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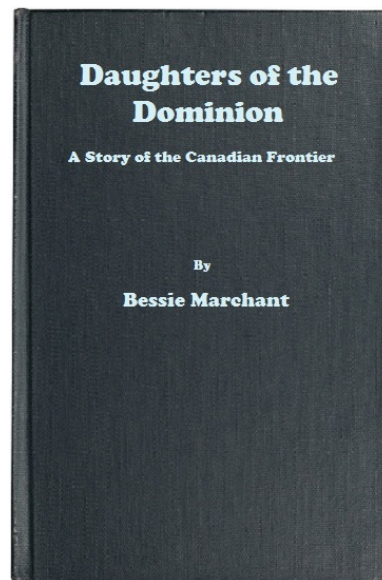
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Daughters of the Dominion

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NELL NURSES THE STRANGER

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# Daughters of the Dominion

A Story of the Canadian Frontier

BY  
**BESSIE MARCHANT**

AUTHOR OF "SISTERS OF SILVER CREEK," "A HEROINE OF THE SEA,"  
"HOPE'S TRYST" ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM RAINEY, R.I.

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CANADA is a great mother; there is room in her heart  
not merely for her own children, but for the needy of  
every nation. They may all come to her and find a home,  
if only they will work to earn it.

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## CHAPTER I

### The Lone House at Blue Bird Ridge

"NELL, Nell, where are you? I want you to give an eye to the dog; the creature has had a dreadful mauling," shouted Doss Umpey, in petulant tones. He had thrust his head in at the open door, and seemed quite angry to find that there was no one moving about in the houseplace.

"I'm coming, granfer," cried a voice, somewhere out of sight. Then there was a shaking of the rickety ladder which stood in the far corner of the dark little room, and a thin girl in very shabby clothes came slowly into view.

No one would have called Nell, otherwise Eleanor Hamblyn, at this period of her life, a pretty

girl. Two good points, however, she possessed: one a sweet, low voice, that excellent thing in woman; the other a pair of beautiful luminous eyes, which made those who saw them forget the defects of her face and figure.

"You never are on hand when you are wanted. What you find to do in that old loft all the time just about passes my comprehension," growled the old man, whose temper was none of the sweetest.

"Well, I ain't far off when I'm wanted, anyhow," replied Nell, good-humouredly. Then she asked in an anxious tone, "What's the matter with Pip?"

"Got mauled pretty badly; must have been having a turn with a wolf, I should say, only it's early for wolves to be getting troublesome. So p'r'aps he's been fighting a wild dog."

"There ain't no wild dogs round here," objected Nell, with a shake of her head.

"I'm not so sure of that. Last time I was over to Button End, Job Lipton said he'd seen a buff-coloured beast hunting rabbits on the ridges, and that there'd been a talk of sheep being killed out Lewisville way," the old man said, as he turned from the door. Nell followed him to inspect the dog, which lay helpless on the edge of the forest.

The house, a wooden one, old and weather-beaten, was perched on a high woody ridge in the great forests stretching along the American side of the Canadian frontier. A mighty Valparaiso oak grew on one side of the house, giving shade in summer and shelter in winter, but the forest had been pushed back on either side, to make room for a small orchard of wind-twisted apple-trees.

It was a lovely day in late September, but the fall of the summer could be seen in the changing hues of the maples, which flamed into crimson and gold, lighting up the sombre green of the other trees.

Pip was a big deerhound, fierce of aspect, and the creature lay at the edge of the clearing, where it had fallen, exhausted in its effort to get home after the fray, in which it had plainly come off second best. It was covered with blood and wounds, one ear being torn in a ghastly fashion.

"Oh, you poor dear thing! Good old Pip, you have been having a rough time!" exclaimed Nell, dropping on her knees beside the dog, and touching it gently here and there.

The creature wagged its tail feebly, as if it understood and appreciated her sympathy; then uttered a whining cry.

"Thirsty, are you? I'll get you drink, and rig up a little curtain to keep the flies from bothering," she said in the soothing tone one would use towards a child that had been injured.

"Couldn't you help me to carry Pip indoors, granfer? I could look after it so much better there," she said, when she had brought the water, which the creature feebly lapped.

"The dog will be cooler out here, and we can bring it in at nightfall. I've got some work to do down beyond now, and can't be bothered."

It was characteristic of Doss Umpey that he had always work to do down beyond whenever Nell wanted any assistance from him, so she made up her mind that when he was safely out of the way she would manage somehow to get poor Pip into more comfortable quarters.

Despite the work he had spoken of, the old man seemed in no hurry to go, but stood leaning at ease against the bole of a great redwood tree, talking in the dreamy fashion which always seemed to suit him much better than hard work.

He was not a really old man, being only about sixty-five, strong and hearty, but with a constitutional aversion to sustained effort of any sort.

"There's no mistake but you are right-down handy at tending critters that are ill. A first-class nurse you'd make, Nell, if only you'd got the chance," he said, watching her active ministrations to the dog with lazy admiration.

"Why don't you give me the chance, then?" she retorted quickly. "I'd love to be a nurse, or to be anything that would help me to get on. Just look at me, granfer. I'm seventeen to-day, and I'm just good for nothing. I can't even keep house properly, because I ain't got the things to do it with."

"I'm a poor man, or maybe I'd have done a better part by you; though, as folks are always telling me, it isn't every lone man like me that would have been bothered with bringing up a child as didn't really belong to him," Doss Umpey said, puffing out his chest with an air of satisfaction. He always prided himself a great deal on this, the one charitable act of his life, but it is open to doubt whether Nell would not have been better off if she had been left to the tender mercies of some orphan asylum when her father died, than she was in the care of a grandfather who troubled himself so little about her interests.

"If only I'd crossed the border and settled in Canada when I was a young man, it would have been a deal better for me all round," he said, leaning his head back against the redwood and gazing pensively up into the sky.

"Why didn't you?" demanded Nell, as she gently bathed Pip's torn ear in cool water.

"Circumstances were against me. Most things have been against me somehow," he said, with a reflective sigh.

"Look here, granfer, couldn't we go now?" she asked eagerly. "We couldn't be poorer than we are here, and if we lived where there were more people, I could get work to do at helping, that would bring in money."

"We'll see about it, girl, in a few weeks, maybe, but it would be an undertaking, I can tell you, to go such a long way."

"How far is it to the frontier, granfer?" asked Nell, who as ever was athirst for information.

"Oh, a good few miles. Why, you can walk for thirty miles on this trail, without coming to anything bigger than a woodcutter's hut, and when you've done the thirty miles you are still a goodish distance from the border. But if anything ever happens to me, you'd best make tracks over the border as fast as you can go."

"Why?" she asked, throwing back her head to get a better look at him, then blinking like an owl, because the sun came into her eyes.

"For ever so many reasons. Canada is a land of promise for young people. Then, English law, by which, of course, I mean Canadian law, is kinder to lone women and girls than American. But I must

be stirring, or that bit o' work down beyond won't get done by sundown." And the old man prepared to shuffle off at a slow, comfortable crawl, which was his usual rate of travel.

But there was a request Nell had to prefer before he went, and she rose up hurriedly to intercept his going.

"Granfer, I'm seventeen to-day; mayn't I have the box of mother's things that father left for you to take care of? He said I was to have them when I was seventeen."

"So he did, only I'd forgotten all about it, and, now I come to think of it, I lost the key a good few years back, so you'll just have to wait till I come home again, then I'll get out my tools and prise the lid open."

Doss Umpey quickened his pace then, as if anxious not to be recalled, and was soon out of sight, hidden from view by the trees.

Nell heaved an impatient sigh, but busied herself with the dog; then, when she had made the poor creature as comfortable as she could, she went back to her secret avocations in the loft.

This loft was her refuge, the one place where she was secure from interruption. The roof was open to the shingles, so above, below, and at the sides it was all bare brown wood, without any attempt at adornment of any kind. Window proper there was none, but a hinged shutter in the western gable let in sunshine and fresh air, and, weather permitting, this stood open night and day.

There were no small prettinesses such as may be found in many a chamber belonging to girls who are poor. But, all the same, it did not lack individuality. It was scrupulously clean and well kept, while on a packing-case, standing near the open shutter, were arranged a small pile of books, a bigger heap of newspapers, a bottle of ink, a pen, and a few stumps of pencils.

Here every day Nell did her best to carry on her education, reading everything she could get hold of, and writing extracts from her scanty library on the margins of the newspapers, because she had no writing-paper or exercise books.

She had been hard at work here when her grandfather called her down to attend to the dog, and she went back to her occupation when he had gone away, and she had left Pip as comfortable as circumstances permitted.

But now her attention wandered; the talk about Canada had excited her, while the disappointment about the box was depressing.

Presently she pushed her work aside, and went down the ladder to the lower room. The box containing the things which had belonged to her dead mother stood there. It was only a small box, but strongly made and clamped with iron. Nell had not seen inside it since her father died, but she knew what it contained. There were frocks and coats belonging to her mother, a gold watch and chain, a gold bracelet, and some brooches. The jewelry was of no great value from a monetary point of view, but it was precious beyond price to the girl, whose memory of her mother grew every day more faint and indistinct.

"Just to think that granfer should lose the key, when I wanted it so badly!" she murmured to herself, as she leaned over the box, touching it with caressing fingers.

At that moment the sound of a deep-drawn sigh caught her ear, and lifting her head she saw a strange man standing on the threshold and clinging to the door-frame.

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## CHAPTER II Nell's Dilemma

A TURN in the trail revealed steeply rising ground, which caused Dick Bronson, spent as he was, to stand still and groan.

It was two days since he had lost his horse in a swamp. The poor creature had been sucked under by the treacherous mud, and as he was unable to extricate it, he had shot the animal with his revolver to end its sufferings.

Since then he had walked and walked, following this mysterious trail which appeared to lead to nowhere, yet which was sufficiently open and well defined to make him certain that he must in time arrive at some habitation, if only he kept on long enough.

But a big forest is an awkward place for a man on foot to get lost in; and Dick Bronson was well aware that the trail might meander on for another thirty miles without passing a human habitation, only he had come to the limit of his endurance, and could go no farther.

As he leaned against the trunk of a mighty cedar, wondering if death from starvation and exhaustion were a long pain, or whether merciful stupor would soon claim him, his weary gaze swept earth and sky in mute farewell.

Then he was suddenly roused to new life and energy by perceiving a thin column of smoke rising against the clear blue of the sky, immediately on the top of the high ground, where the trees grew with wide, open spaces between.

Smoke meant fire, and fire meant people, which in turn meant food of some sort. And the man who had been fasting so long felt that it mattered little what kind of food it was, if only it could stay the gnawing pangs of hunger and give him back his strength once more.

Slowly and painfully he breasted the sharp ascent, only to find that another and longer slope lay before him. But at the top of this second hill stood a wooden house in plain view, with a hospitably open door, and smoke rising from the chimney.

He could not be said to quicken his steps, for he was too worn out for that. But the sight of the open door and the chimney smoke revived his flagging hopes and turned his thoughts from death to life again.

As he came nearer to the house he saw something which, at first sight, he took for a baby's cradle, with a little awning over it, just at the edge of the forest. Coming nearer, he saw it was no

cradle, but a huge dog lying under a tent made of muslin or mosquito netting.

The creature lifted its head feebly, and uttered a low, warning growl at the approach of the stranger; but as it did not move, and was apparently sick or wounded, Dick Bronson came on without hesitation, and, passing the little tent, walked with feeble, uncertain steps towards the open door.

He caught at the door-frame to keep himself from lurching forward into the house, and then found himself confronted by a tall, thin girl in nondescript attire, of which the only details he could remember were a scanty skirt, deplorably shabby, and a man's holland jacket.

"Will you give me food and shelter for a day or two? I am done up with wandering, and my horse died the day before yesterday."

Dick's voice was shaken and unsteady from all that he had gone through, and he looked even more an object of pity than he supposed.

The girl's eyes were mournful, but she only shook her head, answering regretfully—

"I'm very sorry for you, but this isn't a hotel, and we don't cater for strangers."

"You will surely let me have some food. I can pay you; and can't you see that I am starving?"

His voice was hoarse and urgent now, and again he had to lay fast hold of the door-frame to keep himself from falling.

"I will give you some food, though I'm afraid you won't think it is very nice. But you can't stop here, because granfer wouldn't let you. Button End, where Joe Lipton lives, isn't more than ten miles away. He'll take you in for certain, and make you comfortable too. They often have people there," the girl answered.

Dick laughed harshly. "A quarter of a mile I might manage by crawling; but ten miles is as much out of the question as a journey to the moon."

The girl looked troubled, then said, in a soothing tone—

"Come in and sit down, while I get you something to eat. Perhaps if you have a good rest you may—"

But the sentence was not finished, for at that moment Dick swayed towards her, and would have gone crash on the floor at her feet had she not caught him in her strong young arms, and so broken his fall. Only staying to thrust an old coat of her grandfather's under his head for a pillow, she darted to the fireplace, where a pot of broth was being kept warm in the embers, and, pouring some of it into a cup, came back with it, and kneeling by the stranger's side tried to put some of it in his mouth with a spoon.

The broth was some that she had made for the sick dog, but it was strong and nourishing, and it was all she had. When a few spoonfuls had trickled down his neck, Dick came back to his senses again, and, being supported by the girl, was able to drink the rest of the broth in feeble gulps.

"Ah, you were nearly done for that time, you poor thing!" she said, in kindly tones, her lustrous eyes shining with a beautiful womanly pity.

"Yes, very nearly. If it had not been for you, I think I must have gone under," he murmured weakly.

His senses were reeling still, but the broth was doing him good. Yet even now he failed to understand how low down in his strength he had come, until, making an effort to rise and stand on his feet, he sank helpless to the ground again.

There was anxiety mingled with the pity on the girl's face. It was plain to her that the stranger would not be able to continue his journey for hours, probably days, and it was the thought of what Doss Umpey would say to this tax on his hospitality, that was troubling her so sorely now.

"If only you'd been at Joe Lipton's place, now, instead of here, they could have made you ever so comfortable," she said, with a sigh of regret, as she hovered about him in anxious wonder as to how she was to get him on to the settle, where he could lie more comfortably than on the floor.

"I am all right here, or should be if I could have some more broth," he said, with a wistful look at the empty cup in Nell's hand.

But she shook her head with a decided air. "To over-feed starved things is to kill them outright, so if you want to get better you must just trust yourself to me."

"Sorry to give you so much trouble," he murmured weakly.

"Oh, tending sick things isn't trouble. I just love nursing, only I haven't had any one to nurse since father died, except a dog or a horse now and then. This is such a lone house, you see, and there are no people here to want helping. I should be just perfectly happy to have you here to take care of till you are well, only granfer will hate it so, that he won't be even common pleasant to you, I'm afraid."

"Never mind; I must risk the unpleasantness, as I can't get any further. It is beginning to rain, too, so it is a mercy I reached shelter when I did," Dick said drowsily, for a pleasant feeling of languor was stealing over him.

"Rain? So it does. I must get you on the settle somehow, and then go out and bring in Pip—that is our dog, you know. He's a big, savage creature at ordinary times, but he got fighting last night, and is so dreadfully mauled that there ain't much life left in him. Now, put your arms round my neck, and I will pull you up."

Wrapping her thin muscular arms about the stranger, Nell succeeded in getting him on to his feet, and, supporting him as best she could, got him across the floor, dumping him unceremoniously on to a long low settle, which stood beside the great open fireplace. Then she went out for the dog, for by this time the rain was coming down heavily.

The creature must have been a considerable weight, but she staggered into the house with it, laid it tenderly down by the side of the fire opposite to Dick, and ministered to its wants with as much affection as if it had been a child.

The man on the settle watched her in silence, marvelling at the womanly tenderness, which was in such sharp contrast to her appearance; then presently, growing more drowsy, he fell asleep.

Once or twice he was conscious of being roused, and made to swallow something, but the

disturbance seemed only like a part of his dreams, and it was hours before he was fully awake again.

Sounds of rather heated argument assailed his ears now. A man's voice, raised in fretful complaint, was saying—

"I've told you often enough that I wouldn't have a lot o' strange folk clutterin' round, pokin' their noses into what doesn't belong to 'em, and when I says a thing I mostly means it, as you ought fer to know."

"Oh, I know it well enough, and I wouldn't have kept him here if I could have sent him on. But, granfer, he dropped like dead at my feet, and at first I thought he was gone."

"Not much loss if he had died that I can see. I expect he will be no end of expense to us," grumbled the man's voice; and at this Dick considered it high time to make them aware that he was awake and listening.

"I can pay you for all I need, thank you. Although I'm afraid no money can really recompense your granddaughter for her great kindness to me."

The room was in heavy shadow, and the wood fire gave only a dull red glow, so that Dick Bronson could not see clearly the face of the old man, who turned round with a note of snarling query in his thin voice.

"What are you, anyway? A sheriff's officer?"

"Nothing half so important. Only just a hard-working man, taking a holiday in the forest; but my horse got stranded in a soft spot, and I had to shoot the poor beast. Then I lost my bearings, and had come almost to the end of my endurance, when I reached this house."

There was such a ring of sincerity in the simple statement, that Doss Umpey's suspicions about the good faith of the unknown were allayed to a certain extent, and he asked, in a grudging tone—

"Well, what do you want, anyhow?"

"I don't quite know what you mean," said Dick, in a bewildered manner.

"How long do you want to stop, and what do you want us to do for you?" asked the old man, impatiently.

"I want to lie here only until I am strong enough to get on to the nearest hotel. I will pay you for the accommodation, and for the food I eat. I am really very hungry now; may I have something more to eat?" Dick asked, turning his head to look at Nell, who stood by the side of the settle, her face a study of vexation and worry.

"Can you pay for it, I want to know?" Doss Umpey began, but Nell silenced him in an imperious fashion.

"It won't make any difference, anyhow, granfer, for we ain't going to let him starve, and if you ain't willing for him to have supper, you won't get any yourself."

"Of course I'm willing he should eat. Only a poor man like me, with others depending on him, has got to be careful," grumbled the old man, climbing down with so much haste that Dick would have laughed if he had not been so angry.

He was about to fumble for his pocket-book in order to hurl some money at his inhospitable host; but Nell, divining his intention, stopped him with an authoritative gesture, then spoke to the old man with quiet decision in her manner.

"If you are so anxious to get rid of the gentleman, granfer, you had best give Blossom a good supper to-night; then by to-morrow morning the horse could take him to Button End. They'd be able to house him comfortable at Joe Lipton's."

"That's a good idea, Nell. What a pity you didn't think of it sooner! Then I'd have saddled the beast and taken him over to-night. We should have been able to be quit of him the sooner."

"Oh, he wouldn't have been fit to go to-night," she answered.

"Well, he shall go bright and early to-morrow morning, anyhow," said the old man; then departed, slamming the door behind him.

When he had gone, Nell stirred the dull fire into a cheerful blaze, then brought a bowl of some savoury stew to the settle where Dick was lying.

"You'd best sit up and take your supper now, while you can have it in peace. Granfer is a bit trying sometimes, and he just hates strangers like poison," Nell said, as she arranged the bowl and the iron spoon so that her guest, by turning on his elbow, could sup comfortably without rising.

"I should think he just is trying. Why, he is about the most disagreeable old man that it has ever been my ill fortune to meet. Why do you stay and put up with it? If I were in your place I should run away," Dick said.

"Where should I run to? And who would take me in? A girl isn't able to shift for herself and defy the world like a man. Besides, I don't know how to do things properly. I can saw wood, do rough cooking, and such work, but nothing nicer, so no one would want me," Nell responded wistfully.

"The stew is good, anyhow, if it is only rough cooking, and I suppose you could learn to do other things if you had the chance," Dick went on, as he ate his supper with slow enjoyment, covertly studying Nell the while as she sat in the light of the fire.

"I can learn anything if only I get the chance. I've got an old dictionary upstairs, and I've taught myself to spell every word there is in it. I know I talk rough, but that is only because I haven't had a chance of being with educated people and hearing how they sound their words."

"A whole dictionary? Why, you must be a perfect prodigy of learning!" exclaimed Dick, smothering a laugh, as he looked at the thin girl in her shabby attire.

"That means something out of the ordinary course of nature," she said quickly, evidently quoting from her much-studied dictionary. "No, I don't think I'm out of the ordinary, only, you see, I do have such a lot of time to myself when granfer is working down beyond, that I just have to do something."

"I see. Have you got any more books?" asked Dick, who was finding Nell decidedly interesting to talk to.

"Only a few. There is a Bible, an old geography with a great many leaves gone, Longfellow's

poetical works, and Bacon's essays. I wanted some of father's books, only granfer said they must be sold to pay for my board, so he let the schoolmaster have the lot for ten dollars."

"What a shame!" There was a thrill of boyish indignation in Dick's voice that brought a flush of pleasure to Nell's thin cheek. Then he asked, "Are your father and mother dead?"

Nell nodded, rose abruptly from her seat, and going over to the opposite side of the fire, stooped down to do something to Pip. When she came back there was only a strained something in her tone to show that he had touched on a sore subject.

"Mother died ever so long ago, when I was only three years old. But I was eleven when father died, and I came up here to live with granfer."

The door opened at this minute, and the old man came in, the water dripping from his garments, and his mood even more unpleasant than before.

But Dick Bronson, soothed by his supper and weak from his long fasting, fell asleep very soon, and so escaped the constant complaints of his unwilling host, who grumbled as long as he was awake, then, betaking himself to a hammock, snored loudly until the morning. Nell did not close her eyes, however, but, sitting on the floor of her loft, kept vigil from reasons best known to herself.

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### CHAPTER III The Old Coat

THE next morning broke gloriously fine, and the brilliant sunshine put fresh vigour into Dick Bronson. He had spent a rather unrestful night, his slumber being often broken by hideous dreams.

He had even got off the settle and hobbled out into the sunshine, searching for some place where he might wash his face, before Nell descended the shaky ladder from her loft.

Doss Umpey was also up and out betimes, looking after his horse, which was stabled in a lean-to behind the wooden house. A sorry beast it was, with knock-knees, and a general air of being worn out, but it had energy enough to try to bite the old man when he endeavoured to put the bit in its mouth.

"Nell, Nell, come here; I want you," the old man called, in querulous tones. And presently Nell came running round the corner of the house, in response to his call, looking jaded from her night of watching, but with an evident intention to be cheerful, and to keep the peace if she could.

"It is this old hoss again. I can't think what has come to the creature; it shows its teeth every time I get near it," he said, handing the bridle to Nell with an air of resignation.

"Want to bite, do you, Blossom? Oh, fie! you must not give way to tempers like these. Don't you know that bits and bridles mean apples and bread to horses that are good?" she inquired, in coaxing tones, as she drew one hand out of her pocket, gave the horse a glimpse of something eatable in her palm, then dived it out of sight again.

Blossom became instantly docile, opened its mouth for the insertion of the bit, but without showing any desire to bite, then began nosing round Nell's pockets, in anticipation of the coveted reward.

"You old varmint!" began Doss Umpey, with the evident intention of bestowing a kick on the obstinate old horse; but Nell stopped him with a quick gesture.

"No, you are not to kick the poor old thing. If you do, I will take the bit out of its mouth again and go away, then you will have to manage as best you can," she said, in a decided tone. And because he knew she would be as good as her word, he desisted from hostilities, and instead proceeded to strap a ragged saddle on to the lean old horse.

Nell gave her guest the best breakfast that she could contrive, but her resources were painfully limited. However, even dandelion coffee, maize-bread, and stringy bacon are better than nothing. So, with yesterday's starvation fresh in his memory, Dick Bronson ate what was set before him, and was thankful.

Then he pressed payment upon Nell, but she would not take it, even turning away with an air of offence when he endeavoured to persuade her that he would rather pay than be indebted to her for hospitality.

"If you are so anxious to pay for what is done for you, give granfer a little money, but only a little, please, for taking you over to Button End," she said, with a touch of disdain.

"Of course I shall do that. But I should like to compensate you also, for all the trouble I have been," he said eagerly.

"There is no need; I like trouble," she answered. And then, as Doss Umpey at this moment led Blossom up to the door, Dick had to go out and mount, with the burden of his indebtedness hanging heavily upon him.

"You'll be coming home by sundown to-day, granfer?" Nell asked, a little anxiously.

"Mos' likely," he answered, busying himself with the off stirrup, and not looking at her.

"You must," she said sharply. "Pip is very bad this morning, and so stiff he can hardly wag his tail. I don't mind being left alone when the dog is all right, but it is another matter now he can't even growl at anything."

"All right," the old man replied, with a touch of impatience, and then asked the stranger if he were ready to mount.

"I can't ride that poor old bag of bones; I shall break its back!" exclaimed Dick.

"Blossom is ever so strong. You need not be afraid," Nell said, with a reassuring smile.

At this Dick tried to mount, but he was weak and stiff from his painful experience, and was, moreover, harassed by the active attempts of Blossom to bite him.

"Wait a minute. If you will stand on that bench by the door, I will lead Blossom up, and you can get on. The horse will think it is a sack of meal and won't take any notice," Nell said, briskly coming



to the rescue in her usual prompt fashion.

Dick did as he was bidden, but laughing in an embarrassed fashion, for it was rather mortifying to have to be mistaken for a bag of meal.

When the mounting was accomplished, Doss Umpey led the horse away by the opposite trail to that by which Dick had arrived on the previous day.

Dick took off his hat to Nell with the utmost courtesy of which he was capable, and she waved her hand in return, colouring high with pleasure.

"No one ever treated me so nicely before," she murmured. Then she stood watching until the man on horseback, with the shambling figure of Doss Umpey at his side, passed out of sight.

Never had a day seemed so long to Nell as that one. Her usual avocations had no power to beguile her, and when, secure in her solitude, she brought her beloved books downstairs, she found that even reading had lost a great deal of its charm.

She was actively anxious, too, about the dog, for the poor creature seemed to grow worse as the hours went on, and in the afternoon Nell began to realize that Pip had fought his last fight, and was preparing to make his exit from a world of strife.

The knowledge moved her to real grief, for the dog, though savage and surly to other people, had been her friend and companion, the only playmate she possessed. Many and many were the solitary days they had spent together, and there had been not a few nights when the fierce deerhound had been her only companion at the Lone House on Blue Bird Ridge.

If Pip were dying, then she would not leave him alone; so, bringing some sewing, she came to sit on a little stool near the fire, where the languid eyes of the poor animal could see her to the last.

The afternoon was gorgeously fine, and Nell would have taken her work into the sunshine but for the dog. As it was, she sat in the dark cheerless room by the fire, administering broth at intervals to her dumb patient, and talking to it in a low crooning tone, which seemed to soothe the poor creature.

Her sewing was of a very uninteresting character, and consisted in mending up the worst rents in an old coat of her grandfather's, a garment so patched and worn that it would have been difficult for an outsider to tell of what it was originally made.

Nell sighed a little over her task, but kept steadily on until, mending a great rent in the lining, her fingers encountered some stiff letter paper.

Thrusting her hand into the pocket she found there was a hole at the bottom which had let quite a store of articles through, these being caught between the lining and the cloth at the bottom of the coat.

She drew them out one by one, a nail, a screw, half a pocket-comb, a small key, and a letter which had been through the post, and was directed to her grandfather in his proper name, Mr. Theodosius Humphrey, The Lone House, Blue Bird Ridge, Lewisville, and the date was just ten days old.

"Why, granfer must have got the letter the last time he went over to Button End," she remarked, talking aloud, as is the common way of lonely people. "Yet when I asked him if there was any mail for us he said no directly. I remember, though, how cross he was that night, and how low down in his spirits he has been ever since."

She studied the outside of the letter for some time, admired the firmness of the handwriting, but did not attempt to read the contents. Then she took up the key, and looked at it critically. It was small and bright as if from being constantly carried, and a sudden idea occurred to her.

"Why, I do believe it is the key of my box. Granfer said he had lost it somehow, and of course he would not know it had slipped right through there. I will go and see if it fits, then I can open the box myself."

Throwing down her work, with the needle still sticking in the rent, Nell was about to move with hasty steps across the floor, but paused first to look at Pip.

The dog's eyes were closed now, and it was breathing regularly; so, with the hope that it was sleeping, she stole softly away to try the key in the lock of her box.

It fitted easily, and turned without any trouble; then, with a palpitating heart, she lifted the lid and peered inside.

There seemed to be only a few things in it, although she had supposed it would be quite full. A feeling of apprehension seized her then, and, dragging the box across the floor nearer to the open door, she knelt down beside it, sorting out the contents.

A dark blue merino dress, made in the fashion of fifteen years before; a black silk cape, the worse for wear, trimmed with beaded gimp; a black bonnet, with dark blue ribbon strings, and a bunch of pink roses under the coal-scuttle front;—these, with an armful of nondescript underwear, were all the box contained, saving a big stone wrapped in paper that lay at the bottom, and made it seem heavy.

Just at first indignation kept Nell's grief in check. There had been good clothing in the box, she knew, and her mother's little stock of jewelry, with a few odd remnants from her childhood's home, of little worth to any one else, but of priceless value to her.

Feeling dazed and bewildered by the shock, Nell sat on the floor, with the heap of clothing in her lap, staring stupidly into the empty box. Then a fragment of paper with writing on it caught her attention, and, leaning forward, she picked it up.

The piece had been torn from a letter, and only a part of the sentence remained.

"Unless the money is paid within a week, I will give information, which will lead to your speedy arrest, and you will——"

Nell stood straight up, letting the lapful of garments drop unheeded on the floor. She had seen that handwriting before, but where?

It was a habit of hers to stand up when any problem hard to solve forced itself upon her

attention.

As she stood erect, staring straight before her, she saw the letter which a little while before she had found in the lining of her grandfather's old coat, and at once she remembered that the writing on the envelope was identical with that on the slip she held in her hand.

With a bound she reached the table, and, seizing the envelope, dragged out the enclosure it contained.

She had felt no interest in it before, and no desire to pry into business which did not concern her. Now, however, all this was altered, and she deemed it her right to know what the letter contained.

Like the slip of paper in the box, it was curt and threatening, with no beginning in the usual way, but signed at the bottom with a great flourish.

"If I receive no money from you within a week, I will send some one to look you up. If you do not pay then, well, I will let the police know, and then you will soon see the inside of a prison, which may bring you to your senses and make you keep up your payments better.

"R. D. BRUNSEN."

Nell gasped in her astonishment, for the man who had arrived at the Lone House yesterday in such a condition of exhaustion, had told her that his name was Bronson, Dick Bronson.

Was it possible that he had come to spy on her grandfather? Of course the story that he was travelling through the great forest on a pleasure jaunt might have been a fiction, only, somehow, her late visitor had struck her as being truthful and honest in his statements, and it was very disappointing to find herself mistaken in him. The names Bronson and Brunsen were so much alike that they might be the same, the difference lying only in pronunciation, for Mr. Bronson had only told her his name, he had not spelled it for her.

A long time she stood pondering over the matter, but quite unable to arrive at any definite conclusion concerning it. Then, warned by the slanting rays of the sun, she set to work preparing supper, in readiness for her grandfather's return.

The letter she put in a prominent position on the supper-table. He would be sure to ask her where she had found it, then she would tell him all about it, and ask him why he had tampered with her property, which was contained in the box.

The sunset faded out in splendours of crimson and gold; then a cold wind stole across the ridge, rustling the millions of crisping leaves on the great forest trees, and night came brooding down.

Never during the years of her life at the Lone House had Nell felt so solitary as on this night. Hitherto, when her grandfather had remained away, she had had Pip for companionship and defence. But now the dog was breathing its last, no longer able to recognize her when she stooped to pat it, or to wag its tail in response to her voice.

The night was weird in its silence; she had no watch or clock to beguile her with its ticking, or to let her know how the slow hours were passing.

To-night she did not go upstairs to her loft, because she could not leave the dog. So, keeping the fire burning for the sake of companionship, she wrapped herself in the coat she had been mending, and lay down on the settle to rest.

But she had kept vigil on the previous night, from a fanciful dread lest harm should befall the stranger guest beneath their roof. She knew her grandfather's disposition well, and that the old man would be quite capable of turning the stranger out in the night if the idea came into his head, so she had kept awake, in order to frustrate any design of the kind.

On this second night she also decided to keep watch, to see that Pip wanted for nothing. But healthy girls of seventeen cannot keep awake always.

Very soon the Lone House grew more silent still, the fire sank to a bed of red coals, which turned by slow degrees to white ashes. The laboured respiration of the dog grew intermittent and feeble, finally ceasing entirely. But Nell slumbered on in blissful unconsciousness until the morning sun threw broad beams of light across the uncleared supper-table, the spent fire, and the dead dog; then, with a little cry, she started into wakefulness.

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#### CHAPTER IV

##### What the New Day brought

NELL sobbed and cried in a childish abandonment of grief when she found that Pip had died whilst she slept. But as no tears could restore the animal to life, the womanliness in her presently re-asserted itself, and she set to work to make the house clean and tidy, pending her grandfather's return. After that she would dig a deep grave for poor faithful old Pip, in which she would lay the creature in readiness for burial, when Doss Umpey returned.

The exercise did her good, and as the sun was shining more brightly than ever, her mood grew almost cheerful as the day went on.

While sweeping under the settle, her broom—a home-made affair, consisting of rushes bound together—brushed out from under the settle a little leather case, which she had certainly never seen before.

Picking it up, she brushed the dust from it with her sleeve, then opened it to examine the contents.

At first sight it seemed to be quite empty, and the leaves of the memorandum book inside were innocent of pencil marks or writing of any description. There was a pocket in the case behind the book, however, and from this Nell drew out the photograph of a middle-aged lady, with the sweetest face she had ever seen. Something else the pocket contained also, and this was a packet of three

clean ten-dollar notes.

"Oh, how could the case have come there?" she cried, peering under the settle to see that no more treasure-trove was lurking in the obscurity there.

But nothing else remained, not even dust, so effectually had the rush-broom done its work.

"Mr. Bronson must have dropped it from his pocket in the night. He was a bit restless some of the time," she muttered, shivering a little as she thought of her uncomfortable vigil, sitting on the floor of the loft.

Then she wondered how she could possibly restore his property to him without the knowledge of her grandfather. There was an uncomfortable feeling in her heart that, if her grandfather knew of the money, he would want to keep it, and that course of procedure did not march with her ideas of honesty.

So she resolved for the present to hide the money. Perhaps Mr. Bronson would write to her. He had spoken of doing so, and of sending her some books, in which case she would be able to write to him in return, and send the packet.

"Only I'll post the letter myself, even if I have to walk to Button End and back," she said, with great decision. Then she returned to her work with a will, being anxious to have the house as clean and tidy as hands could make it before the old man's return.

She had dragged the mat, with Pip's dead body resting on it, to the cool shade at the back of the house; and there, in the hot noontide, she dug the grave, perspiring a great deal, but working with great energy, to get her task completed.

The hole was ready at last, and she climbed out of it with a sigh of relief, dropping on to the ground for a brief rest.

Then she heard sounds of talking—a woman's voice high-pitched and complaining, children's tones eager and excited, and the tramp of horses' feet.

With a fluttering at her heart, she ran round to the front of the house. As a rule, hardly one person in a month passed along the trail, except in winter, when lumbering was being carried on—even then it was only men and boys who came; but these arrivals, by the sound of their voices, were plainly womenfolk, or at least there was one woman.

When she turned the corner of the house she saw a little procession of three horses, just halting under the big Valparaiso oak. A woman, lean and shrewish of aspect, was mounted on the first animal, in company with many bags and bundles, among which a fryingpan and two new tin saucepans showed conspicuously.

Two children—a boy and a girl—shared the next horse, their steed also being hung round with trappings of the same description; while the third horse was heavily laden with more household stuff.

A man and a big boy completed the party, which looked hot and tired, as well they might after the ten miles' journey from Button End, for in this glowing September noontide the forest trail was hot as a furnace.

Nell approached with a bewildered look on her face, and some dismay in her heart, wondering how she could contrive to offer hospitality to so many people. Her household stores were at a painfully low ebb at the present moment—indeed, she had neither tea, sugar, nor coffee to offer them, and the remaining flour in her barrel had been made into bread that morning—two small loaves, which would not half suffice to feed this party of five.

Then she remembered the great basket of berries which she had gathered two hours before, and that the early apples were already quite eatable, so she quickened her steps to greet the arrivals, a little comforted on the score of hospitality.

"Are you Doss Umpey's gal?" called out the woman, in high-pitched, querulous tones.

"I am his granddaughter," Nell answered, with as much dignity as she could muster, yet all the while conscious that her dreadful old clothes detracted very much from the cold aloofness of her bearing.

"It's about the same thing in the end, I guess," rejoined the woman, with a cackle of harsh laughter. "Well, there's a letter from the old man to tell you why we've come, and are going to stop."

And she tossed a smudged envelope to the ground, directed in Doss Umpey's straggling writing, to "Miss Nell Umpey, at Blue Bird Ridge."

It was really too bad, and poor Nell could have cried with vexation, that her grandfather, who was too lazy to spell his own name properly, should call her by it also. But when she had read the letter, she was thankful indeed that he had not addressed her by her right name.

"DEAR NELL (so ran the letter),

"You will be surprised to hear that I have sold the Lone House and the furniter to Joe Gunnage and his wife, and they are going to live there. Mrs. G. says you can stop on as hired gal if you like. But if you are wise and have got enuff pluck, you'll just git over the border into Canada as quick as you can; you are safe to do better there than in the States. I'd have sent you some money if I could, but the fac is I'm desperate hard-up all along of harbouring wipers in my buzzom as have warmed up and stung me. But I'm hopin' to get on to something good soon, then I'll look you up and help you. Meanwhile don't you let on to no one what I've told you, nor nothin' about me, as I don't want the perlice to get interested in what I'm doing.

"DOSS UMPEY."

Nell was so long in getting at the sense of the old man's badly written letter that by the time she had done, the three horses had all been unladen and hobbled so that they could feed in the open space before the house, and the woman was carrying the bundles in at the door, assisted by the children.

"Have you come here to live?" asked Nell, in a bewildered tone.

Although she had read the letter, she could not yet comprehend its meaning, or realize that the old life was gone, and that she was suddenly thrust upon her own resources, with no one to care what became of her.

"It looks like it, don't you think?" said the woman, with another cackling laugh. "Now then, girl, what's your name—Nell? Don't stand there staring as if you was short-witted; stir round lively, and help me get these things inside."

Nell came to assist in a half-mechanical fashion, still doubting the evidence of her own senses. The man and the big boy had not spoken to her, had hardly glanced in her direction indeed, but were absorbed in looking round their new premises, grumbling loudly because the clearing about the house was not so big as they had supposed.

The small boy and girl had likewise disappeared on a journey of exploration, so Nell and Mrs. Gunnage were left alone.

"What! haven't you got a cooking-stove?" cried the woman, in shrill consternation.

"We did have one, but it dropped all to bits in the spring, and I've had to bake bread in the ashes all summer. Granfer had said that he would get a new one in the fall," Nell answered.

"Well, it's fall now, and I must have a stove, for I can't bake bread in the ashes, if you can. Joe will just have to go over to Button End to-morrow, and get me one. What is up that ladder?" demanded Mrs. Gunnage, sharply, having just caught sight of the rickety ladder in the corner behind the door.

"It leads to my room," Nell replied, then was instantly indignant because Mrs. Gunnage prepared to mount and inspect the loft without asking permission.

But the swaying, creaking ladder proved too much for the woman's nerves.

"I will just have Joe make me a firmer ladder before I go up there, for a fall would about shake me to bits. Is there any furniture up there?"

"An old camp bed and two boxes," Nell answered, with characteristic brevity. She had come to the conclusion that she simply detested Mrs. Gunnage, and that nothing should induce her to remain at the Lone House as hired girl to such a woman.

"I thought as much! But, my word! to hear Doss Umpey talk of his furniture, a person might have looked to find marble-topped tables and mahogany chairs. A downright swindle it is, to call this old truck furniture."

To this pronouncement Nell made no reply; she was quietly reserving herself for what must come later, trying also, in some way, to shape and plan her future, yet feeling all the time in such a whirling confusion of mind as scarcely to be capable of meeting the needs of the moment.

"It is a puzzle to me where we are all going to sleep. Why, the house isn't big enough to swing a cat in!" exclaimed Mrs. Gunnage, scornfully; and indeed the small interior did seem rather crowded, now that the lading of the three horses had been brought in and dumped upon the floor.

"For to-night the little girl can come to sleep with me in the loft. The two boys would be very comfortable in the stable, for there is quite a nice lot of hay there that I have been cutting and collecting for Blossom in the winter, and the nights ain't cold yet," Nell answered, with a desire to make things as pleasant as she could for these interlopers, who had come into such sudden and unexpected possession of her home.

Mrs. Gunnage turned upon her with an air of exasperation.

"To-night, indeed! Well, I've more than one night to think and plan for, and I'm sure I don't know how Miranda would manage to climb up that shaking ladder. I shall keep her down here with us for to-night, and after that we must see what can be done. I'm willing to keep you on through the winter as hired girl, if you like to stay, for your board; but, by the look of you, I shouldn't say you'd be worth wages at present."

"Thank you, I could not stay for my board, and I will go away to-morrow morning," Nell said hurriedly.

"But where will you go? Your granfer said you hadn't any friends, that was why I sort of offered to take you out of charity," the woman said, measuring Nell's lean length with her eye, and mentally resolving to make her so-called charity a very paying investment indeed.

Nell flushed an angry red. To her, charity was the most hateful word she knew, and synonymous with everything horrid and unkind.

"It is true that I have nowhere to go and no friends. But I am strong, and can work, so that does not matter, and I have no need of charity," she answered, with her head held at a proud angle.

"Oh, stuck up, are you? Well, a little hard work will soon take that out of you, I reckon. Where are you off to now?" demanded Mrs. Gunnage, as Nell moved towards the door.

"I am going to finish burying our poor old dog, which died last night. I was digging a grave for it when you came," Nell answered.

"Dead, is it? I remember Doss Umpey told my Joe the creature was pretty bad. Well, there ain't no need for you to go out fussing about burying it. The men folks can see to that, and do you just stay here and help me get a bit straight. I could fancy a cup of coffee and a bit of food if it was got ready for me."

"I would rather bury the dog myself, thank you," Nell remarked, and was passing out of the door when a shrill scream from the woman arrested her steps.

"Come back, I say, and do as I told you. When I speak, I expect to be obeyed."

"I will come and help you presently, if I have time, but I am not your hired girl, please remember," Nell rejoined, civilly still, but with her head held at a dangerous angle, and her eyes shining with the light of battle. Then she walked away, disappearing round the corner of the house, and set to work at covering Pip in the grave she had dug, shovelling with tremendous energy in order to get her task completed before any one should disturb her.

No interruption came, however, and when she went back to the house Mrs. Gunnage was sullen, but civil.

Nell made up the fire, boiled some water, and made the tired woman some coffee. But the two loaves of bread which were her own she quietly carried up to the loft and put with the clothes from her mother's box. She would need that bread for her long journey next day, and did not mean that it should be taken from her, by accident or otherwise.

For the remainder of the day, until darkness fell, she did her best to help Mrs. Gunnage. She cooked supper for the family, and served them all as meekly as if she were in truth the hired girl. She even shared their supper, feeling that she had certainly earned it. When darkness fell, she mounted up the swaying ladder to the loft, and then set to work on her own preparations for the future. The night was moonless, and she had no lamp or candle, but one can do a great deal by feeling when the occasion demands it.

Only two of her treasured books could be taken,—the Bible, which had been her father's, and Longfellow; the dictionary and Bacon's essays must be left. Perhaps Miranda Gunnage or one of the boys would like to have them.

When her preparations were quite complete, and, by the sense of touch, she had taken leave of the few treasures she must leave behind, Nell lay down on the broken camp-bed for the last time and fell asleep.

No dreams came to disturb her repose. No fears of her future stuck thorns of unrest in her pillow that night, and when the first of a family of blue birds came to twitter and stir in the great oak outside her open shutter, Nell started up broad awake, quite prepared for her plunge into the Unknown.

It was not daylight yet, for that was the western world, and the towering heights of the Rocky Mountains blocked out the earliest splendours of the rising sun. But morning would soon be here, and meanwhile there was her toilet to consider; a great affair this, for she had resolved to cast off her rags and clothe herself in the attire found in her mother's box.

Very softly she moved, through fear of waking the sleepers down below. Yet she could not avoid little gasps and gurgles of delight as she arrayed herself in the flowing, old-fashioned skirts, and buttoned the blue bodice across her thin chest.

She had rolled her hair into a big knot at the back of her head, and when the bonnet, with its bunch of pink roses, was tied on her head, Nell felt that her appearance left nothing to be desired, and could not possibly be improved.

By this time daylight had fully come, and she was able to survey herself in the cracked piece of looking-glass, which was all the mirror she possessed. The black silk cape she had packed in with the few garments she had to carry. Her cast-off clothing was folded into a neat little heap, and Nell was wondering how soon she might venture down the ladder, to make her start out into the wide world, when a harsh voice called up from below—

"Now then, gal; when are you going to bestir yourself, or do you mean to lie there all day?"

It was the voice of Mrs. Gunnage, and, screwing her face into lines of stern resolution, Nell picked up the old canvas bag containing her clothes and the two books, then came slowly down the swaying ladder, her blue skirt folded closely round her, and the pink roses nodding in her bonnet.

"Well, you do look a figure of fun! What sort of game are you up to now?" demanded the woman, sharply; but there was an anxious look in her eyes, for she had counted rather considerably on retaining Nell as a household drudge through the winter.

"I am going away. I told you last night that I shouldn't stay here, now that granfer has gone. And I'm obliged to start early because I've a long way to go. It is going to be very hot presently, then walking will be difficult."

"You can't go till you've had your breakfast."

"Oh yes I can, thank you. I have two small loaves of bread, and I shan't want anything else," Nell answered, moving towards the door.

"Look here, it shan't be said I turned you adrift. You stay here all winter, and I'll give you a dollar a month for pocket money," said Mrs. Gunnage, spreading her hands out to emphasize the magnificence of her offer.

"I can't stay, thank you. I'd rather go. Good morning," jerked out Nell. Then, stepping across the threshold, she went out to face the future, and all that it might bring.

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## CHAPTER V Summoned Home

BRATLEY JUNCTION was a small depot on a branch line, and it was rather a stretch of the imagination to call it a junction at all, since it ended fifteen miles farther on at Camp's Gulch, while the one little branch was the bit of line running up five miles into the mountains to the Roseneath Mines.

There were mines everywhere in that district. Down on the plains, up in the hoary sides of the towering hills, and tucked away in gloomy cañons the human family dug, delved, and toiled, wresting coal, iron, copper, and even silver, from the covering earth.

Then, when man had done his best, or worst, in upheaving and making desolate what Nature had intended should be wild and beautiful, another sort of man—only sometimes it was a woman—set to work at bringing order out of chaos, and levelling the heaps flung up by the human moles, laid out little fields and fruitful gardens in the sunny hollows of the western hills.

A very different class of settlers these from the dwellers in the middle west, who till their ground, harvest their crops, and thresh their corn by machinery. It was mostly hand work here, and, in many cases, very hard work. No great fortunes were possible, but a living could be wrested from the soil, and a race of boys and girls, self-reliant and clever, were growing up to carve careers for

themselves, and to win honourable names among the powerful of the earth.

The Bratley depot was a long wooden shed divided into offices and storerooms, while half a dozen houses, also of wood, clustered near.

The work of the girl telegraph clerk was not heavy, nor yet tremendously important, so it was usually a beginner who was stationed there, and very dull work most of the beginners found it.

Gertrude Lorimer was no exception, and she had groaned fully as much as her predecessors in office over the boredom of life at Bratley.

But she was in her second year now, and hoping for speedy promotion, more especially as her duty had been so thoroughly done, that she had never been reprimanded for any sort of neglect.

She was leaning over the slab where her instrument was fixed, tidying books and papers on the shelf above. The September morning was warm and sunny, while Gertrude's mood was of the happiest, for a holiday of a very special sort was in prospect, and she was putting the office in nice order for the deputy, who was to arrive by the noon train to supply her place for a fortnight.

Her holiday was to be spent in New Westminster, and the thought of two weeks in a real city with business blocks, river steamboats, trams, and all the other luxuries of civilization compensated Gertrude for not going home this fall.

Lorimer's Clearing, where her people lived, was a lonely farmstead lying almost close to the American frontier, a difficult journey from Bratley, which took a whole day to perform.

Gertrude had suffered many a fit of home sickness since she had been at Bratley, for she was one of those girls to whom home is everything, and neither by nature nor training was she fitted to stand alone.

But one could not see the world at Lorimer's Clearing, so the summer holiday this year was to be spent in the city, with a view to enlarging her understanding, and as she was to stay with a sister of her father's who lived at New Westminster, she would still be among her own kinsfolk.

Presently, in through the open door of the telegraph office came a stout, bustling woman, with a cast in her eye, who held up her hands in amazement at Gertrude's activity.

"Well, Miss Lorimer, if you don't just beat everything; turning the place inside out, as if it was regular spring-cleaning time instead of a fall holiday!"

"Oh, I'm only having a dust down, Mrs. Nichols. I could not leave the place in a muddle for my deputy, or I should deserve that she, in her turn, would leave it so for me," Gertrude said, as she flourished her duster along the high shelf, raising a great dust.

"Don't flick your duster so, child; just pass it gently along, sort of wrapping the dust into it as you go. What you are doing now is to set all them atoms in active circulation for a few minutes, then back they settles again thicker than ever," expostulated Mrs. Nichols, who was a notable housewife, and hated to see work done in an improper fashion.

"That is what my mother always says, but I'm afraid that I am not a domestic genius; my ambitions don't lie that way," laughed Gertrude.

"It is of little use having ambitions, for you'll never realize them if you don't set out to do everything first class as you go along," retorted Mrs. Nichols, with a wag of her head.

Gertrude was beginning a laughing reply when a call clicked out from her instrument, and she dropped her duster to take down the message which was arriving.

Mrs. Nichols waited until this was done, filling in the pause with an active raid on the next shelf. As she stood with her back to Gertrude, she did not know that anything was wrong, until she was startled by a faint moaning cry, and turned quickly to find the girl's face had turned ghastly white.

"Law, child, whatever is the matter? Has bad news come over the wire? Sure it ain't another big fire in the city?" cried the good woman, in alarm.

Her husband had lost his life in the great conflagration which had swept over the city some years previously, and since then her main idea of trouble had been some similar disaster.

"No, no, it is a message from home; there is great trouble, and I must go. Oh, what a mercy it is that my deputy is coming to-day, because now I can get away this evening!" Gertrude said, with panting breath.

"What sort of trouble?" demanded the widow.

"My eldest brother Percy, the one next to me, is not expected to live; Arthur is very ill too. My poor mother must be nearly distracted, for she just dotes on those two."

"It won't be any use your going to-night; you will just be dumped out at Blakeson's somewhere about midnight, and there you'll have to stay till morning. No, the only thing you can do is to send a message that you'll be home to-morrow afternoon; then they'll send the wagon to meet you at the depot, for you won't want to walk seven miles when you get out of the cars," said Mrs. Nichols.

