Garland Hamlin

The Forester's Daughter: A Romance of the Bear-Tooth Range

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Содержание

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I
THE HAPPY GIRL

The stage line which ran from Williams to Bear Tooth (one of the most authentic then to be found in all the West) possessed at least one genuine Concord coach, so faded, so saddened, so cracked, and so splintered that its passengers entered it under protest, and alighted from it with thanksgiving, and yet it must have been built by honorable men, for in 190- it still made the run of one hundred and twenty miles twice each week without loss of wheel or even so much as moulting a scrap of paint.

And yet, whatever it may have been in its youth, it was in its age no longer a gay dash of color in the landscape. On the contrary, it fitted into the dust-brown and sage-green plain as defensively as a beetle in a dusty path. Nevertheless, it was an indispensable part of a very moving picture as it crept, creaking and groaning (or it may be it was the suffering passenger creaking and groaning), along the hillside.

After leaving the Grande River the road winds up a pretty high divide before plunging down into Ute Park, as they call all that region lying between the Continental Range on the east and the Bear Tooth plateau on the west. It was a big spread of land, and very far from an Eastern man's conception of a park. From Dome Peak it seems a plain; but, in fact, when clouds shut off the high summits to the west, this "valley" becomes a veritable mountain land, a tumbled, lonely country, over which an occasional horseman crawls, a minute but persistent insect. It is, to be exact, a succession of ridges and ravines, sculptured (in some far-off, post-glacial time) by floods of water, covered now, rather sparsely, with pinons, cedars, and aspens, a dry, forbidding, but majestic landscape.

In late August the hills become iridescent, opaline with the translucent yellow of the aspen, the coral and crimson of the fire-weed, the blood-red of huckleberry beds, and the royal purple of the asters, while flowing round all, as solvent and neutral setting, lies the gray-green of the ever-present and ever-enduring sage-brush. On the loftier heights these colors are arranged in most intricate and cunning patterns, with nothing hard, nothing flaring in the prospect. All is harmonious and restful. It is, moreover, silent, silent as a dream world, and so flooded with light that the senses ache with the stress of it.

Through this gorgeous land of mist, of stillness, and of death, a few years ago a pale young man (seated beside the driver) rode one summer day in a voiceless rapture which made Bill McCoy weary.

"If you'd had as much of this as I have you'd talk of something else," he growled, after a half dozen attempts at conversation. Bill wasn't much to look at, but he was a good driver and the stranger respected him for it.

Eventually this simple-minded horseman became curious about the slim young fellow sitting beside him.

"What you doing out here, anyhow – fishing or just rebuilding a lung?"

"Rebuilding two lungs," answered the tourist.

"Well, this climate will just about put lungs into a coffee-can," retorted Bill, with official loyalty to his country.

To his discerning eye "the tourist" now became "a lunger." "Where do you live when you're to home?"

"Connecticut."

"I knew it."

"How did you know it?" The youth seemed really interested to know.

"I drove another fellow up here last fall that dealt out the same kind of brogue you do."

This amused the tourist. "You think I have a 'brogue,' do you?"

"I don't think it – I know it!" Bill replied, shortly.

He was prevented at the moment from pursuing this line of inquiry by the discovery of a couple of horsemen racing from a distant ranch toward the road. It was plain, even to the stranger, that they intended to intercept the stage, and Bill plied the lash with sudden vigor.

"I'll give 'em a chase," said he, grimly.

The other appeared a little alarmed, "What are they – bandits?"

"Bandits!" sneered Bill. "Your eyesight is piercing. Them's *girls*."

The traveler apologized. "My eyes aren't very good," he said, hurriedly.

He was, however, quite justified in his mistake, for both riders wore wide-rimmed sombreros and rode astride at a furious pace, bandanas fluttering, skirts streaming, and one was calling in shrill command, "Oh, Bill!"

As they neared the gate the driver drew up with a word of surprise. "Why, howdy, girls, howdy!" he said, with an assumption of innocence. "Were you wishin' fer to speak to me?"

"Oh, shut up!" commanded one of the girls, a round-faced, freckled romp. "You know perfectly well that Berrie is going home to-day – we told you all about it yesterday."

"Sure thing!" exclaimed Bill. "I'd forgot all about it."

"Like nothin'!" exclaimed the maid. "You've been countin' the hours till you got here – I know you."

Meanwhile her companion had slipped from her horse. "Well, good-by, Molly, wish I could stay longer."

"Good-by. Run down again."

"I will. You come up."

The young passenger sprang to the ground and politely said: "May I help you in?"

Bill stared, the girl smiled, and her companion called: "Be careful, Berrie, don't hurt yourself, the wagon might pitch."

The youth, perceiving that he had made another mistake, stammered an apology.

The girl perceived his embarrassment and sweetly accepted his hand. "I am much obliged, all the same."

Bill shook with malicious laughter. "Out in this country girls are warranted to jump clean over a measly little hack like this," he explained.

The girl took a seat in the back corner of the dusty vehicle, and Bill opened conversation with her by asking what kind of a time she had been having "in the East."

"Fine," said she.

"Did ye get as far back as my old town?"

"What town is that, Bill?"

"Oh, come off! You know I'm from Omaha."

"No, I only got as far as South Bend."

The picture which the girl had made as she dashed up to the pasture gate (her hat-rim blown away from her brown face and sparkling eyes), united with the kindliness in her voice as she accepted his gallant aid, entered a deep impression on the tourist's mind; but he did not turn his head to look at her – perhaps he feared Bill's elbow quite as much as his guffaw – but he listened closely, and by listening learned that she had been "East" for several weeks, and also that she was

known, and favorably known, all along the line, for whenever they met a team or passed a ranch some one called out, "Hello, Berrie!" in cordial salute, and the men, old and young, were especially pleased to see her.

Meanwhile the stage rose and fell over the gigantic swells like a tiny boat on a monster sea, while the sun blazed ever more fervently from the splendid sky, and the hills glowed with ever-increasing tumult of color. Through this land of color, of repose, of romance, the young traveler rode, drinking deep of the germless air, feeling that the girl behind him was a wondrous part of this wild and unaccountable country.

He had no chance to study her face again till the coach rolled down the hill to "Yancy's," where they were to take dinner and change horses.

Yancy's ranch-house stood on the bank of a fine stream which purled – in keen defiance of the hot sun – over a gravel bed, so near to the mountain snows that their coolness still lingered in the ripples. The house, a long, low, log hut, was fenced with antlers of the elk, adorned with morning-glory vines, and shaded by lofty cottonwood-trees, and its green grass-plat – after the sun-smit hills of the long morning's ride – was very grateful to the Eastern man's eyes.

With intent to show Bill that he did not greatly fear his smiles, the youth sprang down and offered a hand to assist his charming fellow-passenger to alight; and she, with kindly understanding, again accepted his aid – to Bill's chagrin – and they walked up the path side by side.

"This is all very new and wonderful to me," the young man said in explanation; "but I suppose it's quite commonplace to you – and Bill."

"Oh no – it's home!"

"You were born here?"

"No, I was born in the East; but I've lived here ever since I was three years old."

"By East you mean Kansas?"

"No, Missouri," she laughed back at him.

She was taller than most women, and gave out an air of fine unconscious health which made her good to see, although her face was too broad to be pretty. She smiled easily, and her teeth were white and even. Her hand he noticed was as strong as steel and brown as leather. Her neck rose from her shoulders like that of an acrobat, and she walked with the sense of security which comes from self-reliant strength.

She was met at the door by old lady Yancy, who pumped her hand up and down, exclaiming: "My stars, I'm glad to see ye back! 'Pears like the country is just naturally goin' to the dogs without you. The dance last Saturday was a frost, so I hear, no snap to the fiddlin', no gimp to the jiggin'. It shorely was pitiful."

Yancy himself, tall, grizzled, succinct, shook her hand in his turn. "Ma's right, girl, the country needs ye. I'm scared every time ye go away fer fear some feller will snap ye up."

She laughed. "No danger. Well, how are ye all, anyway?" she asked.

"All well, 'ceptin' me," said the little old woman. "I'm just about able to pick at my vittles."

"She does her share o' the work, and half the cook's besides," volunteered Yancy.

"I know her," retorted Berrie, as she laid off her hat. "It's me for a dip. Gee, but it's dusty on the road!"

The young tourist – he signed W. W. Norcross in Yancy's register – watched her closely and listened to every word she spoke with an intensity of interest which led Mrs. Yancy to say, privately:

"'Pears like that young 'lunger' ain't goin' to forgit you if he can help it."

"What makes you think he's a 'lunger'?"

"Don't haf to think. One look at him is enough."

Thereafter a softer light – the light of pity – shone in the eyes of the girl. "Poor fellow, he does look kind o' peaked; but this climate will bring him up to the scratch," she added, with optimistic faith in her beloved hills.

