent?"

"I'm your man," came from a large bunch of corduroys.

"I'm the shipper of that bunch of cattle in the yards. Perhaps you saw our averted catastrophe. Instruct your engineers hereafter to avoid whistles when wild steers are being driven."

The corduroy man replied: "That engineer's resignation has already been telegraphed to headquarters. A man with no better sense than he displayed is incapable of holding a job on this division."

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After a few more remarks incidental to the loading and shipping next morning, West turned his horse in quest of his sombrero. As he wheeled he came face to face with Fletcher, whose curiosity prompted him to follow West. For a moment neither spoke, and then James blurted out, "Well, I'll be d—d, West; you always know just what to do and what's more, do it!"

As they neared the spot where their serious trouble with the cattle occurred, a faint sound of distress reached West's acute ear. Searching behind a huge pile of rock and brush, he discovered one of the best steers with its front legs broken. In the flash of an instant he had pulled his gun and the true and sure aim ended the dumb brute's misery. All he remarked was, "Another feast for some hungry 'Injun,'" and hurried to join the other men at supper.

THE FIRST VISIT OF DAVE DAVIS

"It seems ages since the boys left for the round-up," remarked Bess to Mrs. West, one afternoon, as they sat sewing. "When do you think they will be home?"

Folding the soft, white cloth, which seemed to accentuate the dark-skinned hands, Mrs. West paused a moment before answering.

"Um, well, let me see! They started about ten days ago. They ought to be through on Sullivan Creek by this time, and then to Dayton Creek and home. Perhaps in four days more."

"Well, when they come, I think they will discover two things. One, that I have wasted heaps of ammunition, and two—that I can 'hit the spot' three times—almost," laughingly replied Bess, as she sat near the window, unconsciously lifting some faded American Beauty roses from a vase. As if suddenly commanding her thoughts, she gave the flowers such a vigorous thrust back into their receptacle that the water flew into her face.

"Why girlie—what a way to treat your poor roses!" said Mrs. West.

Half ashamed and half defiantly Bess turned. "Why did not Mr. Davis send the roses to you? You were the one who cared for him. He seems to have forgotten that, and I'd like to remind him of it, too," she said, with a flash in her eye.

"Well, the opportunity is at hand; but please don't," replied Mrs. West, for just then she saw Mr. Davis ride into the yard. [118]

So completely was Bess surprised at the unexpected appearance of the subject of her thoughts, that she strove in vain to cover her embarrassment. Hot blood rushed to her cheeks. Fragrant, waving, brown hair half shielded her eyes, and for once she was glad of its unruly fluffiness.

At first she thought only of flight, for somehow she did not feel that she could as yet meet the man whose last words to her still rung in her ears, and caused little qualms of fear in her heart. During the weeks in which she had not seen him she tried in vain to banish him from her mind; but the strange fascination which he held over her only seemed to increase. And yet she knew her heart did not leap for joy at thought of him, but rather its quickened beatings caused her an undesirable pain,—one so strange, and new and foreign. Could it be that this was love,—that great, mysterious thing which, whether we will or no, grips our very souls like bands of steel, and wrings them most piteously. How could she know? She had dreamed that with love came the sense of peace and rest; the feeling of utter repose and satisfaction, the complete knowledge of all that is good and true, the fulness of contentment, the satisfaction of every heart-felt longing; and here, at the very first appearance of the man who had so ardently confessed his devotion for her, her one thought was to flee, to hide and not to see him. Instead, she remained standing, perfectly quiet, and by the time she heard his step in the hall and Mrs. West's cheery salutation she was quite mistress of herself. [119]

With still a hesitancy in his walk, he came into the room. How his face brightened and his step quickened at sight of Bess. Eagerly he stepped forward and clasped her extended hand.

"I am glad to see you have improved greatly in so short a time," ventured Bess, in a low voice.

"Thanks; but to me the past weeks have seemed an eternity. Not a word, not a sign from the little girl I left so reluctantly."

Bess felt like calling to Mrs. West as she passed the doorway,—she could not be alone with Mr. Davis.

"You came to see Mrs. West," said Bess in a tentative way; "I'll call her!" But as she stepped forward towards the door, her face lifted and lips parted ready to call, the man abruptly intervened, caught her to him and smothered the sound upon her lips. Again and again he kissed her till she had no breath to give voice to her anger.

"You—you—stop—how dare you frighten me so! You have no right to—to—" but tears choked her voice and she could only gaze at him with flashing eyes.

The man did not move nor offer any words. Slowly he put his hands in his pockets and looked at her with eyes that burned into her very soul and held her spell-bound. How handsome he looked,—so tall and large, health again glowing in his face and form. For a full moment thus he stood, immovable, immutable! Never for an instant did he lift his eyes from the girl's! Now her eyelids gave a brief quiver, her lips parted in a soft sigh, and her hands fell listlessly by her side. Then he spoke, in a voice so low that it was scarcely audible, so tender that its caress seemed like music. [120]

"Come here, dear!" Lifting one hand in an appealing gesture, he held it poised for a moment and then let it rest gently on a fluffy brown head, which moved slowly and irresolutely near to him. Lifting the girl's face so that he could look directly into the eyes, he said: "Tell me—have I no right to love you, or to make you—*make* you love in return? Nothing seems good to me but you; you have my heart and soul to save or destroy; you—little girl—are the keeper of my happiness, my very existence. The miserable days without you have been unbearable; the long nights more miserable still. I love you—do you understand that—*love you*—I want you—and shall have you!" Again he grew fierce, and held the girl so firmly that he felt her struggle for breath. Slowly relaxing his arms and gently placing the girl before him he continued: "Kiss me now, Bess, of your own free will, and that will tell me that you love me."

For a moment she stood silent, dumb. A spasmodic quiver shook her body and trembling eyelids covered her eyes. Her hands went to her heart as if trying to restore its beating, and suddenly she stepped back, flung out her chin, and in a voice almost uncontrollable with emotion said, "I'll call—Mrs.—West—" and ran out of the room before her admirer could prevent. [121]

He stood a moment at the vacant doorway and then, with a sinister smile showing the firm, white teeth set hard together, he said, half audibly: "You—shall!"

Bess found Mrs. West and succeeded rather poorly in trying to be calm. The dear, white-haired woman placed her arm lovingly about the girl and led her gently back into the living-room.

Mr. Davis was standing with his back to the door as they entered, toying carelessly with the faded roses.

"Your beautiful roses were greatly enjoyed and appreciated. We thank you for them, Mr. Davis," said Bess, in a voice which showed that she had not yet recovered her composure.

She still clung to Mrs. West's hand, as if she needed her assuring clasp. Mrs. West could not refrain a smile at the extra stress which the girl placed on the "we," and added: "Yes, and you may judge by their condition, Mr. Davis, how greatly they were prized. American Beauties are not plentiful here, and their rarity as well as their beauty makes them doubly dear."

"I am sorry, Mrs. West, to have been so tardy in coming to see you. But I found affairs in great confusion when I returned to the Agency. Will you kindly tell me how much I am indebted to you?"

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A look of anger and humiliation clouded the woman's face. She did not reply at once and was relieved from doing so by Bess, who drew herself up to her full height and said with a bravado that astonished both her hearers: "Mr. Davis, do not insult my little Mother by offering money for her kindness towards you. Such indebtedness is only liquidated by—by—gratitude, and by—roses," she added, glancing at Mrs. West, and pulled the shriveled petals off and dropped them carelessly on the rug.

"I see it is utterly useless to offer anything but my thanks, Mrs. West." Davis held out his hand to her and turning to the girl he added, "And may I send more roses?"

As he took his departure a moment later, Mrs. West asked Bess if she would ride as far as Polson with Mr. Davis and bring the mail. There did not seem any plausible excuse to offer for not wishing to go, and Davis gladly waited until she had donned her riding habit and a man had brought Mauchacho from the stables.

What a delight to the eye was the tall, lithe form, with its becoming green skirt and soft, fluffy waist. The sombrero was tied on securely with her long, white, silky veil, that caressed the pink cheeks. Long gauntlet gloves with fringed ends dangling, and a dainty quirt, gave her an added touch of individuality. She spurned the proffered assistance to mount, and had gained the saddle before it was fairly given. The little dread which she had at first felt at riding the three miles with Mr. Davis had left her, for somehow the indescribable feeling she had, when he first came, had completely vanished, and she knew that she was again complete mistress of herself—she was the generalissimo!

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The horses' hoofs filled her ears with music as the two rode along, almost without a word, and by the time they reached Polson's she was completely at ease and all the passion and fear of the past hour were, for the time, at least, forgotten.

Mr. White, seeing their approach, brought the packet of letters out to Bess, who eagerly examined them. At one, her face lighted up with beautiful happiness, and she cried out: "Oh, goody—one at last from Bee!"

After a few desultory remarks to Mr. White, Davis turned his horse to go. Lifting his hat to Miss Fletcher, now buried in the pages of a voluminous letter, he spoke so low that he doubted if she heard, she gave a nod and smile to his, "Remember, the roses are only for you!"

Bess crowded the pages of the letter into its envelope, and thrusting all the mail into her blouse she leaned forward with a quick command to Mauchacho, who almost instantly caught the girl's eagerness and sped like the wind along the border of the lake for home.

Davis turned in the saddle, resting his hand on his horse's back, to watch with admiration the beautiful rider. The long, white veil was now streaming far behind her like some dainty, fleecy cloud, trying to keep pace with a fleeing nymph. There was no movement to her body, and she seemed to be flying through space. Davis' hand unconsciously restrained his horse, who was now standing perfectly still. He watched the girl ride out of sight behind a low hill, and when he again resumed his journey he was filled with greater determination than ever to win her at any cost.

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Mrs. West hurried to the door as she saw Bess' unusual haste, but her anxiety was quickly dispelled as she caught sight of the girl's happy face. Slipping off her horse's back, Bess left him with trailing reins, and sprang quickly up the steps.

"Oh, little Mother," she cried, as she grasped her hand and dragged her to a seat on the steps beside her. Into her blouse she plunged her hand and drew forth a letter which contained some startling news, indeed.

"See! here is a letter from Bee—Berenice, you know, and she writes—let me see, where is it?" She wet her thumb and fumbled among the pages. "Oh, here! 'At last, dear Bess, I have gained father's consent to come to visit you, although he knows I will surely be eaten by bears or buffalos or captured by the Indians.'"

Bess laughed as she gave Mrs. West's hand a pressure of love and assurance. "She thinks, or her father, rather, thinks we are still among savages, doesn't he?" Then she continued to read: "You see, dearie, I am quite worn out with the care of sister—' Oh! haven't I told you about it all, little Mother? Well, I will when I've finished reading this; 'with the care of sister, who is much better now, better than she has been before in all these miserable years, although we have given up hope that she will ever be her dear old self again.'"

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Compassionate tears were swimming in Bess' eyes so that with difficulty she continued reading, "that the visit would not take place until early in the autumn."

"Really," said Bess, "I can scarcely wait so long. Berenice and I have been like sisters and were always roommates in school, before her sister's health demanded her continual presence at home. I have not even seen her since then."

She now carefully replaced the letter in its envelope and told Mrs. West briefly the tragedy of

the sister of her dearest friend, Berenice Morton. It seems that about five years before this time, Miss Grace Morton, who was attending school in Massachusetts, met a Harvard man with whom she fell deeply in love. He was also enamored with the young woman and became a frequent visitor. At last he persuaded Grace to consent to a secret marriage, so that each might continue in school and complete the year's work before announcing what they had done.

At first he was more devoted as a husband than as a lover, but when it became imperative to announce their secret marriage before the close of the school year, she sent him an urgent request to come to her and take her home to her parents. In vain she waited for him; days grew into weeks, and still he did not come. Driven to desperation at last, she went home to face her parents, to face the world, to bear her agony alone. The shock was so great that the frail mother could not bear it, and her death resulted a few weeks later. But the strong-hearted father and tender young sister opened their arms to the poor, frail, young woman, and with all their combined efforts sought to lessen her burden. Each day she watched for some word or sign from the man who had so cruelly deserted her, but as each day closed without the pain and longing being satisfied, she gradually sank deeper and deeper in despair. Her dear ones began to hope that with the advent of her child she might regain her health of mind, but when the little one came no flickering breath stirred its lips. In vain she opened her arms to receive her treasure, and when they remained empty her heart broke and her mind fled in search of the tiny wandering soul. During all of these years the brokenhearted father and sister watched in vain for some sign of recovery. Now Berenice had written that she was better! Could it be possible that at length their prayers would be answered?

"You see, in all our letters to each other, I never felt like asking Berenice more than she cared to write voluntarily; I do know, however, that she met the man once while visiting her sister at school shortly after the marriage."

When Bess had finished telling Mrs. West the history of the tragedy, the little mother's heart was so wrung with tears and pity that she could not speak, and abruptly entered the house.

"I wonder," said Mrs. West, after she had again found her voice, "what on earth could have prompted any man to do such a cowardly, dastardly act! I believe if I were placed in a similar position with Mr. Morton and should ever discover the scoundrel, I would—kill him!" she said, half to herself and half to the girl, who had followed her into the living-room, and who was now gazing with wide, astonished eyes at the excited woman. For the first time since Bess had come to the HW ranch had she seen the latent savagery aroused. How grand and imposing the woman looked, standing straight and rigid, her black eyes emitting flashes of fire! One hand was thrust into the white tresses, while the other, half upraised and clenched, seemed to grasp an imaginary weapon! She truly looked as if she meant what she said, and as if she could do what she meant. Presently she walked over to an open window, as if she needed the fresh air which gently swayed the curtains. When she had grown quite calm again she turned to Bess, awed at the woman's magnificent rage.

"My dear, I am glad you are here with me, and quite safe from those vultures who swoop down upon any woman as legitimate prey, simply for the gratification of a momentary passion. They do not hesitate to match their strength against the weak, nor to use every wile, hidden by suavity of manner and equivocal promises, to accomplish their purpose. I do not say all are like this, but the few are ever ready, waiting."

The girl's brown eyes filled with a strange light, as if they did not comprehend the subtle significance of the words, or perhaps saw for the first time the full significance of what, heretofore, had seemed like a faint, quavering intuition. Her personal experience with men had been so very limited, and withal so pleasant, that she had felt a sort of brotherly interest in those whom she knew. But somehow, now, there was creeping into her soul an indescribable timidity or fear, and for what she could scarcely define. Into her mind flashed remnants of incidents she had heard of brokenhearted girls, and the tragedy of her friend's sister stood out clear and ominous! With a start she recalled the day when she and Henry West stood near his sister Helen's grave, and the half incoherent words again came into her mind and assumed a new and terrible meaning. Yet, here stood the unsuspecting mother, now grown sweet and calm once more; surely, Bess' surmises must be wrong, for how could any mother have such a secret knowledge and still be able to smile—or even to live?

"No," Bess thought, "I must not even think such a thing of that dear, sweet, sleeping stranger."

At length Mrs. West came over to Bess, and folding her in her arms stroked the soft tresses as if she were her own daughter, still tiny, still sweet, still living!

"I fear that I have alarmed you, dear, but somehow those things always make me lose control of myself, and I feel like the wild creatures who are ever guarding their young against the onslaughts of danger."

Bess permitted herself to be held in the protecting embrace for several moments, then suddenly releasing herself, she sprang to the center of the room, and dramatically drawing herself up to her full height, throwing back her head and clenching her hands, she said, with emotion quavering in her voice: "Look—tell me—shall I always be able to protect myself? Look!"

Mrs. West was held entranced for a moment by the beautiful girl. Health glowed in her eye and reddened her lips and cheeks; strength of character was stamped in every feature; the strong will-power showed in the rigid jaw and tense nostrils.

"Yes—I know you will always have the courage, and God will give you strength."

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A JOURNEY UP FLATHEAD LAKE

The round-up took longer this spring than usual. There were more calves to be branded, and several days of unpropitious weather delayed the men. It was nearly three weeks since Henry West and his cowboys and the foreman had started to join the others on the range. Eagerly had Bess and Mrs. West watched for their return. News came, when the boys were over on Sullivan Creek, that everything was progressing nicely and that they would soon be through, unless had weather prevented.

For the first time since Bess came to the ranch she felt lonely. She did not care to read, and her music seemed tame and uninteresting. She sewed until Mrs. West compelled her to stop, for she could see that the girl was growing nervous over it. A dozen times a day she would walk to the gate and scan the road toward Polson, hoping that James might be coming. One day, noticing that Bess seemed to be unusually quiet, Mrs. West suggested that they go to Kalispell to visit some friends and do some shopping.

"It is a beautiful trip up the lake and Flathead River, and I am sure, dear, that you would enjoy it. We can go better while the men are away than later, and besides, I want to ask some friends here for the July celebration, which the Indians will have next month."

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"Oh, that would be fine!" said Bess, as she brightened up. "I am so anxious to see what kind of a Montana city Kalispell is. Could we go on the boat this noon, do you think?"

"We will hurry and try. It will not take me long to arrange matters. You put a few things into a suit case, while I give the Indian woman some instructions."

Shortly Bess was ready and hurried into the library to leave a note for James and Henry, should they return while she and Mrs. West were away.

They reached the boat in ample time, and were pleasantly engaged in conversation with several other passengers who were also going to Kalispell when Bess heard her name spoken. She did not turn her head and gave no outward sign, save a vivid wave of color. Again she heard the word "Bess," as if it came to her from a breeze off the lake, and she unconsciously summoned all her strength to resist turning about.

"Why, Bess!" said Mrs. White, who had walked down to the pier and onto the boat with them, "some one must be speaking of you, for see how your ears are burning," and she jokingly gave one of them a tiny pull. Just then Mrs. West caught sight of a tall, handsome man who still had a slight limp in his walk, as he stepped upon the gang plank.

"Good morning, ladies! It looks as if wishing you 'bon voyage' were opportune." Bess turned and acknowledged the greeting of Mr. Davis. His eyes sought hers with that strange fascination which possessed them the last time she had seen him, and held her gaze. She suddenly grew dumb and cold, and with a visible effort controlled herself. "Are you not well this morning, Miss Fletcher?" he asked, in a solicitous voice, as he stepped directly before her, holding out his hand.

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The breeze had blown his soft, brown hair about his face as he stood with his hat in his hand, and Bess, at last finding her tongue, answered: "I may not look well, Mr. Davis, but I certainly combed my hair, which is more than you have done."

"If mine is as becoming, blown into my eyes, as yours is this very moment, then I shall never comb it again."

He knew the girl was trying to cover her embarrassment, and he greatly relieved her when he turned to address his remarks to Mrs. West, from whom he learned that they were going to Kalispell for a few days.

"Yes, I also am going. I'm certainly most fortunate to have such pleasant company," Davis said.

When Bess heard this she longed to go back to the ranch, or go with Mrs. White. She could not analyze the strange feeling which came over her when near this man. While he fascinated her, still he repulsed her; while she did not fear him, still she felt ill at ease; while he interested her, still she fought against it.

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Everyone was aboard; the whistle shrieked its departing signal, and the plank was being pulled onto the boat when Bess hurriedly whispered to Mrs. West, who was alarmed and astonished at her really pale countenance, "Please—dearie—is it too late? May I go home to the ranch? I—really feel that I do not care to go—now—" Suspicious moisture gathered under the half-closed lids.

"If you are ill, dear, certainly we shall go home. Mr. Davis, I fear Bess is not well. Will you ask them to hold the boat while we go ashore?"

He sought the girl's pale face anxiously, and said: "Certainly, Mrs. West, and if I may I will assist you in taking her to the ranch."

"No—no," cried the girl hurriedly. "You—I am quite well and will go on," and she ran quickly up the stairway into the tiny cabin and flung herself upon a couch.

Mrs. West and Mr. Davis looked at each other for a moment, and then he said to her very seriously, "Mrs. West, you understand as well as I do, that the little girl is fighting—fighting against the dictates of her own heart. She will reciprocate sooner or later and love me as I do her. May I go to her and speak to her now?"

"Do not be so impatient, Mr. Davis. Remember she is still an unknowing child, one who is afraid of strangers. One may cherish a rose-bud, but let him attempt to open the petals before they are formed and grown into rose-leaves, he will discover only bruised and broken fragrance in his hand."

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"Your philosophy is true; but it is hard to curb one's impatience. I need her, Mrs. West, and since these days of pain which I spent in your home, the torture of being away from her is hard to

bear.”

She could not doubt the sincerity of his confession, as she listened to his low, impassioned words.

“Will you help me, Mrs. West? Tell me you will help me in teaching her to care for me!”

“All I can reply, Mr. Davis, is that my first concern is and shall be the happiness of Bess,” and Mrs. West left him with this rather unsatisfactory reply.

The boat was now quite a distance out into the blue waters of the lake, and already Wild Horse Island was in sight. The day was beautifully clear and warm, and only a slight breeze stirred the tiny waves. The boat swung to the left and began to go up the big arm of the Lake, which in itself is a large-sized body of water. At Dayton Creek they waited a few moments while more passengers were taken aboard, and Bess was drawn from her couch to watch some fine horses being taken on the boat.

“There is one that looks like Mauchacho,” she said to Mrs. West, whom she thought was standing beside her.

“Please, may I talk to you now? There are a number of interesting things which I would like to point out to you, if I may,” said a low voice quite near her.