"Oh, I can't wait; it will be dreadful! Think of the torture of lying awake all night, and wondering what is going to happen to those poor boys," wailed Gertrude.

"You will be very foolish to lie awake. It is some one to help that your mother will want, not a poor worn-out creature, only fit to be put to bed and nursed like a baby. I only hope it ain't nothing infectious, for I'd just hate for you to go home and get sick."

There was anxiety in the tone of Mrs. Nichols now, for she had grown really attached to her young lodger in the months that Gertrude had boarded with her.

"I don't care if I do get sick; I don't care what happens to me at all, if only the boys get better!" wailed Gertrude. "Why, they are just the life of the home—and so clever, too."

"They will get better, don't you fear. Boys can pull through anything; it is girls that want most taking care of. Well, well, but this is a damper for you, and you just starting off to the city for your holiday, too!" sighed the stout woman, in kindly concern.

"I'm thankful I hadn't started. Oh dear, how shall I get through the hours until to-morrow morning?" And Gertrude's sobs broke forth afresh at the thought of the long wait in front of her.

"You'll get through right enough; and, after all, it is only a minute at a time, you know. But you had better send a message to your aunt to say that you are not coming. Then, when your deputy comes, and you are off duty, just you come right home and go to bed."

"What, in the middle of the afternoon?" cried Gertrude, aghast.

"Why not? You have nothing else to do, and the more rest you get before you start the more help you will be when you get home."

The sound wisdom of this suggestion commended itself to Gertrude, who knew her own limitations pretty thoroughly, and was perfectly well aware that she would be of no use at home if she were worn out with worrying and want of sleep.

The deputy arrived in due course. This time the operator was no raw hand, but one who had somehow failed to get on, and was, in consequence, thankful to get chance work for a time. This was a great comfort to Gertrude, as probably the deputy would be willing to do duty longer than the fortnight if required, and so the post would be kept open for her.

She had to leave Bratley by the first train, which was very early. Several changes of cars were necessary, and there was a long wait of two hours at Blakeson's, where she had to change from main-line cars on to a branch line again. It was the middle of the afternoon when she stepped out of the cars at the depot nearest to her own home, and saw her father waiting for her with the wagon.

Abe Lorimer, a meek, quiet-looking man of fifty years, had a bowed, broken look that Gertrude had never noticed before. Her heart gave a sudden throb of pain as she saw him, and when they stood face to face it was her eyes, and not her tongue, which asked the question she could not, from very fear, put into speech.

"He's gone, poor lad; died this morning at the dawning," jerked out the stricken father.

"Dead—Percy?" gasped Gertrude, turning white to the lips, and reeling as if she were about to faint.

"Get into the wagon, and let's be off sharp; seems as if I can't bear the neighbours coming to tell me how sorry they are," said Abe, with an apprehensive look at a group of loungers, who had strolled up to see the cars come in.

Gertrude gathered her various belongings up in blind haste, her father lifted her trunk into the wagon, and the two were driving away from the depot before the loungers had time to make any further comment to each other than that Abe Lorimer looked pretty sick. But as he mostly had a melancholy appearance, no one paid special heed to it on this occasion.

Gertrude, struggling with her sobs, was trying to steady her voice enough to ask how it had all happened, yet she lacked the courage for her question, because there was something in her father's face which warned her there might be still more ill news to follow.

They were out of sight of the railway track, and the two horses were going at a steady trot up the long two mile rise to the village, where the store and the saw-mills were, and then Abe broke into speech again—

"Arthur is very low down; the doctor doesn't think there is much chance of his pulling through, but if both the boys are taken, it will be my death-blow. I've got a sort o' feeling inside me, that I can't stand up against it nohows."

Gertrude slid her arm through her father's, and laid her cheek against the rough sleeve of his jacket. There was no word of comfort that she could say to him, but for the time her pity for his suffering was so keen, that she had no opportunity of giving way to her own sorrow.

Mounting the rise, the horses broke into a quicker pace, went down the hill through the village—the town, some people called it—tore round the corner, and, dashing past the saw-mills, took the next rise at a gallop.

"Father, how did the boys get sick?" Gertrude asked, after a long silence. She was growing desperate now, for the line of trees right in front of them marked the boundary-line of Lorimer's Clearing, and she must know about the trouble before she reached home and met her mother.

"There's a sort o' malarial fever going about; it don't amount to much if you stay in bed and keep warm when it's on you. The boys took it, but there was no keeping 'em in bed, and one day they went bathing in the Black Cauldron—you know how cold the water is there—and that's what did the mischief. Patsey looks poorly this morning, and your mother is keeping him in bed. It is a good thing harvest is over; if the sickness had come two weeks ago, it would have been pretty near ruin."

Gertrude nodded. Having been brought up on a farm, she understood very well what a frightful disaster sickness in harvest time would be.

"Lots of folks are ill round about here," Abe went on, as if he found it a relief to talk, now that the ice was broken. "The doctor said this morning that Giles Bailey's aunt was very bad, so sick he didn't think she'd pull through, and there ain't a woman to be got for love or money to sit up with her o' nights."

"Giles Bailey's aunt?" echoed Gertrude. "I don't think I know them, either nephew or aunt."

"Very likely not. The aunt, Mrs. Munson, has got a farm about five miles the other side of the boundary, and Giles works it for her. A good sort of lad, but slow. He used to come over to singing-school last winter at Pratt's Corner, but the boys said school was mostly half over before Giles turned up, and that he'd no more notion of singing than a raven."

Gertrude smiled, but a sob came up in her throat, and had to be battled with. Percy and Arthur sang so beautifully themselves, and had always been regarded as the stars of the winter singing-school.

"Father, there's Flossie coming to open the gate; poor little girl, how lame she is!" Gertrude said, five minutes later, as the horses trotted swiftly down the last stretch of cleared cornland toward the house, which stood with its back to a forest-clad hill. Her eyes had caught sight of a diminutive figure coming, with a series of bobbing jerks, over the ground to open the field gate.

"She is lame, but she is uncommon useful, poor little maid, and has taken baby off your mother's hands entirely, ever since the boys got sick," Abe answered, with a sigh.

Flossie was nine, and suffered from some kind of hip trouble, which prevented her from going to school, or sharing the sports and pleasures of the other children, yet she was a very happy little maiden usually, despite these drawbacks, and home owed more of its brightness to her than any one would have suspected. But Flossie was under a shadow this morning, and, seeing the mute

distress on the little sister's face, Gertrude braced herself to a great effort of self-forgetfulness, and determined to be as brave as she could, for the sake of the others.

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## CHAPTER VI A Strange Welcome

NELL was very tired. Since early morning she had tramped steadily, pursuing that apparently unending trail. Sometimes the way had been up steep ascents, over high ridges, where big boulders stuck up among the trees; then it would drop to lower ground, and skirt wide swamps, in one of which Dick Bronson's horse had come to its untimely end.

But from the open ground of the last ridge she had crossed, Nell had caught sight of what looked like a cultivated field right ahead, and she was walking on with more hope now that she might reach a house of some kind before night fell, and so be saved the weird experience of spending a night alone in the open.

Several times she had walked to Button End and back again to the Lone House in a day, which was a distance of twenty miles, so her long journey on this occasion had not been so tiring to her as it would have been to any one less accustomed to very long tramps.

It was thirty miles from Blue Bird Ridge to the nearest settlement on the long trail, Doss Umpey used to say; and Nell was beginning to wonder how near she was to that settlement, when she came to a broader cross trail, which showed recent wheel marks.

A few minutes she stood hesitating which way to take, then her quick eye caught sight of a handful of straws caught on a bush.

"A cart carrying corn to the homestead, that is what it was, and this is the way it went," she said to herself, with the quick observation which comes to dwellers in isolated spots, who have only Nature for their companion.

Then, giving a jerk to the bundle in the canvas bag, which for greater comfort she carried on her back, she went onward again, following now the broader cross trail which showed wheel marks, and here and there fluttering pennons of corn.

For a mile she tramped wearily on—a long, long mile this was—and she would many times have yielded to her desire to sit down and rest but for her fear that night might come, finding her still without a shelter for the hours of darkness.

The trail ended suddenly in a gate that gave entrance to a fenced enclosure, in which stood a barn, some smaller sheds, and a wooden house.

A man was coming in at another gate on the lower side of the enclosure, and he had with him two horses and a cart laden with wood, while a scraggy dog of mongrel type circled round and round, barking wildly at some pigs, which tried to make a rush through the opening.

Nell stood leaning against the bars of her gate hesitating to enter. A fit of shyness had suddenly come upon her, and she was wondering what these people would say to her, or how she could account satisfactorily for rambling about the country alone, without betraying to curious outsiders the fact of her grandfather's desertion of her.

"Come right in, will you, please, miss? I'd come and open the gate for you—it's a bit awkward, I know—but I'm afraid of Spider bolting," shouted the man with the cart. And as one of the horses began at this moment to plunge and rear, Nell understood which was Spider without further introduction.

She opened the gate then, and walked boldly into the yard, and was going across to the man when he shouted to her again—

"Go right in, will you, please, miss? The door is unfastened right enough, only I had to shut it to keep the pigs out. Poor aunt is desperate bad to-day, worse than she has been all along, and she'll just be downright glad to see you," he called out. Then he had to give instant attention to Spider, as the creature was endeavouring to walk on its two hind legs, to the discomfort of the steady old animal to which it was yoked.

Nell's heart gave a great bound of relief. If some one were ill in the house, they would be sure to let her stay and help, at least until daylight came again. So, with a nod to the man, she turned away, and walked up to the door of the house.

This opened straight into the family living-room, which was in a state of confusion such as Nell had never seen equalled. Dirty crockery was strewn on tables, chairs, and floor. Eatables of various sorts were also lying about in the same disorder. One pair of boots and a hat stood on the dresser, close to an untrimmed lamp and a basin half full of milk, while a loaf of bread, with a knife sticking in it, lay on a coat which had been flung down on a bench near the door.

"Oh, what a fearful muddle!" she murmured under her breath. And weary though she was she would have laughed at the scene before her, only she remembered there was a sick woman somewhere, and she had to find her quickly.

Three doors led out of this room, but instinct guiding her she opened the right one first, and walked into a stuffy chamber, the closeness of which seemed almost to choke her, coming as she did from the sweet fresh air of the forest.

A woman with a flushed face and tumbled grey hair lay on the bed, moaning and muttering. She took no notice when Nell bent over and spoke to her, but only moaned and muttered as before.

"She is delirious, that is what she is," murmured Nell, pronouncing the long word with the careful satisfaction which she always seemed to derive from anything which came out of her much-studied dictionary. "Well, the other room must wait, and I'll see to her first."

Years before, when she was a little girl of eleven, she had helped to take care of her sick and dying father, so she was not so much at a loss, as some girls might have been, if thrust suddenly



into a sick-room.



"COME RIGHT IN, WILL YOU, PLEASE, MISS?"

Her first move was to the window, which she opened as wide as it would go. Then she straightened the tumbled bedclothes, slipped a cool pillow under the sick woman's head, and gently sponged the hot face.

In this room, as in the other, plates, cups, basins, and jugs were scattered about in confusion, most of them containing food in some shape or form.

Nell gathered them up as best she could, carrying them to the outer room, to be washed when she had leisure.

Finding a bucket of clean water standing in the little pantry, which opened from the general living-room, she carried a cup of it for the sick woman to drink.

"Ah, how good it is!" murmured the poor thing, opening her eyes and looking at Nell. But there was no surprise in her glance—it was just as if she had expected to see a girl in an old-fashioned blue frock waiting upon her, and with a grateful "Thank you, my dear," she lay back on the cool pillow and closed her eyes again, only now she did not mutter or moan so much as before.

Having done what was most necessary in the sick-room, Nell stepped out to the other room, and attacked the confusion there. Having lighted the fire, which had gone out from lack of tending, she put a kettle of water on to boil, and then set to work to get the crockery ready for washing.

Absorbed in her work, she forgot how tired she was, and she was stepping briskly to and fro, when the outer door opened, and the man who had shouted to her entered with the dog at his heels.

He stopped short however then, and stared about him in genuine amazement, not at Nell, but at the wonders her hands had wrought in the matters of tidiness.

"My word, how you've slicked the place up, and you haven't been long about it, neither!" he said, in a tone of deep admiration.

He had a stupid, good-natured expression, with a round rosy face like a schoolboy's; but what puzzled Nell so much was that he talked as if he had been expecting her all day.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming to-night, and I'd the feeling that if poor aunt didn't soon have a woman to tend her, she'd not stand much chance of pulling through. How do you think she is now?" he asked anxiously.

"She seems very ill, but she lay quieter after I had made her bed and put her comfortable. Perhaps she will seem better in the morning. How long has she been sick?" Nell asked.

"It's a matter of a fortnight now since she was first took poorly, but she has only kept her bed a week, and the doctor he's been twice. It is a desperate way, twelve miles for him to drive out and the same back. Did you walk all the way?"

"Yes," murmured Nell, faintly, as, with a flash, it dawned upon her that the reason of her welcome was because she had been mistaken for some one else, some one who had not come, and probably would not on this night at least, for it was beginning to get quite dark.

But she could not tell this chubby-faced farmer about herself, not to-night at least, and since the need of a woman to help was so urgent, she was surely doing no harm in availing herself of the shelter of his house, if she did her duty by the sick woman.

"Well, if you've walked all that twelve miles, you certainly ain't fit to be sitting up with poor aunt

to-night," he remarked, with a disappointed air.

"Oh yes I am, and to-morrow night too, if there is a need for it. But perhaps your aunt will be better in the morning. What did the doctor say she was to have to eat?" Nell asked.

She was still moving about the kitchen, putting things in order, yet going more slowly now because the work was almost done. The countryman, however, had dropped on to a bench near the stove, and looked quite worn out.

"Oh, gruel and milk, and messes like that. Poor aunt, she always did hate spoon victuals; so, when I came in to my dinner to-day and found she couldn't eat the gruel I'd left for her at breakfast, I just fried her an egg and a bit of bacon, and tried to get her to eat that."

"But that wasn't right. Why, it might have killed her!" exclaimed Nell, in a horrified tone.

"Well, it didn't, anyhow, for she couldn't touch it, so I ate it myself. Have you had any supper?" he asked, with a wide yawn.

"No; I really haven't had time to think about it yet. But you will be wanting yours, I should think; the kettle is almost boiling. Shall I make you some coffee, or would you rather have tea?" said Nell, who, despite her weariness, was rather enjoying the situation, because there was lavish abundance of everything to eat and to use in this little border farmhouse, compared with the pinching poverty of the Lone House on Blue Bird Ridge.

"I don't care. I'll have just which is easiest to make, or what you like the best; and there are bits of food littering round on plates that will do for my supper. I've mostly cleared up what poor aunt couldn't eat, since she was took sick."

"I put the bits all together on a dish, and set it in the pantry. I'll bring it out for you, and make some coffee, then you can get your supper while I look after your aunt; and I expect you will be glad to go to bed very soon, for you must have had some bad nights lately."

"Well, to tell the truth, I haven't been to bed for a week. I sleep in the loft, you see, and when I'm up there with my head under the bedclothes, I can't hear what's going on, so I stayed down here and got what sleep I could on two chairs and a bench. It has been a hard time," he said, looking so tired as he sat with his head leaning against the wall, that Nell felt quite sorry for him.

"You can sleep with a quiet mind to-night," she answered, lifting the coffee-pot from the stove and bringing it to pour him out a cup where he sat. "If your aunt is taken worse, I will be sure to call you; and if not, there won't be any need for you to worry. I know quite a lot about nursing, and I always used to help with my father when he was ill."

"Abe never did look like a strong man," said the countryman, sleepily, and Nell darted a sudden look of alarm at him, wondering if he might be on the verge of some awkward questioning; so, to stave off the evil moment, she stepped into the next room, and busied herself looking after the invalid.

The sick woman still tossed and moaned; but she had been made so much more comfortable, that some at least of her suffering had been lessened, whilst the water which Nell let her have in copious draughts, seemed to refresh and cool her.

Before he went to his bed in the loft, the man came softly into the sick-room, having left his boots at the door.

"How are you feeling now, aunt?" he asked, bending over the flushed face on the pillow with lumbering tenderness.

She only muttered an incoherent something in reply, and moved her head restlessly, as if it worried her to have him hanging over the bed.

"Don't you know me, aunt—not know Giles?" the poor fellow asked in a shocked tone, unconsciously raising his voice.

The sick woman only moaned and muttered; but Nell thought it high time to interfere, and gently plucked at his sleeve.

"I wouldn't worry her, if I were you. The quieter she is left the sooner the fever will drop."

"She's worse than she has been all along," he said, in a shocked whisper. "She has always seemed to know me before."

"Never mind. Go to bed now, and get a good sleep; perhaps she will have come to her senses in the morning," Nell said cheerfully; and Giles went off with a drooping head, for he had a good heart, and was warmly attached to the sick woman who had been like a mother to him.

Left alone, Nell made her preparations for keeping watch all night; then, going into the sick-room, wrapped herself in a big shawl which she had found lying on a chair, and gave herself up to the luxury of thinking.

Events had marched so quickly, that, used as she was to a monotonous life, the sudden plunge into change and activity really bewildered her.

It all began with the coming of the exhausted stranger to the Lone House on the ridge, and Nell thought of the vigil she had kept through fear lest Doss Umpey should turn him adrift at dead of night, steal his money, or do him some other harm. Following this came the night she had spent alone with poor dying Pip, and had fallen asleep to find when she awoke that the poor dog was dead.

She thought of the letter she had found in her grandfather's pocket, with its mysterious threat, and she wondered again, as she had done so many times previously, if Dick Bronson and R. D. Brunsen had any connection with each other.

It bothered her a great deal, that she could not return to the stranger the case with the dollar notes and the portrait. She felt like a thief, to be carrying so much money about which did not belong to her; yet, by some strange contrariness, it was at the same time a comfort to her, since all the while it was in her possession she could not be said to be utterly destitute.

Presently her thoughts wandered to Mrs. Gunnage, and she wondered drowsily whether the good woman's nerves had as yet permitted her to climb the ladder, to inspect the property which she had been obliged to leave behind when she came away.

Suddenly something different in the room struck Nell, causing her to be instantly on the alert.

The moaning and muttering of the sick woman had ceased, and, bending over the bed, she found that the sufferer was lying peacefully asleep.

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## CHAPTER VII A New Vocation

DR. SHAW was not in exactly an amiable frame of mind that morning. To begin with, there was more sickness in the district than he could very well cope with single-handed, while the lack of good nursing for his numerous patients was telling on his temper to quite a serious extent.

He had just come from a house where a patient, recovering from a rather bad bout of the malarial fever, just then so prevalent in the district, had been treated by an over-indulgent mother to roast goose and apple-pie, with, of course, disastrous results.

The fever itself was a puzzle. Some had it very lightly, and soon recovered, being no worse for the attack. Others had it so heavily that it became a life-and-death struggle.

In some instances it seemed epidemic, for whole households would go down with it; but mostly the cases were isolated, and had no connection with each other. As the neighbourhood had always been so healthy, the fever outbreak was all the more puzzling, and the overworked doctor had irritably decided to put it down to the weather, which had been unusually damp and hot through the latter part of the summer.

His practice lay on both sides of the frontier, and having looked after his Canadian patients, he crossed the border, plunging into the wild forest land that stretched for so many miles along the American side of the boundary.

Little oases of civilization were dotted here and there in the timbered wilderness, and it was to one of these lonely clearings that he turned his horse's head.

"A fine old journey for us both, Dobbin, and only to find a dead woman at the end," he said, in a grumpy tone, as his horse dropped into a walk to climb the shoulder of a mountain spur.

But Dobbin only shook an impatient head, for the flies were troublesome, and appeared in no way worried about the state of a patient more or less.

Dr. Shaw was always angry when his patients died, and his meek little wife had declared that he was quite dreadful to live with when, the previous week, both of Abe Lorimer's sick sons had slipped out of life one after the other.

"Whew, but it is hot this morning!" he exclaimed, mopping his face with a big red handkerchief, which would have shocked a city practitioner.

Dobbin's glossy coat was dripping with perspiration when at length the end of the journey was reached, at the very same gate where Nell's tired feet had halted on the previous afternoon.

"Why, the blinds are not down!" exclaimed the doctor, in an amazed tone, as he rode in through the gate and saw the two front windows of the house both open. The door was open too—a barrier made of an ironing-board and two chairs serving to keep out pigs, ducks, and similar intruders.

He was so struck by failing to find the signs of sorrow which he had expected, that he sat still in his saddle staring at the house, until Nell, who had heard his approach, came hurrying out to greet him.

The blue merino dress had been laid aside to-day for the sake of coolness, and Nell appeared in a pink cotton skirt with a washed-out holland blouse, which had short sleeves and no collar.

"A woman here!" exclaimed the doctor, staring at Nell as if he had never seen anything like her before. "Pray, where did you spring from?"

"I came yesterday afternoon," Nell answered, colouring vividly, her eyes dropping before his steady gaze in an embarrassed fashion.

"Well, you came just right. How is Mrs. Munson?" he asked, descending from his horse, which stood with a drooping head.

"You mean the sick woman?" she asked quickly.

"Of course. What! don't you know her name even?" And he stared at Nell harder than before.

"Mr. Giles only called her 'poor aunt,' so I did not know," Nell said, in apology. "Will you go right in and see her, if you please, sir? and I will look after your horse."

"How is she?" demanded the doctor.

"I think she is better. She has been asleep ever since about midnight, only rousing up when I've given her food."

A broad smile broke over the doctor's rugged face, quite transforming it, and he exclaimed, in a delighted tone—

"Well, that is good hearing! If she has slept so long she will pull through now, with care."

Nell led the horse away to the barn. Giles had gone with his two horses and the wagon to fetch a last load of corn from a distant field; but he had told her before he went where she could find a feed for the doctor's horse, and when she had done this, she stayed to give the heated animal a rub down, just as she used to do for old Blossom.

When she entered the house, she found that the sick woman was awake, and talking to the doctor in rational though feeble tones.

"So good of you, doctor, to find me such a kind nurse. I must have died last night, if some one had not come to help me. Giles is a dear good fellow, but he is clumsy when it comes to sickness, like most other men."

Nell walked into the room at this moment, and her dark eyes had a wistful entreaty in them as she looked at the doctor. She was mutely begging that he would not betray her just yet, and everything that was chivalrous under that rugged exterior responded to the appeal.

"I am glad you like the nurse," he said, with a nod of encouragement to Nell, who stood where

the woman on the bed could not see her. "I was very worried myself when I found that Miss Lorimer could not come as she had promised, but Miss—Miss—Let me see, what did you say your name was?" And he jerked his head in Nell's direction.

"Hamblyn—Eleanor Hamblyn," she answered, in a low tone.

"Well, Miss Hamblyn has come at the right time to save your life, and if you will pay attention and do as she says, without doubt you will soon be well again," Dr. Shaw said, talking now in a dictatorial fashion, which meant that he was to be obeyed to the smallest detail.

"If she tells me to lie in bed and not worry, I'll do that, thankful enough," Mrs. Munson replied, with a feeble laugh. Then she closed her eyes, and lay as if asleep, while the doctor talked to Nell.

"I shall not come over again for three days; Mrs. Munson won't need it, and I'm badly wanted in other directions. Are you able to stay on and take care of her until she is better?" he asked, with a sharp look at Nell, whom he had beckoned to follow him to the other room, so that the sick woman might not be disturbed.

"Oh yes; I can stay if you think they won't mind having me," she faltered. "But I came without being asked, you know."

"You came in the very nick of time, too. And as to your staying—well, it is Mrs. Munson and Giles Bailey who are in your debt, not you in theirs. Mrs. Munson will need careful nursing for the next few days, for she is very low down; but with care she'll do very well. Are you used to sick folks, eh?" And again his sharp glance seemed as if it would read her thoughts.

But Nell looked at him with honest, unembarrassed eyes which disarmed all suspicion.

"Father was sick for a long time before he died; but that was years ago. Since then I've only had dogs and horses to nurse when they weren't well, for nothing ever ailed granfer."

"Except in temper, I suppose. I know the sort," he said, with a grim laugh at his own joke; then he asked quickly, "Is your mother dead too?"

"Yes. She died when I was a little girl," Nell replied. Then she asked, after a moment of hesitation, "Will you please tell me about the other girl—Miss Lorimer, I mean—and why she did not come?"

"She ought to have come, or let me know that she couldn't do as she had promised," the doctor said, with a frown. "But, seeing what trouble they are in, it is not wonderful she lost her head and forgot. She is Gertrude Lorimer, the eldest of Abe Lorimer's children. Two of her brothers, bright promising boys, were buried last Sunday. I had to go to Lorimer's Clearing the day before yesterday, and I asked Gertrude if she could come and take care of Mrs. Munson for a few days, and she promised that she would come over yesterday morning, so I rested easy in my mind about my patient. But, to my dismay, when I got to Lorimer's Clearing this morning, I found that Mrs. Lorimer had been taken ill yesterday, and was in bed, and that Gertrude had simply forgotten all about her promise to come here."

"Poor girl!" murmured Nell, sympathetically.

The doctor frowned, shook his head, but finally relented enough to admit that Gertrude was deserving of some little pity, even although she had forgotten her promise.

"I will admit that I should not have found it easy to forgive her, if Mrs. Munson had died from want of nursing. On the other hand, if she had sent me word, I don't know where I could have found a woman who could be spared to come here for the work."

"You ought to be grateful to her for not letting you know then, because now you have not had to worry about it so long," Nell said, smiling, as she prepared a hasty meal for the doctor.

But he was not disposed to admit so much, and shook his head a great deal while he ate his lunch. He talked to Nell in a cheerful, friendly fashion, but asked her no more questions about herself, rightly divining that there was trouble behind, of which she did not find it easy to speak. He was fearful, too, of scaring her away from a place where she was so badly needed, so he took pains to reassure her.

When he was ready to go, she brought Dobbin from the barn for him; then, as he was mounting, she asked, with wistful inquiry in her tone—

"Can you tell me, please, how far it is from here to the Canadian border?"

He looked down at her with a friendly smile. "Nine or ten miles. Why do you want to know?"

"I am going there when Mrs. Munson has done with me," she answered quietly.

"Going there? Where? It is a rather large order, don't you know, to say you are going to Canada, because, you see, it is so big."

"I don't know where, but I shall be sure to find work, shan't I? Granfer said there was work for everyone in Canada," she said, a little anxiously.

"Humph! well, I suppose there is, only the trouble is that people won't always do it. However, I don't fancy there will be much trouble in your case, either in the getting or the doing, when you come over the border; and if you can't get work, I will ask Mrs. Shaw to find you some if you come to Nine Springs."

"Nine Springs? What a pretty name! Is that where you live? If I can't get work, I will come, but I shan't trouble you if I can help it," Nell said, while a bright flush of excitement kept coming and going in her cheeks because of the kindness which was being shown to her by this stranger.

"What sort of work can you do—I mean what sort do you like best?" the doctor asked.

Nell's brow clouded. "Oh, I like everything; but I don't know how to do any except rough work, what everyone can do, I mean."

"If you like everything, and are willing to work, you won't be long in finding your vocation, I fancy. Meanwhile take care of Mrs. Munson, and in three days I will come again," he said, with a kindly nod. Then he rode through the gate which Nell opened for him, and he was soon out of sight round the bend in the trail.

Nell walked back to the house in a thoughtful mood; her fancy was busy with that other girl who had promised to come, but had forgotten through stress of other things.

"Suppose she had come, what should I have done?" she murmured with a sudden catch of her

breath, for her plight had been a very desperate one; then, because she was by nature unselfish, she quickly thought of the other side of the question, "What would Mrs. Munson have done if no one had come?"

As she paused on the threshold, looking round at the glory of the outdoor world before entering the house, some words of her dead father, spoken in the last days of his life, came into her mind.

"We are all a part of God's great plan, and there is a niche for every one of us to fill, so let us see that neither by discontent nor fear we spoil the Creator's purpose concerning us."

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## CHAPTER VIII

### Moved on

THE next three days were filled with much hard work, heavy nursing, and considerable anxiety for Nell.

Mrs. Munson was slowly mending, but now that she was on the high-road to recovery, she was quite positive that she was on the point of dying, and harassed her long-suffering nurse accordingly.

Since his aunt was getting better, Giles Bailey was able to turn his attention to the outdoor work, which had been neglected before Nell's arrival, and he was abroad in his fields from dawn to dark, only coming into the house to eat and to sleep.

This was a great comfort to Nell, who felt she could easily have too much of his society, for on the brief occasions when he was in the house, he would sit with his chubby round face propped on one hand, silently gazing at her, until she became so nervous that she did not know what to do with herself.

It never occurred to her that his silent gazing was prompted by deep admiration for her active movements and resourceful ways, or she would have been more uncomfortable still. But, as it was, she was thankful his farm work kept him so busy that it left him scanty leisure for sitting in the house.

The day before Nell expected the doctor to pay his second visit, she had a scare which made her heart beat furiously.

She was looking out of the window in the afternoon, thinking how she would love to go berry-gathering in the forest, if she could have left her invalid, when a man on horseback rode in at the gate shutting off the forest trail, and she instantly recognized him to be Joe Gunnage, who had come to live on Blue Bird Ridge.

Giles Bailey, who was in the yard, came up and spoke to the man, and talked to him for perhaps ten minutes; then, without dismounting, Joe Gunnage rode back by the way he had come, and Giles came on towards the house with news writ large across his fat round face.

Nell fled at his approach, taking refuge in the sick-room, where she dropped into a chair on the far side of the bed, and, picking up a half-darned stocking, worked away as if her whole attention were absorbed in the effort to get the holes filled in with the utmost dispatch.

Mrs. Munson was sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows and swathed in shawls, for the day was cool, with a brisk wind blowing.

"It'll be a warning to me if I pull through this, Miss Hamblyn, not to let Giles get so short of socks and stockings," she was saying, in a plaintive tone. "It always seemed so prudent and economical to be just doing with the three pairs, two off and one on, but a fit of sickness is a regular eye-opener, I can tell you, and the poor lad would have gone barefoot in a few days more if it had not been for you."

"I say, aunt, here is news! May I come in? But I mustn't stay more than two minutes, for I've left the hosses hitched to the field gate, and there ain't much telling what mischief they will be up to if I ain't there to look after 'em. Whom do you think I've been talking to here, just outside the window?"

"Not the President, I suppose, though I don't know as you could look more bursting with news if it had been him and half the senators from Washington to keep him company," Mrs. Munson replied, in a caustic manner.

Her manner to her nephew was, as a rule, severely repressive. She believed that he, in common with all other young people, required a great deal of keeping in order.

"It was Joe Gunnage as we used to know at Lewisville ever so long ago, and he has come to live at Blue Bird Ridge," said Giles, taking off his straw hat and rumpling his hair wildly, which had the effect of making him look more foolish than before.

"Where's that? I can't remember that I've ever heard of the place," Mrs. Munson said feebly, for she was very weak still, and neither able to speak nor think with her accustomed vigour.

"Why, you remember the Lone House on the long trail, where old Doss Umpey used to live!" exclaimed Giles.

Mrs. Munson gave a start of surprise, but Nell sat like a figure carved in stone—only her needle moved in and out of the stocking with a mechanical, almost unconscious, action.

"If you'd said the Lone House, I should have knowed before; but Joe Gunnage won't be such a very near neighbour, for it's a good thirty miles from here, I should say. What has become of Doss Umpey? Is he dead?"

"No; he has had to flit in a hurry, that's all. It's the inside of a prison he ought to see, only Joe says it's doubtful whether they'll catch him, because he's such a slippery old rascal," Giles remarked, with an air of such intense enjoyment, that Nell, writhing in her secret shame and misery, felt that she hated him.

"Oh! Has he been doing anything fresh, or was it the old business up again?" Mrs. Munson asked, with eager interest.

"A bit of both so far as I could make out. It seems that Brunsen has been talking a good deal, and

that has stirred the police up. Then Joe has been grubbing out a hole at the back of the Lone House, and he has come on some things as had best be reported to the border police; that is what made him ride this way."

"Why didn't you ask him to come in and see me?" demanded Mrs. Munson.

"I did; but when I told him you were sick with fever, he said he'd rather not, for it was hard enough for well folks to get on at the Lone House, but sick ones would have no sort of a chance at all."

"That Joe Gunnage always were a regular downright coward," replied Mrs. Munson, with a snort of disgust. Then she lay back on her pillows, looking so white and spent with the brief excitement, that Nell nodded an emphatic command to Giles to go away and leave the invalid quiet.

In her own heart a storm of fear and misery was raging. What was this old business connected with her grandfather and the man named Brunsen, about which Giles Bailey and his aunt talked so glibly? Was there some law-breaking connected with his life, concerning which she knew nothing?

A vague unreasoning terror seized upon her then, and she quailed at heart as nothing had ever made her quail before.

Ever since she could remember she had had to face hard, grinding poverty, but there had been no shame in that. The father whose memory she cherished so fondly had been a preacher, a scholar, and a gentleman; and although Doss Umpey had been none of these, she had always supposed him to be a straight man according to his lights.

How intensely thankful she felt that she had so carefully hidden the secret of her identity from these people, among whom she had been flung by accident! Of course, the fact might leak out yet; indeed, it must, if Joe Gunnage called at the farm on his way back from the frontier.

Then she thought of the strange manner in which her secret had been so far protected. Both Giles and his aunt had at first supposed her to be Gertrude Lorimer, the other girl; then when the doctor came and explained why the other girl had not been able to come, they had still looked upon the stranger nurse as having come from the neighbourhood of Nine Springs, some one sent by the doctor.

"If only I can get away from here quickly, and hide myself in some place where no one has ever heard of Doss Umpey or the Lone House on the long trail, how thankful I shall be!" Nell exclaimed to herself, and little thought how hard she was to find the task of escaping from this unenviable notoriety.

When Dr. Shaw appeared on the next day, he was greatly pleased with Mrs. Munson's progress, and said so many complimentary things about Nell, that her cheeks flamed and burned at the unaccustomed praise.

"How is the other girl, if you please?" she asked shyly, when she brought the doctor's horse for him to mount.

"Gertrude Lorimer? Oh, I was there to-day, and I don't like the look of her. I never saw a girl who tried harder to do what was expected of her, and to rise to the needs of the occasion; but she hasn't got it in her, and she can't do it. Mrs. Lorimer is in bed, and her husband ought to be; the boy Patsey has got a bad chill and is in bed too. Those children will go bathing when they are hot, in the icy cold springs on the clearing, and they always are getting chills," he answered, with a disapproving shake of his head, and was about to ride away. But Nell had not done with him yet.

"Could you—would you mind looking round for some work for me to do? Mrs. Munson will soon be well enough to spare me now, and I have nowhere to go. I am very strong, and I can do outdoor work, or anything rough," she said, flushing from sheer nervousness, lest he should ask her questions difficult to answer.

"I will see what I can do. Don't they treat you kindly here?" he asked, with a jerk of his head towards the house.

"Oh yes; it isn't that. But I came without being asked, and so, as soon as I can be spared, I would rather move on. Can't you see that I must?" she said earnestly.

He laughed at this; then said in a graver tone, "Well, have patience until I come again; I shall be this way in a week, I dare say. Meanwhile, I will talk to Mrs. Shaw, and we will see what can be done for you. In any case, you can't be spared from here until Mrs. Munson is able to leave her bed, you know."

"That won't be very long, for she talks of getting up to-morrow," Nell replied, drawing down the corners of her mouth, for she was clear sighted enough to see that Mrs. Munson, able to get about the house, would be a person to be reckoned with.

"Ah, I shouldn't be surprised if she does, for she is one of the very tough sort. You must humour her as much as possible, and she will get better all the sooner."

Nell went back to the house with a flutter of hope at her heart. Perhaps when the doctor came again he would be able to tell her of some one in need of a strong girl who was rather ignorant. Her thirst for knowledge of all sorts made her value her own attainments at a very low figure, although in reality she was not nearly so ignorant in matters domestic as she supposed.

The next morning she commenced a very thorough cleaning of the farmhouse. Starting with the loft where Giles slept, she routed out the dust, scrubbing and scouring with such zeal and energy that Mrs. Munson held up her hands in amazement, and the silent Mr. Bailey stared at her more admiringly than ever.

When the house had been cleaned to her mind, and the clothes all washed, she made a great batch of bread, and was taking the last loaf from the oven when the doctor arrived, two days before he was expected.

He was not riding this time, but driving Dobbin in a high two-wheeled cart, very light and strong, as indeed any vehicle would need to be that was used on those forest trails.

Mrs. Munson was sitting in a rocking-chair by the stove, giving Nell a great deal of advice on the baking of bread. But she held up her hands in dismay at the sight of the doctor, and exclaimed about the length of the bill which she would have to pay.

"You have no need to trouble yourself on that score, Mrs. Munson; I have not come to see you this morning, but to fetch Miss Hamblyn away," he said gravely.

"What for?" demanded the invalid, in surprise, her tone resentful, although an hour before she had been quietly planning to get rid of her nurse as soon as possible, because it cost more to keep three people than two.

"Because some one needs her even more than you do now," he replied. Then turning to Nell, who was standing mute with surprise, he went on, "I have been over to Lorimer's Clearing this morning, and find they are in a terrible plight. Mrs. Lorimer is still in bed and unable to move, although she is suffering more from the shock of losing her sons than anything else. Abe Lorimer is ill this morning, only just able to creep from one room to another, and Gertrude, poor child, can't lift her head from her pillow. There isn't a soul to do anything except Flossie, the little lame girl, and she has the baby to look after. Will you go and help them, as you have helped Mrs. Munson?"

"Thank you; yes, I shall be pleased to go," replied Nell, with a radiant face, for her heart was strangely stirred to think that it was the other girl whom she was going to help. Numberless were the fancies she had cherished concerning that other girl, and she had greatly longed to see her.

"I don't know how I shall get on without you," Mrs. Munson said, in a grudging tone; and the radiance on Nell's face faded out.

"I think you can manage now, if you don't try to do too much," she said gently. "The house is all clean, you know; the washing is done up, and I've baked enough bread to last a week."

"I'll have to do, I suppose, since you are so set on going, though Giles will seem but a clumsy cook after you."

"Go and get your bonnet on, and pack your things; I can't wait more than half an hour, and if you've got more than one trunk, you will have to leave it behind," Dr. Shaw said, with a nod of kindly dismissal to Nell.

She disappeared into Mrs. Munson's room, donned her blue merino dress and the bonnet with the pink roses; then, because there was a stiff breeze blowing, and she was hot from her labours at bread-making, she flung the black silk cape with the bead trimming round her shoulders, and fairly held her breath with awe at the grandeur of her own appearance.

A little sigh escaped her because her shoes were so worn, but they were very black and shiny, which hid their shabbiness a little.

When her toilet was completed, she took up her bundle and went back to the outer room, where Dr. Shaw sat talking to Mrs. Munson.

"Well, of all the surprising things! Why, what made you turn yourself into such an old woman?" he asked, with a disapproving look at the bonnet and cloak, which were better fitted in point of age for Mrs. Munson.

"Don't I look right? I'm very sorry, but I haven't got anything else to wear," Nell said; then added, with a ripple of laughter, "But perhaps the folks will like me all the better if I look old. They will think I'm the more able to do things."

"They will soon find that out without any telling," the doctor said, as he pushed back his chair and rose to go.

Mrs. Munson, who had all this time been fumbling with a yellow canvas money-bag now asked, in a rather acid tone—

"How much am I in your debt, Miss Hamblyn, for the work you've done?"

An astonished look came into Nell's dark eyes, and she answered impulsively—

"Why, you are not in my debt at all, of course; and I am very much obliged to you for letting me stay."

"That is all nonsense!" broke in the doctor, as he shook his head at Nell. "You must give Miss Hamblyn what you think fit, Mrs. Munson. She has got her living to earn, and cannot afford to do her work for nothing."

"She has had her living, and good living too, for we don't stint food in this house," Mrs. Munson said grudgingly, for she was very much disposed to take Nell's view of the matter, and restore the yellow canvas bag to her pocket with its contents undisturbed.

But this the doctor would not permit. "Something you must pay, Mrs. Munson, if only as a thank-offering, for, remember, it is the nursing you have had which has saved your life," he said, sticking to his point with so much pertinacity that in the end Mrs. Munson produced two dollars from the yellow bag, which she bestowed upon Nell with the air of one who confers a very great favour indeed.

"It will help towards buying you a pair of boots, and it won't be before you need them either," she said, in such pointed allusion to the worn state of Nell's footgear that the poor girl crimsoned with mortification.

"Now that little ceremony is over, we will be moving," said the doctor, with an air of relief.

And in a very few minutes more Nell had taken leave of Mrs. Munson, and, with her bundle, was mounting the step of the doctor's high two-wheeled cart.

Giles Bailey came up just as they were driving off, and protested vigorously against Nell being spirited away in such a hurried fashion.

But the doctor only laughed at him. "If you are so anxious to provide your aunt with a permanent nurse and helper, friend Giles, you should get married, and bring your wife home to look after things."

"She'd have a rather bad time of it, I'm afraid, shut up with aunt and me," he replied stolidly, and, as usual, staring hard at Nell.

"I'm afraid she would," commented the doctor. Then he told Dobbin to start; so the journey was commenced, and Nell was moved on further into the wide world.

"I did not like to take that two dollars, but it is lovely to have some money of my own," she said, drawing deep breaths of satisfaction, as the cart swayed and bumped over the inequalities of the trail.

"What! had you no money at all?" demanded the doctor, in a shocked tone.

"Not of my own. I have got thirty dollars with me, but it isn't mine," she answered.

"Why have you got it, then?" he asked bluntly.

"I found it after the person had gone away to whom it belongs; and I can't send it to him, because I don't know where he is," she replied, with disarming candour.

"I suppose, then, you feel entitled to keep it. Quite a lucky find for you," he said, darting a sharp glance at her, which made her flush in a hot, uncomfortable fashion.

"Of course I should not keep what is not my own," she answered, with a gentle dignity. "I might have been forced to borrow a little of it if I had been compelled to pay for my board at Mrs. Munson's, but now there will be no need to touch it."

"I hope not," said the doctor, gravely; then he began talking about different things, showing Nell the big boulders of ironstone which stood up among the tree growths like the ruins of some ancient castle. "The Indians have a legend about those rocks," he said. "When the frontier was decided upon, the two nations agreed to build a wall, twice the height of a man, from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic, and they started here, where material was abundant. But the wind spirit and the water spirit arose in their might, beating down the puny beginnings of the great undertaking, and killing those who had planned it."

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## CHAPTER IX A Friend in Need

DR. SHAW put Nell down at the gate of the house at Lorimer's Clearing, but he did not stay to take her in and introduce her, because a man had stopped him five minutes before, begging him to go to an urgent case two miles in another direction.

"That is what comes of being a doctor; a man is the servant of every one, and has not a moment to call his own," he grumbled, as he urged his horse to a better pace.

"But it must be lovely to help people, and to know how to do things," Nell said, with a sigh of envy.

"Oh, ignorance is bliss sometimes, I can assure you," he answered, with a laugh. Then, having arrived at the gate, he got down and helped her to dismount with more courtesy than he was in the habit of showing towards the people who shared his rides.

A bad fit of shyness seized upon Nell as she passed through the gate and walked up to the house.

It was years since she had approached so grand a residence. There were white curtains to the windows, and plants growing in bright red pots, while the door was painted green and the door-frame white.

She stood hesitating a moment, wondering if there were not some humbler entrance at which she could apply for admission, when from the open window came the sound of a child's wailing cry, and then a pain-wrung voice in fretful complaint.

"Oh, Flossie, do take baby up and keep him quiet, my head is so bad!"

"I will as soon as I can, but I've got to take Patsey some broth, and it is such hard work to carry baby about with me," a tired little voice answered meekly.

Nell drew a quick breath and straightway forgot her shyness. She even forgot to knock at the door, but, pushing it open, marched into the house, dumped her bundle on the nearest chair, and whisking off the black silk cape, said cheerfully—

"I will take the broth to Patsey if you show me which room, then you can look after baby until I come back again."

The small lame girl, who was warming broth in a saucepan at the stove, faced round in amazement, while a girl lying on the settle by the window, covered up in a rug, lifted her head from the cushion with a start of surprise, and even the baby in the cradle in the corner left off wailing, attracted by the nodding pink roses in the new-comer's old-fashioned bonnet.

But Nell had no idea of the attention she had attracted. Elbowing the lame girl gently aside, she got possession of the saucepan, and having decided that the broth was warm enough, poured it into the basin which stood on the table, then said brightly—

"Now show me where Patsey is, or can I find him myself?"

"He is in there," answered Flossie, pointing a small, rather grimy finger in the direction of an open door at the end of the room; then she added with a gasp, "But he doesn't like strangers."

"Oh, he will like me," replied Nell, in a confident tone, making the pink roses nod up and down as she nodded her head; then, carrying the broth, she walked across the kitchen and into the room where Patsey, a freckled-faced boy of twelve years old, was lying in bed.

"Who are you?" he asked in great surprise, attracted as the baby had been by the pink roses which adorned the stranger's bonnet.

"Oh, just now I'm the broth-woman, and you've got to sit up in bed and drink it every drop. Then I may change into the bed-making woman—that is, if any one wants to have a bed made, and after that—well, you just see about drinking this broth, while I think about what I will be next," she said coaxingly, reading signs of rebellion in Patsey's eye.

"I don't like broth," he whined.

"Call it soup, then, and you know every one likes soup," she said, with a low merry laugh.

He sat up in bed without further demur, and commenced on the broth, taking it with slow reluctance as if he had no appetite. Then his eyes suddenly brightened, and he exclaimed—

"I know who you are; you are Mrs. Munson's fairy that Dr. Shaw talked about, and he said he was going to borrow you to come and help us until we all get better."

Nell coloured high with pleasure, because of the good reputation which had preceded her; then



she said laughingly—

“Well, if I’m a fairy, you will have to make haste and get better before I have to go. There are not many flowers left, you know, and the leaves are falling fast, so when they are all gone the fairies have to go too.”

“Where do they go?” demanded Patsey, wrinkling his freckled face into a grin of amusement.

“I don’t know; that is one of the things I shall have to find out. Lie down now, laddie, and I will come back presently to make your bed, only first of all I want to see what I can do for your sister.”

Carrying the empty basin back to the other room, Nell found the girl who had been lying down was sitting up, and holding by one hand to the table.

“Don’t you think that you would feel better if you were in bed?” she asked, in a pitiful tone.

“I dare say I should, but I daren’t give up, because there’s no one else to do anything, except poor little Flossie, and she is lame,” the girl said, lifting her pale face and heavy eyes to look at Nell with wistful entreaty.

“I can do the work now I’ve come. Flossie will show me where to find things, or I can ask Patsey to tell me. He is getting better, by the look of him, and he took all his broth,” Nell said, as she untied and laid aside her bonnet. Then she pulled an apron from her bundle of clothes, and, having tied it on, proceeded to roll up her sleeves in readiness for work.

“It would be lovely to lie down and have no care. I think it is the worry of everything that has made me bad,” said the poor white-faced girl.

“Worry always makes people sick, if they have too much of it,” rejoined Nell. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she asked, “You are the other girl, ain’t you?”

“What do you mean?” inquired Gertrude, in surprise.

“I mean, you are the girl who was to have gone and stayed with Mrs. Munson, and didn’t,” explained Nell.

Gertrude frowned, then said, in a petulant tone, “Oh, why am I to be reminded of that miserable business at every turn? Surely other people forget sometimes; and just think what our troubles have been of late!”

“Please forgive me, I did not mean to make you cross. I only wanted to say ‘thank you,’ because you did forget, and so left room for me,” said Nell, in a contrite tone.

“I’m cross all the time now,” admitted Gertrude. “But I can’t help it, and oh, I am so glad you have come; only I’m afraid you won’t be comfortable, and I don’t know where you can sleep.”

“Don’t trouble about me, and it isn’t bedtime yet. Just let me make you comfortable, and then I’ll go and see what I can do for your mother; she is sick, too, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Poor mother! she is just broken-hearted about losing Percy and Arthur, and it makes her seem as if she doesn’t care about anything else,” Gertrude said, with quivering lips.

Nell helped her to get to bed, waiting upon her with so much understanding and skill that Gertrude exclaimed presently, in amazed wonder—

“How kind you are! Where did you learn it all?”

“I don’t know. But I am so sorry for you,” replied Nell, looking rather abashed, but speaking with such evident sincerity, that Gertrude began to think there was some good left in life after all, and a ray of hope stole into her heart.

“Go to mother now, will you, please? I think father is lying down in there too; but you won’t mind, will you? It will be such a comfort to them to know that some one has come to help us.”

Nell went off then to the darkened room at the end of the house, where the mother lay sick with misery and broken hopes. It was such a grand chamber, too, with a flowery paper on the walls, a flowery carpet on the floor, and curtains to the bed, as well as the window. The new-comer stood still on the threshold, quite amazed at so much magnificence, and scarcely liking to walk across the carpet to the bed, through fear of spoiling it with her worn old boots.

Abe Lorimer was not in bed, but sitting in a rocking-chair, looking very ill and wretched.

“Come in,” he said, in his slow, quiet tones, looking at Nell with vague curiosity, as if he wondered who she was, yet did not care very much about the matter at all.

“Who’s that?” demanded a querulous voice from the bed.

Whereupon Nell ventured across the carpet on tiptoe, and stood where Mrs. Lorimer could see her.

“If you please I’ve come to help,” she said, finding it difficult to repress a shiver, for the woman on the bed reminded her in a roundabout fashion of Mrs. Gunnage, and it was a reminder which brought no pleasure with it.

“Who are you?” asked Mrs. Lorimer, surveying Nell with measuring eyes, which took in every detail of her appearance, from the masses of dark, rather untidy hair crowning her head, down to the worn boots, which were her private mortification just then.

“Dr. Shaw brought me over from Mrs. Munson’s place, on the American side,” explained Nell, who was so secretly elated with having realized her ambition in having crossed the frontier, that some of it had to come out in her speech.

“You can stay and help a bit, if Gertrude likes to have you. Have you seen her?” asked Mrs. Lorimer.

“Yes; I’ve just put her to bed. She is ill. I’m afraid she has got the fever, the same as Mrs. Munson had,” Nell said gravely, deciding, with quick intuition, that Mrs. Lorimer needed rousing more than medicine.

“Gertrude bad! Whatever shall we do? Abe, do you hear, or can’t you rouse yourself?” she said, lifting herself on her pillow to look at the man, who sat leaning back in the rocking-chair.

“Hush! don’t bother him, he looks so bad,” Nell whispered. “Do you think, if I made the other room comfortable, you could get up for an hour or two and sit by the fire? I could manage the others so much better if you were up. There would be nothing for you to do, only to lean back in a rocking-chair and be comfortable.”

“I don’t know if I could sit up. I’ll try. Oh dear! there never seems any chance for me to be ill in

peace," sighed the poor harassed woman, then shed a rain of self-pitying tears.

Nell did not stay to condole with her, but hurried back to the family sitting-room, where Flossie was doing her best with the baby, a lusty young gentleman of sixteen or seventeen months, while another boy, of perhaps four or five years, had just come in from somewhere with some hens' eggs in a basket, which he held up in triumph for his sister to see.