A moment later the down-coming stage pulled in, loaded to the side-lines, and everybody on it seemed to know Berea McFarlane. It was hello here and hello there, and how are ye between, with smacks from the women and open cries of "pass it around" on the part of the men, till Norcross marveled at the display.

"She seems a great favorite," he observed to Yancy.

"Who – Berrie? She's the whole works up at Bear Tooth. Good thing she don't want to go to Congress – she'd lay Jim Worthy on the shelf."

Berea's popularity was not so remarkable as her manner of receiving it. She took it all as a sort of joke – a good, kindly joke. She shook hands with her male admirers, and smacked the cheeks of her female friends with an air of modest deprecation. "Oh, you don't mean it," was one of her phrases. She enjoyed this display of affection, but it seemed not to touch her deeply, and her impartial, humorous acceptance of the courtship of the men was equally charming, though this was due, according to remark, to the claims of some rancher up the line.

She continued to be the theme of conversation at the dinner-table and yet remained unembarrassed, and gave back quite as good as she received.

"If I was Cliff," declared one lanky admirer, "I'd be shot if I let you out of my sight. It ain't safe."

She smiled broadly. "I don't feel scared."

"Oh, *you're* all right! It's the other feller – like me – that gets hurt."

"Don't worry, you're old enough and tough enough to turn a steel-jacketed bullet."

This raised a laugh, and Mrs. Yancy, who was waiting on the table, put in a word: "I'll board ye free, Berrie, if you'll jest naturally turn up here regular at meal-time. You do take the fellers' appetites. It's the only time I make a cent."

To the Eastern man this was all very unrestrained and deeply diverting. The people seemed to know all about one another notwithstanding the fact that they came from ranches scattered up and down the stage line twenty, thirty miles apart – to be neighbors in this country means to be anywhere within a sixty-mile ride – and they gossiped of the countryside as minutely as the residents of a village in Wisconsin discuss their kind. News was scarce.

The north-bound coach got away first, and as the girl came out to take her place, Norcross said: "Won't you have my seat with the driver?"

She dropped her voice humorously. "No, thank you, I can't stand for Bill's clack."

Norcross understood. She didn't relish the notion of being so close to the frankly amorous driver, who neglected no opportunity to be personal; therefore, he helped her to her seat inside and resumed his place in front.

Bill, now broadly communicative, minutely detailed his tastes in food, horses, liquors, and saddles in a long monologue which would have been tiresome to any one but an imaginative young Eastern student. Bill had a vast knowledge of the West, but a distressing habit of repetition. He was self-conscious, too, for the reason that he was really talking for the benefit of the girl sitting in critical silence behind him, who, though he frequently turned to her for confirmation of some of the more startling of his statements, refused to be drawn into controversy.

In this informing way some ten miles were traversed, the road climbing ever higher, and the mountains to right and left increasing in grandeur each hour, till of a sudden and in a deep valley on the bank of another swift stream, they came upon a squalid saloon and a minute post-office. This was the town of Moskow.

Bill, lumbering down over the wheel, took a bag of mail from the boot and dragged it into the cabin. The girl rose, stretched herself, and said: "This stagin' is slow business. I'm cramped. I'm going to walk on ahead."

"May I go with you?" asked Norcross.

"Sure thing! Come along."

As they crossed the little pole bridge which spanned the flood, the tourist exclaimed: “What exquisite water! It’s like melted opals.”

“Comes right down from the snow,” she answered, impressed by the poetry of his simile.

He would gladly have lingered, listening to the song of the water, but as she passed on, he followed. The opposite hill was sharp and the road stony, but as they reached the top the young Easterner called out, “See the savins!”

Before them stood a grove of cedars, old, gray, and drear, as weirdly impressive as the cacti in a Mexican desert. Torn by winds, scarred by lightnings, deeply rooted, tenacious as tradition, unlovely as Egyptian mummies, fantastic, dwarfed and blackened, these unaccountable creatures clung to the ledges. The dead mingled horribly with the living, and when the wind arose – the wind that was robustly cheerful on the high hills – these hags cried out with low moans of infinite despair. It was as if they pleaded for water or for deliverance from a life that was a kind of death.

The pale young man shuddered. “What a ghostly place!” he exclaimed, in a low voice. “It seems the burial-place of a vanished race.”

Something in his face, some note in his voice profoundly moved the girl. For the first time her face showed something other than childish good nature and a sense of humor. “I don’t like these trees myself,” she answered. “They look too much like poor old squaws.”

For a few moments the man and the maid studied the forest of immemorial, gaunt, and withered trees – bright, impermanent youth confronting time-defaced and wind-torn age. Then the girl spoke: “Let’s get out of here. I shall cry if we don’t.”

In a few moments the dolorous voices were left behind, and the cheerful light of the plain reasserted itself. Norcross, looking back down upon the cedars, which at a distance resembled a tufted, bronze-green carpet, musingly asked: “What do you suppose planted those trees there?”

The girl was deeply impressed by the novelty of this query. “I never thought to ask. I reckon they just grew.”

“No, there’s a reason for all these plantings,” he insisted.

“We don’t worry ourselves much about such things out here,” she replied, with charming humor. “We don’t even worry about the weather. We just take things as they come.”

They walked on talking with new intimacy. “Where is your home?” he asked.

“A few miles out of Bear Tooth. You’re from the East, Bill says – ‘the far East,’ we call it.”

“From New Haven. I’ve just finished at Yale. Have you ever been to New York?”

“Oh, good Lord, no!” she answered, as though he had named the ends of the earth. “My mother came from the South – she was born in Kentucky – that accounts for my name, and my father is a Missourian. Let’s see, Yale is in the state of Connecticut, isn’t it?”

“Connecticut is no longer a state; it is only a suburb of New York City.”

“Is that so? My geography calls it ‘The Nutmeg State.’”

“Your geography is behind the times. New York has absorbed all of Connecticut and part of Jersey.”

“Well, it’s all the same to us out here. Your whole country looks like the small end of a slice of pie to us.”

“Have you ever been in a city?”

“Oh yes, I go to Denver once in a while, and I saw St. Louis once; but I was only a yearling, and don’t remember much about it. What are you doing out here, if it’s a fair question?”

He looked away at the mountains. “I got rather used up last spring, and my doctor said I’d better come out here for a while and build up. I’m going up to Meeker’s Mill. Do you know where that is?”

“I know every stove-pipe in this park,” she answered. “Joe Meeker is kind o’ related to me – uncle by marriage. He lives about fifteen miles over the hill from Bear Tooth.”

This fact seemed to bring them still closer together. “I’m glad of that,” he said, pointedly. “Perhaps I shall be permitted to see you now and again? I’m going to be lonesome for a while, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t you believe it! Joe Meeker’s boys will keep you interested,” she assured him.

The stage overtook them at this point, and Bill surlily remarked: “If you’d been alone, young feller, I’d ‘a’ give you a chase.” His resentment of the outsider’s growing favor with the girl was ludicrously evident.

As they rose into the higher levels the aspen shook its yellowish leaves in the breeze, and the purple foot-hills gained in majesty. Great new peaks came into view on the right, and the lofty cliffs of the Bear Tooth range loomed in naked grandeur high above the blue-green of the pines which clothed their sloping eastern sides.

At intervals the road passed small log ranches crouching low on the banks of creeks; but aside from these – and the sparse animal life around them – no sign of settlement could be seen. The valley lay as it had lain for thousands of years, repeating its forests as the meadows of the lower levels send forth their annual grasses. Norcross said to himself: “I have circled the track of progress and have re-entered the border America, where the stage-coach is still the one stirring thing beneath the sun.”

At last the driver, with a note of exultation, called out: “Grab a root, everybody, it’s all the way down-hill and time to feed.”

And so, as the dusk came over the mighty spread of the hills to the east, and the peaks to the west darkened from violet to purple-black, the stage rumbled and rattled and rushed down the winding road through thickening signs of civilization, and just at nightfall rolled into the little town of Bear Tooth, which is the eastern gateway of the Ute Plateau.

Norcross had given a great deal of thought to the young girl behind him, and thought had deepened her charm. Her frankness, her humor, her superb physical strength and her calm self-reliance appealed to him, and the more dangerously, because he was so well aware of his own weakness and loneliness, and as the stage drew up before the hotel, he fervently said: “I hope I shall see you again?”

Before she could reply a man’s voice called: “Hello, there!” and a tall fellow stepped up to her with confident mien.

Norcross awkwardly shrank away. This was her cowboy lover, of course. It was impossible that so attractive a girl should be unattached, and the knowledge produced in him a faint but very definite pang of envy and regret.

