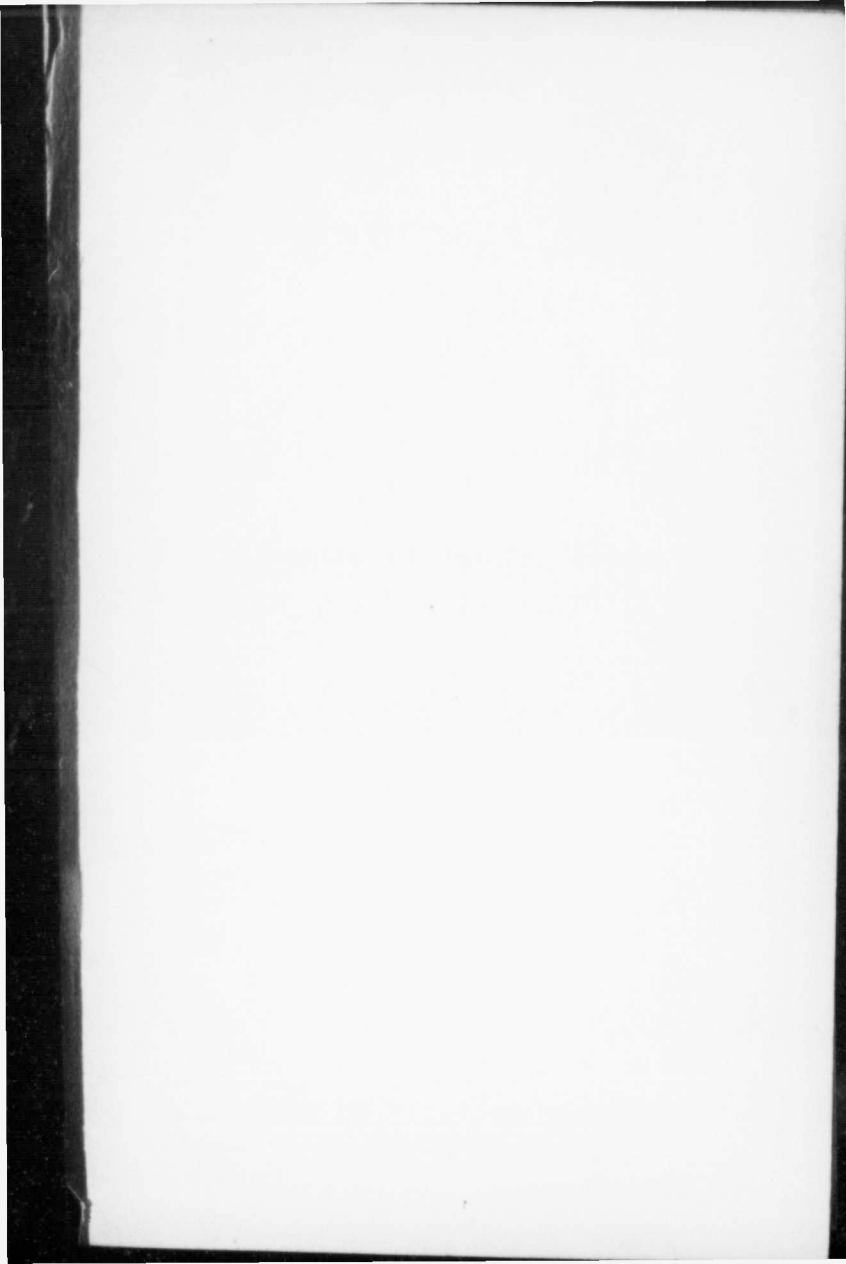
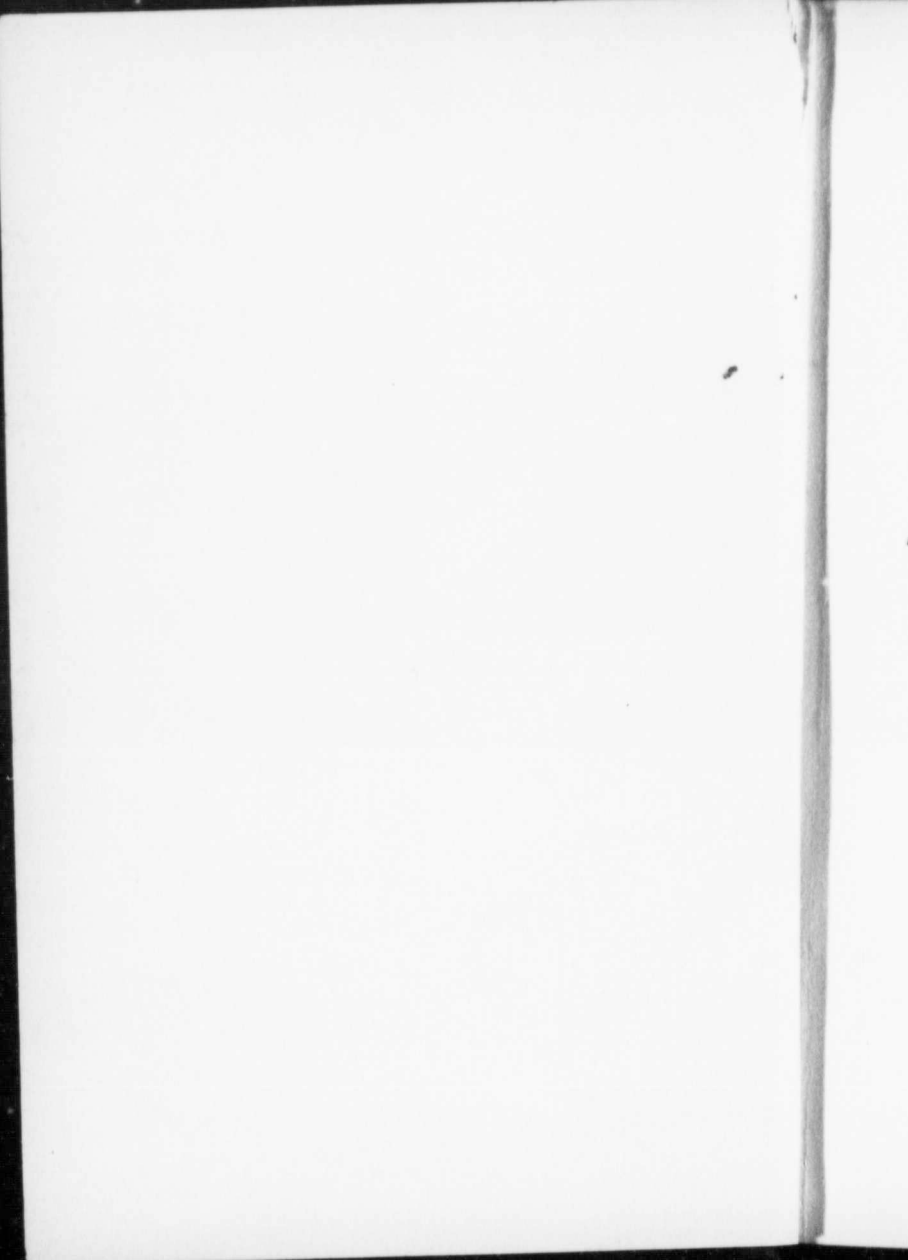
The image shows the front cover of a book. The cover is dark with a repeating Art Deco pattern of stylized, pointed, leaf-like shapes arranged in vertical columns. The title 'THE LOYALTY OF HESTER HOPE' is printed in a serif font, centered in the upper portion of the cover. The text is arranged in three lines: 'THE LOYALTY' on the top line, 'OF HESTER' on the middle line, and 'HOPE' on the bottom line. The book is set against a dark, textured background.

THE LOYALTY
OF HESTER
HOPE





The Loyalty of Hester Hope

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED

50 Old Bailey, LONDON
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ZOLA'S DISCOVERY

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The Loyalty of Hester Hope

A Story of British Columbia

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT

Author of "A Girl of Distinction" "Her Own Kin"
"Di the Dauntless" &c.

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Bessie Marchant

Deborah's Find.
Jane fills the Breach.
A Heroine of the Ranch.
A Countess from Canada.
A Princess of Servia.
A Girl of the Fortunate Isles.
A Canadian Farm Mystery.
Norah to the Rescue.
Laurel the Leader.
Two on Their Own.
The Loyalty of Hester Hope.
Sylvia's Secret.
The Secret of the Everglades.
The Unknown Island.
The Youngest Sister.
Hilda Holds On.
Lucie's Luck.
A Girl of the Pampas.
Molly in the West.
Di the Dauntless.
A Girl of Distinction.
Her Own Kin.
A Transport Girl in France.
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Rachel Out West.
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Three Girls on a Ranch.
The Girl Captives.
Sisters of Silver Creek.
Helen of the Black Mountain.
A Daughter of the Ranges.
Held at Ransom.
Harriet Goes a-Roaming.

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THE LOYALTY OF HESTER HOPE

CHAPTER I

Enlightenment

THE long train of cars slowed down as it neared the entrance to the town of Crag End, for, as the railway ran up the one street of the town, it was necessary to go cautiously: sometimes indeed it had to stop altogether, while a brakeman rushed ahead to shoo away adventurous chickens and ducks, or it might be a matronly sow, with a following of little pigs, taking the air on the railway track. There had been times when drunken cowboys had to be dragged out of the way of the train, but either Crag End was getting more sober, or else the people had no time now to spend in getting intoxicated before noon, at which hour it was that the one train in the day passed that way, the cars which came from the mines running down through Crag End at eight o'clock in the morning.

The train came to a stop in front of Pete Carson's

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store, which was also the post office, and the conductor assisted the only passenger, a girl, to alight. Quite an assortment of luggage was bundled out after her: a big Saratoga trunk, a pigskin valise, a green leather dressing bag, a very up-to-date hatbox of generous proportions, a smart-looking hold-all, and a flat tin case, like a deed box, but most probably containing the music which was the necessary accompaniment to the violin case that she carried in her hand.

"Is that all, miss?" asked the conductor, who, having been liberally tipped, was endeavouring to make himself feel that he had earned his money.

"Quite all, thank you, and I am very much obliged to you," said the girl in clear, crisp tones, through which rang an indefinable something that marked her out as a real Canadian by birth and upbringing, and not merely an adopted daughter of the Dominion. She was cultured and refined, but she carried herself with a freedom and independence that are the natural heritage of the children of "Our Lady of the Snows", and not to be easily imitated by any of the mixed nationalities coming to make a home in the country.

A family of ducks, with a loudly quacking and very fussy mother, strolled up to court a speedy destruction under the wheels of the train, but were promptly headed off by the watchful brakeman. The bell began to clang once more, and the train moved slowly onward again. Then a girl in very shabby attire, who was in charge of a still more shabby wagon, drawn by an elderly horse, came forward to ask, in a hesitating fashion, of the passenger left stranded among the ducks:

"If you please, are you going to Powell Gorge?"

"Yes, that is the name of the place; I am Mrs.

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Enlightenment

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Powell's new lady help," said the arrival, crisply, uttering the words as if she rather enjoyed the sound of them.

A smile that was first cousin to a grimace flitted for a moment across the face of the shabby girl, and then she said brusquely: "I have come to meet you, but I'm sure I don't know how we are going to get that trunk of yours into the wagon."

"We must get a man to lift it, of course; it is much too heavy for us," replied the newcomer, looking round with an imperious air, in search of the necessary and indispensable man.

He was not in evidence, and seeing no one whom she could summon to her aid, the girl walked across to the store, poking her head in at the door in search of someone with strong arms who would lift her trunk for her. But there was only Willie Peel, the lame nephew of the proprietor, in charge of the store, and he started forward, blushing furiously, as was his wont whenever a girl in her teens addressed a remark to him.

"Very sorry, miss, I assure you I am, but I don't believe that there is a man in Crag End at this minute. Everyone has rushed off to Hunter's Gully, because Abe Simpson has been badly mauled by a bear up there, and when they found him—Abe, I mean, for the bear had cleared out before they got there—the men said that his hands were clenched tight on two great lumps of gold-bearing quartz. So rich were the lumps that every man in the place has rushed off to find out where they came from, and half the women have gone too; that is why there was no one about when the cars came in," said Willie, wondering whoever the distinguished young lady could be, for it was much too early for

Mrs.

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summer visitors yet, and there were no "swells" resident at Crag End, nor likely to be.

"Can't you help me? Or are you afraid that someone will run away with your store if you turn your back on it?" she asked with a scornful intonation.

Poor Willie became pinker than ever, but now there was a look of acute distress in his blue eyes as he answered humbly: "I would come directly if I could be of any use, but I am so lame that I am no good at lifting, as Miss Trevor will tell you."

"Miss Trevor? Is that the girl out there with the wagon? Who is she, and where does she come from?" asked the girl, who was shrewd enough to see how it hurt Willie to talk of his infirmity, and so with rare tact passed by his allusion to it as if she had not heard it.

"Miss Trevor lives at Powell Gorge: that is Sam Powell's place, and it is ten miles out of town. She is Sam Powell's hired gal, though I have heard that Mrs. Powell calls her a lady help;" and Willie gurgled into amused laughter at his own feeble joke.

"I see; thank you." And with a brisk nod of her head the girl turned and went out of the store.

Miss Trevor meanwhile had not been idle, but had got everything except the trunk stowed in workmanlike fashion in the front of the wagon.

"Couldn't you find a man?" she asked, as the stranger came back from the store.

"No. I wonder whatever we can do? Had we better leave it to come another day, do you think?" and the newcomer looked so dubious that half her self-assertiveness seemed to vanish before the cloud of doubt which had dropped upon her while she stood in the store

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listening to the lame young man explaining the position of the shabby girl whom he called Miss Trevor.

"I would not leave it; you may want the things, and Mr. Powell does not like being obliged to send the horse to town very often," said Miss Trevor. "If you would open the trunk, and take out some of the heavier things, then we could lift it up to the wagon, and put them in again. It will take a little time, but we can manage it that way very well."

"What a capital idea! Father always says that it is better to be born resourceful than to be rich," exclaimed the stranger; and whisking out a bunch of keys, she quickly had the trunk open, displaying piles and piles of pretty frocks, dainty underwear, and costly toilet accessories, which she began to bundle out on to the ground with more haste than carefulness.

"Oh, what lovely clothes!" cried the shabby girl. "Oh, do take care, or you will spoil them!"

"They won't hurt; the ground is fairly dry, you see, and I pride myself that I am rather good at packing. Yes, I have a fair-sized wardrobe, but I always think that it is the truest economy to have a good lot of things, then no one garment has to be worn more heavily than it should be. There! I think that we can manage to lift the trunk now. What a good thing it is that we are Canadian girls; if we had been English, we should have just stood looking at the thing, wringing our hands in despair, because the task was too much for our feeble strength!" and the arrival laughed in a breezy, self-confident way, which appeared to rouse the resentment of the shabby girl.

"I am English, so your theory won't wash," she said tartly, then handed up the bundles of boots, the piles of

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frocks, and the armfuls of underclothing. But now she resolutely turned her head away from beholding vanity, although what it cost her to be bad-tempered, when she was simply yearning to admire all the pretty things, no one but herself could possibly know.

"There! that will do; now I am ready. Thank you so much for helping me. I am very sorry that I have given you so much trouble. Your name is Miss Trevor, I believe?" and the girl who called herself a Canadian looked at the shabby girl with such a frank friendliness in her face that Miss Trevor's wrath abated as speedily as it had arisen.

"My name is Alice Trevor. What is yours?" As she asked the question, Alice turned to look at the stranger as if she were mentally sizing her up.

"I am Hester Hope: but I thought you would have known that, as you had come to meet me," said the arrival.

"Mrs. Powell did not tell me your name, only that you were the new lady help, and that I was to come and meet you." Again the smile that was so near akin to a grimace flitted across the face of the shabby girl.

Hester climbed up to the wagon seat, then sat in silence while Alice gathered up the reins, and mounting to the seat beside her gave the old horse to understand that it might as well be getting on again. Then she gave a nervous little cough, and burst into hasty speech:

"Miss Trevor, the young man at the store said that you were Mrs. Powell's lady help, and—and—I mean that I should be awfully sorry for you to think that I have stolen your situation from you; but Mrs. Powell advertised, you know, and I answered the advertisement."

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"Oh, I don't mind, and I would not spend another summer at Powell Gorge for double or treble the salary that Mrs. Powell has ever given me," said the shabby girl in a hard tone. Then, seeing how Hester's face contracted in a frown of distress, she said hurriedly: "But I don't fancy that you will have such a hard time as I have had, for you look as if you could stand up to her and assert yourself more than I have done. You are such a lady, too, that she simply can't ask you to do some of the things that I have done."

"Mrs. Powell spoke in her letter of wanting a refined and well-educated girl, one who would be a pleasant companion. She said that there would be a few light household duties," said Hester in a rather doubtful tone. Of course from this girl who was leaving Mrs. Powell she ought to get a very fair knowledge of what would be required of her, but, on the other hand, it might be necessary to discount largely what Alice Trevor said, as the girl might from pique or prejudice give a very unfair account of place and people.

"The household duties are light certainly, because in a house where there is next to no furniture there cannot be much to do, and as the food is of the most meagre description the cooking is not heavy; but there are the other sorts of work not mentioned by Mrs. Powell, which prove so trying—the haymaking, the harvest work, the fruit gathering, and in winter the feeding of pigs and cattle. It is a hired man that the Powells should advertise for, and not a lady help," said Alice bitterly.

"But you have surely not done all these things?" and Hester turned on the wagon seat to get a better look at the shabby girl, who was slender of build and delicate of aspect.

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"Indeed I have, and I have done all the family washing too. Sometimes I have made the bread as well. But in the middle of summer I could not do that, because I was in the fields from morning until night, and so Mrs. Powell had to do it herself; and pretty stuff she made too, heavy as lead, scorched on one side, half-baked on the other. And then she wonders that she has indigestion! I should have been dyspeptic myself, only I had to work so hard in the fields; and then, too, I ate so much fresh fruit that the quality of the bread could not hurt me," replied Alice, laying the whip lightly round the ears of the old horse, just by way of reminder that it had better be getting forward at a brisk pace, lest a worse thing befall.

"But if you have done so much, what has Mrs. Powell done?" asked Hester, wrinkling her brows into a frown, and telling herself that she certainly must not take all these statements without a grain of salt.

"Mrs. Powell writes poetry and romances. She has never been able to sell anything that I know of, but that makes no difference; and what time she has left over from writing she fills in by quarrelling with her husband," said Alice.

"How long have you lived with the Powells?" demanded Hester sharply. And now there was a touch of scorn in her voice, for of course the girl must be exaggerating, and she herself had a sovereign contempt for that sort of thing.