"Oh, Teddy, what a nice lot! Where did you find them?" cried Flossie, excitedly.

But Teddy, overawed by the sight of a stranger, merely put his finger in his mouth, drooped his head shyly to one side, and said nothing.

The sun was shining so brightly that Nell had a sudden inspiration.

"Have you a little cart to draw the baby about in? Wouldn't you like to go out in the sunshine for awhile, dear?" she asked. Then, struck by the paleness of Flossie's face, she added hastily, "Or are you too tired?"

"I'm not too tired to go out; I'd love to go, but won't you want me to help?" Flossie asked wistfully.

So much help had been required from her lately that life had become a rather wearisome business.

"I think I can manage. Don't go out of sight of the door, then I can call you if I want to know anything," Nell said, as she wrapped Master Baby in the first shawl which came handy, while Teddy ran to bring the little cart, which had served all the young Lorimers in turn.

For the next hour Nell was as busy as she could be. She swept and tidied the sitting-room, and put the fire into cheerful burning order; then, wrapping Mrs. Lorimer in a few loose easy garments, she helped her out to the sitting-room, and put her into the most comfortable chair by the fire. That done, she went back to the bedroom, made the bed, and tried to persuade Abe to lie down upon it.

But he only shook his head, saying that he would rather be left alone, so she had to go away hoping that he would change his mind later.

There was much to be done with such a houseful of invalids, and the day wore to evening without Nell realizing how time had flown. Then the hired man, who had been helping Abe Lorimer since the deaths of the two boys, came in for the pail before going to milk the cows, and she at once applied to him for help.

"Mr. Lorimer is ill. I can't persuade him to go to bed, and every hour he is staying up now will make a day's difference in his getting better, only of course he's too sick to know that, or he'd get into bed as quickly as he could. Can't you go and persuade him? You might even help him to undress."

The hired man, who was fresh out from England, and had been an assistant in a chemist's shop before coming West as a farm labourer, promised to do what he could, and disappeared into the bedroom. Nell shuddered to think of his heavy, dirty boots on that flowery carpet, but there was no help for it, for she had not liked to ask him to remove them, and he probably had not thought anything about the matter.

He was a long time gone, and when he came back, he announced that he had succeeded in getting Mr. Lorimer into bed, but believed him to be very ill indeed.

"Some one ought to sit up with him to-night," said the young man, as he took the pail and went out to milk the cows.

"I wonder what we shall do?" said Nell to Flossie, when later the little girl came in with the baby, while Teddy dragged the baby-cart away to the wood-shed. "Does the hired man sleep in the house? What is his name? And is he any good?"

"What a lot of questions! I can't answer them all at a gulp," Flossie said, with a quavering laugh. "His name is George Miller, he sleeps in the loft, and he is so kind that I just love him," she cried with enthusiasm, but added, with a grave shake of her head, "I'm afraid he does not know much about farm work."

"What he doesn't know he will have to find out then, somehow," Nell said rather grimly, for she did not know much of farm work herself; and she could have wept because of her own ignorance, as she looked about the house and the dairy, and thought of all the work which wanted doing, but must, for the present, be neglected, because of her want of knowledge.

"But I can tell George lots of things, and mother can tell him too," Flossie said confidently. Then she showed Nell how to get the separator ready for the evening milk to be passed through, told her where the cream would have to go, and generally instructed her in the first principles of dairy management.

Mrs. Lorimer was much better that evening, and declared herself quite equal to looking after her husband through the night, which was a great comfort to them all.

George Miller went off early to his night's rest in the loft, after volunteering to sit up if he were needed, and when he was gone, Nell was able to make her arrangements for the night.

There were only two downstairs bedrooms at Lorimer's; but there was a small, very smart best parlour, and in this a bed had been placed, on which Gertrude was lying.

Nell fairly held her breath when she had leisure to examine the splendours of this apartment, which, however, had a close fusty smell that half choked her, accustomed as she was to fresh air in unlimited quantities. There was a looking-glass over the mantel-shelf which was festooned with green tissue paper. Stiffly starched antimacassars hung over every chair-back, one table had a bright red cloth, and another had a green one, while the vases on the mantelpiece were blue. It was very grand, of course; but, on the whole, she felt more at home in the family sitting-room, which was also dining-room, kitchen, and scullery rolled into one.

Gertrude's bed stood against the wall on the side farthest from the window, and by pushing the table with the green cloth farther into the corner, Nell decided that she could get a very good night's rest lying on the rug in the middle of the room, and could look after Gertrude at the same time.

Flossie and the baby slept for that night in a bed standing in Patsey's room, while Teddy curled

down in Patsey's bed, sleeping all night rolled up in a tight little ball like a kitten. Nell went in to look at them once or twice, and was so charmed with their peaceful sleeping faces that she could have lingered looking, forgetful of her own need of rest. But Gertrude's moaning drew her back each time she went away, and kept her awake a great part of the night as well.

"So many children, I can't take care of them all; so much work, mother, I can't get it done!" muttered the sick girl, over and over, as the weary hours went by, until at last, despairing of sleep, Nell rose from her hard bed on the floor, and sat down on one of the smart chairs to wait for daylight, when active work must begin again.

"Dear, dear, poor girl; how it all must have worried her!" said Nell to herself, as she listened to Gertrude's distressful plaint. "Now, I should just love to have a lot of people of my own like this. If only the four in the other room were my brothers and sister, I should be so happy, that there would seem nothing in life left to wish for. What a puzzle life is! Here is the other girl, broken down and sick, because she has got too many helpless folks to look after, while I am just about breaking my heart because I've no one to love or care for. I hope they'll be obliged to keep me here for ever so long, then I can make-believe they are all my own people, especially Flossie and the baby."

Nell's thoughts merged into dreams at this point, so slipping and swaying, drooping forward and recovering herself, she dozed and waked, then dozed again in fitful unrestful slumber, until the cocks began to crow shrilly, and she heard George Miller, the hired man, come creeping with slow, cautious steps down from the loft chamber overhead.

"Time to get up now," she said to herself, with a little laugh of amusement, as she rose from the chair and stretched her weary limbs; then going out to the kitchen, she plunged her face into a bowl of cold water, and so prepared for a day of toil.

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## CHAPTER X To Fill the Breach

THE leaves had all fallen, and been hidden inches deep under the first snow of the season; but Nell was still at Lorimer's Clearing, working at all sorts of tasks, and striving with all her might to lighten the heavy burdens resting on the household.

Patsey was well again, and getting into mischief as often as possible. But as he went to school every day, his opportunities for mischief at home were rather limited.

Mrs. Lorimer was also well—at least she said so, but there was a broken, crushed look about her, as if life had lost its zest and charm. Very hard to please Nell found her, a grudging nature which would accept service, but give no love in return; so silent, too, that whole days would pass in which she spoke—only to complain.

The coming of the first snow found Abe Lorimer only able to leave his bed and creep out to sit in the big chair by the stove, while Gertrude was not even able to do that.

The doctor did not come very often. Mrs. Lorimer told him not to, declaring that it was as much as they could do to buy food for such a big household, without piling up a long doctor's bill as well.

"But I should come all the same, if I thought there was any chance of their pulling up any the quicker," Dr. Shaw said confidentially to Nell. "There are some cures that only Nature can work, and she is a very slow physician. However, time does wonders, and Gertrude will be sound enough again some day, but I have my doubts about the father."

So Nell stayed on doing the work of the house while Mrs. Lorimer looked after the invalids. Patsey slept with George Miller in the loft, so that Nell could share the children's room, but Gertrude still lay in the smart best parlour.

Washing, baking, sweeping, scrubbing, the days passed like a dream to Nell, and she was happier than she had been in all the years since her father died. At last she had love enough to satisfy her, for the children were devoted to her, and the big fat baby, who was so slow in learning to walk, always preferring other people's feet to his own, had struck up a violent friendship with Nell, and thought there was no pleasure in life equal to riding round on her back, while she swept, dusted, and did many other similar household tasks with the child clinging to her shoulders.

She would have been happy enough to stay on indefinitely, working for her board, her only wages being love. But she was quick to see that Mrs. Lorimer would be glad to get her out of the house, and as soon as Gertrude could get up there would no longer be any excuse for her remaining at Lorimer's Clearing.

The thought of the future worried her a great deal in the quiet nights, when the children were all sleeping round her, and she had nothing to do save lie still puzzling out the problem which loomed every day so much nearer to her.

It was dead of winter; the sickness which had been so prevalent in the neighbourhood had entirely disappeared, with the exception of the two cases at Lorimer's Clearing. Nell had ventured to ask Dr. Shaw one day if he knew of work which she could go to next, but he only shook his head, and told her to be content where she was, for no one needed her so badly as the Lorimers.

But she was very sensitive, and very proud too, and the thought of being where she was not wanted made a misery for her which tormented all day long.

At last Gertrude was able to leave her room, and to creep feebly about the house. Then Mrs. Lorimer spoke plainly to Nell, not with the thankful gratitude which she ought to have shown, but with the brutal directness of one who has no consideration for anything outside her own narrow circle of interest.

Nell had been out-of-doors, hanging the week's wash up to dry, in a cutting wind which rushed down from snow-covered mountain tops and howled through the valleys. Coming in, numbed and trembling from exposure to the bitter cold, she said, with a brave attempt at cheerfulness—

"There! the hanging-out is done for this week, and I hope by the time next Monday comes the weather will be warmer."

"Perhaps you won't be here then, so it won't matter to you whether it is cold or not," Mrs. Lorimer said, going on with her sewing, and never glancing at Nell, who turned very pale, and winced as if some one had struck her a blow.

She was only pale for a moment, though; then her colour came back with a rush, and she asked, in a tone which she vainly tried to keep steady—

"How soon do you wish me to go?"

Mrs. Lorimer looked up then, scanning the girl's face with a cold gaze.

"You can suit yourself about that; I don't mind whether it is this week or next. I'm not denying that you've worked hard, and done your best for us all round. But we have had heavy expenses since harvest, so even an extra mouth to feed is a consideration, and I'm bound to cut down expenses where I can."

Nell drew a long breath and set her teeth hard, then turned away without a word. But there was hot revolt in her heart all the same, and a wild protest against the bitter injustice of Mrs. Lorimer's treatment.

"Why won't people be kind to me?" she moaned under her breath, as she scrubbed out the children's bedroom with the hot soapsuds left over from washing, and a few salt tears blinded her eyes, then dropped on to the wet floor.

Her grandfather had gone away, leaving her to face the world as best she might. Mrs. Munson had been glad to get rid of her because of the expense of her board, and now Mrs. Lorimer, for whom she had toiled so hard, was simply telling her to go.

Nell caught her breath in a sudden sob, and then a pair of arms came stealing round her neck, gripping her in such a loving hug that she was nearly choked.

"Nell, dear Nell, I heard all that mother said just now, and it has made me feel so bad that I don't know what to do. But don't judge her too hardly, for the deaths of Percy and Arthur seem to have changed her entirely. I have to keep telling myself that all the time, for very often I am tempted to wonder if she has left off loving me," said Gertrude, whose face was pale and drawn, her eyes red with weeping.

Nell choked back another sob. "I wouldn't mind so much if I had anywhere else to go. But, being winter, it is hard to find work. There isn't much out-of-doors just now that a girl can do, and there are women enough about here for all the indoor work, now that the sickness has all gone," she said, in a worried tone.

"You must not go—you must stay here with us," answered Gertrude, impulsively.

"I can't—not a day longer than I can help, that is—for your mother says my keep is a consideration; and oh, Gertrude, it is just awful to be beholden to charity for your food!" Nell said vehemently; and then she scrubbed a section of the floor with tremendous vigour.

Gertrude laughed in a weak, mirthless fashion. "Charity, did you say? Why, Nell, has it never occurred to you how tremendously indebted we are to you? Apart from the loving-kindness you have shown to us all, and which no money could ever pay for, the actual work you have done should have earned you a considerable salary anywhere else. Why, at Bratley, where I am telegraph clerk, a woman would charge half a dollar a day, and then not do half the work that you do. Oh, I know; and I will tell mother just what I think about it all. I should have gone to her then, and said just everything that was in my mind, only father came in, looking so worn and sad that I had no heart nor courage left to make a scene."

"Gertrude, don't say anything to her at all about it," implored Nell, whose misery had been effectually routed by this sweet sympathy and championship. "I don't mind half so much now I know that you feel sorry I've got to go. Only, just at first, it seemed as if nobody cared what became of me, and I felt so dreadfully lonely and outside of everything."

"Poor Nell! and yet you are not outside at all, if only you knew it," murmured Gertrude. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she went on, "I'm going to tell you something now that seems too sacred to put into speech, only perhaps you will feel better if you know. Always, when I was lying in bed in the parlour, I could hear what any one was saying in father's room, and every night when he was keeping his bed too, I could hear him saying his prayers. You know what a quiet, slow-of-speech man he is—but when he is praying it is so different—and it became a positive comfort to me to hear him. He used to pray for us all by name, and every night he thanked God for having sent you to help us, and he used to pray so earnestly for you that you might be repaid for your goodness, and that your future might be taken care of, that I am quite sure you won't be left unprovided for; and if you do go away, it will be to take higher and better work."

A glow of happiness came into Nell's face, the trouble of Mrs. Lorimer's unkindness faded into an unimportant detail, and she said cheerfully—

"Well, I shan't trouble anymore about it to-day, and by to-morrow, perhaps, things will look different, or I shall see better about what I've got to do next."

But, as it happened, before to-morrow came, she found what it was she could do next, and it came about in this wise. When Patsey came home from school that afternoon he brought with him a letter for Gertrude, which filled her with consternation.

It was from her deputy at the Bratley depot, who wrote that she could hold the post for only two weeks longer, as she had been offered a clerkship in Nelson, a permanent post with a good salary.

"Oh, mother, do you think I could get strong enough in a fortnight to go back to work?" cried Gertrude, dismayed at the thought of losing her position at Bratley.

"I don't think anything about it, for I know you can't," Mrs. Lorimer replied gloomily.

"Oh dear, what shall I do? Every one says the Bratley clerks are sure of promotion, and I had such a clean record, too; now I shall have to resign, and all my previous work and waiting will go for nothing."

Nell, who was busy at the stove with preparations for supper, turned quickly with an eager

question—

“Could I fill the place for you, do you think?”

“But you don’t know anything about telegraphy,” interposed Mrs. Lorimer.

“I do, a little. For four months before father died, after he was too ill to preach, we boarded with Mrs. Chapman, at Poll’s End. Their daughter Sally was the depot operator, and she taught me a lot; I could send and receive messages for her, and I often used to be in her office for hours alone, while she went walking with her friends,” Nell said, a little breathlessly, while she looked from Mrs. Lorimer to Gertrude, and then back again.

“Oh, mother, if only it could be done, how happy I should be!” exclaimed Gertrude, with clasped hands, and an eager look in her eyes.

“I should think it might; there is a fortnight yet, you see, and you could spend that time in coaching Nell up. If she is as quick at telegraphy as she is at other things, she is bound to do.” And as she spoke, Mrs. Lorimer turned to Nell with a strangely softened glance.

“Then I’ll write to-day to say that I will send another deputy in two weeks’ time, and Nell can stay at Bratley until the doctor says that I may go back to my work again,” Gertrude said gleefully.

That night, when Nell was in the dairy doing the last of her work for the evening, Mrs. Lorimer came softly in and stood beside her as she wiped down the shelves, and cleared away the empty pans.

“Nell, will you forgive me for telling you to go this morning?” she said slowly, her voice quivering in spite of her efforts to keep it steady.

“Why, yes, of course,” said Nell, quickly, adding, with a nervous laugh, “I had been so happy here, with such a lot of folks to love, that it was hard work even to think of tearing myself away, though I would have gone sooner if I could have found anywhere to go, or if I had known that I was not needed here.”

Mrs. Lorimer put a shaking hand on her arm. “I’ve had a black, bitter mood on me for a long while past, and I’ve said and done things that a happier person might well be ashamed of. But it took your generous offer to fill Gertrude’s place at Bratley to make me see how really mean I was.”

“Don’t talk about it any more, please; it hurts me,” whispered Nell, turning rather pale, for there was a look in Mrs. Lorimer’s face which frightened her.

“It had better be said out now and done with, then there will be no need to put it into words again. I haven’t been fair to you in my mind ever since you came, and yet at every turn you have given me good for evil. That is what has made me come to you now to say straight out that I’ve been wrong, and to ask forgiveness.”

Nell dropped her dish-cloth, and, with a sudden impulse, put her arms round the cold, unresponsive woman in an affectionate hug.

“You are not to say another word, do you hear? Or, if you do, I’ll—I’ll—let me see, what will I do? Oh, I’ll go to bed before my work is done, and I won’t learn to be a telegraph operator, so there!”

The effect of these threats was rather diminished by the merry laugh that accompanied them.

There was an unwonted moisture in Mrs. Lorimer’s eyes as she turned away. She was not a woman given to tears, or to laughter, or to any other sort of emotion, but there were strange depths in her character that few people even guessed at, and Nell’s forbearance and generosity had moved her mightily.

They were busy days which followed. Nell rose early, and worked at household tasks until Gertrude was able to leave her room. Then the two spent a couple of hours busy with rule books and a dummy sounder. It might have been as puzzling as Greek to Nell but for her remembrance of the instruction given her by Sally Chapman. Young as she was, she had been quite a skilful operator then, and it took only a little effort to bring it all back.

One day, before the fortnight was up, Abe Lorimer took her over to Nine Springs in the morning, and left her there until the evening, in the telegraph office at the depot, where the operator, a merry-faced girl of twenty, let her send and receive the messages as they came in, telling her that, with practice, she would make a very good operator indeed.

It was raining fast when Abe Lorimer drove to Nine Springs to fetch her home that night, while the melting snow gave a raw coldness to the atmosphere that was dismal and depressing.

But Nell was too happy for the weather to have any effect upon her, and it seemed to her, as the horses splashed along through the mud and the slush, that she had nothing in the world left to wish for, unless, indeed, it was, that she might be able to restore to Mr. Bronson the thirty dollars which lay such a heavy burden upon her heart.

Her own two dollars, which Mrs. Munson had given her, had gone to buy her a pair of boots. But Abe Lorimer had given her five dollars that morning, so she had money of her own again.

There had been additions to her wardrobe, too, which filled her with profound satisfaction. A long brown coat of Gertrude’s had been bestowed upon her, and Mrs. Lorimer, who was clever with her needle, had made a little brown cloth cap to match it; while Patsey had shot a pheasant in the top pasture, bringing home the wings as a special adornment for the brown hat.

The black silk cape had been made into a blouse for best occasions, the blue merino had been altered into a more youthful shape, and Nell surveyed her improved appearance in the looking-glass with an amazement which was comical in the extreme.

“Oh, what a difference clothes do make!” she exclaimed. “It isn’t only the outside look of them, it is the inside feel. I’m not Nell any more when I’ve these things on; I’m Eleanor Hamblyn, or perhaps Miss Hamblyn, which is grander still.”

“What nonsense! You will always be Nell to us, even if you are dressed up in silk velvet and diamonds, with lace frills,” laughed Gertrude, who had been assisting at the transformation scene. Then she asked gently, “Haven’t you ever had pretty, or even suitable, clothes before?”

“I don’t know; I suppose not, or at least, I never looked pretty in them. You see, my mother died when I was so very small, and my father did not know much about clothes, though everyone said he preached beautiful sermons.”

"But afterwards—for you say your father died ever so long ago—wasn't there anyone to see that you had a nice frock once in a while?" Gertrude persisted, with natural girlish curiosity about Nell's past.

"It was worse and worse afterwards; for granfer not merely didn't know about what sort of clothes a girl ought to wear, he didn't care," she answered bitterly. Then she abruptly changed the conversation, for, mindful of her grandfather's caution, she never talked of her life at the Lone House, and was extremely reticent upon the subject of her immediate past.

She often thought of Joe Gunnage's errand to fetch the Canadian police to inspect the find at the Lone House. But she had not dared to ask any questions, or set on foot inquiries concerning it, through fear lest it should in any way harm her grandfather.

So she hid the past as carefully as she could, comforting herself that now she was on Canadian soil she was safe from any reminders of that old bad time. But it was only hidden, not forgotten, after all.

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## CHAPTER XI

### The Recognition of Mrs. Nichols

NELL stepped off the little platform at the rear of the cars with a dazed sensation of utter unreality all about her.

Only once before, since she could remember, had she ridden in a train, and that was more than a year before her father died.

Now it seemed to her that she had been whirling along for days, weeks—or was it years since Abe Lorimer had put her on the cars at Nine Springs?

"This morning, of course, at nine o'clock, and now it is nearly four o'clock; and oh, I wonder if the baby misses me very much, and what they are all doing at home?" she sighed to herself, feeling strangely desolate and forlorn, as she stood beside the small box containing her belongings, and looked at the towering hills and gloomy pine-clothed slopes about Bratley.

Then a stout woman, with a shawl over her head, came through a small wicket gate by the side of the track, and, advancing straight towards Nell, asked in a rather wheezy tone—

"Are you Miss Lorimer's new deputy?"

"Yes," replied Nell, with a sudden terror lest she should be found wanting in some unexpected place, and the fear made her feel for the moment like an interloper, or an impostor, until she remembered the words of the merry, good-natured operator at Nine Springs; then her courage came back, and she was able to smile at Mrs. Nichols, whom she recognized by her appalling squint, according to the description given by Gertrude.

"Well, I'm Mrs. Nichols. You've got to board with me, and I'll make you as comfortable as I can, though, between you and me, I'm getting more than a little tired of deputies, and I'd give a good deal to have Miss Lorimer back again, bless her kind little heart. How is she now, poor lamb?"

"She is getting stronger every day now, and the doctor says she will be able to come back directly the winter is over," Nell replied cheerfully.

Now there was some one to greet her, she did not feel quite so desolate and forlorn.

"Well, it ain't over yet by a long way," sighed the stout woman, "and I can only hope you will not be so faddy in your food as the deputy who is leaving. What I've had to bear with that young woman's appetite these weeks past no one but myself can ever understand. She can't, or she won't, eat potatoes, nor turnips, nor carrots; she turns up her snubby nose at leek pie and Irish stew, and as for a bit of pudding, she won't touch it. All her cry is for new-laid eggs, bread and butter, toasted cheese, and such like. Just think what that means to a poor widow woman, with butter at twenty-five cents a pound, and new-laid eggs at five cents apiece."

"As dear as that, are they? Well, it is good for the people that have got them to sell, but we will live on potatoes, Irish stews, and that sort of thing, until butter and eggs get cheaper," replied Nell, with a smile.

"Ah, you are one of Miss Lorimer's sort, I can see, only you have got a stronger will and more purpose. But you can't have a kinder heart; I will say that for her. But come along, my dear, and I will get you a nice early cup of tea, for you must want it after a long day of knocking about on the cars," said Mrs. Nichols, who was a fairly shrewd reader of human nature, and had taken the measure of Nell's stronger character at the first glance.

"Is this the office? Would you mind if I went in and had a look round first? I'm not very hungry, but I do want to get used to things, and the other deputy goes away to-night, I believe," said Nell, who was in secret terribly afraid of her new responsibilities, and anxious to reassure herself on the subject of her own capability.

"Yes, that is the office, and Miss Simpson goes away by the eight-o'clock cars, and the office shuts down then for the night," explained Mrs. Nichols.

"Would you mind, then, if I didn't come in until after eight o'clock? I want to have as much time to get used to things as I can," Nell said nervously.

"Do just as you like, my dear. I might as well step in and introduce you to Miss Simpson, then she will treat you properly. Let me see, what is your name—Miss Hammond?"

"No; Hamblyn, Eleanor Hamblyn," explained Nell; whereat a puzzled look came over the face of Mrs. Nichols, and she treated Nell to a look of the keenest scrutiny, then marched into the dingy little telegraph office, and promptly introduced her to the dyspeptic-looking girl who had been acting as Gertrude's deputy for so long.

Miss Simpson chose to be very affable, greeted Nell warmly, and declared herself utterly thankful that she was going to leave a dead-alive hole like Bratley.

"I never saw such a place; not a solitary individual to talk to, except the miners that go backwards and forwards to Camp's Gulch and Roseneath, and they are a mixed lot, I can tell you," Miss Simpson said, with a toss of her head, and an air of knowing a great deal on all sorts of subjects.

"But the work, is that very heavy?" asked Nell, who was not interested in this aspect of the drawbacks of Bratley. "I mean, does it come with a great rush at certain times of the day?"

"Oh no, there is never a rush of any sort; I wish there were, if only for the sake of keeping one in practice. I'm a twenty-five-word operator myself, and ought to have been promoted long ago, instead of which I have just had to hang round, doing deputy work while waiting for my chance. An eighteen-word operator would manage very well here; what do you scale?"

"I can do twenty words comfortably," replied Nell, modestly; then added, with deprecating candour, "but I'm not on the list yet, so I can only do deputy work."

"Get yourself put on the list, then, the very first time the inspector comes this way; he'll be glad enough to get a twenty-word operator, I can tell you, for some of the beginners are a fearfully slow lot."

Nell began to feel reassured, and when, a few minutes later, the clicking call of the sounder gave warning of a message coming, she took her place at the table and wrote the words down as they came through.

"Stop Roseneath cars for twenty minutes; supplies on to Camp's Gulch got wrong."

"What does it mean?" asked Nell, in a bewildered tone, as she stared at the message she had written down.

"You've got to stop the cars, of course; run, or you will be too late," said Miss Simpson, pointing to the door with a hasty gesture.

Nell made haste to obey, returning five minutes later very much out of breath, and rather curious concerning the message.

"Did it mean that the supplies for Camp's Gulch had got on to the Roseneath cars by mistake? or what did it mean?" she asked, panting still from the haste she had made.

"I don't know, and as it is not my business, I don't care," returned Miss Simpson, languidly.

"But I care; I want to know what everything means, or else how can I do my work properly?" Nell asked, with an inflection of dismay in her tone.

"Oh, a few months' work as an operator will soon cure you of any tendency to curiosity, and take away some of your superfluous energy as well," replied Miss Simpson, with a superior air. "But here comes another message; look sharp!"

Nell turned to the sounder, writing down the words as the machine ticked them out, and when the message was all through, she heaved a great sigh of relief.

"There is my mystery explained, and I am so very glad," she said, with a laugh.

The conductor of the Roseneath train came into the office at this moment, anxious to know why his train had been prevented from starting, and she read the message to him.

"Three cases tinned meats, four boxes marked fragile, seven bags rice, all marked W. H. P., put on Roseneath train here by mistake."

"I said it was a mistake when they were put on, only no one would believe me," said the conductor, wrathfully, as he turned to go and take the misladen freight from his cars, shouting loudly for the baggage clerk to come and help him, and so shorten the delay in starting.

But the baggage clerk, who was also pointsman and a good many other things as well, had already gone off to some other duty, and was not available.

"I will help you," said Nell, impulsively, running after the harassed conductor, who was fuming and irritable with the delay.

He stared at her for a moment in astonishment; then his face cleared as if by magic.

"Thank you, miss; it will make five minutes' difference, perhaps more, and it all counts in the day's work," he said. But he lifted his hat to her with a ready chivalry that showed he respected her none the less for her offer of help.

Five minutes of really hustling work, then the packages were all off the train, the whistle sounded, and the cars moved off towards Roseneath, just as the baggage clerk came running back to see what was amiss.

Nell explained the situation to him, putting the freight in his care for loading on to the next Camp's Gulch cars, then returned to the office, very warm and rather untidy from that spirited wrestling with rice bags and boxes marked "fragile."

"Oh, how could you do such a thing?" cried Miss Simpson, holding up her hands in horror.

"There was no one else to help, and it didn't hurt me, only I'm rather dusty," Nell said, with a rueful look at her brown coat.

"The cars might have waited until to-morrow morning before I would have soiled my fingers by helping to take off freight. Such a fearfully unladylike thing to do," rejoined Miss Simpson, severely, pursing her thin lips, and looking very prim and proper.

"Was it unladylike?" asked Nell, opening her eyes very widely. "I'm very sorry; but, if the same thing happened again, I expect I should do just the same."

"I expect you would. Some people are made so," rejoined Miss Simpson, slightly. Then, with a change of tone, she said briskly, "As you are here and settled in so comfortably, there is no reason why I shouldn't go off duty at once. I shall have time to dress myself nicely before the cars come in."

Nell looked a little blank. She had expected to have Miss Simpson's help all the evening, especially as her own actual coming on duty was not supposed to begin until the next morning.

However, it was of no use to protest, as the young lady had so plainly made up her mind to do no more work at Bratley.

The evening was a busy one. So many calls from the instrument, some of which had to be answered, others merely going through to other places. Nell's breakfast, and the luncheon she had taken on the cars, had become dim memories, and she was feeling tired and faint when, about six o'clock, Mrs. Nichols came puffing and wheezing into the office, laden with a basket and a small tin can.

"Feelin' half starved, ain't you? If not, you ought to by this time. A burning shame, I call it, to leave you here in charge, while she is curling and frizzing her front hair, and you with no chance to feed comfortably all day, while your duty properly doesn't begin until to-morrow morning. But I've brought you a drop of tea and a doughnut, so that you shan't starve outright before supper."

"It is very kind of you," said Nell, gratefully, as she sipped her tea and nibbled the doughnut. Then, remembering a problem which had been bothering her several times that evening, she said rather anxiously, "Now that you are here, will you tell me how I am to find your house? It will be quite dark at eight o'clock, for the moon does not rise until nearly midnight."

"I'll come and fetch you myself. It is lucky that the weather is frosty to-day, or a nice time I should have had of it tramping through the mud. There is that telegraph again. What a nuisance the thing is!" Mrs. Nichols said, as the warning machine ticked out its third summons while Nell drank her tea.

"There is a clerk at Lytton who seems to find time hang heavy on her hands to-night, for she keeps calling me up, and asking me if I won't talk; but I don't know what to say to her," replied Nell.

"Tell her so, then, and she will soon leave off. Well, I must go now and see if Miss Simpson is through with her frizzing and curling. If she goes on torturing her poor hair like this for another ten years she won't have any left;" and away went Mrs. Nichols, puffing and wheezing like a laden locomotive on an up-grade track.

"I wonder why she stares at me so much?" Nell said to herself, when the stout woman had gone, for the scrutiny of Mrs. Nichols had been very close and keen, making her feel vaguely uncomfortable.

Just then there was a call from the sounder. Nell had to take down a list of instructions from Camp's Gulch, then send a message to Roseneath. After that Lytton called her up again, and so the evening went on.

Ten minutes before the cars for Lytton came in, Miss Simpson sailed into the office in all the glory of her frizzed hair, her best hat, and smart new winter coat.

"Thought I'd just look in and see how you are getting on, though it is rather a shame to come and make you envious," she said, with a laugh at her own wit.

"Why envious?" asked Nell, simply, thinking the envy was to be called forth by the splendours of Miss Simpson's array.

"Because I'm going away, of course, and you have got to stay on here in this dull hole. Wait until this time next week and see if you don't find yourself longing to be in my shoes."

"Perhaps I shall if that tiresome Lytton girl keeps calling me up and wanting to talk, only I'm afraid your shoes would pinch me rather badly, they are so much smaller than mine," Nell answered, with a merry laugh, looking from her own stout footgear, bought from the store at Nine Springs, and eminently suitable for country wear, to the high-heeled, pointed-toed shoes with great steel buckles which Miss Simpson was wearing.

"That isn't a girl at Lytton; but Claude Hale, a friend of mine. I didn't tell him I was going away to-day, so, of course, he wonders why I am so unresponsive. Pray don't tell him I am gone, then he'll be puzzled to death at my coldness," giggled Miss Simpson, in a high state of glee.

"I shall not tell him anything, but I hope he will soon leave off worrying," replied Nell; then, as the cars came rumbling down the valley, she went to the door of her office to see Miss Simpson get on board.

"If nothing is harder than to-night has been, I shall be able to manage all right, and I will write to Gertrude to-morrow and tell her so," murmured Nell to herself, as she stood at the door watching the retreating figure of Miss Simpson.

A wave of homesick longing came over her as, with a screech, a roar, and a clatter, the train of cars moved on out of the station. Lorimer's Clearing was not her home, but it was the only place in the wide world which had given her a home feeling, and she yearned to go back to the toil and the drudgery, if only with these she could have the love which had surrounded her there.

In her generous heart she had quite overlooked and forgotten Mrs. Lorimer's first hard treatment of her, and although it was quite possible that she would never feel the same warm love for the mistress of the house as she had felt for all the others, there was no danger of her remembering, as a grudge, that Mrs. Lorimer had been unfair, nay, positively unkind.

Punctually on the stroke of eight came puffing, wheezing Mrs. Nichols, who subsided on the one chair which the office contained, to wait while Nell shut everything up safely for the night.

Even in the pauses of her work she was conscious again of that same close scrutiny which had bothered her so much before.

"Perhaps it is her way, or her squint," she said to herself, with a shrug, as she locked the office door and put the key in her pocket, then plunged with her guide into the frosty dark.

The baggage clerk had taken her box earlier in the evening, and in a very few minutes Nell found herself in a warm, cosy sitting-room, in darkness at present save for a ruddy glow from the half-open door of the stove.

"You stay right there while I light the lamp, then you won't fall over anything," said Mrs. Nichols; and Nell did as she was told, feeling very thankful that the long exciting day was over at last, and that she had nothing more to do but to sit still and rest.

The lamp, when lighted, revealed a well-spread supper-table, and a most inviting armchair, into



which Nell was promptly hustled, and ordered to take her boots off.

"What a nice room!" she exclaimed, her attention being immediately attracted by a row of books on a long shelf in the farther recess.

"It is comfortable; but then, I've been used to being comfortable all my life," Mrs. Nichols said, with a laugh, as she poked up the fire, drew the coffee-pot nearer to boil up again, and then, opening the oven door, lifted out a dish of delicately-browned sausages, surrounded by a rampart of mashed potato.

Nell enjoyed her supper, and the unaccustomed sensation of being waited upon; but she was conscious all the time of being held in close scrutiny by her hostess, who kept dropping into strange silence.

"You said your name was Eleanor Hamblyn, didn't you? Was your father a preacher on the American side years ago?" the good woman asked presently.

"Yes," replied Nell, but with a sudden shrinking, for with her grandfather's injunction to secrecy fresh in her mind, it was rather embarrassing that this woman should recognize her.

"I was sure of it, for you are just your mother over again; poor Nell Gwynne, with her great dark eyes and her sweet low voice," said Mrs. Nichols, then burst into a fit of hearty crying.

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## CHAPTER XII

### Nell Learns her Family History

NELL jumped up in great consternation at this unexpected emotion on the part of her hostess.

"Oh, please, I am so sorry; but I think there is a mistake. My mother's name couldn't have been Gwynne, because her father's name was Humphrey, Doss Umpey he always called himself."

"Of course, of course, I knew I couldn't be mistaken," cried Mrs. Nichols, with a gurgling gasp which threatened to choke her. "But your mother's name was Gwynne, my dear, though you might not have known it, and Doss Umpey was not her father at all, but only her mother's second husband."

"Are you sure, quite sure of that?" asked Nell, eagerly, going rather white, and standing with one hand clutching at the mantelpiece, as if she were afraid of falling.

"Quite sure, and I ought to know if any one did, seeing that I was your mother's greatest friend until she married the preacher, and went away with him to her new home. She dropped her old friends a bit then—felt she didn't want any one but her husband, I expect, which is natural, but not always wise." And Mrs. Nichols heaved a heavy sigh.

"Tell me about my mother, please," said Nell, her colour coming and going, while she tried to realize what it would mean to her not to have Doss Umpey for her grandfather.

"Your mother was a sweet, pretty creature, my dear, much prettier than you, for she was plumper, and had more colour; but you've got her eyes and her voice, and that brown hat and coat do suit you amazingly well. Doss Umpey drove the stage then between George Creek and Mutley town, and his wife—that was your grandmother—kept a store at Mutley with Nell to help her."

"Was mother called Nell too? Father spoke of her always as Eleanor," said Nell, doubtfully.

"I know he did, and I expect your husband, when you have one, will call you Eleanor too, for it is a fine, stately name, well suited for grown-up folks; but it isn't fitted for children, so I suppose that is why they don't get called by it."

"Was granfer kind to my mother?" asked Nell.

"I don't think he was unkind; but your mother couldn't bear him, and it was when he tried to make her marry Dick Brunsen that she revolted openly, and wouldn't stay at the store when Doss came home, but always used to come over and sleep at our house, where she met the preacher, your father."

"Dick Brunsen?" said Nell, faintly. She was thinking of the man who came to the Lone House for succour the day that Pip got hurt, and who had said that his name was Dick Bronson.

"Yes; Dick Brunsen was a widower with one child, a boy of five or six, and he was called Dick too. Brunsen was very thick with Doss Umpey at the time; they two and Ned Logan were inseparables, until that scandal about robbing the stage, then, of course, Logan had to go to prison, and the other two quarrelled, though, if strict justice had been done, the three of them would have gone to penal servitude together."

"Tell me about it," murmured Nell; and there was a throb of pleasure at her heart because Doss Umpey had been only stepfather to her mother.

"It was believed, only it couldn't be proved, that Brunsen planned the robberies, and paid Logan to carry them out, Doss Umpey being, of course, a consenting party. This is how it was done. Brunsen, who lived in a big house at Mutley, pretending to be a rich man, used to order all sorts of expensive goods from the city to be paid for on delivery; then they would be sent on from the depot at George Creek by the stage, and always on those occasions the stage was held up and robbed when crossing the iron plains, which was a desperately lonely bit of high ground between George Creek and Mutley."

"But didn't any one suspect?" asked Nell.

"Naturally they did after the first time or two, but it was difficult to get proof, for they could not catch the thieves, you see; but a watch was set, and Logan was caught in the act, tried, convicted, and sent to penal servitude. He died in prison, I believe, and did not give information as to where he had hidden a lot of the stuff he had stolen, and which Brunsen was, of course, anxious to get hold of, since he had paid Logan to steal it for him. Then Brunsen forced Doss to give up driving the stage. That was just about the time that your mother was married, and her mother died a few months after."

Nell nodded. "Yes, I know; I've heard father talk about that, because it made mother so ill, and he used to do the cooking," she said, with a little laugh.

"I dare say he did, for Parson Hamblyn was a good husband, and a good Christian, too. Ah, my dear, you have a lot to be thankful for in your father, even though he was cut off, as it were, in his prime, and I dare say you can't remember much about him."

"Oh, I remember a great deal; I was eleven when he died, and I was with him so much, you know. We boarded with Mrs. Chapman at Lewisville then, and he was ill so long."

"I heard of his death, and that the child—that is, you—had been taken by relatives, but I knew nothing beyond the bare facts. Who were the relatives, child? Where have you been living since? And how did it come about that you are here, doing deputy for that nice Miss Lorimer?"

Nell's head dropped a little. It hurt her pride a great deal to have to speak of those years she had spent at the Lone House on Blue Bird Ridge, in the home of Doss Umpey.

"I've lived with granfer ever since; that is, until last fall," she said, in a low tone.

"With Doss Umpey? It isn't possible, surely!" Mrs. Nichols held up her hands in very real amazement. "Why, he was a horrid, vulgar old man, and you are a lady, only your hands are so rough."

Nell laughed. "I don't think it matters whom you live with—if you can't help it, that is. Father meant me to stay with Mrs. Chapman until I was old enough to earn my living, and he thought there would be enough money to do it; but when he died it was found there wasn't any. Then granfer offered to take care of me, and so I had to go."

"Where did you live?" asked Mrs. Nichols; but when Nell told her of the isolated house in the wide forest, she held up her hands in fresh dismay, declaring that such a life was too dreadful even to think about.

"I didn't mind the loneliness so much, not after the first, for there were mostly horses and dogs for company, but it did worry me because I could not get to know things, and every year made it worse," Nell said, with a sigh, remembering her limitations.

"Where is Doss Umpey now—dead?" demanded Mrs. Nichols, with a sharper note coming into her voice.

"He went away. I don't know where he is now," Nell replied briefly.

"Leaving you to shift for yourself?" cried the good woman, wrathfully.

"I have done very well, and learned a great many things—not book-learning, you know; I have had no time for that, but perhaps I shall have now. You have a fine lot of books here; would you mind if I read them in the evenings and on Sundays?" she asked, with a wistful look towards the shelf in the corner.

"You can take one with you to the office every day, to read in your waiting spells. I'm only afraid that they're not educating sort of books, being mostly interesting reading. But here have I been talking, talking, talking, and you so tired that you look fit to drop. Come away to bed directly, child," said Mrs. Nichols, getting up in a great hurry on discovering how late it was.

"Shall I clear supper for you first?" asked Nell, who was unaccustomed to be waited upon.

"Did any one ever hear the like? You are not my hired girl, remember, but a young lady boarder; and I've got to make you comfortable, or there'll be ructions somewhere." And Mrs. Nichols laughed at her own cheerful wit, as she piloted Nell into the bedroom prepared for her.

Such a cosy, cheerful little chamber it was, with wooden walls, wooden ceiling, and wooden floor; and there was a white curtain drawn over the window, and a red-and-white spread on the bed.

Nell fell asleep directly her head touched the pillow, for she was just worn out with the manifold excitements of the day, and she did not wake again until Mrs. Nichols called her at half-past six o'clock the next morning.

Snow had fallen during the night, and Nell had to wade ankle-deep through the soft whiteness on her way to the depot; but it was only a short distance, and she was vigorous from her long night of deep, untroubled slumber.

There was a new zest in her life this morning, which made all things look different. Her limitations in the matters of training and education were as apparent to her as ever; but a great burden had been taken from her shoulders by the revelations of her hostess last night. It was something to know that Doss Umpey was not her mother's father, and that she owed him neither love nor duty on the score of kinship. Some gratitude might be due to him for those years in which he had given her the semblance of a home; but Nell had quite sufficient common sense to see that the old man would not have taken her if he had not seen that she would be no expense to him, and he had not hesitated to leave her at the mercy of the cold world when it suited his purpose to go into hiding.

"But the past is past, and I'll get on now," she said to herself, in a gleeful tone, as she raked out the ashes from the office stove and kindled the fire. "I'll get some education too, as soon as I can afford to have lessons. Meanwhile I'll just learn everything that comes my way, and every little helps."

Her heart was singing the same blithe song all the morning, while she swept and dusted the office, which Miss Simpson had not troubled to leave tidy on quitting the post.

"Every little helps," she murmured, as she responded to insistent calls from Lytton, from Camp's Gulch, and Roseneath, sending back the proper replies, or calling them up when she had tidings to send through.

It was a busy morning over the wires. Sometimes she became confused, even a little uncertain of herself, in the strange newness of it all; but on the whole she managed very well, her natural quickness and adaptability standing her in good stead, while her determination to succeed was a great factor in her success. Noon had passed before there was a sufficient lull in the business of the day for her to find time even to open the book which she had taken at random from Mrs. Nichols's bookshelf that morning.

But the rest of the day was comparatively easy. There were long spells of quiet time in which she

read peacefully, sitting in luxurious comfort by the office fire.

The man in charge of the depot was elderly and taciturn, while the baggage-clerk, owing to the varied character of his duties, was rarely visible, save when the cars came in. But this state of things suited Nell perfectly; and if she had not missed the Lorimer children so badly, that first day at Bratley would have been marked in her memory as a red-letter day, ushering in, as it did, a new era for her.

Her book was interesting, too, being a record of the growth and greatness of the Dominion whose daughter she had become. So few new books had come her way in these last six years, and she had previously no knowledge of the big young land which, like some giant baby, was stretching its limbs and making its influence felt among the weary old nations of the world.

"I'd no idea books could be as interesting as that. It beats the dictionary," she said to herself, with a little laugh. "But perhaps if I hadn't been shut up to the dictionary first, I shouldn't have been so well able to understand other books now," she added, as a conviction came to her that perhaps those years at the Lone House had not been quite lost, after all.

"Fond of reading, are you, miss? Would you like to see a paper?" asked the conductor of the Roseneath cars, who had benefited by her kindly offices on the previous day.

He had looked in at the half-open door as he passed Nell's business sanctum, and seeing her absorbed in a book, had sought, by the offer of a paper, to show his appreciation of her helpful kindness.

"Thank you; I should like to see it," she answered.

But just then came a call from Lytton, and she had to take down a lot of instructions about the lading of some freight cars, which were to go right through to New Westminster.

By the time this was done there came other demands on her attention, and it was not until Mrs. Nichols had brought her tea and gone again that Nell remembered the paper left for her by the friendly conductor.

For a time she sat turning it over, amused by the advertisements, and wondering if the person offering boots and shoes at half their cost price were a philanthropist or a rogue, but inclining strongly to the latter view, even deciding in her own mind that he must have stolen the goods, since he could afford to sell them so much under their value.

Then her attention was caught and held by a paragraph in an obscure corner of the paper, and she sat staring at it for a long time with frightened eyes, only recalled to the present and its needs by the loud clicking call of the sounder.

Putting the paper aside with a quick movement of distaste, as if it were something to be afraid of, she went to the sounder, and began, half mechanically, to take down the message which was coming through.

It was a long message; but before it was half down on paper she had become quite painfully alert, waiting for the next word with every sense on the strain.

But for the paragraph in the paper it might have conveyed no meaning to her. As it was, the whole fitted together with the accuracy of a child's puzzle, to which one has obtained the clue.

This was the paragraph—

"STRANGE FIND OF LONG-LOST PROPERTY."

"A miscellaneous hoard of stolen goods has been unearthed at a lonely house on some high ground, known as Blue Bird Ridge, about forty miles from the frontier on the American side. The find comprises, among other things, valuable watches, chains, silver dishes, spoons, forks, and other articles for table use, invoiced from tradesmen in Victoria, Vancouver Island, and also from firms doing business in New Westminster. Apparently the things have lain hidden for years, and were only discovered by accident, the present occupier of the house, in excavating for a root cellar, having brought to light the chest in which the hoard was stored. It appears that the house was, until recently, occupied by an old man and a young girl, both of whom have mysteriously disappeared. The property was invoiced to a gentleman living at Mutley, and must have been stolen *en route*."

So it was this find that Joe Gunnage was riding to acquaint the Canadian police with, on the day when he halted at Mrs. Munson's farm, but refused to enter the house through fear of catching the fever. If he had crossed the threshold and had seen Nell, it is very probable that he would have reported her to the police also, when she might have found it an extremely difficult and unpleasant task to establish her complete innocence and ignorance of the whole business.

She felt quite sure that Doss Umpey knew nothing concerning the buried treasure, or he would most certainly have dug it up and disposed of it. Her thoughts went back to the story told by Mrs. Nichols, on the previous evening, of the stolen things hidden by the man Logan, which no one had been able to find, and she was wondering if this might not have been the very hoard, when the sounder bell aroused her, and she had to take down this message—

"Look out for stout, elderly man, dressed as miner, but has been gentleman, talks with lisp, heavily marked smallpox, may be accompanied by young man, his son, also gentleman, tall, fair, good-looking, and an old man, grey-haired, bent, but very active. The party are to be watched, and their movements reported to the nearest police centre."

Perhaps, if she had not heard the story told by Mrs. Nichols so recently, and had not seen the newspaper paragraph just before taking down the long telegraphic message, Nell would not have been able to understand the whole situation so completely; even now there were blanks that her imagination could not fill, but in the main the matter shaped itself somehow after this fashion.

Brunsen, the elder, who had written the threatening letter to Doss Umpey, which she had found at the Lone House, must have somehow come to poverty or had to go into hiding. Perhaps this find

at the Lone House had had something to do with his downfall; or it might have been, in betraying his old confederate to the police he had been implicated himself, and so had to fly. With him would go his son, who was the child of whom Mrs. Nichols had spoken.

Nell shivered as she thought of him. It was so dreadful that a pleasant and courteous gentleman like the stranger who had come exhausted to the Lone House, should be mixed up in trouble of this kind. Sometimes she thought there must be a mistake somewhere, in the identity of that exhausted stranger, and yet he fitted in to the story so completely that there seemed no possibility of his being other than the son of R. D. Brunsen.

The third man mentioned in the telegraphic message was, without doubt, Doss Umpey himself, although why he should be on friendly terms with a man who had systematically blackmailed him was a mystery that Nell's imagination could not fathom.

A great shrinking and fear came upon her, as she thought of the old man coming into the neighbourhood and discovering where she was living. He had deserted her, going off and leaving her destitute to get on as best she could. But if he came back into her life now, it would be to drag her down to his own level again, from the little height of respectability to which she had so laboriously climbed.

What should she do? What could she do?

For a brief space, wild visions came to her of throwing up her work and going off somewhere out of reach of any chance encounter with Doss Umpey.

Then wiser thoughts prevailed. To begin with, she was in honour bound to remain at her post for Gertrude's sake; while to turn coward and run away from duty could bring nothing but shame and trouble to her.

So she resolved to stay where she was, and not anticipate trouble. Only, to no one could she speak of her knowledge; that must be a secret buried in her own heart.

She showed the telegram to the people about the depot, as she was bound to do, then hung it up on a nail in the office, for further reference if required; but she hung another paper in front of it as if accidentally. Then, folding the newspaper carefully, she put that away also, wishing she could fold her knowledge away into forgetfulness likewise.

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### CHAPTER XIII

#### On the List

BUT for the secret care she carried, the weeks which followed Nell's coming to Bratley would have been the pleasantest she had ever known.

After the isolation of Blue Bird Ridge, Bratley Junction was quite a gay and bustling place. It was true there were only about half a score of houses, scattered about in the vicinity of the depot, and the trains which went through were chiefly freight wagons or cars laden with miners, on their way to or from the mines at Camp's Gulch and Roseneath.

But there were life and movement; she saw faces and heard voices; moreover, she was learning new things, and becoming every day more conscious of the strength that was in her—the power to work, to think, and to act as she had never done before.

At first the strangeness of having no hard drudging toil was very great, but it soon wore off, the sooner perhaps because she worked so very hard at the new duties which had come to fill her days, while her energy in the acquirement of all sorts of knowledge appeared to increase with her opportunities for learning.

By the time she had been at Bratley a month she had raised her time qualification to twenty-two words a minute, and had been put on the list of candidates for permanent posts by the inspector when he came his round.

It was a nervous moment for Nell when the inspector walked into her office one morning, accompanied by his assistant, for he was a big man with a dictatorial manner, and her courage oozed out at her finger-tips when he began to question her about her work, and to find fault with some irregularity in transmission between her office and Roseneath, concerning which complaints had been made at headquarters.

"The train men say that the trouble is owing to snow-laden branches of some spruce trees, that grow near the track, resting on the wires. It is only when there is fresh snow that we find irregularity," Nell said quietly, though inwardly she quaked from fear lest this much-dreaded official should lay the blame on her, which would re-act upon Gertrude, whose deputy she was.

"How far is this place?" asked the inspector.

"About two miles up the valley," replied Nell, promptly.

The big man opened his notebook, consulted it carefully, then spoke in a pleasanter tone.

"Yes; according to the reading of the galvanometer at Lytton, that would be about the distance. Now, how am I to get there?"

"Some freight cars go up in about two hours," suggested Nell.