Bess could not resist the little appeal which the tone gave without being rude, and with rather a forced smile she permitted Mr. Davis to stand beside her.

“Those horses are being taken to Kalispell for the Fourth of July celebration. They have some good races. Will you be there to see them, Miss—Bess?”

“Oh, no! We are only to be there for a day or two. Some of Mrs. West’s friends are coming to the *HW* Ranch during the July celebration which the Indians are to have. I shall save all my shouts for the races then, you know.”

“Presently we shall come to the famous ‘Picture Rocks,’” said Davis, during their conversation. Not a word had he said save some remark about the horses or the scenery, as they passed an interesting place.

As the boat neared the rocks it slowed so that the passengers might get a better view of the pictures. Here, on the flat surface of a cliff, which rises abruptly out of the water for a hundred feet, are quaint tracings made by the Indians, many, many, years ago. Horses, deer, moose and other animals are clearly drawn. Numerous lines near a deer record the successful hunt. Several buffalos were clearly outlined and other drawings which could not be defined. How it was possible that these records have stood the ravages of time is not known.

Bess was so interested that as the boat resumed its journey she asked Mr. Davis for more information concerning the strange and wonderful pictures. He led her to some comfortable chairs, and so interested did she become in the stories which he told that she almost forgot her chaperon.

“Really, I must go and find Mrs. West,” said Bess, as she arose from her seat.

“Wait a moment,” ventured Mr. Davis, as he touched her hand restrainingly. “First, I want to ask you, why did you resist me as I came onto the boat? You knew I was near; why did you not turn?”

Bess drew her hand from his tightening clasp, and pushing back the hair from her eyes, said: “Because, Mr. Davis, you thought you could make me turn and answer your call, and I wanted you to know that I could control my own will.”

“My dear—did you say you heard me call? Indeed, I had not uttered a sound! Some day—you will not try so hard to resist me, nor to make yourself believe that which you know is not true. May I see you, if only for a moment, while you are in Kalispell?” he continued, but before he could catch the reply the girl had run out to where she saw Mrs. West with some other ladies.

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CHAPTER XVI

"MON DESIR" AND THE BOX OF ROSES

"It does seem so good to be home again where it is cool and clean and cozy," said Bess, as she flung herself into an easy porch chair the morning of their return from the County-seat. She scanned with interest the tall, magnificent pines and firs which bordered the lake, as if she had been away from them months instead of days. A half-drawn glove was held in her clasp, as she lifted her hands to her eyes better to discern some horsemen whom she saw in the distance.

"Little Mother," she cried, "come quickly; I believe those are the boys returning!"

Mrs. West came hurrying out with a pair of field glasses, and soon the two were hastening out of the gate and down the road to see "the boys." For a moment they were out of sight behind the low hill, then suddenly, a single horseman came into sight, riding swiftly toward them. In a moment more Henry West sprang to the ground and held both his mother's hands as he pressed his tanned and roughened cheek against hers.

Turning to Bess with the gladness of return shining in his eyes and ringing from his voice, he said, "Oh, it seems so good to be home again! We had a long, hard siege of it this trip. But where are you going?" as he noticed she still wore her hat. [138]

Bess had suddenly burst into hysterical laughter. She could not reply. His mother explained that they had just returned from Kalispell and that she was glad they were at home when he arrived. Just then James Fletcher with several of the cowboys came riding up.

"Well, little sister, are you so glad to see us that you can't control your laughing?" said James, jumping from his horse and giving Bess such a hearty squeeze that she gasped for breath.

"Really, Henry, if you could see how funny you look with that—that little goatee, I guess you call it!"

Henry gave the whiskers a stroke or two, and replied in a joking manner entirely foreign to himself, "You see, 'noblesse oblige'. I was chosen foreman of the round-up, and so grew this to give me dignity."

"Yes, Henry could not have carried on the round-up had not the boys been awed by the whiskers," added James, looking at Henry, and they both laughed as numerous jokes recurred to them.

"To say the least, they are awful, don't you think so, little Mother? Please boys, go hurry and shave and look like yourselves again."

The long, delightful afternoon was spent in lounging in the hammock or resting in the quiet, cool rooms. Bess sang for the boys and they listened, as if they had been isolated for months. Presently James fell asleep, and Henry moved nearer to the piano where he could watch the girl's face as she sang. Song after song fell in soft cadences from her lips and held the man entranced. How dear she looked in the simple white dress, with some wild rose-buds in the knot of hair at her neck. Tiny, stray locks half hid her eyes and made them a soft, deep brown. Now she began the low, indecisive minor of Nevins' '*Mon Desir*,' and as her rich, melodious voice framed the words, an involuntary sigh escaped the man who stood so near her. Stretching out his hand he placed it abruptly over hers on the piano, and with a trembling voice and eyes brilliant with emotion asked Bess to cease. [139]

"Why, Henry—your favorite song," said Bess, astonished.

"Not today—I can't—hear—it—today." He turned abruptly and quitted the room.

James stirred and stretched his arms with a yawn, saying, "Didn't I just hear you sing 'My Desire', sister? Go on, finish it!"

But Bess, rising from the seat, closed the music, gently and tenderly, as if she were concealing some sacred thing.

"Not today; I could not sing it again—today." Going through the open door she sought the splashing spring near the house, where she sat dreaming and wondering—wondering at the strange moods of Henry West. The shadows of the trees were lengthening perceptibly, and a tiny chill in the air warned her that it must be nearly dinner time. She stooped to bathe her face in the clear, cold stream, where it flowed through the hewn trough, and at once felt refreshed, bright and alert. By the time she reached the house she was unconsciously singing, and as the words—"Give me my desire" arose to her lips she felt rather than heard a deep sigh which came from behind the swaying curtains of the living-room. As she entered through the open door, she saw Henry West, reclining in a large chair, his hands clasped together above his head, in a restful attitude. All traces of the round-up were gone, save the deep brown of the sunburn on his face, which made him look almost as dark as a full blooded Indian, and contrasted strangely with the soft, white, silk shirt. [140]

As Bess came near with a sweet smile lighting up her face, she asked, half coaxingly, "I wonder if you and James are too tired, or have ridden too much during the past three weeks, to go with me for a ride after dinner? We can go after the mail, and then cross on the ferry and ride over to the falls. They must be magnificent now that the water is so high. I could hear them roar as we came through Polson this morning. Mauchacho has not had his saddle on for days."

She had not noticed until now how really tired and worn out the man looked. Three weeks of constant riding is a hard task, even for those who, one might say, live in the saddle. To have charge of the round-up; to manage successfully and skilfully the driving and separating of thousands of cattle and the correct branding of the calves; to see that each man performs his especial duty and his share and is not behind some protecting hill sitting on the ground, digging his spurs into the ground, watching his horse eat grass while the other "boys" are driving the cattle to the branding corrals; to do all these and many more duties dependent upon him, completely used up all of West's reserve force. [141]

"There—there—never mind—don't say 'yes'; really, I am selfish to forget how tired you both must be, indeed," continued Bess anxiously, as West, with effort, lowered his arms and drew himself together. She took one of the rose-buds from her hair and carelessly fastened it in a button-hole of his shirt. The faint perfume arose to his nostrils, and for a moment made him quiver, as if he were cold. He gripped the arms of the chair, that his hands might not, against his will, clasp the girl and draw her down to him and hold her there forever. "Give me my desire, and then let me die," the words of the sad, tragic song leaped to his mind.

"Really, Bess," he explained, "James is quite worn out. He stood the round-up splendidly, and although I tried to give him easy shifts he insisted upon doing his share. I will go with you for a ride, and am not tired."

"No, Henry, we will just stay at home, and you and James shall tell me all about the experiences of the past few weeks."

As they went into the dining-room a large box was at Bess' place at the table. Her face and neck dyed crimson as she caught sight of it, for well she knew what it contained and who was the sender. She would have placed it aside, but James and Mrs. West coaxingly demanded to see the contents. Her trembling fingers could scarcely untie the cord. Henry, who sat beside her, offered his assistance, and as she removed the cover and green, waxen paper and lifted the large, white roses to her face, a card fell at Henry's plate.

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"Oh! a card too! Let's see, Henry, who it is that sent the conservatory," cried James, who never missed an opportunity to tease his sister. But Henry, without even glancing at the card, placed it among the flowers which Bess held in her arms. Her first impulse was to flee, but instead, she stood up straight and firm, and with an impulsive gesture gave the card to Mrs. West. "Read, Mother," demanded the girl, "and tell who sent these and many others to us," with especial emphasis on the last word.

"This time, dearie, I fear we are not in partnership. James, you know who sent the roses; the card reads, 'To my sweetheart,'" said Mrs. West softly, as she again replaced the card.

"I congratulate you Miss—Bess," remarked Henry, his face suddenly grown pale.

"So do I, Sister; Davis is a bully good fellow, I think, and I'm sure he'd make a great brother," added James before the girl could speak the words of expostulation which rushed to her lips.

She crushed the roses to her breast and a shower of white petals fell to the floor. One fluttered against West's hand, and he started as if a poisonous insect stung him.

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Mrs. West quickly saw the girl's deep confusion and came to her aid, remarking that the two were rather hasty in their congratulations, which, as yet, were most inopportune.

As Bess seated herself, she let the roses slide unheeded from her lap to the floor. Henry West stooped, lifted the now bruised and broken blossoms, and going into the living-room placed them upon the folded copy of *Mon Desir*, as gently and as reverently as if they were laid upon the silent breast of a lost and dead love.

BESS FLETCHER'S NEW GUN, AND ITS FIRST VICTIM

West was standing near a tall pine tree, fastening a small square of white paper against it with a pin. James stood near, holding a 38 Smith and Wesson in his hands. Bess stood back some fifteen yards with a 22-caliber repeating rifle rested across her left arm.

"She said she did, Henry," said James as he lifted his eye-brows in a smile of incredulity.

"Yes, I did yesterday—hit the mark, not only three but four times, if you please."

"Well, the test is at hand. You have to 'show us' Sister, before we can 'deliver the goods.'"

Twice had the pin dropped from West's fingers, but the third attempt had securely fastened the target in place.

"Now, then, Bess, three holes within an inch apart, and only three shots," said West, as he stepped aside. James ran and concealed himself behind a tree, as if he really feared being shot.

For a moment Bess stood still, lifted the gun, examined it to see that the cartridges were all right, adjusted the sights correctly, and then with a firm, decisive movement placed the weapon against her shoulder. A sharp report and one mark was recorded; the click of the lever and another shot, and then the third. She stood with the butt of the gun resting on her foot, as she watched eagerly as both boys hurried forward to view the record. Both were pointing and measuring and talking. She heard James say "not quite" and West replied "near enough."

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"If it is not correct, I have lost," said Bess, as she started towards the tree. She found two holes together and the third a little more than one inch to the left.

"Take one more shot, Bess; I know you can hit it," said West, as he assured himself that the gun was loaded and handed it back to the girl. Bess resumed her position, and the next shot cut directly between the other two, making one large mark on the paper.

"Good," cried both the boys at once, and they came laughingly forward to present her the pretty new weapon. James cleared his throat preparatory to making a presentation speech, and as the words "In behalf of" were said, Bess threw her arms about his neck and then placed both her hands over his mouth.

"Thanks, Henry, it is a perfect beauty," said Bess, as she accepted the gun. As she read engraved on one side of the handle, her name, "Bess Fletcher" and on the other, *HW* brand, she extended her hand and happy tears filled her eyes.

Both men demanded that she give the pistol a trial, and both were really astonished to see how quickly she used it and how accurate were her aim and judgment of distance.

"See, I have the pocket in my skirt all ready for it," and the gun slid into the ingenious opening near the waist, leaving only the handle inconspicuously exposed. "You see, I was determined to win, although I really cannot see what possible use it can ever be to me. I could not bear to shoot a bird, and as far as defense, what can harm me, Henry?"

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"I have carried a gun here on the range always," remarked West, as he drew one from his holster, "and I have never used it but once, and that was to shoot a rattlesnake which put up a fight. See, here are the rattles,—eleven and the button." Taking off his hat he showed the interested pair where he wore it on his hat-band. "Another time I had it drawn and cocked, but,"—he paused; "but—I replaced it." Bess saw him bite his lip as if the memory of the incident, even, filled him with hate. Neither asked what the occasion was, but as he carefully looked at the weapon his face told them that he might use it again. He thrust it back into its leathern receptacle, giving the holster a firm pat, as if to assure himself the gun was secure—and ready.

Bess had remounted her horse and gone back to the house to show the prize to Mrs. West. As she left them, James turned to West, who was re-adjusting one of his stirrups before remounting. The three had come a short distance from the house for the shooting exhibition, and now James and West were going on to gather up some running horses which he wished to get in shape for the races to be held within the next few days.

"Henry," began James, as he walked to the man standing near Eagle, "why can't you tell me what troubles you? You are not like your old self, not one bit. I have seen it ever since my return, and of late your mood is becoming worse. Is it anything which I could help—if it is, tell me, and you know I'll do anything under God's sun to help you, old boy."

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He placed a friendly arm about the dark, silent man's shoulder, and with a gentle pat or two rested it there. He noted the sudden dilation of the wide nostrils, heard the teeth as they ground together and caught a hopeful expression in the dark, deep eyes as they were lifted to his face for a moment.

As if to arouse the man from a dream, James gave his broad shoulder another pat, at which West straightened himself and grasped James' hand in his, in a strong grip.

"You, Jim, are and have been my truest, best friend. Ever since that first night at Harvard have you been more to me than a brother. My trouble is something which even God could not help. Part of it is past, part is still to come. The past cannot be forgotten, the future is inevitable,—I must face it and—alone. I could not tell you without causing you unnecessary pain, and believe me, I should ask your help, if you could help me. Never mind my moods. I try hard enough to brace up before your sister and my mother, but I know that sometimes I fail miserably. Give me your hand again, Jim, and know—that when I can or must tell you, nothing shall prevent my seeking you and your confidence."

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He put his foot in the stirrup and swung with easy grace into his saddle. James mounted and rode beside him, trying in vain to think of something to say which might relieve the awkward silence. Either West did not see another rider approaching them, or else he purposely reined Eagle from the hard, beaten road, across the prairie. In response to a signal from the horseman, James called to West. "Henry, Davis is signaling to us. Come back and see what he wants."

Already Fletcher had started back and was talking with Davis when West came up slowly. He touched his hat as the Indian Agent looked up at him, and noting that the conversation did not concern him he let Eagle nibble at the grass at some little distance, while he waited for James.

"Thanks, Fletcher; I shall do as you suggest," came to West's ears, as he looked up to see James returning and Davis going on—he knew to his home to see the one whom he himself loved more than all the world.

"Do you know, Henry," said James, "I think Davis is a fine man. He just asked my consent to visit my sister and try to win her for his wife. I told him that as far as I was concerned, he might do so, but that Bess could and would please herself. In fact, I told him that she did not seem to care for anyone's addresses."

West could not reply, his heart and lips seemed suddenly frozen. If he only could warn this brother against that man! Yet, how could he without revealing the deep secret of his heart? Unless he stated facts Fletcher might think it was some personal affair which prompted his criticism of Davis. And yet, to let Bess fall directly into the talons of a vulture without even lifting his voice to defend her, seemed the height of cowardice. He must have time to think—to think.

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Mauchacho, with his saddle on, was standing at the gate waiting for his mistress to resume her ride. He gave a long neigh of welcome as Mr. Davis came riding up. Bess ran to the door to see what Mauchacho wanted, just as Mr. Davis leaped to the ground and started through the gate. With a little ejaculation of surprise she stepped down toward him. She knew that if she could have escaped without being seen, she would not now be shaking hands with this man.

"Mr. Fletcher told me I should find you here, and he assured me that you would be glad to see me," he said. He did not look directly at her as he exaggerated the truth. "Are you not glad, little girl?"

Since the evening when the white roses had come and the card had been read to the others, Bess had not felt so confused nor embarrassed when Davis had been spoken of. Now that James and Henry and Mrs. West knew that Davis cared for her and that he came purposely to see her, she tried to overcome her aversion for the man. While he was near her he exerted an influence which, strive as she would, she could not resist. His manner was charming, his conversation interesting, and there was about him that subtle, indescribable something which made him well-nigh irresistible. Bess was even surprised at herself as she became more and more interested in the man. And yet when he was gone she always felt relieved and happier, as if she were freed from some undue constraint. She never longed for him to come again and always felt a surprise when he came, and an insane desire to run away to hide. As she did not reply to his question, he asked again, "Is my sweetheart glad to see me?"

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"Really, Mr. Davis, your conjecture is rather bold! Did I ever say I was anyone's sweetheart?"

"But you are, you are mine, and just now your brother congratulated me."

"Well, indeed," said Bess, haughtily; "is a girl compelled to assume the role, *nolens volens*?" Her brown eyes snapped defiance at the man standing a few steps below her.

"There, Bess, no one will compel you to do anything against your own will," quickly corrected Mr. Davis, for he did not wish his too slow progress to be retarded by any whim or imagined compulsion. He had had experience enough to know that with women, coaxing accomplishes more than commands.

"Come, I came to take you for a ride. I see you were intending to go anyway," he said tactfully. Half reluctantly she permitted him to lead her to the gate and assist her in mounting. Immediately, as she felt her horse under her, her usual happy spirit returned and in a short time she was laughing and merry as could be. The warm breeze blew her white veil about her face and tossed her hair about in sweet confusion. What a picture they made as their horses moved swiftly along in rhythmic motion! He sat his horse well and rode without any awkwardness, now that his ankle was strong once more. It seemed to him that he had never seen such perfect grace before, as he saw how beautifully the girl rode her splendid horse.

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"If it were not so hot down across the flat," said Bess, "I would show you that Mauchacho can go twice as fast as that cayuse you are riding," and the twinkle in her eye was inconsistent with her assumed, contemptuous smile.

"This is the first ride we have had together for so long that I could not bear to hurry it," replied Davis, as he placed a restraining hand on Mauchacho's bridle.

"It seems to be growing dreadfully hot! Go to the right beyond those rocks and we shall find shade and a spring," said the girl, as she noticed tiny beads of sweat trickling down the horses' necks.

Suddenly, Mauchacho, who was leading, gave a quick snort and sprang sidewise into the air and landed several feet to the side of the trail, nearly throwing Bess from the saddle. Astonished at the unusual performance of her horse, she glanced quickly about to discern the cause of this fear. The next instant she snatched the 38 Smith and Wesson from her skirt and a sharp crack sounded as the shot created a squirming, writhing mass in the trail only a few feet in front of her. Davis' horse had also become frightened at the coiled rattler and was now almost uncontrollable. Bess sprang from Mauchacho, who had the sense to know that the snake was now harmless, firing another shot into the quivering streaks of drab and it lay still.

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"Well, upon my word, Miss Fletcher, I take off my hat to you!" said Davis, as he succeeded in quieting his horse. "Who taught you to be such a 'crack shot' and where did you get that pretty gun? Where did you conceal it, may I ask?"

"Come, cut the rattles off for me and put them in my hat-band, Mr. Davis! This is the first thing I've shot with my pistol which Henry West gave me only today as a present, because I had

learned to shoot so well under his directions," answered the excited girl.

"Eleven rattles and a button! Just like his!" She could not resist a tiny shudder of aversion as she placed the sombrero with its new decoration upon her head. Yet she knew that Henry West's face would light up with gratification when he saw her trophy.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAUCHACHO WINS THE RACE

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"Come, folks, hurry, hurry! I can hear the Indians' drums already!" cried Bess, as she ran through the hall and downstairs.

Several guests who had come from Kalispell the day before to see the Indian celebration were with Mrs. West in the living-room.

James Fletcher and Henry West, together with the other gentlemen of the party, were waiting at the gate with several extra saddle horses. Mrs. West expected to drive and call for Mrs. White on the way through Polson. The site selected for the various races and Indian dances was on a level stretch of county South and East from Polson. As the merry party mounted their horses and started they soon came in sight of the large crowd which had already congregated. The incessant muffled sound of the tom-toms or the loud cry of an Indian, came to their ears as they urged the horses so that they might not miss any of the performances.

The first sight which attracted them was a number of squaws and bucks who were seated on either side of a log rapping upon it with sticks. The squaws sang in weird monotonous in time with their sounding sticks; and occasionally a buck joined them for a few notes as if to give the song a greater impetus. With a swift motion and a sharp cry one of the bucks pointed with his stick at another Indian who sat opposite him only further down the line. Instantly the music (if indeed it could be called music) ceased, and each one in this gambling game looked expectantly to see if the Indian designated held in his hand the piece of bone which had been passed deftly, and with no little sleight of hand, from one to another. A look of sheer disappointment came into his face, however, and he placed a forfeit with the opposing side. Again the song and drumming were resumed more vigorously than before, the result this time was that one of the bucks arose, removed his blanket and stalked away, amid calls and words of derision and laughter from the others.

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West suggested that the party move on and seek some shady place where they might rest and view the dances. They had not long to wait, for presently they saw marching towards them a long file of brilliantly dressed Indians, squaws, papooses and larger children. The squaws were gorgeous in flaming reds and yellows, in purple velvet or red satin, in greens and even one in pink, with floating ribbons and flashing beads and ornaments. They sang in high, shrill tones to the accompaniment of the tom-tom, which was carried by four stalwart bucks beating vigorously and marching ahead.

