

# The Magpie's Nest

By ISABEL PATTERSON

Illustrated by Mary Essex

## CHAPTER XXIII.



HEY strolled back to the hotel and dined, sufficiently if not luxuriously, on the verandah. Moths fluttered around the lamp, which was hardly needed. The sun had gone down, its lingering fires in the West dying slowly. There was no moon. The air remained soft, and yet had a salty tang.

"Listen to the waves," said Hope, leaning her chin on her hands and leaving her coffee neglected. "I am going down to talk to them. They've just been to Europe." He insisted on taking all the available wraps, and followed her. The sun was settling down, and the tide was coming in again, murmuringly musical; the soft swish of her feet and the edge of her gown seemed an overtone of a great muted symphony.

They shared his tweed topcoat, spread on the ground, and she was silent, her chin on her hands again, her profile palely indistinct, looking out to sea, where was nothing visible. At last she moved, put down her hand. Hardly conscious of his own action, he laid his over it.

"I told you—" she began, her voice uncertain, soft, the voice one might expect from that little indistinct white face which was yet warm to his gaze. "This is—silly."

"You said—we should be—"

"No—I didn't mean—What did you say?"

"I don't know," he said quietly, as if it were just then out of his power to interrogate himself, retrace time and recall what had been.

"Friends," she said, as if she were questioning something, not themselves. And again, as he did not answer, and she felt herself swayed by some invisible force and there pressed on her heart the knowledge that to take her hand from his would destroy the strange beauty of the night and mar the rhythm of the little lapping waves and cover her with loneliness and the dark, she cried out softly: "You were talking nonsense—And this is—foolishness!"

"No," he said. "I wasn't—I will do anything you say." But he put his arms about her, not closely, but just so she was aware of their restrained strength. She remembered the smooth, powerful play of his shoulders, how the muscles rippled and flexed under her hand, when he swam in with her. And the stark reality of him, the sense of him as flesh and blood instead of the sublimated figure out of an old tale that she had loved in Tony Yorke, took her breath. She was no longer safe behind the veil of her own illusions, a Princess of the Glass Tower, ardent only in imagination, cold to her lover's lips. Seeing Nick human, she must needs see herself also in the same case; and she knew that if she would make the venture, as she had that afternoon, she had no just right to look to him for help—Even if he were stronger—and why should he be?—For the tide had them again; she felt it; it drew her with that implacable, irresistible ease. The waves were sharply sweet, closing over her head, as they reached hands to one another and felt the flood engulf them. Whether they kissed or not, they hardly knew.

"Ah, no, no," she cried again, but it was to herself she spoke, close against his shoulder. "I am sorry—what did we say?"

The word was magic to unlock his clasp. "Don't be sorry—my fault—I'll go now—" So much she heard, and without his touching her, she could feel him call on all his healthy young strength, gathering himself up tensely to breast the tide again. He would go away, if she said he must—if she would send him away—

For the space of a heart beat, her brain was clear as crystal, and she saw the forfeit, and the gain, as if they had been held in either hand. Nothing palpable, remote, no stuff of dreams, but the commonplace essentials of life from day to day, were in the balance now. Would she put in pawn the countenance of the world, order, freedom of all small things, for this—The blood flowed hot to her heart. The prudence that would draw back and bargain now, when she had been so lavish for the tinsel imitation, struck her as contemptible.

"Oh-h-h," she said, the word spilling into a little laugh, "what does it matter what we said? I forget—?" She held out both her hands to him, and to life, seizing her immortal moment without fear.

THE Chinese have a naive way of calling their children by some derogatory nickname, during their tender years, thus pretending before the gods that the treasure of their hearts lies elsewhere. We laugh at this, but sometimes imitate it.

Hope, her head bent over her drawing-board, appeared to be entirely absorbed in her work. If she admitted any extraneous thought, it was for other material affairs. She did not feel well. She had got a chill from her belated swim. She had hated rising that morning, and came home with unspeakable relief. She felt very cold all day, and now a burning languor possessed her. But the day's work must be finished. A natural tenacity



Hope opened the door and then leaned against the wall. Nick noticed that first. "What is the matter, dear? Are you sick?"

and single-mindedness, which amounted almost to stupidity, helped her to concentrate. There was nothing in her attitude that indicated she might be waiting for anything or anyone.

Yet, when the doorbell rang, she sprang up instantly, and went rather unsteadily but quickly down the hall. Mrs. Hassard was out. Hope opened the door, and then leaned against the wall. Nick noticed that first.

"What's the matter, dear?" he asked. "Are you sick?"