He shook his head. "Too long to wait; anything else to suggest?"

"Snow-shoes, if you can use them; the snow is fairly firm to-day," she answered, with a look at the pair in the corner which the baggage-clerk had hunted out for her recreation.

"The very thing. Do you know anything about snow-shoes?" asked the inspector, turning to his assistant, a sickly-looking youth, who, like Nell, was a deputy.

"I have seen them," replied the lad, with a nervous look at the pair in the corner.

"That is no answer. Can you use them?" asked the inspector, brusquely.

"I have never tried," said the lad, in a tone of deprecating apology. Then he coughed so long and badly, that all Nell's pity was stirred on his behalf.

"If your assistant could operate for me, I would go with you, sir; and I can ask the baggage-clerk to find you a pair of snow-shoes," she said eagerly, for the prospect of a few miles' run on snow-shoes was alluring to her, after her long days of imprisonment in the warm, stuffy little office.

The inspector's face, which had been gathering a frown of portentous blackness, instantly relaxed into a more genial expression.

"That will do very well. Robertson is quite capable of looking after your office, but it is plain that he would be of no use at all on snow-shoes. Can you be ready soon?"

"At once," replied Nell, slipping on her coat and cap. Then, running out, she found the baggage-clerk, and asked him to bring a pair of snow-shoes for the inspector's use.

In less than ten minutes they were off, speeding up the narrow valley by the side of the Roseneath track, and before they had gone a quarter of a mile, Nell found that she was by far the more expert on snow-shoes, and exulted accordingly.

"I suppose you are a country girl, Miss Hamblyn?" remarked the inspector, in a tone of query, as he succeeded in overhauling her again, after she had stood still to permit him to overtake her.

"Yes, or I might not have known how to use snow-shoes at all," she replied, with a laugh. She was a little breathless from the sharp exercise in the keen air, and her cheeks were flushed to a bright red from the same cause.

"I would always rather have to do with young people brought up in the country. It is not merely that physically they are more vigorous, but mentally they have more grasp and capacity," he said, as they went side by side up a long slope, in a part of the valley which ran like a deep crease between the wooded heights on either side.

"Town children have more advantages," replied Nell, thinking of those empty years on Blue Bird Ridge, when no part of her seemed to grow except her body.

"Advantages, so called, are not everything, and sometimes one is better off without them. Look at that assistant of mine, brought up in a town, and coddled mentally and physically ever since he was born, the consequence of which is that he has not a scrap of originality or even initiative in his composition," said the inspector, who had lost his official majesty of bearing under the influence of vigorous exercise, and was just simply genial and friendly.

"To me his great lack appeared to be in bodily strength, poor boy," Nell said, in a tone of pity.

"He certainly isn't very fit," remarked the inspector.

Then for a few minutes no conversation was possible, for, with Nell going in front, they were speeding down a slope to a corner where the track wound with a sharp curve round a great cliff of ironstone. Tremendously valuable that cliff would be some day, for here and there on the bare precipitous sides, the ore showed in great red stains and patches.

The cutting running through this part of the valley was so narrow that the telegraph wires had been carried over the cliff, and it was upon this height that the interruption to proper transmission must have occurred.

"It will be a stiff climb," remarked the inspector, in a dubious tone.

"We had better go up that way; the trees are thinner, and we shall not have to take off our snow-shoes so soon," said Nell, pointing to an opening which promised a long round.

The inspector followed her without a word, and presently, after ten minutes of pretty stiff exertion, they found themselves on the top of the cliff, with the railway track far below.



"NELL FOUND THAT SHE WAS BY FAR THE MORE EXPERT ON SNOW-SHOES"

But the telegraph wires were high above them, carried here on some dead spruce trees of which the branches had been lopped clean away, leaving only naked stems standing.

There were young trees growing beside these old dead stems, and their snow-laden branches sagging downward had wrought the mischief on the wires.

The inspector had brought a small handsaw with his other tools, and, mounting the post, he speedily cut away the encumbrance, while Nell watched him from below, dodging the debris as it came down.

"Another day of this kind of thing, and the wire would have been broken," said the inspector.

"Then no messages could have gone through, which would have been awkward," Nell remarked. She had been busy tying various articles to the string which had been lowered by her companion for the purpose, thus saving him the trouble and loss of time of a descent from his lofty perch.

"No message could have been sent unless the two ends were held in contact so that the current could pass. But if the wire were broken or cut here, I could send without an instrument," he replied. Being by nature a teacher, and only by training an inspector, he instinctively sowed information wherever the soil seemed fertile.

"Could you? How?" Nell's face, as she stood looking up, was tense and eager, so that, despite his official brusqueness, the inspector smiled as he glanced downward.

"I should tap the two ends together, so opening and closing the circuit; that, in reality, is all that a telegraph key does. An inexperienced person might have some difficulty in reading such a message, but it would be easy enough to a good operator," explained the inspector; and then, from the top of his pole, he launched into a lecture on telegraphy, whilst he finished clearing away the spruce branches, so leaving the wires free from any danger of contact.

"It is such wonderful work, and so interesting!" cried Nell, as, the work ended, the inspector buckled on his snow-shoes again, and the two set off towards Bratley once more.

"Properly speaking, all science is interesting—to a real student, that is; but electricity and all connected with it is positively enthralling," replied the inspector. Then he launched into descriptions of the mystery and wonder of the science, which lasted, with few interruptions, for the whole way back to the depot.

So the dreaded visit of the inspector had gone off like a festival day, and the letter Nell wrote to Gertrude that night was rose-coloured all through, which was a fortunate thing, for the reply which came back in the course of a week was tinged with deep depression.

"Home will never be the same again I fear" (wrote Gertrude). "Father and mother are both so bowed and broken with trouble, that I tremble to look at them. Father can't get strong either, and he has such a terrible cough. Dr. Shaw is worried about him, I know, and is always talking to mother about the need for feeding him up. But poor mother is so absorbed in grieving about Percy and Arthur, that she seems to have no attention to spare for anything else, so Flossie and I have to coddle father as best we can. I would resign Bratley altogether and stay at home now to help father and mother, only they won't hear of it—at least mother won't, though I think father would like to have me here with him. So by-and-by when the spring comes and I am a little stronger, I shall have to turn you out, my poor brave Nell; you know how I shall hate to do it, and yet there seems no other way. I have been trying to persuade mother that the best thing she can do is to ask you to come back and stay the summer at Lorimer's Clearing, but she says she is quite equal to the work herself, and as Dr. Shaw says that work is her best medicine, there seems nothing else to be done but to leave her to herself. Oh dear! life is such a grievous tangle just now, and I have not your courage for the hard places. This is a dismal letter, but it is such a comfort to tell you my troubles. Your loving

"GERTRUDE."

Nell sighed a little as she read the letter. Just in her heart of hearts, it did seem hard that she could not keep the Bratley post, now that she could fill it so well; and Gertrude was needed at home, in spite of all Mrs. Lorimer might say about it, for Abe Lorimer clung to his eldest daughter more than to any of his children, and if he were weak and ill he must need her all the more.

Mrs. Nichols said the same thing, when the letter was read to her.

"Miss Lorimer ought not to come back, that's plain, and if she sent in her resignation now, they'd be sure to give the berth to you; then we could settle down as cosy as you please. But there is always a contrary person somewhere, and it is mostly a woman. That is how I have found it," she remarked, shaking her head with a dissatisfied air.

"Mr. Lorimer was very ill when I was at Lorimer's Clearing. For days the doctor did not think that he could get better," Nell said, with a troubled look on her face, for she was wondering what would become of all that helpless little family, if the breadwinner were to be taken away.

"He hadn't got the look of old bones, that time when he brought his daughter here, when she first came to take the post. A nice, kind sort of man he seemed, and I didn't wonder at Miss Lorimer setting such store by him," said Mrs. Nichols.

Nell's eyes filled with tears; she was thinking of what Gertrude had told her about Abe Lorimer putting her in his prayers during those days of his sickness. No one to her knowledge had prayed for her since her father had died, and it thrilled her heart to feel that one good man felt sufficient interest in her to remember her when he knelt to pray.

"Perhaps I shall be able to get deputy work somewhere else by the time Gertrude is able to come back. If not I must take to housework, or nursing, or anything else that comes handy," she said, with forced cheerfulness. "Only I won't go into a big city, if I can get work anywhere else, for it would nearly choke me, I think, to be where there were acres and acres all covered with tall houses

stretching right up to the sky nearly."

"Big cities are all very well to them that like that sort of thing; but no one, not in this country anyhow, need go to live in them if they'd rather stay out in the open. Mind you, I won't say but wages are better in the big cities, and the work is mostly more lively and cleaner; but the pushing and the struggling, and the dreadful competition, are enough to frighten any one into grey hairs before they've years enough to make them middle-aged," said Mrs. Nichols, with a reflective sigh. Then she put her hand up to smooth her own hair, which showed only here and there a thread of silver; but life had been kind to her.

"Oh, I shall stay in the country, and be satisfied with a small salary," laughed Nell. Then she added in a graver tone, "It has been delightful living here with you, just like one long holiday; but I shall not be sorry when I have work of my very own to do. I'm nothing but a stop-gap now, you see. Indeed, that is what I seem fated to be. When I was nursing Mrs. Munson, I was doing the work of some one else. It was about the same when I was at Lorimer's Clearing; I was just filling up their places until they were all well enough to take their own work again, then I just had to move on and stop the next gap."

"Well, it is honourable work, anyhow, even if the pay isn't very great. Besides, if you do other people's work the very best you know, you are morally certain to do your own work all the better when you come to it. But what puzzles me is where all your mother's money went to, Nell, for Parson Hamblyn wasn't the sort of man to make ducks and drakes of it," Mrs. Nichols said, reverting to a subject already well thrashed out between them.

"I don't think she could have had very much," the girl said, a little wearily, "for we were always poor when I was a child; we weren't really pinched, you know, but there was only just enough."

"No, it might not have been very much, but even a little would make a difference to you, my dear, and if your father supposed you would be able to go on boarding at Mrs. Chapman's after his death, it is a sure sign that he had not spent all the money. I'm afraid you've been tricked out of it somehow by that crafty old Doss Umpey."

"Never mind, I'd just as soon be without it, for there is no money so sweet as what I earn for myself," Nell answered cheerfully; but her cheeks paled, for just then she always shivered and felt bad when Mrs. Nichols spoke of the old man.

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#### CHAPTER XIV Promoted

APRIL was in. There were sheets of flowers—mauve, yellow, pink, and purple—in the open spaces of the forest ground at Bratley. The streams were swollen and muddy from the melting snows on the higher hills, while the sun shone more warmly and the day grew longer.

Nell, child of nature that she was, grew entranced with the beauty and promise all about her, and but for the duty which chained her fast to the little office at the depot for twelve hours out of every twenty-four, she would have been out-of-doors the whole day long.

Her office was a perfect bower of beauty in these spring days, for so many people brought her flowers and other offerings of a similar nature, in return for kindly offices of one sort and another which she had at different times performed.

Having no exalted notions regarding her own dignity, she was always ready to help other people without fear of lowering herself thereby.

When Mrs. Nichols fell ill with a bad cold early in March, Nell got up at five o'clock in the morning and did the week's wash before going to her office. More than once, too, she trimmed the lamps at the depot, when the baggage-clerk, whose duty it was, smashed his thumb. Many, also, were the bits of needlework, stocking-darning, patching, and so forth, which she performed during office hours for over-taxed mothers of families.

Now she was reaping the reward of her small services; and to her, lonely as she had been, it was inexpressibly sweet to earn the loving-kindness of those about her. Having no people of her own, she was fain to adopt everyone in any sort of need who crossed her path; and she was by far the most popular person in Bratley during that sweet springtime.

There were two drops of bitterness in her cup, however. The first was the fear lest her grandfather should find her out, or be himself found out and sent to prison on account of some of that old-time law-breaking of which he had been guilty; the other drawback to her happiness lay in the fact that Gertrude was to come back at the middle of the month to take up her work again, and then she, Nell, must find some other occupation.

As yet she had made no plans for the future, except to arrange with Mrs. Nichols that she would stay there for a week or two after her deputy work was done, while looking round for work of her own.

Meanwhile the days were as full of work as it was possible to crowd them, and every night Nell went to bed so tired that she fell asleep directly her head touched the pillow. There was her own office work, which had grown more exacting now that spring had opened sources of employment which had been closed during winter; then she had sewing to do for herself and her neighbours; while every spare minute was filled in with efforts to increase her scanty store of book-learning.

The sewing was a harder task than it would have been to a girl who had led a less toilsome life. Nell's hands and arms, roughened and strengthened by much wood-sawing and chopping, digging, and similar tasks, felt the awkwardness of what our great-grandmothers called sewing white seam.

But sewing is a distinctly feminine accomplishment; and as Nell yearned to excel in all womanly occupations, she persevered with needles and cotton until she became an adept at the gentle art.

As the time drew on for Gertrude's arrival, she found herself looking forward to it with an eager

delight, which pushed her personal pain of losing her employment quite into the background. Some work would be sure to turn up for herself sooner or later. Meanwhile she would have the pleasure of seeing Gertrude, and hearing news of the children.

Just a week before the day when Gertrude was to come, Nell got a letter which set her pulses fluttering, and made her dance about her office in sheer joyfulness of heart.

The letter was from headquarters, and offered her the post of telegraph-operator at Camp's Gulch, at a salary equal to what Gertrude received at Bratley.

She longed to rush over to Mrs. Nichols with the good news, only she could not leave her office. So she hurried off to find her good friend the baggage-clerk, and ask him to go to Mrs. Nichols as soon as he could spare five minutes and say how badly she wanted speech with her.

"No bad news, I hope?" he said, with clumsy kindness; for her face had grown white and strained with the intensity of her hidden emotion.

"It is good news—for me. I will tell you presently, only I want Mrs. Nichols to know first," she said, turning abruptly away, and walking off to her office again, feeling horribly afraid that she would break down and cry like a baby before his face.

"She's a queer girl in some things. I'm blessed if ever I saw anyone take good news like that before," he muttered, as he watched her hasty retreat.

Then, because he was decidedly curious on the subject of Nell's news, he went over at once to the house where Mrs. Nichols lived, and startled that worthy woman rather considerably by the manner in which he delivered his message.

"Miss Hamblyn wants you to step over to the depot as spry as you can, for she's got some news she wants to tell you—good news, she calls it; but to me she looks as if she'd had a smartish blow of some sort."

"Gracious me, Sam Peters! Why couldn't you have come before I'd got my hands messing into this bread? Or else why couldn't you have stopped until I was through with it, and had set it to rise?" exclaimed Mrs. Nichols, in great exasperation; for she, being a true daughter of Eve, was intensely anxious to know what Nell's news was.

"Well, ma'am, not being blessed with what folks call second sight, I don't see how I could be supposed to know when you were going to be busy with a batch of bread. But you'd better come along as quick as you can, for Miss Hamblyn was as white as a sheet when she spoke to me, and she went off back to her office with her lips a-quiver like a child that's just in for a good cry; and I ought to know, seeing that I have got seven of them." Having delivered himself of this statement, Sam Peters walked away with his head in the air, leaving Mrs. Nichols in a condition bordering on distraction.

"Did any one ever see such a man? And whatever can Nell have heard that she should call good news, and yet want to cry over? I hope that old man Doss Umpey hasn't been finding out where she is, and trying to get her to go back and live with him. Or perhaps she has heard of a situation a hundred miles away, and feels bad at going so far from Bratley."

Mrs. Nichols's bread had but scanty consideration that morning. It was certainly poked, prodded, thumped, kneaded, and all the rest of it; but everything was done in such an absent-minded fashion that it was not wonderful, it was a trifle sad and lumpy, turning out vastly inferior to the usual excellence of her productions in that line.

As soon as it could be left to rise at its leisure before the fire, Mrs. Nichols flung her big grey shawl round her, slipped a pair of rubbers over her worn house-shoes, and set off for the depot.

But when she arrived, very much out of breath, and panting from the haste she had made, Nell was busy at the sounder, and held up her hand in token that she must not be interrupted.

For a whole twenty minutes after that, Mrs. Nichols sat wheezing and puffing on the chair in the corner, while Nell listened to communications being ticked out from Lytton, and sent back replies to questions which were being asked.

At last, just when the stout woman's patience was exhausted, and she was on the point of getting up and going back to her bread, the irritating clicking of the sounder ceased, and she had the satisfaction of seeing Nell turn round ready to talk and be talked to.

"I meant you should know first; that was why I sent for you, for I should have had hard work to keep a secret like this the whole day through. I have been offered the post at Camp's Gulch, and so I shall be only fifteen miles away."

"Now, that is what I call real good news!" exclaimed Mrs. Nichols, briskly. "And I will just give Sam Peters a piece of my mind for coming along and frightening me in the fashion he did," she added resentfully.

"But I told him it was good news," said Nell, whose colour had come back by this time.

"So he said; but he also informed me that you went white in the face, and that your lips were quivering as if you were going to cry. He even had the impudence to tell me that he ought to know how people looked when they were going to cry, because he'd got seven children."

Nell laughed merrily. "Judging from the frequency with which his children do cry, I really think that he ought to know. I'm afraid, too, that I did feel rather like tears, for it was such a wonderful thing to me that my need should be met like this, and that I should not have to be one day out of employment," she added, in a graver tone.

Mrs. Nichols sniffed dubiously. "I would have been glad enough to have you for a few weeks, or even a few months, come to that. And perhaps by waiting you might have found something better. Camp's Gulch is a dreadful rough place, and I should think you would be nearly the only woman there."

"Not quite so bad as that, I hope," said Nell, drawing a rather wry face. "But don't you see that my especial delight in the matter is because I shall be only fifteen miles from Bratley, and sometimes I can come over and spend Sundays with you and Gertrude?"

"There is that to be considered, certainly," admitted Mrs. Nichols, tacitly consenting to be mollified. "Only, so far as roughness goes, you would have been better off at Roseneath, or any of



the little places this side of Lytton."

"Never mind; I have had to get used to a lot of roughness in my time, so perhaps I shall not feel it as a better brought-up girl might have done," Nell said hopefully. And in her heart she determined to make the best of it, however rough and disagreeable the place might be.

"Your life may have been rough of late, but I guess you've been as well reared as most girls. Parson Hamblyn's daughter would know as much as most what true refinement is, I fancy," the stout woman said, with a toss of her head.

But Nell was not going to be drawn into any sort of argument on that score, for she had already had to find by experience that she was no match for Mrs. Nichols, who could talk her down in a very short time, so she only said quietly—

"It will be very nice to feel that I have got a permanent post, and work that is really my own to do at last, for I am getting a little tired of being moved on so often."

"Poor child! I only wish it was a nicer place than Camp's Gulch at which you were going to settle down. However, we can only hope it will be for the best; and now I must go back to that bread, for what it will be like is more than I can imagine," said Mrs. Nichols, rising in a great hurry, as she suddenly remembered the lump of dough which was warming in the pan before the fire, ready and waiting to be baked.

After that the days were fuller than ever. Nell scrubbed out her office until it was clean as hands could make it, and the men about the depot declared themselves afraid to set foot inside the door. Then she polished everything which could by any amount of rubbing be induced to shine, and when everything was done which love could suggest or ingenuity devise, she sat down to wait with what patience she might the day and hour of Gertrude's arrival.

Mrs. Nichols had also been having a grand upheaval in preparation for the coming of Gertrude. Nell's little wooden-walled bedroom had been turned out and scrubbed, while Nell herself was occupying the draughty old loft, until the day of her departure for Camp's Gulch.

It was not a comfortable sleeping-apartment, certainly, but it was far better than the room in which she had had to sleep at Blue Bird Ridge, and, never having been brought up to luxury, she thought less of discomforts than many other girls might have done.

The condition of her wardrobe troubled Nell rather at this juncture. Ever since coming to Bratley she had hoarded the remnant of salary left over after board and lodging were paid for, and from this small surplus had paid Mrs. Lorimer for the brown coat and cap which had stood her in such good stead all the winter. Gertrude had cried out hotly against taking the money, declaring that the cost of the coat had been earned three times over during the weeks when Nell toiled for them all at Lorimer's Clearing; but Mrs. Lorimer had decided to keep it, and so there was nothing more to be said.

Now the days were getting brighter, and the merciless spring sunshine would show up the shabbiness of the old blue merino, which had to serve for Sundays and weekdays alike. Nell just yearned for a new frock, but the difficulty was how to get it. If she had been expert at her needle, as some girls were, she might have bought a few yards of cloth and put a frock together for herself; but, although she could manage to sew a straight seam, and set on a patch with a fair degree of neatness, and might even have done the sewing of a frock, if it had been put ready for her, the cutting-out and fixing were quite beyond her capabilities.

There were, of course, the thirty dollars belonging to the stranger, which she had found under the settle at the Lone House; but Nell would have gone about in actual rags, rather than have touched this sum, which she was always hoping to be able to return to the rightful owner.

On the evening of the day before Gertrude's arrival, the baggage-clerk came up to Nell as she was leaving her office. He had a long, thin dress-box in his hand, and looked rather more sheepish and dejected than usual.

"There's this box come for you on the night cars from Lytton, Miss Hamblyn, and I would have taken it over to Mrs. Nichols's place for you, but I'm just loaded down like a pack-donkey to-night," he explained, in a tone of deprecating apology.

"For me? But I don't expect any parcel. There must be a mistake, surely!" exclaimed Nell, in great astonishment.

"Miss Eleanor Hamblyn, care of Mrs. Nichols, Bratley," read the baggage-clerk. "It don't look much like a mistake, seeing that there ain't two of you. Will you carry it along with you, or shall I bring it over first thing in the morning?"

"I will carry it, of course. How much sleep do you suppose that I should get to-night, with the thought of a mysterious unopened parcel on my mind? Then the depot might get burned down in the night, or robbed—in fact, anything might happen." And she laughed as she took the parcel, though she was trembling with nervous expectation.

"So it might, miss," replied Peters, in a tone of solemn dejection. And he touched his cap as he turned away; but a careful observer would have detected a cheerful grin, which, beginning at his mouth, widened until it covered his whole countenance, like the ripples which cover a pond when a stone is thrown in.

Nell, being occupied with her parcel, did not see the smile, and would not have understood it if she had. As it was, she went off at a run, and burst in upon Mrs. Nichols like a whirlwind in miniature.

"Just look, a parcel has come for me by rail! Where can it be from, do you think?" she cried.

"Best open it and see," suggested the stout woman, whose face, as she turned her head away, reflected the same smile as the baggage-clerk's had displayed.

In agitated silence Nell wrestled with the knots. The quicker way would have been to cut the string; but where rigid economy had to be studied, cutting string was regarded as wilful, wicked waste, so the knots had to come undone.



“FOR ME? BUT I DON’T EXPECT ANY PARCEL!”

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When the box was unfastened, the lifted lid showed white tissue paper; when that also had been lifted, there was revealed a coat and skirt of dark grey cloth, and two blouses, one white, the other with little red spots on a white ground.

For a minute or two Nell stood speechless, staring into the box, and in the background Mrs. Nichols stood silent also, only now there was a half-anxious look on her face, as if she feared how Nell was going to take this love-prompted offering, which might, however, prove so hurting to her sensitive pride as to seem almost like an insult.

But Mrs. Nichols need not have been afraid. Nell turned presently, her face white to the lips, and her eyes shining like two stars.

“Who did it? You?” she asked, jerking out the words in an unsteady fashion.

“Only a part, everybody did something; even Sam Peters’ wife managed a dollar, because she said she didn’t know how she would have got through this winter if it hadn’t been for the help you had been with the mending. Mrs. Pringle, she gave two dollars; and so on all round. You see, we all owe you something, dear, in the way of kindness, for you have always stood ready to help everyone who needed it. We got the schoolmistress to buy the things, for we figured it out that a woman who knew so well what to buy for herself, would know how to set about suiting other people with clothes.”

Nell sat down suddenly and cried as she had not done for many a long day past. She had worn her poor shabby clothes with brave, uncomplaining patience, and had never dreamed that other people would feel sorry for her because of them. But this delicate and unobtrusive kindness, which had stepped in to prevent her from going in her worn garments to the new home, touched her keenly, and she, who had no family, began to feel as if all the world were her kin, and that loneliness was a word out of date and obsolete.

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## CHAPTER XV

### The New Resident

BLAKESON’S FERRY was a main-line depot. A small branch from here served a number of rural places, of which one was Nine Springs.

Blakeson’s had quite a historic past, if legendary lore might be believed. It was here, some fifty years ago, that an Englishman named Blakeson came to settle with a large family, consisting of nine sons and four daughters. The Salish Indians, resenting this invasion of their territory, immediately sought to wipe out the intruders, and several encounters followed, in each of which the intrepid settlers came off victorious, for every one of the family, down to the youngest child, was expert in the use of firearms.

Finally, feeling that the finger of fate was in it, the Indians desisted from aggressive warfare; then Blakeson, who was a man of business, approached them with offers of work, for which wages should be paid. But the lordly red man has a soul above toil, and the Salish tribe to a man would have turned their backs on the offer, but for the sight of the “wages,” which Blakeson proposed to pay in kind.

These took the form of gay red blankets, bright-hued cottons, gleaming knives, and other similar

temptations to industry.

Even then the red man might have stood aside, and gone without these treasures which had labour for their price. But there were the red women to be considered; and the Salish squaws, driven to toil from babyhood, decided *en masse* that they might as well work for wages, when such were to be had, as work for no reward at all. So Blakeson got his labourers, who, although they were only women, proved quite as satisfactory as their men might have done, if work had not been an indignity which no red man would face.

But that was all over and past long ago, and there was only the name of Squawlands, by which the wide tract of cleared ground by the river was known, to remind one of the old story now.

Gertrude Lorimer thought of it, as she stood among a throng of other passengers waiting for the main-line cars to come along and stop. All the stories of the trials and tribulations of early settlers appealed to her by force of contrast between the past and the present. Present-day immigrants had only the forces of nature to repel and overcome, while if a solitary Indian did happen to appear on the scene, he was regarded very much as a curiosity and an object of charity, but certainly with no trepidation.

Then her attention was disagreeably recalled to the present by the jostling of a big fat man who was dressed like a miner, but who, when he apologized for his rudeness, spoke as a gentleman might have done.

Gertrude might have thought no more about the man and the incident but for the familiar and unpleasant leer which accompanied the courteously worded apology. Drawing herself up with a haughty movement, she turned away, just as a young man, dressed in similar fashion, exclaimed angrily, as he dragged at the fat man's arm—

"Haven't you the sense to know a lady when you see one?"

The young man's voice had the same cultured intonation, and Gertrude, noticing it, supposed they must be immigrants fallen on hard times, and when she was sufficiently remote from the man who had jostled her, she turned to have another look at them. They had been joined now by an old man with bowed shoulders and a querulous, drawling voice, who spoke in rough tones, and was plainly just what he looked—an illiterate countryman; and the only noticeable thing about him was that the other two seemed to be in his command, and had to do his bidding.

The train came in at this moment, and, entering a car, she settled herself just behind a young man who had a five-years-old child on his knee.

Gertrude, having parted so recently from the little brood at Lorimer's Clearing, was just in the mood for making friends with any child who crossed her path, and before ten minutes had gone by, had the little fellow in her arms, and was taking off the keenest edge of her home-sickness by amusing him.

Then the conductor passed up the car with an abrupt inquiry if there were a doctor on board.

"I am a doctor; what is wanted?" said the young man whose child Gertrude held.

"An old man has got a hurt and is bleeding heavily; wants binding up, or he'll peg out," answered the conductor, laconically, and then added, as if by an afterthought, "End car but one."

"I'll come," said the young man, springing up; then, suddenly remembering the child, hesitated, looking at Gertrude.

"I will take care of the boy until you come back," she said, answering the unspoken request, and smiling into the stranger's face.

"Thank you," he replied briefly; then laid his hand on the child's shoulder, "Be a good boy, Sonny," he said, and, lifting his hat to Gertrude, passed out of the car in the wake of the conductor.

"I always am a good boy," explained the child, looking up into Gertrude's face with innocent, candid eyes, "except when I am bad."

She laughed outright. "That is what most of us are, Sonny, good except when we are bad, or bad except when we are good."

"Are you bad sometimes?" he demanded, with a wondering look.

"Very often, I'm afraid; but I get good again as soon as I can, because being bad is horrid." And she shrugged her shoulders, as if to emphasize the discomfort of the condition.

"Fader isn't ever bad," the boy remarked, with a pitying look at Gertrude as if he were very sorry for her.

"That is very nice," she answered. Then she immediately absorbed him in a game of cat's-cradle, being fearful lest he should begin to cry if allowed time to think about his father's perfections just now.

But Sonny was laughing merrily at his success in cat's-cradle when a little later his father re-entered the car.

"Look, fader, Sonny can do it most beautiful!" he shouted gleefully, insisting on going through the whole performance again in order that his father might witness his cleverness.

"It was kind of you to look after the laddie," the young man said to Gertrude. "A doctor is never quite like other men, you see, and he must go where he is wanted regardless of everything, so Sonny has to be left occasionally."

"I hope it was not a serious case," she said, more from politeness than from any special interest in the man who had been hurt.

"No; only a flesh cut, although rather a deep one. The old man, evidently a countryman and a bit of a tartar, boarded the cars with two others at Blakeson's Ferry—that was where you came on too, I believe. He commenced finding fault with his companions, and kept it up until one of them struck at him with a sharp-edged tin mug, and gave him a nasty cut over the eye."

"I remember seeing that group at Blakeson's, and the old man was quarrelling then," Gertrude replied.

"A regular truculent old fellow, I should say, and quite equal to hitting back when he gets the chance. However, he gave me a half-dollar fee for my trouble, so I must not complain of my first paying patient in this part of the world," the young man said, with a smile.

"Have you come to settle?" Gertrude asked, with the quick sympathy and interest which the native Canadian always feels for a new-comer.

"Yes; I'm going up into a mining district, and have been advised to settle at Bratley, which is on a branch line from Lytton, I believe. Do you know the place?"

He leaned forward as he put the question, and Gertrude was struck by the likeness between him and his child.

"I am going there," she replied. "But I'm afraid you won't find much work at Bratley; it is such a small place, only about ten or twelve houses round the depot, and the nearest mines are five miles away, and nearer to Roseneath than Bratley."

"The question is, whether there is another doctor in Bratley or near it?" he said, setting his square jaw in lines of sterner determination.

"I have never heard of there being one, either at Camp's Gulch or Roseneath," Gertrude replied.

"Very well; I shall at least have what they call a sporting chance, then," he said, his stern face relaxing into a smile, "while those of you who are my friends and well-wishers can occasionally fall ill out of pure neighbourly kindness, so that I can keep my hand in at the gentle art of healing."

Gertrude laughed; then cradled the child, who had fallen asleep, still closer in her arms.

"I don't expect there will be any necessity for that. As soon as it is known through the neighbourhood that a doctor is in residence, all sorts of needs will be cropping up, and instead of your neighbours falling ill in order to give you employment, it is much more likely that they will have to turn to and nurse the patients who are brought from a distance and dumped upon your hands to repair."

"Ah, that is a good idea. I hadn't thought of bringing the mountain to Mohammed in that fashion," he said quickly. "Of course, if there is no doctor in the neighbourhood there would be no hospital either, and one would be as necessary as the other in a wild district like this."

"Quite as necessary," she answered. "They have terrible accidents at the mines sometimes, and there is nowhere for the poor fellows to be taken care of, so they have to lie in their miserable shelters, which are not worth the name of huts, until they get better, or die."

"Ah, it would be uphill work, I dare say; but plainly there is room for me here, and that is the main thing I wanted to know," he said, drawing a deep breath.

"There is always room in Canada, I think, for everyone," she answered, with a touch of land-pride in her tone.

"There ought to be, for it is big enough," he said. Then he was silent for a long time, looking out of the window with an absorbed gaze, which, however, saw nothing of the scenery through which they were passing. Presently he roused himself with a start, and, turning towards her again, said, in a courteous manner, "My name is Russell—Charles Russell; would you mind telling me yours?"

"I am Gertrude Lorimer," she said simply; adding, with a blush, "but my home is not at Bratley, although I live there when I am at work. I am the telegraph operator at the depot."

He bowed, thanked her, and would have taken Sonny into his own arms then; but the child sleepily protested, clinging fast to his comfortable resting-place and refusing to be moved.

"Please let him stay. I have brothers of my own as young as Sonny, and it has been a great wrench to leave them," she said, looking up at him; but quickly dropping her gaze again, because her eyes were swimming with tears.

He made no further attempt to take the child then, understanding as if by instinct that there was some pain behind of which she could not speak.

In reality, it was not the parting with Teddy and the baby which had tried her most, nor even the straining clasp of Flossie's thin arms about her neck, but the sad patience on her father's face, and the unsteadiness in his voice when he had said to her—

"I wish you could have stayed on at home for a while, Gertrude; it is lonely having you go away."

"Let me stay, father," she had cried. "I will wire from Nine Springs to headquarters that I can't come back."

"No, no, child; it would never do—your mother wouldn't like it," he answered; and nothing that she could say would move him. Only when she had boarded the cars, and been carried from his sight, the weary patience of his look remained in her memory to haunt her.

Her father was a broken man, she knew; the shock of the double bereavement and his severe sickness had undermined a constitution already worn down by hard work and rough living. If only she could have stayed at home to cheer him with her presence how thankful she would have been! But Mrs. Lorimer had willed it otherwise, and in that house it was the mother who decided everything.

There was a wait at Lytton when they changed cars again; and afterwards, on the run to Bratley, Gertrude was wondering, with a little trepidation, how Nell would meet and greet her.

Nell was a dear good girl, of course; hard-working, devoted, and self-sacrificing to a most extraordinary degree. But she was not refined or elegant in her manners, and her fearful old clothes added to her awkwardness. Suppose she should rush out from the office with a loud impulsive greeting when the cars stopped, how Dr. Russell would stare and wonder!

Gertrude shivered at the mere thought of such a thing; then reviewed Nell by the mental pictures taken during the time she was at Lorimer's Clearing, doing two people's work in a house of invalids. Nell's hair had always been rough, her face not invariably clean, while her clothes! But Gertrude shrugged her shoulders and tried not to think of it at all, only the worst of it was, the more she tried the less was she able to banish the subject from her mind, until at length it became such absolute torture that beads of perspiration came out on her brow.

Dr. Russell, looking at her now and then with a grave, intent gaze, wondered at her secret agitation; but it is probable that he would have wondered still more if he had known its cause, for Gertrude did not look like a girl who would be influenced by a littleness of this description; but then, every heart has its own feelings, which no outsider can even guess at.

The cars slowed down at Bratley, and, holding Sonny in her arms, Gertrude rose from her seat

and went out on to the rear platform. Dr. Russell was close behind her, laden with bags and bundles.

One or two other passengers only were alighting here, although the train was packed with miners going on to Roseneath, where a mining boom was on just now.

Sam Peters touched his cap in recognition, gave her a melancholy smile, and immediately bestowed his attention on her trunk, as if that, after all, were the only thing in life worth living for.

Gertrude was a little surprised, even a trifle resentful in her thoughts, for surely Nell might have come out of the office to greet her, and, quite forgetting her agitation on the subject a few minutes before, she was disposed to regard the want of welcome as a grievance.

Suddenly a girl in a well-cut dark grey skirt, and a pretty blouse with a fluttering red ribbon, came darting out from the office, and seized upon Gertrude with a sort of whirlwind of greeting.

"Oh, my dear, how lovely to see you again! Who is this? At the first glance I thought you had brought Teddy with you, and I was dreadfully disappointed when the second look showed him to be a stranger."

Was this well-dressed, eager-faced girl really Nell? Gertrude gave a little gasp of amazement as she looked at her; then straightway became heartily ashamed of those grudging thoughts which had tormented her all the way from Lytton to Bratley.

"Dear Nell, how you have altered and improved!" she exclaimed. "No, it isn't Teddy, but a deputy little brother, borrowed to ward off home-sickness. Is he not a darling? and his name is Sonny Russell."

Nell wanted to make friends with the child too, but Sonny, in an unwonted fit of shyness, put his face down on Gertrude's shoulder and was not to be beguiled from there.

At this moment the train began to move on again, the pace quickening with each car that slid past.

"Why, there's Nell!" exclaimed a fretful, high-pitched voice.

Nell turned sharply at the sound of her name in a voice she remembered full well, but there was no one to be seen, and the cars were speeding on to Roseneath.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### Camp's Gulch

THE depot at Camp's Gulch looked as if it were planted on the extreme end of civilization. A person seeing it for the first time might wonder why the railway had been made so far, or why, seeing that it had come so far, it had not been carried farther still.

It was fifteen miles from Bratley, the track following the windings of a valley which, always of sufficient width to allow room for river and rail, broadened in places until it was several miles wide, then narrowed again where the towering hills encroached upon the fertile lowlands.

Very rich were some of those hills in copper ore, veins of silver and gold being seen here and there among great masses of porphyry and granite; while heights of ironstone occurred here and there, that attracted thunderstorms and drew down the lightning, which split and shattered the great boulders as a mammoth battering-ram might have done.

The depot consisted of a water-tank, elevated on four posts, a log-hut divided into two rooms, which were telegraph-office, waiting-room, and everything else combined. Another log-hut, at a few yards' distance, was the home of the station-master and his wife; and standing close beside the track was a big, strong, well-built shed with great double doors—a properly equipped storehouse, in fact, which often contained valuable merchandise.

Camp's Gulch was a great base for supplies, and although it looked so desolate, and lay so solitary among the hills, those hills yet teemed with life of a strange, rough sort.

There were even little villages of picturesque wooden houses framed in straggling forests of bull-pines, tall larches, and Douglas firs, hidden away among the hills; and there were great holes and wide caverns in the precipitous sides of the high cliffs, where pockets of copper ore had been worked out by the miner's pick.

It was to serve these isolated, out-of-sight places that the depot at Camp's Gulch existed, and two trains every day, except Sunday, brought up stores and carried away minerals from the smelters higher up among the hills.

"I shall feel as if I am back on Blue Bird Ridge again," Nell said to herself, with a first sensation of dismay, when she stepped out of the cars at Camp's Gulch next morning and looked round upon her new surroundings.

Then she shivered a little, as she had done many times since the previous afternoon, when, standing by the side of the track at Bratley, she had heard that fretful voice exclaim, "Why, there's Nell!" as the moving cars slid past.

The voice had belonged to Doss Umpey, of that she was quite sure, and, remembering the warning telegram, she was miserably uneasy about the matter. Having seen no one, it was plainly no business of hers to report the circumstance. But someone else would see him and his companions, if he had any, so it was only a question of time, perhaps very short time, before he would be under police supervision, maybe even in prison, for some law-breaking of the past which had but recently come to light.

The incident had spoiled all her pleasure at Gertrude's arrival, but it had also the effect of dulling her pain about leaving Bratley. Indeed, she had been feverishly glad to get away, and could have wished that the distance had been a hundred miles instead of only fifteen, because then the chances of another encounter with Doss Umpey would have been so much lessened.

It was only the first look at Camp's Gulch which dismayed her, for a turn round revealed the

open door and pleasant, curtained windows of the house where she was to board with the station-master and his wife.

Then a white-haired old man, frail of aspect and with a most benevolent face, accosted her, bowing profoundly.

"Our new young lady, ain't you, miss? Very glad to see you, I'm sure. Hope you'll be happy up here. Trip, my name is—Joey Trip at your service—and marm indoors there is just spoiling for a sight of you."

"I will run and speak to her at once, then," Nell said, with a laugh; "but I will come back quickly, because I shall be wanted in the office."

"The young man what's been catching on here since Miss Irons got married week afore last goes back to Lytton in half an hour's time. Marm says she's just awful glad he's going, for he's that sickly she's afraid he'll take to his bed one of these days, and won't get up again. It's dreadful bad to be weakly; I hope you don't have bad health," the old man said, as he courteously waved Nell towards the door of the log house, before which a white-haired woman was standing. Then, as Nell moved towards her, he called out, "You'll have to raise your voice a bit, miss, for marm is rather hard of hearing."

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Trip was stone deaf, and when Nell had shouted to the utmost extent of her vocal powers without making herself heard, the old woman laid her wrinkled hand on Nell's arm and whispered impressively—

"Try whispering, dear; and do it rather slowly."

Nell did as she was bidden, and with complete success, which was to her a matter of rejoicing, for it would have been a fearful ordeal to be compelled to shout at the top of her voice every time she had a want to make known.

"Yes, I can hear that way; and I am very glad to see you. Come in, Miss Hamblyn, dear, and look at your room. The place is small, but it is clean and comfortable," the old woman whispered back, as she led Nell into a cosy, spotless kitchen, and from there into an equally spotless bedroom.

"What a delightful place! I am sure that I am going to be ever so happy here!" exclaimed Nell, her heart warming to the frail old woman with the gentle, kindly face; then, stooping, she bestowed a hearty kiss and a warm hug upon her hostess, before hurrying away to the office to take over duty from the young man who had been acting as her deputy since the marriage of the former clerk had left the post vacant.

To her surprise she found that the deputy was no other than the boy Robertson who had been the inspector's assistant when he came to Bratley.

The poor lad looked more delicate than ever, and thoroughly disgusted likewise.

"I never saw such a place as this is," he grumbled to Nell, as she bustled about arranging matters in the office more to her own satisfaction. "It is not a telegraph operator they want here, but a heavy-goods porter. Why, I've had to lend a hand at loading wagons or unloading them nearly every day since I have been here, and what you, a girl, will do is more than I can imagine."

Nell laughed. She was thinking of the snow-shoe incident; but she was not cruel enough to remind him that on a previous occasion she had shown herself very much his superior in the matter of achievement, and only remarked, in an easy tone—

"Oh, I guess I shall manage comfortably enough. I was brought up to do most things that came along; and Mr. Trip looks a nice, amiable old man."

"He is a silly, futile old creature, and seems to regard himself quite on a level with a gentleman," Robertson replied, in a pettish tone. Nell laughed again, understanding that the young man's grievance lay in his not having been treated with what he deemed to be proper respect.

"It isn't how other people treat us so much as how we treat ourselves that matters," she said quietly, making a wry face at the dust and dirt on the instrument table, which threatened to leave ugly marks on her clean blouse.

"What do you mean?" he asked, with an offended air which would have made her laugh again but for the hollow cough which accompanied it, and that woke her pity instead.

"My father used to say that if we always respected ourselves, and were careful never to do anything we were ashamed of, other people would respect us too," Nell said softly.

"It is about time I was going, I expect," the boy remarked stiffly, and with his head held rather high. She did not even guess how acutely those words of hers had struck home.

Nell soon had to find that, although there was not so much telegraphy to be done at Camp's Gulch as at Bratley, the post was decidedly not a sinecure.

Before the train had been gone half an hour, old Joey Trip came in gently apologetic to know if she could lend him a hand in moving some sacks in the big store.

Out went Nell with the brisk willingness which she always displayed in helping other people. But a brief ten minutes showed her that it was not she who helped Joey, so much as she who did the work with a little help from him.

He had no bodily strength, poor old fellow, although his spirit and energy were as great as ever. But Nell was strong, so she pushed, pulled, and hustled the bags into their place; then went off back to her office, leaving the old man quite happy in the belief that he had done all the work, with just a little help from the new young lady clerk.

The view from her office window showed a steep mountain-side with a white line of road peeping out here and there where the trees thinned out. This was the main road away from the depot; but there were others, some branching from this one, and others leading away on every side into the heart of the hilly wilderness.

It was a very lonely life upon which Nell had entered; she had no society at all, saving old Mrs. Trip and her husband. A few women did occasionally come to the depot from the mining villages, but they were a sorry-looking lot for the most part, and she felt no desire to have any acquaintance with them.

Nearly every night, when the depot work was over, Joey Trip would start off to the store in

Camp's Gulch Settlement, which was about three miles away, and he was rarely back much before midnight, when he came home primed with all the gossip of the mining-camps. He was a sociable old fellow, and loved nothing so much as gossiping with his neighbours; and the stories he had to tell Nell of the hardships endured by the miners often used to make her heart ache for the men who had to lose their health, and sometimes their lives, in their desperate efforts to wrest wealth from the hidden stores of the rugged mountain heights.

"It's the food what kills most of 'em," Joey used to say. "A good many of the poor fellows come out from England, and have been used to proper cooked food all their lives; but when they get up at the mines, and have to get along on hard tack and reesty bacon—that's bacon gone wrong, you know—why, it ain't long before they go wrong themselves, don't you see?"

Nell did see, and very plainly too; but there seemed no way out of it, for an ordinary average woman would certainly not endure life in those lonely mining villages if she could get a chance of earning a living elsewhere.

One day, when Nell had been about six weeks in Camp's Gulch, Joey Trip was talking enthusiastically of a successful American who had found a vein of copper so rich on the higher side of Donaldson's ridge, that he was simply coining money.

"He spends it, too, like a gentleman; and it is drinks all round every night at the Settlement now, only I have to take mine in lemonade, because I'm too weak in the head to stand anything stronger," Joey remarked, with a plaintive reflection on his infirmity which was irresistibly comic.

"It would be a good thing for the pockets of a great many of the miners if they also were weak in the head as you are," said Nell, when she had done laughing; but she started and grew rather white at his next words.

"It would be a rather good thing for Mr. Brunsen, I make no doubt, for, poor young man, he drinks a terrible lot of one sort and another; but he is very good company, when he hasn't had too much, leastways."

"What Mr. Brunsen is that?" she asked brusquely, turning so that Joey Trip could not see her face, and moving bales of hessian and barrels of hard-tack biscuits with great energy.

She was helping him to stow away a lot of freight which had come up by the morning train, and was wearing a very big coarse apron which she had made herself for this kind of rough work, thus enabling her to render the old man valuable service without damaging her attire.

"Why, he's just Mr. Brunsen, I suppose," said Joey, with a cheerful cackle of laughter; "though the men at the Settlement call him Darling Dick when he treats them, and—Why, there he is over yonder, on the other side of the track, talking to a stranger!"

Nell gave one look at the two men who were talking at a little distance; then, with a half-articulate cry, she turned and fled out of the freight-shed by a small door in the rear, and, darting round the empty freight wagons, succeeded in reaching her office unnoticed by the two men, who were still talking, both of them now having their backs turned in her direction.

Her cheeks were burning and her heart was fluttering wildly, for in one of the men who stood talking she had recognized the stranger who had arrived at the Lone House in a state so near to utter collapse.

Very wretched she felt as she bent over the instrument table, dusting where no dust was to be seen. She had regarded that exhausted stranger as the most courteous and polished gentleman she had ever seen, so it came as a crushing blow to her that he was just a vulgar drunken fellow who would treat a low saloon rabble until they all became intoxicated together.

The sounder began its insistent call at that moment, and a message began to come through from Vancouver City regarding a consignment of copper. It was a long message, and was followed by one from New Westminster, both of them having reference to the same business.

As the telegraph wires went no farther than the rail, Nell had to take and send all messages from her office. But she never had to trouble about delivering them, as they were left until called for, like letters in a country store.

Half an hour later a man on horseback rode down from the smelter with a sheaf of messages to be sent off, and, as some of them would bring speedy answers, he lounged away an hour talking to Joey, and coming at intervals to stare at Nell through a pane of glass let in at the upper half of the office door.

She had made it a hard-and-fast rule to allow no one inside her office, and the miners, even the roughest of them, had speedily come to understand that this rule must on no account be infringed.

It was an unusually busy morning, and she had no time to think in the pauses of her work, which was perhaps a good thing, her thoughts being in a state of turmoil because of that incident of which Joey had told her, and which her own eyes had so unexpectedly confirmed when she looked from the open doors of the big shed and saw Dick Bronson standing on the opposite side of the railway track.

Unconsciously, she had made a hero of the stranger who had come to the Lone House, and she had credited him with almost every virtue under the sun. His face had looked good, his manners were refined, and to her he had been exceedingly gentle and courteous.

The rush of her work ended at noon; and the long hours of the spring afternoon were uninterrupted in their slumbrous quiet.

Mrs. Trip sat dozing in her spotless kitchen, with door and window both open. Joey sat on a log on the sunny side of the big shed, snoring peacefully. But Nell, in her little office, worked with feverish haste, sewing as diligently as if her life depended on the number of stitches she could make before supper-time.

Her thoughts were flying even faster than her fingers. Now that she had leisure to think and to plan she was settling many things, and one of them was that first and foremost came the necessity of at once returning to Mr. Bronson, or Brunsen, the case containing the thirty dollars and the portrait of the sweet-faced elderly lady, which she had found under the settle at the Lone House when she cleared up after the departure of the stranger.

But she did not wish him to know that she was in his immediate neighbourhood. He might recognize her if he came to the depot, but even this was doubtful, because she was altered so much in every way.

While she was meditating on how she could get the money to him without his getting any clue to her whereabouts, the sounder began its call, and was followed by the signal, "Gertrude talks."

A smile quivered over Nell's troubled face. Every day, when business was not pressing, they talked to each other over the wires; but this was the first time to-day that she had received a word from her friend.

"Mrs. Nichols wants you to come down Saturday night until Monday. Will you?"

Nell thought hard for a minute. Should she go? It would be delightful to see all her friends at Bratley. It would also be delightful to be away from Camp's Gulch for a Sunday just now, when she so heartily desired to avoid any encounter with Mr. Brunsen. But the difficulty lay in the fact that she could not be back at Camp's Gulch on Monday morning until twenty minutes after her day of work was supposed to begin, and twenty minutes to a telegraph operator sometimes makes a very great difference indeed.

Other clerks at the depot had gone away and risked being found out, Joey had told her; but this absence-without-leave idea did not commend itself to Nell, so, after considerable misgiving, she wired to Lytton to know if she might be away from her post for that first twenty minutes on Monday morning.

The answer came back, after some little delay, and was very satisfactory, in spite of its curt-brevity.

"Yes; once in every month."

So Nell told Gertrude that she would certainly come down by the cars on Saturday evening; and even while she was sending the message a bright idea came to her: she would write a note to Mr. Brunsen, and send him back his money and the portrait from Bratley. She could then put Bratley at the top of her letter, and he would never dream of looking for her at Camp's Gulch.

This plan soothed her considerably. She wrote a frosty little note, saying that she had found the case and its contents on the morning after he left her grandfather's house on Blue Bird Ridge, and had been unable to return them to him before, owing to her ignorance of his address.

But she was dispirited and unlike herself for days afterwards. It is never an easy thing to readjust one's likes and dislikes at a moment's notice; and the shattering of Nell's secret idol cost her many a bitter pang.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### One-sided Confidences

NELL had quite an ovation of welcome when she reached Bratley on Saturday evening. Stout Mrs. Nichols was at the depot to welcome her guest. Mrs. Sam Peters was there also, one baby in her arms, another toddler clinging to her skirt, and two other small folk in the background. The baggage-clerk received her with his melancholy smile and the flourish of his cap usually reserved for railway inspectors and other official personages.

"Why, it is just like coming home!" exclaimed Nell, ecstatically, as she kissed all the Peters children, and tried not to notice how far from clean their faces were.

"That is just how we want you to feel," replied Mrs. Nichols, who was wheezing and puffing more than ever from excitement and delight, as she prepared to carry her visitor off in triumph.