The happy girl, even in the excitement of meeting her lover, did not forget the stranger. She gave him her hand in parting, and again he thrilled to its amazing power. It was small, but it was like a steel clamp. “Stop in on your way to Meeker’s,” she said, as a kindly man would have done. “You pass our gate. My father is Joseph McFarlane, the Forest Supervisor. Good night.”

“Good night,” he returned, with sincere liking.

“Who is that?” Norcross heard her companion ask.

She replied in a low voice, but he overheard her answer, “A poor ‘lunger,’ bound for Meeker’s – and Kingdom Come, I’m afraid. He seems a nice young feller, too.”

“They always wait till the last minute,” remarked the rancher, with indifferent tone.

II
A RIDE IN THE RAIN

There are two Colorados within the boundaries of the state of that name, distinct, almost irreconcilable. One is a plain (smooth, dry, monotonous), gently declining to the east, a land of sage-brush, wheat-fields, and alfalfa meadows – a rather commonplace region now, given over to humdrum folk intent on digging a living from the soil; but the other is an army of peaks, a region of storms, a spread of dark and tangled forests. In the one, shallow rivers trickle on their sandy way to the Gulf of Mexico; from the other, the waters rush, uniting to make the mighty stream whose silt-laden floods are slowly filling the Gulf of California.

If you stand on one of the great naked crests which form the dividing wall, the rampart of the plains, you can see the Colorado of tradition to the west, still rolling in wave after wave of stupendous altitudes, each range cutting into the sky with a purple saw-tooth edge. The landscape seems to contain nothing but rocks and towering crags, a treasure-house for those who mine. But this is illusive. Between these purple heights charming valleys wind and meadows lie in which rich grasses grow and cattle feed.

On certain slopes – where the devastating miners have not yet played their relentless game – dark forests rise to the high, bold summits of the chiefest mountains, and it is to guard these timbered tracts, growing each year more valuable, that the government has established its Forest Service to protect and develop the wealth-producing power of the watersheds.

Chief among the wooded areas of this mighty inland empire of crag and stream is the Bear Tooth Forest, containing nearly eight hundred thousand acres of rock and trees, whose seat of administration is Bear Tooth Springs, the small town in which our young traveler found himself.

He carefully explained to the landlord of the Cottage Hotel that he had never been in this valley before, and that he was filled with astonishment and delight of the scenery.

“Scenery! Yes, too much scenery. What we want is settlers,” retorted the landlord, who was shabby and sour and rather contemptuous, for the reason that he considered Norcross a poor consumptive, and a fool to boot – “one of those chaps who wait till they are nearly dead, then come out here expecting to live on climate.”

The hotel was hardly larger than the log shanty of a railway-grading camp; but the meat was edible, and just outside the door roared Bear Creek, which came down directly from Dome Mountain, and the young Easterner went to sleep beneath its singing that night. He should have dreamed of the happy mountain girl, but he did not; on the contrary, he imagined himself back at college in the midst of innumerable freshmen, yelling, “Bill McCoy, Bill McCoy!”

He woke a little bewildered by his strange surroundings, and when he became aware of the cheap bed, the flimsy wash-stand, the ugly wallpaper, and thought how far he was from home and friends, he not only sighed, he shivered. The room was chill, the pitcher of water cold almost to the freezing-point, and his joints were stiff and painful from his ride. What folly to come so far into the wilderness at this time.

As he crawled from his bed and looked from the window he was still further disheartened. In the foreground stood a half dozen frame buildings, graceless and cheap, without tree or shrub to give shadow or charm of line – all was bare, bleak, sere; but under his window the stream was singing its glorious mountain song, and away to the west rose the aspiring peaks from which it came. Romance brooded in that shadow, and on the lower foot-hills the frost-touched foliage glowed like a mosaic of jewels.

Dressing hurriedly he went down to the small bar-room, whose litter of duffle-bags, guns, saddles, and camp utensils gave evidence of the presence of many hunters and fishermen. The

slovenly landlord was poring over a newspaper, while a discouraged half-grown youth was sludging the floor with a mop; but a cheerful clamor from an open door at the back of the hall told that breakfast was on.

Venturing over the threshold, Norcross found himself seated at table with some five or six men in corduroy jackets and laced boots, who were, in fact, merchants and professional men from Denver and Pueblo out for fish and such game as the law allowed, and all in holiday mood. They joked the waiter-girls, and joshed one another in noisy good-fellowship, ignoring the slim youth in English riding-suit, who came in with an air of mingled melancholy and timidity and took a seat at the lower corner of the long table.

The landlady, tall, thin, worried, and inquisitive, was New England – Norcross recognized her type even before she came to him with a question on her lips. "So you're from the East, are you?"

"I've been at school there."

"Well, I'm glad to see you. My folks came from York State. I don't often get any one from the *real* East. Come out to fish, I s'pose?"

"Yes," he replied, thinking this the easiest way out.

"Well, they's plenty of fishing – and they's plenty of air, not much of anything else."

As he looked about the room, the tourist's eye was attracted by four young fellows seated at a small table to his right. They wore rough shirts of an olive-green shade, and their faces were wind-scorched; but their voices held a pleasant tone, and something in the manner of the landlady toward them made them noticeable. Norcross asked her who they were.

"They're forestry boys."

"Forestry boys?"

"Yes; the Supervisor's office is here, and these are his help."

This information added to Norcross's interest and cheered him a little. He knew something of the Forest Service, and had been told that many of the rangers were college men. He resolved to make their acquaintance. "If I'm to stay here they will help me endure the exile," he said.

After breakfast he went forth to find the post-office, expecting a letter of instructions from Meeker. He found nothing of the sort, and this quite disconcerted him.

"The stage is gone," the postmistress told him, "and you can't get up till day after to-morrow. You might reach Meeker by using the government 'phone, however."

"Where will I find the government 'phone?"

"Down in the Supervisor's office. They're very accommodating; they'll let you use it, if you tell them who you want to reach."

It was impossible to miss the forestry building for the reason that a handsome flag fluttered above it. The door being open, Norcross perceived from the threshold a young clerk at work on a typewriter, while in a corner close by the window another and older man was working intently on a map.

"Is this the office of the Forest Supervisor?" asked the youth.

The man at the machine looked up, and pleasantly answered: "It is, but the Supervisor is not in yet. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"It may be you can. I am on my way to Meeker's Mill for a little outing. Perhaps you could tell me where Meeker's Mill is, and how I can best get there."

The man at the map meditated. "It's not far, some eighteen or twenty miles; but it's over a pretty rough trail."

"What kind of a place is it?"

"Very charming. You'll like it. Real mountain country."

This officer was a plain-featured man of about thirty-five, with keen and clear eyes. His voice, though strongly nasal, possessed a note of manly sincerity. As he studied his visitor, he smiled.

"You look brand-new – haven't had time to season-check, have you?"

"No; I'm a stranger in a strange land."

"Out for your health?"

"Yes. My name is Norcross. I'm just getting over a severe illness, and I'm up here to lay around and fish and recuperate – if I can."

"You can – you will. You can't help it," the other assured him. "Join one of our surveying crews for a week and I'll mellow that suit of yours and make a real mountaineer of you. I see you wear a *Sigma Chi* pin. What was your school?"

"I am a 'Son of Eli.' Last year's class."

The other man displayed his fob. "I'm ten classes ahead of you. My name is Nash. I'm what they call an 'expert.' I'm up here doing some estimating and surveying for a big ditch they're putting in. I was rather in hopes you had come to join our ranks. We sons of Eli are holding the conservation fort these days, and we need help."

"My knowledge of your work is rather vague," admitted Norcross. "My father is in the lumber business; but his point of view isn't exactly yours."

"He slays 'em, does he?"

"He did. He helped devastate Michigan."

"After me the deluge! I know the kind. Why not make yourself a sort of vicarious atonement?"

Norcross smiled. "I had not thought of that. It would help some, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would. There's no great money in the work; but it's about the most enlightened of all the governmental bureaus."

Norcross was strongly drawn to this forester, whose tone was that of a highly trained specialist. "I rode up on the stage yesterday with Miss Berrie McFarlane."

"The Supervisor's daughter?"

"She seemed a fine Western type."

"She's not a type; she's an individual. She hasn't her like anywhere I've gone. She cuts a wide swath up here. Being an only child she's both son and daughter to McFarlane. She knows more about forestry than her father. In fact, half the time he depends on her judgment."

Norcross was interested, but did not want to take up valuable time. He said: "Will you let me use your telephone to Meeker's?"

"Very sorry, but our line is out of order. You'll have to wait a day or so – or use the mails. You're too late for to-day's stage, but it's only a short ride across. Come outside and I'll show you."

