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## The Sealed Valley

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "Jack Chanty"

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From Thursday's Daily.

"What happened to him?" said Kitty.

"Who knows?" said Jim. "Maybe just the folly of an ignorant man travelling alone. Maybe there's something on him to give us a clue."

Jim knelt again.

His searching fingers came in contact with a little cloth packet sewed to the inside of the man's shirt.

Cutting the stitches with the point of his knife he unwrapped it and revealed inside a final wrapping of soft cotton, a delicate platinum chain with a great, gleaming emerald hanging from it. Father and daughter looked at each other in strong amazement.

"There's some strange tale behind this," said Jim. "Put it in a safe place."

The stranger's eyelids flickered and a slight sound issued from his lips.

"We must lay him on your bed," said Jim. "This is your job from now. Is there any condensed milk left?"

"I have saved a can," said Kitty. "Dilute it and warm it, and feed him bread soaked in it when he is able to swallow. Keep hot cloths around his shoulder. Like he will have fever. Give him gelsemium and aceton. You know the doses."

"I know," said Kitty.

A new era began for her from that moment. In the presence of this urgent reality her vague discontents were dissipated like morning mists.

Kitty had a passion for mothering which had never been satisfied, for they all treated her like a child, and none of them had ever been sick.

At first the stricken man—that strange visitant from nowhere!—was no more than an object for her to wreak her passionate pity upon.

Only by degrees did he come to have an individuality for her.

It commenced at the moment when she made the surprising discovery that he was young. She learned that from the fresh, vibrant quality of his voice. He was delicious.

All that night and the next day and the night that followed he tossed and murmured in his fever. But it could be seen that he was growing better. Kitty was sleepless and happy.

At first his speech was formless and incoherent. Later he fixed Kitty with his big bright eyes, and spoke with an unnatural distinctness and appearance of sanity.

She listened as one listens to a romance, interested and thrilled, but unsuspicious of any real foundation to the tale. It was too much like a fantasy of the imagination, all his talk of a beautiful valley hidden within the mountains, that you entered through a cave; and of a brave and lovely woman who ruled the place that he called Nahnya.

The name suggested nothing to Kitty.

"He is a poet," she thought with a touch of awe. In her simplicity she

wrote it all down during the hours of the night, so that she might be able to tell him later.

On the second morning, Kitty dozing on a chair beside the bed, was startled into complete wakefulness by hearing him say in a weak, natural voice:

"You are real! I thought I had dreamed you!"

"You're better!" cried Kitty, overjoyed.

"Am I still up north?" he said wonderingly. "I never expected to see a white girl!"

"There's none but me," said Kitty.

"How did I come here?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Kitty. "You just tumbled in the door."

He told her of his accident.

"The Stanley Rapids!" said Kitty. "That is only ten miles up the river. You must have been many days making it!"

"Walking in circles, I suppose," he said. "I started all right, keeping to the shore. But the pain was so bad, I suppose, I got light-headed. I remember stumbling through the woods with all kinds of things going through my head."

"You mustn't talk any more," said Kitty commandingly.

"All right," he said, smiling. "Don't go away."

Nourishment and good care worked wonders with the patient. He insisted on getting up next day. Catching sight of his face in a mirror he cried out in horror and demanded a razor.

Kitty left him alone to make himself presentable, while she helped her father in the works.

Returning at length, she found him sitting in the kitchen metamorphosed. His thick dark hair was brushed and gleaming; he smiled at her with a face as smooth and bland as a boy's.

Wonderful are the changes wrought in men's faces by a razor! Kitty, remembering how he had looked when her father turned him over, could scarcely believe her eyes.

There was likewise a changed quality in his smile.

Kitty read in it that he found her good to look at. She was much taken aback by the discovery. In a twinkling, it seemed to her, their positions had been reversed.

He was no longer her sick child, but a man—a possible master.

Her heart began to beat fast. To hide her confusion she turned and rumaged on the kitchen shelves. Even with her back turned, she felt as if his careless, smiling eyes were laying bare her very soul. She could not tell whether it was painful or sweet to be exposed to him.

Of course she was not as open as she fancied herself to be. Ralph guessed nothing. Presently she turned with a composed face, and without comment brought him the little packet they had discovered on his

body on that memorable day.

He saw the emerald lying on her outstretched hand without offering to take it. An expression of pain crossed his face and he averted his head.

"Please keep it for me," he said. "I don't want to be obliged to think of things yet."

A little jealous stab of the unknown pricked Kitty's breast. She put the bauble away in her room.

Coming back, she said with a brisk attempt to reassert a nurse's authority: "You may go out and sit in the sun for an hour."

It only made him smile now—covering her with confusion again.

"Yes, ma'am," he said with mock humility. "It you'll come, too."

"I have my work to do," said Kitty rebukingly.

He was intransigent. "Please, I can't walk all that way without help," he said plaintively.

She laughed and helped him outside; lingered beside the bench—and finally sat down on the other end of it. Poor, inexperienced Kitty had no armor for her soft breast. They chattered and laughed, and the hours flew on wings.

Ralph told her no more of his story than his mine and profession. She, feeling that it distressed him to rake up the past, was happy to avoid it. For the same reason she forbore saying anything as yet about the wonderful story he had told in his delirium.

She likewise in private made her father agree not to ask their visitor any questions until he was more vigorous.

Ralph's frame of mind was natural to one recovering from a sudden, serious illness. He instinctively felt the necessity of maintaining a quiet mind while the strength stole deliciously back through his veins.

Away back he apprehended a burden waiting to be shouldered when he was strong enough, but at present he would have none of it. He was no more than a bit of reanimated clay gratefully absorbing the sunshine.

At no time was vanity a great factor in his make-up, and in his present purgated state it was non-existent. It honestly never occurred to him that their jolly talk and laughter and the exchange of happy glances might be working irreparable damage in the breast of the dreamy young girl beside him.

Ralph, being sufficiently recovered, was bunched to the men's bunk outside, and Kitty repossessed herself of her own room. That night in the secure and comfortable darkness her defenses fell away from her. She pressed her lips to the pillow that had supported his head throughout his illness and moistened it with her tears.

"Little did I guess when he came tumbling through the doorway—she thought—and left the thought unfinished on a swelling breast. "It is like an answer to a prayer I didn't dare make," she whispered to herself. When doubts and jealousies

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