"I must go and speak to Gertrude first," Nell said, breaking away from the others and making her way into the office.

Gertrude was hard at work, and could only look up, nod, and leave her welcome until later, when she had a moment's breathing space.

Nell sat down to wait patiently enough; then saw what she had not noticed previously—a bundle in a rug lying on a bench behind the door, which a closer inspection revealed to be Sonny Russell, curled up, fast asleep and rosy.

"What a dear little fellow he is!" she exclaimed, when presently Gertrude turned to give her a warm welcome.

"Oh, Sonny is a darling! His father generally brings him here to stay with me when he is called away on a long journey, because the child frets if he is left too much with old Miss Gibson. They board with her, you know," explained Gertrude.

"How are Teddy and the baby, and Flossie and Patsey?" asked Nell, whose heart still yearned for the big family for whom she had toiled so unweariedly.

Gertrude's face grew overcast. "The children are well enough; even Flossie seems better this spring. Father is not well—he does not get strong nor does he lose his cough, and mother seems poorly too; neither of them is able to get over the shock of losing the boys. It is very sad for them."

"What a pity they did not let you stay at home to comfort them!" cried Nell, warmly.

"I thought so at first, and was very loth to leave home, but I am very glad now that I came," Gertrude said softly, while a rosy flush spread over her face and right up to the roots of her hair.

Nell looked at her in a little surprise. Gertrude was usually so pale and calm of aspect. But there was no time then for discovering the secret of her agitation.

The evening was so pleasant, and the Sunday which followed pleasanter still. There were one or two changes in Bratley, even in the six weeks since Nell had gone away. It seemed funny to her to



see Dr. Russell walking along to meeting with little old Miss Gibson, who had never had any one to board before, although her house was one of the largest in Bratley. Then a family had gone away, another family having come in their place, and actually a new house was to be built at the end of the village.

"It looks as if we were going to be prosperous in Bratley," Gertrude said merrily, as, when meeting was over, she and Nell sauntered away together.

"The population is increasing, certainly," the other answered, with a laugh.

"That is what I tell Dr. Russell, and I am quite sure he will do well in time," Gertrude said, the flush coming into her cheeks again.

"It is a pity he hasn't got another trade to work at while he is waiting for folks to get sick," Nell replied, in practical fashion.

Gertrude laughed. "You mustn't call doctoring a trade; it is a profession, and a man who is a good doctor has no time to be anything else. Nell, shall I tell you a secret?"

"If you like," the other answered soberly, stealing a look at the glowing face of her companion, and guessing what the secret was about.

Gertrude turned her head away, flicking at the grass with her black parasol. Then she said, in a low unsteady tone—

"I believe that Dr. Russell is going to like me very much some day."

"So he ought to do," replied Nell, promptly. "Every one always likes you."

Gertrude shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "I couldn't help it because George Miller, our hired man, was always wanting to give me things and take me on walks. I never encouraged him in any way, yet mother was always grumbling at me about it, and saying she did not want me to make a poor marriage, just as if she thought I should be likely to do such a thing."

"Dr. Russell isn't rich," commented Nell.

"Of course not. Indeed, I suppose he is really poorer than George Miller at the present time; but it is the future that counts, and I'm quite willing to wait for my future, only——"

"Only what?" asked Nell, rather brusquely. Confidences of this description were apt to make her curt of speech, for, with her own reserve concerning all things which touched her closely, she could not understand the desire of some people to talk about the affairs of the heart.

"Oh, I should like to be sure, that is all. Guesswork is very well in its way, but it is not exactly satisfying. I wish he would say to me in plain speech, 'Gertrude Lorimer, I'd rather have you to share my life than any one else, but I'm too poor to marry for a long time. Are you willing to wait?' Then I should know what I had to look forward to."

"We can't have all we want in this world, I suppose, or else I should be able to get a good education," Nell answered, with a sigh.

"Education is always what you are sighing for," Gertrude said, rather disappointed because Nell did not seem more interested in her love-affair.

"That is because I want it so badly. A good education seems to be the foundation of everything, and when one knows little more than how to read and write, one is handicapped in every way. However, I've made up my mind what I'm going to do."

"What is that?" asked Gertrude.

"I'm going to save a hundred dollars somehow, and then I'm going to spend it on educating myself," Nell replied, with a vigorous shake of her head, as if to imply that her plans were all made.

"But how will you set about it? The proper way to get an education is to work up through the schools, win scholarships, and go to college; then of course it isn't so expensive, but any other way would cost a fearful lot of money."

Nell drew a long breath, and looked rather daunted for a moment; then she said brightly—

"I'll tell you what I mean to do, when I get my dollars saved. I'm going to find out some learned person, and offer to do her housework in return for teaching. Then I shall reap a double benefit, for no two people have their housework done the same way; so I shall find out fresh ways of doing things, and get my education as well."

"You would certainly get cheated," objected Gertrude. "The person would be sure to get all her housework properly done, but you would not get your share of education."

"Then I should not stay," replied Nell, stoutly. "I may be ignorant, but I generally know when I am being cheated."

"Don't get in such a state of agitation; you have not won the hundred dollars yet, you know," laughed Gertrude. Then Nell laughed also; and they rambled on through the sweet spring sunshine, chattering of the present, making plans for the future, and thoroughly enjoying the brief resting spell in their hard-working lives.

The day went all too quickly, as such days are apt to do; then came Monday morning, and Nell went back to Camp's Gulch to take up her lonely life again, and zealously hoard the dollars which were to buy her a store of book-learning later.

It was a huge relief to feel that she had restored the thirty dollars and the portrait to their rightful owner, only for some weeks she had an unrestful feeling, from fear of encountering the man whom old Joey had identified for her.

About a month after her visit to Bratley, Joey Trip, who had as usual spent his evening leisure at the Settlement, returned in a state of great excitement, brimming over with news.

Mr. Brunsen had sold his copper interest to a syndicate for five thousand dollars, and then had promptly disappeared, before the unhappy syndicate had had time to find out that they had been most deliberately hoaxed, and that the seam, which had looked so rich and thick, was nothing but cleverly doctored shale, the copper ore having apparently worn itself out. Of course it might recur again farther in, but that had to be found out.

Meanwhile the syndicate were about the maddest lot of men in the district, and vowed all sorts of vengeance on Brunsen and his companions, if only they could be caught.

Nothing was heard of them, however. The weeks of summer sped on. June, July, and then August

wore away, until at last September came in with fervid but shortening days, and Nell began to realize that it was almost a year since she had left the Lone House on Blue Bird Ridge, and set out to try her fortune in the great world.

She cherished no resentment against her grandfather for deserting her; indeed she felt rather under an obligation to him for having gone away and left her free to follow her own bent. He had given her good advice, too, in telling her to get over the border, and she was always thankful for the train of circumstances which had led her from one sort of work to another, until at last she had reached a fairly permanent position.

The summer had been so crowded with work, that books had been perforce relegated to the background. Joey Trip had a large garden spread out alongside of the railway track, in which he cultivated a great assortment of useful vegetables, and many bright but common flowers. But the crops would have been terribly weed-choked that summer had it not been for Nell's unceasing energy in weeding. Early and late she plied her industrious hoe, for fortunately the garden was within easy hearing distance of the sounder.

The old people were very kind to her, and she in return was glad to do what she could for them. Besides, the outdoor work had a fascination for her, and despite her personal ambitions, it was impossible for her to sit in her hot little office engrossed in books, whilst the sun and wind were calling to her to come out and rejoice in the beauty of the summer world, and the weeds were growing so fast that the crops must suffer if they were not pulled out.

Arithmetic was her great stumbling-block on the road to knowledge. She could reckon things quickly in her head, but when it came to setting a sum out on paper, and working it by this rule and that, to bring it to a proper result, she was hopelessly confused. Geography was so fascinating that she had to look upon it as a play task, the study being altogether too delightful to be regarded as work. It was much the same with history, which in her own mind she classed with fiction, and she sandwiched it in between graver studies. Grammar proved almost as puzzling as arithmetic, but she struggled on, determined to write and speak as correctly as possible, and in this she was much more successful than any one might have deemed possible, considering the environment of her daily life.

But now it was September, garden work would soon be over, and the long dark evenings would give her the leisure she needed, to help her on towards the goal of her strivings.

So she watched the fading of the great beds of golden-rod without regret, although it had been one of the joys of the summer to her to admire the patches of living gold which adorned the open spaces of the valleys. The blue jays cried with shrill notes to each other as they flew in and out of the yellowing trees, and the plaintive chickadee cheeped mournfully through the quiet autumn days. But there was such a joy of living and of striving in Nell's heart, that the chickadee only soothed instead of inspiring her with melancholy.

She had been down to Bratley but once since June, and now Mrs. Nichols was away, visiting some friends of earlier days on the American side, and Gertrude was sent to board meanwhile with little old Miss Gibson, whose house was large enough to admit of her taking Gertrude as well as Dr. Russell and his little son.

Miss Gibson had sent more than once asking Nell to come, but she would not go, having an instinctive feeling that Gertrude had no room in her heart for a girl friend just now.

"If ever she needs me, I'll go to her quick enough, but I would rather not be regarded as a nuisance, so I will stay away until I am wanted," Nell told herself, with quiet determination; for she had the rare faculty of being able to stand aside, to efface herself if the occasion required it, for the good of her friends, and although this entailed upon her many hours of loneliness, it did not fail to bring its own reward, all in good time—But that is anticipating.

Sometimes she had a long letter from Flossie Lorimer, detailing the doings of Teddy and the baby; also of Patsey, who meant to be a civil engineer when he grew up, and to invent as many things as Edison had done.

Nell read and re-read those letters from Flossie, sometimes she even cried over them, but that was on the rare occasions when she was low spirited and melancholy. It had been a keen disappointment to her that she had not been asked to spend her holiday at Lorimer's Clearing. Because no invitation had come, she had taken no vacation, for a holiday is of little use to those who have no home in which to spend it.

Gertrude had not gone home either that summer, for she was anxious to save as much money as possible, to make up for the months in which she had been obliged to employ a deputy.

On the day before Nell's birthday she had a letter from Flossie, which disturbed her a good deal.

"I wish you were here now" (the child wrote), "for you used to take all our burdens on your back, and I always felt so safe because you were so strong. But now mother is poorly most days, though she won't let me tell father, and she says we can't have the doctor for her because of the big bill we owe Dr. Shaw. Sometimes mother gets so short of breath that I'm afraid it will stop altogether, but she is dreadfully angry if I look frightened. Father has had a bad cough all summer, and he couldn't work at all well in harvest. Mother does not know I'm writing this letter, but Patsey does, and he is going to pay the postage because I haven't got any money of my own now. I wish you would come and stay with us again, dear Nell, and so does Patsey; he says he wishes you were our sister as well as Gertrude. Your loving FLOSSIE."

"Dare I write and ask if I may go to them for a fortnight?" Nell asked herself, as she pondered the letter in her mind. Once she thought of telling Gertrude over the wires that Mrs. Lorimer was not well, and was only deterred by the fear that poor Flossie might be found out and punished, for having ventured to let out the secret of her mother's indisposition.

"I will wait until the day after to-morrow, and then if I feel the same about it, I will ask Mrs.

Lorimer if I may come for two weeks; I will even offer to pay for my board. She will be less likely to refuse me then," Nell told herself a little grimly, but never even guessed at the wild upheaval that was to come into her life before the day after to-morrow arrived.

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CHAPTER XVIII  
The Dead Chinaman

"MANY happy returns of the day, dear; may it be the most delightful birthday you have ever spent."

Nell smiled broadly to herself, as the clicking insistent little machine ticked out Gertrude's message of birthday wishes, and she thought of last year, when Doss Umpey had even forgotten it was her birthday.

The smile changed to a sigh as her thoughts went backward. The old life had been very lonely and narrow; it was delightful to think how things had changed for her since then. It all seemed so far away now, but she remembered every minute of the day; how Pip had been so badly mauled, how her disappointment at not being able to have the key of her mother's box had made her miserable, then how the stranger had come to collapse on the doorstep.

But she did not wish to remember anything about the stranger, so she dismissed the subject with a shrug, and tried to think of something else.

The day passed much as other days had done, except that there seemed more work than usual to do, and Joey Trip was weaker and less able to move the big packages.

"The old fellow ought to be superannuated, that is certain," said the conductor of the evening train, when he and the fireman had to unload the freight which the old man should have handled.

But Joey was nowhere to be seen, and application to Mrs. Trip had produced the information that Joey was not well, and could not leave his bed. Then the men, who really needed instruction as to where to place the different sorts of merchandise which were being taken out of the freight cars, had to appeal to Nell for advice.

She was sewing in her office, and came at once when asked for assistance, but she looked genuinely surprised at being told that Joey was ill and unable to leave his bed, for she had seen him take the road to the Settlement about an hour before the cars came in.

However, concerning this she said nothing, for of course he might have returned and been taken poorly since that time.

Reaching down her big apron, she went out with the men, listened to what they had to say about the freight, then gave her own opinion as to where it should be placed.

The floor of the big shed had been raised to the level of a freight wagon, which was most useful for purposes of loading and unloading.

"I suppose this place is safe enough; locks up properly at night, and all that?" the conductor asked rather uneasily, when the fireman had gone back to his engine, and Nell was preparing to shut the great double doors.

"Oh yes; I should think it would stand a siege. Look at this bar across these doors," she said, with a laugh, as she slid the great bar of stout wood into its place, and left the shed shut up for the night.

"That is well, for there is more value in some of that stuff brought here to-night than thousands of dollars could replace," the man said earnestly.

Nell looked worried. "I wish you had not told me; I shall be having bad dreams to-night," she said, with a nervous laugh.

"I had to tell some one, and seeing that Joey Trip isn't here, why, I had to tell you, for how was I to know that you wouldn't just leave the place with the doors open, so that any one who chose might walk in and help himself? But you've got your head screwed on right, so now I've warned you, it will be safe."

"Where are these valuable things consigned to?" asked Nell, as she and the conductor made their way out of the shed by the small side door.

"Some to one place, some to another; the smelter takes most. They'll be sending down early in the morning, I expect, for the lot."

"I wish they'd send to-night," said Nell, with a sigh, knowing very well that it would fall to her lot to bear the responsibility.

The conductor laughed. Then, as time was up, he strolled back to the waiting cars, shouted an order to the engine driver as he went past, then, as the train began to move, swung himself on board. There were only three passengers, a man and two women, but there were some freight-cars laden with logs from the saw-mills at the Settlement, and one or two empty wagons.

A great silence seemed to fall on the lonely little depot after the engine and its train of cars had gone snorting and puffing down the valley, while the dusk of evening began to steal into the tree-shaded hollows of the hills, although higher up the last rays of sunset were lingering still.

Nell watched until the last trail of steam had disappeared round the bend in the valley, then, remembering that Joey Trip was unwell, she went to the house to ask what ailed him.

"In bed, is he? I am so sorry. Would you like me to wire down to Bratley for the doctor to come up on the morning cars?" whispered Nell to the deaf woman.

Mrs. Trip, who was looking very miserable, began to cry, faltering out between her sobs—

"It don't come natural to me to fib, Miss Hamblyn, 'deed it don't; but what was I to do? The truth would most likely have lost him his place."

"What do you mean?" asked Nell, with a bewildered look.

"Joey ain't sick at all," gasped the old woman in great distress, "not that I knows on, at least, though I'll grant you he's silly."

"Where is he, then?" demanded Nell, blankly.

"He ain't at home; he went off nearly two hours ago, I should say it was," sobbed the old woman.

"But where?" asked Nell.

"How should I know? I only saw him go. Then when the train man came to ask for him, I guessed he'd gone off somewhere; and because I was afraid I told the falsehood, and now I'll have it on my conscience to my dying day," Mrs. Trip said, moaning piteously.

Nell tried to comfort her, but did not succeed very well. Remembering that her office was not locked up, she went slowly back to make things secure for the night, turning over in her own mind as she went the probable reasons why Joey had chosen to absent himself from duty on that particular evening, and resolving to tell him pretty plainly when he returned that for the future he would have to do his own work, as she was quite tired of being pointsman, porter, and everything else, in addition to her own proper duties.

She was in her office, putting away things for the night, when she heard wheels rumbling along the road, and, looking out, saw a rough two-wheeled cart drawing up by the big shed.

"Oh, they have come for the valuables! How lucky!" she exclaimed to herself. Not stopping to shut the office door, she ran along to the big shed to open the double doors, and, if necessary, help the man to load the cases on the cart.

To her surprise, however, he had not come for goods, but had brought a dead Chinaman along in a coffin, to be put on the cars for Vancouver, whence the remains would be shipped to the land of his nativity.

"But the train ain't gone yet for sure, is it?" asked the man in charge of this gruesome freight.

"Yes, ten minutes or a quarter of an hour ago. Why didn't you hurry up?" said Nell, sharply.

"I thought I'd time, plenty of it, but it's that wretched watch of mine; stops the thing does, then goes on again after half an hour or so as comfortable as you please, and me none the wiser," the fellow said, drawing out his watch and showing it to Nell, who saw that it was, as he had said, half an hour slow.

"What are you going to do?" she asked curtly.

"Leave him here, of course, to go by first train in the morning; it won't make much difference to him I guess, whether it's now or next week. But I was told to get him here for the night cars, and I guess Li Hung will be pretty mad when he knows I missed. Still, accidents will happen sometimes."

"Where does he—I mean where does it come from?" asked Nell, with a shiver.

"Goat's Gulch; it's a place pretty high up, about six miles beyond the Settlement, and it's a silver claim what they've got, this lot of Chinkies, I mean. There's six or seven of them. Li Hung he's the boss, and this one here in the box was Li Hang, his brother. Is old Joey Trip about to help me to unload, miss? I'm in a hurry to get back, for my wife ain't very well, and ours is rather a lonely location."

"No, he is not about. Wait a minute while I go and get the double doors open, then I will help you myself," she said brusquely, feeling more angry than ever with Joey Trip, for having gone off in such a careless fashion, leaving her in charge.

The coffin must be taken into the big shed, she knew, so she entered, groped her way to the double doors, slid out the bar, and pushed them open. It was not dark yet, but the moon was already coming up, and there was a luminous brightness in the sky left from a glorious sunset, which made things stand out in a particularly vivid manner.

Nell was helping with her vigorous young strength to drag the coffin from the cart to the raised floor of the shed, when she noticed to her surprise that there were round holes here and there along the side, under the raised beading which ornamented the lid.

Instantly it flashed into her mind that these were air-holes, and as instantly it occurred to her that dead men did not require air-holes, although live ones might do.

By a great effort she kept the sudden terror which leaped into her heart from showing in her face, while she pushed and pulled with great fuss and much apparent effort, as if the work were beyond her strength.

"Are there a couple of blocks anywhere that we could lift the coffin on, miss?" the man asked a little anxiously, as he peered about the dusky interior of the big shed.

Nell seized upon two square blocks of wood, upsetting as she did so a long length of light but very strong steel chain, which had come up on the cars that evening, consigned to the company running the smelter. The chain put an idea in her head, that came like an inspiration of hope.

"Will these do?" she asked, dragging the blocks forward for his inspection.

"Just the right sort of thing, thank you. Would you mind shoving the blocks under while I tilt the concern up? You see, it's polished underneath, and Li Hung would never get over it if he thought I'd left it so that the bottom would get scratched or spoiled. Terrible particular about their coffins these Chinkies are. It is the first thing they buy when they are able to save money a bit, and they'll spend no end of time in polishing and rubbing to keep them bright and shining."

"Ugh! How horrible! I'm so afraid of things of that sort," cried Nell, glad to relieve her feelings by a violent shudder.

She was honestly very much afraid just then, only it was not a dead man, but a possible live one inside the coffin, whom she feared so greatly.

"Bless you, miss, you've no call to be frightened; dead men won't hurt nobody. Shall I stay and help you to lock up?" he asked, with a sympathetic kindness which Nell would have greatly appreciated, if she had not believed him to be a hypocrite, which he actually was.

"No, thank you; I would rather do it myself," she answered brusquely, beginning to draw the first of the doors into its place.

"Good evening, miss," he said cheerily, as he got into his cart and started the horse on its homeward journey up the hilly road between the trees.

"Good evening," she answered, giving the half of the double doors a shake and a bang, as if it would not settle into its place properly.

The door was all right, but she wanted a moment or two in which to let the man with the cart get

farther away before she acted on the inspiration which had come to her.

The horse was going slowly, and the man kept looking back, but at last he had passed the place where a derelict railway wagon blocked the view. Then she turned, and, quick as thought, seized upon the length of steel chain and passed it round the coffin four or five times. After this, as a final precaution, she dumped two heavy cases upon the polished lid, and, shutting the other half of the door, slid the great bar into its place.

It was awkward work groping her way to the side door, and she knocked herself more than once upon the way against barrels and cases, some of the latter having sharp corners.

But she was outside at last, and, locking the door behind her, had a moment in which to sort out her thoughts and decide what next had to be done.

She was quite positive in her own mind that the inmate of the coffin was a living man, that the person who had brought it had arrived purposely late for the evening train, and that a scheme was afoot to rob the big shed.

Could she by any means prevent the robbery? The man in the coffin was certainly a prisoner until some one released him, for the steel chain was much too strong for one man's strength to break. But he would have confederates, several perhaps, and how could she, a girl, hope to outwit them?

If she ran all the way to the Settlement, the robbery might take place before she could get back. She might even be intercepted, and prevented from giving an alarm.

Then she remembered the telegraph, and darting into her office, the door of which was open, she struck a light, and prepared to wire to Bratley, or if necessary to Lytton for help.

To her dismay, however, she could not get into communication anywhere; the wires had been cut.

Strangely enough, this new phase of disaster, instead of overwhelming her, braced her nerves, and made her determined to succeed in summoning help to save the railway company from robbery.

She thought of the inspection trip which she had made with the inspector, and of his explanation of how a message could be sent if the wire were cut. But when she had found where the wire had been cut, how was she, a girl, to climb a twenty-foot telegraph-pole in the dark and carry with her the long end of the wire? Then suddenly she remembered that there was a testing pole about a mile away; that is, a pole with iron spikes sticking out at intervals, up which an active person might climb. The inspector had explained to her that at each station the wire was carried down into the ground, and that the current, after passing along it, made its way through the earth to the point from which it started. It occurred to her therefore that if she could climb the testing pole she might be able to complete the circuit by cutting the wire there and then tapping one of the ends against the lightning conductor, with which most of the poles in that ironstone region had been fitted, a long metal rod running down into the earth. If she could do this, she felt sure she would be able to send a message. At any rate she could try.

A mile away, and the ground so rough it would take her at least twenty minutes to get there, and even then she would have to cut the wire. But there was a wire-cutter in the drawer of the instrument table, and seizing it she dashed out to the warm darkness of the September gloom, and, taking a path leading away from the railway track, ran at top speed until she was pretty well exhausted.

Then she dropped on the ground for a twofold purpose—first to get a complete rest, and secondly to hear if she were being followed.

But there was no sound that reached her ears, saving her own panting breath, and after a brief rest she was up and away again, heading straight for the railway now, and getting over the ground faster than at first, because the going was smoother.

Having arrived at the testing pole, she had to drop on the ground again and have another rest, for she was much too tremulous and exhausted to attempt the climb until she had recovered her breath a little.

Step by step she pulled herself up the tall pole until she reached the top; then she gave a low cry of surprise, for it was there that the wire had been cut!

Fortunately for her purpose, it had been cut on the side nearer to Camp's Gulch, and about two feet from the pole. She therefore dragged the cut end of the wire round until it reached the lightning conductor, thus making the circuit complete. Then, tapping it on the rod, she sent her imploring appeal to Bratley.

But it was nearly eight o'clock, perhaps even past that hour, and Gertrude's office might be shut up, so, after having twice repeated her message of distress to Bratley, she sent an appeal all the way to Lytton, being determined that some one should know of the desperate strait she was in.

It was harder work coming down the pole than it had been going up, and when at length the bottom was reached in safety, she was trembling so much with the fearful strain of her achievement that again she had to lie down to recover a little.

Full well she realized that the greatest danger was yet to come, and that the time of waiting for help to arrive was the most anxious and hazardous of all.

If Joey Trip had only been at home it would not have been so bad. But, since a stone-deaf woman was practically as useless as no one, she was to all intents and purposes alone.

Back she went as fast as she could travel, only now there was a clutching fear at her heart, and she started at every sound, real or imaginary.

Mrs. Trip was standing at the door, peering out, when Nell came in sight, walking leisurely now because she did not want to frighten the old woman too soon.

"Come in, child. What do you want to go wandering round at night for, just as if you were an owl? I've made you a real nice pancake for your supper, and there's honey as well, because of its being your birthday," said the old woman, laying her hand affectionately on Nell's shoulder. Then, because something in the girl's strained white face and troubled eyes arrested her attention, she asked sharply, "What is it? What's the matter, child? Has aught of harm come to Joey?"

"No; it isn't Mr. Trip. But I'm afraid there is mischief afoot," whispered Nell.

Then, dragging the old woman farther into the lighted room, she stood with her face turned to the lamp, and told in whispers the story of what they had to fear.

"Heaven send that Joey has not gone off on purpose to be out of this!" cried the old woman, lifting up her shaking hands with an imploring gesture.

"No, no, I am sure he has not," whispered Nell; "for in that case he would have waited until the cars had gone as usual. But I must go now, for I have to watch the big shed, even though I may not be able to save the stuff. Give me a bit of bread that I can carry with me, and the pancake must wait until I have more time to eat it."

"It is such a beautiful pancake, and I made it for your birthday," said the old woman, regretfully, as she cut a generous chunk from the loaf.

Nell started. She had forgotten about it being her birthday; and then, remembering her last birthday, she wondered if always the date was to mark change and upheaval in her life.

But she had no time for speculation now, and, eating a mouthful of bread, she gulped down a cup of hot tea without sugar or milk; after which she noiselessly emerged from the house door, and, making a wide detour by way of Joey's garden, gained the other side of the railway track.

She meant to creep as far as the derelict freight-car if she could, but to reach it there was an open moon-lit space to cross. Once hidden in the freight-car, she believed that she would be able to see without being seen, so that if a raid were really made on the big shed she might be able to know in which direction the things were taken away.

But, as she crouched waiting in the shadow of the trees until the passing of the moon left the open space in shadow once more, a slouching step sounded, coming nearer and nearer, and, to her amazement, Doss Umpey came into view.

"Granfer!" she cried, startled into forgetfulness of the need there was for keeping herself out of sight.

Just then, from far away down the valley came the faint whistle of a train.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### To the Rescue

GERTRUDE LORIMER was in her office, waiting rather impatiently for the hour of her release from duty. There were so many reasons why she wanted to be free on this particular night.

For one thing, Mrs. Nichols had arrived home earlier in the evening, after a long stay on American territory, and Gertrude was anxious to hear the story of her adventures—so far, at least, as it could be told over an early supper. Afterwards Dr. Russell had suggested that a walk up to Skwail Point in the moonlight would be a pleasant way of passing the autumn evening.

The schoolmistress was going, and Neal Peters, the baggage-clerk's younger brother; Tom Smithers, his wife and her sister would be pretty sure to go also, for moonlight walks when the day's work was done were becoming quite a favourite recreation among the young people.

Skwail Point was always worth seeing, whether by moonlight or daylight, because of the Indian legend attaching to it.

The Point or Peak was the highest ground in all that hilly district, and the Squamish tribe held the belief that from Skwail Point the blessing of daylight had first been let loose upon the world. Previously it had been shut up in a box and jealously guarded by the sea-gull. But one very severe winter when the Chinook did not blow, the sea-gull was driven inland from the coast in search of shelter from the bitter cold, and, pausing to rest for a few minutes on the Point, found his feet frozen to the ground. While the sea-gull, with the precious box of daylight under his wing, was making frantic efforts to free himself, a raven came along and offered to assist.

But the raven's attempts only hurt the sea-gull, who cried to him to desist.

"I should not hurt you if I could see better," said the wily raven. "Why don't you open your daylight box, and let me see to get you out of this fix? For if you stay here much longer, you will certainly be frozen to death."

At this the sea-gull opened the box just a little way, being in terror of letting the imprisoned daylight escape, and in still greater terror of being frozen to death.

But the raven, who meant that the daylight should be set free, kept hurting more and more, declaring all the time that he must have more light for his work, or the sea-gull would die. Presently the sea-gull, which had been endeavouring to have as much light for himself as was necessary, but to keep all the rest shut up, dropped the box by accident, and the daylight rushed out, spreading itself all over the world so that it could never be gathered again. The sea-gull wept bitterly on discovering what had happened, and that is why the sea-gulls still utter such a plaintive cry as they skim the waters in search of food.

Gertrude had told the legend to a good many people, at different times when she had gone up the Point, and she meant on this evening to tell it to Dr. Russell. She told stories exceedingly well; her manners were easy, and her language simple and direct. It was her one great accomplishment, and she was secretly very proud of it.

Dr. Russell had quite revolutionized Bratley; he was always pointing out some improvements, or suggesting alterations which would be for the benefit of the place. He was getting patients now, and there seemed every probability that in time he would be able to build up a lucrative practice. He had been to Lytton that day to consult a doctor there, regarding the case of a Roseneath miner who was then just occupying a spare bed in Miss Gibson's house, in order to be under the care of the doctor.

Twenty minutes to eight o'clock, a quarter, then ten minutes. How long that last half-hour was,

to be sure!

The cars had gone, and the only remaining sign of activity on the depot was an engine and one freight car waiting to take some miners to Roseneath; it would be gone in a few minutes, and then Gertrude would be free for her supper and the pleasure which was to come after.

Just then she heard a piercing shriek, many shouts, and much trampling of feet.

Running out to see what was the matter, she saw a group gathered about the engine; but before she could reach the place, a man detached himself from the group and ran at the top of his speed in the direction of Miss Gibson's house.

"An accident; some one is hurt, and they have gone for the doctor!" she murmured, turning pale.

Just then Sam Peters saw her coming, and moved to intercept her.

"Don't come here, Miss Lorimer; it ain't a sight for girls. Driver Tompkins has just been and got scalded awful about the hands and face, and they're gone to fetch the doctor to him. Go back to your office, and wait to see if you are needed to wire anywhere for help, for we haven't got another driver on the place to-night."

Gertrude fled back to her office, shutting the door with a bang. She had a nervous horror of accidents, of sickness, and of unpleasant sights generally, and she sat for what seemed to be an interminable time waiting to be of use, in case it was necessary to telegraph anywhere for help.

Suddenly the sounder began to call, while a great clicking ensued, as if the telegraph-instrument had suddenly gone crazy.

Gertrude sprang to the table, glancing at the clock as she passed, being surprised to find that it was twenty minutes past eight, when in an ordinary way she would have been off duty, and the office locked up.

What a funny message it was, too!

"Help me quick, robbery, Camp's Gulch, alone, shed threatened, valuables—NELL."

It took Gertrude two minutes to gather the sense of it all; then, dashing to the door, she seized the depot bell standing outside and rang it vigorously. The noise would rouse the place, she knew, but she dared not leave the office, as more messages might come, and she must be ready to take them down.

In a moment there came a rush of hurrying feet, Sam Peters, the station-master, and half a dozen miners coming at a run, to know what was the matter, their first and most natural idea being that she had set the office on fire.

"There is trouble at Camp's Gulch; a robbery threatened. Miss Hamblyn says she is alone, and wants help. What can you do?" jerked out Gertrude, who was very white in the face, and trembling from head to foot.

"Send the engine that's waiting for Roseneath, to Camp's Gulch instead," said Sam Peters, whose eyes appeared ready to bolt out of his head, as he turned his gaze on the station-master.

"That would be easy enough if there was any one here who could drive an engine, which there isn't now that Tompkins has gone and got himself in such a plight," snarled that official, angrily. "It is downright tempting Providence to have that doddering old stupid, Joey Trip, at a place like Camp's Gulch, and that with only a bit of a girl-operator to help him. It is a couple of strong men that are wanted there, and so I've said often and often, and may say it again and again, until my breath gives out before any one will take notice of what is wanted."

"What is the use of talking; it's doing we've got to look after," snapped out Peters, angrily. "Here's an engine standing in the depot with steam up; we could be at Camp's Gulch in twenty minutes or half an hour at the outside, if only we'd got a driver."

"Ah, that's where we are beaten," growled the station-master.

"Can't the stoker drive?" demanded Gertrude, impatiently.

"He ain't fit for anything only to look at," the station-master answered, in extreme wrathfulness. "He was a dry goods clerk, or something of the kind, in England; came out here, got within sight of starvation, then was taken on as stoker this morning to fill a gap, and he only just about knows a chunk of coal from a fire-shovel. He's run away now, I believe, because he was frightened."

"Oh, can't something be done? Won't somebody go to help poor Nell? Just think how good she was to you all. If only I were a man I'd take that engine safely up to Camp's Gulch, whether I knew how to drive or not," cried Gertrude, in hysterical breakdown, standing with clasped hands, while the tears streamed down her face.

"I can fire, but I can't drive," began Sam Peters; but just then there came an interruption. A brisk voice called out to know what was the matter, and, elbowing the group of miners aside, Dr. Russell strode into the office.

Some one began to tell him of their dilemma, but Gertrude had turned to the instrument table, for the sounder was calling again, and another message was coming through.

"Listen!" she cried imperatively. "They have sent me word from Lytton that there is trouble at Camp's Gulch, and are asking if the Roseneath engine has gone; if not, I am to send it to Camp's Gulch at once. Now what is to be done?"

"I can drive an engine a little—that is, I can start her and stop her, and all that kind of thing, but I don't understand firing," said Dr. Russell, slowly.

"I can fire, so I guess we shall do. Come along, let's get off. We ought to have a crowd of ten or fifteen with us. Who'll help?" asked Sam Peters, moving now towards the engine, and gripping the doctor by the arm as if fearing he might run away.

It was not so much a question of who would go as who would consent to be left behind. However, it was settled in a very few minutes, and then the engine and the freight wagon slid away from the depot until it seemed to shoot through the darkness, a flare of red light which dashed like a lurid streak across the pale moon-lit spaces.

Sam Peters fired as if he had been used to that sort of thing for the last five or six years, doing it

with a regularity that suggested clockwork; while the doctor stood hanging on to the levers, peering ahead into the night, with the corner of his eye always on the indicator, for he and Peters both knew that the engine was an old one, and not over safe for such a speed as they were making.

"Open her throttle; we've passed the half!" yelled Peters. With a nod the doctor pushed down another lever. A hideous screech sprang out, keeping up its terrifying blast as the remaining miles sped by. In the freight-car there was silence save for an occasional ejaculation as some unwary one was dashed from his place by the violent rocking and jerking of the flying engine.

Suddenly Sam Peters ceased his firing, and, peering over the side, seemed to be looking for landmarks.

"Shut her down, quick!" he yelled, and at the same moment, dashing open the furnace-door, began raking out the firing, which only a little while before he had been shovelling in with such painstaking energy.

The doctor dragged down the lever, applied the brakes, then hung on for dear life, expecting nothing less than an awful crash, for, in the absence of signals, and with but the scantiest knowledge of the track over which they had been travelling, what was more likely than that he had not pulled up in time? It was a space of awful suspense, measured by seconds, but in point of strain seeming like hours; then, with a grinding and groaning of brakes, the engine came to a stand a little distance from the depot.

"Shall I drive her right in?" the doctor asked, conscious that there was an odd sense of strain in his tone, while he panted for breath.

"Better leave well alone, I should say. My word! it was a near shave. If I hadn't reckernized the Gulch brook shimmering in the moonlight a mile back, we should never have pulled up in time, and then there would have been an awful smash," said Sam Peters, in a jerky tone, as he wiped his streaming face with a handkerchief which had been clean once, but was certainly not so now.

"Thank God we came safely through!" the doctor said reverently, thinking of the lives of the men in the freight-car.

Then they all tumbled off the train and ran towards the depot, which looked so quiet and deserted in the bright moonlight.

"Why, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong. Has it been a hoax after all?" said the doctor, wonderingly, as they reached and passed the depot building and arrived at the big shed, which appeared to be safely shut up and secure.

"Looks like it!" exclaimed Sam Peters, blankly.

"What's that?" said one of the volunteers, suddenly darting across the railway track to where something dark showed, lying on the ground near to the derelict freight-wagon.

The something was Nell, who moaned when they lifted her up, and appeared to be bleeding from a wound on her cheek or her ear.

"Doctor, where are you? Here's something in your line," shouted the man who had first found Nell, but who feared to lift her up lest he might hurt her more.

Dr. Russell came up at the run. "There's more on hand than we thought for. Some one is shut up in that shed, and making a fine row, but he will have to wait until we are ready to let him out," the doctor said grimly. He then sent four of the men to watch the doors of the big shed, asked another to carry Nell across the track to the telegraph office, while he went in front to open the door.

Nell was not unconscious, but she seemed unable to speak, or was, perhaps, too dazed from the blow she had received.

The other men, at the doctor's suggestion, spread out to have a look round, but nothing could be done or settled until Nell was able to explain the situation.

"There is certainly some one in yonder who is pretty anxious to get out," remarked one of the volunteers. "Just hark at him, whining and crying like a whipped schoolboy. It's a rum go this; we come tearing up here fit to break our necks to catch the robbers, only to find when we get here that one seems pretty securely caught."

"Luckily for Miss Hamblyn the doctor stopped wide of the depot, for she was lying too near to the track for safety," said one of the miners.

"I thought we were going to be smashed up every minute; never had such a ride in my life, and I can't say I want another," remarked his companion, with a shudder.

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THE RESCUE-PARTY DISCOVER NELL  
ON THE RAILWAY TRACK

"Doctor wants to know if any one has seen Joey Trip, or his wife?" called another man, coming up at a run.

"I haven't seen any one except Miss Hamblyn. Perhaps it is Joey that is making all the row in yonder," suggested one of the watchers.

"Not likely," said the other.

"Well, I'm going to inspect his house; funny if there shouldn't be any one at home," remarked the man, who had come up with the inquiry.

"It is a funny business altogether," replied the watchers. And they propped their backs against the wall, smoking in stolid patience, thinking, perhaps, of the supper they had missed, or listening to the thumping and shouting which was going on inside the shed.

Meanwhile Nell was lying on the floor of the telegraph office, her head resting on the doctor's jacket, which he had rolled up to make a pillow for her, while he knelt beside her, trying to investigate her hurts.

Her right hand hung helpless at the wrist, her right cheek had a disfiguring weal from chin to ear, from the broken skin of which the blood was slowly oozing. But it was the look in her eyes, and her inability to speak beyond an inarticulate gurgle, which bothered the doctor most.

"Some dislocation of the jaw, I'm afraid. Ah!" and a sympathetic shudder went through the doctor's frame, because of the anguish which leaped into Nell's eyes.

"I wish we'd got a woman here to help," he muttered irritably, as his assistant, a burly miner six feet high, and broad in proportion, shook and shivered, nearly dropping the lamp in his agitation. "Hold that light steady, will you. If you are not careful you'll be setting the poor girl ablaze with her clothes soaked in kerosene, and she has got quite enough to bear already."

"Can't help it, doctor. I never could stand seeing any one suffer; it sort of turns me sick," said the sturdy giant, collapsing into a nerveless heap, to the imminent danger of the lamp.

"You great baby, I mean you lubberly idiot, get out, and send in one of the other fellows!" said the doctor, wrathfully, springing up and seizing the lamp, which he put on the floor for safety, then hustled the quaking miner out of the office. "Go along to the engine, and send Sam Peters to me; but you must stand by the engine while he's away, for there is too much mystery in this business for us to take risks anywhere."

"I'll stay by the engine; I'll do anything, only I can't stand that," said the man, his voice breaking in a great gasping sob, as, with a jerk of his head in the direction of the girl on the floor, he fairly bolted from the office.

The doctor sent an uncomplimentary ejaculation after him, then was relieved to see the dim ghost of a smile about Nell's white lips.

"I'm glad you can smile; I feel more like heaving a book or a boot at his head," grumbled the doctor. Then kneeling down again, he said quietly, "Shut your eyes once for 'yes,' and twice for 'no.' Are you in very great pain?"

Slowly Nell's eyes closed—once, a great tear forcing itself from under her dark lashes and rolling down her cheek.

"Is your jaw worse than your wrist?" he asked, stroking his own right jaw to show what he meant.

Nell's eyes closed twice; but before the doctor could frame another question, the door was pushed open, and Mrs. Trip was thrust hurriedly into the office.

CHAPTER XX  
Fairly Caught

SOME of the miners, in prospecting round the depot, had ventured to try the door of Joey Trip's house, and had found to their surprise that it was unfastened and yielded to the touch.

Pushing it cautiously open, two of them entered, to be greeted by a tremulous old voice from the darkness, "Is that you, Miss Hamblyn? And has Joey come home yet?"

"No, mother, it ain't Miss Hamblyn; she has been and got herself rather bashed up, and doctor is looking after her a bit," said the man who had entered first, and who spoke in a deep, big voice.

"I'm rather deaf," faltered the feeble tones out of the darkness, with such unmistakable terror in them now, that the men were concerned to know how best they could manage to let the poor old woman understand that their intentions were friendly.

One of them struck a match, and, seeing by the light of it that a lamp stood on the uncleared supper-table, proceeded to light it.

When this was done, Mrs. Trip was discovered to be sitting crouched into the remotest corner of the room, a shrinking, frightened creature whom anyone might have pitied.

"There ain't nothing to be afraid of, mother. Won't you step round to the depot, and lend the doctor a helping hand with the young lady?" asked the man who had lighted the lamp, and who, in addition to his deep voice, had a thick moustache which hid the movement of his lips.

"I—I am a little hard of hearing, gentlemen," faltered Mrs. Trip, in greater terror than ever. It was plain that she took them for robbers, and was in fear of her life.

"The poor old thing is stone deaf, Jim; whatever are we to do with her?" asked the man, with the big voice, turning to his companion who chanced to be clean shaven, and who spoke with a pronounced movement of his lips.

"I should sling her on my back, and carry her off by force. Doctor would be glad of her, no doubt."

"No, no, don't use force, gentlemen, I beg of you. I'll do anything in reason that you want; but I haven't got the key of the big shed, and my husband isn't in just now," wailed Mrs. Trip, in piteous tones, shaking worse than ever.

"Rum business, this, Jim; the old lady can understand what you say, though your voice ain't bigger than a tin whistle, so to speak. But you'd better step forward and explain the situation a bit," said the big man, retreating to the background.

Jim stepped forward, holding out his hand in a friendly fashion, while he spoke very slowly.

"Look here, missus; you're Mrs. Trip, I suppose? Well, we've come along from Bratley with an engine and a freight-wagon to-night, because we had word there had been some idea of a robbery taking place. But it is a pretty mysterious bit of business so far, and we can't get light on the subject nohows."

"Hurry up, Jim; you're taking as much time as a preacher who has got the whole evening before him," growled the big man.

"I was bound to quiet her down a bit first; you can't do nothing with women when their fears is uppermost," retorted Jim, with a quick turn of his head. Then, facing Mrs. Trip again, he went on, "Miss Hamblyn has been a bit hurt. She has had a nasty fall or something. Could you step across to the office, and help doctor look after her a bit?"

"Miss Hamblyn hurt? Oh, I am sorry. Yes, gentlemen, I'll come at once," said Mrs. Trip, coming out of her corner, trembling still, but somewhat more easy in her mind concerning these unknown visitors, who looked so rough and fierce.

"Catch hold of my arm, mother; you'll get along quicker so," said Jim, crooking his elbow with great politeness.

"Why, you are quite kind, and I thought you were both robbers!" exclaimed the old woman, in tremulous tones.

"I don't wonder at that, for I expect we do look a bit rough; but you should see us when we are dressed up in our Sunday clothes, biled shirts and all that sort of thing," said Jim, in friendly fashion, as he escorted the old woman across the open space to the telegraph office.

"I can't hear what you say, except when you turn your face to me," she said querulously.

So he held his head round towards her, and repeated his words in order that she might gather the sense of what he was saying. When the door of the office was reached, he just opened it and pushed her in.

"Oh, my dear Miss Hamblyn, what is the matter? Can't you get up? Did the robbers hurt you?" cried Mrs. Trip, in great distress, crouching down by Nell, and trying to take her hand.

But this the doctor was quick to prevent, for it was Nell's broken right wrist which Mrs. Trip had been about to touch.

"Can't you see that the poor girl is hurt, that she can't talk, and is in dreadful pain?" said the doctor, sharply.

"I'm a little hard of hearing, sir," rejoined Mrs. Trip, meekly.

"Miss Hamblyn has hurt her wrist. Can you get me something to bandage it with—a towel that I can tear into strips, or that sort of thing?" roared the doctor, at the top of his voice.

Mrs. Trip shook her head with a worried air. "I can hear that you are making a great noise; but with all that hair over your face, I can't hear what you say."

"Was any one ever in such a plight?" cried the doctor, thoroughly exasperated. "A patient who can't talk, and a nurse—save the mark!—who can't hear!"

Again there was the flicker of a smile on Nell's pain-wrung face; but the doctor did not stay to see it. He had sprung to the door, and was shouting for the man who had brought Mrs. Trip in.

"Here I am, doctor," said Jim, who had been propping his back against the wall of the depot, and

thinking of his supper—a meal that appeared to be very much in the future still.

"Whatever did you mean by bringing that poor old woman in here? I can't make her hear anyhow, and I want bandages, splints, and several other things," said the doctor, testily, for the situation was beginning to get on his nerves.

"I can talk to her, and without making much noise about it, either. Shall I come in, doctor?" asked Jim, with alacrity, for anything was better than hanging round with nothing to do, save to think of the supper he could not have.

"Yes, come along, and be quick about it," said Dr. Russell, striding back to his patient.

Jim followed, and, repeating the words as the doctor spoke them, succeeded in conveying to Mrs. Trip a clear idea of what was wanted of her.

"I understand now. I will go at once and get the things you require," she said, turning to the doctor, and speaking with gentle dignity.

He nodded and smiled reassuringly, told Jim to go with her, then himself turned back to Nell, whose eyes were asking for something.

Failing to make him understand, she began to move her left hand over the floor, as if she were writing, then pointed towards the place where pencil and paper might be found.

"You want to write something of importance?" he asked, as he brought writing materials.

With a movement of her hand, she signified that he must lift her up. When this was done she began to write with awkward slowness, the doctor holding the paper for her, and picking up the pencil every time she dropped it.

"I threw the key of the shed on the railway track. Send some one to find it. There is a live man in the coffin—a robber!"

When she had written so much, she looked at the doctor questioningly, to see if he understood.

"Why did you throw away the key? Did someone try to take it from you?" he said, beginning to get light on the situation, when her eyes answered him yes.

"Did that someone hit you a blow which dislocated your jaw, and another that broke your wrist?" Again her eyes flickered out yes.

"The brute! It would give me great satisfaction to serve him likewise. I would cheerfully do the necessary repairs afterwards without charging him extra for it," growled the doctor.

But Nell seized him by the arm, shaking it urgently and pointing to what she had written.

"You want this key found at once? Where is the coffin—in the shed?"

To this also she signified yes. Then, stepping to the door, the doctor issued the order that the railway track was to be searched up and down, as far as a girl would be likely to throw, for the key of the shed.

There was instant activity now, and every one set to work on the search, saving the man in charge of the engine, Jim, who acted as interpreter to Mrs. Trip, and Sam Peters, who had to serve as the doctor's assistant.

The broken wrist was set first. The doctor half hoped the pain of the setting would cause Nell to faint, so that he might put the jaw-bone back into its place before she recovered from her swoon.

But consciousness never left her, though no sound, save a sob, broke from her when the fractured wrist-bones grated together, and were bound up in splints made from a broken starch-box. The doctor winced himself, when handling the dislocated jaw; but it would have been cruel kindness to delay the doing of what was so necessary to be done, and in three minutes it was over.

"There, there; I shall not have to hurt you any more," he said soothingly, turning his head away from the sight of the suffering in Nell's eyes, and grumbling at Sam Peters, who was wiping his tears away on his coat-sleeve, and sniffing like a schoolboy who has just been caned.

Nell shut her eyes for a few minutes, as if to blot out the memory of the torture she had just passed through; but she opened them with a start two minutes later, when there was a knock at the office door, and some one in a sibilant whisper announced to the doctor that the key had been found.

"Yes, it is all right; I will see to things. There is no need for you to worry about anything. I am going to wrap you in these blankets; and then you can rest until we are ready to take you back to Bratley," he said, with authority in his voice, for there was a touch of wildness in her eyes, which gave a hint of possible delirium later, resulting from the strain and the pain she had endured.

Rolling her in blankets, which Mrs. Trip and Jim had brought from the house, and slipping a comfortable pillow under her head in place of his own jacket, the doctor left her to rest on the floor, watched over by Sam Peters.

Mrs. Trip and Jim were then packed off to prepare some sort of supper for the hungry men, while the doctor and the others went to see about opening the big shed.

The key and the lock of the small side door were both of peculiar construction, and it took them a few minutes of fumbling before they could get the door open.

"It is what they call an unpickable lock. Skeleton keys are no sort of good for this kind of job," remarked one of the miners who ought to know, as back in the past—a past long since expiated by honest repentance and subsequent upright living—he had served an apprenticeship at the risky business of burglary.

"The door is made of pretty good stuff too. It would not be easy to stave it in, I guess," said another, who had been a carpenter, as he passed his hand admiringly over the stout timbers of that well-made door.

"The shed altogether is the soundest bit of building to be found this side of Lytton," announced a third; and just then the key turned in the lock, and the door opened.

"Help! help! Get me out of this, quick! I thought you were never coming!" exclaimed a smothered voice from somewhere.

"Seeing that you have waited so long, it won't hurt you to stay as you are for half an hour longer," the doctor said calmly, as he flashed the light of his lantern round the big shed, and made an examination of things generally.

"Who are you, then, and how did you get in?" asked the man hidden away in the coffin, with surprise and anxiety in his tone.

"That is just the question that occurred to us about you. Were you in a trance, that they packed you up in this sort of box to ship you off to the Flowery Land?" asked the doctor, with a twinkle in his eye.

"You just let me out of this, and I'll tell you all about it," whined the man, in a pleading tone.

"How many revolvers have you got in there with you?" the doctor asked; and then, with a motion of his hand, he showed his companions the manner in which the chain had been twisted about the coffin, most effectually imprisoning the person inside.

The prisoner returned no answer to the doctor's question, until it had been twice repeated; then he sulkily answered—

"Two."

"Well, that is about as many as one man can use at a time," the doctor remarked coolly.

"Seems as if I had heard that fellow's voice somewhere before," remarked one of the miners to the man standing beside him.

"So have I," replied the other; then both were silent, as the doctor began to speak again.

"Now, first of all, before we set about getting you out of this fix, we want to know what made you choose such a means of conveyance, why you came, and what you came for," said the doctor.

But the imprisoned man made no reply to this; and after a minute or two of waiting, the doctor went on, in a calm tone—

"If you don't choose to tell us what we want to know, you can stay where you are until morning. The police will find it very easy to convey you to Lytton, trussed up in that fashion, and I dare say they will be able to make you speak, though we have failed to do it."