"Ever since I was thirteen. I came with my mother, who was a widow, but she died a few weeks after we settled at the place, and I have stayed on. I was nineteen last month, and then I determined that I would go somewhere else, for the work could scarcely be harder

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anywhere, while it might be that there would be less quarrelling in an ordinary household," answered Alice.

Hester opened her mouth to ask another question, then suddenly refrained. If she had patience she would soon see for herself what kind of people these were with whom she had come to live; and then, if Alice were right, well, it would be comparatively easy, although rather humiliating, to turn round and go home again.

Then the road, which had been a good one while it ran beside the railway track, branched suddenly away to the left, and became a mere trail leading up hills so steep that Hester was forced to dismount, as well as Alice, who had been walking ever since they left the railway track. At one point the poor horse struggled and struggled, and would have stuck fast if both girls had not flung their strength into the argument against the hill, and so got the reluctant wheels over the bad bit and on to a portion of the trail where the going was easier.

Then came another turn in the trail, which led now through a wide belt of blackened tree trunks, standing stark naked against the dazzling blue of the sky, while underneath the ground was ablaze with brilliant yellow daisies.

"Oh, oh, what a sight! What made those trunks so black?" cried Hester, standing still on the trail to gaze in wonderment at what, to her, seemed a freak of nature.

"It is an old fire lot, and was burned out about eighteen months ago. Isn't it weird? I always feel scared when I come through, and a lump comes up in my throat which nearly chokes me. It is the sort of feeling one has when one wants to cry very badly, only is rather ashamed to begin," said Alice; and Hester was amazed

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to see that her eyes had suddenly filled with tears, as if even now, eighteen months after the destruction, she could not look on the ruined forest unmoved.

"An artist would go crazy over a scene like that," said Hester, who still gazed as if fascinated at the satiny black trunks, which rose like ebony pillars from a carpet of clear gold. "But if he put it in a picture, not one person in a hundred would believe that he had painted a real scene. By the way, have we got to walk all the remaining miles to Powell Gorge? Because in that case I will just sit down and change my boots, for this pair, although very smart to look at, are by no means comfortable for walking in."

"You can get up now if you like, but I shall walk for another mile. There is a very bad dip a little farther on, and we are a fairly heavy load for one horse," replied Alice.

"Ah, that is a gentle hint to me concerning the amount of my luggage. Are there any more hills to be climbed after the next bad bit is passed?" asked Hester, who had clambered into the wagon again and was already at work unlacing her boots.

"It is all hills, more or less, but there will be no more necessity for you to walk, and I shall be able to ride here and there when we get higher up," said Alice; and then she went to the head of the horse and encouraged the creature in descending a hill so steep that Hester gasped in sheer horror at the thought of a wagon going down such a place. Then came a mad rush for a few yards, and another hill rose in front of them, up which the horse scrambled, twisting the wagon from side to side in a sort of zigzag, which shook the poor passenger in the most fearful fashion.

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When this was past, Alice got up to ride for a mile or so; then came another hill, a lonely fruit ranch was passed, and after a long interval another. There were forks in the trail, with names painted on blazed trunks to show where they led, and after two hours of this sort of thing the wagon clattered down a stony hillside, turned short round into an apple orchard, and there, straight before her, nestling against the hill, Hester saw a brown timbered house.

"Is that the place?" she asked, for the house was little more than a log cabin, and she might surely be forgiven the dismay that rose in her heart at the sight, for she had been led to believe that the Powells' residence would be some wide old house, such as those that are to be found in some districts of California.

"Yes, that is the place," replied Alice; and then, as her gaze swept the bare little building which had been her home for six years, she cried out sharply: "But what is the matter? Look, look, Mrs. Powell is lying on the veranda!"

And then Hester saw that a woman was lying on the wooden-floored veranda, with arms outspread, as if she had fallen, or had been flung down so.

CHAPTER II

Consternation

"Is that Mrs. Powell?" asked Hester in sharp surprise, for she had thought to find a lady, or at least a person with a refined bearing and a cultivated mind; but this woman who lay stretched on the floor had a distinctly commonplace look, and from her appearance was neither refined in manner nor clean in person.

"Yes, that is Mrs. Powell; but what can be the matter with her? I must run at once and see; it looks to me as if she has had a fit," said Alice, and stuffing the reins into the hand of her companion, she sprang down from the wagon and ran towards the house. "Are you ill, Mrs. Powell? Oh, you poor thing, I am afraid that you are very bad indeed!" she cried, as she bent over the prostrate woman, who gave no sign of life at all, save in the breath which came fitfully from her parted lips.

Alice touched the woman's hands, which were faintly warm, took quick note of the ominous dragging of the left side of the mouth, then, springing to her feet again, ran into the house and came back with a pillow, and slid it under the head of the unconscious woman. By this time Hester had got down from the wagon, and leaving the horse to its own devices, she came to the aid of Alice, who fled into the house again for water, and

came running back with a little in a basin, with which she proceeded to bathe the face and hands of the patient.

"I don't think it is a faint," she said to Hester. "And besides, I have never known Mrs. Powell faint. I fear that it is a seizure; look at this," and she pointed to the droop of the mouth.

"Then a doctor will be necessary; where does the nearest one live?" asked Hester, wondering whether it would come within the scope of her new duties to fetch medical aid to her employer.

"At Crag End. But Dobbin will never do the journey again to-day; the poor old creature is nearly done up, for he had been miles up the mountain for fence rails before I harnessed him to the best wagon to go to the town. When Mr. Powell comes in he will have to walk to Crag End, and that means that it will be four or five hours at the soonest before we can get the doctor here. Poor thing, poor thing, I cannot bear to think of her suffering!" and a mist of tears rose to the eyes of Alice, who was by nature soft-hearted and sympathetic.

"No need to pity her at present, because I do not suppose that she feels a thing; only, of course, she ought not to be lying out here full in the sunshine, the glare must be bad for her," said Hester, with sturdy common sense.

"We must carry her in and put her to bed; and the bed isn't made yet, I saw that when I went for the pillow," replied Alice: and she winced as she thought how the sordid discomfort of the house must strike this girl from the city, who looked as if she had been reared to all sorts of luxury.

"I will make the bed while you stay here and do

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what you can for her," said Hester hastily, feeling that she would rather do anything than have to remain near that still figure on the floor; and then she said, "Which is the room?"

"The one that faces this way; mine is at the back," said Alice, who was on her knees now, trying to force some sort of a stimulant into the mouth of the woman.

Hester stepped into the house and entered the front bedroom, a bare, dirty place, with a closed window and an air of stuffiness which made it difficult to breathe in the atmosphere.

"Ugh! How truly horrible!" she exclaimed; and darting to the window she hastily pushed it open as far as it would go, noticing even in that moment of agitation what a magnificent view was outspread before the house. Then swinging the clothes from the bed she set to work to smooth the lumpy mattress to the best of her ability, and spreading a blanket and then a sheet tightly over it, she went out to assist in the task of getting Mrs. Powell to bed.

"I am fearfully ashamed that you should have to see such an untidy room, but I have had no time to do any work indoors for the last week," said Alice in meek apology, while an uncomfortable flush spread over her face, for she hated to be thought slovenly, and it made her utterly wretched to think that this smartly turned-out girl must be writing her down as incapable, and perhaps lazy.

"I did not suppose that it was your fault," said Hester crisply. "And in any case the good woman might have opened her bedroom window when she got up this morning, instead of bottling up all that filthy air to poison other people. But how are we to

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carry her? She looks as if she would be fairly weighty. And we ought not to bend an unconscious woman in any way, I fancy, for it seems to me that I have heard of that thing turning out fatal in its time."

"We can make a stretcher with two poles and a sheet; quick, help me to draw one under her;" and Alice darted into the house again, returning a minute later with a stout sheet, two poles, and some safety pins, these last her own property, as Hester was quick to guess. The sheet was drawn down under the woman, then the poles were rolled in, one on either side, the sheet being securely fastened with safety pins; and then, taking one the head and the other the foot, the two girls managed to lift the heavy figure and to carry it without much shaking to the bedroom, where the window still stood wide open.

It took an extra heave to lift the stretcher high enough to pass the woman on to the bed, and the effort tried Alice so sorely that she sank against the pillow, looking so white that Hester was downright frightened.

"Don't faint, don't, I beg of you!" she implored. "Just think of what my position will be if you do; and already I am scared nearly out of my wits, for remember, I came here to be a lady help and not a sick nurse."

Alice stood erect with an effort and smiled feebly. "I think it is because I am so hungry that I feel so queer," she answered in a weak voice. "Breakfast was not ready when I had to start up the mountain for the fence rails, so I took a piece of bread and went off with that; I was late in getting back, and had no time for a meal before I came to meet you, so I had

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another piece of bread: that is all that I have had to-day, and I think that I am spun out."

"Why, you must be nearly starved!" exclaimed Hester, whose own appetite was beginning to give her sharp reminders that noon was long past. "Sit down in that chair by the bed and look at the patient, while I go and scavenge for a meal. This mansion does not look so big that I am likely to lose my way when I go to search for the kitchen regions, and if there is anything to eat in the place I am bound to find it, because, you see, I am so fearfully hungry myself."

"I must go and unharness Dobbin, for, poor old fellow, he is as hungry as, or more so than I am myself," replied Alice, then turned to look at the woman on the bed with a doubtful air before she left the room. "I don't know if there is anything more we ought to do for her at present. She will have to be undressed presently, but that can be done after we have had something to eat, and I do not feel as if I had the strength to lift her any more just now."

"She cannot hurt lying like that for another half-hour, for her garments are not tight. If you must unharness that horse, go and do it now. I would volunteer, but I don't mind admitting that I am honestly afraid of the beast, so I will do the foraging indoors while you are gone; only don't be long, please, for I don't like being left alone in the house at all," said Hester; and then she whisked out of the bedroom in search of kitchen and storeroom, while Alice with a languid step went to free the old horse from the wagon.

"It is a sort of a picnic, only a very queer sort!" muttered Hester to herself as she plunged out of the bedroom into a nondescript apartment, which she found

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to be kitchen, dining-room, and sitting-room combined. From there she found her way into a room at the back, which was cool and dark, and which served for dairy and storeroom; while opposite to it, and also at the back, was a bare, ugly bedroom, evidently the chamber apportioned to Alice, and the one that would be her own when Alice left.

There were eggs in a bowl and a pan of new milk standing to cream by the little window in the corner which looked out on a tangle of green vines. Hester, having no compunction at all about disturbing the cream that was on the rise, darted for two glasses and a tin dipper which stood near, then carefully filled both glasses to the brim and carried them into the kitchen. Then she went back for the eggs, and returning looked about for a frying-pan; but even while her gaze was roaming round the room, her fingers were busy in reviving the nearly dead fire in the stove.

"There is the pan, now for some grease," she muttered, catching sight of a frying-pan hanging from a hook on the wall; and she darted back into the larder in search of some kind of fat in which she could fry eggs. There seemed to be nothing but a big lump of butter in a deep earthen bowl, and although she was doubtful as to whether it was permissible to fry eggs in butter in that house, the need for a quick meal was so great that she did not hesitate, and, taking a generous lump, was busily frying four eggs when Alice entered the room with a white face and a dragging step.

"How nice something smells; what is it?" she asked, sinking into a chair beside the table.

"Drink that before you ask any questions or venture on any comments about what I am doing," said Hester,

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with a laugh, as she pushed one of the two glasses of milk nearer to Alice.

"I am afraid that we shall get into trouble over this, for Mrs. Powell does not like the milk disturbed when the cream is rising; but how very good it is!" said Alice, drawing a long breath of satisfaction as she set down the glass, which she had half-emptied.

"Perhaps she does not like eggs being used either, especially when they are fried in butter, which I don't mind admitting is extravagance; but as I could not find any lard I had to take what I could find, and I am quite willing to eat dry bread another day to make up for it," replied Hester, as she carefully dished two eggs and passed them to Alice.

"Two eggs? Oh! I could not eat more than one, it is such awful extravagance," murmured Alice, but her eyes had brightened, and she drew her chair closer to the table, eager for the food she needed so badly.

"You will sit there until you do eat them, or I will know the reason why," Hester said, with a dictatorial air that had its due effect on the other girl. She had found part of a loaf of bread—not by any means good bread, for it had not been well made; but they were both too hungry to cavil at small drawbacks, and they ate their meal in great content, although Hester got up from the table every two or three minutes, to go and peep at the still figure on the bed.

"I cannot think where Mr. Powell can be," said Alice uneasily, as she sat looking about the untidy room when her meal was over. Hester was still eating, but then she had jumped up from the table so many times that it was not wonderful she should be the later to finish.

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will be coming home presently as hungry as a hunter. By the way, what shall we give him to eat when he does come?" asked Hester, for the barren appearance of the larder rather weighed upon her spirits, she being blessed with a vigorous and healthy appetite.

"There should be some bacon that can be fried for him, and I think there is a piece of mutton hanging up somewhere, only I am not sure, because I have had so little time indoors lately," said Alice. "Indeed I ought not to be here now, for Mr. Powell asked me to go on weeding the raspberry patch when I came back from the town, and I told him I would if I could. But of course, if I had had good news instead of bad, I should have been forced to stay indoors and wash my clothes this afternoon, for one could not very well go to a new situation with dirty garments."

"What good news did you expect?" asked Hester, in a sympathetic tone, for a black cloud of gloom was on the face of Alice, and her eyes were very anxious.

"I expected to hear I had got a post in New Westminster that I wrote about, as a sort of assistant housekeeper to a lady who keeps a boarding-house; but when I went to the post office this morning at Crag End I found a letter from Mrs. Palmer, saying that she had engaged someone else, as it was evident that I had not experience enough in cooking to suit her. Oh, it was a dreadful disappointment!" and Alice's eyes filled with tears, which she whisked away with the back of her hand, hoping that Hester did not see them.

"What did you tell her, this Mrs. Palmer I mean?" asked Hester a little curiously.

"The truth; what else was there to tell her? I said that I had had so much field work, it had not left me

28 The Loyalty of Hester Hope

much time for things indoors, but that I was most anxious to learn, and I would come for half-salary the first month, so that I might get into the ways of doing things by degrees," said Alice.

Hester laughed softly, and rising to her feet stretched her arms high above her head, exclaiming: "What a dear little unsophisticated country mouse you are! You should have written to your Mrs. Palmer extolling your own attainments, and dwelling on the fact that you were of refined appearance, that you had nice hands, which no amount of outdoor work had been able to roughen, and that your speech was that of a cultured lady; and although the salary she offered was not a great one, you would try to make it do, for a month or two, until you got a little more experience. Now that would also have been the truth, every word of it, and Mrs. Palmer would have been eager to engage you, instead of sending you a letter which I suppose nearly broke your heart. The next time you write for a post, you had better let me draw up the letter for you."

Alice coloured with pleasure, for there was so much truth in the face of Hester that she had no fear that she was being laughed at; but she shook her head in a doubtful fashion as she said: "I am afraid that it would not do to praise myself in that fashion. Nor shall I be able to try for a post now until Mrs. Powell is better, for it would not be kind to leave you to face all this alone; so if you don't mind having me to share your room, I will stay and see you through."

"You are a darling!" cried Hester, flinging an impulsive pair of arms round the neck of Alice, and hugging her to the point of suffocation. "But I am by no means sure that I am going to put up with this kind of thing

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myself for very long. I shall just stay and see if Mr. Powell is more promising to look at than his wife appears to be, and if he does not look interesting, I shall turn round and go home again. Thank Heaven that I have a home to go to!"

"Why did you leave it to take your chance among strangers?" demanded Alice, thinking, with a pang at her heart, that nothing would have induced her to leave her home, if she had only had one to cling to.

Hester twisted her face into a most astonishing grimace. "It is humiliating to have to own it, but I suppose I must," she said. "The fact is, my father, bless his dear old heart! took it in his head to get married again, and I was not going to play second fiddle where I had played first for so long; and so I told him that I would rather earn my living and be independent for a while. That is what made me jump at this opening, for it seemed so promising, and just what I wanted."

"Oh, look at the time, nearly three o'clock! I wonder where Mr. Powell can be?" cried Alice. Then she went into the room where Mrs. Powell lay, and came out a few minutes later with a very anxious look on her face. "I must go to the upper pasture for the cows, but if Mr. Powell comes home while I am away, will you get him something to eat, and tell him that we think Mrs. Powell is really ill, and that he ought to go for the doctor?"

"What is he like, this Mr. Powell? I ought to have some idea, or I may be ordering the wrong person to tramp off to Crag End; oh, and don't you see, I might even feed the wrong person!" said Hester, who hated to be left alone with Mrs. Powell, only did not like to say so.

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"Oh, you will know him when he comes into the house, but you will have to impress upon him that his wife is really ill, or he may not think it necessary to stir, she so often goes off to bed in the day; and although she is unconscious now, he will very likely declare that she is only asleep, or—or——"

"Or shamming, were you going to say?" asked Hester, with a quick grasp of the situation.

"I am afraid I was; and although it sounds dreadfully cruel to say it of her, she did sham sometimes, poor thing, and it was always after they had quarrelled," admitted Alice.

"Then they had been quarrelling this morning?" asked Hester, following Alice to the door, as if she would fain keep near her as long as she could.

"Yes, they were having words when I went away, and I am afraid it is that which must have upset Mrs. Powell, for she was such an excitable woman, and she was so angry because Mr. Powell would not come to meet you," Alice answered. And then, taking a stick in her hand, and whistling for a sandy brown dog, which limped on three legs, she went away up through the apple orchards, and Hester was left alone.

At first she did not mind it very much; there was so little time for feeling afraid while she was hard at work, and because her hands were unaccustomed to household tasks everything took her longer than it would have taken Alice. The fowls came trooping down to the house to be fed, and she had to hunt until she found some grain to give them. Then presently the shadows began to fall: night was coming down, Alice had not returned, Mr. Powell had not come home, and she was alone with a woman whose only sign of

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life was the fleeting breath which, to Hester, seemed to come fainter than it had done at the first.

Was Mrs. Powell dying? If she actually passed away what could Hester do? And where, oh, where was Alice?

As Hester walked to the door for about the fiftieth time to look for some sign of her return, there came into her mind the story which the young man at the store had told her about the bear that had mauled someone so sorely. Suppose Alice had encountered a bear on her way to the upper pastures?

Just as this dread made its way into the mind of Hester she saw the indistinct form of some animal coming slowly down through the apple orchards, and immediately her strained fancy jumped to the conclusion that the creature was a bear.

CHAPTER III

Valiant Doings

HER first impulse was to dash into the house and bar the door. The silence and oppression within were quite bad enough, but when it came to having wild and savage animals roaming round outside Hester was quite willing to admit that her courage was not equal to the occasion.