The Indians in the procession now began forming a circle with the squaws and the drummers in the center where they squatted upon the ground. Now the tom-toms assumed a different *tempo*, the nasal, piercing singing of the squaws began anew, and simultaneously, at a certain note in the music, all the Indians began the dance. To some, it looked like a confused mass of bending, jumping, moving beings, each of whom seemed bent upon going through the greatest contortions. But when one observed closely it was seen that at a certain beat of the drum the heels came to the ground, then the toes or the whole foot. Their bodies moved forward and backward in graceful savagery. See their gorgeous blankets sway! How the festoons of feathers and fixings wave with each movement of their supple bodies; watch the interested expression on the faces! See that tall, slender buck with a whirl of eagle feathers hanging down his back; hear the bells about his ankles as they jingle in perfect rhythm to the song and drum! Now he has bent forward till the feathers in his hair sweep the dust! Backward he sways and his knees fairly touch his face! See his eyes gleam, how eager is his whole face! How his hands lift high the war implement with its decoration of eagle feathers!

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But hark, the music ceases, and at one shrill note the dancers stop. Already each brow is dripping with beads of sweat. Now one Indian, straight, strong, lithe of limb, steps alone upon the trodden circle. The sun makes his almost nude body gleam like burnished copper and dazzles the beads upon his belt and bracelets. A large war bonnet of weasel skins and eagle feathers, with two curved buffalo horns, covers his head and falls down his back till it nearly touches the ground. Bells tinkle upon his moccasins and at his wrists. As he steps out from among the others, cries of approval are heard upon all sides, and Bess knows that he must be some extraordinary Indian. Turning to West she asked who the Indian was, who was about to dance, and what the dance was to be.

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"He is Two Feathers, and is noted for his wonderful dancing. This is to be the snake dance, I think," replied Henry West, as he moved Mauchacho to a better position for the benefit of Bess. Glancing about to see that his guests also had a good view, he rode Eagle over to the carriage where his mother and several other ladies were seated. Assuring himself that they were comfortable and could see the sport, he started to return to Bess' side when he saw to his chagrin that Mr. Davis, the Indian Agent, had just assumed that position. The girl greeted Mr. Davis, and was introducing him to her companions, when she noticed West standing aloof from the others. In response to a gesture from her he came quickly to her side. "Please stay here, Henry; I want you to tell me about the dances."

Reluctant though he was to be near Davis and to be compelled to speak with him, he did as she requested. Dismounting, he leaned an arm across the saddle, and only occasionally lifted his face to Bess' in response to her questions during the dance.

But she was now all absorbed in the graceful undulations of the dancer. See how he stretches out his neck and writhes his body like a huge reptile, curving now to the right, till his face nearly touches his shoulder, and swiftly moving forward and again to the left, in long, gliding vibrations! Some of his manoeuvres were so suggestive of a living snake, that Bess could feel her flesh creep. When the music increased, the singing of the squaws shrieked higher and shriller, the

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dancer thrust forth his head and hissed. She impulsively threw up her hands which came in unexpected contact with the decoration on her sombrero. She gave a little, nervous scream as she felt the rattles quiver under her touch. West glanced quickly at her and asked anxiously if she were ill. Before she could reply, however, Davis said, "Really Bess, this exhibition of savagery is rather hard on your nerves. Let me take you away!"

He looked with insolent eyes at Henry West who met the gaze without a tremor of the eyelashes.

"It is not that which made me act so silly. I unconsciously touched these things on my hat and they always send the shivers through me. I could not bear them at all, except that they are my first trophy."

"Are you coming with me?" asked Davis, as he began to turn his horse's head.

"Oh, no; for see, all the others are now joining Two Feathers in the snake ceremony! See! even those small boys are dancing like old warriors!"

Forward and backward swayed the circle of dancers, undulating in and out past each other; bending their bodies low towards the ground with a creeping movement until they seemed like a huge, squirming mass of bright colored and winged reptiles. In measured tread they danced, they swayed, they moved, in perfect time to the singing of the squaws and the hollow sounding drum. Their heels struck the earth with such unison that one could feel the vibrations. Would they never tire?

West asked to be excused, as he wished to prepare his horses for the relay race which was to begin later. The fact was, he felt himself growing hot and angry in Davis' presence and feared that something might occur to make him lose his self-control. Once during the conversation Davis had asked Henry West why he had not joined in the dance. Bess did not see the smiling sneer as he asked the question, and consequently thought it was only meant for a joke.

"Fancy Henry dancing with the Indians and with a blanket on," laughed Bess, as she patted him on the shoulder and looked at him with saucy, smiling eyes from under her fluffy hair. She could not know that the malicious remark of Davis cut West like a knife, and did not understand that the purport of the words was—"why do you not go where you belong instead of mingling with white people." For a brief moment West looked at Davis, who quickly turned his face; then he said carelessly and indifferently, "I know all those dances, Miss Bess, and perhaps some day you may be applauding me instead of Two Feathers."

As he lifted his broad-brimmed hat to her and the others in the party, he sprang to the saddle with one easy swing of his leg, reined Eagle abruptly about and started swiftly away. Davis looked at Bess as she watched Henry West, feeling no little chagrin at her look. She seemed to lose interest in the dances now that he was gone, and though Davis tried to point out the especial features of the Sun dance and Medicine dance, she watched them half-interestedly.

"Come—let us see if the others have not had quite enough by this time," said Bess, after the Indians had given two more long, fantastic dances.

As the horses were brought out for the relay race, and the party moved to be nearer the track Bess again became filled with excitement. James had explained to her that this race was ten miles, or around the half-mile track twenty times; there were three entries and each rider could have three horses. They were to change horses, re-saddle and remount unassisted, except that some one could help in holding the horses after each mile. The rider completing in the quickest time, of course, won the prize. Bess had only eyes for Henry West as he led his horses down the track to the starting point. One horse was already saddled, and walking by West's side was the Indian who was to ride his horses.

Presently the other men with their horses and riders were ready. The three Indians mounted; the crowd was waved back out of the way; everyone grew expectant and interested. At the crack of a pistol the horses were off like a flash amid clouds of dust. Evidently they were not new at this kind of racing and were eager for the sport. As they sped around the track they were almost abreast, and as the mile was nearly run West's horse was a length behind the other two. As they neared the wire where each horse was being held ready to receive its saddle and respective rider, each slackened his pace and now simultaneously the three riders slid from their horses, quickly unbuckled the saddles, flung them upon the waiting horses, and with quick and sure fingers girted them, remounted and were off! Swift Arrow, the Indian riding for West, had changed his saddle so quickly that his horse was ready to start when the others were. This second horse kept pace with the others and toward the end of the half mile was gaining slightly. One of the other horses suddenly bolted off the track, and by the time the rider had him under control he was at least a quarter behind. Again at the change Swift Arrow's deft fingers had adjusted the saddle, remounted and was off before the second Indian had fairly gained his feet. On and on they rode, first one gaining, then the other ahead according to the fleetness of the horses. How the crowd cheered as the favorite horse came in ahead! How they shouted as Louie pounded his heels into the horse's sides in vain! See, here he comes at last, a half lap behind the other two, with his shirt flopping in the wind and one of his leggings hanging down over the stirrup. As he passes the man who holds his horses the legging is caught and jerked free. Again the others have remounted and gone, as Louie comes steaming up, half falling as the other loosened legging dangles at his feet. His long braids have become untied, and now the black, straight hair with its single feather is standing straight out with the breeze. Nothing daunted, with his fleeing companions already nearly a mile ahead, he bends low over his horse and rides as only an Indian can. Seven miles are run! Swift Arrow still leading! The eighth begun! Look! What attracts West, as he runs hurriedly across the track? His keen eye caught a glimpse of the saddle as Swift Arrow sped past! See, now, it is surely loose! Will he be able to hold until the end of the mile? Here he comes dashing forward! Already he seems to be beginning to dismount! Look. The horse suddenly turns, and the loosened saddle with the rider are flung to the ground almost at West's feet! The frightened horse plunges and is gone. Two men quickly draw the

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stunned Indian to one side and shouts of "West! West!" are heard coming from the excited crowd.

"Oh! Will he be able to finish the race," cried Bess, excitedly to James, who stood near Mauchacho. [162]

"His other two horses cannot stand it to run alternately now, surely," replied her brother, "and already both the others are ahead! See, here comes Nedreau's horse on the finish of the eighth, and West has still the last half of the eighth to go. He might as well give up."

West had assured himself that Swift Arrow was not seriously injured, and then lifting his sombrero to the calling crowd, snatched the saddle from the ground, threw it upon the resisting horse, fastened it, leaped upon the horse and was off! His head fairly touched the horse's neck as he bent over, and in a steady voice urged the animal into even greater speed! Nedreau's rider was already mounted and off as West came up the half-mile with Louie not far behind. He re-saddled to begin the ninth mile, but the tired, restive horse did not gain a foot over the others. Bess could not sit still in her saddle. "That is not fair," she cried, "for they have three horses and Henry only two!" She saw with trepidation that his horse was falling far behind, and knew that he could not go much farther.

Before any of her companions was aware of her purpose, Bess gave Mauchacho a quick cut with the quirt and flew across the intervening space to the man holding West's horse ready for the remount. Bess sprang to the ground, unfastened and jerked off the saddle and thrust the reins into the man's hands just as West came up. He had seen the girl as he neared the wire, and quickly divined her purpose. She sprang back out of the way and cried, "Take Mauchacho, take my Bird! Win the race for me!" [163]

At first the crowd could not see what was going on, and when the girl's purpose dawned upon them they cheered and shouted wildly. Cries of "Ride," "Go win," "Mount the Bird," came to the breed's ears, and he threw his saddle upon the anxious, eager animal and was off.

See how easily he starts; he even leans over to pat the horse's neck; he does not seem to care nor to notice that Nedreau's Indian is almost a half ahead! Now he is bending low over the saddle till man and horse seem one; neither hear the cries and shouts as they begin the last half of the race. On Mauchacho speeds—swiftly, steadily; nearer, nearer, nearer the other horse! Almost to the other's tail! A leap and they are even! A stretch, and his nose is ahead! One supreme effort and daylight is between the two horses, just as they pass under the wire amid frantic cries, tossing hats and waving handkerchiefs. In a moment the cheers were changed to laughter as poor Louie came trotting under the wire, dressed only in his feather, so strenuous had been his exertions.

Bess stood alone near the track, her hands clasped together. Not even a cry escaped her lips as she saw, not West, but Mauchacho win the race.

As soon as West could slow the horse and bring him back before the judges, he heard the starter announce that "West had won the race." West sprang to the ground, gave the reins to a man standing near, and entered the judges' stand. [164]

"I did not win this race, gentlemen; I had no right to take a fresh horse; the money goes to Nedreau and Louie," and before they could offer any protest he had gone. As he led Mauchacho over to the waiting and now smiling mistress, West paused a moment as he heard the announcement of the correction of the race, and felt relieved as he saw the two Indians receive the prize.

Bess flung her arms about Mauchacho's neck and happy tears filled her eyes. "You beauty! I had no idea that you could go so like a bird! Oh, you dear!" and she patted his neck and kissed his nose just as the men threw a blanket over him and led him away to be cooled off.

Henry West was just about to take Bess back to her companions, when he turned and directly faced Dave Davis.

"Come, Bess—permit me to take you away from here. What prompted you to do such a strange thing? Besides, the race was unfair and West did not win," he said, as he glanced with lowering eyes at the man by her side.

"It may not have been fair, Mr. Davis, but it was a mighty fine race! I will go back to Mrs. West with Henry, thank you," and she gave him a queer smile as she left him, which he did not quite understand. [165]

"Please, little Mother—now, James, don't both of you look so. I just had to have Henry win that race, even though it took Mauchacho and me both to help him do it!"

"Well, sister, we can't truthfully call you a tenderfoot any longer."

"How long have you been in the West, Miss Fletcher?" asked one of the company, as he looked at the happy, satisfied expression on the girl's face. Bess turned her full, brown eyes to the man's face, but for the moment she did not speak. Unconsciously she had slid her fingers into Henry West's brown hand as he stood near to her, but did not heed its tremor nor faint pressure. Then her eyes sought the deep, blue hills with the soft masses of white, fleecy clouds crowning their crests and the verdant pines caressing their feet.

"How long! Oh, how long? When was I not here? Here my heart has been since God's divine touch first made those hills! Here my soul shall be when they have passed away!" replied the girl, her head raised toward the deepening shadows on the crests.

Then came the evening with its cool and quiet; with its rest and peace; with its quivering stars and pale radiance of the moon.

THE STRENGTH OF A BEADED BELT

It was a beautiful morning toward the end of August when Bess Fletcher donned her new brown riding skirt, which her deft fingers had just completed, and came out to her waiting horse. The weather during the few previous weeks had been unusually hot and dry, so that riding had been anything but pleasant. James and Henry had been busy with the hay crop, and Mrs. West and Bess had spent the time with their sewing and reading. During the night it rained, a gentle, copious rain—the first in weeks. Everything was refreshed, and everyone's spirits were aroused from enervation and lethargy. The girl sniffed the fresh, scented air as she drew on her riding gloves. How the perfume from the refreshed pines and firs came floating across from the hills! The great stacks of new hay emitted an intoxicating odor, and busy bees buzzed about, drunk with sweetness.

Mrs. West had come to the gate to make a request just as Bess placed her foot into the stirrup and was adjusting her divided skirt as she seated herself in the saddle. Her well-groomed horse shone like satin, and his dainty foot persistently pawed the damp earth, impatient for a run after his long confinement and rest. Bess leaned over and was patting the arched neck and trying to quiet him with soft words as she gathered from Mrs. West the several errands to be done. [167]

"And then, little Mother, after I have seen Mrs. White for you, do you mind if I cross on the ferry and ride over toward Paul Trahan's ranch to meet James and Henry on their return?"

"Are you quite sure, dear, that you can find the place? It is at least ten miles from the ferry," replied Mrs. West, and in her voice rang a solicitous tone.

"Oh, yes! You need not feel alarmed. I am sure I could find the ranch, but most likely I'll meet the boys long before I reach it," assured Bess, as she touched Mauchacho with the quirt and then threw a dainty kiss to the white-haired woman whose face still wore an anxious look.

A sharp pang clutched at the gentle woman's heart as she watched the rider melting into the distance. She had scarcely thought before that sooner or later Bess might be so melting out of her life—that life of which she had grown to be such an integral part. How unconsciously had her love grown day by day! How dependent had she become upon the girl's judgment and suggestions! And yet, the day was surely inevitable whose declining rays would not linger on a sweet, girlish face near the window, but rather pierce a woman's heart with loneliness and pain.

"But then," she thought, "it will be a long time yet before Mr. Davis will take her away and leave my arms empty once more, and doubly lone." [168]

Bess stood at her horse's head patting his soft, sleek nose as the Indian rowed them across the Pend d'Oreille on the crude ferry boat. The only other passengers were a round-faced, fat squaw and two struggling papooses. At first Bess was oblivious to everything about her, when suddenly she was attracted by a shrill cry and turned just in time to jump to the edge and snatch a wet, wriggling bunch of humanity out of the water. Such a jargon of words as were meted out to the would-be voyager for his venturesomeness!

Bess quickly fastened Mauchacho's bridle about the railing and soon had the sobbing, bedraggled victim snuggled in her arms. What did it matter to her if his skin was red or his hair matted! Was he not a baby in distress? The squaw looked with interest and wonder at the comforter; and finally when the howlings had ceased and only nervous little sobs came forth convulsively, she touched Bess on the arm and motioned that she would take the child. It did the girl's heart good to see him snuggle down under the folds of the bright blanket like a little wet chicken seeking the warmth and comfort of its mother's wing.

Again, just as the nose of the ferry was scraping on the pebbles at the landing, the squaw touched Bess upon the arm. She could not resist the silent appeal in the woman's eyes as she held up for Bess' acceptance a beautifully beaded belt. At first Bess quietly and smilingly pushed aside the proffered gift, but the look of disappointment given her caused her to relent, and then she fastened it securely around her own trim waist. [169]

"Thank you, very much; it shall always remind me of you and the baby who nearly went down the stream."

"You love him papoose? You hold Injun baby? You no care?" asked the woman, as she saw with gratified eyes her treasure worn by the white girl.

"I do not care if he is a papoose—he is one of God's children," Bess answered, and the woman understood.

The little incident was soon quite out of the girl's mind, and only recurred as she touched the belt with her fingers or felt its dangling ends beat regularly against her side as Mauchacho galloped across the range. She had never before been in this direction, and all the hills and rocks held a new interest for her. Several times she checked her horse and slid quickly from her saddle to inspect some odd-looking stones, or to pluck some strange, new flower. Was not this tour of exploration fine! Perhaps she might discover something never seen nor heard of before! It surely seemed as if no one had ever set foot here, and as if she had come alone into an undiscovered and unexplored land. What fun to feel such utter isolation and possession! Riotous thoughts of adventure and daring and possible danger surged through the girl's mind as her horse carried her on and further on into new places and over strange paths. [170]

With a start she came out of her reverie, and straightening up in the saddle began to wonder at the time of day. Unheeded miles had passed under Mauchacho's hoofs, and the slanting sun told her that the hour was late.

"Really, the boys ought to be coming soon. I am sure—that is, I feel almost certain this is the right place. Still, it seems so far back to the last ranch! Oh, well, I'll just let Mauchacho nibble, and I'll take a look around that bunch of thorn-apple shrubs."

She began to sing softly and confidently as she loosened the cinch and pulled the saddle and blanket off the horse's wet back. He shook himself with a grunt of satisfaction and began at once to seek out the most tender grasses.

"Be a good boy till I come back, won't you?" Bess gave him a sounding slap on his wet shoulder that caused him to lift his tail with a "please-don't-bother-me" flirt.

The sun was fervent and Bess walked hurriedly on to reach the shade of the thorns. She reached up and plucked some of the plump, ripe, red thorn-apples, and enjoyed munching them as she wandered idly on. Far ahead of her she discerned, by shading her eyes with her hand, a large herd of cattle. At first she could not tell if they were being driven or whether they were simply eating. As they created no clouds of dust nor seemed to be coming any nearer she decided it could not be the cattle she expected to meet being driven by her brother and Henry. Just then there flashed across her mind an almost forgotten warning which Henry West had given her. Here she was, almost upon a herd of wild cattle all alone and off her horse! Had he not told her how their curiosity was excited by seeing persons afoot with often disastrous results, and warned her to be sure and stay in the saddle if she were near any of the grazing herds. Filled with sudden alarm at her temerity she hurriedly retraced her steps, only to be horrified to realize that she could not tell where to go. The clumps of brush now looked all alike and seemed only to be a confused mass of limbs and leaves. There was the declining sun towards which she had advanced, so now she must retreat in the opposite direction. Yes, but should she turn to the right or the left?

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For a moment she stood trying to collect her bewildered senses. She took her sombrero from her dishevelled hair and gave a frightened scream as her finger-tips came in contact with the rattles which still adorned the band.

"Oh, I just can't bear those horrid things any longer," she cried and with a stick began to tear her trophy off. She had not succeeded, however, when her attention was attracted by a horseman riding far to the left of her. How madly he was riding, bending low over his horse till they seemed like one! Bess watched the rider as he rode on swiftly, then swerved to the left, then back again. He was so indistinct in the hazy distance that she could not tell whether he rode like an Indian or a white man.

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At first she felt an impulse to call, but she knew her voice could not reach him at that distance. Look, toward the sun! What is that? A wall of smoke? A cloud of rolling, increasing dust, mounting higher, higher, nearer, nearer, and caused only by the rushing, fleeing hoofs of a stampeding herd!

Frozen with terror the girl stood irresolute, unable to decide whether to flee in the hope that she might reach her horse or to try to seek safety among the frail protection of the thorn shrubs! She could feel the earth begin to tremble from the rush of pounding hoofs and saw the ominous cloud rolling nearer and nearer. There was no time to flee; no chance to reach the trees; only now could she rush to that projecting boulder and cast her body close against it in the hope that the frantic steers might not crumble it in pieces in their mad onslaught.

What was that she heard? She hesitated an instant as she neared the rock whose unpromising shelter she sought. Surely she heard someone calling her name. "Bess—Bess," the agonized tones came to her ears! Where from, from whom came that ray of hope? Now she reached the rock. Standing boldly upon it she placed her hands to her lips in a rounded funnel and screamed with all her strength, again and again.

Like a flash across and from out the cloud of dust shot Eagle! She saw the red in his nostrils as he leaped directly toward her, a fleck of foam struck her face—and then—and then a vise clutched the beaded buckskin belt; some Herculean arm tore her from the pedestal and hot, swiftly drawn breaths moistened her cheek and neck. She felt herself flying through obscure space! She felt her breath gripped out of her body by some terrible, encircling pressure. What dreadful creature held her in such a death-like grip?

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She lifted her hands and felt the rough bristles on a man's cheeks, then let them slide together about his tense neck in a tenacious hold. A firm, stirruped foot supported one of hers and she let her weight settle upon it. Each breath she drew was impregnated with stifling dust, while surging in her ears was the bellowing of frantic steers and thundering of a thousand hoofs! Would those mad, fleeing creatures never cease; would they never swerve; would they ever keep gaining? What if Eagle should stumble! What if his double burden should prove greater than his strength? The terrifying thought made the girl's arms cling all the more firmly about the rigid neck and made her heart beat with aching throbs in her parched throat! She placed her lips close to the man's ear and in an agonized and almost inaudible voice cried, "Hurry, for God's sake, hurry!"