Norcross followed him to the walk, and stood in silence while his guide indicated the pass over the range. It all looked very formidable to the Eastern youth. Thunderous clouds hung low upon the peaks, and the great crags to left and right of the notch were stern and barren. "I think I'll wait for the stage," he said, with candid weakness. "I couldn't make that trip alone."

"You'll have to take many such a ride over that range in the *night*– if you join the service," Nash warningly replied.

As they were standing there a girl came galloping up to the hitching-post and slid from her horse. It was Berea McFarlane. "Good morning, Emery," she called to the surveyor. "Good morning," she nodded at Norcross. "How do you find yourself this morning?"

"Homesick," he replied, smilingly.

"Why so?"

"I'm disappointed in the town."

"What's the matter with the town?"

"It's so commonplace. I expected it to be – well, different. It's just like any other plains town."

Berrie looked round at the forlorn shops, the irregular sidewalks, the grassless yards. "It isn't very pretty, that's a fact; but you can always forget it by just looking up at the high country. When you going up to the mill?"

"I don't know. I haven't had any word from Meeker, and I can't reach him by telephone."

"I know, the line is short-circuited somewhere; but they've sent a man out. He may close it any minute."

"Where's the Supervisor?" asked Nash.

"He's gone over to Moore's cutting. How are you getting on with those plats?"

"Very well. I'll have 'em all in shape by Saturday."

"Come in and make yourself at home," said the girl to Norcross. "You'll find the papers two or three days old," she smiled. "We never know about anything here till other people have forgotten it."

Norcross followed her into the office, curious to know more about her. She was so changed from his previous conception of her that he was puzzled. She had the directness and the brevity of phrase of a business man, as she opened letters and discussed their contents with the men.

"Truly she *is* different," thought Norcross, and yet she lost something by reason of the display of her proficiency as a clerk. "I wish she would leave business to some one else," he inwardly grumbled as he rose to go.

She looked up from her desk. "Come in again later. We may be able to reach the mill."

He thanked her and went back to his hotel, where he overhauled his outfit and wrote some letters. His disgust of the town was lessened by the presence of that handsome girl, and the hope that he might see her at luncheon made him impatient of the clock.

She did not appear in the dining-room, and when Norcross inquired of Nash whether she took her meals at the hotel or not, the expert replied: "No, she goes home. The ranch is only a few miles down the valley. Occasionally we invite her, but she don't think much of the cooking."

One of the young surveyors put in a word: "I shouldn't think she would. I'd ride ten miles any time to eat one of Mrs. McFarlane's dinners."

"Yes," agreed Nash with a reflective look in his eyes. "She's a mighty fine girl, and I join the boys in wishing her better luck than marrying Cliff Belden."

"Is it settled that way?" asked Norcross.

"Yes; the Supervisor warned us all, but even he never has any good words for Belden. He's a surly cuss, and violently opposed to the service. His brother is one of the proprietors of the Meeker mill, and they have all tried to bulldoze Landon, our ranger over there. By the way, you'll like Landon. He's a Harvard man, and a good ranger. His shack is only a half-mile from Meeker's house. It's a pretty well-known fact that Alec Belden is part proprietor of a saloon over there that worries the Supervisor worse than anything. Cliff swears he's not connected with it; but he's more or less sympathetic with the crowd."

Norcross, already deeply interested in the present and future of a girl whom he had met for the first time only the day before, was quite ready to give up his trip to Meeker. After the men went back to work he wandered about the town for an hour or two, and then dropped in at the office to inquire if the telephone line had been repaired.

"No, it's still dead."

"Did Miss McFarlane return?"

"No. She said she had work to do at home. This is ironing-day, I believe."

"She plays all the parts, don't she?"

"She sure does; and she plays one part as well as another. She can rope and tie a steer or bake a cake as well as play the piano."

"Don't tell me she plays the piano!"

Nash laughed. "She does; but it's one of those you operate with your feet."

"I'm relieved to hear that. She seems almost weirdly gifted as it is." After a moment he broke in with: "What can a man do in this town?"

"Work, nothing else."

"What do you do for amusement?"

"Once in a while there is a dance in the hall over the drug-store, and on Sunday you can listen to a wretched sermon in the log church. The rest of the time you work or loaf in the saloons – or read. Old Nature has done her part here. But man – ! Ever been in the Tyrol?"

"Yes."

"Well, some day the people of the plains will have sense enough to use these mountains, these streams, the way they do over there."

It required only a few hours for Norcross to size up the valley and its people. Aside from Nash and his associates, and one or two families connected with the mill to the north, the villagers were poor, thriftless, and uninteresting. They were lacking in the picturesque quality of ranchers and miners, and had not yet the grace of town-dwellers. They were, indeed, depressingly nondescript.

Early on the second morning he went to the post-office – which was also the telephone station – to get a letter or message from Meeker. He found neither; but as he was standing in the door undecided about taking the stage, Berea came into town riding a fine bay pony, and leading a blaze-face buckskin behind her.

Her face shone cordially, as she called out: "Well, how do you stack up this morning?"

"Tip-top," he answered, in an attempt to match her cheery greeting.

"Do you like our town better?"

"Not a bit! But the hills are magnificent."

"Anybody turned up from the mill?"

"No, I haven't heard a word from there. The telephone is still out of commission."

"They can't locate the break. Uncle Joe sent word by the stage-driver asking us to keep an eye out for you and send you over. I've come to take you over myself."

"That's mighty good of you; but it's a good deal to ask."

"I want to see Uncle Joe on business, anyhow, and you'll like the ride better than the journey by stage."

Leaving the horses standing with their bridle-reins hanging on the ground, she led the way to the office.

"When father comes in, tell him where I've gone, and send Mr. Norcross's packs by the first wagon. Is your outfit ready?" she asked.

"Not quite. I can get it ready soon."

He hurried away in pleasant excitement, and in twenty minutes was at the door ready to ride.

"You'd better take my bay," said Berea. "Old Paint-face there is a little notional."

Norcross approached his mount with a caution which indicated that he had at least been instructed in range-horse psychology, and as he gathered his reins together to mount, Berrie remarked:

"I hope you're saddle-wise."

"I had a few lessons in a riding-school," he replied, modestly.

Young Downing approached the girl with a low-voiced protest: "You oughtn't to ride old Paint. He nearly pitched the Supervisor the other day."

"I'm not worried," she said, and swung to her saddle.

The ugly beast made off in a tearing sidewise rush, but she smilingly called back: "All set." And Norcross followed her in high admiration.

Eventually she brought her bronco to subjection, and they trotted off together along the wagon-road quite comfortably. By this time the youth had forgotten his depression, his homesickness of the morning. The valley was again enchanted ground. Its vistas led to lofty heights. The air was regenerative, and though a part of this elation was due, no doubt, to the power of his singularly attractive guide, he laid it discreetly to the climate.

After shacking along between some rather sorry fields of grain for a mile or two, Berea swung into a side-trail. "I want you to meet my mother," she said.

The grassy road led to a long, one-story, half-log, half-slab house, which stood on the bank of a small, swift, willow-bordered stream.

"This is our ranch," she explained. "All the meadow in sight belongs to us."

The young Easterner looked about in astonishment. Not a tree bigger than his thumb gave shade. The gate of the cattle corral stood but a few feet from the kitchen door, and rusty beef-bones, bleaching skulls, and scraps of sun-dried hides littered the ground or hung upon the fence. Exteriorly the low cabin made a drab, depressing picture; but as he alighted – upon Berea's invitation – and entered the house, he was met by a sweet-faced, brown-haired little woman in a neat gown, whose bearing was not in the least awkward or embarrassed.

"This is Mr. Norcross, the tourist I told you about," explained Berrie.

Mrs. McFarlane extended her small hand with friendly impulse. "I'm very glad to meet you, sir. Are you going to spend some time at the Mill?"

"I don't know. I have a letter to Mr. Meeker from a friend of mine who hunted with him last year – a Mr. Sutler."

"Mr. Sutler! Oh, we know him very well. Won't you sit down?"

The interior of the house was not only well kept, but presented many evidences of refinement. A mechanical piano stood against the log wall, and books and magazines, dog-eared with use, littered the table; and Norcross, feeling the force of Nash's half-expressed criticism of his "superior," listened intently to Mrs. McFarlane's apologies for the condition of the farmyard.

"Well," said Berea, sharply, "if we're to reach Uncle Joe's for dinner we'd better be scratching the hills." And to her mother she added: "I'll pull in about dark."

The mother offered no objection to her daughter's plan, and the young people rode off together directly toward the high peaks to the east.

"I'm going by way of the cut-off," Berrie explained; and Norcross, content and unafraid, nodded in acquiescence. "Here is the line," she called a few minutes later, pointing at a sign nailed to a tree at the foot of the first wooded hill.

The notice, printed in black ink on a white square of cloth, proclaimed this to be the boundary of the Bear Tooth National Forest, and pleaded with all men to be watchful of fires. Its tone was not at all that of a strong government; it was deprecatory.