"Perhaps I could shoot the monster from the window if it came within range," she muttered to herself, and with a fast-beating heart she had even advanced a step towards the gun that was hung in slings from one of the beams of the ceiling, when a plaintive moo from among the apple trees turned the supposed bear into a cow which needed milking, and at once diverted her fears into another channel.

"There is the cow, but oh, where can Alice be? And whatever shall I do? I expect the creature wants to be milked, and I am nearly as much afraid of it as I should be of a bear, for if one can hug and maul, the other can toss me with its awful horns. And, oh dear, oh dear, I fairly hate the country, and there is no girl in all the wide Dominion of Canada who is more to be pitied than I am! Alice was quite right when she said that it was a hired man, and not a lady help, that Mrs. Powell ought to have advertised for to come and do the work."

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Hester stood with the back-door held ready to be banged if the cow appeared likely to charge, but the creature, a mild and gentle Alderney, with a very swollen udder, seemed in too much trouble on its own account to be meditating any assault upon her, and kept stopping and uttering such plaintive moos that Hester's pity triumphed over her fears; and seizing a bucket—not the right one, of course, not even a clean one, in fact: but that was not the time for fussing about trifles—she sallied out to do her best for the cow.

“Here, Moolie, Moolie, or whatever is your name, if you will come here, and promise not to toss me with those frightful horns of yours, I will do my best to milk you; of course I shall do it all wrong, but that can't be helped. Only, my dear cow, you must remember that one good turn deserves another, and if I do my best for you, it is only right that you should behave yourself properly while I am doing it.”

Hester gave a low, gurgling laugh at her own stupidity in talking to the animal in this fashion, and she wondered whatever she would do if the creature turned restive.

There was an untidy haystack not far from the house, which had the appearance of being the favourite resort of the cow, judging by the way it was pulled about, and the creature turned towards it now, while Hester followed after, carrying the bucket in one hand and a three-legged stool in the other.

“Oh, Moolie, if you only knew how awfully afraid I am!” she gasped, as the cow, having reached the haystack, proceeded to pull out a mouthful; and she halted in the background, wondering what would happen if she proceeded to “do things”.

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She knew, from having seen it done, that when one went to milk a cow it was correct to sit on a stool and ram one's head into the creature's side, but whether this position had something to do with getting the milk down, or was merely a way of buttressing oneself in order to get a freer play of the hands, she did not know.

"If only Alice would come!" she exclaimed in her sore trouble, and then the cow turned and uttered such a loud moo so close to her that Hester gave a cry of dismay, the noise sounding so much more formidable at close quarters.

"Well, it has got to be done, so here goes, and if I perish in the act I hope my kin will realize that I died in a brave attempt to do my duty," she muttered with a hysterical gasp; then planting her stool by the side of the cow, she plumped down upon it, and butting into the creature's soft flank with her head, proceeded to do her very best in relieving the poor beast from the burden of its milk. Her hands were strong and her pull vigorous, and so she did better than she thought, and at once established amicable relations with Moolie.

When she had done—for even milking takes time, especially for an amateur—it was so nearly dark that Hester had to grope when she re-entered the house, and now her fear of that unconscious figure lying on the bed in the front bedroom had risen to a sort of panic. She would have run away if there had been anywhere to run to. There was a sort of indignation in her heart when she thought of Alice, for she had made herself believe that Alice was leaving her in this fashion on purpose, and all the strength of her nature rose in revolt at the thought of such meanness.

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this! How Daddy would chuckle if he could see the pickle I have got myself into!" she muttered, as, having crept to the side of Mrs. Powell and satisfied herself that the poor woman still breathed, she went back to the kitchen to find a lamp and light it, for she could bear the shadows no longer.

The cow, having satisfied her hunger at the haystack, came and had a long drink of water from a trough that was near the back-door, and then stayed feeding under the apple trees near the house. It was a comfort to Hester to feel that there was something living near at hand, for the place had come to be almost deathly quiet, since the pigs had gone supperless to bed and were forgetting their hunger in sleep, while the ducks had ceased from their noisy quacking and had settled in a heap by the edge of a little pool, where the water from a tiny stream was caught and held, then allowed to go again when it had risen above the tiny dam that had been thrown across its course.

Although the lamp was lighted, Hester found that she simply could not stay indoors; it seemed to her as if someone would come roaming round the house, and would peep at her through the uncurtained window, and she knew that she could not bear anything of the sort. She dreaded, too, lest the master of the house should return and find her there alone with his unconscious wife. It was not so much what Alice had said about Mr. Powell as what she had left unsaid that made Hester feel so reluctant to meet him. What a low-down, horrid lot of people she had come amongst, and how very thankful she would be when daylight came again, and she could pack her belongings into the crazy old wagon and drive them down to Crag End and the rail-

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way! She had enough money still for her train fare, but there would not be much left over, and she would have to go hungry for most of the long journey east. But she could buy some bread or some biscuits at Crag End, and she would manage on bread and water or biscuits and water, as the case might be.

A cold doubt stole into her mind as she paced up and down the bit of path outside the back-door as to what sort of reception her new stepmother would give her.

"Oh dear, it will be horrid anyway, and I shall have to eat humble-pie until it chokes me!" Hester fairly groaned, as she thought of that unsavoury but wholesome dish, and remembered all the things she had said to her father about taking her own way in the world and being independent.

The night was fine, but cool; a moaning wind sighed down through the apple trees, and presently to Hester's ears came another sound—a cry for help. A spasm of fear clutched her, and then her heart beat so fast that she felt as if she would choke. This place was so terrible in its solitude and its darkness, and now there was that cry. Did it come from a human being, or was it some strange bird or beast that uttered the sound?

There it was again, a strained, hoarse cry, and, as it sounded in her ears, Hester realized for the first time in her life what a really shocking coward she was.

"Oh, I am ashamed!" she panted, clenching her fists so tightly that the nails drove into her palms and hurt her. Then, making a desperate effort, she called back, "What is the matter?"

At first, to her extreme disgust, her voice was no louder than a whisper; but the sound of it somehow

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gave her courage, and her next attempt was a ringing shout, while, to her great surprise, she left off trembling and was at once ready and willing for whatever might be required of her.

"Help me, I am hurt—Alice!" gasped a faint voice from somewhere away in the dark; and then, with a pang of self-reproach, Hester mentally called herself hard names for her wrong judgment of Alice, and set off in a great hurry to find and help her out of difficulty.

But the very first thing that happened was that she found herself suddenly tripped up by something, and promptly measured her length on the ground, with some damage to her nose and an uncomfortable skinning of her elbow.

She picked herself up, feeling dreadfully shaken and understanding that she would have to go warily, for it was what is known as ground dark, and things near the earth were in utter obscurity, while above the stars were shining and the sky was largely free from clouds.

"Can you tell me where you are?" she called.

"Come straight along by the fence and you will find me," answered Alice, and now her voice sounded so near that Hester took courage again; and having ascertained that it was a broken part of the fence which had tripped her up, she groped her way along beside it until a warning growl from an unseen dog brought her to a sudden stand.

"Be quiet, Toby; don't you know a friend when you see one?" said the voice of Alice. And then she cried out: "Oh, Hester, how worried you must have been because I did not come back! But I sprained my ankle among the rocks in the upper pasture, and

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it has taken me all this time to crawl back here; in fact, I should not have done it so soon if it had not been for Toby, good old dog, who has just dragged me along by sheer strength of collar where he could."

"Good old Toby!" said Hester, stooping to pat the dog in a fearless fashion. She might be a coward in some things, but she was certainly not afraid of dogs, and Toby responded to her overtures in the spirit in which they were tendered.

"You can't carry me, Hester, indeed you cannot!" protested Alice, as Hester stooped and slid a strong pair of arms under her.

"I am going to try, anyhow," replied Hester, with a nervous laugh. Everything seemed bearable now that Alice had come back, and she had no longer to face the terrors of the darkness alone.

"Don't try to lift me. Remember that I have one good foot, and if you will only let me hang on to you I can get along famously. Toby was not the right shape to support me properly, although he did his level best to help me, poor old fellow," said Alice, patting the dog's rough head as Hester raised her to a standing posture, and the dog answered with a low whine of pleasure.

"What a brick you were to attempt such a crawl!" exclaimed Hester, thinking of her own cowardice and despising herself accordingly.

"I was so worried about you! I thought that you would be frightened when it got dark because you are a stranger," said Alice. "Has Mr. Powell come home yet?"

"No. Half of my fear has been lest he should come. I have been conjuring up all sorts of night-

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mare fears about him—that is, since I got over the panic which the appearance of the cow flung me into, for at first sight I thought that she was a bear.” Hester caught her breath in a little gasp as she thought of how very scared she had been, and then she burst into a chuckle of laughter, and plunged into the description of how she had screwed her courage up to the point of milking the cow.

“Oh, it was splendid of you!” cried Alice. “Do you know, that has been one of my great troubles, that I should have to milk when I got home, unless, indeed, Mr. Powell reached here first. I cannot think where he can be, for he always used to tell us when he was going to be delayed in coming home. I hope that no accident has happened to him.”

“Not likely: three tragedies in one day would stretch the long arm of coincidence too far. Most likely he and his wife finished up their little disagreement with a decision that it was better for him to go for a short holiday somewhere, and she would have told you about it, only, poor soul, she had this seizure before we reached here,” said Hester, who obstinately refused to believe in any more tragedies that night.

“I hope you are right, for it is just dreadful to think that some accident may have happened to him, and that he may be lying out-of-doors all night at this time of the year. We nearly always get a frost in the early morning, and it is bitterly cold.” Alice shivered as she spoke, thinking how she herself must have lain all night in the cold if it had not been for her own grim determination and the willing help of the sensible old dog.

Hester helped her into the house, and then cried out

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in dismay to see how dirty and ragged she was from her long crawl.

"I know that I am in a fearful plight, but there is one part where the ground is soft, and I had to drag myself through it," said Alice, in meek apology for the trouble she was giving, and then she so nearly fainted that Hester was scared almost out of her wits.

What a night it was! Hester felt as if she had lived years instead of hours by the time she had fed Alice with hot bread and milk and had got her safely to bed. Then there was Mrs. Powell to look after, and although very little could be done for her beyond painting her lips with some stimulant which Alice had found on the top shelf of the cupboard earlier in the day, Hester did not feel as if she could leave the poor woman, and would have sat by the bed all night if Alice had not implored her to remember the needs of the next day and get some sleep while sleep was possible.

So Hester compromised by spreading herself out on three chairs close to Mrs. Powell's bed, just to rest her limbs, as she told Alice, and with a firm determination not to go to sleep. But she was young and healthy and very, very tired, so the next thing she knew was that daylight was shining broadly in at the window, and Alice was leaning over her shaking her into wakefulness.

"Morning already? Why, I had only just dozed off to sleep!" she exclaimed, with such a ludicrous air of astonishment that Alice laughed in spite of the pain of her foot, which had effectually prevented her from getting any sleep during the night.

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that you will have to do because I can't. The pigs had no supper last night, and you had better feed them first, or they will make so much noise that you will be nearly deafened before you have finished the other things," said Alice, who was bending over the bed intently examining the still figure which lay thereon.

"How is she now?" asked Hester, coming to look at the invalid before she plunged into the outside work.

"She looks just the same; and yet I don't know, I think there is more life in her face, and she distinctly moved her lips when I brushed the brandy over them. You will have to drive to Crag End for the doctor after breakfast, Hester, for he may be able to do something that will bring her back to consciousness;" and Alice straightened herself up, holding on to the foot of the bedstead to steady her balance, for having only one sound foot she was very top-heavy.

"I can't drive and it is too far to walk, so there is nothing for it but to get a neighbour to go for us. I suppose that can be done?" and Hester paused in the act of rolling up her hair to look at Alice, who, however, shook her head.

"It is of no use to depend on our neighbours. The Hintons live nearest, and they are nearly three miles away. But James Hinton is in bed with an attack of jaundice, and Mrs. Hinton has a young baby, so it is quite impossible for her to go. The next neighbours live two miles farther on, and by the time you have walked there, on the off-chance that they will be at liberty to go for the doctor, you might as well let Dobbins take you to the town; then you will be sure

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of getting what you want, and you will be indebted to no one."

"Was there ever such a dreadful situation!" exclaimed Hester, swathing herself in a rough apron which belonged to Alice. "Here am I, a girl from a town, brought up to imagine myself above the need to toil with my hands, and I come out here to be a lady help, a sort of creature whose duties consist in being amiable to visitors, in arranging flowers and playing the piano—only in my case it is the violin—and in helping my employer to kill time generally; but instead of all these things, which are easy and pleasant, I find myself forced to risk my life in milking fierce cows, feeding turbulent pigs, and driving spirited horses."

"There is only one cow and that one is as harmless as her own milk, while, instead of driving Dobbin, all you have to do is to sit in the wagon and let him take you down to the town—he knows the way and will get you there in course of time. I would go myself, only the jolting would be unbearable, I am afraid," said Alice.

"Oh dear, I would rather risk my life twenty times over than I would be left to sit and watch that poor thing, for her senselessness gets on my nerves to a most horrible degree," said Hester with a shudder; and then she hurried into the chill of the outside world, where the hoar frost sparkled on grass and trees, and plunged into the work which had to be done. She was not expert at mixing pigs' swill, but the pigs were too hungry to be critical.

The blessed silence which fell on the place when they had started their breakfast was a mighty relief,

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and Hester dashed into the house for the next orders, feeling something of a conqueror. She was not even afraid of the cow this morning, and when milking was over set to work at the poultry with tremendous zest; for here there was nothing to be afraid of, although a broody duck, with feathers ruffled and beak wide open, came at her like an avenging fury, and, dropping the corn bucket, she turned and fled, only to come back a minute later laughing at her own stupidity in being afraid of such a thing.

She went into the house to get breakfast, feeling quite cheerful, and then exclaimed in amazement because it was ready for her to eat, while a most fragrant smell of coffee greeted her as she crossed the threshold.

"I told you to lie in bed, and that I would get breakfast," she said reproachfully, for Alice was so white, and had such a pinched look of pain that it was dreadful to think of her having to jar and jolt that sprained ankle in moving about the house.

"I cannot rest yet; I want to get the doctor here," said Alice, with a catching sob. "It would be so dreadful for you and for me if she were to die before he comes; people would blame us for not having sent off yesterday, and oh, it would be too dreadful to think about!"

"Then don't think about it," replied Hester, with cheery common sense, as she pulled a chair up to the table and prepared to make a hearty breakfast. "If I were to think of the horrors in front of me, in driving Dobbin over that fearful track which calls itself the road to the town, I expect that I should swoon away, or do something equally silly; so I just refuse to think

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about it, and I am going to eat as much breakfast as possible in order to fortify myself for the ordeal."

Harnessing Dobbin to the wagon was really a serious business, and Alice was obliged to stand on one foot outside the door, resting the other knee on the chair that Hester brought out for her, while she gave orders as to the fastening of the various buckles and the adjusting of the straps which fastened the horse to the wagon.

"The prospect of sitting in the place of power behind the creature, and using whip and reins, fades into a very commonplace affair after this sort of thing," gasped Hester, who was panting and perspiring from her efforts at harnessing. She had just been groping under the horse for a strap which had to be fastened up on the side where she was standing, and losing her balance in the attempt, she had rolled over close to Dobbin's heels. The stolid old horse, however, stood unmoved as a post, which was lucky, as the situation would have been decidedly critical if the animal had turned restive at that moment.

"Oh, Hester, you did give me a most horrible fright!" exclaimed Alice, with actual tears in her eyes, as she reached out a shaking hand to brush the dust from Hester's sleeve.

"It wasn't comfortable, I will admit, but all is well that ends well, and having come safely through a tight place like that I really ought not to be afraid of anything else that can happen to me," said Hester, in a rather breathless fashion, as she struggled into her coat.

"I shall be in dreadful trouble about you, and I shall not know an easy moment until you come back," said Alice tearfully.

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"In that case I will not go at all, and Mrs. Powell must just lie there and die without a doctor. She is not much use in the world apparently, and so will not be a very great loss; but you are made of downright good stuff, and I cannot afford to have you make yourself ill," replied Hester, drawing back, and making as if she were going to take her coat off again.

"Oh, no, you must go, and I promise you that I will not be foolish; I will even go into Mrs. Powell's room, and lie down beside her for a little sleep. You need have no fear on my account, none at all," jerked out Alice quickly, feeling desperately afraid that Hester was going to draw back, and knowing only too well that she could not do the journey herself.

"Very well, then, I will go; and, my dear child, please don't worry on my behalf, for no amount of worry on your part can possibly keep me from disaster, while if I get through safely it won't help matters to come back and find you prostrate," said Hester. And then, gathering up the reins in her hand, she clambered up the awkward step of the wagon, and, seating herself in the centre of the driving board, said "Gee-up" to Dobbin with quite a professional manner.

Of course she was awkward in turning the corner past the well-curb, and the wagon, rising on the edge of the stonework, tilted dangerously. Alice, who was watching, cried out in dismay, but Hester with great presence of mind flung herself towards the side which had tilted up, and so preserved the balance; the wagon righted itself with a jerk, and Dobbin broke into a shaking trot, as if scared by the thing behind him.

"Better luck next time!" Hester called gaily over her shoulder, and then was borne swiftly out of sight,

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while Alice hopped indoors shaking all over, and cast herself on her knees by the side of the couch, to pray that Hester might reach the town unharmed.

Having once been induced to trot, Dobbin got into the habit of it, and took Hester over those first few miles at a really spanking pace, for he had been a good horse in his day, and he was not quite done for yet. They had passed both of the lonely ranches which came between Powell's Gorge and the town, and Dobbin was scrambling up a hill that was nearly as steep as the roof of a house, when suddenly a man, dusty, ragged, and dishevelled, burst out of the thick undergrowth bordering the trail, and cried out imploringly:

"Give me a ride, will you? I am being hunted as if I were a wild beast, and I am too nearly done to go any farther."

Every vestige of colour drained out of Hester's face, but there was no trace of fear in tone or manner as she said coldly: "If it is money that you want I can tell you plainly that I have only a dollar and a half in my purse, and you will not get even so much without a struggle, so you had better get out of the way of my horse, for I am not going to be trifled with."

"I am no highwayman," he said harshly; "but I tell you that I am being hunted, tracked down by bloodhounds. Hark! you can hear them in the distance," and he held up a warning hand, while at the same time he checked Dobbin with the other.

And then far away on the opposite hill Hester heard the deep note of a hunting hound, which had just picked up the trail.

"Get in," she said briefly, making room at her side for the hunted man; and then, reaching forward, she hit

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Dobbin a mighty thwack with her stick, which would have made much more impression if its chief force had not been spent on the harness. Dobbin shook his obstinate old head with a petulant air, and went on climbing the hill at a leisurely pace.