"I'll speak fast enough, if you'll only let me out," pleaded the prisoner, who appeared to be in a regular panic regarding his position.

"Say on, then, for we are in a hurry to get our supper; you might almost call it breakfast, as it is past midnight, only we have not been to bed yet," the doctor remarked, looking at his watch.

"We were hard up for provisions, and, for reasons of our own, we couldn't get away from the neighbourhood on the cars, and we couldn't tramp it over the mountains without food," the prisoner said.

"I wonder you didn't strike across the frontier," remarked the doctor.

"We had made the States too hot to hold us," explained the prisoner, who spoke like an educated man. "We thought of being able to rig ourselves out with necessary stores from here, and then tramp to some point on the railway, where we should not be recognized. But this shed was a hard nut to crack. Night after night we've been round here at the business, and have always failed, until we hit on the idea of borrowing Li Hang's coffin, and getting in here that way. The plan answered all right, but the hitch came after, for that girl with the soft voice, who is telegraph operator here, must needs dump something on the lid that I couldn't lift off. I suppose the poor little idiot was afraid the Chinkie's ghost might wander round in an uncomfortable fashion after dark." And the prisoner cackled feebly at his own poor wit.

"Your companions, where are they?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, clear away by this time; you won't catch them, so you need not expect it."

"Well, we've got you, and that is better than nothing," the doctor remarked cheerfully. Then he went on, with a look at his companions, "Now I think we will go and get some supper, and leave this gentleman to meditation a little longer. It may lead him to reflect on how much easier it is to get into a coffin, than it is to get out again."

The men all tramped out of the shed at this, the doctor locked the door, put the key carefully in his breast-pocket, then they all went off to Mrs. Trip's bright, clean kitchen to get some food, and discuss what was best to be done.

"I know who that fellow is!" exclaimed the miner who had spoken of the prisoner's voice as being familiar. "It is that Dick Brunsen, who swindled the syndicate with that faked copper-vein. I guess if some of the fellows he made dupes of got to understand about his being here, you would have hard work to protect him, doctor."

"Then they must not know that he is here, for we don't want any Judge Lynch on this side of the border; it is not the States, you know," the doctor replied, with a trifle of sternness in his tone.

Another man, standing at the back of the room, remarked, in a mutinous tone, that if it were really Dick Brunsen in the big shed, hanging was too good for him.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders, and instantly made up his mind as to the best thing to be done.

"I must take Miss Hamblyn to Bratley as soon as possible, for she has had a bad shock, in addition to the knocking about she has received. I would put the coffin and the prisoner in the car, too, and take the fellow to Bratley, for his own safety; but I don't dare excite my patient, and when I'm on the engine, I can't be taking care of her. So the only thing to be done is to leave him where he is until I can send the police to take charge of him; but, for his own safety, I had better take the key with me, then, as you say, some of you, the lock is unpickable, he will be all right, until we can hand him over to the authorities."

There were a few growls of dissent at this; but, on the whole, the men seemed satisfied with the doctor's decision, and fell in readily with his plans.

The engine was brought on as far as the depot; then Nell, all wrapped in blankets, was carried into the freight-car, and made as comfortable as circumstances would permit. Six of the miners remained at Camp's Gulch to take charge of the premises until morning, and the others, getting into the freight-car with Nell, the return journey to Bratley was begun.

But the engine was running backwards now, and the amateur driver had his hands full in doing his work properly. However, there was no need for haste this time, so they crept along at about twelve miles an hour, whistling themselves into Bratley depot between two and three o'clock in the

morning.

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CHAPTER XXI  
A Patient for Mrs. Nichols

WHEN the volunteer party started for Camp's Gulch, Gertrude resolved to remain at her post all night, or, at any rate, for as much of it as there was a need for the office to be open.

She replied to Lytton, telling of the accident to the driver, and that Dr. Russell had volunteered to take the engine up to Camp's Gulch, with Sam Peters acting as volunteer stoker. When this was done, and Lytton's inquiries were satisfied, she wired to Roseneath, on the chance of finding the office open, to explain why the engine and freight-wagon had failed to put in an appearance.

Then, when everything had been done that was possible, she set herself to face a dreary watch in the depot while the slow hours crept by.

The station-master also remained on duty. At least, he lay on a bench in the little waiting-room of the depot, and snored with persevering industry, the sound of his slumber reaching to Gertrude's office, and adding a fresh weirdness to the night.

About midnight Mrs. Nichols walked in at the office door, wheezing and puffing even more than usual. She had been helping Miss Gibson to look after the scalded engine-driver, and from there had gone to console Mrs. Peters, who was frightened half out of her senses at the thought of Sam firing the engine up to Camp's Gulch and back again. When these neighbourly duties had all been performed, she came on to the depot to stay with Gertrude as long as it was necessary for the girl to remain on duty.

"How different it has all turned out from what we had planned!" sighed Gertrude, who was pale and worn with the excitement of the evening.

"Life is very often like that," moralized the stout woman. "We get to what we think is a nice easy bit, only to find it is fuller of kinks than any of the rest. I wonder what sort of tribulation that poor Nell is in to-night?"

"It is very strange that she should have wired to us, yet we can get no message through to her," Gertrude said, in a musing tone.

"Perhaps the wire got cut after she had sent her message," suggested Mrs. Nichols. Then she burst out vehemently, "Oh dear, oh dear, how I wish I had been on the depot when the message came, then I would have gone up to Camp's Gulch with the men, and seen for myself what was the matter!"

"But you would have been afraid, surely, to go on such a risky expedition," said Gertrude.

"I should have been as safe as the men, anyhow, and my life is not of any more value than theirs; besides, we shall none of us die until our time comes. It would have been a comfort to Nell to have a woman there to help her, for poor old Mrs. Trip can't be much good to anyone, seeing that she is stone deaf," sighed the stout woman.

"How fond you are of Nell! I believe you love her better than you do me," said Gertrude, with a short laugh, and a very pronounced stab of jealousy at her heart.

"I'm fond of you both, and if I make more of Nell than of you, I am sure you have no reason to complain, for think of the difference between you. She is, so to speak, nobody's child—at least there is not one of her own folks left alive to care for her, while you are just the cherished elder daughter of a family," Mrs. Nichols said warmly.

"Everyone seems to get on with Nell; I wonder why? for she is not pretty, although she has a nice face. She is not well educated either, yet there is a sort of refinement about her, which, as a rule, one finds only in very cultured people." There was a little envy in Gertrude's tone now, as if she knew herself to be lacking in the quality which she so much admired in her friend.

"Parson Hamblyn was a gentleman, a real one," replied Mrs. Nichols, with emphasis. "Dr. Russell reminds me of him sometimes, with his fine manners and educated speech; but the doctor is an active man, and is going to be a successful one if only he can get a chance; while the parson was a dreamer and a thinker. He was a saint too, if ever there was one. But, taken all round he was too good to live, and I suppose that is why he died."

"Is anyone too good to live?" asked Gertrude, opening her eyes widely, and thinking of her own harassed father, with his gentle uncomplaining patience under heavy tribulation.

"I don't fancy I shall be in any danger of dying from that complaint yet awhile," said Mrs. Nichols, with a shrug of her ample shoulders. "But there are some people who are so unworldly, that they seem more fit for heaven than this earth, and Nell's father was one of them. She gets her refinement from him, but all her kind helpful ways come from her own good heart, poor child! I wish I had been there to help her to-night."

"What is that?" cried Gertrude, springing from her seat and hurrying to the door.

"I didn't hear anything, except that man snoring. A deal more noise he makes asleep than he ever does when he is awake," Mrs. Nichols said scornfully, as she also rose and followed Gertrude to the door.

The night was calm and still, with a touch of frost in the quiet air, which would turn the maples crimson and gold the next time the sun shone down upon them.

A minute or two they stood listening at the door; then Gertrude said eagerly—

"It is a train coming, I am sure of it. Oh, will you wake the station-master, and ask him to see if the points are all right? Sam Peters always attends to that, you know, so it may be forgotten."

Mrs. Nichols hurried off, nothing loth, for in truth the snoring was getting on her nerves. But Gertrude remained motionless, straining her ears to catch that distant hollow rumble which seemed so long in coming nearer.

There had only been the sleeping official, Mrs. Nichols, and herself on the depot through all those long hours of waiting, but as the rumble of the train sounded coming nearer and nearer, people hurried up by ones and twos, the women wrapped in shawls, the men with their shoulders up to their ears and their hands in their pockets, and stood in silent groups, waiting for that slow-coming train.

It was a relief when a whistle was heard; then the station-master waved a lantern to and fro, and the engine crawled slowly into the depot. The spell of silence was broken, and a perfect shower of questions burst upon the doctor and Sam Peters, who, by reason of their position on the engine, were of course the first to be interviewed.

"All in good time, friends; but it is business first. Will one of you go and wake Mrs. Nichols up, and tell her I am bringing her a patient?"

"She's here, doctor," shouted half a dozen voices.

"Miss Lorimer, is she here too?" asked the doctor, who was already off the engine and moving towards the freight-car.

"Been on duty all night, and is waiting to wire on to Lytton all the news you have brought," said the foremost of the crowd.

"That is right. I will go to her in a few minutes and give her the details; but I must see to my patient first," said the doctor.

By a series of energetic signs made with her left hand, Nell refused to be carried off the car as she had been carried on, and came tottering out, a strange-looking figure, her head bound up in a towel, her figure draped in a blanket, and her face so white and drawn with pain that it was difficult to recognize her.

"Get her to bed as quickly as you can, but don't allow her to speak one word. She has a broken wrist, and her jaw is hurt. Give her a little broth, if you have got it, or some milk, but she must have nothing else to-night," the doctor said briefly. And, escorted by the little crowd of sympathizing women, Nell was led off the scene.

Then the doctor went off to the telegraph office, where Gertrude, weary but alert, was waiting to send the news on to headquarters.

Sam Peters and the miners who had come back on the car entertained the remnant of the crowd with the story of that night's doings at Camp's Gulch, and vastly amusing the listeners found the recital, apparently, for they laughed and cheered when they heard how Nell had trapped the burglar who was hidden in the Chinaman's coffin.

But there was no laughter in the office, where the doctor was writing details for Gertrude to telegraph.

There was no question of the miners who had come back from Camp's Gulch going on to Roseneath that night, so they all lay down in the waiting-room, and snatched a little slumber so, and were snoring profoundly before Gertrude was ready to lock up her office and go.

The doctor had waited for her until Lytton had got all the information it required, and had sent her word that she might now go off duty until the morning, or rather, seeing that it was morning already, until the proper hour for commencing work had arrived again.

"What a strange sort of night it has been!" she exclaimed, as she went along the dark road with her escort.

"Yes, really an adventurous time for some of us," he answered, with a laugh, thinking of that wild ride to Camp's Gulch on the rocking engine.

Gertrude shrugged her shoulders. "I think I prefer monotony to adventure—at least, adventure of this sort. I am thankful I was not in Nell's place."

"I also am thankful you were not in her place either," he answered gravely. With a little flutter at her heart, Gertrude asked—

"Why?"

"Because it would have been a moral and physical impossibility for you to do what Miss Hamblyn did. She of course has now got to pay the price of her doings in nervous breakdown and physical suffering, but you would doubtless have had exactly the same amount of prostration to endure without having been able to accomplish anything."

"You are not exactly complimentary to me," said Gertrude, in an icy tone, although privately she was perfectly aware of the truth of the statement.

"I did not mean to be uncomplimentary," he said gravely. "I am quite positive that wherever you were placed, or in whatever circumstances you found yourself, you would do your very best, and it would not be your fault if you failed in any way."

Poor Gertrude! Never in all her life had she been made to feel so small, so utterly insignificant; and the worst of it was that the doctor was so perfectly innocent of any attempt to hurt her feelings. Indeed, in his secret heart he was very much drawn to her, and had been ever since their first meeting, and if there had been a prospect of his being able to keep a wife in decent comfort he would have asked her to marry him, so that he and Sonny might have a real home again.

But Gertrude, not being endued with second sight or any specially keen intuitive faculty, had no means of knowing how nearly she realized her companion's ideal, and, believing that he rather despised her, was miserable accordingly.

She did not even notice that he held her hand closer than usual at the parting, but went indoors with a dragging pain at her heart, which was destined to keep her company for many a long day to come.

Mrs. Nichols was waiting for her, and they had a cup of tea together, talking in whispers for fear of disturbing Nell, who lay in the next room trying to go to sleep.

The door was just ajar, and to her strained sensibilities the whispers were perfectly audible, causing her indeed no small amount of mental torture.

They were saying the kindest things about her, magnifying her into a heroine, while she, lying there with her broken wrist, hurt jaw, and torn ear, where Doss Umpey's stick had hit her such

cruel blows, knew herself to be a coward, and in a certain sense a traitor to her duty, because she had not said who it was that had planned to rob the big shed.

When Doss Umpey had encountered her, as he came stealing through the quiet moonlight, he had said that this was Brunsen's job, and he was bound to help it through, although he did not hold with law-breaking himself, because of the danger of it.

She had besought him to go away, to have nothing more to do with the Brunsens, but to get his living honestly if he could; she had even volunteered to send him a little part of her own earnings, to help him to keep clear of his undesirable acquaintances.

Then he had said that this thing must be carried through as planned; that it could not possibly fail. He did not seem to have noticed that distant whistle, which she had been hearing now for some minutes.

But she called his attention to it, and told him it was the help she had telegraphed for from Bratley, by using the cut wire at the top of the nearest testing pole.

Doss Umpey was thoroughly enraged with her then, and, closing with her, had endeavoured to search her pocket for the key of the big shed, she having incautiously told him that the man in the coffin could not possibly escape unaided.

But she was young and vigorous, more than a match for the old man from a muscular point of view. So, wresting herself free from his grip, she snatched the key from her pocket, and flung it away from her in the darkness, because she feared lest some confederate should come to his aid, and she should be completely overpowered. But she had been careful to toss the key on the railway track, because it would be easier to hunt for it there.

The screech of the whistle was rapidly growing nearer—they could even hear the roar of the engine; it was only a matter of minutes, and, grown desperate, Doss Umpey lifted his club and caught her a fearful blow on her right ear and jaw. She had cried out at the intolerable anguish it had caused her, and putting up her hand to ward off the next blow, had received its full force on her wrist. Whether he struck her again, or whether she just sank down to the ground faint and sick with her pain, Nell could not remember, as she lay in bed at Mrs. Nichols's house, while that worthy woman and Gertrude whispered to each other of her bravery as they drank their tea.

Presently there was a pushing back of chairs, a little rattling of crockery, and then silence. No one had come near her. Gertrude had peeped in at the door, and seeing by the dim light of the lamp that Nell's eyes were shut, had gone away, supposing her to be asleep.

But, between pain and unrest of mind, there was no sleep for Nell that night. She lay with closed eyes, certainly, but she was wide awake all the same. When the doctor came to see her before he had his breakfast, it was to find her feverish and excited, while the wildness in her eyes made her look like a hunted creature.

"I thought I gave strict orders that Miss Hamblyn was not to be allowed to talk, and that no one was to talk to her," said the doctor, in a stormy tone, turning to Mrs. Nichols.

"The poor dear has not uttered a word—I don't believe she could if she tried; and as to talking to her, this is the first time I've said a word in her presence, since you gave your orders last night," replied Mrs. Nichols, rather indignantly; for she did not believe in being accused of doing injudicious things when she was entirely innocent of them.

"It is my fault, then, in not having given her a sleeping draught; but I felt so sure she would sleep naturally," he said, in a worried tone. Bending over the bed, he proceeded to make a more careful investigation of Nell's injuries than had been possible on the previous night.

When he had finished his examination he sat down by the bed, and began to talk to Nell with the uncompromising straightforwardness which was winning him favour among these people of the far west, whose lives are too full of toil and endeavour for them to tolerate a medical opinion which says one thing and means another.

"You are not so well this morning as I expected to find you; but that is largely your own fault, because, when you were helped to bed last night, instead of going to sleep, as you ought to have done, you commenced to worry about yourself, and kept it up until sleep became impossible to you."

A faint smile curved Nell's lips. She had been worrying, it was true, only the doctor was very much mistaken as to the cause of the worry.

"The reason you find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to talk," continued the doctor, "is because the dislocation of the jaw caused much swelling and soreness of all the muscles of your throat; but if you are able to get some hours of restful sleep this soreness will largely vanish, and you will be able to talk comfortably."

Again Nell smiled; but there was something in her eyes which made the doctor ask anxiously—

"You have no other injuries, of which you have not spoken?"

Nell's eyes and hand said no for her with so much emphasis that the doctor's fears on that score were completely set at rest. But as the look of trouble still remained in her eyes, he invented an errand for Mrs. Nichols which took her for a brief space from the room, and then he asked, in a low tone—

"If you are not worrying about your own condition, is it some other trouble that you have?"

Nell's eyes drooped uneasily. She could not tell him, she could not tell anyone, how afraid she was that Doss Umpey would be found and arrested for being concerned with the two Brunsens in the attempt to rob the big shed.

"Ah, I thought I was right!" he exclaimed; then added, with a brusque gravity, "The pity of it is that there is so little sense in worrying; you can't help or hinder things by lying and stewing over them, but you very seriously retard your own recovery. Now, are you going to be sensible enough to banish worry and go to sleep, or am I to dose you with a sleeping draught?"

For answer Nell turned her head slightly, closed her eyes, drooping into her pillow in such a fashion that the doctor went away satisfied as to her power to sleep unaided by drugs.

CHAPTER XXII  
The Fate of the Prisoner

"THEY are a lawless lot, those Settlement men, and Sam Peters says the crowd known as the Syndicate are the worst of the lot," said Mrs. Nichols, one afternoon a week later, when, her housework being done, she came to sit with Nell, who was resting on the couch which stood under the window in the cheerful little sitting-room.

Very much of an invalid was Nell, for the fright or the shock, or the secret trouble which she could not keep wholly in abeyance, had pulled her down until she was but a wan shadow of herself.

She could talk again, although her words came with a halting slowness which made the doctor frown when he heard her, just as he frowned when she described the noise in her injured ear, which sometimes was so great that she could hear nothing else on that side. But he told her she would be better in time, so she was trying to bear the discomfort patiently.

She glanced up with quick inquiry in her face, at the remark made by Mrs. Nichols about the men of the Settlement.

"Why do you think they are so lawless?" she asked, her heart beating a little faster, for this was the first time since her arrival that Mrs. Nichols had shown any desire to gossip.

"Because of the way they took the law into their own hands last week, about that fellow you chained up in the coffin," replied the stout woman, holding her head very much on one side while she contemplated a patch which did not look straight.

"I thought Gertrude said the police went up to Camp's Gulch on the early cars next morning to arrest him?" said Nell, with a dismayed look.

"So they did, only when they got there he was gone; one of the big doors was lifted clean off its hinges, and the Chinaman's coffin had been taken away. It made us all feel pretty weird at the time, I can tell you, so the doctor said you were not to be told, for fear there was a tragedy behind, which would have upset you. But Sam Peters came down this morning to see about packing up his furniture, and he's just been over and told me all about what has come out since."

"Yes?" queried Nell, doubtfully.

Mrs. Nichols cleared her throat vigorously. Next to hearing a bit of neighbourly gossip which had no venom in it, was the pleasure of passing it on, so she was disposed to make the most of the occasion.

"It seems that some of the miners—the Roseneath lot, you know—recognized the voice of the man in the coffin as belonging to young Dick Brunsen, who had swindled the Syndicate. So, when the doctor and Sam brought the engine and the rest of you back here, one of the men started hot-foot to the Settlement, to let the Syndicate know where the man was to be found who had cheated them so badly. It was a risky thing to do, and I guess that Dick Brunsen's life had never been in quite so much danger before."

"Did they hurt him?" queried Nell, faintly.

"No; that is the funny part of it, for when men take the law into their own hands there is mostly a tragedy somewhere. Directly the Syndicate got word about where Dick Brunsen was to be found, they set off for the depot to get their revenge before the police arrived to arrest the prisoner. But it seems that the young man's father was hanging about the depot, and when he heard what was on hand, he came forward and made a bargain with them."

"What sort of a bargain?" asked Nell.

"The very best sort from the point of view of the Syndicate. He offered to return every dollar of the money out of which they had been cheated, if only they would do something to set young Dick free; but if they would not do this, Brunsen said that both he and his son would die before they would reveal the hiding-place of the money, which, as good luck would have it, they had not been able to spend. The Syndicate figured it out then that dollars were more satisfactory than revenge, so they agreed to get young Dick free somehow, even if they had to pull the shed down to do it. But they vowed that if the money was not forthcoming after they had done their part, the Brunsens, father and son, should be strung up to the nearest tree by their necks."

"How horrible!" groaned Nell, with a shiver.

"But they did not do it, so there is nothing to turn white about," retorted Mrs. Nichols. "They just swarmed down to the depot, a mob thirty or forty strong. The miners on guard there instantly gave way before them, and passively looked on, if they did not help. The great door was lifted by main force, though how much it weighs I shouldn't like to make a guess at, and young Dick, with the Chinaman's coffin, was carried away. Nothing else was meddled with though there was property enough in the shed to have tempted people more honest than they ever professed to be."

"I know that. It was the fear of its being stolen which bothered me so badly," sighed Nell.

"Well, nothing was taken, however, and when the first cars reached Camp's Gulch in the morning, it was to find the place absolutely deserted, except for poor old Mrs. Trip, who was asleep in her house."

"I can't think what made Joey go off in such a fashion. I shouldn't have been half so much afraid if he had been there to keep me company," Nell remarked.

"The doctor thinks the poor old man clean forgot that the night cars hadn't come in. The man that keeps the saloon at the Settlement said Joey looked funny that evening, and some of the customers thought he had been drinking; but it is plain the poor man must have had a stroke on the way home, as they found him lying unconscious under the trees at Hobson's Gap."

"How is he now?" asked Nell.

"Sam hasn't heard this morning; but Dr. Russell has gone up to the Settlement to-day, so we shall most likely hear when he comes back."

"It will be a great change for Sam Peters to live at Camp's Gulch," remarked Nell.



"I am very glad he has got the post," Mrs. Nichols answered. "He did really deserve promotion; but it is not clear to my mind that he would have had it if it had not been for his swarm of children."

"Why not?" queried Nell, in surprise.

"It is my opinion that the railway people meant to have as many folks for their money as they could get—it is such a lonely place, don't you see? And as Sam Peters had such a swarm of children, they reckoned he would populate the depot better than any one else, so he got the berth."

"How it came about I don't mind, seeing that he has got it," Nell answered, with a smile; then she asked, "Who is doing my work—that poor sickly young Robertson?"

"No; the operator is a big red-haired young man, named Scott, and he has fitted up an old freight-wagon to live in, because there is no room in Sam's house," Mrs. Nichols said, with an uneasy wriggle as she darted an anxious look at Nell, for Sam Peters had told her that morning that Scott was at Camp's Gulch for a permanency, which would mean that Nell had been superseded.

She saw the anxious look, and smiled faintly. "You need not be worried about my feelings being hurt. I did not expect to go back to Camp's Gulch; indeed, I am thinking of sending in my resignation, only it seemed better to wait a few days longer, in order to make quite sure."

"To make quite sure of what?" asked the stout woman sharply, looking at Nell more anxiously than before.

"That I can't be an operator any longer. I am all but certain I shall not be able to do it, because of that noise and confusion in my head. The doctor says he hopes it will get better in time, but he does not say what time, and I cannot go dragging on indefinitely."

"Can't you hear enough with your other ear?" asked Mrs. Nichols, but Nell shook her head.

"That was my best ear, and now I could never be sure of myself. However, there are other ways of earning one's living, so I must just begin over again," she said a little sadly, for beginning over again meant starting at the bottom once more, and this was disappointing.

Mrs. Nichols looked troubled too. "I'm real sorry you feel like that, especially just now, for Miss Lorimer has got to go home; will be away all winter perhaps, if her mother ain't better, and if you had only been fit for deputy work, why you might have stayed here so comfortable," she said regretfully.

Nell gave a little start. "Have they sent for Gertrude from Lorimer's Clearing?" she asked.

She had not seen Gertrude that morning, and had indeed only had brief visits from her on each evening.

"Her father wrote the day before yesterday, and asked her to go home next week. Mrs. Lorimer is very low down, and, judging from a few things that poor girl has let drop, very difficult to live with, I'm afraid."

"Next week. Poor Gertrude!" Nell sighed heavily, for she had seen far enough into the heart of her friend to know how much it would cost Gertrude to leave Bratley just now.

Then she sat silent for a while, wondering if she dared offer to go to Lorimer's Clearing and help them all until Mrs. Lorimer was better, finally asking the advice of Mrs. Nichols on the subject.

"You might offer certainly, and I haven't a doubt you would do a good part by them. But you are worth a better post than that now, and I can't bear to think of your being dragged backwards when you ought to be rising all the time. Of course, socially, you are a long way above the Lorimers, and I don't like to think of your drudging for them like a common hired girl," the stout woman said, in a discontented fashion.

Nell smiled faintly. "Some one must do the drudgery, and I am more fit for it than Gertrude."

"Very likely you are, so far as strength goes; but, well, you ought to be above that sort of thing now. I hate for you to take a low-down place, so there!" said Mrs. Nichols, vehemently.

Nell laughed outright at this, only somehow there was a lack of mirth in the sound. Then she took a sudden resolve, and began to tell Mrs. Nichols of the encounter with Doss Umpey at Camp's Gulch, which had resulted in her injuries.

"I could not speak of it while there was any danger of the police finding him," she said sadly. "But if the Brunsons got clear away, most certainly granfer would get away too. Only when you begin to talk about my social position being so much better than Gertrude's, it is as well that you should know what weights there are to drag me down."

"Oh, the wicked old man, to strike you such cruel blows!" cried Mrs. Nichols, in horrified tones. "Why, he ought to be shut up in prison for the remainder of his life."

"Hush, hush! I could not bear that. He was just mad with rage, or he would not have struck so hard, and I was too dazed and stupid to get out of his way in time," Nell said hastily, more willing to make excuses for the old man now than she had been in the past.

"Don't talk about him; it turns me sick!" exclaimed Mrs. Nichols, angrily. "That reminds me, too, that I brought a parcel home with me from the American side for you. But we've been in such a state of worry and confusion ever since, that I haven't thought a word about it until now."

"A parcel for me? What is it?" cried Nell, a tinge of pink coming into her pale cheeks.

"That I don't know. But when I was staying with my cousin, Sabina Clack, at Lewisville, a Mrs. Joe Lipton, from Button End, came on a visit to her sister who lived opposite, and, as luck would have it, we got quite intimate."

"Why, I know her—at least, I've seen her," said Nell. "She was kind, too. I remember she gave me a lot of old magazines once, because I hadn't anything to read."

"I saw she was a kind-hearted sort; but she hadn't a single good word for Doss Umpey, and she said all Button End was up in arms at the way he went off and left you to the mercy of them Gunnages."

"But I did not stay with them long," said Nell, smiling now to remember how angry Mrs. Gunnage had been with her for going away.

"A good thing, too. Well, when Mrs. Lipton was going on about Doss Umpey, and saying that he was no better than a murderer, because he had driven you to wander till you died, I just told her that I happened to know you were not dead, and, what is more, I knew where you were and what

you were doing. I did not open my mouth very wide as to particulars, but told her enough to satisfy her about you. Then she asked me if I would take charge of a parcel which had been left at her house, and give it to you when I had the chance."

"Who left the parcel there?" asked Nell.

"A gentleman, Mrs. Lipton said, and she told me she should have sent it over to the Lone House with the Gunnages, only she didn't trust Mrs. Gunnage any further than she could see her."

"Dear me! it sounds mysterious. Can I have the parcel now, or am I to wait a while, in order to have my curiosity roused to boiling point?" asked Nell, eagerly.

"You shall have it now; then you can look at it while I take Miss Lorimer's tea across to the depot," said Mrs. Nichols, thrusting her work on one side, and going off to her room in search of the mysterious parcel.

It was of considerable size and bulky, well tied up in stout brown paper with strong string fastened in many knots, and it was addressed "Miss Nell, care of Mr. Doss Umpey."

A wave of burning colour surged over Nell's face as she looked at the handwriting and read the address. But she seemed to have lost all interest concerning the contents, and sat with it unopened on her lap, while Mrs. Nichols prepared Gertrude's tea, and went off with it to the depot.

Even then, when she was alone, a great reluctance to open it still oppressed her, until at length, ashamed of what looked so much like cowardice, she picked up a knife, and cutting the string pulled off the outer wrappings.

Then was revealed a big piece of crimson merino, yards and yards of it, a long length of soft white flannel, some ribbon to match the merino, and four books. There was a letter packed in between the books, and Nell picked it up with an odd sensation of knowing already exactly what it contained.

"DEAR MISS NELL" (so ran the letter),

"Will you please pardon the liberty I am taking in sending you the accompanying books and material? The books were all the store-keeper had, of a readable sort that is, and the choice of material was likewise limited, but I thought you would look so nice in a red frock, so I am sending it along.

"As you would not take any payment for your kindness, I just shot a little old case with a few dollars in it under the settle where I slept; please use the money to buy books, or anything else that you may need. I shall not forget that in reality I owe you my life, for I must certainly have died if you had not taken me in and cared for me so kindly. I hope some day to see you again. Until then, I am, sincerely yours,

"D— B—."

The name at the bottom was signed in full, but it had evidently been written in a violent hurry with a leaky fountain-pen, then inadvertently smeared so badly that it was undecipherable.

Nell sat looking at it so long that she forgot about the other things, until Mrs. Nichols came back from the depot.

"Oh, what a pretty colour! and it is good merino, too, and the flannel is the best quality—it cost half a dollar a yard, if it did a cent, I guess. Oh, my dear, do tell me the name of the gentleman that sent it!" cried Mrs. Nichols, who was walking round the parcel in an ecstasy of admiration.

"You can see the letter if you like," replied Nell, quietly; but her colour was coming and going, and it was easy to see that she was having hard work to maintain her self-control.

Mrs. Nichols stood by the table and read the letter through in silence, until she came to the signature, then she said with something like irritation in her tone—

"What is the name?"

"Can't you read it?" asked Nell.

"It is so horribly smudged. Just like a man to stuff a letter into an envelope without stopping to blot it. The first name looks like Dick, and—but no, it can't surely be Brunsen!" cried Mrs. Nichols, in a shocked tone.

"I am afraid it is," sighed Nell.

"And the money, did you find that?" demanded Mrs. Nichols, sharply, referring again to the letter, which she still held in her hand.

"Yes, but I did not use it. I sent it back to Mr. Brunsen just as soon as I knew where to find him," said Nell, holding her head very high now, while her cheeks glowed redder than before.

"Sent it back? Whatever do you mean, child?" asked Mrs. Nichols, in a puzzled tone.

"I was standing in the big shed at Camp's Gulch, back in the summer, when I saw the gentleman whom I had taken care of at the Lone House, standing talking to someone else on the Settlement road, and when I asked Joey Trip who it was, he said it was Mr. Dick Brunsen, the man who afterwards cheated the Syndicate. So I wrote a note to say where I had found the money, and sent it back to him in a letter," said Nell, rather unsteadily.

"What did this person say in reply?" asked Mrs. Nichols, frowning heavily.

"There was no reply, of course, for I put no address, and I posted it here in Bratley," said Nell.

"That man Joey Trip is an idiot," announced Mrs. Nichols, with tremendous emphasis.

"What do you mean?" queried Nell, in surprise.

"I mean just what I say; and if I were not so fond of you, I should say that you are an idiot too," retorted Mrs. Nichols, sourly.

"But why?" asked Nell, more puzzled than before.

"For thinking that the man who took the trouble to send you this parcel was that drinking, cheating, thieving Dick Brunsen whom you tied up in that Chinaman's coffin."

"But it must have been the same; Joey Trip said so, and he ought to know, seeing that Mr. Brunsen had been treating him to lemonade every night for weeks past," Nell answered. But there was a wistful look in her eyes, which showed how gladly she would submit to being worsted in her

theories concerning the identity of the man who had remembered her so kindly.

"Joey Trip is stupid as an owl. Most likely he would say that his fire-eating Dick Brunsen was a saint, if you asked him; but reasonable folks would know better. Now, look at these books. Here's 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' 'Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier,' 'Essays on Chaucer,' and 'The Imitation of Christ.' Are they the sort of books a man would choose as a present for a girl if he were of the sort that we know this Dick Brunsen is?"

"Joey Trip said it was the same; and oh, Mrs. Nichols, if it isn't, I've sent the money to the wrong man!" exclaimed Nell, starting up in great dismay.

"That is just about what you have done, I expect," replied the stout woman, with an air of gloomy triumph.

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## CHAPTER XXIII Honouring the Heroine

A FORTNIGHT slipped past, during which Nell's injuries mended slowly, though her general health was anything but satisfactory; for the shock and strain of her adventure at Camp's Gulch proved too much for even her intrepid spirit.

Gertrude had been gone a week. Nell had received one brief letter in which Gertrude said she was sending in her resignation, for they could not do without her at home now.

A fresh operator had been installed at Bratley—a girl who gave herself superior airs because of her city up-bringing, and who drove Mrs. Nichols nearly wild with her untidy ways.

Nell was secretly longing to get to work again, and chafing sorely at her enforced idleness. She spent hours every day in the sunshine; reading, walking, making plans for the future, and doing her best to help anyone who stood in need of assistance that she was able to give.

She had spent a long afternoon with Mrs. Jones, at a farm about half a mile from the depot, who had a sick baby and a swarm of toddlers of various ages—six of them altogether, and the eldest not ten years old.

Nell had taken them all, saving the ailing baby, to the field where Mr. Jones was ploughing up potatoes; and the whole tribe had been picking up the potatoes, even small hands accomplishing a fair amount of work when there was some one present who could turn it into play.

But the stooping, and the effort to keep the little ones amused, had brought on the buzzing in Nell's head in quite an aggravated form, and she was feeling very miserable indeed as she trailed along the dusty road, carrying a heavy basket of late plums in her left hand, which Mrs. Jones had sent as a present to Mrs. Nichols.

It was growing dusk by the time Nell reached Bratley, for which she felt thankful, as her face was drawn into puckers of weariness and discomfort.

Entering by the back door, she put the plums on the kitchen table, meaning to slip off to her own room to get a little rested before any one noticed her entrance; but in this she was disappointed.

"Is that you, Nell dear?" asked Mrs. Nichols from the sitting-room; and there was an indefinable something in her tone which made the listener thrill and quiver with expectation, while half her weariness dropped from her as if by magic.

"Yes; I have come. Do you want me?" she asked, presenting herself at the door of the inner room where Mrs. Nichols sat knitting by a fire of sticks, although the evening was unusually warm for late September.

"There is a letter for you from Camp's Gulch, sent by special messenger; it came an hour ago. I would have sent for you, only I was expecting you home every minute," replied Mrs. Nichols.

"As important as that, is it?" said Nell, coming forward into the firelight. "What is it about? A round-robin from the Peters family, asking me to come and take up my abode in the old freight-wagon, I expect. But I'm not going. I mean to send in my resignation to-morrow, for I've swarms of bees let loose in my ear again, and it is just horrible."

"Poor child! But I expect you have done too much to-day, and that is why your head is bad. No, the letter is not from the Peters lot; it is from the Syndicate. There it is on the table. I was told to take care of it, so I've just sat and stared at the thing ever since it came."

"The Syndicate?" echoed Nell, in amazement.

Then she opened the envelope and drew out a short letter, accompanied by a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill.

"Oh, they have sent me some money, but I can't keep it!" she cried, in profound astonishment mingled with dismay.

"Why not?" demanded Mrs. Nichols, trying not to look as if she knew about the contents of the letter.

"Because—oh, because it is just absurd that I should be paid for doing my duty," flashed out Nell, with her head in the air.

"What is in the letter?" asked Mrs. Nichols, nodding and smiling as if vastly pleased.

"Read it and see. Oh dear, I don't like such a fuss being made," said Nell, ruefully.

"Read it to me; I can't see by this light, it flickers so much," replied Mrs. Nichols, and stooping forward to the fire, Nell began to read—

"DEAR MISS HAMBLYN,

"On behalf of the Syndicate, I have the pleasure of asking your acceptance of the enclosed one hundred dollars, as a small acknowledgment of our indebtedness to you in the matter of your action re the attempted burglary at Camp's Gulch railway depot. We owe you our sincere thanks for catching the man we wanted so badly, and we trust you will soon find

yourself recovered from your injuries.

“Written for the Syndicate, by  
“MARK FLOSSMAN.”

“Well, it is a very nice letter, anyhow; and you would surely never hurt their feelings by sending the money back, especially as they are not rich men,” said Mrs. Nichols.

“I did not think of it hurting their feelings; but it is such a dreadful lot of money to take for just nothing. It isn’t even as if the railway people had given it to me,” Nell replied, with visible relenting in her tone.

“The railway people will do something, I have no doubt, when they know that you are compelled to resign because of what happened to you in your efforts to secure them from loss. But even if they had lost everything the big shed contained, they would not have stood to lose so much as the Syndicate did over that bad deal in copper. I guess they will be more careful how they spend their money next time. No wonder they feel so grateful to you for helping them to get their money back.”

“I am glad they did not hurt the poor man when they had him in their power,” Nell said, feeling that nothing would have induced her to take this money if the Syndicate had wreaked some dreadful vengeance on the prisoner.

“So am I, though I must say he got off more lightly than he deserved to do. But you will keep the money, dear, and it may help you to some of that education you are always longing for; although, to my way of thinking, you are already as learned and as ladylike as any one need wish to be.”

“Oh, how perfectly lovely that would be!” cried Nell, ignoring the compliment and thinking only of the possibilities contained in the gift of the Syndicate.

In the end she decided to take the gift in the spirit in which it was offered, and she wrote a graceful little letter of thanks to Mark Flossman; then, in a spirit of flat contradiction, felt fearfully ill used because she had been the innocent means of bringing Dick Brunsen to justice, even though it was rough justice, which showed plainly enough that she did not entirely accept Mrs. Nichols’s theory about the identity of the man whom she had succoured at the Lone House more than a year ago.

The next day she sent in her resignation, accompanied by a note from Dr. Russell, which stated that, owing to the injury to her ear, it would be a long time before she was a safe operator again.

To her amazement, the officials at headquarters, taking into account the peculiar circumstances of the case, paid her full salary up to the date of her resignation, and sent her a hundred dollars as compensation for injuries received and her consequent loss of work.

“I expect they got shamed into it by what the Syndicate did,” said Mrs. Nichols, which was a little ungracious on her part, as doubtless the officials at headquarters knew nothing whatever of the action of the Syndicate in honouring the heroine.

“I can sit still comfortably now until my arm gets better, and then I will just go to work and fit myself to be something special in the world,” said Nell, gaily. “I should love to go to college and study medicine, only I’m afraid the money wouldn’t be enough to carry me through, or I might not be clever enough to get a degree. Would it not be lovely if I were Dr. Eleanor Hamblyn?”

“I would rather see you happily married to some good man,” grumbled Mrs. Nichols.

“One cannot always have what one wants, so that pretty little dream of yours may never be realized,” laughed Nell. Then she was suddenly overtaken with a sober fit, and went off to her room, where she stayed for quite a long time in a brown study as to ways and means.

When she applied to the doctor for advice about the best way of going to work to secure a thorough education, with a possible college course to complete it, to her surprise he threw cold water on the whole scheme, and advised her either to invest the money with a view to a rainy day, or to use it to start herself in some business.

“But I don’t know any business; and I want to be a cultured woman,” explained Nell.

“There is no reason why you should not be a business woman and cultured too,” he said, smiling at the look of disgust on her face.

“I have not been trained to business,” she objected.

“Nor have you been trained to entering a profession,” he answered quietly. “Except, perhaps, school-teaching, which is fearfully wearing work. There is not a profession that is not over-stocked, while there is always a crying need for bright capable women in what are mistakenly called the humbler walks of life.”

“But you are a professional man,” she said, with a pout.

“To my sorrow, yes. But if I had put half the hard work into learning a business that I put into acquiring my professional knowledge, Sonny and I would not be hanging round at little boarding-houses, scrimping and saving to make one dollar do the work of two,” he said, with a smile which was so wistful that it made Nell want to cry.

“I have always longed to get an education,” she said, with a sigh; “and now at last, when it looks possible, you tell me it is of no use to try for it.”

“Pardon me, I said nothing of the sort,” he replied, with a smile. “I only warned you against trying to enter a profession. Education is a word capable of many renderings, and anyone can get education of a sort if they only keep their eyes open wide enough.”

“Oh dear, how bewildering it is!” she exclaimed, with dismay in her tone. “When I had no money at all, I used to think that everything would be perfectly easy if only I had a little pile of dollars to call my own; but now that I have the dollars, it is harder than ever, because I don’t know what to do with them.”

“After this you will better understand and sympathize with the sorrows of millionaires,” said the doctor, laughing at her dismayed looks. Then he added, in a graver tone, “I should not advise you to do any hard study for the next year or two. If you take life fairly easy, with no undue mental or nervous strain, your ear-trouble will right itself, and you will have no further fuss with it. If, however, you think of fighting your way through exams., and that sort of thing, I warn you that you

will have to suffer for it."

Tears of disappointment welled up in Nell's dark eyes, for the candid opinion and friendly advice of the doctor came as a great blow to her, shattering many a magnificent castle in the air. No one but herself knew how ardently she had longed to rise above the drudgery of ordinary life, and to make for herself a name and a place among the extremely cultured of the world.

But she made no great outcry about it, and was careful not to let anyone guess how hardly the statements of the doctor had hit her. She had sufficient common sense to know how truly he had spoken. It was out of the question for her to be a school teacher, even if she had cared for the life. If she trained for a clerkship she would be only one of scores all trying for the same post, and she might very easily be among the unsuccessful ones.

"I am too young to be a nurse, I am afraid," she told herself, as she sat on a sunny hillock not far from the depot watching a train of cars steaming up the Roseneath valley. She was quite alone, for school had begun again, and the swarms of children who usually attached themselves to her as a sort of guard of honour were this morning otherwise engaged.

On the whole she was rather glad to be left solitary to thresh the matter out. It was three days since she had had her talk with Dr. Russell—three days of gloomy meditation, in which many a fine castle in the air had come down, and many a bright illusion had been dispelled in the strong light of common sense.

"I will wait one more week, and then I must decide," she said to herself, with a sigh, as she rose from her sunny hillock and prepared to take her way back into Bratley village again.

Then she remembered her father's words about seeking Heavenly guidance in the grave decisions of life. Truly Parson Hamblyn had not lived or preached in vain; his teaching remained alive and vigorous long after he himself was dead.

"Seek prayerfully to be led aright, dear little Nell; and when the guidance comes, don't kick against it," he used to say. The tears of tender, loving regret arose in her eyes as she recalled the wasted form and pale face of her father as she used to see him in those sad far-off days just before he died.

Then a smile twitched at her lips, for she reflected how very much she had been kicking during these last three days against her own disappointment about the higher education.

"It is the laziness of these days that is upsetting me, I believe. I will go up to Camp's Gulch and see Mrs. Peters to-morrow. If I go by the early cars, I can walk over to the Settlement and have a look at poor old Mrs. Trip and Joey," she said to herself, thinking how strange it seemed to have time and ability to go about here and there as fancy might dictate.

Mrs. Nichols highly applauded the idea of a visit to Camp's Gulch. The difficulty had been to induce Nell to go anywhere, and it was plainly not good for her to sit about brooding on the problem of what she could or could not do.

It was considerable promotion for Sam Peters, baggage-clerk and pointsman of Bratley, to be station-master at Camp's Gulch, and there might have been some truth in what Mrs. Nichols said about his having been chosen for the post because of his numerous family. Mrs. Peters was tremendously pleased at the improvement in her husband's position, and would persist in declaring that they owed it all to dear Miss Hamblyn, which was, of course, rather embarrassing to Nell.

She travelled up by the early cars next morning, and received a warm welcome from Sam and his wife. It gave her quite a thrill to see the place again, and to think of all the excitement and strain of the adventurous night which had terminated her residence there and cut short her career as a telegraph operator. But already changes were coming, and two more wooden houses were being erected just beyond the big shed, on the Settlement road.

"Why, it will be quite like a town presently, with gas-lamps and asphalted side-walks," laughed Nell, when she saw the wooden frames of the new houses. "But who is going to live in them?"

"That is what we want to know," said Mrs. Peters, as she jogged her baby up and down in her arms to give it a little exercise, while the small child who had been the baby previously clung to her skirts, whimpering to be carried also.

"A person might manage to get a living in summertime by letting lodgings or taking city people in to board, but it would be different in winter," Nell remarked, noting afresh the exceeding beauty of the wooded heights, and wondering how anyone could endure living in ugly places who had once looked on scenery like this.

"It is the winter that will frighten the people, I expect; but it need not, for there are some new mines to be opened on the other side of the hill, Sam says. They have found copper rich there; that, of course, will bring a lot of men about the place, and anyone who would be willing to cook good plain food, such as pies, cakes, soups, and stews, might make a comfortable living."

Nell made a grimace. "Oh dear, it just takes away one's appetite even to think of it!" she exclaimed.

"Do you think so? Cooking never takes away my appetite; but then, I just keep doors and windows open as much as possible when I am boiling and stewing, which makes a great difference. I wish you would take one of those houses when they are finished, and see how well you could make it do," said Mrs. Peters, wistfully; for, despite her delight in her new dignity, she often felt very lonely at Camp's Gulch.

Nell burst into a merry laugh. "Fancy me setting up housekeeping at eighteen! And oh, how grand it would sound! Camp's Gulch Restaurant. Proprietor, Miss Eleanor Hamblyn. Tariff on application. Currant dumpling a speciality. Table d'hôte at noon daily except Sundays."

"You may laugh as much as you like," said Mrs. Peters, who had laughed herself until the tears ran down her cheeks. "But mine is a very good idea, after all."

Later in the day Nell walked over to the Settlement to see poor old Mrs. Trip, who was living in a little one-roomed shack and nursing Joey, who was still very ill.

The old man did not appear to recognize Nell, and she was shocked at the change in him. But Mrs. Trip said he was much better and getting well fast. She seemed to take great pride in her

patient, and said it was quite a comfort to have him sick, because now he could not go off leaving her alone for hours at a stretch in the evenings.

Nell found it difficult to keep from laughing outright at this view of the case, and came away thinking that there was a bright side to most troubles if only one knew where to look for it.

She went back to Bratley on the evening cars, and found Mrs. Nichols waiting on the depot to meet her, and the good woman had bad news writ large on her face.

"What is the matter?" asked Nell, faintly.

"I've had a letter from Dr. Shaw, of Nine Springs, asking about you. Miss Lorimer's father is dead; the mother is ill and incapable of anything; and the doctor wants to know if you are well enough to go to them," Mrs. Nichols replied.

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## CHAPTER XXIV A Sister by Adoption

GERTRUDE moved about the house with a sense of unreality about her. It could not be true, she told herself, that her father lay sleeping his last long sleep in the next room, while her mother was lying too ill to know or care what became of the family in this sad time.

It could not be true, but only a bad dream from which she would wake presently; only meanwhile she must do her best for the helpless children, who had no one to look to but herself.

Oh, why was life so hard, so very hard, for some people, when others found existence so delightfully easy?

It was her mother she had come home from Bratley to nurse; but it was her father, after all, who had needed her most.

She had not realized that he was ill until the morning when he could not get up; then, when Dr. Shaw came to see him, the truth fell on to her as a crushing blow that he was slipping out of life.

When he died, Flossie had besought her to send for Nell; but, remembering Nell's battered condition, Gertrude would not even write to tell her of the sorrow which had come to them.

"We must bear our troubles ourselves, Flossie; we can't always expect other people to stagger along under our burdens," she said, when the little sister pleaded so hard for Nell to be sent for.

"But we are not bearing the troubles ourselves; I mean, other people are helping us. See how kind Dr. Shaw has been, and Mrs. Higgs, and Miss Trotman. Only all the time I feel as if there is no one who could comfort us like Nell," said Flossie. She forbore to press the matter, because Gertrude looked so worried.

There were more troubles for the elder sister to face just then than the sickness and death which invaded the house. Monetary difficulties were staring her in the face, and she was quite shocked to find how poor her father had become in that last hard year of his life.

A mortgage had been raised on the property, or rather it had been increased, and bills were owing which Gertrude had supposed to have been paid long ago. Then the stock on the farm had been seriously diminished—a horse had died; two had been sold. The yearling cattle had also been sold; only weaning calves and milking cows remained on the place.

"But there is the corn; that is worth a good bit, isn't it, Patsey?" she asked, with a little shiver, when she and the boy were discussing the situation on the day before the funeral.

"Not so much as you might think. Besides, if we sell the corn, what are we going to live on, or how shall we keep the cattle and the pigs through the winter?" Patsey asked, lifting his tear-stained face to look at her for a moment, then letting his gaze drop to the floor again.

"I wonder whatever we shall do? If only you were two or three years older we might rub along easily, but I know so little about farming," she said, with a sigh.

"I hate farming!" exclaimed the boy, vehemently; then looked heartily ashamed of his outburst.

But Gertrude only slid her arm round his neck and laid her head down on his shoulder.

"I hate it too," she said softly; "but we must not think of ourselves just now, Patsey; mother and the children stand first, you know."

"Yes, I know; and I'll do just whatever you tell me, Gertrude. I promised father I would the night before he died," Patsey answered. And he set his teeth hard, because he did not want to be caught shedding tears in public.

"The trouble is, I can see no way out of the tangle myself. It is quite possible we may have to sell the farm, only I don't see how we are going to get a living for mother and the children if we do," Gertrude said.

"What is that?" asked Patsey, lifting his head with a jerk.

The two were in the family sitting-room, with the outer door open, although the window was shrouded with drawn blinds. The boy's sharp ears had caught the sound of wheels coming up the field, and he half rose to his feet to go and see who was coming, then changed his mind and sank back on his seat once more.

"Perhaps it is Dr. Shaw; he said he might look in this evening and see how mother was going on. Run, Patsey, and open the gate for him; it will save him from having to get down," said Gertrude.

Patsey darted off like the wind; it was a huge relief to him to run, only, with the solemn presence of death in the home, it had seemed almost improper to move beyond a slow walk.

Mrs. Lorimer was being watched over by Flossie for a little while, and a kindly neighbour had taken the two youngest children home with her, to be out of the way until the funeral was over.

Gertrude gathered up one or two things, which were lying about the room, with that instinct of tidiness which is second nature to some people.

She heard the doctor's voice greet Patsey; then heard the gate bang and the wheels come on to the house and stop. Then she was startled by hearing a familiar voice saying—

"I can get down myself, thank you. I have one hand, you know."

"It is Nell!" she exclaimed. She hurried to the door just in time to see Nell holding to the side of the doctor's trap with her one sound hand and dismounting after a fashion of her own.

"Yes, I have come. I just had to when I heard what was the matter, and it is of no use for you to send me away, because I will not go," she said, with a low laugh which ended in a sob.

"I am too thankful to have you here even to wish you away," Gertrude answered, with a sudden relief at her heart, for it seemed to her that nothing could be quite so hard to bear now that Nell had come to share the burdens with her.

