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# THE MAGPIE'S NEST

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DREAMY, and living much in the dreams she fashioned from the old romances she read, Hope Fielding lived in a world unreal, but real to her.

To her father's lonely ranch in Alberta came three strangers talking of the railroad which was coming through; one of these, Conroy Edgerton, who had a daughter about Hope's age, sent her a box of chocolates. When the railroad did come, Mr. Fielding, who was a path-maker, and not a money-maker, moved back farther north.

Hope was ambitious and needed money to pay her way through the Normal School. She went to the city and engaged as housemaid in a hotel where Evan Hardy—one of the men—was boarding. Here Conroy Edgerton came, and she recognized him instantly. He was interested and they met a few times.

Jim Sanderson—another boarder—had been pursuing Hope for months, and finding her alone, made himself so objectionable, that she knocked him down with the butt end of a revolver. Then she left the hotel.

## CHAPTER V.

IT should have been spring, but the streets were grey and dry, and the wind brought dust instead of the scent of flowers. Dust—dust—it stung her eyes, and the taste of it was on her lips. She felt it in her hair.

The town lay in a cup of the hills, where the river wound a lazy half-circle. It had just begun to climb the slopes. At the edge hovered a fringe of skeleton dwellings still building; then, abruptly, without even a sown field to frame it all, the prairie began. The houses were shriekingly new, painted garishly, or naked to the sharp sunlight, save on one or two short streets. On these they were small and low, of nondescript architecture, sheltered gratefully behind rows of soft maple and cottonwood, and spreading a lapful of vivid green lawn. Their tones had softened in the score of years since they had constituted the whole town; they alone looked homelike, lived in.

"If I only had a little sackcloth," mused Hope, a corner of her mouth drawn up quizzically. "I shall be twenty-one to-morrow!" Her mind hopped about inconsequentially. Standing on the schoolhouse steps, she looked up and down the empty and profitless streets. The children had dispersed.

Twenty-one seemed very old. "Are you going home?" Mary Dark, coming up behind her suddenly, slipped an arm through hers. Hope started, turned, and smiled, but said nothing. "I came to take you to Mrs. Patten's for tea," Mary added. Mary was of a pale darkness, with a sorrowful, impish face.

"I—I don't want to—now," murmured Hope, doubtfully. "I want—to run away." Her eyes searched the horizon of dun-coloured hills that met a pale, clear sky.

"Where to?" asked Mary. "And with whom?" "Everywhere—nobody," said Hope. "All, all alone. Or I shall explode! Do you know that somewhere people are doing things—inventing, exploring, writing, thinking? They've found the North Pole, and discovered the X-rays, and built aeroplanes. We sit here, like chickens in a coop. Mentally, we're in the Dark Ages. I want to go and crowd in, to be part of it all, to understand it. Things are happening, and I'm not there!" Her voice was almost a wail. "I want to be in the middle of the big commotion, to clutch the tail of the comet. I want an X-ray for breakfast. I want to fly. I want to go where real, new ideas are being thrown around like brickbats. I don't care if one does hit me behind the ear. When I left home, it wasn't for this." She waved her hand contemptuously. "Want to watch the wheels go 'round.' And I thought I

could do it—get near to life. But if this is all, why didn't I marry one of those tow-headed Swedes on the next ranch? I tell you, I want to see the world. And I don't mean simply cafes, and glittery, over-dressed people."

"This is the world," said Mary Dark, wisely. "I've seen it."

"Like the Sydenhams did?" asked Hope scornfully. "You've heard, of course; you know them—I don't. They came back from England last week, after spending a week there. Went over to 'do' the Continent for six months. They never saw the Continent. They've lived here all their lives, haven't they? And they came back—here—said 'there was nothing over there, anyway!'"

"Yes, I heard," said Mary, laughing. "But what ails you? Quarrelled with Ned?"

"M-m-mph," Hope answered, with an indescribable sound and a shrug. "Nor with Tom nor Dick nor Harry nor with whatever their names are. I wish there were even some real men here. Clerks—and retired grocers—and remittance men—and things—"

"But you flirt with them," Mary reminded her.

"I suffer fools—sometimes," said Hope, disingenuously. "Oh, I'm suffocating. I really cannot bear ever to see one of them again. I'm almost twenty-one," she repeated hopelessly. "Is life really like this? I thought it would be all one glorious adventure, not an endurance contest in boredom—slow starvation."

"Come to tea, you idiot," answered Mary, affectionately. "Fate put a little too much yeast in your lump of dough, I fancy. It will fizz out by-and-by."