"Can't you get a move on the beast, miss? I want to be out of sight of the place where my trail is lost, or it won't help me much," said the man, who was elderly, and spoke with an air of culture, despite his appearance.

"I have never driven a horse before; if you can do better yourself pray take the reins," she said, tendering them to him without hesitation.

"Hold tight, then!" he said grimly, and the next moment Dobbin was plunging uphill at a furious pace.

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CHAPTER IV

An Exciting Drive

HESTER clung with both hands to the side of the wagon, and set her teeth hard to keep from shrieking, as the wagon swayed, bumped, and bounced over the rough trail; sometimes the wheel on her side was tilted right up, and sometimes it was the man who had to cling to his side of the wagon to keep from being flung against her. But it was plain that he was a skilled driver, and Dobbin knew it as well as she did. For although the man got every bit of pace possible out of the horse, yet he was careful to spare it as much as possible, choosing the smoothest bits of the road for the hard-driven creature's feet, and letting the wagon, and incidentally the passengers, take all the bumping.

"It is a downright good horse, and I do believe that we shall do it," said the man, breaking silence for the first time since he had told Hester to hold tight—that is, he broke silence so far as she was concerned, although he had said a great many things to Dobbin by way of encouragement and cheer, always couching his remarks in language fit for a lady to hear, although he looked such a rough customer.

"We shall just do what?" asked Hester, in a rather choked voice, for she was wondering what the end of this adventure was going to be.

An Exciting Drive

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"I think that we shall just catch the cars that pass through from the mines to the main track at eight-forty every morning," he said, with a wave of his hand towards the railway, which now appeared in sight.

Hester did not answer immediately, for just then a lurch of the wagon flung her against her queer companion with such force that the breath seemed to be nearly knocked out of her; then, when she had straightened herself up again, she exclaimed, "Ah, here comes the train! Will you manage it?"

"I must," replied the man quietly, and then Dobbin sprang forward again at a wild gallop, the long descent to the railway was taken at a terrific pace, and just as the train, ringing its big bell, came to a standstill, Dobbin was pulled up alongside the cars. The creature was snorting, puffing, and blowing, and altogether too thoroughly winded to be scared at the engine, or the clanging bell either, although in an ordinary way he would have deemed it a fitting opportunity for a bolt.

"Thanks for a pleasant ride," said the gentlemanly tramp, as he swung himself to the ground amid a group of interested spectators. And then he added in a casual tone: "If I were you I would rest the horse for an hour before going back. It would pay you too if you were to ask someone to give the poor beast a rub down and a drink of warm oatmeal gruel."

"I will do it, certainly; thank you for the suggestion," replied Hester, with her sunniest smile, greatly amused by the staring of the curious crowd; and then, as the stranger leaped on board the rear car and the train began to move again, she called out "Goodbye!"

He waved his hand in acknowledgment, and passed into the car out of sight, while Hester brought her

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attention back from the vanishing cars to the crowd round the wagon, who were already making frank comments on the overdriven condition of Dobbin.

"Can you tell me where I can find someone who will groom my horse for me and give it a warm drink of oatmeal gruel?" she asked, smiling again, because she had long since found out how helpful it was to the success of anything she might have in hand to smile over it. She addressed herself to a big man with a mop of flaming carrot hair, feeling instinctively that he was a sort of leader among the others, and would be of most use to her.

"The poor brute looks as if it needed taking care of; it's Sam Powell's critter, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, and I have had to drive in for the doctor, for Mrs. Powell has had a seizure and Miss Trevor has sprained her ankle. But I do not know much about horses or driving, and I should have had hard work to manage by myself, I am afraid," she said.

"Dear, dear! you seem to be having a peck of trouble at your place. Where is Sam Powell, and why didn't he come to get the doctor for his wife? Or is he bad too?" demanded a shrewish-looking woman, thrusting herself nearer to Hester, who had dismounted and was standing close beside the panting Dobbin.

But Hester had been warned by Alice to be careful in what she said concerning the state of things at Powell Gorge, and so she only said very quietly: "Mr. Powell is not at home, and does not know of his wife's seizure yet. But will you please tell me where the doctor lives, because I am so afraid lest I should miss him?"

"You come along with me and I'll show you. Don't worry about your horse: Tim will see to that," said the

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woman, with a wag of her head in the direction of the big man, who was already taking Dobbin from the shafts.

"I shall want to start again in an hour," said Hester. Of choice she would have been off again in half an hour, but the man had said that Dobbin must have the hour, and she would not deprive the poor beast of the rest which had been so hardly earned.

"Yes, I should think that you might get off again in an hour, though the poor thing is a bit blown now," remarked the little woman, with a backward glance at the horse. And then she added, as if with the idea of consoling Hester: "Don't you worry about the critter, miss, for there is no one to beat Tim that I know of in setting tired horses on their feet again. He used to be in the Mounted Police, you see, until he had his accident and couldn't ride, when he had to resign. I'm his wife. Mrs. Lorimer is my name. What is yours?"

"I am Hester Hope, and I came by the cars yesterday, only I did not see you," said Hester, smiling down at the little woman in such a manner that Mrs. Lorimer at once fell a victim to her charm.

"Some kin to Mrs. Powell, are you?—though I must say that you don't favour her in looks," said the little woman, palpably anxious to know all about this smart-looking girl who had confessed herself so ignorant of horses and driving.

"I am no relation to Mrs. Powell. I came in answer to her advertisement for a lady help, but I find that I am so ignorant of the things that I am expected to know that I do not suppose I shall stay after Mrs. Powell gets better," said Hester, determined to gratify Mrs. Lorimer's thirst for information where it only concerned herself,

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in the hope of thus being able to stave off awkward questions on other subjects.

The little ruse was a complete success, and the ferret-nosed woman was so busy in acquiring information concerning Hester's family and connections, the sort of house her people lived in, and the style in which they were able to live, that she quite forgot to ask a single thing that mattered about the state of things at Powell Gorge.

The doctor lived in a little two-roomed wooden house at some distance along the main street. He opened the door to them himself, and Hester was very much taken aback to find that he only looked like a medical student after all, and that he was blacking his own boots, for he had a boot on one hand and was clutching a brush with the other when he opened the door. But boot and brush were instantly tossed aside, and he donned his very best professional manner at sight of Hester in her well-cut clothes and with her general air of style.

"Mrs. Powell, of Powell Gorge, did you say? Yes, I know the place; about ten miles out, isn't it? I am afraid that I must see one or two patients here in the town first, and then I will ride over," he said, his face having gone a shade redder because of the fashion in which he had been caught.

"Oh, please, I wonder whether you would mind tying your horse behind my wagon and driving me over? I can't drive at all well, and I am horribly afraid of horses, they look such big, clumsy creatures when one is sitting up behind them. I do not know how I should have got here this morning, only someone kindly drove me the worst part of the way; but he had to go off on the cars," said Hester, who did not mean to be left to her

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own devices on the homeward journey if she could help it.

"I will drive you with pleasure, and it will save my horse too, for I'm rather heavy, and the poor beast has quite as much work as is good for it," said the doctor readily. And then he put Hester through a brief catechism as to Mrs. Powell's symptoms, because it would be necessary to take some medicines out with him, as the distance was so great.

"She has no symptoms at all: she is just unconscious, and lies as if she were dead, only that she breathes," replied Hester. "It is really Miss Trevor for whom you can do most, for her foot is so bad and she seems so shaken from the pain of it. I do not know how to bandage it, or what to do at all; indeed, I do not think that I am good for anything, and I had no idea that I was so appallingly ignorant until yesterday."

"I will take bandages and some liniment with me, and I dare say that I shall be able to give relief," said Robert Lambert gravely. But it never occurred to him to pay Hester a compliment by saying that he was sure she must be clever, or something of that sort, and so she went off thinking him a very boorish young man, although it is highly probable that she would have disliked him still more if he had shown any desire to flatter her. Such is the perversity of the human heart, especially of a girl's heart!

"Now you come over to my place and have a cup of coffee before you go back," said Mrs. Lorimer hospitably. "I will show you my best china, and you shall tell me if your folks have got any like it, or better."

"I am sure that we should not have any better, for we usually have Irish servants who have just come over

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from Ireland, and they mostly smash everything that they can lay hands on," said Hester, as she walked away with the little woman. Then she asked anxiously: "Has Dr. Lambert got many patients in the town that he must see before he comes out with me, do you know?"

"I don't know as there are any sick folk in Crag End except Abe Simpson, who was so mauled by the bear on the night before last. Oh, there is old Mrs. Jenkins, who is all doubled up with rheumatism. He will most likely have a look in at her, for, you see, it has a better professional air to have a lot of other things to do when anyone wants you, and he is dreadful keen on making his way. He is poor, too, and does for himself entirely; even washes his own shirts, so they say, though I don't know how he manages it, for I never see any clothes out to dry. Still, he always looks clean, and he is nearly the only man in Crag End that blacks his boots, so he must be rather fond of giving himself trouble, I should say, by the way he goes to work." The little woman rattled on in her sharp tones, very much to the satisfaction of Hester, since only one person could talk at once, and while Mrs. Lorimer held the floor there was certainly no occasion for her to exert herself in making conversation.

When the hour was up Tim Lorimer harnessed Dobbin to the wagon again, but flatly refused to take any money for his services, although he told Hester that she might step across to the store and pay for the oatmeal which he had used in making the gruel, as it was Sam Powell's place to feed his own horse.

"And if you'll take my advice, miss, you will ask the doctor to give you a lesson in driving on the way back. Knowledge of that sort comes in very handy in these

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parts," he said gruffly, as he finished buckling the last straps, while Hester stood watching to make sure that she understood how it was done.

The doctor was ready by this time, and tying his own horse to the back of the wagon he mounted beside Hester and took the reins, while she smiled to herself to think that this was the second time that day that she had been driven by a stranger; only this stranger was in sharp contrast to the last in the matter of personal tidiness, and she ran her critical eye over him, thinking how different he was to every other man whom she had seen since she came to Crag End.

"Tim Lorimer says that you do not know much about driving, so I think that you had better look on for the first half of the way, and for the second part, where the trail is not quite so steep, you shall drive while I look on," he said, as Dobbin made his way up the long slope from the railway track at a slow pace.

"Thank you. Perhaps it will be as well that I should know how to do it, although I do not mean to stay with Mrs. Powell—that is, I shall go just as soon as she is well enough for me to leave, for I consider that she was not honest in engaging me to come as a lady help when it was the roughest sort of hired girl that she really meant," said Hester.

"But if you belong to the country—and you have Canadian written in big letters all over you—surely you should have known the sort of life that you would be likely to encounter in a new district like Crag End," the young man replied, as he gave Dobbin a broad hint to get on a little faster.

Hester flushed, for of course she ought to have known, and indeed her father had warned her; but she was in

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such a state of hot revolt because he had married again that she simply would not listen to reason or to common sense. Perhaps she was even a little ashamed of herself; but she was not going to admit so much to this stranger, and so she contented herself with sitting in dignified silence, while Dobbin scrambled up the steep hills or plunged down them, as the case might be.

They were nearing now the place where Hester had encountered the hunted man, and she was secretly congratulating herself on the apparently deserted look of the dreary bit of wild land, and telling herself that the hunters must have given up the quest and gone their way again, when the doctor broke the silence which had lasted so long.

"I think that we have got over the worst of the trail now, and so you had better change places with me and have your lesson in driving."

"Very well, only you must not expect to find me a very apt pupil, for I am fearfully stupid about some things," she said with a laugh, and changed places with him. Then, gathering up the reins in her hands, she was trying to look as fit for the position as possible, when an abrupt turn in the trail, a little farther on, plunged them into a group of men, kneeling or stooping about some object on the ground, which at first sight could not be clearly identified.

But Hester knew instinctively, and her heart gave a great bound as she jerked the reins tight to stop Dobbin, in response to a word from the doctor.

"What is the matter?" he asked, as the men turned to him, while Hester sat rigid as a figure carved in stone.

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has fallen lame. It has stubbed its foot on a thorn, I guess," said the man who appeared to be leader of the group, a big, rough fellow, looking like a miner.

"I am a doctor, so perhaps I can help the poor beast a little; at least I can try," said the young man, and springing down from the wagon he went with a quick step towards the dog, the men making way for him and letting Hester get a clear glimpse of the hound, which lay on the ground licking its foot in a pathetic fashion. The men held the head of the animal while the doctor made his examination, and then he came back to the wagon for some bandaging with which to strap up the injured foot, after he had cleansed the wound with some water from one of the water bottles carried by the men.

"They are miners out from Placerville. They seem to have been doing a bit of man-hunting, and they have not only lost their quarry but they have lamed their dog. The poor beast is not fit to put its foot to the ground, and I am wondering if we could not offer them a lift for the next four or five miles. May I?" he asked, looking at Hester with a confident smile, and never doubting that she would say yes.

"No, no, indeed you must not think of taking the dog into the wagon; I cannot—I mean, I will not have it here," she said, with a feverish outburst which frightened her, for she thought that the men who had gathered about the wagon would surely guess the very thing that she was so anxious to hide.

"Do you mean that you are afraid of the creature?" asked the doctor, with so much scorn in his tone that Hester was humiliated to the very dust.

"Yes!" she gasped, telling the honest truth, for she was afraid for the man whom she had helped to escape.

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She did not know how far the vengeance of these rough men could follow, and if once they found out in which direction he had gone, they could of course set the telegraph to work, and it was her business to protect him and cover his retreat as far as she could.

"I am sorry; I did not think that you were like that," the doctor said, and again there was that scorn in his tone which made her wince so cruelly. Then he strode back with his bandages, and she was left to wait again.

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CHAPTER V

Chaos

"You will have to make a stretcher and carry the poor beast, or you will have it lame for life," the doctor said to the men.

"It is a good long tramp, fifteen miles, to Placerville, and only a hummocky trail. Could you give the dog and one of our fellows a lift for a few miles, Doctor?" asked the leader.

"Sorry, but the wagon isn't mine, and the young lady won't," explained the doctor curtly; and his tones, reaching to the ears of Hester, again made her wince, yet in no way altered her determination, although she became quite unreasonably angry.

"Gals are mostly afraid of anything on four legs, from a mouse upwards," remarked one of the men, whereat the others laughed. But the doctor looked both angry and contemptuous when he came back to the wagon, and Hester writhed secretly, but sat stiffly erect, and drove slowly forward past the group of men, which parted to let her through, some of them even saluting ironically. She bowed in return, then felt her hair stiffen as the dog lifted its head, sniffing curiously, when the wagon went slowly by. That was the side upon which the hunted man had scrambled into the wagon, and enough of his scent must have remained to bring some sort of a reminder to the clever creature;

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but luckily the men did not notice or connect it with the chase which had ended so abruptly, and the next moment the danger was over, and she could breathe freely again.

The remainder of the drive was as silent as the first part had been. Occasionally the doctor would give a quiet word of advice about the driving, but Hester, being on her mettle, and racking her brains to know what to do, managed to get Dobbin along in a workmanlike style, which did not call for criticism.

"You are a much better driver than I thought you would be. Are you always given to underrating yourself?" the doctor asked kindly, as Dobbin turned into the orchard at Powell Gorge and the journey was over.

Hester flushed hotly, but instead of answering she asked a question: "Why were they hunting a man yonder—those miners, I mean?"

"It was a bit of rough justice, I fancy. The police cannot always be where they are wanted, and if the miners take the law in their own hands sometimes, and arrest a criminal caught red-handed, who shall blame them? It seems that there have been a good many rather glaring cases of salting lately. A strict watch has been set on suspected people, and at last one man was found in the act; but he managed to slip away, and so they set out to hunt him down, hoping to catch him before he reached the rail," said the doctor.

"What is salting?" demanded Hester in a jerky tone, while a sudden fear sprang into her heart lest she had been aiding a real criminal to escape, which was a very different thing from helping an innocent man to outwit his enemies.

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valuable ores, such as silver and gold, but chiefly gold, into the ground in places where someone else may find them, or where the person who put them there may pretend to find them, and then be able to sell the ground at some fictitious price. It is a most infamous way of swindling, and the man who does it deserves to be punished, and punished heavily," explained the doctor; and a cold chill crept over Hester at the thought of what she had done.

She was not going to confess her share in the man's escape just yet, however, and was opening her lips to say the first thing that came into her head, by way of changing the conversation, when, catching sight of the house, she cried out in surprise: "Why, what can be the matter? Look at the house, all the shutters are shut! It looks like a dead place."

"Were they shut when you started this morning?" asked the doctor.

"No, indeed. I did not even know that there were shutters to the place—that is, I had not noticed them. And Alice—that is Miss Trevor, you know—promised me that she would lie down all the time that I was away, just to give her foot a chance."

"We shall soon know if anything is wrong. Just go and ask while I tie the horse up," he said, lifting her down from the wagon; and then he turned to see to Dobbin and his own horse.

Hester ran to the house and tried the door, but found to her consternation that it was locked. Then she hurried round to the back, and tried to enter by the door there, but that also was fast; and after knocking and banging without getting any reply she went back to confer with the doctor.

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"So both doors are fast and all the windows are shuttered! It looks as if we are going to have a job to get in," he said thoughtfully. "By the way, what is that up there?" and he pointed to a sort of shutter in one gable of the little house.

"That? Oh, I expect that it leads into the loft," Hester answered, staring up at the little shutter, which stood a few inches open, as if it had been left so for the purpose of keeping the roof cool.

"Now try to remember if there is any trapdoor inside the house by which access can be gained to the loft," said the doctor, who was looking rather worried.

"Why, yes, of course, and it is in the storeroom, dairy, or whatever it is called, there;" and Hester pointed to the quarter of the house where this room was situated.

"Very well, I must climb up there, and enter the house in that fashion. I wonder if there is a ladder to be had, or whether we shall have to run the wagon back against the house, and construct a platform upon which to climb?" he said, looking round in search of a ladder, or of something which would serve his purpose if there was no ladder to be had.

"There is one in the barn, I know, for I saw it this morning," said Hester, and started off at a run, followed by the doctor, who helped her to get the ladder down from the pegs on which it hung; and then they carried it back to the house in company. The doctor reared it against the end of the house, and then he went up, while Hester stood on the lower rung to keep it steady.

Was there ever going to be an end to the worries and perplexities that had descended upon her since she

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had come to this post, which had seemed to promise so well until she got here, to find how grossly she had been deceived? Perhaps she had deserved the lesson, though; and then her thoughts flew off to the Bible history of Jonah, who, in running away from one difficulty, lighted on another that was very much worse.

"Well, it will be a lesson to me to be satisfied with what I have, and I will take care that I don't run away from this," she muttered, grim determination in her face and bearing as she waited for the doctor to let her into the house.

Presently she heard the grating of the bolts at the back-door, and ran round in time to meet him when he got the door open.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly.