Nell entered the house with very mingled feelings. She had been so happy here with the children last winter, that it was impossible not to feel joyful at coming back, only the shadow and the sorrow pulled the other way, and she was quite ready to weep with those who wept and to share in the sadness which oppressed the others.

The doctor went straight into Mrs. Lorimer's room, where he whispered a word in Flossie's ear which brought the child limping out to the sitting-room in a great hurry, where she cast herself into Nell's arms and nestled there in a speechless welcome which was eloquent beyond the power of words to express.

Gertrude had followed the doctor into her mother's room, and Patsey was outside with the doctor's horse, so the two were alone.

"Nell, we've wanted you so badly," sighed poor Flossie, whose small white face had an unchildlike look which made Nell's heart ache.

"I came directly I knew," she answered, in a low tone.

"I was sure you would; but Gertrude would not write, because she said you were not well enough to come. Who told you about it?" she asked.

"Dr. Shaw wrote to Mrs. Nichols to ask her if I were fit to come. I did not know about it until the evening, because I was away at Camp's Gulch all day; but I started by the early cars this morning, and I'm going to stay as long as you need me," Nell answered, in a low, soothing tone, as she gently rocked the little girl in her arm.

"Then you will stay for always, because I need you all the time, dear big, strong, sweet sister Nell!" murmured the child; and to Nell the words were the sweetest she had heard for many a year, and the knowledge that someone wanted her brought a flood of happiness to her heart.

They had plenty of time for confidences, for the doctor was a long while with Mrs. Lorimer; Gertrude also remained in the sick-room, and Patsey was walking the horse slowly up and down the meadow in front of the house.

"We are dreadfully poor now, Nell; did you know?" Flossie asked, with a pucker of anxiety pinching her small face into lines of pain.

"A little about it; the doctor told me," she answered, flushing at the admission, because she fancied Gertrude would not be pleased to think their poverty was town-talk already.

"Gertrude and Patsey think I don't know anything about it, and they won't talk about money worries in front of me, because they won't have me bothered; but they forget that I have been shut up at home while Gertrude has been away, and so I expect I know more about our being poor than they do."

"Never mind, we will find a way out of it somehow. I have got just a little money of my own now, you know, so I shall be able to help if matters get serious," Nell replied, more with the desire of reassuring Flossie than from any idea that she and the Lorimers would henceforth make their home together.

But when she went into Mrs. Lorimer's chamber and saw the poor woman lying there helpless, she began to realize that circumstances might be shaping her future in a way she had little expected.

It was not until the funeral was over, and Abe Lorimer had been laid to rest by the side of his two sons, that she put her thought into words. Even then she might have waited longer but for the fear of the future which was weighing Gertrude down.

"You see, it is not only the children that I have to think of and provide for, but there is mother also to nurse. Dr. Shaw does not say very much, but it is easy to see how little hope there is of her being able to do much for a very, very long while," Gertrude said, with a careworn look on her face which made her seem years older.

"If we both put our shoulders to the wheel it won't be so hard, and in a few years Patsey will be able to help," Nell replied quietly.

She was dusting the room with her left hand, moving here and there, but keeping her face turned from Gertrude, who was standing at the stove making a cup of arrowroot for the invalid.

"What do you mean?" asked Gertrude, blankly.

Nell dropped her duster and wheeled; her face was very pale, and her breath came in gasps because her heart was beating so fast.

"I mean that I am going to help to bring up the children," she said, her words coming out with a firmness and decision which surprised her; but then, she had to speak in such a downright fashion because so much was at stake. "I have been so lonely, with no one to care for or to care for me in return. I have no brothers and sisters of my own, so I am going to adopt some; and as I love you all better than any others, I intend adopting all of you, so there!"

It was impossible to help smiling at this way of putting matters, and Gertrude laughed in an unsteady fashion just because she could not help it. Then, putting the saucepan of arrowroot down where it could not boil over, she turned to protest.

"Nell, it is just like your goodness of heart to suggest such a thing, and, in truth, we are all very willing to be adopted; but we cannot have you sacrificing your life in such a fashion. You have it in you to rise in the world, so you must not be held down and your career spoiled because of our children."

"My career, as you are pleased to term it, will not be spoiled, and it is of no use for you to

protest, because I have made up my mind. If you don't like to live with me, you can take a situation, or even get married; but I will stay at home and look after the children," Nell answered calmly. Picking up her duster again, she continued her one-handed performance of tidying the room. Her heart was beating very fast still, but instinct told her the victory was on her side, and although Gertrude might continue protesting, she would capitulate in the end.

"You might want to marry some day yourself," said Gertrude, flushing a little, then turning pale again, for there were great renunciations in her life just then, and the pain of them was sometimes almost more than she could bear.

"I might, of course. But there is no need to discuss that event until it becomes probable. Have you any more objections?" she jerked out, flourishing her duster as if to sweep them away before they could be uttered.

"A great many; but mother's arrowroot would be overdone if I stayed to put them all into words, so I must go. Only, Nell, if you had any idea of how fearfully poor we really are, you might want to think twice before adopting us all," said Gertrude, as she poured the arrowroot into a cup and walked off with it into her mother's room.

Nell laughed softly, and her duster went quicker and quicker as she moved round the room, making plans as she went. There had been so little time to think things out as yet, but already a scheme was looming up in her mind which she determined to talk over with Gertrude on the very first opportunity. It was out of the question to think of keeping on the farm, since neither she nor Gertrude understood enough of agriculture to be likely to make the place pay, and it was hopeless to think of raising the salary of a capable man.

Whatever enterprise they embarked in, it must be something in which they two could do all the work, with perhaps a little help at odd times from Patsey and Flossie.

Under the circumstances, it was only natural that the suggestion of Mrs. Peters should keep recurring to Nell as a possibility that could not now be ignored. The idea of running a food shop was no pleasanter now than it had been then; but there was the promise of a living in it. And putting her own likes and dislikes out of the question, Nell faced the situation squarely, and decided that the scheme was worth a trial.

So she wrote to Mrs. Peters, asking what the rent of one of the houses would be, and if she might have the refusal of the first one, waiting quietly until the answer came to her letter before making any suggestion to Gertrude.

Mrs. Lorimer lay in a strange apathetic condition, taking little notice of what went on around her. The doctor did not consider her condition immediately serious, but he was not hopeful about her recovery; and so the whole burden of the family rested on Gertrude, or would have done but for the coming of Nell and her voluntary acceptance of half the responsibility.

The first thing to be done was to get rid of the farm; but here difficulties cropped up. Mrs. Lorimer was not, at present, capable of decisions; her husband had died without making a will; and Gertrude, the eldest of the family, was still a minor. The doctor advised letting the farm for a time, and, as the land was in fairly good heart, this was easily done. But the rent would not be of very much service to the family, as a large part of it would be needed to pay interest on the mortgage every year.

By the time this was settled, a letter came back from Mrs. Peters, saying that Nell could have the house at a moderate rental, that it would be ready for occupation in a fortnight, and that parties of miners were arriving at Camp's Gulch every day, so that there was prospect of good brisk trade all through the winter.

A little to the surprise of Nell, the scheme found instant favour in the eyes of Gertrude, who had altered a good deal during those weeks of heavy trial since coming back from Bratley.

Previously she would have turned up her nose at the idea, and steadily refused to take to a career which involved so much rough work and association with so many rough people.

Now she was thankful for the chance of earning a living for those dependent on her; and the question of personal liking seemed too trivial for consideration.

The house at Camp's Gulch was to be taken in Nell's name, as her two hundred dollars was their sole available capital. The live stock and farming implements, with all the crops at Lorimer's Clearing, were taken at a valuation by the tenant; but that money was safely lodged in the bank until Mrs. Lorimer should be well enough to decide how she would like to have it used.

Then the household furniture was packed; and, leaving Mrs. Lorimer, the two little boys, and Flossie at the house of a neighbour, Nell, Gertrude, and Patsey went off to Camp's Gulch to get the new home ready.

It was the parting from their old associations which brought such gloom to the faces of Gertrude and Patsey on the morning when they turned their backs on Lorimer's Clearing. But Nell was blithe-hearted as a bird, because at last she had attained to a family and a home of her own, only for the sake of the others her aspect was sedate, giving no hint of the gladness within.

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## CHAPTER XXV

### The Humours of Trading

NELL had been busy since morning, and a great spread of pies, cakes, and bread in small loaves testified to her industry.

She had been equally busy yesterday; but had sold everything out before going to bed, and had awakened this morning with a bareness of cupboards almost equal to Old Mother Hubbard of nursery fame. In fact, she and Patsey had made their breakfast from corn porridge and fried potatoes, because there was nothing else in the house to eat.



It was just one week ago to-day since they had arrived at the new house at Camp's Gulch. They had found to their amazement when they arrived that Mrs. Peters had already opened shop for them in the bare new house, and was serving pies and pots of stew to the tired miners trailing home from work.

"The next two hours are the busy time; I've been nearly run off my feet every evening. Sam comes along to help when the last cars are gone; but by that time the rush is nearly over," Mrs. Peters said, as she stirred the great dish of stew that was being kept hot on a kerosene heater in the window.

"But what made you begin it?" asked Nell, slipping off her hat and coat and appearing quite at home already, even though "home" as yet had not a stick of furniture in it, saving a rough table with a few borrowed cooking utensils in the kitchen, which was also shop during the hours of buying and selling.

"Two things. The first was that I was afraid a rival shop might start before you could begin; and the second was that I was so sorry for the men with no proper food when their day's work was done. It is enough to make any ordinary man take to drink when he can't get decent food to eat; and the whisky sold by that man at the Settlement saloon is just rank poison and nothing else, if you'll believe me," said Mrs. Peters. Then she turned to attend to the wants of two men who had just entered the kitchen.

"We want some supper, if you please, ma'am. What have you got?" asked the foremost man, sniffing hungrily, for the odours of the little kitchen were very appetizing to hungry men.

"Not much to-night except pies and stew. We haven't got straight yet; but just wait until next week and then you'll see a difference," replied Mrs. Peters, with a wag of her head towards Nell, as if to emphasize where the difference came in.

"Well, we can't very well wait until next week for our supper, so we'll take what you've got and be thankful," said the man. And the two walked off with a couple of tin basins of stew, two pies, and a small loaf of bread, for which they paid half a dollar, and thought themselves well off.

"You must come over to our place to sleep; you just can't lie on the boards," Mrs. Peters had said in hospitable invitation, although the little house at the depot was already as full as it could hold with any degree of comfort.

But neither Nell nor Gertrude would consent to this, and they spent the night comfortably enough each rolled in a rug and lying on a big sack of shavings, while Patsey had a similar sack all to himself in the kitchen.

Since then the days had been full of hard and constant work. It was fortunate for Nell that by this time she had regained the use of her hand. Leaving Gertrude to unpack and arrange the furniture she had devoted herself to the business of catering for her numerous customers, and had found more than enough to keep her busy.

As soon as the house had been arranged in comfortable order, Gertrude departed to fetch her mother and the children from Nine Springs, while Patsey remained to help Nell.

The question of school loomed largely in their minds just now—the Settlement school was three miles away. But with the Peters children and the young Lorimers, there were nearly enough children to start a school near the depot. If another family came to live at Camp's Gulch this might be done; meanwhile it seemed easier for Patsey to go up and down to Bratley on the cars every day than for him to wear out his boots on the long walk to the Settlement.

Just at present he was not attending school, but had been out picking berries with which to make pies the next day. Nell's customers appeared perfectly indifferent as to what pies were made of; the main thing was to get a pie.

"There ought to be enough to-day, Patsey; just look at them!" she exclaimed, as he came in laden with the berry baskets.

"My! Just don't they look good!" exclaimed the boy, looking hungrily at them, for he had had nothing since breakfast; and although corn porridge with potatoes had been sufficiently satisfying at the time, he was conscious of very keen hunger at the present moment.

"There is a big one for you on the corner of the stove; sit down and eat it now, then you can get in the wood for to-morrow's cooking. It is nearly three o'clock already; and the cars come up before six, you know," Nell said, as she dusted down the baking board and put the things tidily away for the next day.

"I've got it all chopped, so it won't take long to bring it down to the house in the truck," Patsey said, attacking his pie with great gusto, and thinking that it was if anything even nicer than it looked; but then he was so very hungry that this imparted a special flavour to the homely viands.

Nell looked out through the open door with a sudden longing. The afternoon sunshine lay warm and bright on the cleared space before the house. It was late October, but the winter was holding off; the days were soft and pleasant, although the nights had mostly a touch of frost in them. She wanted to be out-of-doors, to feel the strong wind lifting her hair, to be dazzled with the sunshine, and to watch the darting chipmunks hunting and hoarding their winter store of nuts.

"Patsey, if I go to fetch in the wood, would you dust the sitting-room and your mother's bedroom? I haven't had time even to look in there since breakfast. If I go to do it now I shall not have a minute for out-of-doors; then I shall have that horrid buzzing in my head all the evening."

"It is horrid work for a girl hauling that wood-truck down the slope," said Patsey, with a rueful face, although, to be strictly honest, he deemed it still more horrid work for a boy to be obliged to dust a sitting-room and a bedroom.

"Oh, I don't mind the wood-hauling. I simply could not go out walking for the sake of walking when there is so much to do in other ways; but to go backwards and forwards with the wood-truck is such an extremely virtuous way of taking the air that I shall not have any trouble with my conscience over the matter. Mind you dust the legs of the chairs, Patsey, and don't round off the corners, for that isn't good style in dusting."

"What am I to do if customers come?" asked the boy, in a mumbling tone, his mouth fuller of pie

than good manners warranted.

"Serve them, of course. But please don't sell all the loaves before I get back, for I want a nice one for your mother's supper. It won't do to treat her badly on her first night at home, you know," Nell said brightly; and she started up the slope at the back of the house, carrying her hat in one hand and dragging the wood-truck with the other.

Just over the hill at the back of the house was a strip of ground heaped with fallen trees, which some fierce storm in the previous winter had levelled to the ground. This wood might be had for bringing home; and Nell had determined to have her wood-shed filled with it before the bad weather came. With the rapid increase of population threatening Camp's Gulch just now, the price of firing would be sure to go up, so it behoved them to secure as much as they could possibly get while it could be had for nothing.

Every morning Patsey went over the hill, hacking and hewing, until the sun was high enough for berry-gathering; then, bringing home a truck-load of wood, he left the remainder to be brought in the evening.

Nell loved this sort of work. The squealing of the wheels of the wood-truck as they cried out for grease troubled her not at all, because it seemed perfectly natural for the wheels of wood-trucks to make a noise; then there was the pleasant smell of bark, of falling leaves, and all the mingled perfumes of the forest.

Oh, it was good to be out! Nell loaded her truck with the cut wood Patsey had left ready; then raced down the slope, while the noisy wheels shrieked and groaned behind her. Tipping out her load of wood, she started up the slope again, going more slowly now as if the keen edge of her energy had worn off. Five times she made the journey; then, warned by the sinking of the sun that it was time for her to be going indoors again, she hauled the last load into the shed, then went in to see how Patsey was getting on at housekeeping.

To her surprise she found him talking to some one who was not a customer but a visitor.

"Dr. Russell!" she exclaimed.

"I thought I should surprise you," he said, with a laugh. "I came up on the noon cars to see a patient at the Settlement, so I thought I would stay and see Mrs. Lorimer comfortably settled after her journey."

"That is very good of you," said Nell; adding, a little doubtfully, "but how will you get back to Bratley? Will the cars wait for you?"

"They will have to. I shall threaten Sam Peters that he will have to work me along to the junction on a hand-car if he lets the train go without me; and the thought of pumping me for sixteen miles will make him quite willing to hold the cars back for five or ten minutes if necessary. Why, pumping would be harder work than the stoking he did on the memorable night when we came in such a hurry to help you out of a fix," replied the doctor, with a laugh.

"But there isn't a hand-car at this depot; at least, I don't think so. I know there wasn't one at Bratley last winter when the inspector wanted to go up the Roseneath track, and we went on snow-shoes instead," said Nell.

"A much pleasanter way of getting along—when there is snow, that is. But the cars will be here soon and I must be going. Are you coming over to the depot to welcome the arrivals?"

"No; I cannot leave now because my customers will be coming in, but Patsey will go; he is going to put some cushions in the wood-truck and bring his mother across from the cars, for she is much too weak to walk even such a short distance," explained Nell.

"A wood-truck? That is a box on wheels without any springs, I suppose. It is not to be thought of. Is Mrs. Lorimer a heavy woman?"

"No; she is about my height, but, of course, much thinner; indeed, she has wasted fearfully of late," replied Nell.

"Well, I have carried heavier people than you, so I ought to manage Mrs. Lorimer. Patsey can be at the depot with the wood-truck, but we will hope that we shall not need him for the invalid," said the doctor. Then putting on his cap, he strode away in the gathering dusk.

Nell watched him with a smile quivering about her lips.

"Very kind of him to come up to meet the invalid; but I expect right down at the bottom of his heart it was Gertrude that he thought most about, poor man, though he does not seem to have the courage to tell her so."

She sighed in a quick, impatient fashion, for well she understood the great barrier which Abe Lorimer's death had raised between Gertrude and Dr. Russell. The doctor had his little son to keep, and only a poor and casual practice to depend upon; while Gertrude, with an invalid mother, a delicate sister, and three young brothers, was more heavily burdened still.

"If only they would understand how willing I am to take Gertrude's family off her hands they might get along very well. But I can't go and say so right out in plain speech; and, oh dear, they are so stupid!" she muttered in impatient speech, as she put some more wood on the sitting-room fire, lighted the lamp standing on the well-spread supper-table, then went back to the kitchen to serve a couple of customers who had just come in on their way back from the mines.

"How nice your food smells; why, it is worth a quarter just to stand inside and sniff," said one of the men, who had evidently come down in the world, for he spoke with the cultured tone of a man of education and bore himself with the upright carriage of one who has been well drilled.

"That would be one way of making money, certainly; but I fancy it would hardly pay in the long run, because when I am very busy cooking I should find it an intolerable nuisance to have a lot of people crowding in to smell the savoury odours from my oven and stew-pans," Nell answered, with a smile, as she served the two customers as quickly as she could.

There was a great bowl of beans being kept hot on the stove, flanked by another great bowl of potatoes which had been steamed with their skins on; and the stream of customers coming in soon disposed of the contents of both bowls.

But, without doubt, the most popular portion of Nell's stock-in-trade were the pies. These were

of varied sorts; there were meat-pies, apple-pies, huckleberry-pies, blueberry-pies, and pies filled with a savoury mess of vegetables and herbs chopped fine and mixed with suet. The last-named were, perhaps, the most popular of all; one of them, with a couple of good-sized potatoes, made a comfortable meal for a man at a very small cost indeed.

There was no Irish stew to-night, for Nell thought it well to vary the menu as much as she could. A nine-quart boiler of soup was fizzing and bubbling on the stove—very good soup it was, too; the rough cookery which Nell had learned during those lonely years on Blue Bird Ridge was standing her in good stead now, since it had taught her the art of making good soup from next to nothing.

The door from the kitchen to the living-room was kept closely shut this evening, for Nell did not want Mrs. Lorimer to be worried by the commotion of buying and selling, or by the odours of the hot little kitchen.

Nell heard the bustle of arrival; but the kitchen was thronged just then with men buying their suppers, so she could not go to give the travellers a welcome. But she was relieved when, a little later, Patsey slipped out from the sitting-room and helped her by ladling the soup from the boiler. She was so tired that even a little help was welcome.

By this time the potatoes had all gone; there were only a very few beans left; the stock of pies had diminished until there were only six or seven left, and the kitchen looked as if an invading army had swept through it.

Nell left Patsey in charge then, and stole into the next room to welcome her family. Teddy and the baby were sitting in front of the fire eating jam and bread, licking sticky fingers and enjoying themselves generally, watched over by Flossie, who was hovering about them like an anxious, motherly hen guarding her chickens.

"Oh, Nell, what a lovely house this is!" cried the little girl, as she gave Nell a rapturous welcome.

"It is lovely now you have all come to make it look homely; but it was rather lonely before," said Nell, stooping to kiss the rather jammy faces of the two small boys.

"Poor mother cried, and was so bad when she got here that Gertrude has taken her off to bed," said Flossie, resting her head against Nell in supreme content.

The last week had been such a hard one for the poor little girl that to-night seemed like the beginning of a new life.

"I am just going to have a look at your mother, Flossie, then I must come back and have a peep at you again; but I shall not be free of the kitchen for another half-hour, I expect. Have you had anything to eat yourself, dearie?"

"I'm not hungry," said Flossie, with a sigh, as she turned her head sharply at the sound of a moaning wail from the next room.

Nell gave the child a loving hug; then crept softly into the chamber where Gertrude was getting her mother into bed and patiently soothing the feeble complainings of the poor sick woman, who was far too ill to be reasonable.

"I tell Gertrude all this dragging me about will just kill me; but no one seems to care," said Mrs. Lorimer, looking up at Nell with imploring eyes.

"You shall not be dragged about any more, and to-morrow you can stay in bed all day. This is such a pleasant room when the sun shines, and the view is lovely," Nell murmured, in a consoling tone. Then she helped to lift the invalid into a more comfortable position in the bed.

Gertrude was patient and tender as the most loving daughter could be. Nell, stealing a look at her, saw the flush on her cheeks and the radiant happiness in her eyes, and guessed that for her the sadness of that home-coming had been lifted and brightened by the kindly consideration of the doctor, who had arranged to be on the spot to help with the invalid when the cars came in.

"Where are we all to sleep, Nell?" asked Flossie, in a weary tone, when Nell went back through the sitting-room.

"Patsey and the little boys have got the room behind the kitchen, and I will either make you up a bed in your mother's room, or you can come up in the loft and sleep with me," Nell said.

"I should love to sleep with you; but I didn't know there was a loft. Is it a ladder or steps?" asked the child, eagerly.

"Steps. But I will show you presently. I am going to send Patsey to put Teddy and the baby to bed, but you are to rest until I come in."

"I can put the children to bed—I always do," replied Flossie, with a patient sigh, for her small arms and feet were very weary to-night.

"No, no; you are too tired. Patsey will do it," said Nell, with a brisk nod. Then she hurried into the kitchen, where Patsey was just draining the last of the soup into the tin pot of a man who was a late-comer, and so had to be satisfied with what he could get.

"There is not nearly a pint, so we will charge you half price," said Nell, politely.

"That won't suit me at all, for I don't want half a supper. Ain't you got anything you can fill it up with?" said the man, sending a hungry gaze round the bare kitchen in search of something eatable.

"There are the beans—they are filling," suggested Patsey, with a wag of his head towards the big bowl, which still had a handful or so of beans lurking at the bottom.

"Right you are, boy. Beans is filling. Shove 'em into the soup, if you please, miss, and give it a stir, then I shall have a supper fit for a millionaire," said the man, and, tossing down the money, he departed in great content.

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CHAPTER XXVI  
A Woman of Business

NELL was very happy, and prospering beyond her wildest dreams.

Fortunately for her the early part of the winter was exceptionally mild and open, so that mining operations went busily forward, and she had no lack of customers nightly to consume the food which she spent her days in cooking.

The great burden of maintaining the family rested almost entirely upon her, for Mrs. Lorimer was so ill that most of Gertrude's time was taken up in nursing and caring for the poor invalid. Patsey was away all day at Bratley, except on Saturdays, when he was chopping and hauling wood, or on Sundays, when he took Teddy and Flossie over to the Settlement in the wood-truck, to attend the Sunday School which was held there in the tin-roofed mission hall by the smelter works.

Despite her hard work, and the drudgery of her days, Nell carried a bright face all the time, feeling herself supremely blessed in having so many depending on her, so many to love, and to love her in return.

She possessed, too, the happy knack of finding employment for everyone, so Teddy, aged five, and little Abe, the baby, both had their accustomed tasks, which they performed with a zest and energy worthy of great undertakings.

Abe was two years and a half old now, a fine sturdy youngster, who loved nothing better than movement of some kind, so he and Teddy between them dragged wood into the kitchen from the wood shed, with much snorting and hissing, in imitation of the engines arriving and starting at the depot.

Both of the small boys yielded Nell a whole-hearted devotion, and followed her about nearly all day long. But it was Flossie's love which was the most precious to Nell, and had her life been twice as hard, she would still have felt herself amply repaid in the affection she received from her adopted family.

Dr. Russell came regularly once a week to see Mrs. Lorimer, who grew rather worse than better as the weeks went on.

Mrs. Nichols had been to see them once, but she was ailing herself, and not able to get out much.

When Christmas had passed, and the new year had begun, a heavy snow fell, and lay for three weeks. Then came a check in Nell's business, so many of her customers took holiday, and went off to the towns until the weather broke again.

She was rather glad of the slack time, since it gave her a breathing spell, and enabled her to do many things which were so impossible when in full tide of work.

Sometimes she sighed a little ruefully over her inability to find more time for reading, and told herself that she would soon forget what little she had learned before. But in reality she was making great strides in all sorts of knowledge, and learning some of the deep lessons of life, which no books could have taught her.

The loft where she and Flossie slept was almost as bare, although more weather-tight than the one in which she had slept at the Lone House. But Nell had put her bed near the pipe of the kitchen stove, which came up through the loft, and so she and Flossie were comfortably warm even in the bitterest weather.

One use Nell made of her spare time was to rearrange her premises for the greater convenience of her work. She got Sam Peters to make her a big store cupboard, which was placed in one corner of the kitchen, and saved her endless runs into the sitting-room, where formerly she had been obliged to keep her groceries, tubs of lard, and that sort of thing. Then she made a great stock of marmalade, for the huckleberry jam was almost gone, and her store of apples, which had been brought from Lorimer's Clearing, was dwindling fast.

The wood shed was getting empty too, for although Patsey worked hard all day Saturday, he could not in one day supply the drain of seven. So, drawing a pair of old woollen stockings over her shoes, Nell sallied out to the clear crisp cold of the winter afternoons, armed with an axe, a saw, and an old box on runners which did duty for a sledge, and enjoyed blissful hours in chopping and sawing among the dead wood on the slope behind the house.

"Nell, dear, you have all the drudgery; it is too bad! I would come and help, only I can't leave mother," Gertrude said, on the first afternoon when Nell returned, flushed and sparkling, from her labours in the snow.

"It isn't drudgery, it is a real holiday, only I wish the children could enjoy it too," Nell answered wistfully, for the two little boys and Flossie had bad colds, and were not able to stir out of doors.

"I'm afraid I should not think it such a treat as you do," said Gertrude, shivering a little.

She was looking pale and thin, while there were dark rings round her eyes, brought there by overmuch confinement in a sick-room.

"Then it is a very good thing that I am the one who is free to go. I had been feeling rather mean, because I was having all the fun, but this, of course, restores the balance," laughed Nell, as she divested herself of her outdoor garments.

Every day for a week she went wood-hauling in the afternoons. Then a thaw set in, her customers came back, and the old rush began.

One evening, when February was well on its way, a member of the Syndicate dropped in late to buy his supper, and then remained to talk.

He was an elderly man, who should have been rich enough by this time to have ceased living such a toilsome life, only the trouble was that although he could earn as much money as any man, he could not save it. This individual went by the name of Ike, and Nell could never discover that he had any other. She always called him Mr. Ike, a circumstance which appeared to afford him great amusement. But she had long since found that "With what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again," was as true in the simple things of life as in the great issues of the soul; and because she always treated her customers with a ceremonious civility, she invariably received from them a similar courtesy in return.

"Good evening, Miss Hamblyn," said the miner, lifting his cap with a flourish when he entered the room, then dropping it back on his head with a weary air as he subsided on to the bench near

the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Ike. Have you been taking a holiday?" she asked; for she had not seen Ike, who was one of her most regular customers, for nearly a fortnight.

"Yes; and I've been quite a considerable way too. Had a run down to Vancouver City, and spent ten days or more loafing round hearing the news."

"You must have found the city pretty lively after Camp's Gulch," remarked Nell, as she ladled a pint of soup into the miner's tin can.

"It was a sight too lively for me. I suppose I must be getting old and rusty, for I find I ain't half nimble enough to keep up with city folks nowadays," he answered, rather gruffly; by which she understood that he had been gambling, and had probably lost almost all the cash he had taken with him, and had returned with empty pockets.

"You would not find it so cold in Vancouver City as here among the hills?" she asked.

"It was cold enough. A sharper spell of winter weather than we often get in these parts," he answered. Then, suddenly remembering an item of news which might interest her, he lifted his head and became talkative. "I heard a little about a friend of yours away down in the city," he said, with a short gruff laugh.

"A friend of mine? But I don't know anyone in Vancouver City," she said, in surprise, then suddenly shivered, thinking that he might be referring to Doss Umpey.

"Not by sight, perhaps, for I don't think you saw him, not that time when you had most to do with him, leastwise." And Ike paused to relieve his feelings with a rumbling laugh.

"What do you mean?" demanded Nell, in a bewildered tone.

"I mean that I happened on news of Dick Brunsen, and he's dead," said Ike, stating the fact rather as if it were good news than otherwise.

But Nell turned ghastly white, and seized hold of the table to keep herself from falling, while she echoed faintly—

"Dead? How?"



"I HEARD A LITTLE ABOUT A FRIEND OF YOURS  
AWAY DOWN IN THE CITY," HE SAID.

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Ike was sampling his soup, so failed to notice her agitation. Taking a deep draught from the tin can, he then wiped his lips on his jacket sleeve, and proceeded to answer her questions.

"Oh, he died real game. I always said he was a lad of parts, only the trouble was he'd got such a lot of misdirected energy that it was bound to get him into trouble sooner or later. He'd got two pals, one was his father, the veriest old hypocrite that ever drew breath, and the other was a chap they called Doss Umpey, a pretty good match for Brunsen senior by all accounts. A long time ago, when I was a young man, they two and an Irishman named Logan were up to no end of law-breaking, smuggling across the border, setting up coaches, and all that sort of thing; then Logan got pinched, and the other two turned virtuous, or pretended to."

Nell nodded. So much of Doss Umpey's past she already knew from Mrs. Nichols, but she was wondering what fresh revelations were to be made by Ike, or what he would say if she were to tell him that she had lived so long at the Lone House with the old man, believing him to be really her grandfather, and not merely the stepfather of her mother.

Ike had paused for another draught of soup; when it was swallowed he went on with his story.

"It seems that when we lifted Master Dick out of that Chinaman's coffin, where you'd chained him up so secure, and he had paid back that little lump of dollars out of which he had cheated us, he and the two old chaps tracked off to Nelson, and worked there for awhile, with the eyes of the police on them all the time. Then suddenly they disappeared, and when next they were heard of, it was at Skeena, and they were giving it out that they had struck it rich on the shores of the Babine Lake, an uncertain number of miles from Skeena, and in a district pretty thickly sprinkled with Tacla Indians."

"But Skeena is very cold, isn't it?" asked Nell, thinking how Doss Umpey used to grumble about the cold during the long winters on Blue Bird Ridge.

"Rayther nippy, but it doesn't count for much if you've wintered at Klondike, as I have," replied Ike, taking another pull at the soup, which nearly emptied the can.

Nell shivered. She had the feeling of wanting to pull the information out of him, but Ike was not the sort of man to be hurried over any story he had to tell, so she was forced to wait patiently, and let him go his own way.

"There was a man stopping at Carter's—he was working at Cate's shipyard just then, but he had been in Skeena a month before, and had left the day after the thing happened," went on Ike.

"What happened?" asked Nell, with a little stamp of her foot, for his slowness of narration thoroughly exasperated her.

"The way young Dick pegged out game, of course. The three of them had been showing round a couple of nuggets, and talking big about the bucketfuls of the same stuff that might be picked up for the asking on a little stream that emptied into the Babine Lake, and, of course, they pretty soon got a crowd together to go with them, every man armed, for the Tacla Indians are an awkward lot to deal with. So they started, and were three days out from Skeena when trouble began, for a rumour went round that the nuggets hadn't been found on the Babine at all, but had been stolen from a man what had brought them down from Juneau, and taken too much liquor on board at Skeena to be able to look after his own property. The crowd was a pretty rough one, and they pretty soon made the three stand out."

"What is that?" asked Nell, faintly.

Ike gave another rumbling laugh. "It about amounts to standing up to be shot at. The old men hadn't got much fight left in them, but young Dick wasn't made like that, and they say he fought like ten men rolled in one, and knocked the crowd over in so many places all at once, that at last they just bowled him over in self-defence, as you may say."

"Do you mean he was shot?" asked Nell, in a horrified whisper.

"That is what it amounts to, I suppose, though I never heard anyone give it a name. In fact, it might prove extremely awkward for some of that crowd, if it could be proved which of them had let off their revolvers on that occasion. Law is law in Canada, you know; and the police are about as smart as they make 'em, but they haven't got eyes in the back of their heads, and they can't be in fifty different places at once, so accidents do occur once in a while," said Ike, with a big sigh; after which he finished his soup, and decided to have another pint to take away with him.

"Were they all killed?" asked Nell, whose very teeth were chattering.

Ike shook his head. "There was no particulars come through regarding the old'uns. But the worst of it was that the story about gold on the Babine was true, as the crowd found when they got there, only the Indians was there too, and had their eyes skinned. So that of the thirty or forty what went, only five came back to Skeena."

Nell covered her face with her hands, and sobbed from sheer horror, and sympathy with the poor victim of such a tragic fate. She had no especial pity for the crowd so nearly wiped out by Tacla Indians, for their end had in it a sort of retributive justice which appealed to her ideas of fitness.

"There now, don't you take on about a fellow being wiped out as was born to be hanged, and only missed his destiny by a fluke, as you may say."

There was considerable consternation in Ike's tone, and he gazed at her with so much concern that she must have laughed at his lugubrious expression had her mood not been so far removed from merriment just then.

"It is such a dreadful story!" she gasped, her voice broken and unsteady.

"There are worse things happening in the world every day. Mind you, if the fellow had not cheated people before, they would not have been so likely to think he was cheating them then," said Ike, rising to his feet, and laying some money on the kitchen table, which served Nell as a counter.

She opened the stout leather bag which hung from her waist to give him change, while words from Holy Writ beat themselves out in her brain, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

"Now, don't you go a-crying yourself blind over Dick Brunsen, because, as I said before, he wasn't worth it," said Ike, as he took his change and prepared to depart.

Nell shook her head in a dubious fashion, which might have been translated in several ways, but she made no other remark, save a polite good evening; and Ike went away pondering on the soft-heartedness of girls in general, and of this one in particular, who could sob over the end of a low-down cheat like young Dick Brunsen.

Nell shed a good many tears during the next few days over that story of wilderness tragedy, and there was no doubt at all in her own mind that Doss Umpey and the elder Brunsen must have shared the fate of young Dick; or at any rate had they escaped being shot as he was, most probably they fell victims to the Indians later.

She said no word to Gertrude about the incident. There had never been any inducement to speak much of her past to the Lorimers. Since she could say so little in praise of Doss Umpey, she had carefully refrained from speaking of him at all to anyone, except Mrs. Nichols, who already knew more about him than Nell did herself.

Just now, too, Gertrude had enough sorrow of her own to bear, for Dr. Russell had spoken plainly

of Mrs. Lorimer's condition, and said that a few weeks would probably end the poor woman's sufferings. He was very kind to them, doing everything in his power for the comfort of the invalid; but he could not lift or lessen the strain of Gertrude's life, and Nell often looked at her in fear and trembling, wondering what they would do if she broke down.

Then, one day, just when it seemed the strain was as great as it could be, Mrs. Nichols came up from Bratley and announced that she had come on a good long visit, because she felt that she needed change of air and scene.

Nothing could have been more opportune than her coming, and if the doctor was at the bottom of it, neither he nor Mrs. Nichols ever mentioned the fact.

So the days wore on. Each week the sun shone with more strength; the sap rose in the forests, and the millions of leaf buds grew and swelled in token that summer was coming.

Meanwhile Nell toiled steadily for her adopted family, so content with the love that was her daily and hourly reward, as never to guess or to speculate concerning the future, and what it might bring her.

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## CHAPTER XXVII An Early Customer

IT was the last day of June, and the promise for July was for fine weather and sunshine.

Camp's Gulch was in a state of bustle and activity, which bespoke great business activity. There was a row of ugly little huts for miners on the side of the depot farthest from the Settlement road. Some of the miners had their wives and children with them now, and this increase of population necessitated a school-house here as well as at the Settlement.

So a wooden shed, brown and unpainted, with a shingled roof, had been hastily run up, and Gertrude had applied for and obtained the post of teacher. She had fortunately taken her certificate at Nine Springs, before becoming a telegraph operator, so there had been no difficulty regarding her fitness for the post, and as she was on the spot, everyone regarded her as the most suitable for the position.

Mrs. Lorimer had slipped out of life during the first days of March. Her sufferings had been so great that those who watched her could feel only thankfulness that the hour of her release had come.

Her children mourned her truly, but in the months of her helplessness they had learned to do without her, and so they could not be said to miss her as much as if she had been cut down in rude health.

With the coming of more women to Camp's Gulch, some parts of Nell's business had grown less, for where men had their wives to keep house for them, they did not need to go and buy cooked food. But she had made up the lack with other things, until her little kitchen had come to look like a regular store.

On that last day of June, Nell had an inspiration, and, according to her wont, she acted upon it promptly.

"Do you know, Gertrude, I am disposed to think we might take a summer boarder, perhaps two, if they were willing to share one room," she said, as they sat resting in low chairs out in the garden, after the day's work was done.

"Is it necessary, dear? You have such heaps to do already," Gertrude said, a little doubtfully, for Nell worked so hard that it scarcely seemed possible she could do more.

"It would be very pleasant to have a city-dweller with us for a few weeks, and might save us from becoming too hopelessly countryfied," Nell answered, with a laugh; then added in a more serious tone, "The fact is, I heard of one to-day, and that is what made me decide, all in a great hurry, that a summer boarder is the one thing needed to make my happiness complete."

"But where would you put the individual to sleep, Nell?" asked Flossie, who lay in a hammock stretched between the wall of the house and a straight young cedar, which by a happy chance had escaped the destruction when the ground was cleared.

"I fear we should have to turn Gertrude out. But if we offered her the hospitality of our loft, perhaps she wouldn't mind very much," Nell replied, with a low laugh. Her mood was very happy to-night, and the others quickly caught the infection of her good spirits.

"Oh, I love to sleep in the loft, only I hope you won't put my bed close to the stove-pipe, if the weather is very warm. But where did you hear of your boarder, Nell?"

"Mrs. Peters came over this afternoon while you were in school. She had just had a letter from a lady living in Victoria, over in Vancouver, a Miss Alfreton, who wanted to know if she could be accommodated at Camp's Gulch, because she said that her nephew, who was here last summer, had told her it was the loveliest place on earth."

"Poor lady, how disappointed she will be!" murmured Gertrude, thinking of the bare little school-house and the ugly houses of the miners.

"The trees and the hills are beautiful, anyway," broke in Flossie, in a tone of protest, not choosing to hear Camp's Gulch despised even by insinuation.

"And the view from my kitchen window is not to be surpassed, of that I am positive," said Nell, with a laugh. "Miss Alfreton may or may not be accompanied by her sister. Now, shall we take them or not?"

"Would they board with us?" asked Gertrude, doubtfully still.

"They must. I for one shall not consent to give up our only sitting-room and take my meals in the wood-shed. Besides, I fear there is so much of the Yankee independence about me still, that I should not choose to have people here who wished to eat at a separate table, because we were not fine

enough in our manners, or sufficiently solid in our finances, to eat with them," Nell replied, with a toss of her head.

Gertrude's brow cleared. "Oh, if they are to come on terms of equality, just paying for their board, that is a different matter. It is sinful to be so proud, especially when one is poor, but I just hated the thought of people lodging in the house, and having to be waited on by you, poor overworked dear!"

"I'm not overworked, so dismiss the idea at once and for ever," said Nell, with a wave of her hand. "But if we could make a little money in that way this summer, we should be able to get Patsey into that school for electrical engineers next fall, without any more trouble, and once he is there, I am confident he will make his own way all right."

"You are always thinking of us, Nell, never of yourself!" exclaimed Gertrude. And now there was almost a reproachful inflection in her voice, as if unselfishness were a matter for regret.

"Well, you need not be so ready to remind me that I am only adopted, and not the real thing," said Nell, with a strained laugh as she rose hastily and went indoors, saying that there was something in the kitchen which she must do before bedtime.

"There, now you have hurt her feelings," said Flossie, in low-voiced reproach.

"I did not mean to," said Gertrude, humbly. "But it fairly frightens me sometimes to think of how much we owe to Nell that we can never, never pay. Why, to one dollar that I earn, she earns or saves ten, and she works twice as hard as I do every day in the week."

"I know all that," replied Flossie, with a contented laugh. "But there is another side to it, what Dr. Russell calls the other point of view, and that is that, while there is only one Nell to love us, there are five of us to love Nell, and that, as she reckons wealth, makes the balance even."

"I wonder very often how we could ever have got through last winter without her," Gertrude said, with a little sigh, as her thoughts went back to those days of pain and strain, when Nell had been the only breadwinner.

"I suppose we could not possibly have done without her, and that was why God sent her to us," said Flossie, with such a thrill of confidence in her tones that Gertrude was comforted in spite of herself.

"Dear old Nell, she does deserve to be happy!" she murmured.

"Nell is happy, except for a slight pang now and then when you drop out allusions to her being only our adopted sister. The rest of us never hurt her in that way, because we never remember about her not being our own sister, unless some one reminds us. I'm going indoors now to see what she is doing, and if I find her weeping in the back entry, I shall come out and pinch you for having made her cry," said Flossie, with a laugh, as she slipped out of her hammock and stole softly into the unlighted house to discover what Nell was doing.

Gertrude sat on in the gloaming, thinking her own thoughts and smiling over them. She was very tired with her day's work, and rest was welcome. It was pleasant, too, to have a brief space in which to sit with folded hands while visions of the future stretched before her, tinted with a rosy light of happiness.

Back in the sad days of last winter Dr. Russell had asked her to let him share the burdens which had descended upon her, and although she would not let him do it then, it had brought comfort and happiness to her to know that he cared enough to be willing to take her and her family too.

But it was only common prudence to wait, for the doctor was earning little more than sufficed to keep Sonny and himself in food and clothes, although the increase of population in the neighbourhood would doubtless bring him more patients in course of time.

Gertrude could not stand alone and organize a career as Nell had done, she was formed on such entirely different lines. But she possessed a fund of enduring patience, and could bear great burdens if only she had some one to take the initiative for her.

Her thoughts to-night, resolved into plain speech, meant that if Patsey could be got into the school of electrical engineers next fall, it would clear the way considerably for herself and the doctor. Teddy and little Abe would require little more than food and clothes for some years to come, and could be brought up easily with Sonny Russell, for boys, like colts and calves, always do better in groups than singly, while Flossie belonged so entirely to Nell that no one would dream of parting them.

"Are you coming to bed to-night, or do you intend staying out there?" asked the brisk voice of Nell from the door, and then Gertrude's dream visions fled, leaving her in the world of actualities once more.

"What a pity it is to be obliged to go to bed on a night like this," she said regretfully, as she paused on the threshold.

"It would be a still greater pity if we could get no chance for sleep and forgetfulness, before the work of to-morrow began," said practical Nell. "Come in and shut the door, Gertrude; you look just like a ghost."

"I feel like one," Gertrude answered dreamily. Then she said abruptly, "I have got a sensation about me that change is impending, and that we shall somehow be different to-morrow."

"That follows as a matter of course, and to-morrow is always in advance of to-day. But I am too sleepy for moralizing, so let us go to bed," Nell said, with a shiver, as she drew Gertrude in, and bolted the door.

Patsey and the two boys were already in bed and asleep. The three girls made haste to be ready for slumber also, and soon sleep and darkness held the little household in a profound hush until the coming of dawn.

Nell was early astir next morning. She made it a rule always to get her housework done before the cooking for the day began, and as she had mapped out an extra amount of housework for this particular morning, it behoved her to be up early to get it out of the way.

If Miss Alfreton were really coming, the room she would occupy must be scrubbed out, and put into fresh order for her arrival, so as soon as Gertrude could be persuaded out of bed Nell attacked



the task with tremendous energy, turned almost all of the furniture out of doors into the cool shade thrown by the cedar, then scrubbed the floor and the wooden walls until the little chamber was redolent of cleanliness. Her housewifely instincts were very strong, and every part of her small domain must be as spotless as her hands could make it.

By the time the cleaning was done she had to start work in the kitchen, and was hard at work getting her first batch of pies baked, when a small boy of uncertain age appeared at the open door of the kitchen, and stood there as if not sure about entering.

He was a complete stranger to Nell, who knew most of the people, old and young, in the neighbourhood. He might have been merely nine or ten, judging by his size; or if one reckoned his age from the expression of his face, he would at once have been taken for fifteen or sixteen.

"Come in," said Nell, pleasantly; then, seeing that he still hesitated, she asked, "What do you want?"

"I want a pie if you please, ma'am," he said, with a true Yankee drawl.

"But they are not made yet. At least they are not baked," said Nell, as she stooped to put another tin filled with pies into the oven, and shut the door, after having carefully tested the heat with her bare elbow, which was the only thermometer she possessed.

"How long to wait?" demanded the boy, in a laconic fashion.

"Half an hour, more or less. Where do you come from?" inquired Nell, turning from the oven to the table, and starting on a fresh batch of pies, her quick fingers turning, twisting, and moulding with an ease and skill delightful to witness, or at least the boy appeared to think so, as he crept into the room, and stood by the table, watching her operations with a look of absorbed interest.

At the question, he shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, as if hesitating about his answer; then, lifting his head with a defiant jerk, he replied—

"From Goat's Gulch."

"Goat's Gulch?" repeated Nell, wondering why the name seemed so familiar, and at the same time brought with it such disagreeable sensations. Then suddenly she started, remembering that it was the place from which the man unknown had said that he brought the Chinaman's coffin on that eventful evening in last September. "That is a long way from here, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, about six or seven miles, perhaps, and such a road!" said the boy, rolling up his eyes until only the whites showed, as if to express its badness.

"Did you come all that way, just to buy a pie?" asked Nell, in surprise.

He nodded, then became more explicit. "I've got to take two, one for myself, don't you see, for dad said I shouldn't be picking and pulling at the one for old Doss if I'd got one of my own."

Nell's hand trembled suddenly, and there was a great clattering among the crockery which she was handling, but her tone was quite steady when she asked—

"Who is old Doss?"

"Oh, he's our lodger, and he's been sick a good while back. Off his feed he is too, and so thin you could pretty nearly count every bone in his body. So dad he said I was to come over and buy him a pie from the cook-shop close to Camp's Gulch depot, and as there ain't no other cook-shop than this, I guess I've hit the place right plump in the middle of the bulls-eye," the boy said, with great complacency.

"But pies are not good for sick folk; they should have broths, and jellies, eggs, gruel, and that sort of thing," expostulated Nell, in a shocked tone, for the thought of giving new pastry to an invalid did appear rather dreadful to her.

"Dad 'as made him broth and gruel, but he just tastes it and turns his head away, as if he hadn't any relish for it. Then dad thought of your pies, and said he guessed the sight and smell of one of them would make old Doss eat, if anything could."

Nell had grown very white; it had not taken her long to decide that probably the old man of whom the boy spoke was her grandfather, and she with equal quickness made up her mind what was her duty concerning him.

"I think I should like to come and see your sick man. How can I find my way from the Settlement to Goat's Gulch?" she asked.

"You don't want to go to the Settlement at all; there's a nearer way over the hills. But you'd never find out where we lived, not alone," said the boy, with a chuckle.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because we live in a cart—me, and dad, and old Doss, and if we didn't want our location spied upon, why we should just move on round the next corner, don't you see," the boy answered, with another chuckle.

"But you can't live in the cart in winter," objected Nell.

"We did last winter, and the winter before too. We backed the cart under a bluff, made a platform with a bit of sheet iron across the shafts, lifted the stove up on to that, and was just as cosy as chipmunks, I can tell you," said the boy, who was eagerly eyeing Nell's cooking operations.

"As you say I couldn't find this place where you live without help, will you let me walk back with you, because I want to see your sick man?" she asked, rather anxiously.

The boy stared at her in undisguised amazement. "Do you mean you are wanting to tramp all the way to Goat's Gulch, just to see whether old Doss is fit to eat one of your pies?" he demanded.

"I should not like him to have one unless he is fit for it," Nell said, with a smile. "But if you are willing to let me go with you and will do an errand for me first, I will give you a nice pie to eat when the errand is done, and a big glass of lemonade to drink with it."

"I'll take you, though I ain't, so to speak, much given to walking out with young ladies. What is the errand?" He smacked his lips appreciatively as he looked at the pies; then stuffed his hands deeper in his pockets as he waited to know what was really required of him.

Nell scribbled a few words on a piece of paper, and asked him to carry it across to Mrs. Peters, the station-master's wife, and wait for an answer.

When the boy had gone on his errand she hurried to get her morning's baking done, and to

arrange matters so that she could leave for a few hours.

The answer sent back by Mrs. Peters was brief and to the point, for she had simply turned Nell's piece of paper over, and written on the other side in very big letters, "I'll be there."

Nell put a big pie on a plate, poured out a glass of lemonade, and bade the boy sit down on the doorstep to eat his lunch.

"I shall be ready in just one hour," she said. "So get a good rest, for I am a fast walker, and I shall expect you to keep up with me."

The boy grinned as his sharp teeth closed on the first mouthful of that toothsome pie, but he was too busily occupied to discuss the question of his walking powers just then.

Never had Nell found an hour slip by at a quicker rate than this. There was the baking to finish, the kitchen to clear up, dinner to get ready for Gertrude and the children, and the furniture to restore to the room she had so carefully cleaned in the early morning.

But all the time she was darting to and fro in her endeavours to compress the work of two hours into one, there kept ringing in her mind Gertrude's words of yesterday, "We shall somehow be different to-morrow."

"If it is really granfer, I must not let him slip out of sight again, poor old man," she murmured to herself. "I must take care of him somehow. Perhaps Joey and Mrs. Trip could board him; but I shall know better when I have seen him—poor granfer!"

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

### Doss Umpey's Excuses

GOAT'S GULCH was a narrow valley, or deep slit in the hills, much higher up than Camp's Gulch or the Settlement, and so inaccessible that Nell was continually wondering as she toiled up the rocky slopes, how the cart in which the boy and the two men made their home, had been brought to such a place.

Trees there were in plenty, some growing out from the crevices in big rock-boulders, others struggling for root-hold on jutting shelves, where the soil was thin and poor.

Of level ground there was absolutely none. It was all uphill, or it was down, or strewn with boulders so big that they looked like mountains in miniature.

Even the inexperienced eyes of Nell could see how rich in ores of iron and copper some of this rugged ground was, but she did not know that in places veins of silver ran in and out among the other ores.

It would have been a fearsome place to get lost in, for there was no road or trail of any kind, and one gloomy valley only led to another of the same description.

"Is it much farther?" asked Nell, who was so tired that she felt ready to drop, while the buzzing at her ear had recommenced in a most uncomfortable fashion, as it invariably did whenever she was overdone.