The trail, hardly more than a wood road, grew wilder and lonelier as they climbed. Cattle fed on the hillsides in scattered bands like elk. Here and there a small cabin stood on the bank of a stream; but, for the most part, the trail mounted the high slopes in perfect solitude.

The girl talked easily and leisurely, reading the brands of the ranchers, revealing the number of cattle they owned, quite as a young farmer would have done. She seemed not to be embarrassed in the slightest degree by the fact that she was guiding a strange man over a lonely road, and gave no outward sign of special interest in him till she suddenly turned to ask: "What kind of a slicker – I mean a raincoat – did you bring?"

He looked blank. "I don't believe I brought any. I've a leather shooting-jacket, however."

She shrugged her shoulders and looked up at the sky. "We're in for a storm. You'd ought 'o have a slicker, no fancy 'raincoat,' but a real old-fashioned cow-puncher's oilskin. They make a business of shedding rain. Leather's no good, neither is canvas; I've tried 'em all."

She rode on for a few minutes in silence, as if disgusted with his folly, but she was really worrying about him. "Poor chap," she said to herself. "He can't stand a chill. I ought to have thought of his slicker myself. He's helpless as a baby."

They were climbing fast now, winding upward along the bank of a stream, and the sky had grown suddenly gray, and the woodland path was dark and chill. The mountains were not less beautiful; but they were decidedly less amiable, and the youth shivered, casting an apprehensive eye at the thickening clouds.

Berea perceived something of his dismay, and, drawing rein, dismounted. Behind her saddle was a tightly rolled bundle which, being untied and shaken out, proved to be a horseman's rainproof oilskin coat. "Put this on!" she commanded.

"Oh no," he protested, "I can't take your coat."

"Yes you can! You must! Don't you worry about me, I'm used to weather. Put this on over your jacket and all. You'll need it. Rain won't hurt *me*; but it will just about finish you."

The worst of this lay in its truth, and Norcross lost all his pride of sex for the moment. A wetting would not dim this girl's splendid color, nor reduce her vitality one degree, while to him it might be a death-warrant. "You could throw me over my own horse," he admitted, in a kind of bitter admiration, and slipped the coat on, shivering with cold as he did so.

"You think me a poor excuse of a trailer, don't you?" he said, ruefully, as the thunder began to roll.

"You've got to be all made over new," she replied, tolerantly. "Stay here a year and you'll be able to stand anything."

Remounting, she again led the way with cheery cry. The rain came dashing down in fitful, misty streams; but she merely pulled the rim of her sombrero closer over her eyes, and rode steadily on, while he followed, plunged in gloom as cold and gray as the storm. The splitting crashes of thunder echoed from the high peaks like the voices of siege-guns, and the lightning stabbed here and there as though blindly seeking some hidden foe. Long veils of falling water twisted and trailed through the valleys with swishing roar.

"These mountain showers don't last long," the girl called back, her face shining like a rose. "We'll get the sun in a few minutes."

And so it turned out. In less than an hour they rode into the warm light again, and in spite of himself Norcross returned her smile, though he said: "I feel like a selfish fool. You are soaked."

"Hardly wet through," she reassured him. "My jacket and skirt turn water pretty well. I'll be dry in a jiffy. It does a body good to be wet once in a while."

The shame of his action remained; but a closer friendship was established, and as he took off the coat and handed it back to her, he again apologized. "I feel like a pig. I don't see how I came to do it. The thunder and the chill scared me, that's the truth of it. You hypnotized me into taking it. How wet you *are*!" he exclaimed, remorsefully. "You'll surely take cold."

"I never take cold," she returned. "I'm used to all kinds of weather. Don't you bother about me."

Topping a low divide the youth caught a glimpse of the range to the southeast, which took his breath. "Isn't that superb!" he exclaimed. "It's like the shining roof of the world!"

"Yes, that's the Continental Divide," she confirmed, casually; but the lyrical note which he struck again reached her heart. The men she knew had so few words for the beautiful in life. She wondered whether this man's illness had given him this refinement or whether it was native to his kind. "I'm glad he took my coat," was her thought.

She pushed on down the slope, riding hard, but it was nearly two o'clock when they drew up at Meeker's house, which was a long, low, stone structure built along the north side of the road. The place was distinguished not merely by its masonry, but also by its picket fence, which had once been whitewashed. Farm-wagons of various degrees of decay stood by the gate, and in the barn-yard plows and harrows – deeply buried by the weeds – were rusting forlornly away. A little farther up the stream the tall pipe of a sawmill rose above the firs.

A pack of dogs of all sizes and signs came clamoring to the fence, followed by a big, slovenly dressed, red-bearded man of sixty or thereabouts.

"Hello, Uncle Joe," called the girl, in offhand boyish fashion. "How are you *to-day*?"

"Howdy, girl," answered Meeker, gravely. "What brings you up here this time?"

She laughed. "Here's a boarder who wants to learn how to raise cattle."

Meeker's face lightened. "I reckon you're Mr. Norcross? I'm glad to see ye. Light off and make yourself to home. Turn your horses into the corral, the boys will feed 'em."

"Am I in America?" Norcross asked himself, as he followed the slouchy old rancher into the unkempt yard. "This certainly is a long way from New Haven."

Without ceremony Meeker led his guests directly into the dining-room, a long and rather narrow room, wherein a woman and six or seven roughly dressed young men were sitting at a rudely appointed table.

"Earth and seas!" exclaimed Mrs. Meeker. "Here's Berrie, and I'll bet that's Sutler's friend, our boarder."

"That's what, mother," admitted her husband. "Berrie brought him up."

"You'd ought 'o gone for him yourself, you big lump," she retorted.

Mrs. Meeker, who was as big as her husband, greeted Norcross warmly, and made a place for him beside her own chair.

"Highst along there, boys, and give the company a chance," she commanded, sharply. "Our dinner's turrible late to-day."

The boys – they were in reality full-grown cubs of eighteen or twenty – did as they were bid with much noise, chaffing Berrie with blunt humor. The table was covered with a red oil-cloth, and set with heavy blue-and-white china. The forks were two-tined, steel-pronged, and not very polished, and the food was of the simplest sort; but the girl seemed at home there – as she did everywhere – and was soon deep in a discussion of the price of beef, and whether it was advisable to ship now or wait a month.

Meeker read Sutler's letter, which Norcross had handed him, and, after deliberation, remarked: "All right, we'll do the best we can for you, Mr. Norcross; but we haven't any fancy accommodations."

"He don't expect any," replied Berrie. "What he needs is a little roughing it."

"There's plinty of that to be had," said one of the herders, who sat below the salt. "'is the soft life I'm nadin'."

"Pat's strong on soft jobs," said another; and Berea joined the laugh which followed this pointless joke. She appeared to be one of them, and it troubled Norcross a little. She had so little the sex feeling and demanded so few of the rights and privileges of a girl. The men all admired her, that was evident, almost too evident, and one or two of the older men felt the charm of her young womanhood too deeply even to meet her eyes; but of this Norcross was happily ignorant. Already in these two days he had acquired a distinct sense of proprietorship in her, a feeling which made him jealous of her good name.

Meeker, it turned out, was an Englishman by way of Canada, and this was his second American wife. His first had been a sister to Mrs. McFarlane. He was a man of much reading – of the periodical sort – and the big sitting-room was littered with magazines both English and American, and his talk abounded in radical and rather foolish utterances. Norcross considered it the most disorderly home he had ever seen, and yet it was not without a certain dignity. The rooms were large and amply provided with furniture of a very mixed and gaudy sort, and the table was spread with abundance.

One of the lads, Frank Meeker, a dark, intense youth of about twenty, was Berea's full cousin. The others were merely hired hands, but they all eyed the new-comer with disfavor. The fact that Berrie had brought him and that she seemed interested in him added to the effect of the smart riding-suit which he wore. "I'd like to roll him in the creek," muttered one of them to his neighbor.

This dislike Berrie perceived – in some degree – and to Frank she privately said: "Now you fellows have got to treat Mr. Norcross right. He's been very sick."

Frank maliciously grinned. "Oh, we'll treat him *right*. We won't do a thing to him!"

"Now, Frank," she warned, "if you try any of your tricks on him you'll hear from me."

"Why all this worry on your part?" he asked, keenly. "How long since you found him?"

"We rode up on the stage day before yesterday, and he seemed so kind o' blue and lonesome I couldn't help trying to chirk him up."

"How will Cliff take all this chirking business?"

"Cliff ain't my guardian – yet," she laughingly responded. "Mr. Norcross is a college man, and not used to our ways – "

"*Mister* Norcross – what's his front name?"

"Wayland."