"Tired," she said, watching him with that curious tentative look he had come to know. He looked down the hall first, and then without words picked her up and carried her back to her room with the greatest ease. As if that served instead to tell her what she sought to know, she broke into laughter.

"Heap big Injun," she remarked approvingly. "For a little man, that is."

"Ha!" he said, ferociously, "a little man, am I? You snipet—apologize!" He put her up on his shoulder and she wound her fingers in his hair and drummed on his chest with her heels. One of her shabby blue satin slippers fell off.

"For a mejum-sized man," she amended meekly. "Lemme down; I'm a sick woman." So he laid her on the couch in a careful bundle, picked up the slipper, and put it on with a kiss.

"All worn out," she said thoughtfully. "Look; my toe is coming out of the other one." He struck an operatic attitude, and sang, in a tragic baritone:

"My God, my God, your little feet are frozen!"

"What is that charming bit?" she enquired mirthfully.

"Rodolphe's song—or is it Marcel's? Very free translation. Never seen La Boheme? We must go some time. To appreciate La Boheme, of course, you've got to have lobster and champagne afterward; we'll do that too. Not to-night, no?"

"Please, nothing to-night," she said. "Let's be devilish and play seven-up for pennies. Nick, have you got a lobster and champagne income?"

"No, dear, I haven't," he said candidly.

"I have only my paltry stipend from the Cornwall Motor Works, and a rich uncle whose health is positively irritating."

plain. Something with more "punch" in it; that was what they all wanted. Heaven alone knew what the imbecile phrase meant, and she would have to find out. No doubt it could be done, but the immediate prospect was not comforting. Her mind was as sluggish as her limbs; it refused to be spurred to fresh efforts, or even to keep the old pace.

"You stay in bed," Nick commanded, "till you're perfectly well."

"And let the ravens feed me?" she enquired.

"Certainly; I've got a herd of trained ravens," he said. "Look here, Hope, have you got plenty of money?" He spoke very fast.

"Yes," she said cheerfully, "lots." She made a mental reckoning; she could afford to stop work for what seemed a long time, in prospect; ample time to recover in.

"I hate to see you sick," he said again, with some indignation at the powers that be.

"Oh, I don't mind," she said absently. "Not for a few days; it's rather luxurious. I'm sure that under more favorable circumstances I should be a confirmed malade imaginaire. But don't let me be a nuisance to you."

He caught up her hands and held them against his heart.

"Don't," he said. "Don't laugh at me. I—love you."

When he said that, her laughter went quickly enough. She was afraid to hear it. She was afraid of vows, of all the spoken ritual, the winged words that return as arrows from the bow of wrath when the cord of faith is loosed. Therefore, inconsistently, she had made a vow, herself, to let each day be sufficient unto itself. Her sense of humor must have been dormant just then. It should have reminded her that of the three parties concerned, only one had said anything at all about this preposterous contract; and that one herself.

BUT what he was vaguely afraid of was that she was going to get away from him. She had run away once, from the beach. And she did not seem able to explain why. That was simple enough, too. She thought he might be sorry again, or that he would expect her to be nursing regret. If she had laughed at him a little afterward, that was not surprising. He had fallen into such hopeless confusion on finding her again in town. Any human woman would have laughed at him. Besides, it helped her to her own balance. But now, when he waited exposed to her shafts, the tears came in her eyes too, and she drew his head down into her arms, with a soft crooning sound. They whispered, in the immortal "little language" of lovers, until Hope recalled herself to duty.

"Now," she remarked patiently, "you will please get my pad. And a cushion. And my pencil. Thanks. You may go on talking, if you won't expect me to listen. Or do you want to read a book?"

"Grace is in town," he answered irrelevantly. "Will you be well enough to come to lunch, or tea, or something, this week, and meet her? As soon as you're better, I should like you to. I must go and see her."

"Humph?" said Hope. "Oh yes, any time. Well, why don't you go and see her?"

"I will to-morrow." Somehow he felt a premonition that Grace would scold him. "I'll tell her to be ready for an exclusive little party."

"Exclusive little party," repeated Hope mechanically. "Oh, shut up, Nick. How can I work? Yes, I know I told you to go on talking, but you shouldn't pay any attention to me."

"I won't," he said. "I'll talk all I want to." Having thus declared his independence, he was silent, glancing at Hope surreptitiously from time to time, as if he feared his thoughts might be overheard. He had matter for thought.

Her small but extremely capable looking hands held his gaze. They were so sure and quick.

"Hope," he said at last, "where is your wedding ring?"

"I threw it away," she said briefly, without looking up.

"Did you feel like that?" he asked.

She nodded.

He did not speak again for along time. Did she still feel like that?

(Continued on page 16)