"I don't know. I just made my way straight to the door, to get some daylight on the situation. Stay outside if you are afraid until I have had a look round," he said kindly, for after that incident of her refusal to give the dog a lift he did not think very highly of her courage.

"I am not afraid," she said quietly, and stepping past him set about opening the shutters and letting the daylight stream into the dark house.

"Why, there is Alice on the floor!" she exclaimed in surprise, when she had opened the shutters of the bedroom where Mrs. Powell lay on the bed in her death-like trance.

"Something has frightened her and she has fainted," said the doctor, with a swift summing-up of the situation which did him credit; and then lifting Alice in his arms he carried her to the couch in the next room, and set himself to the task of bringing her round.

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Hester waited on him, bringing him whatever he called for, and making so little fuss about it that he had to alter his opinion somewhat and take back a few of the hard things which he had thought of her. But it seemed a long time before Alice began to draw long, sobbing breaths, and finally to open her eyes and look up into their faces, and the doctor was more concerned than he would have cared to admit.

"Ah, that is better! You will soon feel all right now," he said encouragingly, when she tried to speak to them, and then he bade her lie still for a while, and told her that he would go and see how Mrs. Powell was, and come back to her later.

"Thank you," she said faintly; and then he went off into the next room, making a sign to Hester to accompany him, leaving Alice to rest for a short time.

"Whatever it was that upset her and made her faint, it was nothing to do with Mrs. Powell," said the doctor, as he bent over the unconscious figure on the bed. "Do you know if she has been subject to fainting fits?"

Hester shook her head. "I have not heard. Remember I have only known her since yesterday; but I think that if she had been given to fainting she would certainly have done it yesterday, when we were simply plunged in disasters. Besides, something must have frightened her rather badly to have made her fasten the house up in such a fashion. There were only the two of us in the house last night, yet she never even suggested shutting the shutters then, and in fact was much braver than I was."

"Humph! It is a queer business altogether," said the doctor; and then he told Hester that he did not

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think there was any immediate danger of Mrs. Powell dying, although she would probably never recover either speech or reason.

"Then she will want a nurse!" cried Hester, aghast at the thought of a fate so horrible descending upon the woman who had so grossly deceived her.

"You could not get a nurse for a case like this, and indeed there is so little to be done that almost anyone with strength to lift, and common sense in regulating the amount of nourishment which the patient can take, can manage for her," he said quietly; and Hester had a cold shiver all over her, for it was easy to see that, failing any near kin, she might have to undertake this most disagreeable task herself, or at least to share it with Alice.

"I wish that Mr. Powell would come home, then there would be someone to give orders," she said impatiently, as they went into the next room to see how Alice was feeling, and if she were able yet to tell them what they so badly wanted to know concerning the condition in which they had found her.

"I am so sorry to have given you so much trouble," Alice said meekly, looking up at Hester. "But I was never so frightened in my life, and I should have run away into the woods and never come back, only I did not dare to leave poor Mrs. Powell in her helpless condition; so I barricaded the house as best I could and then went into the bedroom and sat down close beside the poor thing, and somehow I feel sure she knew how hard I was trying to take care of her."

"But what was it that scared you so badly? I am certain that it must have been something pretty horrid, for I know that last night I thought you were as brave

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as any girl I had ever seen," said Hester in a soothing fashion, paying her little compliment with a generous air that brought a flush of pleasure to the pale face of Alice.

"I had crept out to the door to see if there were any sign of you coming back, for I felt so horribly lonely and nervous, because I was not able to get about as usual. And then I saw a great crowd of people coming along the cross-trail from Lowman's Ridge, and, to my horror, so far as I could see they were all naked," said Alice, drawing a long breath of sheer terror at the recollection.

"Naked?" echoed Hester in consternation.

"Yes, and they were brandishing their arms about, and singing or shouting; then I thought they must be a sort of Red Indians on the warpath, and I expected to be scalped at the very least. Of course my first idea was to rush away and hide in the woods, but there was poor Mrs. Powell to be thought of; and as I had about five minutes before they could reach the house, I flew round and shut the shutters, and then I crept into the room and sat down beside Mrs. Powell, to wait for whatever might come. I heard the people come walking round the house: they knocked at the door, and shook the window shutters, then I thought that they were getting in, and I do not remember any more;" and Alice gasped, looking so much as if she were going to faint again that Hester seized a newspaper that lay near, and began to fan her so vigorously that she raised a regular gale of wind about her.

"I expect that it was a Dukhobor pilgrimage," put in the doctor. "They are the most harmless people under the sun, but they have the craziest outbursts. There

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was a man at Crag End yesterday who had come from Lowman's Ridge, and he told me that they were getting out of hand again, and that they had turned all their horses loose the day before, because one of their preachers or teachers had been impressing on them that it was wicked and contrary to the law of God for them to keep dumb animals in subjection. Of course the police had promptly rounded up the creatures, and were holding them until such time as the people quieted down into a normal condition once more. But I expect that instead of quieting down they got roused up to the pitch of going on pilgrimage, which is, I believe, always the culminating point of their enthusiasm."

"I thought that the Dukhobors were settled in Saskatchewan and Assiniboia?" said Hester.

"So they are, but small parties are continually breaking away from the main body and making fresh settlements for themselves, and since this is a free country, they can of course go where they like all the time they have money to take up land. And as they are more frugal and industrious than most people, and can live where a good many would starve, they mostly do get on," said the doctor; and then he plunged into such vivid descriptions of the doings of the Dukhobors, and gave Alice such thrilling descriptions of their various naked pilgrimages in the past, that she was laughing at her own fears before he had finished.

But Hester had employed the time in getting a meal ready. A rather nondescript affair it was, for the bread was nearly out, and there seemed to be very little of anything eatable in the place; but something was better than nothing, and the doctor was much too hungry to be particular as to the fare set before him.

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"When will it be necessary for you to come and see Mrs. Powell again?" asked Hester, as she handed him his second cup of coffee.

"In a week's time will be quite soon enough; there is absolutely nothing that I can do for her," he answered.

"If Mr. Powell does not come home before that time, what shall we do?" asked Alice in a worried tone, for having lived at Powell Gorge for so long, she understood the difficulties of the place much better than the other two, who were strangers.

"The only thing to be done that I can see is to go straight on doing your very best, just as if he were here," replied the doctor. "I suppose that you have no idea as to his absence, whether it is through a quarrel with his wife, or whether he has gone off, as some men do, for a round of dissipation, or whether some harm has happened to him? Remember he is a complete stranger to me, I do not even know him by sight, and so I can have no theories about him."

"Mrs. Powell and he very often had words, and once I saw him hit her; but really I could not blame him for that, for the wonder to me was that he had not done it before, she was so fearfully aggravating," said Alice. Then, as if ashamed of having uttered an unkind remark about a woman who lay in such a helpless condition, she added hurriedly: "You see, Mrs. Powell was in weak health, and so very nervous that she was not always responsible for what she said and did."

"Humph!" answered the doctor. "That is a poor excuse to make for one's sins of ill temper. But at least it supplies a reason for his absence, only it is of course very difficult to know what to do for the best,

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seeing the condition in which Mrs. Powell lies. Who is the nearest magistrate?" asked the doctor thoughtfully.

"James Hinton, and he is our nearest neighbour too, but he is unfortunately ill with jaundice," answered Alice.

"Ill, is he? Well, I will go and see him when I leave here, and ask him what had better be done. He may be willing to let me prescribe for him, in which case I shall have two patients instead of one in this direction—I mean three, for of course there is Miss Trevor."

"I cannot afford to have a doctor," broke in Alice quickly.

"I fear that in this case you must afford it, or rather that Mrs. Powell will have to bear the expense for you; that sprain is rather a bad one, and unless you rest your foot absolutely for a few days, you may not be able to use it for a long time," the doctor said gravely; and then he went out to get his horse, and Hester went with him, for he had given her a glance which told her that he had something more to say to her.

"What is it?" she asked, when they were safely out of earshot of the house.

"That girl, Miss Trevor, must be taken care of: she wants complete rest, good and nourishing food, and no worries," said the doctor.

"Isn't that rather a big order under the circumstances?" asked Hester quietly, not betraying, even by a glance, the dismay his words brought her.

"Yes, I admit that it is, but I must warn you, and so I tell you frankly that she has reached a point of endurance beyond which she cannot go. She appears to me

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to be thoroughly run down and weakened by a long course of hard living and overworking, so that this sprained ankle may be a blessing in disguise, if it only makes her lie still and rest for a time," he replied, so gravely that Hester was truly thankful she had not let him see how dismayed she was at the prospect of wrestling single-handed with such a situation.

"I will do my best to keep her quiet, and if I do not entirely succeed I hope you will not blame me too much, for you can have no idea what an intrepid kind of girl she is," said Hester, laughing, as she thought of how Alice had faced the long crawl home from the upper pastures last night, when another and weaker nature would just have given up and lain still.

"Humph! To tell the truth, I thought her rather wanting in nerve to have been so hopelessly scared by that swarm of people coming about the house, for do you know, Miss Hope, she was very near collapse, so nearly dead from sheer fright that I very much doubted my ability to bring her round," he said.

"It does not do to be too hasty in judging people," said Hester, with a touch of scorn in her tone, for she was thinking of how the doctor had written her down a coward, just because she would not give the bloodhound a lift in the wagon. "Alice was probably so badly run down that her courage was not equal to the strain put upon it. But I wish, if you are going to Mrs. Hinton's, that you would ask her if she can come over for half an hour to-morrow morning and help me to put Mrs. Powell straight for the day; you see, I cannot lift the poor thing alone, and as Alice must not stand on her feet I cannot very well manage without help."

"I will be sure to tell her," said the doctor, and

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then he rode away, and Hester was left to face the situation with what courage she could.

First of all she went back to the house and insisted on putting Alice to bed; then when this was done she went out to look after matters outside. There was so much to do that it was more than an hour later before she had time to go back to the house to see how it fared with Alice. She was coming at a run then, when, rounding a corner of the barn to get a short cut to the house, she nearly fell over a small, half-naked creature, who was crouching there and sobbing bitterly.

"Why, who are you, and what is the matter?" cried Hester in a sharp tone, being scared nearly out of her senses by the encounter.

But the only answer she got was in a tongue unknown, while the poor creature sobbed more wildly than ever.

CHAPTER VI

Zota

"WHY, you poor child, where did you come from, and whatever is the matter?" demanded Hester a second time, and now her voice was so much kinder, and her manner was so gentle as she stooped over the frightened creature, that although her words were not understood it was plain the wanderer knew that her attitude was friendly.

By this time Hester saw that the unknown was a girl of about sixteen, clad only in a woollen petticoat, all her body from the waist upwards being naked, while the little feet peeping out from under the petticoat were naked also. Then she remembered the naked pilgrimage of the Dukhobors, which had frightened Alice so much, and at once she guessed that this girl must have been one of the pilgrims who for some reason had dropped out of the ranks.

"Dukhobor?" she asked, swinging her arm out towards the point whence she believed the pilgrims had come.

The girl nodded; then, gaining courage, came to stand on her feet with some help from Hester, and lifted a tear-stained yet pleasing face in mute entreaty.

"Poor thing, how cold you look!" exclaimed Hester, for although the spring sunshine was warm there was

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a chill wind sneaking round in odd corners; and seeing that the girl was shivering, she pulled off her coat and wrapped it about the slender figure.

There was a burst of fervent thanksgiving from the unknown at this act of mercy, and then, while Hester stood in doubt, wondering what to do with this queer piece of flotsam that had drifted into harbourage there, the girl settled the question herself by trotting away on her naked feet to open the gate for the cow, which had come down from some pasture of its own choosing, and was mooing loudly to be let through.

"Now, I wonder if she would be willing to stay and help me with the work for the next few days?" muttered Hester to herself, as she watched the barefooted maiden, who was making friends with the cow by pulling it some hay from the cut part of the stack. "And chiefest of all, I wonder if she knows how to milk?"

Then she went with a quick step to the house, and bringing out a milk pail—the right one this time—she pointed to the full udder of the cow and then to the pail. This the girl instantly comprehended, and with a nod to show that she understood, she ran across the green to fetch a stool that stood beside the door leading to the barn; and bringing it back she planted it beside the cow, and went to work in such a quick, methodical manner that it was easy to see that it was no new task to her.

"Well, really, what a treasure she might prove at this juncture, if indeed the naked pilgrims do not return to retrieve her!" murmured Hester, turning away to the house with a quick step to tell Alice of her find.

But Alice was asleep, and realizing that this was the very best medicine that she could possibly have, Hester

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stole away again, and betook herself out-of-doors to see how her new assistant was getting on.

"What is your name?" she asked, as the girl came towards her carrying a full pail and smiling broadly.

"Zota," answered the girl promptly, which showed that she had mastered at least a few words of English.

"Zota? Oh, that is very pretty," said Hester, with a beaming smile; and then with a gesture she invited the girl to bring the milk pail into the house, and Zota obeyed, casting glances full of wonder at what must have seemed like the extreme of luxury to her, although to Hester the house at Powell Gorge was quite squalid in its poverty.

When the milk was put out in a pan to cream, Hester and her new helper betook themselves out-of-doors once more, to do what seemed necessary for that evening. The day had passed in such a whirl that there had been no time to do the hundred-and-one things that must come into the everyday work of even a small farm. There were two promising broods of little chickens which had hatched out only that morning, and these had to be seen to; while quite a big family of baby pigs also required more attention than they had had on the previous night: so Hester found that her hands would have been very full indeed if it had not been for the Dukhobor Zota, who appeared to understand everything connected with the outdoor work much better than she did herself.

Alice was awake when they went back to the house again, and Hester signed to Zota to remain in the outer room while she went into the bedroom to tell of her find.

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hired girl of a first-rate sort, so now you will be able to lie still and get your foot better at your leisure," said Hester in a cheery tone.

"A hired girl? But, my dear Hester, she will want wages, and we don't know where our own pay is to come from, so how can we engage anyone else to help?" asked Alice, with a worried crease coming into her face.

"I don't fancy that this one will want much in the way of money, although we may have to help her in the matter of clothes," said Hester; and then she told Alice how she had found the poor child shivering and half-naked behind the barn, and had lent her own coat for the unwilling little pilgrim to wear. "She is such a dear, and she can milk superbly; it is quite a pleasure to see her walk up to a cow. And I fancy that the beast approves of her as much as I do myself, for the pail is nearly full of milk, and I could not get so much either last night or this morning."

"But won't the others come back for her when they find that she is missing?" asked Alice, with her old terror sweeping back over her.

"We must risk that; but they will not hurt us if they find that the girl has been kindly treated, and I could not send the poor child adrift in such a condition. Why! she has almost nothing on except a woollen petticoat, and although the day has been warm for the time of year it is too cold to go about in such a fashion," said Hester, with a thrill of indignation in her tone. Alice made no more protests after that, and indeed she was feeling too ill to worry overmuch about anything; and as the hours of the evening went on, Hester was increasingly grateful to think that she had found a helper, for Zota proved quick and capable. She helped Hester

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to lift Mrs. Powell into a more comfortable position, and to tidy up the disordered house; and then she lay down on the floor near to Alice's bed for her night's rest, while Hester went to sleep in the room with Mrs. Powell, for it did not seem right to leave the poor woman alone for hours at a time.

The night passed quite uneventfully, and Hester awoke in the dawning feeling fit for anything. But early as she was in rising, Zota was before her, and Hester found a cheery little fire burning in the stove when she came out of Mrs. Powell's bedroom, while the open back-door revealed Zota running to and fro between house and wood pile, clad only in the petticoat that had been her garment when she was found on the previous day.

"Oh, the poor child, to be out like that and the ground all white with frost!" exclaimed Hester in dismay, and then she darted into the room where Alice was lying, and where her trunk had been placed, in order to find some clothing for the girl.

Alice was better this morning, and wanted to get up; but this Hester would not hear of, and indeed there was no need, now that they had Zota for a helper.

"But there is butter to be made to-day, and bread; you cannot do everything," objected Alice, who felt as if all the cares of the universe were resting on her shoulders.

"What I can't do I will leave undone, and if I cannot succeed in bread-making, which is very possible, we will live on milk porridge, Australian damper, or batter pudding," replied Hester with a laugh, as she hurriedly produced clothing from her ample supply for the use of the poor Dukhobor girl.

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The animals had been fed, breakfast had been eaten and cleared away, and Hester was just about to wrestle with the problem of bread-making, when a horse and wagon came at a fine pace down through the orchard, driven by a careworn and rather untidy-looking woman, whom Hester rushed out to meet, guessing at once that she was their nearest neighbour.

"I think that you must be Mrs. Hinton?" she said, running forward to hold the rather restive horse while the woman clambered down from the high step of the wagon.

"Yes. Dr. Lambert was to our place yesterday, and he told us that Mrs. Powell was bad, Mr. Powell was missing, and Miss Trevor had hurt her foot, so he said that I was to come over and help you with the sick woman this morning. But I can't stay more than an hour, for now that my man is bad I've got all the work on my hands; and I see that the young tobacco is coming through this morning, so I will have to work harder than ever," said the woman, with a sigh of pure weariness.

Hester had not the slightest understanding of what the reference to tobacco meant, but she did not like to ask questions, and so she said instead, "I hope that Mr. Hinton is getting better this morning, and that the doctor was able to do him some good yesterday."

"Well, yes, I think that he is a bit better, and it was real good of you to send the doctor along, for I reckon that he is just a terribly clever fellow, though he has got such a scamp of a father. I have been wanting my man to have the doctor for a fortnight past, for in my opinion it is better to take a thing in time, and to get better quickly, than to go hanging

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on for weeks and weeks just because you won't face the expense of having a doctor to start with; but men are awkward creatures to manage, even the best of them. But now I've got the doctor there my man will just have to give in, and get better as quick as he can." As she spoke, Mrs. Hinton was shaking out her skirts and twitching her hat on in a straighter fashion with as much care as if she were going to some grand function, instead of merely having driven over from the next farm to help a sick neighbour for an hour or so.

"I hope that he will soon be better, for your sake as well as his own, for it must be very worrying for you; and Alice told me that you have a young baby," said Hester, with that sympathy of look and manner which was one of her great charms.

"Yes, Dicky is only four months old, Tommy is three years, and Nonnie nearly two, so I have my hands quite full; but the children don't worry me, not when their father is well at least. But I am afraid that he will be thrown back again if Sam Powell don't turn up to keep his word about the tobacco;" and Mrs. Hinton looked at Hester with so much anxious enquiry that Hester was forced to ask a direct question in order to get some understanding of the situation.

"Will you tell me what you mean about tobacco? I am a stranger, you see, and so, of course, I do not know anything about the life here except what I have been told, and that is not much, for so many things have happened since I came, and there has been so much anxiety, that I have had to find out things as I went along."