Instantly she felt the horse make a supreme leap, another and yet more, till soon, through her half-opened eyelids the girl could see that the enveloping cloud of dirt and dust was falling behind. Now a steady, even voice was saying, "Slow, old boy! Easy, easy! All right Eagle; take your time, boy! Slow, slow!" Bess could feel the arm's muscles relaxing with the slackening speed of the horse; hear a deep, indrawn breath of relief, and see through the dust-covered hair which nearly veiled her face, a man's features o'er spread with grime, yet white with pallor.

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As Eagle came to a stop she felt herself gently lowered to the ground and supported by her rescuer who dismounted at the same instant. Lifting her hands whose fingers were still stiff from their tenacity, she pushed the dishevelled hair far back from her eyes and forehead and stood gazing with thankfulness and gratitude into the deep glowing eyes. No words came to her lips nor was the silence broken by the passive man. It seemed that hours had elapsed since Eagle had been relieved of his burden, when a nervous unnatural laugh came from the now quivering lips of Bess.

"It's very dusty for such a recent rain, isn't it?" came in a voice husky and high-strung. "Henry—Henry—for pity's sake speak to me, or can't,—don't you see—see—that I, oh dear—I

know—I shall—c-r-y!” and already great tears filled her eyes and began coursing down her flaming cheeks through tiny streaks of mud.

“Sit down here, Bess, till you feel rested. Poor little girl—it was a dreadful ordeal, but you are brave, braver than a man would have been.” [175]

Henry West seated himself near the girl whose whole being was torn with convulsive sobs. She had thrown herself on the ground and buried her face in her arms. How he longed to lift her within his arms and hold her tightly until the storm of loosened terror might cease! Could he only have drunk the salty tears that rained upon her face! Dared he only whisper in her ear all his love and longing! He must—must! He could not, would not be silent longer! She was his very own now—his, saved from the mangling blows of wild beasts. His heart pounded against his throat demanding that its pleadings be given voice! With a swift start and open arms he bent over the trembling form. His fingers closed hard till the skin was drawn tight over the knuckles! His hands opened, slowly, appealingly—eager to enfold their treasure, their right, but only the tips of the fingers swept gently, softly across the brown, disordered tresses. With the long, gentle stroke the sobbing lessened and then at length ceased.

Slowly the girl turned and faced the comforter whose fingers still thrilled with the delicious contact of the dear head and hair. She sought in vain for a look or word of censure which she imagined she deserved. Instead, a dark face was all aglow with gratitude and love, and deep eyes spoke the words which a guarded voice dared not utter. [176]

“Oh! Henry—see—blood on your spurs. Look at Eagle—and yet once you told me that you never rode him with spurs!”

As soon as his attention had been directed toward the almost forgotten horse he walked swiftly over to Eagle still quivering and trembling in every limb.

“Old boy—was it a pretty hard run? Brace up—don’t give up—you’re good for another,” West was saying as he let his solicitous hands touch here and there. Bess knew from his manner that the horse was really sick, although he tried to appear unconcerned. Henry began to walk the horse about, and it made the girl’s heart ache to see the splendid limbs move with stiffness and pain. If there were only something she could do to help!

On she walked, close to Henry West’s side, now unconsciously touching the reins and now patting the shoulder wet with beads of pain. Suddenly—with an almost human cry the horse gave a plunge and fell to the ground! West stood aside—for a moment immovable and still—then with a reluctant yet decisive movement drew his gun from his holster. Bess sprang quickly to his side and grasped both his arms with her own! Thrusting up her face till her breath fanned his cheek she cried, “Don’t—Henry—he shall not die! All this just because I forgot your warning—because I am a fool—a horrid—careless girl!”

“He cannot live—I cannot bear to see him suffer. I must—shoot—if—I—can!” Releasing his right arm he drew the left one up and about the girl’s head, and closing her ear with the palm of his hand he held her tightly and closely to him, her face completely buried in the soft, silken folds of his begrimed white shirt. How could she know that that embrace was firm with love? How could she know what the wild, irregular beatings of that strong heart were saying? How could she know that the prolonged hesitancy was caused by the recrudescence of hopeless longings! She sensed his effort at calmness, felt an arm uplifted, a slight concussion, and knew that Eagle was dead. She did not watch Henry West as he removed the saddle and bridle from the dead horse, nor did she see the last tender caress given to the stiffening neck. [177]

“Had it not been for you, my Eagle—she—she—would—now—be—,” were the parting words given to the favorite of all the horses which West had ever ridden. And yet he was glad of the sacrifice.

“Do you mind staying here alone, Bess, while I go in search of Mauchacho? It will soon be growing chilly and dark and we must get home tonight. Can you give me any idea where he is?” Bess looked helplessly about and was still utterly confused by the mad, mad rush ahead of the steers. She could not tell if she had ridden one mile or twenty. West noted her bewilderment, and with an assurance that he would try to return soon started rather doubtfully forward. He retraced the way they had so recently come and after several indecisive swervings to the right and left Bess saw him hit upon a trail and hurry swiftly on until the thorns and brush hid him from her view. [178]

How utterly alone she felt! She could scarcely refrain from running after West and calling on him to wait! Glancing over her shoulder her heart was filled with pity and regret at the sight of the dead hero. Already she saw circling high in the evening sky, a pair of huge, black wings eager for prey.

“I’ll stay here and watch Eagle! Those vultures shall not banquet yet awhile!”

Glowing red and yellow colors dyed the evening skies. Soft shades of purple touched the distant tops and slopes of the mountains. Darkening shadows silently gathered among the pines, indistinct in the distance. Night was coming on apace, and still the girl stood—silent and alone, keeping vigil over the coveted feast. In the glow of the western sky gleamed brightly the tender sickle of the new moon. Turning so as to glance over her shoulder, Bess wished that the waiting might soon be ended.

She arose from the flat rock upon which she had been resting and began pacing nervously back and forth. Snatches of verses she said aloud, then some strain of a song floated spasmodically across the range, too wide to send back an echo. The moon, with its brief consolation, had gone behind the horizon, and the night was rapidly growing darker. A qualm of fear filled the girl’s heart, as a coyote’s shrill, hungry cry rent the air. She quickly drew forth the weapon which she had always worn, from its snug and inconspicuous pocket, and stood ready to defend rather than for defense. [179]

From out the gloom she felt rather than heard an approach, which she prayed might be Henry West. A low whistle came in response to her call, and soon Mauchacho was led to his

mistress and his soft nose brushed caressingly against her arm.

"I had a hard time in finding the saddle or else I might have returned sooner. Have you been very anxious and lonely?"

"Can we hurry away from here, Henry. I cannot bear to feel these dreadful, hungry creatures so near," replied Bess, as another unearthly cry came from the waiting, anxious coyotes.

West placed Bess in the saddle, flung his own empty one upon the horse and walked swiftly forward leading the way. At length they came to a ranch where West secured a horse, and rode with conservative speed toward home.

It was after numerous futile calls that at last they heard the squeak of the ferry-boat as it came laboriously across the stream in the darkness to meet them. Dark clouds were filling the sky and another rain seemed imminent. Groping his way with the horses, West led them on to the boat and then lifted Bess from the saddle. Silently they stood as the Indian rowed them over the dark water. Startled by a glare of lightning Bess placed her arm through Henry West's and gave it a pressure of confidence.

"Had it not been for the gleam of the beads showing me your belt I doubt if I could have lifted you, Bess—for our—our ride—today," said Henry, after a long silence. "Where did you get it? I do not remember ever seeing you wear it before!"

"I have only had it today. An Indian woman gave it to me this morning as I came over on this ferry, because—well, because I held her little dirty baby in my arms!"

"Bess, that same Indian woman was the one who directed me when I discovered Mauchacho's shoe print in the trail leading away from the right direction. She also told me with tears in her eyes why she gave you her belt. Not wishing to alarm James, I did not even show him where you and Mauchacho had gone, giving him some excuse. I borrowed his spurs, for I knew, intuitively perhaps, that Eagle—even Eagle—might need them, for the first time."

"And for the last time, also," added Bess, and tears again came freely.

THE CAMPING TRIP AND "PETER PAN"

It was several days after Bess' thrilling adventure before her nerves were again calm and steady and before her muscles had recovered from their soreness. While she felt reluctant to lie in bed, and was sorry because of the extra worry and work which she caused, still it was delicious to experience a mother's solicitude. No word of reproof had Mrs. West given her, only kindness, attention and anxiety. Bess secretly wished that some one would administer to her the censure which she felt she richly deserved. And yet, how it smarted when it came one morning, just before James and Henry West were about to start on the fall round-up.

They had come into Bess' sunlit room to say good-bye. Her soft, white hand was enclosed for a moment firmly in West's hard and sunburned palm. He did not dare speak lest the tremor in his voice should betray him to both sister and brother. As James bent over his sister, with a kiss, he said, "Remember Bess, no more foolish escapades—," but a firm grasp on his arm checked the words and led him from the room before he could see the welling, nervous tears fill her brown eyes—and then splash on her tightly folded hands.

"What's the use, Jim old boy—she has had all she can bear already!" she heard the quarter-breed say as they went away. [182]

James turned and quickly re-entered his sister's room. Taking her in his arms he kissed away her tears and left her consoled and happy once more.

"Hurry and be yourself again, Bess, for the camping trip next week. I only wish the round-up were over so that Henry and I might go, too. We'll see you and the Kalispell friends in camp as we go over by the Big Arm. Guess we can find the place. So long—sister—" and throwing her a kiss from the door he hurried to join West, who was already in the saddle and anxious to be off.

Bess had been looking forward to the novelty of camp life ever since the invitation had come to her from Mrs. West's friends at Kalispell. She was to meet them on the fifth of September on the south side of the Big Arm of the Lake, directly opposite Wild Horse Island. Here they were to camp and hunt small game and fish for ten days.

Bess arose with the sun on the morning of the fifth, and was soon ready to start for camp, accompanied by one of the ranch-men whom Mrs. West had ordered to ride with the girl and pack her baggage.

"I wish you were going too, little Mother," said Bess earnestly as she hurried about, finishing her preparations.

"It would be enjoyable I'm sure, but I cannot think of it this time, dear. Come home strong and safe, won't you?" [183]

What a magnificent morning! Just a hint of autumn in the bracing air, while a soft, hazy atmosphere veiled the mountains and nestled on the ripples of the lake. The sun had not yet mounted high enough to dry the dew which lay on the grass and dampened the trail. Fifteen miles toward the north-west was the place where camp was to be made, the man had told Bess in response to her question, how far would they ride?

As they crossed the ferry, all the events of the recent tragedy surged over her, and as her hand clasped the beaded belt it sought the place where the iron hold had broken the threads and loosened the beads. An unknown and foreign sensation seemed to sweep over her; a sharp pain, incomprehensible, clutched her heart as she again felt the embrace of her rescuer. He stood out clear, full and bold before her mind's eye in a strange new light! The thought of another man forced itself into her mind, and she was startled from her musings as the ferry touched the shore by a well known voice.

"Good morning; this is a most unexpected pleasure! You seemed deeply absorbed as I watched you coming across. I hope you were thinking of me!"

"I was, Mr. Davis—just then," answered Bess as she accepted the outstretched hand.

"I had intended to call at the *HW* Ranch this morning in the hope of seeing you, and here I find you evidently going on a visit." [184]

The cowboy who was accompanying Bess led the horses off the ferry and down the rocky beach for water.

"Bess—dear—it seems ages since I have seen you. Why have I not had a line from you? Can't you know that I am eating my heart out because of your coldness!"

"Really, Mr. Davis—I have not been very well—and could not gather enough energy to write. Wait until I return from my camping trip and I'll write and tell you all about it," answered Bess as she turned to leave, seeing that the horses had drunk their fill and were waiting for her.

"Stay a moment! Where are you going? May I go with you?"

"Ah, you were not invited," she answered, laughingly. "Why, you see I am to be in camp ten days with some friends from Kalispell who are coming down for the fall birds."

"Oh, yes—I sent a permit to Mr. George and party to hunt on the reserve, and I also received an invitation to visit camp. Now that you are to be there too, may I not hope for a second invitation from you, dear?"

His voice took that fascinating tone which always sent an undefinable thrill through her, and his eyes held her own in a long, steady look.

"We—camp on the Big Arm—perhaps—you can find it," came from her lips with an effort. [185]

Davis felt hurt that his request was not answered more heartily, but he concealed his chagrin with a smile of assurance that he would come.

The happy, alert girl saw a subtle change stealing over nature and knew that autumn had come.

How delicious was the aroma of the firs and pines as the horses went along the shaded road

through the long stretch of timber! Occasionally through the tangle of scrub-maples, whose bright green foliage was splashed here and there by a scarlet leaf, one caught a glimpse of the deep blue, glistening lake and the mountains on its east shore. Tiny squirrels and chipmunks were scampering over fallen logs or chattering high up in the tamarack branches. Every rock and stump was beautiful with its creeping wreath of kinnikinnick, whose glossy foliage and large scarlet berries puts to shame the holly. On the buck-brush hung great, white snow-drops, while the wild rose bushes were heavy with scarlet fruit.

The whirr of a pheasant through the underbrush caused Mauchacho to prick up his ears and quicken his pace. A blue grouse with her late brood scurried across the road seeking the shelter of the thicket. Bess wished she too were some dainty feathered creature, happy in the solitude of the woods, free from all restraint, secure within the sheltering arms of the earth. Oh! to creep away off under the tender green branches; to clasp her arms about the rough bark of the pine trees; to rest her cheek upon the redolent grasses! On the outstretched limb of a charred pine tree sat a large, blinking owl. Great tufts of grey feathers covered his legs and claws, while at his throat shone the purest white.

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Bess raised an imaginary gun with a deliberate aim, and immediately Mr. Owl stretched his large white and grey wings and was out of sight.

"Oh, see!" cried the girl, as only a few yards ahead of them there sprang across the trail a white-tailed doe and fawn! Only for a brief instant did they pause, then went crashing through the timber and brush, flirting defiant good-byes with their white flags. The cowboy was watching surreptitiously from the corner of his eye the pleasure and animation which Bess was enjoying. Her brown eyes danced and filled; her cheeks flamed as if touched with an Indian's paintbrush, suggesting an autumn leaf through her brown, fluffy hair. Her enjoyment was keen because of a sweet and sensitive temperament alive to the surroundings and susceptible to the wonders of nature.

"Did you hear that?" asked Bess of her companion.

"Yes—that was the boat whistle. Your party are probably near their landing place. Guess we have about three miles more to go before we reach there."

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In a short time they again came into full view of the great, blue lake. How immense it was! The Great Arm alone was a lake. To the right lay Wild Horse Island; the camping ground must be very near. Had it not been for the sound of voices or the driving of tent-stakes the camp would have been hard to locate, so snugly was it concealed among the trees and by a thicket of cottonwoods and small pines.

It was a busy scene which Bess saw as she rode into camp. Already the tents were being pitched; boxes and bundles and guns were being carried from the beach; beautiful setters were sniffing at every leaf and twig; while over near the branches of an overhanging cedar, Joe, the colored cook, with white cap, coat and apron deftly donned had already lighted a fire preparatory for the first meal. Cheery greetings of welcome were exchanged as Bess slid from her saddle and each one of the girls seemed bent upon talking loudest and longest.

"Oh! girls—girls—save a little breath or else you won't have enough to last ten days!" called Mrs. Bland, with the authority of a chaperon, but her voice was not heard above the laughing and chattering of the other three. Such a time pumping up the air-beds, shaking blankets, unpacking satchels, arranging rugs and adjusting the other things in the ladies' boudoir!

"Little Honey" (as Mrs. Bland's little daughter had been nicknamed) was too engrossed trying to attire herself in new, blue overalls and a boy's "really" shirt, to be interested in her surroundings. Tucking her braids under a big, straw hat, then thrusting her tiny fists deep into the spacious pockets, she cried gleefully,—“Well, Mother—Here's Peter Pan.” Undaunted by the teasings and laughter of the other girls “Peter Pan” strode out of the tent to show herself to the “other boys.”

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"Oh, you dogs! Charge! Lady! Jack Down! Charge, Gladstone! Didn't you dogs ever see a boy before!" she cried amid frantic efforts to ward off the playful, eager animals. Just then she heard the rattle of wheels and ran to meet Mr. George who had driven down from Kalispell so that the horses and light wagon could be used in going to the good hunting fields each day.

"I'm 'Peter Pan,' and these pockets are so handy, and it is so much easier to climb that I guess I'll just stay a boy," she announced as she clambered into the seat beside Mr. George and reached for the reins.

Such a hungry, hearty "bunch" as sat down to dinner! How the aroma of the forest and the sweet, pine laden air whetted their appetites! "Peter Pan" could not get enough bread with its thick layer of apple-sauce. Joe, the cook, looked on with trepidation and wondered how long the larder would supply the demand.

"Never mind, Joe; don't look so worried, we'll have birds for supper," said one of the men, as he arose from the table and began filling his hunting vest with shells. The snap of the barrel of a shotgun brought all three dogs up with a bound, so eager were they to feel the feathers of a retrieve. At sundown, when the tired men and still more weary dogs came dragging themselves back into camp, each bore evidence of his spoils. Through the carriers were hung the limp-stretched necks of a covey, while the several feathers still sticking to the dogs' jaws, proved how faithfully and well they had done their work.

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"Come with me Miss—Miss Flet—"

"Just call me Bess, it's easier."

"Miss Bess, if you will come with me we'll give the dogs their supper," said "Peter Pan," as she led the way to where the dog biscuits had been placed. The dogs were all seated on their haunches waiting with hungry stomachs for their meal.

"These are dreadfully hard things to feed you, poor dogs," said the tiny girl, as she tried in vain to break the biscuits. "I'm glad I'm not a dog, aren't you, Miss Bess? But then, this kind of biscuit is good for a dog, 'cause they make him take aim better. Charge, Jack!" she cried to the

hungry dog who could not wait for her discourse to be finished as he took his supper out of her hand and hurried away to find an undisturbed place to enjoy it.

It was dark before the birds were ready for the table, and supper was eaten by the aid of numerous candles and lanterns. All were weary, so after the plans for the morrow had been made and everything made secure in camp for the night, each sought his couch and slept; some to dream, perhaps of feasts and plenty, or of ringing shots and pointing dogs; one to dream of "comfy" trousers and handy pockets; another to see in her sleep's vision, the flaming, dilated nostrils of a fleeing horse and the dark, determined face of his relentless rider.

THE TROUT DEAL

As soon as Bess heard the breakfast fire cracking she crept out of her bed and hurriedly dressed herself. "Peter Pan" begged her softly, so that the other sleepers might not be disturbed, to "Wait a min't for me." They looked like two hungry birds as they perched on a log near where Joe was preparing breakfast. Snug in their red sweaters and tams they sat with arms entwined about each other, already fast and true friends.

"Did you ever see Mr. George 'flop' pan-cakes?" questioned "Peter Pan," as she saw with utter satisfaction a creamy mixture being stirred by the cook. "No? Well, I'll have him give a free exhibition this morning immediately before the big performance," added the child, with artful mimicry of the man she had heard at the circus during the summer.

"You see, he just takes the frying pan like this—gives it two or three little wiggles—then throws the pan-cake up in the air and makes it turn a 'somer-set' like the circus performer did, and then lets it splash back into the pan. Ask Joe to let us try one before the others come to breakfast. Shall we?"

All thoughts of any attempts in the culinary art were displaced by the soft sound of a moccasin foot behind them. "Peter Pan" clung tightly to Bess' hand as they watched the slow approach of the old Indian. What a wrinkled, old visage, hardened by the vicissitudes of years, attenuated by many fasts. A mat of coarse, grey hair partially covered eyes that were still keen and undimmed by the ravages of time. The tattered blanket illy concealed his quivering form, while worn and ragged moccasins scarcely protected his feet from the stones and thorns. [192]

Bess' heart melted by the picture of abject want, and with a few, quick signs she asked the old Indian "would he eat." A grin of acquiescence was her reply, and soon she had placed before him such a feast as he had never seen before. He fell to devouring the food, almost like a hungry dog, but was checked by a decisive touch on the shoulder. A look of surprise filled his eyes as he paused with open mouth ready to receive the next morsel.

"Shame;" firmly said the girl; "Why forget to thank God?" and she raised her hand toward heaven. Slowly the food was replaced upon the plate; a look of incredulity rested for a moment upon the seamed, old face; then with eyes turned toward the crests of the hills all radiant with the glow of the morning, a withered, dirty hand reverently made the sign of the cross. When his hunger was appeased he bestowed upon his benefactor a look of thanks.

"You go catch fish. Bring nice trout here. More muck-a-muck tonight," instructed Bess with numerous gestures. [193]

The old Indian nodded that he understood and then explained his futile attempt to catch fish the day before. No word did he speak. He waved his hand slowly toward the direction of the North shore of the Big Arm, showed how he had cast the line again and again, but had caught no fish; how he had fished unceasingly all the while the sun arose from its eastern horizon to the zenith and until it had descended to rest behind the hills; how he had returned to his teepee with his willow switch empty and had gone hungry to sleep. Now it was again day! He motioned that he would walk far along the lake's opposite shore where the rocks jutted into the water—there—could she see? Pointing to some beef which was hung up in the tree he made Bess understand that with the aid of that for bait he could catch the wily trout as fast as he could cast the hook, and that soon his basket of willows and leaves would be full. Soon he was sent on his way rejoicing,—happy because his stomach's craving had ceased, glad because of the hope of another meal.

