

The Sealed Valley

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "Jack Chanly"

(From Friday's Daily.)
He seemed to her the cleverest, kindest, most lovable of superior creatures. Further than that, the mystery of his manliness thrilled her. In his eyes there lurked a strange, shy promise of adventure.

She called it "wickedness" in her innocence and was sweetly troubled. "What shall I do if he tries to kiss me?" she thought in a most delicious panic.

As the day passed and he made no move to do so a faint chagrin made itself felt, which she refused to recognize.

As if moved by a common impulse they kept their conversational shallows floating in the safe shallows. Reminiscences of childhood afforded them much humorous matter. Ralph did most of the talking.

"Once when I was a kid," he said "they dug up the street in front of our house for a drain, and ran into an Indian burial ground. My chum and I played ninny-pins on the side walk with the skulls, and the constable arrested us. What fuss there was!"

"I should say so!" said Kitty, simulating a vicious indignation. "Little savages!"

"Why?" said Ralph, teasingly. "Old bones are all right. Don't you like their nice, earthy smell?"

"Horrible!" said Kitty.

"Did you ever see 'Hamlet'?" asked Ralph. He apostrophized a teacup in his extended hand. "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him well. He-ratio! He was a fellow of infinite jest!"

Ralph acted out the speech for her with improvisations.

Kitty was obliged to sit down suddenly, and to hold her sides. Kitty was one of those shy, admiring, easily shocked, and easily moved to laughter girls that inspire a man to the highest flights of audacious wit.

"Speaking of bones," Ralph went on; "when I was a student at McGill, my roommate and I saved up enough to buy a whole skeleton all properly articulated. It was a peach! We kept it in the closet hanging from a clothes-hook."

"Mercy!" said Kitty with a delicious shudder.

"The landlady had a daughter who had a heat and the two of them used to make us fellows tired with their goings-on. They'd stand for half an hour at the foot of the stairs saying good night. Yes, it sounds like a cow drawing its foot out of a boggy place!"

"Aren't you awful!" said Kitty, blushing.

"We decided that something must be done," Ralph went on. "I got some phosphorus paint, and we painted the skeleton all over, and fastened a long line to the hook in his skull that was used to hang him up by."

"And that night, when the pair of them came out in the hall downstairs, and turned down the light, we crept out on the upper landing and leaned over the rail and let Mr. Bones go walking slowly, step by step, down the stairs. He was, a lovely blue color; every bone stood out!"

"You might have killed them with fright!" said Kitty.

"No such luck!" said Ralph. "They didn't hear him coming until he was half-way down. Then I rattled him a little. Geeshophat! You never heard such an awful screech in your life!"

"Both of them! They made for the front door and rattled it like mad, and couldn't get it open. I laughed so hard the string slipped out of my hand and Mr. Bones went down the rest of the stairs, sitting up just like a person—rattle, clatter, smash! Oh, my! Oh, my!"

"I don't think it was funny at all!" said Kitty. But she laughed, and her eyes confessed her admiration of his dreadful boldness.

"Next day we moved," said Ralph solemnly.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Triangle

On the following day, the fifth of Ralph's stay in Milburn Gulch, he was strong enough to walk about more freely.

Jim Sholto took him up the trail to show him the excavations. Jim was secretly hoping that in Ralph he would find a workman to take the place of one of the absent boys.

Being past the period of heart troubles himself, the danger of introducing a strange and not uncommonly young man into his family Eden had not suggested itself to him.

While they were away, Kitty worked about the cabin in a spasmodic way widely differing from her usual deft serenity. She would come to a stand staring before her mistily, a little smile wreathing the corners of her lips; rousing herself with a start.

She would fly about for awhile as if her life depended on getting done, only to fall into another dream. Absently picking things up, she dropped them in fresh places, and presently started hunting for them again.

Snatches of impromptu song welled up from her heart, higher and higher until her voice trembled and broke. She continually ran to the mirror, by turns anxious, critical, scornful, blushing, reassured by what she saw there.