He snorted. "Wayland! If he gets past us without being called 'pasty' he's in luck. He's a 'lunger' if there ever was one."

The girl was shrewd enough to see that the more she sought to soften the wind to her Eastern tenderfoot the more surely he was to be shorn, so she gave over her effort in that direction, and turned to the old folks. To Mrs. Meeker she privately said: "Mr. Norcross ain't used to rough ways, and he's not very rugged, you ought 'o kind o' favor him for a while."

The girl herself did not understand the vital and almost painful interest which this young man had roused in her. He was both child and poet to her, and as she watched him trying to make friends with the men, her indignation rose against their clownish offishness. She understood fully that his neat speech, his Eastern accent, together with his tailor-cut clothing and the delicacy of his table manners, would surely mark him for slaughter among the cow-hands, and the wish to shield him made her face graver than anybody had ever seen it.

"I don't feel right in leaving you here," she said, at last; "but I must be ridin'." And while Meeker ordered her horse brought out, she walked to the gate with Norcross at her side.

"I'm tremendously obliged to you," he said, and his voice was vibrant. "You have been most kind. How can I repay you?"

"Oh, that's all right," she replied, in true Western fashion. "I wanted to see the folks up here, anyhow. This is no jaunt at all for me." And, looking at her powerful figure, and feeling the trap-like grip of her cinch hand, he knew she spoke the truth.

Frank had saddled his own horse, and was planning to ride over the hill with her; but to this she objected. "I'm going to leave Pete here for Mr. Norcross to ride," she said, "and there's no need of your going."

Frank's face soured, and with instant perception of the effect her refusal might have on the fortunes of the stranger, she reconsidered.

"Oh, come along! I reckon you want to get shut of some mean job."

And so she rode away, leaving her ward to adjust himself to his new and strange surroundings as best he could, and with her going the whole valley darkened for the convalescent.

III
WAYLAND RECEIVES A WARNING

Distance is no barrier to gossip. It amazed young Norcross to observe how minutely the ranchers of the valley followed one another's most intimate domestic affairs. Not merely was each man in full possession of the color and number of every calf in his neighbor's herd, it seemed that nothing could happen in the most remote cabin and remain concealed. Any event which broke the monotony of their life loomed large, and in all matters of courtship curiosity was something more than keen, it was remorseless.

Living miles apart, and riding the roads but seldom, these lonely gossips tore to tatters every scrap of rumor. No citizen came or went without being studied, characterized, accounted for, and every woman was scrutinized as closely as a stray horse, and if there was within her, the slightest wayward impulse some lawless centaur came to know it, to exult over it, to make test of it. Her every word, her minutest expression of a natural coquetry was enlarged upon as a sign of weakness, of yielding. Every personable female was the focus of a natural desire, intensified by lonely brooding on the part of the men.

It was soon apparent to the Eastern observer that the entire male population for thirty miles around not only knew McFarlane's girl; but that every unmarried man – and some who were both husbands and fathers – kept a deeply interested eye upon her daily motion, and certain shameless ones openly boasted among their fellows of their intention to win her favor, while the shy ones reveled in secret exultation over every chance meeting with her. She was the topic of every lumber-camp, and the shining lure of every dance to which the ranch hands often rode over long and lonely trails.

Part of this intense interest was due, naturally, to the scarcity of desirable women, but a larger part was called out by Berea's frank freedom of manner. Her ready camaraderie was taken for carelessness, and the candid grip of her hand was often misunderstood; and yet most of the men respected her, and some feared her. After her avowed choice of Clifford Belden they all kept aloof, for he was hot-tempered and formidably swift to avenge an insult.

At the end of a week Norcross found himself restless and discontented with the Meekers. He was tired of fishing, tired of the old man's endless arguments, and tired of the obscene cow-hands. The men around the mill did not interest him, and their Saturday night spree at the saloon disgusted him. The one person who piqued his curiosity was Landon, the ranger who was stationed not far away, and who could be seen occasionally riding by on a handsome black horse. There was something in his bearing, in his neat and serviceable drab uniform, which attracted the convalescent, and on Sunday morning he decided to venture a call, although Frank Meeker had said the ranger was a "grouch."

His cabin, a neat log structure, stood just above the road on a huge natural terrace of grassy boulders, and the flag which fluttered from a tall staff before it could be seen for several miles – the bright sign of federal control, the symbol of law and order, just as the saloon and the mill were signs of lawless vice and destructive greed. Around the door flowers bloomed and kittens played; while at the door of the dive broken bottles, swarms of flies, and heaps of refuse menaced every corner, and the mill immured itself in its own debris like a foul beast.

It was strangely moving to come upon this flower-like place and this garden in the wilderness. A spring, which crept from the high wall back of "the station" (as these ranger headquarters are called), gave its delicious water into several winding ditches, trickled musically down the other side of the terrace in little life-giving cascades, and so finally, reunited in a single current, fell away

into the creek. It was plain that loving care, and much of it, had been given to this tiny system of irrigation.

The cabin's interior pleased Wayland almost as much as the garden. It was built of pine logs neatly matched and hewed on one side. There were but two rooms – one which served as sleeping-chamber and office, and one which was at once kitchen and dining-room. In the larger room a quaint fireplace with a flat arch, a bunk, a table supporting a typewriter, and several shelves full of books made up the furnishing. On the walls hung a rifle, a revolver in its belt, a couple of uniforms, and a yellow oilskin raincoat.

The ranger, spurred and belted, with his cuffs turned back, was pounding the typewriter when Wayland appeared at the open door; but he rose with grave courtesy. "Come in," he said, and his voice had a pleasant inflection.

"I'm interrupting."

"Nothing serious, just a letter. There's no hurry. I'm always glad of an excuse to rest from this job." He was at once keenly interested in his visitor, for he perceived in him the gentleman and, of course, the alien.

Wayland, with something of the feeling of a civilian reporting to an officer, explained his presence in the neighborhood.

"I've heard of you," responded the ranger, "and I've been hoping you'd look in on me. The Supervisor's daughter has just written me to look after you. She said you were not very well."

Again Wayland protested that he was not a consumptive, only a student who needed mountain air; but he added: "It is very kind of Miss McFarlane to think of me."

"Oh, she thinks of everybody," the young fellow declared. "She's one of the most unselfish creatures in the world."

Something in the music of this speech, and something in the look of the ranger's eyes, caused Wayland to wonder if here were not still another of Berrie's subjects. He became certain of it as the young officer went on, with pleasing frankness, and it was not long before he had conveyed to Wayland his cause for sadness. "She's engaged to a man that is not her equal. In a certain sense no man is her equal; but Belden is a pretty hard type, and I believe, although I can't prove it, that he is part owner of the saloon over there."

"How does that saloon happen to be here?"

"It's on patented land – a so-called 'placer claim' – experts have reported against it. McFarlane has protested against it, but nothing is done. The mill is also on deeded land, and together they are a plague spot. I'm their enemy, and they know it; and they've threatened to burn me out. Of course they won't do that, but they're ready to play any kind of trick on me."

"I can well believe that, for I am getting my share of practical jokes at Meeker's."

"They're not a bad lot over there – only just rowdy. I suppose they're initiating you," said Landon.

"I didn't come out here to be a cowboy," responded Norcross. "But Frank Meeker seems to be anxious to show me all the good old cowboy courtesies. On Monday he slipped a burr under my horse's saddle, and I came near to having my neck broken. Then he or some one else concealed a frog in my bed, and fouled my hair-brushes. In fact, I go to sleep each night in expectation of some new attack; but the air and the riding are doing me a great deal of good, and so I stay."

"Come and bunk with me," urged Landon. "I'll be glad to have you. I get terribly lonesome here sometimes, although I'm supposed to have the best station in the forest. Bring your outfit and stay as long as you like."

This offer touched Norcross deeply. "That's very kind of you; but I guess I'll stick it out. I hate to let those hoodlums drive me out."

"All right, but come and see me often. I get so blue some days I wonder what's the use of it all. There's one fatal condition about this ranger business – it's a solitary job, it cuts out marriage

for most of us. Many of the stations are fifteen or twenty miles from a post-office; then, too, the lines of promotion are few. I guess I'll have to get out, although I like the work. Come in any time and take a snack with me."

Thereafter Wayland spent nearly every day with the ranger, either in his cabin or riding the trail, and during these hours confidence grew until at last Landon confessed that his unrest arose from his rejection by Berrie.