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"Of course; downright awkward it must have been for you too, and you quite a lady, so the doctor said;" and Mrs. Hinton turned a frankly critical look on Hester which made her flush crimson right up to the roots of her hair, while she was so angry at her own stupidity in colouring so hotly because the doctor had said she was a lady that she was furious with herself and also with Mrs. Hinton, as she jerked out impatiently:

"But what about the tobacco?"

"It is like this. We have got a little glasshouse on our ranch, and Sam Powell told my man that he would buy his tobacco plants from us this year instead of raising the seed himself, so Jim bought an ounce of seed; and, as an ounce of tobacco seed is calculated to produce about forty thousand plants, we reckoned to sell enough to pay us for the trouble of firing our place these cold nights while the seed is germinating, and Sam Powell said that he would take enough for an acre of ground—that is, rather more than eleven thousand plants. But if he drops out now we shall be left with all those plants on our hands, and it is too late in the season to sell them now, because other people would not have the ground prepared;" and Mrs. Hinton heaved a windy sigh, while her hand stole up to pat her back hair, to make sure that it was as it should be.

"Is Mr. Powell's ground prepared, then?" asked Hester, who had not even known that tobacco was grown in the neighbourhood.

"Why, yes, of course, the ground always has to be got ready for some time before the plants are put in. Sam only grew half an acre last year, but he

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did so well at that as to make him say he would try a whole acre this time, and so, of course we sowed seed accordingly; but that is just the way when people try to get on;" and again Mrs. Hinton sighed, as she followed Hester into the house.

"Don't worry about it yet; Mr. Powell may be back in a few days, and meanwhile I will talk to Alice about it," said Hester, and then she and Mrs. Hinton hushed their voices as they tended the stricken woman, for who could say how much she might understand of what was passing round her?

"Quite helpless, isn't she?" asked Mrs. Hinton, with a shocked look, as she stooped over the bed and surveyed the drawn face of the woman who lay there.

"Yes, but I have an idea that she may know something of what is being said in her presence, even though she can give us no sign," replied Hester.

Mrs. Hinton nodded, and was very careful after that to utter no unnecessary words while she remained in the room. But when the work was done and she had gone with Hester to see Alice, she burst into impulsive speech:

"Well, how you can bear to stay in the house with a living, breathing corpse like that just beats me. I am sure that if I were in your place I should just put on my hat and run away. Oh, I am sure that I should!"

"That is just what I should like to do; but the honest truth of the matter is, I am afraid to run away," said Hester, with a smile and a gleam of fun in her eyes.

"Now, what do you mean by that?" demanded Mrs. Hinton, in blank surprise, while her eyes travelled over

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Hester's neat shirt blouse and plain skirt and the trim leather girdle at her waist.

"You see, I ran away from my duty when I came here, and I found a much harder life than anything I had ever had before; and I am afraid that if I ran away from this I might stumble upon something even harder still," replied Hester.

Mrs. Hinton faced round upon her with amazement in her eyes. "Do you mean to say that you are going to stay here and take care of that poor woman yonder when you have all the world to choose from?—and with your looks you could go almost anywhere, now couldn't you?"

Hester shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know about that, but I do know that while I am needed here I must stay, because it is my duty," she said simply.

"Well, then, I guess that you are one of the seven wonders of the world, for it won't be a very paying game, that I can see. In fact, I don't know what is to become of the place if Sam Powell don't turn up soon, for there is no next-of-kin that I have ever heard of," said Mrs. Hinton.

"Could not a magistrate or a board of magistrates give a sort of power of attorney to Alice and myself to run the place as best we can until Mr. Powell returns or something happens to Mrs. Powell?" asked Hester.

"I don't know whether it could be done, but I will ask my husband. It is certain that someone must take care of the poor thing, for she cannot be left here to perish; and unless someone takes care of the ranch too, why, it will drop out of cultivation," said Mrs.

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Hinton, who was a shrewd woman of business, and had also a keen eye to the main chance.

"You are quite sure that there are no relations of either Mr. or Mrs. Powell to be consulted?" asked Hester.

"I have never heard of any," returned Mrs. Hinton. "When we took up our ground and came here to live, Mrs. Wilmington, of Bear's Slide, told me that Miss Trevor was cousin to Sam Powell, but when I mentioned it to Mrs. Powell she denied it flat."

"How much easier it would make things all round if Alice were a relative, because then she could give the orders and I could carry them out!" said Hester thoughtfully. And then she asked, "Where does this Mrs. Wilmington live?"

"I don't know from Adam where she lives now, but perhaps my husband would know; I will ask him. Good gracious! who is that girl yonder?" demanded Mrs. Hinton, in amazement, as, coming out of the house door with Hester, she saw Zota go scurrying across the green in pursuit of some pigs which were bent on going where they had no right to go.

Hester gave a brief but spirited outline of the finding of Zota, and spoke of her determination to keep the poor girl as long as she liked to stay.

"Well, it is a full-blown missionary that you are, and no mistake!" exclaimed Mrs. Hinton, staring at Hester again as if the situation were beyond her power of comprehension. "First of all you are willing to stop here and slave for a woman who is of no kin to you, and that is a thing against nature; and now on the top of that you have actually taken one of those dirty Dukhobors into your house!"

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"Are they dirty?" asked Hester in surprise. "I thought that Zota seemed very clean in her person and her work."

"They run about half-naked, and are no more civilized than pigs, so Neal West told us last night when he happened along. It was he, by the way, who told us about the doctor's father," said Mrs. Hinton, dropping her voice to a cautious undertone, although there was no one to overhear, saving Zota, who could not understand.

"What about the doctor's father?" asked Hester, seeing that the question was expected of her.

"It seems that he had been caught red-handed salting the ground with gold-bearing quartz, and they were hunting him through the hills with a blood-hound, meaning to lynch him or something like it, only he contrived to get clear away," said Mrs. Hinton.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

CHAPTER VII

Facing the Future

HESTER turned her head away with a quick movement, fearful lest Mrs. Hinton should catch sight of her face. It seemed to her that laugh she must, and yet, unless she cared to explain her merriment to Mrs. Hinton, the good woman would probably go away under the impression that she was being treated with ridicule; and it was not the way of Hester to hurt the feelings of anyone, especially anyone who had been as kind as this neighbour, who had left her own work to come and do her best for the distressed household at Powell Gorge. So with great difficulty she choked her untimely mirth back, although her eyes danced with merriment to think that the doctor had so plainly written her down a coward because she would not have the bloodhound in the wagon, when it was his own father that she was trying to shield.

Fortunately Mrs. Hinton was at this moment scrambling up into her wagon, and so did not see the struggle that Hester was having; and being fond of gossip, when she was settled on the driver's seat she leaned forward to impart a little more information before she drove away. "They do say that Dr. Lambert had a real good post offered him in Ottawa, but when he went east to take it up his father went too, and be-

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haved so badly that the doctor had to throw it up and come back west, where folks don't stand so fine about a doctor's belongings, and only ask whether he is clever enough to make them better when they are bad."

"But Dr. Lambert looks such a boy! I thought that he was only a medical student," said Hester, in a rather slighting tone.

"He isn't very old, but he is a fully qualified practitioner. I know that, for he told me himself, and everyone who knows him says that he is white all through, though that is more than can be said of his father," answered Mrs. Hinton; and then she drove away, while Hester stood looking after the wagon and musing upon what she had heard.

"It would serve that doctor right if I told him what I had done," she said to herself as she walked back to the house; but then she shook her head in disgust at the bare suggestion of such a thing, and smiled covertly as she vowed to herself that she would make that rash young man alter his hastily formed opinion of her before she had done. The day was hard enough, and the unaccustomed work tried Hester tremendously, but she was made of good staying stuff, and, having put her hand to the plough, she was not going to look back, nor yet to waste time and strength in futile regrets.

The girl Zota accorded her a slavish obedience, and once, when Hester spoke sharply, winced and shrank away like a dog that fears a thrashing, which so aroused Hester's pity that she had to watch her tongue most carefully for the remainder of the day, so that there should be no more sharp words to frighten the poor girl.

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Alice was better this evening, and when supper was over and night was brooding down over the steep sides of the gorge, Hester went into the room where she was lying and, sitting down on the bed, went in for the luxury of a good talk.

She had left Zota curled up on the floor before the stove in the outer room, a picture of happy content, with her head resting on the shaggy coat of the dog.

"Poor Hester, how tired you must be!" said Alice softly, and then she put out her hand to pat Hester on the shoulder, putting so much admiring affection into voice and gesture that a sudden mist of tears blinded the eyes of the latter, and for the first time in her life she realized the truth of the Scripture, "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

"There is no especial need to pity me. No one calls for pity who is well and strong, and who is happy enough to enjoy being alive," said Hester. And then she burst out: "Why did that Mrs. Wilmington, of Bear's Slide, say that you were the cousin of Sam Powell?"

Alice flushed uncomfortably. "I believe that there is some relationship. My mother said that Mr. Powell was her cousin, but Mrs. Powell was so angry at any mention of it that I have been very careful not to say anything about it, and indeed have scarcely thought of it for a long time. Mrs. Wilmington used to know Mr. Powell years before, when both of them were young, and she had no sort of discretion in holding her tongue about things that were unpleasant."

"But why need she hold her tongue about the truth? And if you were the cousin of Mr. Powell, why suppress the fact?" asked Hester in surprise.

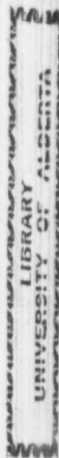
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"Mrs. Powell always hated the thought of poor relations—hangers-on she called them—and as I was as proud as she, why, I was not going to be a poor relation, of course; and so if there really was any kinship we ignored it, and I was just the hired girl, or, as Mrs. Powell preferred to call me, the lady help of the house, free to give a month's notice, or to receive one if my work did not give satisfaction," said Alice, with a touch of injured pride in her tone.

"That way might have done very well in the past, but now it would be a comfort if we had something more definite to go upon," said Hester, laughing softly at the expression on the face of the other girl. "As matters stand now, there is no one to take any sort of responsibility, and if the aid of the law is called in, and trustees have to be appointed, the dollars will have to tumble into the pockets of the lawyers and the estate will be impoverished. But if you could prove your next-of-kinship, why, the matter would be comparatively easy, because you could be invested with the power to act for Mrs. Powell, don't you see?"

Alice wriggled uncomfortably. "I am afraid that I do not want to be responsible. Think of the dreary years I have spent here and the life that I have led, and now that there is a chance to get away, how hard it is to have to come back to face it all over again! Oh, I cannot!" and she turned her face into her pillow and began to sob in a way that frightened Hester.

"Don't be silly!" she exclaimed sharply. "Leave off sobbing and listen to me. This is not a time for hysterics, but for common sense. I came out here to be lady help to someone, and now, to my great embarrassment, I cannot find an employer; that is, the situation



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is here and the work, but no one will own to being my mistress, and it makes things awkward."

"What do you mean?" demanded Alice, turning her face round and beginning to look interested.

"What I say. I want to do my very best for Mrs. Powell, certainly not because I have any affection for her, because she is to me only a stranger; but she is plainly the path of duty at present, and so I have got to make the best of her, don't you see: and the work would be so much easier, and more profitable too, if you could take the head of things. You understand the working of the ranch, and I am willing to learn, so I do not see why we should not make a profit of it, and at least earn our own salaries, while we are keeping the place from going to ruin," said Hester, who was sitting on the bed with her chin resting on her knees, and gently swaying from side to side while she talked.

"Oh, how really charming that would be!" cried Alice with sudden energy and animation. "Why! it would be almost like being our own mistresses, and although we should have to work very hard, there would be no one to reproach us if we took a rest when we were tired. And of course I do know just how the work should be done."

"Exactly. So you can be the boss and give your orders, while Zota and I work to carry them out. But the question is, can you prove your relationship?" asked Hester, pausing in her swaying to and fro to study the face of Alice anxiously.

"No, I cannot do that, because it is only talk that I have heard; but Mrs. Wilmington would know, only the trouble is that I do not know where she is living now. She went away from here after her husband

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died, and I have not heard from her since," replied Alice.

"She must be found somehow, and then things should be fairly easy; and I am sure that I would rather work for you than for Mrs. Powell, poor woman! so we will put up with the burden of looking after her out of sheer gratitude that things are no worse," said Hester. And then she burst out excitedly: "That poor Mrs. Hinton was in such trouble about the tobacco plants! She says that Mr. Powell had arranged to take enough for an acre of ground; and if he is still missing she is wondering what will happen about them. But you know how to grow the stuff, don't you?"

"I ought to know, seeing that I practically lived in the tobacco field last summer, and I did nearly the whole of the work myself. I rather enjoyed it, too, for it is ever so much easier than haymaking or even fruit-gathering—that is, after the first planting is done: that is back-aching work, of course. But after it is done and the plants have started, there is nothing very difficult about it, and it is a very good paying crop too," replied Alice.

"Very well, then, that is settled, at least as far as we can settle it; and now I really think that I must refresh myself with some music. Would you mind if I played a little? My music is not likely to disturb Mrs. Powell, and it would be such a comfort to me," said Hester, rising from her crouching position on the bed and crossing the room, to reach the violin case down from the shelf where she had stowed it when she arrived, so that it should be out of the way.

"I shall love to hear you play," said Alice. "I noticed the violin case directly you got out of the cars,

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and it seemed such a strange thing to see in the hand of one who was coming to a life like this."

Hester laughed. The incongruity of it all had struck her many times already. It really was funny that she, highly educated and accomplished as she was, should have travelled all the way from Toronto to take a post which was harder and rougher than that of any servant in her father's house. But having made her choice she meant to abide by it for the present at least, and if she had any regrets, why, she would just keep them to herself, or at the worst let them find expression only through the medium of her music. That was her mood to-night; perhaps when to-morrow morning came she might be in a state of fierce revolt against fate and circumstance, ready to run away to an easier life if only the chance presented itself, yet sticking to her post in spite of it, because that is the way in which girls are made.

Tucking the fiddle into her shoulder in a manner that was almost a caress, she lifted her bow, and drawing it lightly across the strings she broke into a gay, lilting air, which made Zota spring up from her comfortable position before the stove; and opening the half-closed door of the bedroom the girl began dancing to the music, advancing, retiring, bowing, twirling, and springing into the air with such fairy grace and lightness of movement that Alice clapped applause from the bed, and Hester waved her bow to show her approval likewise.

"My dear child, who taught you to dance like that?" asked Hester, when she had repeated the dance and played two more of the same sort, to all of which Zota danced with great spirit and inimitable grace. But the child, although chattering volubly in her own tongue, had not sufficient English for the explaining of the

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mystery; only both by manner and speech she seemed to be asking for more, and Hester played until she could remember no more music of that description. Then she broke into a plaintive Hungarian air, which was full of wailing passages in a minor key, and which caused the old dog to howl so weirdly that Zota put her arms round his neck, and, dragging his head down, buried it in her pinafore in order to keep him quiet.

"I am quite positive that Zota is not a Dukhobor by birth, or she would never be able to dance like that," said Hester, when the child had gone to get a drink of milk for the old dog by way of compensating the creature for the discomfort caused by the music and the subsequent smothering.

"She must have been with the Dukhobors, or how would she have come here?" said Alice. "And remember how unclothed she was, poor thing!"

"Oh, yes, she was one of the pilgrims, of that I am quite sure," replied Hester, "only I do not think that she was a willing one, or she would not have dropped out by the way. Nor do I think that she is made of the stuff out of which enthusiasts are evolved. It takes a peculiar strength of character to be a Dukhobor pilgrim, to bear the heat and the cold, the hunger, and the awful weariness, and Zota does not appear to have any of that sort of endurance in her nature, although she is a dear, willing child to work."

"Do you think that they stole her?" asked Alice, her voice dropping to a lower key.

"No, I don't. Indeed, I never heard of a Dukhobor stealing anything. It is far more likely that in their own land they adopted her out of the purest charity, and have kept her so long that they have about forgotten

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she is not one of them by birth. They are a strange, weird people, so my father says. He was on one of the public committees for helping them some years ago, when the first lot came over from Russia, and he says that their patience under hardship was truly wonderful. But they are descendants of ancestors who have been downtrodden and oppressed for years, so in consequence they are taciturn, mulish, and stubborn in their ways, a complete contrast to Zota, who is quick, light, and bright in manner and movement, wincing at once under reproof, and easily moved to laughter or to tears."

Hester had risen while she talked, and was busy packing her violin into its case again, while Alice watched her from the bed. Then she went to the outer room to see that everything was in secure order for the night, for in an unprotected household such as theirs was at the present it did not do to leave things undone or to take unnecessary risks.

She kept the dog in the house at night, because it gave her a sense of protection, and when she had seen that the front door and the one at the back were both barred, she stepped back into the bedroom to say "Good night" to Alice, and to tuck the rug closer about Zota, who lay peacefully asleep on the floor, smiling happily in her dreams.

"I do not like to think of that poor girl lying on boards while I sleep on a bed. Could you not rouse her and make her lie down beside me?" asked Alice, in a tone of distress.

"The floor won't hurt her; it is a great deal warmer and more comfortable than what she has been used to of late, I expect," replied Hester. "And it is very much better for you to have the bed to yourself while

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you are so much of an invalid. Zota might kick your bad ankle in the night, or lie so close to you that you would be hot and uncomfortable. If I were sharing your room just now, I should certainly sleep on the floor, to give you a better chance."

"Then I am very glad that you are not sharing it, for, bad as it is to have Zota lying on boards while I wallow at ease on a pine-needle mattress, it would be very much worse to bear if it were you on the floor," said Alice, with a choke in her voice which was a very near relation to a sob.

"To be strictly correct, you should add that the pine-needle mattress is the lumpiest old thing that ever called itself a bed, and that, instead of wallowing at ease upon it, you lie there very often in real discomfort, and wish that you were able to get up and rush about as we do," said Hester with a laugh. And then she went away into the front room to spend her night near to Mrs. Powell.

Brave and courageous as she was proving herself in other things, Hester was conscious of a very real shrinking when it came to spending hours alone with this living-dead woman, who was so much like a corpse, saving that she lived and breathed.

"I am just a coward at bottom," said the girl to herself, with an angry stamp of her foot, as she set the lamp down on the table and looked at the quiet face on the pillow. "Fancy being afraid of a poor thing like that! Oh dear, I wonder what my dear daddy would say if he could see me just now! I am glad that I have not told him much about things, for I guess that he would be properly worried if he knew."