The tardy members of the party had at last come to breakfast. Mr. George was prevailed upon to "flop" the pan-cakes, and "Peter Pan's" number increased alarmingly.

"I eat so many because it is such fun to watch them perform, not because I like them," she assured her mother, as she watched the marvelous feat repeated. [194]

"My name will now have to be 'Peter Pan-cake,' 'cause I'm so full," she said, as she gathered up the remaining few and fed them to the waiting dogs.

"Oh! Bess—come see Gladstone!" she cried gleefully, as she watched the dog dig a nice little hole in the leaves and then bury his breakfast. How artfully he scraped the twigs and dirt together in long sweeps with his nose, and then pressed it down firmly.

"You see," she explained, "he does it that way so that the other dogs can't find it. Then when he gets hungry he goes and digs up his—his—why, his money, and eats it."

"Money," laughed Bess, heartily. "I know—you mean *cache*, don't you, dear?"

"Oh, yes! Mr. George, an' he knows everything about dogs, told me what it was, and I couldn't quite remember, you see. Once he told me all about Jack's grandmothers and grandfathers and uncles and all the family, and he called it a legacy or something like that. Don't you think it would be grand to know so much about dogs?" chatted the tiny girl to her interested listener.

Soon everything was ready to start for the day's hunt; lunch basket filled, guns and ammunition ready, dogs eager to be off, and a wagon filled with hearty, happy people. They would try the stubble of the wheat fields on the Baptiste ranch today, and all felt confident already of much sport and many birds. [195]

"Honk—honk—honk" greeted their ears before many miles had passed behind them. Such scrambling for guns! Such hurrying to get a good position! Such banging of shells! "Honk—honk"—and the geese went sailing on.

"Guess the weather isn't right for a goose," ventured "Peter Pan," the only one who felt disposed to make any explanation.

But the weather proved just right for chickens! And the hunters desisted because they were

ashamed to slaughter more.

Bess found the Indian squatted at a comfortable distance from the "kitchen fire" waiting her, upon her return. While the others were busy with the birds, or the horses, or supper preparations, she closed her deal for the fish. Spread out upon the large, green thimble-berry leaves were several beautiful speckled and salmon-tinted trout, all large and firm. The old Indian motioned that she was to have them all and that he would keep those left in the basket. Bess peeped inquisitively into the nest of leaves and there beheld—oh! such beauties! Shiny brook trout! They should be the feast. She showed with convincing gestures her unfeigned contempt for large fish when the lovely small ones were to be had. Yes, he might return these to the basket and leave the small ones for her.

At first the grizzled old man looked at her as if he were deeply puzzled. Did she really mean that she preferred the small fish! A queer, hesitating smile slowly began to spread over his face as he reluctantly drew out the fish, one by one, and placed them on the leaves. Several times he paused, and by numerous frantic gestures and guttural sounds asked again if she really wished him to replace the larger fish. [196]

At last, so completely was he assured, he quickly flung the remaining beauties into the basket, snatched the parcel of food which the cook had prepared for him and arose to hasten away. Again he was checked by a touch on the arm and with his hand half raised again to make the sign of thanks, his astonishment was even greater increased by a proffered half-dollar.

"Trout for breakfast!" Bess called cheerfully to the "colored gentleman" whose white teeth gleamed through a whimsical smile. "Trout for breakfast!" she again announced to the men of the party who had been watching the fish deal with unobserved interest, and by this time were convulsed with laughter.

"Come here girls—come 'Mr. Peter Pan' and see the shining beauties!" she added, as they came from the tent with hastily arranged toilets.

"Well, I'm glad you are all so tickled to death over our prospective breakfast," she continued, while the laughter increased, "but I must say the joke—if there be one—seems rather jejune." Little "Peter Pan" squeezed five little sympathetic fingers into the tightly closed palm of the perplexed girl, led her with gentle determination behind a clump of scrub-pines, drew her fluffy head down to her lips and whispered softly: "I heard Mr. George whisper to Uncle Jim that they were 'squaw-fish,' but if I can I'll try to help you eat them." [197]

Bess gathered the child into a loving embrace and together they went to supper to face the jolly ridicule.

"I'm the sorriest of all," chimed in "Peter Pan," "'cause there's only one thing that's better than trout."

"And what is that other?" questioned Bess.

"Why, it's doughnuts with the holes fried shut."

Some fairy must have brought some for breakfast next morning, for there they were, round, fat and golden, with only little puckers where the holes used to be. A tell-tale patch of flour on Bess' cheek gave away the secret of the early riser.

A PSEUDO SQUAW

The "girls" were to remain in camp, while Mr. George and "Uncle Jim" drove the horses to a ranch to have them re-shod. A trip to Sullivan Creek had been planned, and it was necessary that the team and wagon be in good condition to cover the long distance over a rough, hilly road. The dogs were in need of a rest to recuperate for the next chase. The good-byes were called and re-answered till the men were out of sight.

"Oh! let's gather these red thorn-apples and buck-brush berries and make bracelets and strings of beads, and then dress up in blankets and play we are squaws," suggested "Peter Pan," as she began to fill her many pockets with the berries within her reach. Each one seemed bent on plucking the most and soon hats were brimming over.

They sat in a bright, sunny exposure near the edge of the water and strung the red and white berries on long, stout threads, the while happy jokes were made, stories told or snatches of familiar songs were sung. As Bess began to sing again one of the familiar verses, "Peter Pan" checked her rather unceremoniously with, "Oh! please—Miss Bess, we have *sang* that so many times already."

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"My dearie, you mean to say—have—what?" corrected her mother.

"I can't tell, mother—I'm not that far yet in my book," came the ever ready answer of the little grammarian.

Bess had quietly slipped away while the others were still industriously threading their beads. Presently the three dogs, who were stretched out in the glorious warmth of the sunshine near the busy workers, suddenly came to their feet with a bound and ran barking savagely at a form approaching through the trees. As suddenly did they drop their tails between their legs and fawned at the feet of the blanketed intruder, as a familiar voice said softly yet commandingly, "Boys! Gladstone! Jack! What's the fuss? Don't you know me?"

They could scarcely be blamed for their mistake, for Bess looked a veritable Indian. About her was a vivid blanket, a red cloth wound her forehead nearly concealing her hair which had been braided and hung down either side of her neck. A pair of moccasins (which Mrs. West had urged her to bring in case the nights might prove cold) and the coils of red and white beads completed her costume.

"You look just like a really Indian girl," cried "Peter Pan," clapping her hands gleefully. "Why, even the dogs thought you were one too, didn't they?" she added, with her deep blue eyes glowing with appreciation.

"Here Bess, go down by the road and get us a few more of the thorn-apples; my string is not yet long enough," said Mrs. Bland, as she and the others kept on with their task.

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"Oh, there are some splendid large ones!" said Bess to herself, as she caught sight of a clump of the brush, with shiny, red fruit a little way down the road. She wandered aimlessly on, watching the dust puff out as she made "toed-in" tracks with the moccasins. The choice place for thorn-apples had been passed, but then, that did not matter, as here were more directly ahead of her.

The sound of approaching horses and their riders' voices came to her ears. The delay of indecision, whether to flee to camp, or whether to conceal herself in the near-by thicket, made either impossible, for already directly in front of her came two horsemen, and she knew that she had been seen. Turning her back toward the approach, and concealing her face in a fold of the blanket, she stood aside, hoping that they might pass without giving her any especial attention.

One had passed, and peeping from her cover she saw that he wore the Indian police uniform. A soft chuckle reached her ear, and she knew that he knew he saw a masquerader. But her heart stood still, as a voice so familiar, yet just now so foreign said, "You ride on ahead and see if you can locate their camp. I'll be there presently."

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She heard the horse stop and felt his nose brush her blanket, so near had he come to her.

"*Klah-on-ya-Mary*—are you here alone?" and the end of a quirt touched her none too gently on the head. She heard a stirrup squeak and felt that the man was dismounting.

"Come here—I want to talk to you. You know me—I am the Agent—I want to look at you;" but the instant the silent figure felt the touch of his eager fingers upon her arm, Bess sprang forward like a frightened deer, and ran swiftly into the bushes and was soon out of sight. It was all the man could do to restrain the frightened horse, and when he again looked to where he had seen the bushes part to enfold a brightly-hued fleeing creature, they had folded their branches as meekly as if they had nothing to conceal.

"Damn these squaws; they are not usually so touchy," said the man, as he gave his horse an unnecessary jerk at the reins as he remounted and started on. A thin, blue, curling smoke through the trees revealed to him the campers' location, while awaiting him at the trail was his escort. The police continued on his journey upon receiving a few minute instructions, and the Agent reined his horse into the path leading to the camp. At first he saw no one except the white-aproned man busy preparing lunch, then his advent was seen by the ladies, still busy with their beads.

Mrs. Bland came forward to receive the visitor.

"I am very much pleased to meet you, Mr. Davis," she said, as he introduced himself. "I am sorry that the men are away from camp just at present. They are to be back in time for luncheon. Won't you dismount and help us enjoy a few of the birds which you so kindly permitted us to kill?"

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"Thank you—I am sure it will be a treat," he answered as he slid from the saddle.

"Er—I—I had hoped to meet Miss Fletcher here also," he added, as he hesitatingly glanced

about.

"Oh, yes, she is here—that is, she will be here presently. She just now went down to the road after some more thorn-apples for our chains. We are going to play Indian," she laughed.

"Even the dogs thought Miss Bess was a really squaw when they saw her all wrapped in a blanket," put in "Peter Pan" as she came inquisitively forward to see their visitor.

Slowly the explanation of the squaw by the road-side forced itself into his brain. For a moment he held his breath wondering if he had made a fool of himself. Perhaps she did not recognize him, but if she did he would easily convince her it was a joke—that he had known it was she all the while.

What could be keeping Bess so long? Why did she not return to camp with the gathered thorn-apples? Each moment a glance went up the trail, hoping that she would soon be coming. No one saw the silent pseudo squaw as she crept softly on her hands and knees in the shadow of the logs and the close covering of the brush. No one saw her now as she lay flat on the ground securely concealed by the thick leaves and the tall grasses, watching the occupants of the camp with glowing eyes. No one? Yes, one alert pair of ears had heard a twig snap; one keen nose had sniffed the air, and now a pair of appealing eyes were looking into hers.

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"Charge Gladly!" she said to the dog with a wriggling tail, as emphatically as she could in a whisper. Then she flung her arm about him holding him close lest he betray her concealment. Would the visitor never go? Should she be compelled finally to come forth and rejoin the others at the camp? If she could only convince herself that the Agent had recognized her in the road and had not really thought she was a squaw she would not now hesitate in meeting him. But somehow a feeling of uncertainty crept into her heart and for the moment made her fairly hate him. The approach of horses along the highway caused her to sit upright and listen. Gladstone, too, heard the sound and before he could be checked, began a vigorous barking. She could hear the horses coming through the tangled brush, and in a moment more she stood face to face with James Fletcher and Henry West.

"Great guns! Bess; you are a regular Pocahontas! How's that for a 'peachy' squaw?" he said to West, as he nearly tumbled from his saddle and gave his sister a vigorous hug. Henry West had also dismounted and caught his horse's bridle over his arm. In his glance was a look of questioning approval which caused Bess to ask:

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"I am wondering, Henry, if you like me this way?"

"If all squaws looked as well, a man wouldn't mind being an Indian," he said significantly, walking by her side.

"Oh! here you are; where did you hide?" cried little "Peter Pan," as she ran forward to meet her favorite.

"Put 'Peter Pan' on the horse and let her ride," said Bess, in the way of an introduction to Henry West. He lifted the child gently and placed her in the saddle, carefully guarding her lest she fall. The child was watching the dark features of her companion with an apprehensive look. As he held her for a moment in his arms when she dismounted, she softly touched the bronze cheek with her fingers, and said: "I like you, even if you are—so much darker—than my Uncle Jim," and slid, half afraid, out of his clasp and ran to her mother's side, her eyes following him.

As soon as Mr. Davis found an opportunity amid all the confusion of introductions and greeting and clamorous talk, he stood near Bess and said: "Really, I had begun to think you had fled to your 'wick-i-up' and were not coming to see me at all. Your disguise was scarcely sufficient, for I knew you instantly and tried to carry out your joke, but you were too hasty."

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Bess suddenly let the blanket fall from her shoulders to the ground and faced Mr. Davis squarely. She looked into his eyes searchingly; beyond them she gazed till her accusing glance penetrated his very soul. Without the tremor of an eyelash her search was answered by a look as steady and firm as her own. At last a smile broke upon her lips as she said: "I did—did half imagine that you really thought—you were talking to an Indian."

"They are too uninteresting to me even to stop to speak to," he reassured her, and was glad that further explanation was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. George and "Uncle Jim."

Soon all were enjoying the delicious birds, done to a turn by the efficient chef. Perhaps no one of the merry company, except Bess, noticed the reticence of Henry West, who sat beside her. She quietly gave his hand a little squeeze as she passed him the salt, which sent the blood pounding through his heart till he felt it could surely be heard by the others.

In spite of the many earnest requests to remain, James and Henry declared that they must hurry on to rejoin the rest of the bunch who were on the round-up. Dave Davis, the Indian agent, also took his departure after several futile attempts to speak with Bess alone.

The rest of the day was busy with cleaning guns, greasing the wheels and loading the wagon, preparatory for the long trip to Sullivan Creek on the morrow, which would in all probability take two or three days.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN UNUSUAL PROPOSAL

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"I'm sorry this is our last day in camp, aren't you, 'Peter Pan'? We have had such a splendid time and it seems all too short."

Bess and "Peter Pan," together with one of the dogs, were left alone in camp while the rest of the party had gone on their last shoot. The little girl was feeling slightly indisposed after the last few strenuous days, so Bess asked to be permitted to stay "at home" with her for the day, as she could not, or rather would not, shoot the chickens; anyway, Mrs. Bland, too, might enjoy one more day with her gun and the birds.

"Yes, I am just dreadfully sorry that we shall have to go home, 'cause then I won't see you any more, and I feel as if I love you next to my mother," answered "Peter Pan," and she put up a pair of puckered lips for a kiss as she hastily swallowed the last bit of her apple pie.

"Really—Miss Bess, do you—do you think that a little girl ought to have only one piece of pie?" she asked, so entreatingly that Bess, injudiciously, she feared, gave her another large, juicy triangle.

Laughingly she said: "There are times, dear, and this is one of them, when I think a little girl may have all the pie she wants." But before the last crumb had been safely stored away, black lashes were drooping languidly over a pair of deep blue eyes, and a sleepy little girl was carried into the tent where she might sleep and dream of apple pies—p-i-e-s.

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Bess sat beside the sleeper with an unopened magazine on her knee.

Just then her eyes rested on one of the air-beds, and immediately she began to wonder why it shouldn't make a good boat. The more she thought of it the more she determined to try it and see.

Without much trouble she arrayed herself in an improvised bathing suit and removed the canvas cover from the inflated rubber bed. She felt a reluctance in leaving "Peter Pan" alone, but she thought she would be gone only a few moments and would be in full view of the tent all the time.

"Here, Lady!" Calling to the drowsy dog, she placed the animal with the sleeping child.

Lifting the bed upon her back and shoulders she proceeded to the beach, after procuring two of the granite plates for paddles. Far down near the water's edge she could see Joe busy dressing birds for dinner. She soon had her craft safely launched and was paddling about with great glee. Its motion was susceptible to the slightest stroke of the paddles, and try as she would she could not make it tip.

"Oh, it's such fun! I wish little 'Peter Pan' were here, too, to enjoy it," she said aloud as she circled and splashed about in the water. Now she would sit on one corner and dangle her feet in the water, now slide completely in while clinging firmly to the float.

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An unceremonious barking from the tent caused her to scramble quickly onto the bobbing craft and look to see what or who might be the intruder.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, as she saw Dave Davis leap from his horse and fasten the reins about a tree. He was just about to proceed toward the tent when she called loudly to him, that he might not awake the sleeping child. At first he did not locate the direction of the call, then soon discovered the voyager and her ship.

"Ship ahoy!" he called, as he made hurried strides over the round pebbles and larger stones on the beach.

"I am proxene in camp today; but I must confess no visitors were expected," said Bess, slipping into the water to cover her confusion, as she remembered too late her dishabille.

"What are you to be next, I wonder! One day I find a squaw and another a mermaid!"

"Come on in—the water's fine," said Bess, making foaming eddies.

"It's rather dangerous—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted the girl. "See, she can't tip," as she tried to convince him by her varied maneuvers.

"Be serious a moment, Bess, and come out; I have something very important to tell you."

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"Oh! I can't come out with this rig on. Really, I can't," answered the girl.

"I am in a hurry, but must talk with you while we are alone."

"Then tell me here. I can hear it—anything—begin," humorously replied Bess, splashing vigorously.

He deliberately stepped upon a large boulder which projected out of the water not far from the air-bed boat.

"Bess," he began seriously; and then added slowly as he held her eyes firmly with his own, "you and I are to be married next month—the fifteenth!"

"Wh—," came in a gasp to the girl's parted lips; but no further sound could she utter. For a full moment she stared at the man standing so resolutely, as if he were a part of the very rock itself, his large, splendid form drawn to its full height, till he seemed like a giant towering above her. His eyes were intense with passion, and his voice trembled with emotion when he again repeated: "We are to be married in a month, dear. I am going away from this place, and you are going with me."

The astonished girl gave a nervous gasp as she cleared her throat, trying to make her words audible.

"I do not seem to—to understand! I—am—to—go—away—go—with you?" she asked, as her face grew pale and her lips became almost blue.

"Yes, dear—as my wife—I cannot go without you—I could not live without you now!"

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Stooping down he caught hold of the floating "boat," which had drifted quite against the rock

upon which he stood. Stretching forth the other hand he caught the girl by the arm and lifted her upon the rock close beside himself. The water from her soaked garments trickled down as he held her in a tight embrace. At length he ceased to blind and to smother her with ardent kisses, and whispered, "Tell me yes—yes!"

"I'm—cold! Please go." Her quivering form and blue lips accentuated her words.

"First say that you love me—that you do care."

"Care? Oh! yes—I care! Love?—I do not know!"

"When are you to return to the ranch? Shall I wait and come then for my reply?" asked Davis, earnestly; and Bess, hoping that her answer might cause him to hasten away, said eagerly: "Yes—do—tomorrow."

She did not resist the parting kiss, but her lips did not respond to his pressure. She heard him hurrying over the pebbles, heard him speak to his horse, knew that he had gone, but still she stood facing the lake, looking at, yet beyond the mountains. A feeling of numbness crept over her body and chilled her soul. A child's voice calling aroused her from her lethargy, and with a quick bound she sprang forward and ran to the tent. After all, she had not been gone so very long, though it seemed as if an eternity had been crowded into the half hour.

While she was dressing "Peter Pan" had gone to view the wonderful boat which Bess had told her of, and soon came hurrying back with the entreaty to "let's try it again—please."

"The water is too cold for you, dearie—and besides, I am tired from my long voyage, you see. Come, we will go down by the water and wait until the hunters come back, and I'll tell you stories of ships—and seas—and everything, 'neverthing else."

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SUNSET ON FLATHEAD LAKE

Sitting side by side with a warm blanket about them, they watched the sunset. The mountains were tipped in varying hues of purple and lavender. Streams of glowing reds and yellows burned at their bases like huge fairy fires. The clouds were delicate tints of pink and coral upon the softer white and grey. The tiny ripples over the broad expanse of water were an ever-changing kaleidoscope,—first a tender, blue sapphire, then an immense emerald, now an opal with its evasive colors beautifully blended. Soon the sun, like a great ball of rusted brass, slid down behind the mighty hills, leaving but the glowing embers of a smoldering day. Softly the vermilion changed into lavender, deepened into purple and fell into charred umber. All the western sky was but a blackened, cheerless grate, and another day vanished into ashes and oblivion.

"Was it not beautiful?" said the little watcher, as she looked into the soft, brown eyes of her companion. "Don't you feel glad that you live here where everything is so beautiful?"

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"Yes, dearie—I want to stay here—here—near the mountains, always!" And the child brushed away Bess' tears, wondering why she should cry.

Oh! the reluctance with which good-byes were said the next morning as camp was broken up and all departed for home. Plans for next year were already projected and promises half made to come again. But who could know where all would be when again the autumn leaf should fall and the whirl of wings should call?

CHAPTER XXIV

WHY A CHEEK BLANCHES

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Mrs. West had been watching the road for nearly an hour, each moment expecting Bess to come. The man had started after the girl early in the morning, and she was impatient for their arrival. At last her anxiety was relieved as she caught a glimpse of Mauchacho hurrying toward home. She clasped the girl in a loving embrace and told her how long the time had been and how lonely she had felt.

"I am never going to let you go away again, my dear; I cannot be happy without you!"