"She was not to blame. She's so kind and free with every one, I thought I had a chance. I was conceited enough to feel sorry for the other fellows, and now I can't even feel sorry for myself. I'm just dazed and hanging to the ropes. She was mighty gentle about it – you know how sunny her face is – well, she just got grave and kind o' faint-voiced, and said – Oh, you know what she said! She let me know there was another man. I didn't ask her who, and when I found out, I lost my grip entirely. At first I thought I'd resign and get out of the country; but I couldn't do it – I can't yet. The chance of seeing her – of hearing from her once in a while – she never writes except on business for her father; but – you'll laugh – I can't see her signature without a tremor." He smiled, but his eyes were desperately sad. "I ought to resign, because I can't do my work as well as I ought to. As I ride the trail I'm thinking of her. I sit here half the night writing imaginary letters to her. And when I see her, and she takes my hand in hers – you know what a hand she has – my mind goes blank. Oh, I'm crazy! I admit it. I didn't know such a thing could happen to me; but it has."

"I suppose it's being alone so much," Wayland started to argue, but the other would not have it so.

"No, it's the girl herself. She's not only beautiful in body, she's all sweetness and sincerity in mind. There isn't a petty thing about her. And her happy smile – do you know, I have times when I resent that smile? How can she be so happy without me? That's crazy, too, but I think it, sometimes. Then I think of the time when she will not smile – when that brute Belden will begin to treat her as he does his sisters – then I get murderous."

As Wayland listened to this outpouring he wondered at the intensity of the forester's passion. He marveled, too, at Berrie's choice, for there was something fine and high in Landon's worship. A college man with a mining engineer's training, he should go high in the service. "He made the mistake of being too precipitate as a lover," concluded Wayland. "His forthright courtship repelled her."

Meanwhile his own troubles increased. Frank's dislike had grown to an impish vindictiveness, and if the old man Meeker had any knowledge of his son's deviltries, he gave no sign. Mrs. Meeker, however, openly reproved the scamp.

"You ought to be ashamed of worrying a sick man," she protested, indignantly.

"He ain't so sick as all that; and, besides, he needs the starch taken out of him," was the boy's pitiless answer.

"I don't know why I stay," Wayland wrote to Berea. "I'm disgusted with the men up here – they're all tiresome except Landon – but I hate to slink away, and besides, the country is glorious. I'd like to come down and see you this week. May I do so? Please send word that I may."

She did not reply, and wondering whether she had received his letter or not, he mounted his horse one beautiful morning and rode away up the trail with a sense of elation, of eager joy, with intent to call upon her at the ranch as he went by.

Hardly had he vanished among the pines when Clifford Belden rode in from his ranch on Hat Creek, and called at Meeker's for his mail.

Frank Meeker was in the office, and as he both feared and disliked this big contemptuous young cattleman, he set to work to make him jealous.

"You want to watch this one-lung boarder of ours," he warned, with a grin. "He's been writing to Berrie, and he's just gone down to see her. His highfalutin ways, and his fine white hands, have put her on the slant."

Belden fixed a pair of cold, gray-blue eyes on his tormentor, and said: "You be careful of your tongue or I'll put *you* on the slant."

"I'm her own cousin," retorted Frank. "I reckon I can say what I please about her. I don't want that dude Easterner to cut you out. She guided him over here, and gave him her slicker to keep him dry, and I can see she's terribly taken with him. She's headstrong as a mule, once she gets started, and if she takes a notion to Norcross it's all up with you."

"I'm not worrying," retorted Belden.

"You'd better be. I was down there the other day, and it 'peared like she couldn't talk of anything else but Mister Norcross, Mister Norcross, till I was sick of his name."

An hour later Belden left the mill and set off up the trail behind Norcross, his face fallen into stern lines. Frank writhed in delight. "There goes Cliff, hot under the collar, chasing Norcross. If he finds out that Berrie is interested in him, he'll just about wring that dude's neck."

Meanwhile Wayland was riding through the pass with lightening heart, his thought dwelling on the girl at the end of his journey. Aside from Landon and Nash, she was the one soul in all this mountain world in whom he took the slightest interest. Her pity still hurt him, but he hoped to show her such change of color, such gain in horsemanship, that she could no longer consider him an invalid. His mind kept so closely to these interior matters that he hardly saw the path, but his horse led him safely back with precise knowledge and eager haste.

As he reached the McFarlane ranch it seemed deserted of men, but a faint column of smoke rising from the roof of the kitchen gave evidence of a cook, and at his knock Berrie came to the door with a boyish word of frank surprise and pleasure. She was dressed in a blue-and-white calico gown with the collar turned in and the sleeves rolled up; but she seemed quite unembarrassed, and her pleasure in his coming quite repaid him for his long and tiresome ride.

"I've been wondering about you," she said. "I'm mighty glad to see you. How do you stand it?"

"You got my letter?"

"I did – and I was going to write and tell you to come down, but I've had some special work to do at the office."

She took the horse's rein from him, and together they started toward the stables. As she stepped over and around the old hoofs and meat-bones – which littered the way – without comment, Wayland again wondered at her apparent failure to realize the disgusting disorder of the yard. "Why don't she urge the men to clean it up?" he thought.

This action of stabling the horses – a perfectly innocent and natural one for her – led one of the hands, a coarse-minded sneak, to watch them from a corral. "I wonder how Cliff would like that?" he evilly remarked.

Berea was frankly pleased to see Wayland, and spoke of the improvement which had taken place in him. "You're looking fine," she said, as they were returning to the house. "But how do you get on with the boys?"

"Not very well," he admitted. "They seem to have it in for me. It's a constant fight."

"How about Frank?"

"He's the worst of them all. He never speaks to me that he doesn't insult me. I don't know why. I've tried my best to get into his good graces, but I can't. Your uncle I like, and Mrs. Meeker is very kind; but all the others seem to be sworn enemies. I don't think I could stand it if it weren't for Landon. I spend a good deal of time with him."

Her face grew grave. "I reckon you got started wrong," she said at last. "They'll like you better when you get browned up, and your clothes get dirty – you're a little too fancy for them just now."

"But you see," he said, "I'm not trying for their admiration. I haven't the slightest ambition to shine as a cow-puncher, and if those fellows are fair samples I don't want anybody to mistake me for one."

"Don't let that get around," she smilingly replied. "They'd run you out if they knew you despised them."

"I've come down here to confer with you," he declared, as they reached the door. "I don't believe I want any more of their company. What's the use? As you say, I've started wrong with them, and I don't see any prospect of getting right; and, besides, I like the rangers better. Landon thinks I might work into the service. I wonder if I could? It would give me something to do."

She considered a moment. "We'll think about that. Come into the kitchen. I'm cook to-day, mother's gone to town."

The kitchen was clean and ample, and the delicious odor of new-made bread filled it with cheer. As the girl resumed her apron, Wayland settled into a chair with a sigh of content. "I like this," he said aloud. "There's nothing cowgirl about you now, you're the Anglo-Saxon housewife. You might be a Michigan or Connecticut girl at this moment."

Her cheeks were ruddy with the heat, and her eyes intent on her work; but she caught enough of his meaning to be pleased with it. "Oh, I have to take a hand at the pots and pans now and then. I can't give all my time to the service; but I'd like to."

He boldly announced his errand. "I wish you'd take me to board? I'm sure your cooking would build up my shattered system a good deal quicker than your aunt's."

She laughed, but shook her head. "You ought to be on the hills riding hard every day. What you need is the high country and the air of the pines."

"I'm not feeling any lack of scenery or pine-tree air," he retorted. "I'm perfectly satisfied right here. Civilized bread and the sight of you will do me more good than boiled beans and camp bread. I hate to say it, but the Meeker menu runs largely to beef. Moreover, just seeing you would help my recovery."

She became self-conscious at this, and he hastened to add:

"Not that I'm really sick. Mrs. Meeker, like yourself, persists in treating me as if I were. I'm feeling fine – perfectly well, only I'm not as rugged as I want to be."

She had read that victims of the white plague always talk in this cheerful way about themselves, and she worked on without replying, and this gave him an excellent opportunity to study her closely. She was taller than most women and lithely powerful. There was nothing delicate about her – nothing spirituelle – on the contrary, she was markedly full-veined, cheerful and humorous, and yet she had responded several times to an allusive phrase with surprising quickness. She did so now as he remarked: "Somebody, I think it was Lowell, has said 'Nature is all very well for a vacation, but a poor substitute for the society of good men and women.' It's beautiful up at the mill, but I want some one to enjoy it with, and there is no one to turn to, except Landon, and he's rather sad and self-absorbed – you know why. If I were here – in the valley – you and I could ride together now and then, and you could show me all the trails. Why not let me come here and board? I'm going to ask your mother, if I may not do so?"

Quite naturally he grew more and more personal. He told her of his father, the busy director of a lumber company, and of his mother, sickly and inert.

"She ought never to have married," he said, with darkened brow. "Not one of her children has even a decent constitution. I'm the most robust of them all, and I must seem a pretty poor lot to you. However, I wasn't always like this, and if that young devil, Frank Meeker, hadn't tormented me out of my sleep, I would have shown you still greater improvement. Don't you see that it is your duty to let me stay here where I can build up on your cooking?"