Being so tired she went to sleep at once, and did not

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wake until Zota came pounding at the door in the morning, for it is one of the compensations of the strenuous life that sleep is given in abundant measure to restore the tired body and the jaded mind. She had spent the night lying on the edge of the wide bed, because, if she had lain upon the floor, Mrs. Powell would have been so much more alone. Rising at the summons of Zota, she was starting on a hasty toilet in the dim light of the dawning, and did not at first turn to see how it fared with the poor stricken creature at whose side she had been lying. But presently a great trembling seized her, a sort of premonition of something having happened, and lifting her face with a jerk from the bucket of water in which she had been washing—for there were no toilet appliances in the room—she looked towards the bed, to find a pair of mournful eyes intently regarding her.

For a moment she stood absolutely motionless, while the drops of water trickled down her face and splashed on to her bare feet. Then, recovering herself with a great effort, she seized a towel, and wiping away the water that obscured her vision, she stepped closer to the bed and asked in a gentle tone:

“Are you feeling better this morning?”

There was no response, nothing but the mournful stare of those asking eyes, and Hester could have sobbed aloud in sheer sympathy with the poor stricken woman who so mutely desired to know what was happening around her.

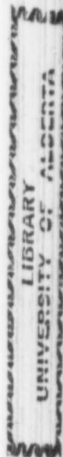
“You have been very ill,” said Hester, gently, dropping her words slowly and clearly into the ear of Mrs. Powell, for she could not tell whether the paralysis had affected the hearing of the sufferer. She thought

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that there was a gleam of understanding in Mrs. Powell's eyes, but could not be sure, so she went on talking, watching keenly to see if there was any attempt at response.

"I am Hester Hope, whom you engaged as a lady help, and I am here taking care of you at present. Alice is here too, only she is not very well just now, and is resting in her own room. Would you like me to call her?"

But although she asked the question twice over, there was no response saving the pitiful, asking stare.



CHAPTER VIII

Links in the Chain

MRS. HOPE was dressed for dinner, and waiting for her husband, who was later than usual in returning from the city. She was a woman near middle age, with a sweet, serene face and contented eyes, and she seemed to be thinking deeply as she paced up and down the room in the spring twilight.

The drawing-room of Mr. Hope's house was a long one, and when she reached the end she paused by a little window which gave a view of the carriage drive, and stood there watching for the coming of the man who had made such a difference in her life during the last few months.

"If it were not for Hester, I should be quite, quite happy," she said, a little sigh escaping her lips as she thought of her young stepdaughter, who had elected to go and work for strangers rather than stay in her father's house after the new wife had come to take up rule and authority there.

Just then a man came in sight round the curve of the drive, but this was a young man, or at least he was comparatively young, not more than thirty or thereabouts, while Mr. Hope was nearing sixty, and looked his age. One bewildered glance Mrs. Hope gave to the newcomer, and then with a little cry of joy she hurried

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out of the room, and herself flung open the hall door before the arrival had time to ring for admission.

"My dear Wilfred, how truly charming to see you! Where did you spring from? And of course you have come to stay all night?" Mrs. Hope was pouring out her questions with breathless eagerness while she drew the visitor into the warmth of the heated house.

"I cannot stay all night this time, for I am a bird of passage, but I shall be very glad if you and my new brother-in-law will give me some dinner—if you will have me without a dress suit, that is," he said with a laugh, as he closed the hall door for her; and then, putting his hands on her shoulders, he looked down into her face with true brotherly affection.

"As if we would not be glad to have you if you came in corduroy, or even fustian, although that is saying a good deal, because it is such smelly stuff, and you know of old my objection to odorous clothing," she said lightly, as she drew him into the drawing-room and then rang the bell.

"That is very pleasant to hear. But what a transformed Linda you are!" he said, looking her over with grave approval. "If I thought that matrimony was likely to work such a marvellous change in everyone, I should be almost inclined to attempt it in my own person, if I could find anyone to aid and abet me in the business."

"I wish that you would get married, Wilfred; there is no happiness like it," she said a little wistfully. And then she turned to the maid who had entered in answer to her ring, and told her that there would be three instead of two at dinner that evening, giving her instructions in such a way that the rather disdainful-looking maid went out of the room with a smile on her face,

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although a moment before she had been feeling openly mutinous at having an extra person at table plumped upon her within fifteen minutes of the meal being served.

"John is later than usual to-night, and he will not have time to dress for dinner, so you will be in good company," said Mrs. Hope, with a happy laugh, as she drew her brother to a seat near the open fire.

"I have been in Toronto quite a few times during the last five years, but this is the first time that it has ever struck me as being in any sense of the word a homelike place," he said, as he sat down beside her, keeping hold of her hand, which had been a boyish trick of his when he was the youngest of the family, early left motherless, and she was the good and resourceful elder daughter of the crowded little country manse.

"What a delicate piece of flattery! And how strange to have you making pretty speeches!" she said, laughing again, then leaning a little forward to get a better view of his face, for they had not met for more than two years, and although they corresponded with great regularity, it was not like seeing and hearing each other speak.

"I called to see my new brother-in-law on my way from the depot, and he professed himself very glad to make my acquaintance. I had to inspect your choice, don't you see, before I came on here, and if I had not been satisfied I should have gone on my way without disturbing your peace," he remarked.

"More subtle flattery," she broke in. "For of course I am to understand, since you are here, that you are graciously pleased to approve what I have done."

"That, of course, is what you are to infer. But,

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Linda, where is the girl, Mr. Hope's daughter? Has she left home?" he asked, for he had been quick to gather from his sister's instructions to the maid that there would only be three of them at the dinner-table.

Mrs. Hope clasped her hands very tightly to hide their trembling as she answered: "There is a crumpled rose leaf in the happiest lot, I suppose, and Hester's absence is the drawback to my happiness. Her father's marriage has spoiled her home for her, and she has actually gone out to earn her own living. Wilfred, I feel dreadful when I think of her; and she is so far away too, right out west in British Columbia."

"Didn't you two quite manage to hit it off together?" he asked in surprise, for in the old days it was Linda who was the family bond, the one who always helped the others to make up their differences, and who kept the peace and would not let them live at enmity with each other.

"She gave me no chance to see whether we could not live together in love and harmony, for when we came from our honeymoon she was gone, and there were only the servants here to receive us," said Mrs. Hope, in a mournful tone.

Wilfred Landells gave a low whistle of amazement at this rather high-handed proceeding on the part of Miss Hope, and then he remarked: "She is Canadian, you see, and a colonial girl is not going to sit down and meekly bear things when she imagines that she is being put upon; and really, I don't know that I blame her for going away, for it gives you a much greater chance of happiness. A stepdaughter would naturally be in the way, especially at first, however amiable and self-effacing she might be. What is she

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doing—ranching on her own, or has she gone to prospect for precious metals?"

"Neither. Hester has gone to be lady help to a Mrs. Powell, who lives somewhere in the mountains about ten miles from Crag End. She has written to her father twice, and this morning I had a few lines from her, which surprised me very much, because their tone was so kind," said Mrs. Hope, who was too loyal to her new ties to admit, even to her brother, how much Hester's action had pained her.

"Beginning to repent, is she, and so is paving the way to return," he said, with a rather sarcastic inflection. "There is nothing like a little experience of life as it is for bringing people to their senses. You had better keep a pretty firm hand on her when she does come back, sister mine, for a girl who is in the habit of taking the bit between her teeth is all the better for having to feel the curb."

"I do not think that Hester is contemplating coming back," replied Mrs. Hope. "Indeed, she speaks of having found her niche in life, a place where she is really wanted. And there seem to have been enough disasters there to make it necessary for someone to take the lead. Hester says that Mrs. Powell, her employer, has had a paralytic stroke, and that Mr. Powell is not at home, so that the whole burden of the nursing and the ranch work falls upon herself and another girl whose place she went to take; and it seems that this other girl has had to remain as well because of the trouble in which they are plunged."

"It sounds interesting. Plainly, Miss Hope must be a girl with some force of character, or she certainly would not talk of having found her niche in a place

like that. I wonder whether Crag End is in my new district?" he said, in a musing tone.

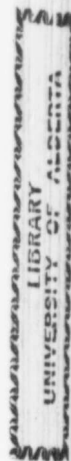
"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Hope, in surprise.

"I have been promoted to a post in British Columbia. That is why I am in Toronto to-day, instead of driving ahead in some out-of-the-way part of Ontario at this particular moment. Let me see, where should I have been? Oh, about a hundred miles out beyond Cobalt, in a district where you find a store about once in twenty miles; that is backwoods life if you like," he said, as he leaned forward to warm his hands at the cheerful blaze of the fire. Used as he was to the close stoves of backwoods hotels and the shacks of mine managers, the blazing logs of the open fire seemed to him a positive evidence of luxury.

"I am so glad that promotion has come, because you did so richly deserve it," she said, laying her hand on his shoulder with the loving grip that he remembered so well. "But here comes my husband, and now we will have dinner."

It was quite evident to Wilfred Landells that his sister was very happily married; and, as he watched her and her husband while he was supposed to be absorbed in eating the particularly well-cooked dinner, he could not help feeling that it was a very good thing that Mr. Hope's daughter had chosen to take her life in her own hands and go out into the world to carve a future for herself, for certainly she was not necessary to the happiness of the two who could find all their happiness in each other.

"So probably Linda's crumpled rose leaf is in reality the thing which makes for her peace and comfort," he



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said to himself, smiling in a gently sarcastic fashion as he thought how glibly even the best-intentioned people talk of the great troubles of life when the things they name as such are very big blessings indeed. Then he turned to answer a question of his host, and the talk wandered from the political position of the moment to mining interests in British Columbia, and Wilfred, who was a Government Inspector of Mines, told Mr. Hope of his promotion, and that he was going west that very night.

"That is good hearing, for if your district touches anywhere within a couple of hundred miles of Crag End I am sure that you will do me the favour of having a look in on Hester," said Mr. Hope, with a quick display of interest in his manner. "She is my daughter, you know, and she has gone out to a situation because she had some sort of a bee in her bonnet about not being wanted at home now that the house has got a new head. But I heard a rumour to-day which rather bothered me, and made me wonder whether she had not been grossly deceived in the post she went to fill. She supposed, so she said in her letter to me, that she was going to be lady help to a woman living on a ranch; but I had a man in my office to-day who knows the Crag End district very well, and he says that it is mostly new land there, and that the people are very rough indeed, certainly not the sort who would have lady helps, though they might be glad to get a stout hired girl to help with the work, if such could be found."

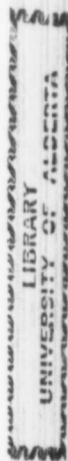
"That is just what I have been afraid of, because Hester has said so little in her letters about her surroundings, and it is not like a girl to be reticent in

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that fashion," broke in Mrs. Hope, looking so troubled that Wilfred made haste to comfort her by treating her to some of his views on the philosophy of life.

"I will look Miss Hope up with pleasure. Indeed, I should have done it in any case, for we shall both be to a certain extent pilgrims in a foreign land, and it is that sort of thing which makes for homesickness. But I would not worry about her if I were you. Like you, I am inclined to think that she must have been a good bit taken in about the post, for I do not imagine that the dwellers in the Crag End district would be likely to want anything in the help line beyond the ordinary hired girl. But it may be, as she says, that she has found her niche, and is really happier in that sort of life than she would be here in the safe harbour-age of home. There are some people, you know, who do not care for the easy things of life; they would rather have to plan and contrive, to work hard, and to suffer hardship, than find all their difficulties overcome for them: and I imagine that Miss Hope is one of that sort. At any rate she has already proved that she is quite capable of taking care of herself, and that is something to be grateful for." Wilfred nodded reassuringly at his sister as he spoke, for he guessed that she was feeling very bad about Hester.

"I think that you are about right," said Mr. Hope. "I had to fight my own way up when I was young, and I know that I fairly revelled in overcoming my difficulties unaided, and as Hester is very much a chip off the old block, it is quite possible that the soft life here at home got on her nerves a bit. You see, it does take the zest out of life to have all your hard things done for you. Only I wish that she had not been in



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such a hurry to take the first thing that offered. If she had wanted to take up ranching, or anything of that sort, why, I should have been only too pleased to put her somewhere as a pupil, and then when she had learned her trade I would have helped her into something of her own."

"There you are again, smoothing all the creases out of the way, and making everything so easy that there would be no pleasure in doing it," said Wilfred, with a laugh. "And you would probably have paid down a heavy premium just to have her taught the theory of a profession, while, where she is, she may be acquiring not theory merely but actual experience, which is a very different thing, and much more to the point. She is also saving the premium, which is another consideration."

"What a son of consolation you are, Wilfred!" laughed his sister, conscious that his coming had lifted the shadow which had hovered over her ever since she had heard that Hester Hope had gone away from home.

Wilfred had to hurry away after dinner, for it was necessary for him to board the night train going west, and he had one or two items of business yet to attend to. But he had left some comfort behind him, and Mr. Hope remarked to his wife, when the visitor had gone, that there was a young man with his head plainly screwed on the right way, and that it was a great pity there were not more like him in the world.

"Wilfred was always a dear boy, though he was great at getting into mischief," said Mrs. Hope, smiling at the remembrance of many past pranks played by the Benjamin of the manse.

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"He is none the worse for that, and it is mostly the tiresome child which turns out to be the best man or woman, as the case may be. I'm not a matchmaker in the ordinary sense of the word, but if that young man ever asks me to give him Hester it will be a real pleasure to say yes to him," said Mr. Hope.

"Be careful that you do not breathe a word of such a wish to Hester, for that would be the very way in which to defeat your own desires," laughed his wife. And then she went on in a more serious tone: "I don't know Hester, but I fancy that she is the sort of girl who has got to be strength to someone else, and so, perhaps, she would be rather wasted on Wilfred, who is so strong himself. What a good thing it is that these things are taken out of our hands, for we should certainly make terrible blunders, I am sure!"

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CHAPTER IX

What Did She Want?

WHEN Dr. Lambert drove up to the house on his next visit in a wagon he had hired, because he had been obliged to carry a patient into the town to be nursed, Hester ran out to meet him with her face full of the news she had to tell.

"Has the poor woman gone?" he asked quickly, for there was a sort of horror on her countenance, as if she had been living on the edge of a tragedy and it had left her with raw nerves.

"She is not dead, indeed I think that she is a little better, for she can open her eyes and look at us. But there is something she wants, and we cannot find out what it is, and it makes us feel so bad to see the trouble that she is in and yet not be able to help her," said Hester, her voice breaking unsteadily.

Dr. Lambert looked at her keenly, and instantly made up his mind that Hester was overdone from a nervous point of view; but he did not say so then, only enquired after Miss Trevor, as he led his horse across to the haystack and tied it to a post there, so that it could feed while he paid his visits inside the house.

"Who stays with Mrs. Powell at night?" he asked presently, when he had paid his visit to Alice and decided that she was on the fair road to recovery.

"I do, of course," replied Hester, in a tone of surprise,

for the question seemed to her so very unnecessary, seeing that there was no one else to do it.

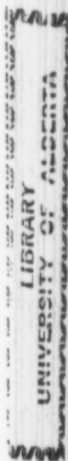
"You are not to stay with her for the next two nights, not even if she has to be left alone," said the doctor in a decided tone, turning back into Alice's room, which he had been on the point of leaving, and seating himself once more on the chair beside the bed. Hester could have struck him almost in her anger and vexation. What a tactless man he was to bring up a subject like this before Alice, who would of course be terribly worried and upset!

"She cannot be left alone, of course, especially now that she can look at us, and I shall certainly stay with her, because there is no one else." Hester's voice had a defiant ring, but the doctor only smiled, and turning his back upon her began to talk to Alice.

"Do you think that you could manage to get as far as Mrs. Powell's room each night without putting your weight on the sprained ankle?" he asked.

"I am sure that I could," she answered readily. "I wanted Hester to let me go in there last night, but she would not hear of it, and she is a dreadfully masterful young person, I can assure you, so I did not like to assert myself; but if you give me permission she will not dare to turn me back."

"That is just what I thought myself," he replied. "A week ago I did not think that you were fit for the strain of looking after anyone, but you have pulled up in a marvellous manner; it is only your foot that will need care now, and I think that you have sufficient common sense not to go about on it for a few days, because you will get better so much quicker if you rest it."



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"Yes, I quite understand that," Alice said quietly.

"Well, you can hardly do sick nursing if you cannot stand on your feet," objected Hester.

"I cannot do the nursing, perhaps, but I can do the watching, and that is what you want, is it not?" asked Alice, appealing directly to the doctor.

"Yes, that is exactly what I mean. You can have your book or your bit of sewing, and you can stay in the room and see that everything is going on right. Then at night you can sleep there, for not being worn down with hard work in the day there will not be the strain on your nerves that there is on the nerves of Miss Hope; and besides, I think that you are better balanced than she is, and of course the mute appeal of a hopelessly paralysed person is very trying to bear." The doctor rose as he spoke, and went into the room where Mrs. Powell lay, while Hester followed him, feeling very angry and mutinous against his authority.

He made a long and careful examination of the helpless woman, while Hester looked on, marvelling at his carefulness and patience. She even forgot to be angry with him as she watched him trying to make the sufferer understand what was going on round her.

"Have you told her about her husband not being at home?" he asked Hester, in a low tone.

"No, we have not mentioned him to her, because Alice thought that it would worry her so desperately if she fancied there was no one to look after the business," said Hester, who herself had wondered many times if it were her husband that Mrs. Powell was pining for.

"I think that we must tell her now. She has plainly some heavy trouble on her mind, and she has a right to know why it is that he never comes into the room to

see her," said the doctor; and then he stooped lower over the bed, and in slow, clear language he told Mrs. Powell that her husband was not at home, that they did not know where he was, and so could not send him word that his wife was ill, and wanted him.

This information was plainly understood in part by Mrs. Powell, for there was such a look of terror in her eyes that now it was the doctor who turned away sick at heart because he could not help her, while Hester leaned over the bed and said every comforting thing that she could think of by way of driving out that look of fear from the haunting, wistful gaze.

Meanwhile the doctor went out through the sitting-room, meaning to wait for Hester to come out when he had untied his horse and brought it away from the haystack. But Zota met him as he passed through the room, and asked him by timid gestures to have something in the shape of a meal before he went to get his horse.

As he was very hungry, and the food though of the plainest was appetizing, he accepted the invitation with great willingness; and when Hester came out of Mrs. Powell's bedroom five minutes later she found Zota chatting away in Russian as fast as she could talk, while the doctor listened to her with his face puckered into a frown of perplexity. Then he said a few halting words in the same tongue, at which the child clapped her hands, and burst into what must have been a particularly vivid description of something or other.

"Is it possible that you can talk to Zota in her own tongue? What a comfort it is, because now you can tell us all about her, and we shall be able to understand why those horrible people, the Dukhobors, treated her

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in such a terrible fashion," said Hester, with a sudden lightening of her heart. There had been so much mystery in the air during the last few days that it was delightful to think that even one thing could be explained and made straight.