"Just round the corner of the next block," said the boy, with a chuckle, as he pointed to a towering mass of rock as big as a Winnipeg sky-scraper, which had a ragged fringe of trees growing at the top and extending down one side.

Now at last a faint trail showed, which deepened into a well-worn path, when at last the corner was turned.

Then Nell saw, standing in a sunny angle of the rock, an old tilted cart, thatched over the top and down the most exposed side with rushes, and so she knew the end of the journey was reached at last.

"Go and see if he is awake; tell him some one has come to see him," she said brusquely, as she sat down to wait on a log of wood which stood near the cooking place, while a queer feeling of faintness attacked her.

The boy nodded, then quickly disappeared into the cart, while Nell sat with her eyes shut, trying to master her uncomfortable sensations.

In a couple of minutes the boy emerged, calling out, "Come along, miss, he's wide awake, and spoiling for a pie!" This last he said with a chuckle of mischief, because he believed that Nell had walked all the way from Camp's Gulch just to see if the sick man were in a fit condition to eat pies.

She rose to her feet with an effort, and carrying the little basket of soup, eggs, and custard which she had brought with her, climbed up as the boy had done, and entered the cart.

Considering the small space at their disposal, the owners of that peculiar abode had done their very best with it. One side had two shelves or bunks, while on the other was a seat that served as sitting-room.

On the lower shelf lay a wasted figure wrapped in an old coat and a tattered red blanket. At the first sight of the bleached, yellow face Nell gave a start of dismay.

"Poor granfer, do you feel very bad?" she murmured, stooping forward so that her face could be plainly seen by the wasted figure on the shelf.

"Nell, is it you?" he asked, in feeble surprise, staring at her as if he could not believe the evidence of his sunken eyes.

"Yes, it is Nell," she said, with a nervous laugh that ended in something like a sob.

Perhaps he was thinking of their last meeting and his fierce brutality, for the surprise still lingered on his face as he asked—

"What made you come?"

"The boy—Joe, he said his name was—told me that their lodger was sick; he came to buy a pie, you know, and when he said the lodger's name was Doss, I thought it must be you, only—" but she broke off abruptly.

"Only what?" he demanded suspiciously, for, judged from the standpoint of how he himself would have behaved under the circumstances, Nell's coming was wholly inexplicable.

"Only I thought that you were dead, wiped out by the Skeena crowd, or the Tacla Indians," she said, unconsciously quoting from Ike.

"You heard of that, did you? Well, I wished then, as I've wished a good many times since, that they had finished me off, for I should have been spared a good many hours of suffering; but I suppose it wasn't to be," he said, with a groan. Nell watched him with a great pity in her heart.

"I made you a small custard; can you eat a little?" she asked, coaxingly, producing a basin and a teaspoon from the basket, which had weighed so heavy during the long hot walk over the hills.

"Food sort of turns me sick," he said, in feeble protest. But by gentle persuasion she induced him to swallow a few spoonfuls.

"Have you had a doctor?" she asked, with a quick thought to Dr. Russell.

"No; I guess all the doctors in the world could not put me on my feet again," he answered, listlessly.

"But medicine might ease you a little," she said, looking at the hard wooden shelf on which he was lying, and thinking how he must suffer from hardship and privation.

"It don't matter so much now the weather is warm, and I sleep a good bit," he replied, in a dull tone.

"If you have been ill long, how have you managed to live?" she asked, wondering if it were starvation which had helped to bring him to such a pass.

"It's real curious, but it's true, I've just been kept alive the last few months by a fluke, as you may say, a mistake that you made a goodish bit ago," he replied.

"What do you mean?" she asked, in great surprise. She would have believed his mind to be wandering but for the sanity in his eyes.

"Do you remember sending a letter with thirty dollars and a picture in it to young Dick Brunsen, back in last summer?" he asked.

A hot colour surged over Nell's face, and a dizzy sensation seized her, but gripping the hard wood of the seat until it hurt her hand, she kept herself steady enough to answer calmly—

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, it's that thirty dollars what kept me from starving, but there ain't much of it left now," he answered.

"But I don't understand. You said I had made a mistake; what did you mean?" she demanded.

"You thought young Dick Brunsen was the man what I took to Button End that time when I didn't come back?" he asked.

But she replied with another question, "Was he not?"

"Bless you, no; and the two were no more alike than chalk is like cheese. Young Dick was always seeing if he couldn't do somebody out of something, and live by scheming instead of work. But the other one, the man that I took to Button End on Blossom, he was as straight-laced as a parson, and he read me a reg'lar moral lecture, all the way to Joe Lipton's, on how I wasn't treating you fair by keeping you on Blue Bird Ridge, with no advantages except fresh air. But he paid me well, so I ain't going to complain about him, nor yet to say that I didn't deserve the lecture," Doss Umpey remarked, with another groan, as he gave himself a twist round on the wooden shelf, in the vain hope of finding a more comfortable spot for his aching bones.

"Did the other one, this man Dick Brunsen, I mean, give you the money that I sent to him?" asked Nell. And now there was such a flood of gladness in her heart, that her weariness was momentarily forgotten, and her eyes were shining like two stars.

The man whom she had succoured at the Lone House had been, according to Doss Umpey, straight-laced as a parson, and so her instincts had been right; she had felt that he was a good man as well as a kind one, and it had been absolute torture to her when circumstances seemed to point to his being a rogue.

"Dick wouldn't have given away that money nor yet spent it to save himself from starvation, I believe," said Doss Umpey, with a chuckle. "He was a desperately superstitious fellow, and he'd got an idea that money sent to him like that by a mistake would bring him luck, so he always used to carry the case with him in a belt round his waist. His father and I used to laugh at him about it, but it didn't make no difference. They didn't know who had sent the money; but I did directly, only I wasn't going to let on to them that I knew anything about it. But I'd seen you on the depot at Bratley, that day when we went through to Roseneath, so it didn't take long to figure things out that you had sent the money, because you'd somehow got mixed up into thinking that young Dick was the party that had to be taken in and done for."

"So they never knew who sent it?" asked Nell, drawing a long breath of relief.

"Not they! But we was dreadful hard up after that business of trying to clear out the big shed at the depot, and we had to lie low too, for between the police and the Syndicate it was rather warm for us. Then old Brunsen won a lot of money at poker, and we cleared out while we'd got the chance. We meant to go to Klondike, but we hadn't got enough money, and it was the wrong time of the year; so we pulled up at Skeena, and looked about to see how we could make things last out until the spring. Then one day, as luck would have it, young Dick was prospecting round a bit, and he came upon a poor fellow who was dying from some wounds he'd had from getting mixed up with Indians. This chap had some nuggets in his pocket what he'd picked up in the Babine country, and he asked Dick to send them to his sweetheart in Quebec."

"Have a little more custard, then lie quiet awhile; so much talking cannot be good for you," said Nell, anxiously, for the old man's appearance rather frightened her.

"Oh, I'm glad to talk, if it's only to myself; it sort of whiles away the time," said the old man; but he consented to swallow the custard, which was so much better than anything he had tasted through the weary months of his sickness. Then he went on with his story as if eager to get it told, "The poor chap pegged out when he had finished telling Dick about the gold in the Babine country,

and Dick he came back to us in high feather, saying that our fortunes were made at last. And so for a time it seemed as if they were going to be; but there's mostly something awkward turns up just as you think you've got to plain sailing, and somehow the crowd we had got to help us got hold of the wrong end of the story of the man with the nuggets. Then came trouble, for they were as ugly a lot as I had ever had to do with. They set upon us like a pack of wolves, and we should have been wiped out in about five minutes if it hadn't been for Dick. He fought like ten men, and we might have pulled through even then, only one coward of a fellow shot him from behind, and so he died." The old man's voice broke in an irrepressible sob; but Nell's face was white and stern.

She was thinking to herself that the way of transgressors is hard, for if Dick Brunsen had only told the truth about how he had come to know of the find of gold in the Babine country, his life need not have been forfeit, and so her pity for him dwindled and died, there seemed no limit to his meanness, so really he deserved the fate which had come to him.

"How did you escape?" she asked.

"The crowd made tracks in no time at all, when they saw that Dick was dead, for no one could say how near the mounted police might be, and law is law in Canada, I can tell you. Old Brunsen had got hurt in the head, sort of knocked silly, so he was no good. We couldn't take the body back to the town, for we were three days out, and the crowd had made off with all the horses and mules that we had had loaded with provisions, tents, and diggers' outfits. So, while old Brunsen lay on the ground moaning, I dug a grave for poor Dick; only, before I dragged him into it, I took off his belt with the thirty dollars in it that you sent, and I've had to make it last ever since, for I've sort of been too sick to earn anything."

"What became of old Brunsen?" Nell asked.

"He was sort of struck silly, I think, with that blow on the head, for he didn't come to his senses, and next morning, when I woke, meaning to start back for the town, he was missing. I spent all that day and part of the next looking for him, and at last I came on his trail, only to find that he must have pitched over a bluff in the dark, for he was lying stone dead at the bottom with a broken neck. I buried him where I found him, just as I had buried Dick, then I sat down and felt pretty sick."

"Poor granfer!" exclaimed Nell, and then she stroked his withered face with gentle fingers, trying to forget all his unkindness and brutality, remembering only that he was poor, sick, and aged, an object of compassion to anyone whose heart held a spark of tenderness. Then, after a little pause, she asked, "What did you do after that?"

"I don't know. I suppose I must have got to Port Simpson somehow, for I seem to remember having been there, and I know I got to Vancouver City by boat, for I was dreadful sick and ill. But it seems as if there have been holes knocked in my memory in places; I can remember parts, but not the whole. It was at New Westminster that I fell in with Fred Higgins and the boy Joe, and I've lived along with them ever since. I lent him some money when he was hard up, and he's been sort of kind to me ever since," Doss Umpey said feebly. Then he dropped to sleep without any warning, and Nell sat silently watching him, noting the grey shadow which had gathered in the hollows of his eyes, and wondering how best she could bring help and comfort to soothe his dying hours.

He awoke as suddenly as he had gone to sleep, seeming so bright and alert from the brief rest, that Nell began to think she must be mistaken, and that he could not be so low down as she had imagined.

"Had a nap, have I? It's real curious how I go to sleep all of a sudden; but it's comforting too, and passes the time wonderful."

"Granfer, do you think you could be moved? I've got a house now, at least, I live with the Lorimers, and we could nurse you until you are better," said Nell, seeing that to care for the sick man was her duty, and deciding that the plan of having summer boarders must be held over, at least, for a time.

"No; I don't want to be moved. I'm as comfortable here as I should be anywhere, and I don't want no bother," he said weakly.

"But it is such a long way for me to come every day, and if I had you at home I could look after you so much better," she said coaxingly.

"I should only die on the way. I know what that road is, and the shaking is more than I could stand. Besides, I don't want the police coming poking round, asking questions by the dozen, and they'd be sure to do that, if I came down to the Settlement."

"I don't live at the Settlement, but at the depot," said Nell, quickly.

"It's all the same, and I ain't coming down there not to please nobody," he said, setting his weak jaw into obstinate lines.

"Granfer, what sort of hold was it that Mr. Brunsen had over you, that you didn't come back to the Lone House that time, but left me to get on as best I could with that horrid Mrs. Gunnage?" asked Nell.

The old man winced visibly, stirring uneasily on his hard shelf.

"That's an old story now, and too long for the telling, seeing that I'm tired," he answered.

But Nell meant to know if possible. "Was it anything about that old business between you and Logan and Mr. Brunsen?" she asked.

He gave a little start of surprise, and wriggled again.

"How did you know about that?" he demanded.

"Some one told me, and then I found a letter in your pocket from Mr. Brunsen, ordering you to pay him some money or he would expose you," she said, not choosing to tell him that she had found some of Brunsen's writing in her mother's box also.

Doss Umpey wriggled, and his voice took on a protesting whine.

"The fact is, Brunsen thought I knew where Logan's hoard was, but I didn't, though I guessed it should be on Blue Bird Ridge somewhere, because his old mother lived there so long. I used to pay Brunsen money to keep quiet, because he'd got black-and-white evidence against me over a bit of business what happened a good few years before you were born. I'd got no money to pay, and I was

obliged to raise a few dollars on the bits of things in your mother's box. After that I couldn't pay interest on the mortgage Joe Gunnage held on the Lone House, so he foreclosed, and I went to Brunsen to explain matters a bit, only to find that he'd just been made a fraudulent bankrupt, and had got to clear in a hurry. So we went together."

"Leaving me to manage as best I could," said Nell, bitterly.

"Well, you did a sight better for yourself than I could have done for you, so there's no need to cast that up at me," he said, with another wriggle. "I promised to send you some money if I had any to send, or if I knew where you were. But luck has been against me all the time. Think of the years I lived at the Lone House, a pokin' and pryin' round to find the things Logan had most likely buried there, yet never came across anything. But directly Joe Gunnage gets there, and begins to dig for a root-cellar, he turns up a whole lot of things, and instead of keeping quiet about them, he must needs go flying with the whole story to the police, stirring up no end of mud. I've had to keep pretty quiet ever since, I can tell you, though there wasn't a shred of evidence against me, and I was as innercent as a babe about them things, for if I had known where they were I should have dug them up and sold them a long time ago."

Nell shivered, and, leaning closer, said gently, "Don't talk like that, granfer. You are old and feeble now, and perhaps there is not much more life left for you."

"A good thing too," he burst in. "I've had about enough of it, one way and another, and I'm that tired, it is as much as I can do to lie here without lifting a finger."

"Poor granfer!" she murmured, and a mist of tears came into her eyes as she realized how little she could do for him.

"Can you give me a little money, Nell?" he asked presently, with the whine coming into his voice again.

She shook her head. "I will see that you don't want for food, and I'll send a doctor to you; but I haven't much money to spare, granfer."

"Well, you'll come again and see me, won't you? Real interesting it has been, having you drop in for a chat to-day. Fred said he'd send Joe down to a food-shop as there was at Camp's Gulch, just to get me a bit of something tasty, but I hadn't no idea as you were there still, and would come to see me."

"I must go now. I've been here such a long while, and I have got to walk back, but I will come again to-morrow or the day after, if I can," she said, wondering how she would manage to find her way home unaided.

"I gave you good advice, Nell, when I told you to get over the border," he said, with a feeble laugh, when she bade him good-bye. "I've always tried to do my duty by you, and I should have sent you some money if I hadn't wanted it myself."

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## CHAPTER XXIX

### The Arrival

NELL'S departure had been so hasty that there had been no time for explanations before she left. She had merely told Gertrude that she was going to Goat's Gulch to see a sick man, and that Mrs. Peters would come and stay at the house while afternoon school was on.

But Gertrude knew of some of the sad passages of Nell's past, and guessed that this hurried excursion might be accounted for in that way, so she concerned herself only in seeing what she could do to ease the domestic burdens before school commenced.

Leaving Flossie and the boys to get the dinner cleared away, she betook herself to the room Nell had been cleaning, and, setting herself to work, got it arranged in good order, the bed made up with fresh, sweet linen, clean curtains at the window, and everything in the nicest fashion, before she left for school.

Mrs. Peters came along just as she was putting the finishing touches to the few ornaments the room contained.

The station-master's wife had a baby in her arms, and two more trotting by her side, but she looked happy and comfortable, so plainly she was not to be pitied, despite her family cares.

"Miss Hamblyn wanted me to catch hold whilst she was away and you were in school, so I just brought the children and came over," announced Mrs. Peters, remembering with gratitude the many occasions on which Nell had come into her house and "caught hold" for her in times of domestic tribulation.

"It is very good of you to come," said Gertrude, thankfully. "Ours is such an awkward house to shut up; some one would be sure to want something, and Flossie is too young to leave."

"Poor little girl! yes, I should think she is. But what is there to do?" asked Mrs. Peters, looking round with an air of tremendous energy, as if she were simply yearning for work.

"Nothing, except to keep the kitchen fire going, and to see that the soup does not boil over. I have got the finishing touches put to Miss Alfreton's room, though I don't suppose she will be here for a few days yet, even if she decides to come at all. Nell cleaned the room early this morning, so I had only the nice part to do."

Gertrude's manner was a trifle apologetic, for it seemed to her that Nell was always doing the hard things and leaving the easy ones for her.

"Well, there's no denying that you both work hard, and it is just wonderful how the children get on at school. Sam says he hadn't no idea that our young ones were so clever. It's just a treat to see how Ned and Sophy can write and cipher," Mrs. Peters answered, as she subsided into a rocking-chair, with an air of restful ease, which showed that the next two hours were going to be pure holiday for her.

The afternoon cars reached the depot about half an hour before school was out. To-day there was quite a crowd of vehicles, and of people also. Four wagons, two carts, and three men on horseback came down from the Settlement to meet the train, while a little throng of people came streaming off the cars when they drew in and stopped.

Among these was a lady, past middle life, with a beautiful face and masses of fluffy grey hair. She was well but quietly dressed, carrying herself with a dignified air. Her large trunk and a small travelling-bag were good though unostentatious, like the rest of her belongings; and Sam Peters touched his cap to her in his very best manner, realizing that she was what he called "very first class."

"Can you tell me where Miss Hamblyn lives?" asked the lady, in a cultured, pleasant voice, which matched her appearance perfectly.

"The first house as you take the Settlement road, ma'am. My wife is over there keeping house this afternoon, while Miss Hamblyn is out. Will you leave your bag with the trunk? It will be quite safe, and I will bring the lot over presently," said Sam, politely, telling himself privately that this must be Miss Alfreton, who had come before she was expected. At the same time, however, he wondered why she had "M. B." in big letters on her trunk.

"Thank you; yes, I will leave them," she answered, with a nod and a smile. She then went onward at a leisurely walk through the pleasant July sunshine, taking keen note of her surroundings, and pausing more than once to admire the view.

Presently she stopped by the first house, and, after a moment's hesitation, entered by the door at the side into the kitchen, which was also shop.

Hardly had she crossed the threshold when Mrs. Peters appeared from the inner room, supposing that an early customer had arrived.

But the first glance at the lady standing just inside the door assured her that this was no prospective speculator in soups, pies, or family cakes; and so she waited for the unknown to state her business.

"Your husband told me that you were keeping house for Miss Hamblyn; will it be long before she is back, do you expect?" the lady asked, her gentle, refined tones falling pleasantly on the ear.

"I don't know about Miss Hamblyn, for she has gone to Goat's Gulch, which is a goodish step from here. But Miss Lorimer will be in from school in about twenty minutes. Will you please to walk in and sit down; the other room is cooler than this one," said Mrs. Peters, flinging the door wide open, and ushering the visitor in with an impressive air.

"What is this; a kitchen or a shop?" asked the lady, with an interested look around, as she passed through into the sitting-room.

"Both, ma'am; you see, being a cook-shop, there's a lot of baking and boiling to be done somewhere, and as room is limited, it is better to do it on the spot," said Mrs. Peters, with a brisk air.

"Decidedly. And how nice it smells! But what a lot of cakes and pies; who is going to eat them all?"

And the stranger paused before the big table, whereon were placed the results of the morning's baking.

"The customers, to be sure, ma'am. There isn't much doing until the evening when the miners leave work, but business is brisk then, and no mistake. I hope Miss Hamblyn will be back by that time, or poor Miss Lorimer will be nearly run off her feet."

"I can help her; that is if she will let me," said the lady, smiling again. Then she went down on her knees to make overtures to the fat Peters baby, who was crawling round the floor, and making occasional efforts to pull himself up by the chairs.

Mrs. Peters stared at the stranger in amazement. Her first thought had been that this must be Miss Alfreton, who had arrived sooner than was expected; but there was a wedding-ring on the lady's white hands, for she had pulled off her gloves while playing with the baby.

Then curiosity got the better of the station-master's wife, and she asked outright for the information she desired.

"Would you mind telling me, ma'am, who you are? Miss Hamblyn was expecting a Miss Alfreton in a few days, but you are not——" Here Mrs. Peters came to a full stop in some confusion, not knowing quite how to express herself.

"I am not Miss Alfreton, but her sister," explained the lady, with a smile. "Miss Alfreton has gone east in a great hurry to meet some friends she has not seen for years, so I came instead. My son is taking holiday in the neighbourhood, and I thought it would be pleasant to be near him. Ah, is this Miss Lorimer?" she asked, under her breath, as Gertrude came in at the gate, followed by Flossie and the two small boys.

Little Abe was not nearly school age yet; but as he always wanted to go where Teddy went, Gertrude used to take him across to the school-house, where he was in no one's way, and always seemed to enjoy himself.

"Yes, it is Miss Lorimer," said Mrs. Peters, feeling that she had somehow bungled the matter of introduction, because she had been unable to make the ceremony more complete owing to her ignorance of the lady's name.

Gertrude flushed a little at the sight of a stranger, and a nervous look came into her eyes as she remembered that Nell was not at home to help her in entertaining the unexpected visitor.

The lady moved towards her with an easy grace, holding out a friendly hand.

"I must apologize for taking you by storm in this fashion. My sister, Miss Alfreton, had a letter from Miss Hamblyn saying that you had room for a boarder; but my sister was obliged to change her plans quite suddenly, so I have come instead, and my name is Bronson—Mrs. Bronson."

"We are very pleased to have you; and I hope you will be quite comfortable with us, although we live very simply, and are quite primitive people," Gertrude said, regaining her courage all at once, because of the friendliness of the lady's manner.

"Then I can stay? That is a great comfort!" exclaimed Mrs. Bronson, with an air of relief. Then she promptly turned her attention to Flossie and the other children, and made friends in such a charming fashion that they were speedily won from their shyness.

"Perhaps you would like a meal of some kind at once?" suggested Gertrude, in rather anxious query, and wondering what Mrs. Bronson would think of them and their way of living, for she was plainly used to moving in good society.

"No, thank you, I don't want anything until it is time for you all to have your supper, or whatever you call your evening meal. If I get too desperately hungry before that time comes, I will go into the kitchen and sample the good things there, for it is evident I have come to a land of plenty," Mrs. Bronson said gaily.

"There is no lack of food, certainly; only I fear that to you our mode of life will seem rather rough. But if Miss Hamblyn is back soon, it won't be so bad, as she will attend to the customers, and I can look after the children. Shall I show you your room? it is quite ready," Gertrude said rather anxiously, for Mrs. Peters and the babies had disappeared, and there were a number of things requiring her attention.

"No, Flossie will do that, and then if she has any duties, I will help her to do them, or if it is play, I can help at that too."

"It isn't play," said the child, with a shy smile; "I get tea ready, when I come from school, then I clear it away, and wash up. Sometimes I help Nell in the kitchen, when there are a lot of customers, because Patsey has to chop wood, and do that sort of thing."

"Ah, everyone works here, I can see, so it will not do for me to be idle. What a nice bedroom, and how exquisitely clean; why, it will be really a treat to sleep here!" exclaimed Mrs. Bronson, with an air of keen appreciation.

"Nell cleaned it all out this morning, very early, and Gertrude put it straight at dinner-time," said Flossie, who was watching the new inmate with grave admiration in her eyes.

"Gertrude is Miss Lorimer, and your sister, I suppose?" said Mrs. Bronson. "Then who is Nell—Miss Hamblyn?"

"Yes, only she is our sister too, because she has adopted us," said Flossie.

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Bronson, in astonishment.

Flossie plunged into a more or less incoherent version of all that Nell had done for them, when they were left orphans, but had to stop abruptly in the middle, partly from want of breath, and partly because it was time for her to get tea ready; and to-night, Gertrude would need as much help as she could give her.

Mrs. Bronson put the cups and plates on the table, cut bread and butter for the children, and proved so helpful generally, that Flossie was charmed.

Nell had not returned when tea-time came, and before the meal was over, the first batch of customers came pouring into the kitchen, so Gertrude, with a hurried apology, had to go to them. To her great surprise, Mrs. Bronson came too.

"Oh yes, please, I am going to help if I may. Is there an apron to spare? Thanks." Swathing herself in a big white linen apron of Nell's, Mrs. Bronson stood by the cooking-stove for nearly two hours, serving out pints of soup, basins of beans, and big sections of a popular dish which was known as toad-in-the-hole.

There was an unusual rush of customers that evening, and Gertrude would have had a very hard time of it, but for Mrs. Bronson's help. Patsey put his head in at the kitchen door once to see if his sister had need of him, but seeing Mrs. Bronson busy at the stove, he departed in a great hurry, being a shy boy and not used to the society of strange ladies.

Gertrude was growing secretly anxious about Nell: but it was of no use to send Patsey to meet her, for she did not know in which direction Nell had gone.

The crowd of customers thinned out after a time, the kitchen wore a stripped look, as if a devouring army had passed through; and Gertrude, leaning against the big table, exclaimed ruefully—

"Oh, I am so tired!"

"So am I," replied Mrs. Bronson, laughing. Then, in a graver tone she asked, "Do you have all this to do, every evening?"

"Nell does. It is her work, you see; and although we all help her as much as we can, she bears the biggest share of the burden herself. But that is her way always," Gertrude ended up—with a little burst of enthusiasm, as she stood fanning herself with a paper bag, for the evening was warm and the little kitchen felt like an oven.

An absorbed look crept into Mrs. Bronson's eyes, and anyone might have thought she was nervous when she asked—

"What is Miss Hamblyn like? Is she pretty? And is she a Canadian?"

"I don't suppose anyone would call Nell really pretty; although to us she is beautiful. But she has a sweet low voice, and her eyes are soft and dark like those of a deer. She was born on the American side, and her father was a preacher; but she never says anything about her life from the time her father died when she was eleven. I think it must have been too sad to talk about."

"Poor girl!" murmured Mrs. Bronson, softly; and the absorbed look on her face deepened until it became abstraction.

But she roused herself presently, and inquired what was the next thing to be done.

"We don't do anything at night after the customers are gone, only just rest ourselves. Would you like to put a shawl on and come out in the garden? The moon will be rising very soon, and it is very pleasant out there; but you will need to wrap up, because this place is hot and stuffy."

"It is warm, certainly. But where are Flossie and the little ones? I haven't heard anything of them for a long time."

"Flossie has put the little boys to bed by this time, and I expect she is lying in the hammock under the cedar; at least, I hope she is, for she gets so tired, poor little girl," Gertrude answered,

with a quaver of true motherly feeling in her voice.

"What is the matter with her—hip disease?" asked Mrs. Bronson, as she slowly untied her apron and prepared to fold it up.

"Yes. Dr. Shaw, of Nine Springs, used to say he thought she might outgrow it; but Dr. Russell, who lives at Bratley, thinks she ought to be treated for it now—have specially made instruments and all that sort of thing. But he is poor and we are poor, so it is not to be thought of," ended Gertrude, with a sigh; and again there was the yearning note in her voice.

"Have you thought of a hospital for her?" asked Mrs. Bronson.

Gertrude shivered. "We could not send her to a hospital, poor little girl; I think it would nearly break her heart; she is so sensitive and nervous."

"I know the sort of nature and I understand just how you feel about it, for I had a little daughter of my own; but God took her," Mrs. Bronson said, a trifle unsteadily. Then, in a lighter tone, she went on, "I shall do my best to win Flossie's affections while I am here, then, if she is willing to come and spend a few months with me in Victoria next winter, we will see what the doctors there can do for her."

"You are very kind," said Gertrude, in a moved tone. "If you live in Victoria, do you know the school for electricians there?"

"Royal Mount College, do you mean? I know it well. My son is one of the professors there. But he has an extended vacation this year, because he has not been well. Indeed, at this present moment he is wandering somewhere on the frontier, I fancy; although whether on the American or Canadian side I cannot say. This is the third year that he has taken his vacation in the same neighbourhood; but this year it has begun a month earlier than usual."

"Nine Springs is not far from the frontier, and there were great forests in that district; but the scenery was not so beautiful as it is here and at Bratley," Gertrude said.

"My son told me the same thing. He said that Camp's Gulch was the most beautiful spot among the mountains, and I expect he will come tramping through this way before many days are over, just to see how I am settling down in the wilds."

"He will not want to stay here?" asked Gertrude, in some alarm, knowing how scanty was the accommodation of the little house.

Mrs. Bronson laughed. "He will never sleep under a roof in summer, if he can help it. He has a huge umbrella that makes a small tent; then, with a strip of indiarubber sheeting and a blanket, he goes about like a snail with his house on his back. Sometimes he hires a horse; more often he just tramps from place to place."

"It must be a very pleasant way of getting a holiday, only rather tiring," said Gertrude. Then she burst out with anxiety that would be no longer suppressed, "I am dreadfully worried about Nell, for I am quite certain she would have been back before now if something had not happened to her."

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## CHAPTER XXX

### An Adventure

WHEN Nell bade good bye to Doss Umpey her intention was to get back to Camp's Gulch as quickly as she could, in order to send a message asking Dr. Russell to come the next day to see the sick man. If she were too late to send a message by the cars, she would telegraph for him; but in any case she must get the doctor there next day.

The boy Joe offered to escort her all the way back to Camp's Gulch; but this she would not hear of, for he had already walked the distance twice and must be very tired. Then, too, she did not think the sick man should be left so long alone, for he looked so frail and exhausted that she would not have been surprised if he had died whilst she sat beside him.

So, bribing Joe, with the promise of another pie next day, to take particular care of the invalid until she came again, Nell said farewell to the two; and turning the corner of the great rock was speedily out of sight of the miner's encampment and making her way homeward as fast as she could go.

For the first mile or two she did very well, for the way, although rough, was mostly downhill, and being a keen observer she found her way without difficulty.

Then came a sharp rise which she remembered perfectly, for it was almost the only bit of downhill which had occurred on the way to Goat's Gulch. But when she reached the top she found herself confronted by two valleys, and could not recollect which one she had to take.

Sitting down for a five-minutes' rest on a big stone, Nell surveyed the scene before her and tried to discover which of the two valleys she had to take to get to Camp's Gulch. It was already growing late, for she had stayed with Doss Umpey much longer than she had intended to do. Even if she walked her hardest and made no mistakes she would not be back until the evening work was all done; and this thought vexed her more than her own weariness, for Gertrude had quite enough to do, without the additional toil of waiting on those hungry evening customers.

A few minutes longer Nell sat on her big stone; then her sharp eyes saw something which made her jump up suddenly and hurry onward. A faint white mist was rising, and she knew it would spread and increase until it filled all the higher valleys with an impenetrable curtain.

Making up her mind in great haste, she plunged into the valley winding away to the left, and went forward as quickly as she could. For the first mile or so she imagined herself to be going right; then, turning an angle, where the trees grew down to the bottom of the valley, she found herself confronted by great yawning holes in the sides of the hills—empty pockets these, where the copper ore had all been cleared out with the miner's pick—and then she knew all at once that she had come wrong, for she had passed no place like this when walking up with Joe.



A minute or two she paused irresolute, wondering if she would go back to the high ground and take the other valley; then, remembering with a shiver the crawling white mist which was creeping along the hillsides, she decided to go forward, feeling confident that she must come upon some trace of civilization before long, because those yawning holes in the hillside showed that people had been working there at no very distant date.

"I suppose I shall drop down into the Settlement presently," she said to herself, as she tramped doggedly onward.

Her weariness was beginning to make itself very plainly felt now, and she had a thoroughly exhausted sensation, which was due to want of food. She had not had a proper meal since her early breakfast, and now it was late in the evening.

The valley seemed endless, and when at length she reached its extreme point, it was only to find that it forked, one way going down through a thickly wooded ravine, the other mounting a barren hillside.

Mrs. Nichols was always fond of saying, "When in doubt, take the way which seems easiest;" but although Nell remembered this well enough, she at once resolved in this case to take the hardest way, because once down in the timbered valley she could see nothing but her immediate surroundings. But if she got on to higher ground, she might be able to get some idea of her whereabouts, and luckily she appeared to have got clear of the zone of white mist.

The long upward slope was higher than she had thought it to be. Before she reached the top the sun was down, and the blue grey shadows of twilight were filling in the hollows of the hills, and blurring the outlines of the wooded slopes.

"I may see a camp fire, or a lighted window. If not I shall just sit still for half an hour until the moon rises," she said to herself, as with sore feet and tired ankles, she toiled wearily up that long, long hill.

It was cooler at the top; a moaning night wind sighed across the great waste, and Nell, who was wearing only a thin cotton blouse, shivered from the cold, as she stood letting her keen gaze travel all round through the gloom.

"What was that?" she cried out, almost shouting in her excitement; for far away, still to the left, was a point of light, which in the distance looked like a camp fire.

"There it is; some one has just lighted a fire to cook supper," she said, talking to herself, because the sound of her own voice somehow took away her horrible sense of loneliness.

She hurried on down the slope, having to go warily now because of the trouble to see her way. There were rocks and holes in the earth to be avoided on the higher ground, but lower down it would be soft spots which she had to avoid, and these were the most dangerous of all.

But the fire was burning brightly now, and she made her way towards it, thankful to find some one besides herself in that great loneliness, yet with many misgivings as to the kind of people she might find camped about that fire.

In mining districts, the population is always rough in the out-of-the-way hollows of the hills. There were a great many men working who were wanted by the police on both sides of the border, and it was characters like these whom Nell was so afraid of encountering.

But the miners were not all bad, and she knew very well that if it were any of the Syndicate upon whom she chanced to stumble she would be as safe as in her own home, for, thanks to her courage in the matter of the depot robbery, they all regarded her as an absolute heroine, and treated her with the utmost deference.

She was near enough now to see that a man was bending over the fire, apparently cooking supper, and she was hurrying in order to get over the ordeal of accosting him, when the ground suddenly gave way under her feet, and, with a terrified cry, she plunged downward into the darkness.

If she had been watching the path half as carefully as she watched the fire, she would have seen a pocket yawning before her unwary feet, and so have been saved the pain and humiliation of her tumble.

At the sound of her cry, the man who was cooking supper abruptly suspended operations, and sent an answering shout through the darkness.

"What is wrong; do you want help?"

Nell heard the shout through the confusion of her fall, and the sound somehow brought a sense of comfort to her, for the voice had a cheery, resolute ring which was reassuring.

But she was brought up with a sudden jerk on reaching the bottom of the pocket, and lay there for a minute or two, with so much of the breath knocked out of her that she had no power even to shout back.

Then she heard footsteps, and saw a gleam of light. The man had made himself a torch by stuffing a great resinous bough in the fire, and was holding it aloft in order to see better.

"Where are you?" he shouted; and again the sound of his voice brought a thrill of comfort to poor Nell.

"I am here; be careful, or you will fall down too," she called back; then laughed hysterically because, even as she spoke, the man stumbled and floundered on the edge of the pocket, the torch dropped from his hand, and immediately went out.

"A nasty hole this, especially when you happen upon it unexpectedly," the man said, in a breathless fashion, as by a great effort he just managed to save himself from rolling down the slope, and crashing upon poor Nell, who was beginning to pick herself up and estimate the number of her injuries.

"Give me your hand, then I will pull you up; but I don't dare come lower for fear of losing my hold, and tumbling in upon you," said the man, as, gripping the top with a firm hold, he stretched his other hand down to Nell.

She put her hand into his, wondering why it was his voice had such a familiar ring, then, by a great effort, she pulled herself up the steep side of the pocket.

"How comes it that you are wandering about in such a desolate place so late, and alone?" he asked, with so much reproachful sternness that Nell coloured hotly in distress and mortification.

"I could not help it. I have been to see a sick man at Goat's Gulch, and I lost my way in returning to Camp's Gulch depot; can you direct me, if you please?"

There was a thrill of indignation in her voice, for she was angry with him for presuming to lecture her on the impropriety of her conduct.

The man's grasp of her hand suddenly tightened, and Nell saw that he was peering at her through the gloom.

"Who are you?" he asked, with a ring of anxiety in his tone.

"My name is Eleanor Hamblyn, and I keep the food-shop close to Camp's Gulch depot; can you direct me there, please? They will be in such a state of worry about me at home," she said, with a pathetic little break in her tone caused by weariness and fright, for the man had not relinquished her hand.

The moon was coming up, and the purple gloom was being shot with silvery light, when the man suddenly exclaimed, in a tone of delight—

"By all that is wonderful, I believe you are my Miss Nell, my good friend of nearly two years ago!"

"Mr. Bronson?" she said, in amazement. Then, because her relief was so great, collapsed suddenly in a flood of undignified tears.

"Poor little girl!" he said gently. "Come over to my fire, and I will give you some supper. But are you hurt?" he asked anxiously, as Nell stood quaking, shivering on the edge of the yawning pocket, which the light of the rising moon showed so plainly now.

"No, thank you; but I am very tired, and—and hungry," she admitted, in a burst of candour. "I was rather frightened too, for I thought you were a miner, and some of the people about here are very rough."

"I am afraid that I look rather rough too, but I have been on the tramp for two weeks now, and work of that sort soon rubs the fresh newness from one's appearance. Sit down on this stone by the fire, and I will get you a mug of tea and a rasher of bacon in no time. One good turn deserves another, you know, and the last time we met it was you who succoured me," he said, seating her on a big flat stone close to the blazing wood fire, and then bustling about with hospitable haste to get her some supper, which she was needing so badly.

Nell felt too tremulous and unsteady to trust herself to say much for a few minutes, and she sat watching him in silence, and wondering how it chanced that a man with so much culture and refinement, should be roughing it in the wilds like a common miner.

"Are you criticizing my cookery, or are you wondering how it is that I am wandering round in this fashion, and leading such a vagabond life?" he asked abruptly, as he carefully lifted a tin mug of tea from the coals and brought it to her.

Nell laughed softly. "I was not thinking of the cookery; but it did puzzle me that you should be wandering about in such a fashion, because you—you don't match the life," she said, with a little halting confusion of speech, feeling rather ashamed of her curiosity.

He dished a rasher of bacon onto a tin plate, and placed it before her, with a clasp knife, a two-pronged cooking fork, and a big slice of bread, then told her to begin supper at once before the food got cold. But he made no attempt to explain his position, and Nell had a vexed sensation of having been snubbed because of her unwarrantable curiosity.

But the tea was good, despite the battered old tin mug in which it was served, and the bacon was nice to one so hungry as Nell, although, if her appetite had not been so keen, she might have objected to it being scorched black on one side and nearly raw on the other.

When she had taken the sharpest edge from her hunger and thirst, she suddenly became aware that her host was eating nothing, but just sitting on another stone and watching her feed.

"Oh, I am so sorry; it is your supper I am taking, and you have nothing!" she exclaimed.

"Not a bit of it. There are provisions in plenty; it is only the implements which are wanting," he replied, with a laugh. "You see, there is only one mug, which is kettle, teapot, and teacup all rolled into one; and it is the same with the knife, fork, and plate. However, there is no need to worry, for I am not very hungry to-night, as I had some lunch in the middle of the day, a very unusual thing for me when on tramp, for then, as a rule, I make two good square meals suffice for twenty-four hours."

Nell finished her supper in a great hurry.

"Now I will cook for you," she said hastily. "Then, when you have eaten, you will perhaps be so very kind as to show me the way to the depot at Camp's Gulch, for they will be getting in a fearful state of worry about me."

"I can show you so far as the Settlement; but after that I fear you will have to be the guide, for I have only come that way once—nearly a year ago—so I can't be very sure of my road."

"If you can guide me to the Settlement that is all I shall need, thank you. I know the road perfectly from there," she answered.

"I hope you don't suppose that I should let you go all that long way alone. You have had quite enough in the way of adventures for one day, I fancy. But sit still and rest. I shall not be more than ten minutes or a quarter of an hour before I am ready to take the road; and you will travel all the better for the pause," he said, as he brewed himself another mug of tea and began to eat a hunch of bread.

"Are you not going to have some bacon?" asked Nell, with dismay in her tone.

"No; the bread is quite enough; and I can see you are impatient to be on the move again," he said. When the tea was to his liking, he swallowed it in great gulps and declared himself ready to start.

"I am so sorry to take you all that way," murmured Nell, as Mr. Bronson prepared for his start by huddling his cooking utensils into a bag which he slung across his back; then, picking up another bundle and a big umbrella which stood at the foot of a tree close by, declared himself ready to start.

"Are you not coming back to this camp?" she asked in surprise, seeing that he had taken all his belongings and was preparing to kick the fire to pieces.

"No; any two trees suffice to sling my hammock in; then I roll a blanket round me, hoist my umbrella, and sleep peacefully until morning," he said, laughing at the concern on her face.

"What a dreadful life!" she exclaimed, with consternation in her tone.

"It is just beautiful," he answered, with enthusiasm. "I go into the wilds for my vacation every year; but I have not ventured on a horse since I had to shoot that poor beast in the swamp two years ago. Then last year and this year I have been looking for you."

"What do you mean?" asked Nell, in great surprise, thinking she could not possibly have heard aright, since she knew of no reason why Mr. Bronson should want to seek her out.

"Just precisely what I said," he replied, laughing at her wonderment. "Common gratitude for what you had done for me took me to Blue Bird Ridge last year, only to find that the Lone House had other tenants who could not or would not tell me anything about you. Then I travelled on to Button End and interviewed Joe Lipton; but he knew nothing, and his wife, who might have helped me, was away visiting and could not be got at, so I had to give it up because the end of my vacation was in sight. I had left that part to the last, you see."

"Yes, I know," said Nell, thinking of that day in last summer when she had seen Mr. Bronson standing talking to a man at the depot, and Joey Trip had said that it was Dick Brunson, only it must have been the other man whom Joey meant.

"How did you know?" he asked in surprise.

"I will tell you presently, only I should like to hear your story first," she answered, with a little catch in her voice, as she thought of the confession she would have to make concerning her disposal of those thirty dollars; and then she began to wonder how long it would take her to save the money which Doss Umpey had spent, so that it might be restored to its rightful owner.

"There isn't much more story to tell. When I crossed to the mainland this day two weeks ago, I took the cars to Lewisville, tramped from there to Button End, and, happily, found Mrs. Lipton at home. From her I learned a lot about you, which interested me greatly; but when I asked for your address, Mrs. Lipton could only direct me to a Mrs. Nichols at Bratley Junction, and I should have pursued my pilgrim way to Bratley in due course, but for your dropping out of the clouds at my feet, as it were, this evening. But where have you been hiding so carefully all this long time, and why?"

It was Nell's turn for explanations now, but her story took so long in the telling, and raised so much comment from the listener, that by the time it came to an end the two were going down the last slope of the road to the depot, while a flood of silvery moonlight showed up their figures in strong relief.

"Nell, is it you?" rang out a shrill boy's voice, and Patsey came bounding from the shadows by the side of the road, where he had been watching and waiting for the last hour, afraid to go any farther from the house, lest he should miss her, and so add to the anxiety and confusion already existing at home.

"I lost my way, that is why I am so late. Is Gertrude much worried?" asked Nell.

"Flossie has nearly cried herself sick, and Gertrude has bothered a good deal. But a lady has come—the summer boarder; only it isn't the Miss Alfreton that you expected, but her sister, a Mrs. Bronson, and she's a downright good sort, for she has been in the kitchen all the evening serving soup and toad-in-the-hole."

"My mother!" exclaimed the man with the big bundle on his back, who was walking on the other side of Nell, and at whom the boy had been peering curiously.

"Oh, I say, are you the Mr. Bronson, the professor at Royal Mount College, that had the tussle with a bear in the Yosemite Valley?" demanded Patsey, eagerly.

"The very same; but that is ancient history now, for it happened five years ago, and I have become wiser since then," he said, with a laugh which rang through the quiet night.

"Why, that is my Dick's laugh, I should know it anywhere," said Mrs. Bronson, who had been standing with Gertrude outside the house door, listening for the first sound of Nell's coming.

"And that is Nell talking to Patsey; how merry they seem, and how thankful I am that she has got home safely!" exclaimed Gertrude, with a sigh of relief.

Mrs. Bronson had started off to meet the group coming down, and Gertrude followed her.

"My dear Dick, where did you spring from?" cried the mother's voice, with a ring of glad welcome in it.

"I might ask you the same question, I think," he replied as he stooped and kissed her, and then as the moonlight fell on her face, Nell saw that she was the original of the portrait, which had been in the case with the thirty dollars—a woman past middle life with a beautiful face, and a sweet, kindly expression.

"What have you been doing, Dick?" the mother asked anxiously, as if her son's appearance caused her anxiety.

"I have been paying my debts, mother, and helping Miss Hamblyn out of a difficulty, because she helped me two years ago," he said quietly.

"Oh, you have found her at last!" exclaimed Mrs. Bronson, and then putting her hands on Nell's shoulders, she looked searchingly into the girl's face.

"I lost my way and fell into an empty pocket; then Mr. Bronson pulled me out, and kindly gave me some supper; but he has had nothing himself, except a piece of bread and some tea; will you please induce him to come in and let us give him some food?" asked Nell, who had flushed to a bright red under Mrs. Bronson's gaze.

"Oh yes, we will make him come in and feed him. Then he can sling his hammock under the cedar tree and sleep in peace until morning," the lady said, with a satisfied laugh, as if her close inspection of Nell had pleased her. "I foresee that he will also want breakfast when morning comes, so you will have two boarders on your hands instead of one."

"But I shall be more help than hindrance, I am sure, because, you see, I can help with the

cooking, or do it all at a pinch," replied Dick, slipping his bundle from his back when he reached the gate of the garden.

Then Nell, remembering the bacon scorched to a cinder on one side and almost raw on the other, laughed merrily, in spite of her weariness; and they all went indoors to get the hungry man some more supper.

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CHAPTER XXXI  
Dividing the Family

THE Bronsons stayed at Camp's Gulch until the end of September. And, although Dick Bronson made many excursions in the neighbourhood, night invariably found him ready to sling his hammock under the big cedar tree growing at the side of the house.

Nell sent for Dr. Russell on the next morning after her adventurous walk, but when he reached Goat's Gulch, guided by Joe and accompanied by Dick Bronson, it was to find Doss Umpey dead.

They buried him in the little graveyard at the Settlement, and although Nell shed tears at his grave, they were rather tears of pity than of affection. For although she might grieve as any good girl would over the misspent life going out in hardship and gloom, she could not pretend to a love which he had never taken the least trouble to inspire, while the buzzing and humming discomfort in her injured ear kept the remembrance of his brutality constantly before her in those days of weariness following her long walk to Goat's Gulch and her adventurous return journey.

She had rather seriously overdone her strength that day, and was so unwell that Gertrude and Mrs. Bronson insisted on the doctor prescribing for her.

After Doss Umpey had been laid in his grave, the weeks of summer flowed on in a golden content, such as Nell had never known or dreamed of before.

She was busier than ever, it is true—business was brisk, and her larger household made great demands on her time; but work had always been a delight, and now it was varied by all sorts of pleasant things, such as had never come into her life previously.

Mrs. Bronson and her son were highly cultured people, who loved learning for learning's sake, and with them Dr. Russell foregathered as a matter of course, since birds of a feather flock together, and the two girls, who invariably dropped into the position of silent and absorbed listeners while the other three talked, found that it was a liberal education to be with people who knew so much and wore their knowledge in such an interesting fashion.

Nell left off sighing in private for educational chances, realizing that here within her reach lay stores of information to be had for the asking. But it was not until the summer was almost at its end, and the Bronsons were on the point of departure for their home in Victoria, that she became aware of the strange new influence on her life which had tinged all those busy weeks of summer with a light of golden happiness.

Mrs. Bronson was taking Flossie to the city for the winter. Patsey was going too, as a pupil at Royal Mount College. With the influence of Mr. Bronson to help him, there was no need to wait for the possible chance of a scholarship, and Flossie would be happier to have her brother with her.

Mrs. Trip had been making new shirts for Patsey, and the day before the travellers started for the city Nell went over to the Settlement to pay the old woman for her work, and to carry some cakes for Joey, who had a childish fondness for all sweet things.

Dick Bronson had gone off for a final ramble through the hills, and had been absent all the morning, but he came down to the Settlement just as Nell was coming away from Mrs. Trip's, and walked home with her.

"What are you going to do when Miss Lorimer gets married?" he asked abruptly, as they turned their backs on the last ugly houses of the Settlement, and took the winding road through the forest.

"Gertrude will not marry just yet," she said.

"Dr. Russell told me yesterday that he thought it would be in the spring, and he also said that he thought of coming to live at Camp's Gulch, because it was growing so much faster than Bratley," Dick Bronson said, not looking at Nell, but watching a fragment of white fleecy cloud that sailed slowly across the blue sky over his head.

"I shall keep the children—at least, some of them. I know Gertrude wants Teddy and Abe to bring up with Sonny; but Flossie and Patsey are my property," Nell said, with a rather nervous laugh.

"My mother wants Flossie. She says the child reminds her so much of my little sister Frances, who died when I was small," Dick said slowly. Then he brought his gaze down from the clouds, and looked at his companion, but her face was turned away, and he could only see the soft, dark hair, and the tip of a very pink ear.

"Mrs. Bronson is very kind; but I don't think Flossie would be happy to go away from us entirely," Nell replied, in a constrained tone.

"I don't think she would either," he said cheerfully. "Then my mother would be sure to spoil her dreadfully, if there were no one at hand to keep a check on things; and that would be a pity, for she is such a nice little girl."

Nell made no reply to this, and the two walked in silence for perhaps a quarter of a mile. She was fighting for self-control, trying to appear calm and collected, but failing signally in the attempt.

Presently Dick spoke again, and now it was his voice which was hard and constrained.

"There is but one way out of it that I can see."

"Out of what?" she asked, turning her head to look at him, but as quickly turning it away again, and flushing hotly because of something she had seen in his eyes.

"This awkwardness of dividing the family. Gertrude wants half, and you want the other half. But

of your half my mother wants Flossie; and Patsey for his own good must be in Victoria for the next six or seven years, which leaves you alone, unless you come too. Will you, Nell?"

Nell lifted up her feet, and put them down mechanically. Her thoughts were in such a wild tumult and confusion that she scarcely knew what she was doing.

Then a hand strong and firm took hers, and held it closely.

"I want you, Nell, more than anything else in the world; and if you won't consent to adopt me, why, I shall just pine away."

She laughed then, because pining away looked the most unlikely of all fates to overtake one in his vigorous health.

"You will come?" he persisted.

"I—I am not well-educated enough," she faltered, thinking of the vast difference between his easy leisured life and her own hard-working existence and lack of advantages.

He threw up his head and laughed in a happy and triumphant fashion.

"Now, that is false modesty on your part, for did you not tell me at our very first meeting that you had read a whole dictionary through from beginning to end, and that you could spell every word there was in it?"

"It is too bad to laugh at me, really!" she said; but she was laughing herself as she spoke, and her eyes were shining with happiness, for this man had been her ideal of all that was good and noble, and even when from mistake he had been mixed up with that other Dick whose name had been so similar, she had still cared for him in spite of herself.

"I will laugh at you, and with you always if you will let me," he said, only now his voice was grave and subdued. "And when we part to-morrow, Nell, it must be with the understanding that in the spring I shall come to fetch you. Will you be ready for me?"

"Yes, I will be ready," she answered softly.

And so they were betrothed.

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Punctuation and printer errors including missing periods and quotes have been fixed.

Inconsistencies in the use of hyphens and hyphenated words has been maintained, e.g. freight-car, freight car, freight-wagon, and freight wagon are prevalent throughout the book.

A cover was created for this ebook.

[The end of "Daughters of the Dominion: A Story of the Canadian Frontier," by Bessie Marchant]

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