She turned this aside. "Mother don't think much of my cooking. She says I can handle a brandin'-iron a heap better than I can a rollin'-pin."

"You certainly can ride," he replied, with admiring accent. "I shall never forget the picture you made that first time I saw you racing to intercept the stage. Do you *know* how fine you are physically? You're a wonder." She uttered some protest, but he went on: "When I think of my mother and sisters in comparison with you, they seem like caricatures of women. I know I oughtn't to say such things of my mother – she really is an exceptional person – but a woman should be something more than mind. My sisters could no more do what you do than a lame duck can lead a ballet. I suppose it is because I have had to live with a lot of ailing women all my life that I feel as I do toward you. I worship your health and strength. I really do. Your care of me on that trip was very sweet – and yet it stung."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know you didn't, and I'm not complaining. I'm only wishing I could come here and be 'bossed' by you until I could hold my own against any weather. You make me feel just as I used to do when I went to a circus and watched the athletes, men and women, file past me in the sawdust. They seemed like demigods. As I sit here now I have a fierce desire to be as well, as strong, as full of life as you are. I hate being thin and timid. You have the physical perfection that queens ought to have."

Her face was flushed with inward heat as she listened to his strange words, which sprang, she feared, from the heart of a man hopelessly ill; but she again protested. "It's all right to be able to throw a rope and ride a mean horse, but you have got something else – something I can never get. Learning is a thousand times finer than muscle."

"Learning does not compensate for nine-inch shoulders and spindle legs," he answered. "But I'm going to get well. Knowing you has given me renewed desire to be a man. I'm going to ride and rough it, and sleep out of doors till I can follow you anywhere. You'll be proud of me before the month is out. But I'm going to cut the Meeker outfit. I won't subject myself to their vulgarities another day. Why should I? It's false pride in me to hang on up there any longer."

"Of course you can come here," she said. "Mother will be glad to have you, although our ranch isn't a bit pretty. Perhaps father will send you out with one of the rangers as a fire-guard. I'll ask him to-night."

"I wish you would. I like these foresters. What I've seen of them. I wouldn't mind serving under a man like Landon. He's fine."

Upon this pleasant conference Cliff Belden unexpectedly burst. Pushing the door open with a slam, he confronted Berrie with dark and angry face.

"Why, Cliff, where did you come from?" she asked, rising in some confusion. "I didn't hear you ride up."

"Apparently not," he sneeringly answered. "I reckon you were too much occupied."

She tried to laugh away his black mood. "That's right, I was. I'm chief cook to-day. Come in and sit down. Mother's gone to town, and I'm playing her part," she explained, ignoring his sullen displeasure. "Cliff, this is Mr. Norcross, who is visiting Uncle Joe. Mr. Norcross, shake hands with Mr. Belden." She made this introduction with some awkwardness, for her lover's failure to even say, "Howdy," informed her that his jealous heart was aflame, and she went on, quickly: "Mr. Norcross dropped in on his way to the post-office, and I'm collecting a snack for him."

Recognizing Belden's claims upon the girl, Wayland rose. "I must be going. It's a long ride over the hill."

"Come again soon," urged Berrie; "father wants to see you."

"Thank you. I will look in very shortly," he replied, and went out with such dignity as he could command, feeling, however, very much like a dog that has been kicked over the threshold.

Closing the door behind him, Belden turned upon the girl. "What's that consumptive 'dogie' doing here? He 'peared to be very much at home with you – too dern much at home!"

She was prepared for his displeasure, but not for words like these. She answered, quietly: “He just dropped in on his way to town, and he’s not a dogie!” She resented his tone as well as his words.

“I’ve heard about you taking him over to Meeker’s and lending him your only slicker,” he went on; “but I didn’t expect to find him sittin’ here like he owned you and the place. You’re taking altogether too much pains with him. Can’t he put his own horse out? Do you have to go to the stable with him? You never did have any sense about your actions with men. You’ve all along been too free of your reputation, and now I’m going to take care of it for you. I won’t have you nursin’ this runt any longer!”

She perceived now the full measure of his base rage, and her face grew pale and set. “You’re making a perfect fool of yourself, Cliff,” she said, with portentous calmness.

“Am I?” he asked.

“You sure are, and you’ll see it yourself by and by. You’ve no call to get wire-edged about Mr. Norcross. He’s not very strong. He’s just getting well of a long sickness. I knew a chill would finish him, that’s why I gave him my slicker. It didn’t hurt me, and maybe it saved his life. I’d do it again if necessary.”

“Since when did you start a hospital for Eastern tenderfeet?” he sneered; then his tone changed to one of downright command. “You want to cut this all out, I tell you! I won’t have any more of it! The boys up at the mill are all talkin’ about your interest in this little whelp, and I’m getting the branding-iron from every one I meet. Sam saw you go into the barn with that dude, and *that* would have been all over the country to-morrow, if I hadn’t told him I’d sew his mouth up if he said a word about it. Of course, I don’t think you mean anything by this coddlin’.”

“Oh, thank you,” she interrupted, with flaming, quick, indignant fury. “That’s mighty nice of you. I went to the barn to show Mr. Norcross where to stall his horse. I didn’t know Sam was here.”

He sneered: “No, I bet you didn’t.”

She fired at this. “Come now! Spit it out! Something nasty is in your mind. Go on! What have I done? What makes you so hot?”

He began to weaken. “I don’t accuse you of anything. I – but I – ”

“Yes you do – in your heart you distrust me – you just as much as said so!”

He was losing his high air of command. “Never mind what I said, Berrie, I – ”

She was blazing now. “But I *do* mind – I mind a whole lot – I didn’t think it of you,” she added, as she realized his cheapness, his coarseness. “I didn’t suppose you could even *think* such things of me. I don’t like it,” she repeated, and her tone hardened, “and I guess you’d better pull out of here – for good. If you’ve no more faith in me than that, I want you to go and never come back.”

“You don’t mean that!”

“Yes, I do! You’ve shown this yellow streak before, and I’m tired of it. This is the limit. I’m done with you.”

She stood between tears and benumbing anger now, and he was scared. “Don’t say that, Berrie!” he pleaded, trying to put his arm about her.

“Keep away from me!” She dashed his hands aside. “I hate you. I never want to see you again!” She ran into her own room and slammed the door behind her.

Belden stood for a long time with his back against the wall, the heat of his resentment utterly gone, an empty, aching place in his heart. He called her twice, but she made no answer, and so, at last, he mounted his horse and rode away.

IV
THE SUPERVISOR OF THE FOREST

Young Norcross, much as he admired Berrie, was not seeking to exchange her favor for her lover's enmity, and he rode away with an uneasy feeling of having innocently made trouble for himself, as well as for a fine, true-hearted girl. "What a good friendly talk we were having," he said, regretfully, "and to think she is to marry that big, scowling brute. How could she turn Landon down for a savage like that?"

He was just leaving the outer gate when Belden came clattering up and reined his horse across the path and called out: "See here, you young skunk, you're a poor, white-livered tenderfoot, and I can't bust you as I would a full-grown man, but I reckon you better not ride this trail any more."

"Why not?" inquired Wayland.

Belden glared. "Because I tell you so. Your sympathy-hunting game has just about run into the ground. You've worked this baby dodge about long enough. You're not so almighty sick as you put up to be, and you'd better hunt some other cure for lonesomeness, or I'll just about cave your chest in."

All this was shockingly plain talk for a slender young scholar to listen to, but Norcross remained calm. "I think you're unnecessarily excited," he remarked. "I have no desire to make trouble. I'm considering Miss Berea, who is too fine to be worried by us."

His tone was conciliating, and the cowman, in spite of himself, responded to it. "That's why I advise you to go. She was all right till you came. Colorado's a big place, and there are plenty other fine ranges for men of your complaint – why not try Routt County? This is certain, you can't stay in the same valley with my girl. I serve notice of that."

"You're making a prodigious ass of yourself," observed Wayland, with calm contempt.

"You think so – do you? Well, I'll make a jack-rabbit out of you if I find you on this ranch again. You've worked on my girl in some way till she's jest about quit me. I don't see how you did it, you measly little pup, but you surely have turned her against me!" His rage burst into flame as he thought of her last words. "If you were so much as half a man I'd break you in two pieces right now; but you're not, you're nothing but a dead-on-the-hoof lunger, and there's nothing to do but run you out. So take this as your final notice. You straddle a horse and head east and keep a-ridin', and if I catch you with my girl again, I'll deal you a whole hatful of misery – now that's right!"

Thereupon, with a final glance of hate in his face, he whirled his horse and galloped away, leaving Norcross dumb with resentment, intermingled with wonder.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.