"I'm going—to—to—a—be married next month!" came like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. Bess slowly continued to draw off her riding gloves, then to unfasten her sombrero, and flung them upon the steps where she stood. She ran her fingers through her hair, pushing it back from her face, glancing at the same time at the "little Mother," whose silence became alarming. The woman's face grew white, and her eyes dimmed by a thin film.

"Next month—Mr. Davis—he will take me away—" continued Bess, disconnectedly. Then pulling herself together she told Mrs. West of Mr. Davis' visit; how he had implored her to end his unhappiness; that he could not go away without her.

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"I thought it all over as I came riding home. James will not always care to be tied down by an 'old maid' sister, as I realize that before very long he and Berenice Morton will be married; and while I know that their home would gladly be shared with me, still I could not forever be an encumbrance. You—little Mother—the only mother I have ever known—I would gladly stay near you—always. But he needs me, too—I have made him care for me, and now can I honestly, honorably, destroy his happiness, or perhaps his life?"

Mrs. West listened closely to the serious declaration, then lifting the lovely face with both her hands, she questioned: "Do you love him, Bess?"

For an instant the eyelids quavered, then with hesitation Bess replied: "How can I know? He fills me with a strange excitement. It must be love! I do not know."

"Well, my dear—I pray you may be happy. He must convince you that you do love him, that you understand the new and subtle voice in your heart."

"Yes—yes—" came from the girl's lips in an abstracted tone, while her soft brown eyes sought something in far-off space. She did not hear when Mrs. West again addressed her, and gave a sudden start as one awakened abruptly from slumber when the white-haired woman touched her tenderly.

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"You did not hear what I told you, dear; I said that I also had a surprise for you. See! Here it is," as she held up a yellow envelope. "It is a message from your friend, Miss Morton. Fearing it contained some very important news, I took the liberty to read it in case I should need to send a messenger after you to the camp. It came two days ago."

Bess read the telegram eagerly. "Oh, joy! Then she should reach here tomorrow! I wonder if I can ever wait so long!"

How she flew about during the early afternoon hours, making preparations for her friend's reception! Her dainty room, all fresh and clean, was at last given the finishing touches, and she stood back near the doorway with her pretty head perked on one side, like a saucy wren's, and her hands folded tightly together behind her. A critical eye scanned every article in the room, and as it swept the mirror it caught sight of a very flushed face with a frame of soft, brown hair that had rebelled at longer being confined beneath the little white dust cap. An involuntary laugh escaped from the girl's lips as she saw the disheveled reflection, but almost instantly her merry countenance changed to an expression of seriousness, as she suddenly remembered that she had promised to give Dave Davis his answer today. Even then she heard some one approach, and running to the open window she looked through the curtain to see who the visitor was.

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"Oh! but he is splendid—I never saw before how tall and great he really is! How red his cheeks are today; how brown his eyes are! Oh! I never noticed before that he had such lovely hair—and feet—and—" ran tumultuously through her mind. She was looking at her lover through different glasses now, and saw with other eyes than before.

"Yes, little Mother," she called hastily, in response to a gentle tap at her door, "please say that I shall be down presently."

Would her hair never go up properly? Such thumbs for fingers! Where on earth were her shoes? Everything else was out of place!

"I will put on my 'dear' little dress," she thought, as she drew from its corner her treasure. Pale yellow crepe, soft, silken, crepy, with knots and loops of brilliant orange-colored velvet. In her hair she fastened a tiny golden butterfly, whose gauzy wings swayed with her every movement. Tiny golden slippers peeped from beneath her gown, and amber beads gleamed through the folds of lace about her throat. How the gown recalled the only time she had worn it, one night at a musicale when she had sung Nevin's *Mon Desir*.

"I think that my riding togs feel more comfortable, after all," she thought, as she surveyed herself once more in the long mirror, before going into the library.

Her silken petticoats rustled and swished as she descended the stairs, as if they fain would silence the beatings of her heart. She halted for a moment before the half-open door, nervously wiping her lips with a dainty handkerchief. Then she stepped calmly into the room.

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Davis arose and started eagerly forward, but stopped abruptly as he beheld the delightful picture which she made. Neither spoke for an instant, as each gazed directly into luminous brown eyes.

With an effort, as she again brushed the bit of lace across her lips, Bess spoke: "I have decided, Mr. Davis. My answer is—yes!"

How long he held her in passionate embrace, how fervently he rained caresses upon her eyes, her mouth, her hair, Bess did not know. Instead, she wondered if the butterfly in her hair would suddenly become animate and fly away, so persistently did it flutter its gauzy wings. She heard the rustle of the silken crepe of her gown under the pressure of his arm. She felt the amber beads trickle down her shoulders and strike with soft patter on the rug, as they became released as if scissors had snapped their cord. Unconsciously she stooped to pick them up, but the man held her fast.

"Oh—please—!" she cried. Summoning all her strength she wrested herself free, her heart beating wildly.

"Forgive me, dear—I could devour you! You were never so beautiful, so lovable before! I'm sorry to have frightened you," said Davis, his voice scarcely audible in its emotion. [218]

"Bess," he began more calmly, "I dare not tell myself how happy you have made me. To think that you are really mine—mine! To know that I may take you away from here, this dreadful country with its sordid conditions, its Indians. To feel that you have given me the right to place you in a realm where you may be the queen that you are!"

Taking her gently by the hand he led her to a seat and then began telling her his plans. He said that no preparations need be made as to trousseau, as everything could be procured after they had reached New York, as she objected to being married so soon. Rather reluctantly he consented to her wish to be married here at *HW* ranch and by Father Damien of St. Ignatius Mission. It should be very quiet with no guests present.

"I shall have a bridesmaid, however," said Bess. "I have just received word that my dearest friend will be here tomorrow—Berenice Morton."

"Mor—ton—did you say—Morton?" asked Mr. Davis, in a strange voice.

"Have I never told you of her?" added Bess, apparently unnoticing any embarrassment. "We were at the convent school together, and just the greatest of chums! I have not seen her since then, and now I can scarcely wait until she arrives. She wrote me that her visit could be only three weeks, but I am sure that she can be prevailed upon to be my bridesmaid, and then she could return with me—with us—as far as New York. Where is her home, did you ask? She, with her father and an invalid sister, have been spending the past few months in the mountains in New Hampshire. I do not know whether they will return to their home near Boston or not. You see—so many—many heartaches were—" Bess could not finish her sentence. The swift rush of tears choked her voice as the flood of memory swept over her. [219]

Twice did Mr. Davis attempt to speak before he felt he had assumed control of his voice. It was not pity, nor sympathy, however, which stirred his soul. It was fear—fear lest she should detect his confusion; fear lest her friend should prove to be the same girl whom he had met only once before—five years before. But then, if she were the same, he had changed so greatly that surely she would not remember him. An invalid sister! Could it be possible that after all she—*she*—was still living! Surely, she had died—he was positive! Perhaps there had been a third sister—there must have been; still ...

"What are you thinking of so seriously?" asked Bess, as his prolonged silence made her turn from the window.

"I was thinking, my dear, of how—of what I have to tell you. I have received word from Washington to come there at once. Undoubtedly it is business concerning my—resignation, which I recently submitted. I fear it may keep me from you for several weeks, and that my return may be impossible before the tenth of October." [220]

"Oh! you need not mind. I am sure that Berenice and I shall be able to enjoy ourselves," said Bess, carelessly. If he felt any chagrin at her indifference he did not exhibit it when he bade her good-bye. As the man remounted his horse and rode away he did not see the interested pair of eyes watching him through the curtains.

As much as he dreaded being parted from his love for several endless weeks, still he felt thankful that he would not be obliged to meet Berenice Morton until shortly before the wedding, as there might be a possibility of his being recognized, and should such be the case he feared the consequences. As it was, he was taking a long chance, and unless something unforeseen should occur he must face the inevitable meeting.

"Ah," he thought, "why not, after I am gone, try to persuade her to come to me? I can easily find some excuse which will make her coming to me imperative!"

As he hastened on he already tried to formulate some plan whereby his return would be unnecessary, and consequently an embarrassing meeting might be eliminated.

BERENICE MORTON'S ARRIVAL

"Stand over there, Berenice, and let me look at you all I want," said Bess, as she and her friend entered the living room.

Mrs. West, after the return from Polson, where she and Bess had gone together to meet their visitor, had slipped quietly away that the two young women might be alone during the first moments.

Berenice Morton did as requested and walked to the far end of the room. Bess clasped her hands across her breast as she feasted her eyes upon her friend. Tall, even taller than Bess herself, and graceful as a swaying reed, she moved with sweet dignity. As she turned about her large, grey eyes, with their dark lashes, her rosy cheeks, aflame with a new excitement, her lips curved in a sweet smile, made a picture, set in a frame of burnished light hair.

"Well—Bess, dear, isn't this enough?" laughingly questioned Berenice, when she felt Bess had inspected her sufficiently.

"How your glasses change your looks! They make you seem so dignified that I really wonder if you are the same girl that used to help me play some of those dreadful pranks. Your hair, which you always declared was just like mine, is ever so much lighter, and—dear me!—so much 'kinkier.' Oh! If I only were g-r-a-n-d like you!"

"If I were only s-w-e-e-t like you!" replied Miss Morton, as again they embraced each other.

"Berenice, of course, I have ten million things to tell you, three of 'whom' are very important. But first you must get freshened up and rested. Then, after luncheon, I'll take you to my den—'way off along the lake, where no one dares to go 'ceptin' me," she said, in a low, sepulchral tone, which might make one surmise all kinds of terrible things.

"Bess! don't take me if there is any danger of mountain lions, or bears, or—or—Indians. Father made me promise to come back with my hair all on and with my body intact," Berenice tried to say seriously, but her sparkling eyes belied her.

"How about your heart, Miss Lady? Did he warn you about that also?" laughed Bess, as she linked her arm through her friend's and led her upstairs into her room.

"How perfectly dear, Bess! No wonder you have been so happy and contented here!"

"Do look at those wonderful mountains, that great expanse of water, those towering trees, that—oh! everything!" ejaculated the stranger, as she gazed out of the opened window. "Isn't it magnificent?"

"Now, do you wonder at all the ravings my letters contained, Berenice?"

"No, I do not, and I do not wonder that you wrote that you could stay here always."

"Always!" thought Bess, "always." And yet soon would she leave this sublime beauty, and she could feast her heart only upon its memory. Could she make the sacrifice?

Bess left her friend and hastened to the dining-room to be of assistance there. She cautioned Mrs. West against saying anything at all concerning Mr. Davis, until she might announce her engagement to Miss Morton.

How deeply Mrs. West and Bess regretted that the "boys" would not reach home until tomorrow.

"And yet," said Bess, "I am glad to get a chance for a word or two before James comes."

A bunch of rose-berries, large and scarlet, intermingled with the white berries on stems of buck-bush, graced the center of the table, while at each plate lay a shining spray of Oregon grape leaves.

After the simple meal was finished the girls arose to leave the room. Berenice reached to pluck some of the rose-berries for her hair, when she abruptly gathered Mrs. West into her arms. She put her cheek against the soft, white hair and kissed her. Then, looking into the woman's dark eyes: "My dear mother's hair was like this," she said, stroking it gently. "Bess tried to tell me in her letters of her 'little Mother,' but she failed. You are dear—more dear than one can say, or tell, or even feel."

Mrs. West's only reply to this unexpected declaration from the dignified stranger was a firm pressure of the girl's hands. She watched the pair as they descended the steps and wandered off toward the lake shore, where she knew Bess sought her favorite retreat.

On and on they walked until at length they came to an abrupt rise in the ground. Bess led the way around the rocks to a huge boulder, softened by mosses and lichens, projecting far out from its supporting rocks. They bent their heads as they entered the partial enclosure, and were soon seated upon large, smooth blocks which had been sawed from a huge pine log. One had been utilized for a table, upon which lay several worn magazines. A thick carpet of pine needles which Bess had gathered and strewn in her den covered the floor. The opening was directly toward the lake, whose waters were now splashing with whitened foam upon the rocky shore.

"There—isn't this a 'really' den? When I kill a bear and a mountain lion I shall place the skins in here; and the antlers from a buck shall be hung above the door."

"What a splendid place to come and dream!"

"Yes," answered Bess. "Henry West helped me to make the chairs, or rather the seats. It was warm work pulling on the big saw, but so competent did I prove that he offered to let me saw the winter's supply of wood," she laughed softly.

Wrapping a blanket about herself and choosing a comfortable seat, Berenice Morton sat anxiously waiting for Bess to begin relating the million important themes, but especially "the first three of whom."

For several moments Bess gazed intently over the lake, huddled snugly in the folds of her blanket. Then, unfastening the beaded belt and withdrawing it from beneath its cover, pulling it

slowly through her fingers, she said: "You—you will surely like Henry West."

She paused for a moment, the while deeply thinking; then continued, deliberately: "So generous, thoughtful, kind; so tender with his mother; so human, so different, so—" and again her thoughts wandered in search of words fit to express her encomium.

"Do you care so much for him, dear? More than for anyone else?" asked the interested listener.

"Oh!—I—you see, Berenice—it was because of this belt, he saved my life," came in an evasive reply.

Bess felt a wave of color surge over her face, and the blood in her heart began to pound violently as she briefly related the story of her perilous adventure and rescue.

"James and Henry West will reach home some time tomorrow, Berenice. James has tried to appear unconcerned ever since he knew you were coming this fall," she laughed, "and I am inclined to believe that perhaps Miss Berenice Morton will be just a little de-e-lighted, too, when the morrow comes." Bess gave her friend an impulsive squeeze that made reply an impossibility.

"Well—I've heard of Henry West and also concerning James Fletcher; what, pray, is the third item of interest?" asked Miss Morton, when she had again resumed her comfortable position.

Bess arose, dropping her blanket near the seat, and walked deliberately outside the opening of her "den." Lifting both her hands to brush her hair from her face, then letting them rest, with fingers intertwined about her head, she turned and looked in at the awaiting listener.

"On the fifteenth of October I am to be married to Mr. Dave Davis, the Indian agent of this reservation!"

Berenice opened her eyes and mouth in wide amazement. Lifting her glasses from her nose and poising them in her fingers, she gazed with astonishment at Bess Fletcher.

"Bess! And you never told me a single word of him before!"

Bess then told her in as few words as possible of her brief courtship and the reason for the hasty marriage; she also outlined her few plans for the wedding, requesting that Berenice write for her father's consent to prolong her visit, that she might assist as bridesmaid. Soon busy tongues were planning details, and by the time the sun's slanting rays lighted up the tiny cavern and warned its occupants of the closing day, every item, each particular, had been planned for the coming nuptials.

The following day the girls began to watch early for the advent of James and Henry. Once, as they sighted several horsemen, they ran down the road, only to be disappointed. It was late in the afternoon, nearly dinner time, when at last they came, tired and dirty. Berenice wondered what the large, woolly things were over their trousers; why their boots had such high heels; what all the rope and "fixin's" about their saddles were used for, as she peered cautiously from the upstairs window.

When Bess finally saw them returning she tried in vain to persuade Berenice to go with her to meet them, and now she decided that the "boys" should not be told until dinner time of the presence of the guest.

Henry slipped from his saddle when he saw Bess coming toward them, and lifting his big hat and holding the impatient horse with the other, said: "Let me be first to congratulate you. James—" but he was interrupted by James hurrying forward and greeting his sister with, "Congratulations, Sister; met Davis early this morning and he told me all about it."

West had taken the reins of James' horse and led him on toward the gate. The girl did not see his face pale under the dark skin, nor had she detected any emotion in his voice as he spoke. She felt just a little hurt at his unconcern, for she had thought that he might care.

The brother, with his arm placed affectionately about his sister, listened to her brief plans and heartily approved of them all.

"I am especially glad, Sister, because I have just made up my mind to return again to my law practice soon. My health seems to be fully restored, and while I enjoy this life, still I believe it to be to my greater interest to return East. And then, too, sometime—I hope—that is—perhaps Ber—" but he was abruptly interrupted by his sister uttering a sudden oh-h-h! and hurrying into the house.

Not long after Mrs. West called "dinner" from the dining-room. James and Henry arose from their respective easy chairs, laboriously and stiffly, and slowly sought their places at the table. Mrs. West also stood behind her chair waiting for the occupants of the other places. James thought he heard a suppressed giggle at the door, but did not face about. Henry had just noticed that two places were still vacant, and his slight curiosity was immediately relieved by two very tall, beautiful, smiling women advancing into the room.

James was about to request his tardy sister to hasten, when, by half turning, he came face to face with Berenice Morton. So completely was he surprised that he could not speak a word. She advanced and held up her hand, which he grasped in both his own as he whispered—"Bee!"

Bess laughingly pulled her aside, and leading her over to the other side of the table waited an instant for Mrs. West to introduce the stranger to her son. Berenice returned the firm pressure of the man's hand as she smiled frankly into his deep eyes. The tempting viands were being shamefully ignored. One girl was too busy with her merry jests, while another could scarcely answer all the interrogatives which were being hurled at her by James.

Mrs. West wondered at her son's loss of appetite and softly asked if he were ill. Sick? Yes! Heart-sick—miserably, utterly, hopelessly heart-sick. Ill with the pain that knows no healing—with a pain that knows no balm! With an enforced smile he assured his mother that he was only tired, and made an effort to join in the merry conversation.

"You two 'boys' must not plan a single thing for the next few weeks, except to 'pack' us girls about. Don't you say so, too, 'little Mother'?" laughed Bess, as they arose from the dinner table.

"That is, of course, if you can endure me so long, Henry; for you can plainly see by that," pointing to the pair already departing through the doorway, "that I shall need dreadfully to have

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some one be a little kind to me, also," she added, with sweetly pouting lips.

His impulse was to reply that he wished he might be kind always, but instead he remarked jocosely: "Perhaps—I may manage—Bess—to 'endure' you. I shall gladly help to entertain your friend in any way I may."

"Come, Henry," said Bess, after she had assisted in clearing the dining-table, "Berenice shall play and I will sing for you and for James."

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Song after song was sung—music, soft and tender, came from the gentle touch of the girl at the piano. Bright, glowing coals were gleaming in the grate where before were snapping brands. Pale moonlight filtered through the curtains and filled the room with soft, luminous light. Silence settled upon all, and each, unconscious of the others, was deeply absorbed in thought.

"The place for dreaming is in bed. Come, my children; it is late and growing cold," said Mrs. West.

What glorious, happy days followed! September, with its soft, warm days, each filled with delightful rides and excursions, had given place to opalescent October, that wonderful month with its brilliant colorings, its ever-changing skies and glorious sunsets. Indian summer lingered on, day after day, and the fervent sunshine made it difficult to realize that soon flaky snow would be falling, covering each nude limb and rock with a winter blanket.

Bess Fletcher had managed during the interim to complete her wedding gown—simple white and severely plain. She had been unusually light-hearted and merry; still, several times when alone, as she thought how rapidly the day of her wedding was approaching, a spasm of pain had seized her, which fairly made her sick. It was a strange sensation which she could not define; and hoping that she would soon overcome it, did not mention it to Mrs. West nor to her friend.

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Every day brought ardent letters, and sometimes Berenice wondered how Bess could wait so long before reading them.

But, most of all, Henry West's mother marveled at her son's changed manner. He entered heartily into all the fun, and even neglected a number of affairs about the ranch to accompany the other three upon some of their long rides. His laugh was frequent and his jesting talk unceasing. Often Bess gazed at him in amazement and tried to solve his strange, new mood. She felt like restraining him sometimes when his merriment seemed almost undignified, and beg of him to be his former self—quiet, calm, or even cold. Once she came upon him quite unawares in the library. He was seated at the table, his arms thrown out upon it, with his face buried in them. He did not hear her enter, and as she touched his arm he sprang suddenly from his seat, overturning the chair. For an instant his face held its expression of misery, then suddenly he burst into a loud, grating laugh. Bess was dumb with bewilderment at his peculiar action.

"Henry—what is the matter? I hate you when you are so unlike yourself! You have been positively horrid for more than a week! Do tell me if you are ill, or what I may do to make you behave!" she stormed at him, her eyes flashing with anger and bright spots burning upon each cheek. Suddenly West checked his laugh and passed his hand against his brow as if to stop its pain. He moistened his parched lips and drew deep, long breaths, while glowing, intense eyes pierced the girl's very soul.

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"Bess—Bess, I'm sorry. Must be I'm not well," he hesitated, as if to catch his breath.

Becoming alarmed, Bess started for the door in search of Mrs. West.

"Stop, Bess—do not go—I need nothing. There is something—something—I have wanted to tell you—so long ago—something—" he sank into a chair unnerved. The girl walked softly to his side and placed her hand upon his own. He clutched it with a cruel grasp, then said: "Please go over there—I cannot talk—if you are so near me!"

"Go on, Henry," requested the girl, after waiting what seemed an interminable length of time. Her heart was wrung with pity, and she could scarcely endure seeing his wretchedness.

"I—I am sorry," he began slowly, as if with an effort to find words, "that you are to marry—that man. Bess—" rising abruptly and facing her, "I have grave reasons—believe me, for hating him as I do. They cannot be told without injury to—to—" but his sentence was interrupted by the sudden entrance of James and Berenice.

"Well! Here are the two pikers!" chided James. "We have been waiting ages for you!"

"Henry is not feeling well. Let's stay at home today."