Every three minutes she went to the door and looked up the trail to see if he were coming back.

On one of these journeys she heard her name softly called behind her. Whirling about she beheld approaching by the trail from the river a graceful figure clad in buckskin skirt and blue flannel, her

beautiful dark face composed and smiling, her black hair braided and wound about her up-held head.

In short, it was her friend and preserver, holding out her hands, and smiling at Kitty wistfully and deprecatingly, just as she had seen her last.

Kitty shrieked with pleasure, and flinging her arms about her friend, dragged her into the cabin and forced her into a chair.

"Annie! Annie! Annie!" she cried, dropping on her knees beside her. "How sweet of you to come! I wanted to see you so badly! You must stay a week!"

Nahnya shook her head, smiling. "I just brought the dugout back," she said in her soft full voice that made a pleasant harmony with Kitty's excited accents. "And I brought fresh meat—mountain goat."

"Did you get your own boat all right?" Kitty demanded to know.

"It was only a little broke," said Nahnya. "I fix it easy."

"How could you bring two boats up against the current?" asked Kitty.

"I only bring yours," Nahnya answered. "Mine is down the river on this side where I can get it."

"How will you get it?"

"I will walk along the shore," said Nahnya. "It is not hard walking."

"Now I've got you, I'm not going to let you go in a hurry!" cried Kitty, clinging to her.

"But you're all busy here," objected Nahnya. "The men—"

"My brothers have gone outside," said Kitty. "There is only my father and—a stranger!"

"A stranger?" said Nahnya.

Kitty was not going to blurt out her secret. Her friend's mind must be prepared by delicate stages for its reception. "We have a white man stopping with us," she said very off-hand.

Nahnya was not blind to the self-conscious air and the blush. Her arm tightened affectionately about Kitty.

"Why did you run away from us like you did?" asked Kitty hastily, to create a diversion.

Nahnya shrugged. "I was afraid they'd thank me and make a fuss," she said uneasily. "I feel like a fool then."

"You silly dear!" cried Kitty, embracing her afresh.

There was a new demonstrativeness in Kitty, a breathless ardor that in itself was enough to tell the other woman something had happened since their parting.

"So you have a visitor," she said teasingly. "I think he is young, yes?"

Kitty tucked in an end of Nahnya's braid that was escaping. "Fairly young," she said.

"You are not so much lonely now I think," murmured Nahnya.

Kitty jumped up. "You must be hungry!" she cried. "I'm forgetting my duties!"

"Not an hour ago I ate," said Nahnya. "I am not hungry."

Kitty developed a great flow of small talk, about the weather, about her brothers, about everything except what was in both their minds, Nahnya let her run on.

Under her friend's quiet, kind smile Kitty broke down at last, and running to her, dropped beside her again and hid her hot face on the dark girl's shoulder.

"Oh, Annie!" she breathed on a trembling, rising inflection.

"Tell me," whispered Nahnya.

"Oh, Annie! It's so strange! I can't. I didn't want to tell you anything. I wanted you to see him and—and to guess! I have lost myself completely!"

"I am turned inside out! It came so suddenly. I never guessed anything like this! Oh, Annie! He is so strong, so kind, so mysterious, so clever, so dangerous! I am terrified of him. I am wretched when he is out of my sight for a minute!"

Nahnya's face became grave. "Has he said anything?" she whispered.

"Not yet."

"Oh, Kitty dear!" murmured Nahnya. "Be careful! Men—"

"He's true!" said Kitty hotly.

"That I can see in his eyes!"

"You know who he is?" asked Nahnya anxiously. "Where he come from?" All about him?"

"No!" faltered Kitty. "He's honest!" she cried. "My instinct tells me so. He's good to me. He's careful of me. He doesn't make love to me! Oh, Annie!" she went on tremulously.

(Continued in Monday's Issue)

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