"You," said Hope, studying the other's half-veiled eyes and close mouth, "have had your adventures. So you sneer at me. Look, there's a naughtymobile! I want a ride. Oh!"

"I've had nothing," said Mary Dark. "And you're flirting with that chauffeur! Hope, you wretch!"

"Not," denied Hope, smiling sidelong. "I met him at the rink last night. I didn't know he was a chauffeur. I thought he was an oyster. He never speaks. But his eyelashes are remarkable."

"You are an abandoned wretch," remarked Mary, severely. "I shall leave you here." She turned on the corner, but through her back hair she could see that the auto had drawn up to the curb.

"Want a ride?" asked the boy of the eyelashes, laconically, in a rich, husky drawl.

"I do," said Hope, and scrambled up beside him. "Whose car is this?"

"Mine, maybe," said the chauffeur, still drawing, and with a jerk of his wrist he sent the glittering monster hurtling down the road. It was true that he had remarkable eyelashes, and his warm olive cheeks had a down on them like a ripe peach, and his eyes were dark and ingenuous, like a child's. His leather cap and plain serge coat became him almost too much. Like Hope, he was just past twenty—in years. "Where to?" he enquired, leaning back.

"Anywhere," she said ecstatically, taking off her hat and putting it under her feet. They slid out along the river road, through the one bit of beauty nearby. The dust streamed out behind them, but they breathed clean air. Out of sight of habitations, the boy put his arm about her.

"Don't be a pest," said Hope, crossly. He removed it. "All right," he agreed. "Didn't know."

"I've only met you once," she said. "I even forget your name."

"Name's Allen Kirby," he drawled. "And I'll stick around, if that will help." His face was expressionless; Hope laughed despite herself.

"Whose car is this?" she demanded again.

"I'll tell you—next time," he promised.

"But there might not be a next time."

"Won't you come?" He turned toward her, watching the road out of the corner of his eye. "Perhaps you fly too high for a chauffeur. You don't look like a school teacher."

"How did you know?"

"I spotted you a week ago. You look like a big-town girl. I asked to meet you. Drove around six times to-day before you came out. Don't know any other girls here."

It was a long speech for him. It astonished Hope immeasurably. She plied him with questions as they fled through the waning afternoon. Sometimes he answered; sometimes he turned the point, drawing, immobile with the stillness of one who always watches. She forgot she had been bored. Here was a most authentic individual. All class distinctions meant no more to her than a diploma. Besides, in those earlier days chauffeurs were outside of class. They were adventurers, a new species. They drove on and on, and back through the dusk again, and she was sorry it must end. He put her down, at her request, at Mrs. Patten's door, and said negligently, "To-morrow," and purred off again.

Mrs. Patten lay on a wicker *chaise longue*, in a black, straight gown and much comfort, nibbling Graham biscuits and talking gossip with Mary Dark, who smoked interminable cigarettes and listened. She had eyes like Mary's in that they were full of surface merriment with deep wells of shadow below. But hers were of a rare hazel-grey, and her features were modelled with classic regularity. If she was not noted as an unusually lovely woman, it was because she was too indifferent; she wore her beauty casually, as though, indeed, it truly belonged to her, rather than like a seller parading her wares. She must have been thirty—but she had the same frank grace about that. And, though it was not so apparent, Lisbeth Patten had not only the courage of her convictions, but the courage to run counter to them. There were things very fine and very foolish about her; she was compounded of tact and indiscretion; of convention and generosity; and neither friend nor enemy knew why they were so.

Now, she fixed Hope with one eloquent glance, and Hope wriggled uncomfortably. It was impossible to defend without being attacked. Mary Dark smiled with wicked humour. The three were friends, somewhat in the manner of castaways on a desert island. At heart they loved each other.

"Have a good time?" asked Mary, casting the gauntlet. "I did," said Hope.

"Eleanor Travers was here this afternoon," said Mrs. Patten, pouring, with a peculiarly refined and graceful gesture, a cup of tea quite black and cold and giving it to Hope absently. "She was asking about you, Hope. I think she means to call."

Hope understood, and yet did not understand. She understood the significance of the implication, but it would never be possible for her to see, with Mrs. Patten's eyes, the importance of it. Miss Travers was conspicuous in the town's inevitable "younger set." She "assisted" at half the social functions, and was an indispensable on-looker at the other half. Her three new gowns a season were described thirty times during that season in the weekly budget of society items in the one afternoon paper. Hope had been in the young city two years now, and said so, though without any especial animus.

"I know, dear," said Mrs. Patten. "But people are just beginning to know you." Again Hope understood.

"I don't think so," she (Continued on page 49)