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James gave his sister a packet of letters which she scanned carelessly. At her brother's request to hurry and see when Davis was coming, she opened his letter. It was very brief. All it contained was a request that their plans be changed and that she come to New York for the wedding, where he would await her. No explanations were given for his request. James saw that the news contained in the letter was displeasing, and taking it, at her request that he read, saw at a glance what was written.

"Well, Bess—shall you go?" and he briefly announced the contents of the letter to the others.

"James—please send a wire to Mr. Davis that my plans will remain unchanged!" and she swept haughtily from the room.

"Gee—I admire her spunk, don't you, Bee?" said James to the girl, as she hastened after her friend.

One day, as Bess and Berenice were wandering rather aimlessly among the pines quite near the house, Berenice exclaimed: "Oh! what a novelty 'twould be to have the ceremony out-of-doors! Here—right here!"

Her suggestion had reference to a large, flat rock completely overrun with beautiful, creepy kinnikinick, and resting at the base of a large tamarack tree. The small firs made a dark-green background, and entwined about them hung clusters of clematis, now white with downy, smoky balls.

"Yes—it would be pretty. All right, we shall! Just think, dear, only one day more, and then—"

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"Oh, my! Somehow the time has seemed too short," remarked Bess, and her friend could not fail to hear the sadness which crept into her voice.

Dave Davis had written that his business had detained him much longer than he had thought, but that he should be able to reach *HW* ranch on the fourteenth. However, on the morrow came a messenger with a letter from Mr. Davis, stating that he could not possibly reach the ranch before the day of the wedding, and that nothing, nothing on earth should prevent his being there in ample time.

"I shall explain in detail as soon as I see you, dear," the message ran, "and cannot express how the enforced delay has hurt me."

"Dear me, Bess; I had hoped to know him intimately before 'the day,'" said Berenice, truly regretful.

If Bess felt any displeasure or annoyance her manner nor her reply did not betray it. Her greater concern, seemingly, was whether or no Henry West would be home in time to attend the ceremony. Two days before he had received word from a distant part of the range that some trouble among the stock demanded his immediate attention. As he hastily bade her good-bye, he said he hoped to be back on the fifteenth, or at least in time to say good-bye before she and Berenice should take their departure.

A WEDDING DAY

At last the morning dawned. Berenice Morton sprang out of bed and hastened to scan the sky. Roseate beauty, softened by a line of tinted clouds, gladdened all the east. The rugged outline of the mountains lay clear-cut against the flaming sky. The sun heralded the new-born day with wondrous grandeur. The entranced spectator turned with an exclamation of joy, but discovered that Bess was still in profound sleep. She took a step forward to awaken her, but refrained, as she thought how worn out the girl must be after all the strenuous labor of decorating the rooms the day before.

So soundly had she herself slept that she did not know that Bess had not closed her eyes until dawn. All through the night her mind ran from one thing to another. Once she was seized by the same pain, grown so frequent of late, which filled her with fear,—but fear for what she could not analyze.

Berenice quietly drew the shades and, hastily dressing, left the room. Mrs. West also thought it wise to let the sleeper rest as long as she could, that she might be able to meet the strain of the day. At the first stir she heard, Berenice ran upstairs with a dainty breakfast. It was late, dreadfully so—nine o'clock, Bess noticed, as she stretched and yawned with no apparent concern.

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"Come, Old Sleepy! You better hurry, or Mr. Davis will have to be entertained by me when he arrives!"

"Berenice, please find James and tell him that he must receive and entertain—a—Mr. Davis, as I shall be too busy getting into my 'gordeous' robes, as 'Peter Pan' would say," said Bess, half jestingly, as she began to make her toilet. "Hurry back, dear, as I cannot dress without you," she called from the banister as Berenice ran down the steps.

Presently Mrs. West came into the girl's room with the announcement that everything was ready,—the luncheon table, the salad, the dessert,—everything. Father Damien had come an hour ago and was resting in the library.

"Now, all we are waiting for is the bridegroom and the hour of noon," laughed Mrs. West, as she took Bess into her motherly arms and held her tightly for a moment.

Bess snuggled close and said, with half a sigh, "Oh—h—little Mother; I half wish he would not come! I am afraid, I dread assuming this awful responsibility!"

"Why—child—how strangely you talk! Surely, you are not in earnest!"

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"I have had the strangest feeling in regard to—to my going away ever since I promised to go. I cannot bear to leave you—my home, this happiness, these hills—all—" The girl buried her face against the woman's neck and burst into tears.

"Bess, dear, no more tears today. Here comes Berenice; don't let her see!"

But the eyes were not dried quickly enough, for as Berenice came hurrying into the room she exclaimed: "So you're like all the other brides; they all have to have a weep, I'm told," and she gave Bess a vigorous shake as she continued: "Cheer up, dearie—for—'behold, the bridegroom co-om-eth.'" She sang the familiar air in closing her adjuration.

Berenice hastened about, putting on the last few touches, and then quickly made her own toilet.

"How are you impressed with my—'man'?" asked Bess.

"James did not give me an opportunity to see him, but hurried him off to make his own 'gordeous' toilet. We shall have to wait now until you are Mr. and Mrs. Davis."

"Oh!" came from Bess' lips in a startled breath, as again she felt a sharp pain at her heart.

James had been instructed that exactly at twelve o'clock he, with Mr. Davis, should proceed to the tree and wait for Bess and her bridesmaid there at the rock. Mrs. West had watched until the last moment for her son's return, but he had not come, although one of the cowboys said he thought he had seen him early in the morning. She decided it must have been one of the other men passing through the yards.

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Bess heard the stroke of twelve, then she listened until the two men had passed down the steps. Mrs. West, dressed in soft white, met the two young women as they reached the foot of the stairs.

Berenice wore a pale pink gown and carried a bunch of autumn leaves and flowers. The simple dress which Bess wore made her look more girlish than ever. About her soft, brown hair was entwined the waxen leaves of the kinnikinick with its scarlet drops, while long, tendril branches of the same were fastened from her shoulder to her waist. Somehow it seemed more fitting for an autumn bride than June roses, and Bess had insisted upon wearing the kinnikinick in preference to anything else. Half in earnest, she said she wished she might also wear her "precious" beaded belt! As she stopped a moment before going out-of-doors, Mrs. West kissed her tenderly and gave her hand a pressure of love and strength, then led the way to where the others, together with Father Damien, stood waiting.

"The birds are the orchestra! See that beautiful leaf! Hear that saucy squirrel!" said Bess, disconnectedly, as she walked slowly forward, clinging to her friend's arm.

Berenice's attention was fixed in wonderment upon several Indians with squaws standing about among the trees. They had heard of the agent's prospective marriage and decided to attend, in hopes of receiving some of the "muck-a-muck" and participating in the "big eat."

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As Bess lifted her eyes to Dave Davis' face when she took his extended hand and was assisted upon the broad surface of the rock, she wondered at the deep love it revealed.

"It has been so very long, dear," he whispered, as his lips brushed her hair.

The priest had opened his prayer book, and, waiting an instant for the pair to face about, began: "*In nomine patris, et filii, et—*"

A smothered cry came from Bess' lips the next moment, as she looked at the face of Berenice Morton. The visitor was still clinging to the hand James had given her to lead her to her position near Bess. Great veins throbbled at her temples, her mouth was opened wide, while horror-stricken eyes stared directly at Dave Davis. Mrs. West sprang quickly to the girl's side and assisted James in supporting her quavering form.

"Go on!" commanded Davis to the disturbed priest, with asperity.

"Wait!" came the countermand from a resolute voice by his side.

With supreme effort Berenice Morton straightened to her full height, flung her arm, with wide extended fingers, directly at the scarlet, angry face of Dave Davis. For a single brief instant there was an awful silence. All seemed suddenly turned into insensible stone! [240]

"You—Dayton Davies! My own sister's betrayer!" came in a shriek.

Suddenly an ashen grey spread over the accused man's countenance, while Bess Fletcher, as the dreadful denouement forced itself into her soul, reeled back against the tree.

As she clutched at her heart the scarlet berries of the kinnikinick squeezed through her fingers, like huge drops of bright blood. Her face was as white as her gown; her lips were rigid and pale. She saw, with impassive concern, Berenice's fainting form supported by James and Mrs. West, placed upon the carpet of pine needles. It had been scarcely a moment since the terrible words had stunned them all, and yet it seemed hours.

"A mistake, Father Damien, continue!" said Davis, with a voice hoarse with anger.

Bess raised her hand with a forbidding gesture, and the priest, seeing the look of determination upon the girl's face, needed no words to tell him that his services were not needed.

He softly closed his book and moved silently away.

Dave Davis stepped doggedly from the rock and turned with parted lips.

"Go—go now!" cried Bess. "Atone, if you can, for that other woman's living death! Restore, if you can, her loved ones' broken hearts! Recall from that grave out yonder the victim of your perfidy! Smile, too—if you will, at how nearly—" but her throat closed convulsively. [241]

As soon as he had placed Berenice Morton on the ground, with Mrs. West administering to her, James rose to come to his sister's aid. He was held spell-bound by her tragic attitude, until the storm of censure which she hurled at the passive man had spent its fury. Springing to the rock he placed a protecting arm about his sister. In a flash he had divined the reason of Henry West's bitter enmity, and wondered how he had refrained from shooting the betrayer of girls.

Dave Davis tried in vain again to speak, but at the first words he uttered he was silenced by James saying hotly:

"You better go quickly—before I—before Henry West returns—or take the consequences!"

"Tell that Indian for me, please," Davis sneered, as he turned to leave, "that this is his doing; that the score shall not remain unsettled—long!"

Without even glancing again at Bess, he strode forward and motioned to one of the perplexed Indians, who, after a few brief instructions, hastened toward the stables.

Bess aided Mrs. West and James in resuscitating the unconscious girl, and by the time she could walk and was removed to the house, all sign of Dave Davis had vanished.

Leaving James with her friend, Bess hurried up to her room, where no one might witness her uncontrollable passion. Not a tear came to moisten her burning eyes, not a sob to stifle the pounding blood at her temples. For several moments she paced rapidly back and forth, her hands shut tight, her nostrils wide with heavy breathing; then, falling upon her knees beside the bed, she buried her face in her arms. [242]

Mrs. West cautiously opened the door and was about to enter to comfort the girl, when she paused as the words of a prayer faintly reached her: "Oh! My God, I thank Thee for preserving me this day from danger worse than death! Grant peace to those tender souls who guarded me from a fate like their own. Keep me always near Thee; help me to solace those who suffer." She did not enter the room, for she knew the Great Comforter was there before her.

It was fully an hour when those in the living-room heard Bess descending the stairs. James hurried anxiously forward as she entered the room dressed for riding.

"There—James, please do not look so. See! I—even I—am smiling! I do not need sympathy—I want congratulations. Think how much worse it might have been! Will you get Mauchacho for me, please? Do you mind, Bee, if I go for a ride? Please, little Mother, do not grow anxious, for I shall not return until I am feeling—feeling rested. No, I am not hungry—I could not eat," she added, in response to Mrs. West's request that she first partake of luncheon. Pressing her lips to the still pallid brow on the pillow, and holding Mrs. West in her arms as she kissed her, she hastened out of the house. Presently James brought her horse and watched her silently as she rode out of sight toward the north, and as he turned with a sigh to re-enter the house he thought: "I wish I had as much of the Fletcher grit as she has." [243]

CHAPTER XXVII

"I—AM—BUT—AN—INDIAN"

Mauchacho was permitted to choose his own trail and pace. His rider did not notice when he stopped to nibble at some tempting grass, or stretched his neck for a few remaining green leaves.

A loud neigh startled the girl from her lethargy, and she discovered a saddled horse standing near the entrance to her "den." At first she felt a slight alarm, then saw that it was one of the ranch horses. Dismounting, and leaving her horse with trailing reins, she hurried to learn the cause of the empty saddle. A cry escaped her, as directly at the opening of the tiny cavern she came face to face with Henry West.

At first she scarcely believed it was he, so changed did he seem. His straight, black hair was in matted disorder; great seams lined his brow and chin; the erstwhile white silken shirt lay torn back from his throat, soiled and begrimed; his sombrero, twisted into a shapeless mass, was clutched in his hands, while the great, black, shaggy "chapps" made him seem like some formidable creature.

He stared at Bess benumbed and uncomprehending. Why was she here? Why had she not gone with him whom she had wedded? Was it a ghost come to bring still greater agony? Slowly stretching forth his hand, fearful lest the apparition should vanish, he felt it grasped eagerly by one pulsating with warm, pulsing life. She lifted her eyes to his with an assuring gaze as she spoke:

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"It is really I—Bess Fletcher! I have been saved from ignominy by Grace Morton's living death—by the broken heart of Helen West."

"You knew!" gasped Henry West, stepping back abruptly.

"How could I have known? Fate, at an almost fatal moment, disclosed the perfidy which you had so cowardly concealed."

"Yes, a coward—a damned coward, who could not tell of his only sister's dishonor to save you—even you, from a life of misery! Since early dawn have I fought here for the courage to go to you, to tell you, but I dared not; had I seen that—that dog again, he would have been killed," came in a frenzied outburst, as Henry clasped his hand over his holster. "This same bullet has been waiting—for nearly two years," he said, as he withdrew the gun and held it in his palm.

Bess reached out her hand. Taking the treacherous weapon and emptying the chambers, she gave it back to West. "There, Henry, you will not need it now; he has gone."

"Gone! Yes, I was told yesterday that his resignation was not voluntary; another man is already at the agency to fill the position."

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"Where are you going alone?" asked Henry West, as the girl remounted and turned Mauchacho's head toward the rugged north shore of the lake.

"Where my horse may take me. Your mother is looking for you at home," answered Miss Fletcher, in a hard voice, as she bent her head beneath the branches of a small pine and rode away.

West stood watching her as she now and again came into view from behind a clump of bushes or around some jagged rocks, trying to clear the mist from his brain and eyes, and assuring himself that she was not an hallucination. At length he took the reins from the ground and led his horse back to the ranch. No one saw him enter the house nor go to his room; and when he joined the others late in the afternoon no one dreamed that the tall, dark man, so immaculately dressed, so calm and quiet, had a moment of anguish.

James was seated near the couch when Henry West entered the room. He arose quickly, words of explanation ready upon his lips, but he was silenced by a gently upraised hand. Mrs. West had also hastened to her son's side with a glad smile of welcome upon her face.

Placing his arm tenderly about her, West said: "James—I know. I saw Bess with her horse riding—" and he swept his hand toward the northward as he bent and kissed the soft, white head against his shoulder. The mother felt the tremor in his voice and the quiver in his heart, and she knew then the secret which his soul could no longer conceal. This was a tragedy! Her son, with the blood of red-skinned warriors in his veins, loved—loved hopelessly! She dared not lift her face from the shelter of his breast. Seeing that his mother was concerned, he led her gently into her room. Here she told him the details of the affair, and when she had finished he knew that she was still ignorant of the true cause of her daughter's death.

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A great sigh of relief escaped him. He could not bear that the trusting mother should now, after the sharp edge of her grief had been dulled, have her heart break anew.

"James was saying just before you came, Henry, that he should take Bess back to New York with him. He thinks possibly they will be ready to go when Miss Morton leaves. Oh! it seems as if I cannot—have her go, Henry! She has grown into my life so fully that if she goes away it will be like pulling out my heart!"

"I think, mother—I—I feel that it is the only thing for her to do. I cannot persuade James to remain, even as half owner of the *HW* ranch and stock. Perhaps we may go away, too, mother,—away from here; away from these hills, these scenes; away from the West and our people. Mother—mother!" he cried, "the sun will no longer bring the daylight and warmth when she is gone!"

For several moments neither said a word, so overwhelmed was each with hopelessness. Then a gentle touch upon the arm caused Henry West to lift his face and reply to the question which his mother scarcely breathed loud enough for him to hear.

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"Have I told her of my love?" He repeated her question. "I could not. Now I am only sad with longing; I am not crushed with cruel certainty. I am—but—an Indian—insensible to love, incapable of feeling; unfit for any place; disqualified, alone! An Indian!"

Never before had she heard such bitter words from her son. Tears filled her eyes.

"Forgive me, my mother!" came in a voice full of tenderness and love.

The sun had set, leaving a crimson glow on the hills, which swiftly faded into the early gloom. James, hearing a horse, hurried to assist his sister, but met instead a man who had brought a message for Berenice Morton. She tore the envelope open hastily and read its contents at a glance.

"My sister is—dead," she said in a whisper, with a face even more pale than it had been during the long afternoon. "I must go at once; my father needs me. If he had only called me sooner. No—no, I am glad he did not—for Bess' sake," she added hurriedly.

Just then Bess came, filling the room with the perfume of fresh air. Her face was still pale and drawn, although she tried to assume an air of serenity. She was immediately apprised of the message, and began at once to plan for her friend's hasty departure. [249]

Berenice was sent to bed to rest and sleep, while the others packed her trunk and made all the preparations to drive to Selish at midnight. Bess tried to persuade her brother to accompany Miss Morton, as she ought not to go on such a long journey alone. "I will finish your packing and send your trunks later on," she argued when he said he could not leave so suddenly.

"We planned this afternoon while you were gone to go all at the same time," said James.

"I do not wish to go now, James. I feel—I wish to stay here where it is quiet, to rest."

At last, when Bess had consented to come very soon, at least as quickly as she should feel herself again, James decided to go on to New York with Berenice Morton.

A WINTER'S VIGIL

Everything was ready for the long drive shortly after midnight. As Bess stepped out-of-doors and beheld the glorious moonlight making everything as bright as gold, she wished she were being tucked snugly into the seat beside her friend, that she might enjoy the drive over the hard, smooth road.

The good-byes had all been said, but Bess climbed up beside Berenice Morton to give her one more farewell kiss, then ran quickly into the house. She flung herself upon the couch and burst into passionate, burning tears, the first which had come to release the tension upon the overwrought nerves.

Mrs. West sat quietly beside her, soothing her, gently touching her brow and hands. At length the quiet, regular respirations told her that Bess had fallen asleep. She softly folded a blanket about the girl; then, replenishing the fire in the grate, sat down to watch and wait until she should awaken. Once, when she could not hear a breath nor see the slight movement of the blanket, she hastily touched the unconscious form. The eyes opened for a moment, then, with a smile upon her lips Bess immediately relapsed into sleep. All night the woman watched, heedless of the chill creeping upon her, disregarding of her own great weariness. The dawn crept in at the window and peered into her white, careworn face, pointing a warning finger; then lifted it toward the mountain-tops and behold 'twas morning!

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With stiffened limbs Mrs. West arose, and leaving a tender kiss upon the girl's hand, turned to leave the room. With the flash of a sun-beam shining into her eyes, Bess sprang to her feet just as Mrs. West reached the door.

"Little Mother! Is it late? Why! I have not been in bed!" she exclaimed with bewilderment, as she saw that she was still dressed.

"Do not hurry, dear. I—I just came in to make a fire, and to—to—see—if—you were—warm," came with effort, as the woman held onto the door for support. Bess ran quickly to her.

"Mother—Mother, what is it? See! you are cold,—your hands, your face! You have been here with me all night? Oh! why—why?" cried Bess, half beside herself. She almost carried Mrs. West across the hall into her room. Quickly she disrobed the shaking form and placed it in bed. She worked with all her strength, now hurrying with hot water, now rubbing and chafing the rigid limbs. For hours she labored unceasingly, but no relief came to the stricken woman. Mrs. White had been summoned, and together they worked, doing everything within their power and knowledge to relieve the sufferer.

A physician could not reach the ranch before the next day, and Bess feared that he might then be too late. Oh, if Henry had only sent one of the men to make the drive to Selish instead of insisting upon going himself, she thought, as she went to the door at frequent intervals to see if he were coming.

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When he came and saw how ill his mother was, dire forebodings filled his mind. She did not know him as he sat by her side and spoke her name, but kept calling "Helen." Bess would respond to the call and at once the woman would be pacified.

For days Henry West and Bess attended the sick woman, relieving each other, that a few hours' sleep might be snatched. Once when she called her son's name Henry answered eagerly, "I'm near, Mother dear! Don't you know me?"

With great effort she lifted her pale, wan hand and gently touched his cheek with her fingers. Tears of joy that she knew him rushed to his eyes, but in a moment more she was again calling hopelessly for her son to come.

Pneumonia, the physician had named the illness. He came often by boat from Kalispell and remained for several hours each time. Bess would not permit her place to be supplanted by a nurse so long as the physician approved of her work. In fact, he told Henry West, that no one could do better nor more than Miss Fletcher. Yet, when he saw that the girl was growing thin and pale, tired from the hard work of nursing, and worn because of the mental strain, he tried to force her to desist lest she should become ill. With a look of entreaty in her brown eyes and a determined smile upon her firm lips she said that no one could attend a Mother like a daughter.

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When the first snow came late one November day, filling all the land with purity, crowning every rock with softness, clothing each outstretched limb on pine and fir with a garment of whitest down, there also came a change in the sick-room. Mrs. West had lain in a profound slumber for several hours, and when she awoke her mind was cleared of the mist. She was too weak to move and very faintly came the words, "Henry—Bess," as her eyes moved to the two silent watchers on either side of the bed. Oh, the joyous looks of understanding which these two exchanged, to know that after all, their care and watching and waiting had been rewarded!

Weeks followed. Mrs. West was propped up against her pillow for a short time on Christmas day, when the Yuletide was marked with decorations of beautiful Oregon grape and long sprays of kinnikinick which Bess had dug from beneath the snow and placed artistically in the sick-room. Bess sang, at her request, one of her beautiful songs. Tokens of remembrance came from James and Berenice Morton, which filled the girl with sadness and loneliness. Toward evening, as she went out to refresh herself with a short ride, she discovered a beautiful, new saddle and bridle upon her horse.

When at last the long, anxious winter gave place to promising springtime, Mrs. West slowly convalesced from her tedious illness. May came with calling birds, the tender greens, the soft air at noon-day, bringing strength to her each day. Bess, too, was growing rosy cheeked and strong from her long rides in the fresh, pure air. She seemed to be as happy and vivacious as when she had come to *HW* Ranch a year before. The ordeal of Mrs. West's illness had crowded out her own

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painful experience and had made her sweeter, stronger, better than she ever had been before. When bitter moments of remembrance occurred to her she fought out her misery alone, and no other eyes ever saw her pain or knew that the sting was not wholly gone. Once James had written her that he had seen Dave Davis—or rather Dayton Davies—in New York; that at first he had not recognized him so changed and dissolute was his appearance.

Now that Mrs. West was fully recovered, Bess had written to her brother that she would soon rejoin him in New York. She had wished first to spend a few days in witnessing the round-up of horses in June. Bess had been anxious to attend one of the round-ups, and now she decided to avail herself of the opportunity of witnessing some of the marvelous exhibitions of which she had heard so much.

THE BRAND *HW*

Henry West had been gone upon the round-up for a week before Bess Fletcher and Mrs. White started. The plan was for them to ride to the west shore of the Big Arm of the lake upon the appointed day, where Henry West would meet them and accompany them to the camp. The two women were ready for the long ride early in the morning, and as they proceeded along the road they chatted and laughed like happy, careless children.

As they neared the vicinity where Bess had spent the happy, pleasant days in camp the autumn before, she felt conflicting emotions of pleasure and pain. Swerving from the road she led the way along the path to the deserted camp ground. The winter had not destroyed every token, for there were still the stakes where rested the dining-table; the five, large cottonwoods still bore evidences of convenient shelves and towel racks, of gun supports and where the hammock had been fastened. A faded ribbon which lay partly concealed by fallen leaves was lifted tenderly by Bess, as it recalled to her the dear little girl who had worn it. Mrs. White, one of the group, heard her give a sigh as she placed the ribbon in her bosom and hurried Mauchacho out onto the main road again. [256]

In the distance Bess could discern Henry West awaiting their coming. When they reached him he made them dismount and rest, as Mrs. White, who was not accustomed to such long rides, was plainly becoming fatigued. They enjoyed their lunch, and after becoming completely refreshed proceeded to the camp which Henry told them was at the extreme end of the Big Draw.

What a marvelous and strange place the Big Draw seemed to Bess! A perfectly level stretch of nine miles which looked like only one; high, sloping hills lined both sides, which made it seem like some mighty river-bed run dry. No cattle were grazing upon the succulent grass, because, as Bess learned from Henry West, it was too far for them to go to water. He pointed out to them, up in a gulch to the left of the draw, a deserted cabin, near which trickled a tiny spring. Bess wished a drink, but when he told them the place was called Rattlesnake Gulch and that the Frenchman and his squaw had been forced to leave the place because of the venomous intrusions, she hastily recovered from her thirst and hurried on.

At last the glow of the camp-fires was seen; the numerous tents gave assurance of a good night's rest, while the delicious aroma of coffee told the weary visitors that supper was ready.

Bess and Mrs. White were greeted and made welcome by the several other women in camp. Seeing that the little woman was almost ready to drop, Bess asked if she might remove her to their tent. Here she was made comfortable and was soon enjoying the tea and toast which one of the women brought to her. [257]

During the night the new, strange noises, as well as the brilliant moonlight made sleep impossible to Bess. She crept quietly out of bed and wrapping a huge blanket around her, stepped out before the tent. How wondrous was the night! In the distant moonlight she could see the wranglers who were guarding the restless herd of horses, riding slowly back and forth. She heard a boyish voice singing softly as he rode about the cavie. Just now she discovered quite near the tent, a man rolled in a blanket and asleep upon the ground, his head resting upon a saddle. With a startled movement she turned to re-enter her shelter, when a deep, low voice said, "Do not be afraid Bess. I am sleeping here that you—that the ladies may feel secure." It was Henry West.

The grey dawn came creeping up through the long draw and peered into Bess' tent before she could close her eyes and lose herself in sleep. When the first pale ray of morning broke, she saw the man who had kept vigil during the night, arise hastily from his impromptu bed and hurry away. She then fell asleep, dreaming of flight before the mad rush of wild horses, and again seemed to feel an iron hold grasping her arm and lifting her high out of danger's path. With a bewildered start she awoke to discover that Mrs. White was clasping her arm and shaking her vigorously. [258]

"Hurry and get up! What in the world were you dreaming of? I could scarcely arouse you! See, breakfast is over and the men have all gone after the horses. If you expect to see the branding you will have to hurry," said Mrs. White, as her busy fingers assisted Bess in making her hasty toilet.

At several different points she could see the smoke arising from the branding fires and the men riding unceasingly to cut out the victims of the red-hot irons.

The women had started out to watch the performance, when a great cry of pain and the smell of burning flesh reached Bess. For an instant she stood frozen with horror, then without a word to her companions turned and fled back to her tent. Here she sat in a huddled heap with her fingers thrust into her ears. Here the other women discovered her, but no word of coaxing or joking derision succeeded in drawing her out again to watch the nauseous spectacle of branding. At noon-time, when all the others were hungry and enjoying the delicious roast, Bess felt sick at the very mention of food. All she wanted was her horse so that she might ride far away from all the confusion and heart-rending sounds.

Henry West asked Bess if she would ride part way with one of the women who was returning to her home at Dayton Creek. "By the time you return the branding will be over for today, and then tomorrow I will accompany you and Mrs. White part of the way home. I cannot tell you how sorry I am that you are feeling so disturbed," said West. [259]

"I am ashamed of being such a—a baby, but the sight of pain or suffering always fills me with horror. I cannot bear it," answered Bess, putting on her gloves and sombrero preparatory to accompanying the woman on her long ride.

How glad she was to leave the camp behind and to ride out into the clear, bright air! The

gentle slopes on either side of the Big Draw were soft with the delicate green of the tamaracks, whose vivid verdure was enhanced by the dark branches of the pines and fir trees. Great rocks of varied hues jutted forth in places as if they concealed the den of some formidable mountain lion.

So impressed was Bess at the sublime grandeur and beauty of the scene that she was oblivious of her companion.

"You are enjoying the view, also, Miss Fletcher?" asked the woman.

"I beg your pardon for being so rude. Somehow, words always spoil this for me," answered the abstracted girl, as she drew herself together and made a sweeping gesture toward the bordering hills and distant mountains. Presently they neared the gulch with its deserted cabin, and Bess gave an involuntary shudder at the sight of its isolated loneliness. They started their horses into a swift gallop, and before long came in sight of the great, high cliff near Dayton Creek. [260]

"There, Miss Fletcher, I think you have come far enough. I'll take the trail across to the cliff and will soon be home. I fear you have come too far. A storm seems to be coming."

Bess scanned the sky and saw dark clouds rapidly rising from the south-west. A sharp flash of lightning, unusual for June in the mountains, gave them both warning to hurry. The one turned her horse toward the cliff, while the other reined Mauchacho about to re-enter the Big Draw. The swift beating of a horse's hoofs behind her made her give a swift glance over her shoulder. She caught a glimpse of some man, probably one of the round-up men, riding hurriedly in the direction of the camp. She felt glad that she would not have to go on alone, for now the warning flashes were growing more frequent, while the wind was gradually increasing. She noticed the horse's speed slacken, heard a commanding voice speak to the animal, then felt the breath from its nostrils as it reached her side. She waited an instant for the man to speak, then lifted her face abruptly to look at the one so near her, a smile of salutation parting her lips. For the flash of an instant the smile lasted, then a look of incredulity crept into her eyes and stopped her heart beats. Mauchacho had instantly responded to the tight, resisting hand upon the bridle and stood taut as a cow-horse. Deep, glowing eyes held her fascinated so that she could scarcely catch her breath! What phantom was this, so like yet so different from the man who passed out of her life! A face thin and worn, with great, burning, piercing eyes; lips thick and distended above a quivering chin! Could such a transformation be wrought? [261]

With a sob she recovered her senses as the man grasped her hand in his own. "Why are you here?" she cried, trying in vain to extricate her hand from his loathsome grasp.

"Why? Because—because I had to see you again," replied the man with a voice still deep and low, yet hard. "Yes—look at me—look well at the result of your faithlessness! Do I seem like the Dave Davis whom you knew a year ago?" and he clutched her hand with a grasp that made her cry out in pain.

A strange, loud laugh burst from him as he nearly pulled her out of her saddle toward him.

"Release me, you—you—"

"Say it! Brute! God, yes—a damned brute, and all because I loved you!"

A vivid flash made the already frightened girl tremble still more. She begged the man to allow her to proceed.

"You are going over to that cow-camp where that Indian is. I heard you were there and was even willing to risk my precious head for just one glimpse of you. Come! If you must go, I shall go with you."

Bess knew that it was useless to try to escape, so she hurried her horse on as swiftly as she dared. The wind had now risen to its height and was blowing a gale. The lightning brought a single drop of rain from the great, fleeing clouds which hid the sky and filled the land with oppressive, early darkness. Great trees swayed against each other and loud crashes told of a mighty monarch which could not resist the strength of the storm. [262]

"Come, we must seek shelter from these falling trees," said the man, whose worn face was pale in the fury of the storm.

Taking Mauchacho by the bit he turned into Rattlesnake Gulch and hastened toward the old cabin.

"Stop! I am not afraid of the storm. You shall let me go on—alone," cried the terrified girl, as she pulled in vain at the horse's bridle. Seeing that her efforts were useless, she sprang from the saddle, half falling to the ground. By the time she had recovered her footing, Davis had also dismounted and had reached her side. As he did so his horse gave an alarmed bound and tore away at full speed. With an oath at his loss the man turned to secure Mauchacho, who was standing with trailing reins and dejected head near his mistress. Just then a great tree snapped and fell crashing to the ground. Taking Bess by the arm the determined man carried her into the cabin. How dark and gloomy was the place! A mountain rat scurried out of sight at the intrusion. Releasing his hold the man walked sullenly across the room and stood watching the fury of the storm from the open doorway. [263]

Bess half crouched against the logs of the wall, almost frenzied with fear. The howling, shrieking wind; the crashing trees, the awful lightning without. Within, a danger greater and more terrible than any storm could be! Her hand, which had clutched at her heart, fell slowly by her side. What was that her fingers touched that instantly filled her heart with hope and sent the blood throbbing through the congealed veins! She closed her hand firmly over the handle of her Smith and Wesson, the gun which had so long lain in its hidden pocket all unneeded. But now, now—! Could it be that even the shadow of love for this man had ever possessed her? Had she not long ago seen and felt the latent repulsion? Was this transformation made by just retribution or an avenging God? A feeling almost of pity swept over her at the horrible change which she beheld in the man. Tears of sadness at the sight of the wreck filled her eyes and made her lips tremble. The man slowly turned and looked at Bess before she realized that he had stirred, so deeply was she engrossed.

"Ah—little girl, you are sorry for me; you do still care for me; I see it—I feel it, know it," came in a voice at first soft and caressing in its tenderness, then swelling with a crescendo of hope till it fairly shouted in its intensity.

He made a swift, decisive step toward her, but was checked as suddenly by her firm, hard outburst. "Stop—do not come one step nearer! You once saw me kill a rattlesnake! I can—do—it again!" Her teeth shut hard and her wondrous eyes narrowed to tiny slits, as with a steady, determined movement she drew the pistol from its pocket and rested her hand deliberately across her left arm. So she stood, fearlessly, confidently. No words were needed for the man to know how utterly lost was his recrudescing hope.

[264]

"Bess Fletcher, I am not unarmed," he said threateningly. "I—could—kill you!" Not even her eyelash quivered as her steady gaze held his own. A faint, scornful smile played for an instant upon her lips. Nor yet did she move when she heard from out the storm Mauchacho's loud neigh in response to another horse's call. Davis suddenly turned to the window and his face grew dark. "West!" he cried hoarsely, and wrenched the door open, attempting to escape under cover of the small firs. He was too late. In the dim light of the swiftly abating storm Bess saw a wide, swaying rope suddenly descend and curl its quivering folds securely about the fugitive's body, pinioning him within its tightening hold.

West leaped from his horse. Without a word he secured the lariat about his captive. Bess came hurrying to him, her pistol still in her hand.

He caught sight of the weapon.

"I came too soon," he said. "You would have used my gift."

"Oh—Henry—you came just in time," sobbed the girl. "What are you going to do," she demanded as West told her to get on her horse, at the same time lifting the helpless man with superhuman strength and thrusting him into his own saddle.

[265]

The new-comer grasped his horse by the bridle and started with long, rapid strides down the gulch, followed by Mauchacho and his helpless rider. The strain of the past hour had completely unnerved the girl, who with difficulty held her seat in the saddle. On walked the determined man leading the way. On rode the captive in dogged silence, while Bess followed scarcely knowing whither nor why.

The storm with all its fury and havoc had passed. Faint flashes beyond the distant mountains showed where its wrath was weakening. Twilight, soft and mystical was settling on the hills and weirdly filling the expanse of the Big Draw. Like the gleam of a great evil eye shone in the distance the fire of the branders, which the wind had fanned into glowing coals. As they neared this spot Davis spoke for the first time.

"What are you going to do with me?"

Bess waited with bated breath for West's reply. For a full moment he walked on as if he had not heard. Then he said undecisively, "The boys in camp shall decide."

"Look here, West, this a damned mean way to treat any man. I demand that you release me—you cowardly Indian!"

[266]

The Indian walked taciturnly on, swiftly, steadily. As he neared the glowing fire, its ruddy light painted his face as red as a warrior's. Several of the irons were still sticking in the fire where the boys had forgotten them as they hastened from the storm. Mauchacho shied when he passed the fire with its irons, as if the sting of their torture was still fresh in his mind.

"Say West—this has gone far enough. Besides—I—Miss Fletcher accompanied me into that cabin—because she wished to—freely—"

But before he could utter another single word of the cowardly lie, West sprang at him and dragged him from the horse. Grasping the rope firmly he drew the resisting man directly toward the fire and flung him mercilessly to the ground. With one hand he snatched a red-hot iron from the fire; with the other he tore open the man's shirt and despite the restraining hold of a woman's hand upon his arm he seared the bared breast with the scorching brand!

"You dog," he roared, "read that burning brand! Know that *HW* means Honor Women! Honor! Learn if you can what it means! When again you try to destroy a woman's life—let your fingers seek this everlasting seal; and for God's sake, if not your own and her's, let the purport of the brand restrain you!"

Without another word he loosened the man, placed him again in the saddle and turned the horse's head toward the east where already a great, round moon lighted the way. West gave the horse a cut with the quirt and soon horse and man were out of sight.

[267]

In an unconscious heap upon the ground lay Bess, where she had fallen as the smoke from the burning flesh filled her nostrils.

West stood gazing down at the white face and pulseless temples. His own heart had scarcely resumed its beating and was still pounding with choking throbs in his throat. All the love of his heart increased a thousand-fold, all the hopelessness of his love grew even more hopeless as the savagery of his recent work forced itself into his soul. With a cry of despair he knelt and lifted the limp form within his arms.

"Oh, if you were only dead! If I too might die now with you so near me! You are dead—dead to me—I know! Good-bye!" he said as he tenderly imprinted a kiss upon the silent lips.

Slowly her large, brown eyes opened and gazed understandingly into the face so near her own. Then a look of horror crept into them, and with a gasp she regained her senses. Thrusting out her hands, she repulsed the solicitous man.

"You—*Indian*," she cried, with abhorrence. With difficulty she arose and mounted her horse. West did not move nor offer her the slightest assistance as he watched her ride away toward camp.

Long he stood, silent and immovable, gazing into the moon upon whose face he seemed to see in scarlet letters, *The Brand*.

CHAPTER XXX

“WHEN YOU CAN FORGET”

It was nearly a month before Bess Fletcher fully recovered from the shock she had experienced. She was now ready to go to New York to rejoin her brother. Whenever she thought of leaving the ranch, of going away from Mrs. West, giving up her horse, of tearing herself away from the wonderful mountains, the lake and all its beloved haunts, it seemed as if she could not go. Her bitterness toward Henry West had grown less as she analyzed his motive, and from his mother learned what had really prompted him in his impulsive act. She had not seen him during the weeks which followed the tragedy, but now that she was leaving she felt that she must speak to him and say good-bye.

She was waiting for him in the living-room. Seating herself at the piano her fingers unconsciously sought the strain of *Mon Desir*, and in a soft, tender voice she sang.

The dark, silent man entered unnoticed and stood in the center of the room, his hands clenched, his eyes half closed, listening. When she finished she brushed away her unbidden tears and turned to discover her listener. Rising abruptly she walked to him extending her hand. “I am sorry—for—for—Can you forgive me for wounding you so deeply? I did not understand then; now I do.”

[269]

“Never mind little—Bess. I richly deserve it all. Let’s not say any more about it.” Then he added, “If you prefer to ride Mauchacho to Selish I will accompany you. Your trunks can go on the stage. It will be our last—ride—together, you know.”

“Yes—yes—one more ride! But we must start within an hour. I’ll go and dress,” answered the girl, and she hurried to her room.

It seemed when Bess bade Mrs. West good-bye that both their hearts were being wrung asunder. Twice, thrice the girl re-entered the house to kiss the little mother, to feel a mother’s embrace again, to know a mother’s love once more. Although the little Mother stood at the window, blinding tears hid the departing loved ones long before the turn in the road was reached.

During the long ride both were silent. Bess was looking with all her eyes at the familiar scenes along the road, as if she would impress them indelibly upon her mind and heart. Whenever West did speak it was to ask some question regarding James, or perhaps to make some suggestion concerning her journey.

At last the summit of the hill near Selish was reached. Bess drew rein and turned in the saddle to view again the scene which had first met her gaze more than a year ago. It still lay the same, all unchanged, all inspiring. She gave a sigh as she hurried on to overtake Henry West, nearly at the foot of the hill. When every detail of her journey had been attended to he came to Bess to say good-bye.

[270]

“Oh, let me go to the top of the hill and say good-bye there to you—to Mauchacho—to the West!”

Reaching the summit they dismounted. Bess threw her arms about her horse’s neck and buried her face against his cheek. What was it she heard—what!

“Good-bye—dear—good-bye, hope—life—love! Oh! little one; if you could have only loved me! Some day—some time, will you come back—when you can forget that tragedy—when you can forget—*that I am an Indian?*”

His voice swayed her soul as a wind sways a fire. He loved her and she had not even dreamed it! How could she have been so blind? She felt her heart fill to bursting with a delicious joy which had never possessed it before. Love it was—*love*—she knew now! Lifting her face gently to his, her eyes soft with a new tenderness and lips parted in wonderment at the fullness, the richness of the new sense, she said, “When—I—can—forget—forget!” Henry understood. He bowed and turned.

She stood motionless watching the rider and the empty saddle descend the hill. She stood with the soft light of the evening sky making a halo about her, and saw him ride silently down into the shadow of the valley. Was it perhaps to him “the valley of the shadow,” for what was there left in life for him now except death?

[271]

Once he turned and saw the girl still standing on the crest enfolded in a flood of crimson light. As he looked, it faded swiftly into purple—and then to grey. He lifted his sombrero and rode on, on to the foot of the hill, and then turned once more. With an anguished cry she started forward.

“I cannot go—I cannot leave all this. I cannot live without you now! Henry—Henry West! *I—have forgotten!*”

Transcriber’s Note

Punctuation has been corrected silently.

Hyphenation has been standardized.

As in the original, the [Table of Contents](#) lists [Chapter XII](#) as beginning on [page 97](#). Please note that in actuality, the chapter begins on [page 98](#). The original error has been retained, however the link has been adjusted to redirect the reader to the correct page.

Throughout the book, “[breed](#)”, “[breed](#)” and [breed](#) are used as abbreviated versions of half-breed. These variations have been retained.

[Page 68](#), “nonchalent” changed to “nonchalant”. (She brushed her wet cheeks with her sleeve in her haste to appear nonchalant to the approaching horsemen, whom she could hear hastening after her.)

[Page 69](#), “begrimmed” changed to “begrimed”. (One hand tightly clasped a prayer book, while the other tried in vain to lift the already begrimed cassock out of the dust.)

[Page 110](#), “wierd” changed to “weird”. (The Indians had flung off their blankets, and with wild and weird shouts, plunged their horses into the water.)

[Page 185](#), “kinnikinnic” changed to “kinnikinick” for consistency. (Every rock and stump was beautiful with its creeping wreath of kinnikinick, whose glossy foliage and large scarlet berries puts to shame the holly.)

[Page 211](#), the sunset illustration has been moved closer to its mention in the text.

[Page 216](#), “creepy” changed to “crepy”. (Pale yellow crepe, soft, silken, crepy, with knots and loops of brilliant orange-colored velvet.)

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