"I can do just a little Russian, for I have a friend of that nationality; but this young lady's Russian has only a bowing acquaintance with that of my friend, that is to say, she talks in some dialect which is rather difficult to understand, and then, too, she talks so rapidly that I cannot follow at all well. So far I have only been able to make out that she is not a Dukhobor; she was not born of the people, but they rescued her when she was a little child, and have been very good to her," said the doctor.

"It did not look very much like goodness to make the poor child go on that mad pilgrimage with scarcely any clothes to wear," objected Hester, with some heat.

"I do not think that the Dukhobors were responsible for that. So far as I can understand, she heard that the pilgrims were bound for a land where the sun shone every day and where it was always warm, where the fruit dropped ripe from the trees by the roadside, and life was one glad, gay dream of pleasant things; and so when the back of the woman who chiefly took care of her was turned the other way the young lady took French leave, and went on pilgrimage on her own account," explained the doctor, while Zota burst into another flow of eloquent speech, which, however, no one could understand.

"But she had scarcely any clothes on, poor child!" cried Hester, who was not disposed to take back all

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her hard thoughts of the Dukhobors without seeing due reason for the change.

"That was probably entirely her own fault; she would do as nearly like the others as she could, and so in her zeal would leave even necessary garments behind her. But were the things she had comfortable in make and quality, or the sort of rags a child of the slums would wear?" he asked, being quicker at drawing deductions from trifles than Hester.

"Oh, good and comfortable of their sort, clean and whole, so perhaps you are right, and she did run away, instead of being, as I feared, forced in some way to wander about half-naked in the cold. I do not think that anything ever made my heart ache so badly," said Hester warmly, and then she flushed, because the doctor was regarding her with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, which looked as if he were thinking of the time when she was too hard-hearted to give the lame dog a lift in her wagon.

Happily Zota claimed his attention at this moment, and when he had satisfied her with a little more talk in very halting Russian, he turned to Hester to say, very gravely now, "I think that it is my duty to warn the police of Mr. Powell's absence, and have a search made for him, because, you see, something may have happened to him, and the terror of Mrs. Powell may be on that very account."

"That must be as you think best," said Hester, but her cheeks blanched as she thought of the poor man lying dying, or dead, somewhere among the deep valleys and gloomy passes of the higher hills. "I, of course, am in no position to judge what he might or might not be likely to do, as he was a stranger to me,

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but Miss Trevor is strongly of opinion that he and Mrs. Powell had some kind of a disagreement that was more bitter than usual, and that he went away in consequence."

"All things considered that is the most feasible solution of the mystery, only as we cannot be sure that it is the right one, we must just do everything that comes into our heads to get to the bottom of the puzzle," he said; and then he got into the wagon and drove away to see his next patient, while Hester went back to her work, and strove zealously to reduce some of the confusion inside the house into a semblance of order.

Alice hopped on one foot out to the sitting-room as soon as the sound of the doctor's wagon wheels had died away in the distance, and the difference her presence made drew a quick comment from Hester.

"Things are twice as easy when you are here, for you know everything and I know nothing—that is, I know nothing of what is most valuable at the moment. This saucepan, for instance, which burned so badly when I had to leave it to go and attend to Mrs. Powell, how do I have to clean it? I tried scraping it with the point of a knife, but it is too slow a process, and I have got to hustle; of choice I would throw the thing out on the rubbish heap, but I suppose that will not do?"

"No, indeed, it will not; put a piece of soda in it, and a little water, then set it on the stove to boil, stand it away just as it is until it is cool, and then you will find that it comes clean without any trouble at all," said Alice, with a laugh. It was good to find that she knew more of household economy than this brilliant city girl, for it seemed to put them more on a level; and

much as she admired Hester, Alice did not want to be inferior to her in everything.

"How simple it sounds when you know how to do it! Fancy setting a dirty saucepan to wash its own face! Now about the butter—there is quite a lot of cream; am I equal to the task, do you think? I am so tired of lard and bread as the only variant of bread and bacon," said Hester, as she rapidly cleared away the things that had been used for the doctor's meal.

"I can tell you about the churning, and then when the butter comes, and has been put to harden, I can kneel on a chair and make it up. We do not possess a proper butter-worker, as we only make for our own use, and it is so difficult to tell anyone how to do it otherwise than by doing it myself as an object lesson," replied Alice; and then she sat issuing orders, which Hester ran hither and thither to fulfil, until the churn was ready and the cream poured in. But just as she was preparing to turn the handle at the regulation pace Zota came in at the door with a basket of eggs, which she had discovered from careful observation of where the hens went off to lay them.

At sight of the churn, however, Zota's basket went down in a great hurry, and she came dancing forward, begging by her eager gestures to be allowed to work it, and showing by the careful manner in which she jerked the handle at every turn that she was no novice at the task.

"Let her do it, Hester; there are so many things which you must do that it is well worth while sparing yourself where you can," urged Alice: and because there was such sound common sense in the advice, Hester took it, and, leaving the churning to Zota, went off to

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tidy up the sickroom. The pitiful, asking eyes followed her with their pleading wherever she went, but there seemed no chance of finding what it was that the poor woman wanted, though Hester left her work half a dozen times to bend over the bed and try to find out.

It was late in that same afternoon when a man in the uniform of the Mounted Police rode up to the house, having been sent by the doctor, who had duly reported the fact of Sam Powell's mysterious disappearance, and the helpless condition of Mrs. Powell, which so seriously complicated the situation.

He was a middle-aged man, bluff, but kindly, and he looked decidedly perplexed at the sight of three girls moving about the place.

"I understood Dr. Lambert to say that there were no children," he said, in a tone of query, looking from Hester to Alice, and then away to Zota, who was teaching the old dog to stand up on two legs and beg for a bit of bacon rind.

"That is quite correct," said Hester, who was forced to be spokeswoman, because Alice left the task to her. "Miss Trevor had lived with Mrs. Powell for six years, but was about to leave, and Mrs. Powell had advertised in a Montreal paper for a lady help. I saw and answered the advertisement, and was engaged by her in that capacity, but when I reached here it was to find her stricken down and Mr. Powell missing."

"Then you can tell me nothing?" queried the officer, and then he turned to Alice, who could do very little more in the way of enlightenment than admit how often Mr. and Mrs. Powell quarrelled.

"And this other young lady, who is she—another lady help?" enquired the officer, with gentle but uncon-

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scious irony, which nearly sent Hester into fits of laughter, though she managed to control herself.

"No, she is really a 'stray', but we have found her so useful that we do not want anyone to come and claim her," replied Alice; and then she told the officer the story of Zota having passed that way with the pilgrims and then fallen out of the ranks.

"In this case I do not think that you need be in any fear of anyone claiming her at present," said the officer grimly. "We arrested the main body of the pilgrims yesterday, and are holding them in custody until we can send them back to their land; but I am sure I do not know how soon that will be, for I have received word this morning of an outbreak of smallpox on the Dukhobor settlement, and I may not be allowed to send the wanderers back until the disease has been stamped out, because, worn down as they are from the wave of religious enthusiasm which drove them out, and the bitter disappointment they have suffered through being stopped, they would most likely fall easy victims to disease."

"What a strange, dreadful sort of people they must be!" cried Alice, with a shudder, thinking of her fright at the sight of the half-naked multitude when they came swarming down the lonely hillside.

"They are strange, I grant you, but I do not think that there is anything dreadful about them," objected the officer. "Indeed, they seem to me to be about the most harmless set of folks on the face of the earth, and I suppose their irresponsibility is largely the result of centuries of oppression under the iron rule of Russia, and it will take a generation or two of free citizens to smooth the kinks out of them. If you can keep the girl

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here for a time it will be a real convenience to us, for I don't quite see what we could do with her, as it is not desirable to take her into custody and keep her in confinement, and sending her back is quite out of the question also. I suppose you can make her earn her keep?"

"She does that without any making; in fact, I do not know how I should manage to muddle along at all if it were not for her help, now that Miss Trevor is not able to do things," said Hester quickly, anxious to give Zota her due.

The officer nodded, and then proceeded to put both Hester and Alice through a fairly close cross-examination regarding their position in the house, although he apologized at the outset for having to do it, explaining that since the police had been called in to try to straighten out the mystery of Mr. Powell's disappearance, they were in a measure compelled to take possession of the situation for the time being.

Alice told him of her supposed relationship to Mr. Powell, and the officer promised that he would at once start enquiries as to the whereabouts of Mrs. Wilmington, who seemed to know so much more about the matter than Alice did herself; because if even a distant relationship could be proved, it would make everything so much easier.

"And if it can be proved, my chance of getting away into a wider life is gone for ever," grumbled Alice, when the officer had gone again and the two girls were alone, quite alone as it happened, for Zota had gone off to the upper pasture to bring home the cow.

"Just what do you mean by a wider life?" asked Hester, who was resting for a few minutes after her

heavy work in lifting Mrs. Powell to another part of the bed. The doctor had done it for her in the morning, but it was necessary that the poor creature should be moved at least twice in twenty-four hours, and as Mrs. Hinton could not be there every time, Hester had asked the doctor to show her how to do it alone.

Alice hesitated for a few minutes, and then she said slowly: "Oh, I want to see things and people; I want to become easy in my manners, as you are; I want to learn how to wear my clothes as you do, and I want to know—everything!"

"It is rather a large order certainly," replied Hester. "But I don't fancy that you would manage so much by just taking another situation—indeed, the chances are that your opportunities of culture would become rather less than greater; and knowledge does not consist in seeing many people, or even mixing with them, otherwise a few weeks of residence at some big railway depot would secure quite a liberal education. To my way of thinking, culture chiefly consists in first knowing oneself and in rightly appraising one's limitations, and then in filling in the blanks; but that sort of culture is not dependent on place nor yet on environment."

Alice sighed, and was silent for a little time, and then she burst out impatiently: "The fact is, I am so tired of myself—of my ignorance, my narrow views of life, and everything else. You talk like a book, you play the violin, so that I want to cry and to laugh at the same time, and I cannot do anything!"

"Now that is nonsense," laughed Hester, "for in reality you are much more clever than I am. The things that I know have been drummed into me by painstaking teachers, whereas it seems to me that you

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have taught yourself things, which is a far more praiseworthy performance."

Alice was opening her lips to reply when there came a quick run of feet outside the door, and Zota burst into the room in a great state of excitement, carrying an old coat in her hands.

"Where did you find it, where?" cried Alice, turning ghastly pale at the sight, for the coat was the one she had seen Sam Powell wearing on the morning when he had helped her to harness Dobbin to the wagon, and she started to the town to meet Hester.

Zota talked and gesticulated, pointing three ways at once, but as they could not understand what it was she said, Hester decided to go and see for herself where the coat had been found; and leaving the dog to take care of Alice, she caught Zota by the hand and ran out with her into the pleasant spring twilight.

Along the steep trail to the upper pastures went Zota, at a pace that taxed Hester's powers to keep up with her; then, turning abruptly aside, she crept on a sort of goat path round an angle of the rock, where some mining operations had apparently been carried out some time before, and, pointing to the open mouth of a deep pit, spread her hands, crying, "There—there!"

It was very wild land about here, and not considered worth cultivating; it did not even make good pasture, as there was so much rock cropping out in all directions.

But apparently it had had a value of its own at some time in the past, for in all directions along the hillside there showed the beginnings of tunnels running in under the cliff-like face of the hill, while in other places huge mounds of debris had been dug out, and left

lying, to be covered in course of time with coarse grass, weeds, and brambles, some of which had almost hidden the opening by which Zota stood with outspread hands, and a frightened look on her flushed face.

"There—there!" she cried again, and at the same moment a screech owl, out early in search of a supper, swooped down from some cranny of the cliff, hooting in a shrill, melancholy fashion, like some person in despair; and because of its unexpectedness, Zota gave a little shriek of alarm, turned to flee, and was only stayed from running away by the sight of Hester's face.

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CHAPTER X

The Search

FOR one moment Hester turned so sick and faint that she had to cling to a stunted willow growing out of a crevice in the cliff in order to keep herself from falling. But it would not do for her to give way then, and gathering up her courage as best she could, she crept forward on her hands and knees to peer down into the awful hole.

At first she could see nothing, but after a few minutes of peering she caught sight of a bunch of bats hanging under a shelf of rock about twelve feet down, and just below, where the rock cropped out again in an abrupt angle, she saw what looked like a man's hat.

She wriggled carefully backwards then, knowing that she dared not stay longer in that position through fear lest a fit of giddiness might seize her, and she might herself slip down into that yawning blackness. But she had to lie on the ground for a few minutes until she could overcome that horrible feeling of nausea, and Zota hovered above her in piteous distress.

"Oh dear, what a fearful coward I am!" gasped Hester presently, and scrambling to her feet, she took hold of Zota's arm and went slowly down the hill to the house. Halfway down, however, a sudden thought struck her, and hurrying back she crawled along the

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ground again, and forcing herself to put her head over the side of the shaft, she called loudly, "Mr. Powell! Mr. Powell, are you there?"

But there was no answer, only the hollow echo of her own voice coming back to her; and when she had satisfied herself that there was no response to her crying, she went away down the hill with Zota.

"What have you found?" cried Alice, starting up when Hester, white of face, walked into the house.

"There is a fearful hole—a sort of mining shaft, I should think it must be—and when I looked down I saw a great bunch of bats clinging together under a shelf of rock; then a little way below that, something that looked like a man's hat or cap. I came away then, because I felt so bad, but halfway down the trail I turned and went back, and shouted down the hole to know if there was anyone there, for it seemed to me quite feasible that Mr. Powell might have fallen down and yet not have been killed, and it seemed so awful to think of his plight. I called him by name, too, so that if he might be in a semi-swoon the sound of his own name would reach him, even when the voice of a stranger would entirely fail to attract his notice." Hester sank on to a chair as she spoke, for her trembling limbs would not support her any longer.

"I do not think that he is down there, though it is certainly mysterious that Zota should have found his coat in that place," said Alice, with a shake of her head. "After you had gone, I picked up that coat and went through the pockets, and see, I found this, which makes the puzzle greater."

She was holding out a telegram as she spoke, which she had found crumpled up in one of the pockets, and

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Hester took it, her head reeling because of the strangeness of everything. Then when the mist had cleared from her eyes a little, she read:

“Come at once; there is no time to lose. The doctor gives no hope.”

“He has gone to see someone who was ill, then, or so it would appear,” said Hester, when she had read the message twice over and had tried to make out the date stamp, which was blurred too much to read.

“But there was no one ill, no one that I have ever heard of at least, and I knew most of their concerns, except——” and Alice stopped short, pulled up as it were in the middle of a sentence, to think.

“Except what?” demanded Hester, who guessed that the other had jumped to some sort of a clue.

“I remember that about a week ago there was a letter for Mr. Powell from down east—Ottawa was the postmark; and I remember hearing him say that he ought to go, and Mrs. Powell was most fearfully angry about it. But she was so often angry with him that I took no especial notice, and I was very busy with my own concerns at the time, for I was trying very hard to get a post for myself,” replied Alice.

“You liked Mr. Powell much better than Mrs. Powell?” queried Hester. She had studied the face of the helpless woman so much that she seemed to know it by heart, and she had shivered more than once at the lines of bad temper and the love of oppression which were so plainly marked thereon.

“He was always kind to me in a way, but it was a kindness that never went far enough; and when Mrs. Powell was so fearfully hard on me, he always

seemed afraid to take my part. He would slink off out of the way, and leave me to bear all the brunt of her irritable ways; and then when she had calmed down, and was easy to live with again, he would tell me that I was a good girl to be so patient, and I should have my reward some day. I am afraid that I despised him dreadfully, for I cannot endure weakness in men. You expect to find it in women, but at least men should be strong," said Alice.

"I expect that in their way men are as weak as women, weaker in some things, because they have not our capacity for endurance; and seeing that it is not in them to be models of manly perfection, there is no sense in despising them when they fall short of the standard you have set up for them. But what shall I do about this coat? Don't you think that I had better hitch the horse to the wagon, and drive over to Hinton's place? Mrs. Hinton said that they had a hired man coming to-day, and perhaps he would come over and go down that shaft for us. Just think, that poor man may be alive still, and it is too awful to think of his lying there another night in such suffering, for think of the days since he has been missing!" and Hester's voice trailed off in a quiver of pain, for suffering of any kind appealed to her.

"It is getting so dark!" said Alice uneasily. "Give me that stick, will you? I will come and help you to hitch the horse up; I can manage that without hurting my foot, and you will never be able to do it alone. Oh dear, what a trial it is to be so useless!"

"You are not useless, so don't go having any fancies of that sort. But there is no need for you to come and hitch up; Zota is quite capable of supplementing my

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endeavours. Goodbye! I shall not be very long gone;" and away went Hester, beckoning to Zota to come and help with the horse.

It would not be really dark for another hour or more, and having hitched up the horse and climbed into the wagon, Hester told Zota to take care of Alice, then drove away through the orchard on the trail which led past the Hinton ranch.

The horse had done no work that day, so she had no scruples about putting it along, and as the doctor had shown her how to apply the whip with most effect, she succeeded in getting quite a respectable pace out of the animal. She did not drive in the ordinary sense of choosing the best of the road for her animal, and guiding it in the way: her driving consisted in letting the horse understand that she was going somewhere, and wanted to get there quickly, and it answered perfectly. For that horse was accustomed to take its own way in most things, and it rattled the old wagon along at such a pace that Hester arrived at the Hintons' house while the family were still at the supper table.

Quite a company of men rose up at her entrance, which was rather unceremonious, for she had driven up to the house, hitched her horse to the fence, and then walked to the open door, and was practically in the room before she realized it.

The new hired man was there, an awkward, loutish youth just out from England, who pushed back his chair and stood staring at Hester with his mouth open. James Hinton was up to-day, for about the second time since his illness, and there was also a stranger, whom Hester did not particularly notice, for she was too absorbed by the errand which had brought her there.

She addressed herself to Mrs. Hinton, because she had seen her before, and so it seemed easier.

"We have found something to-night which we think may be a clue to Mr. Powell's disappearance. There was his old coat lying on the ground, close to the mouth of an open shaft, and when I looked down I saw a cap or hat, lodged in an angle of the rock at some distance down. I called and called, but I could get no response, and so I have come across to know if you would let your hired man come over and go down the shaft to-night, for if the poor man is there, and still alive, it is awful to think of his being left there until the morning." As she spoke, Hester's gaze wandered from Mrs. Hinton to the loutish youth, and passing him by as being of no use at all, fixed itself on the stranger, who was garbed in coarse country clothes, as if prepared for work of the roughest.

He nodded in response to her asking gaze, saying briefly, "I will come;" then turning to James Hinton, he took instant command of the situation, giving orders as if he were more used to dictating than being dictated to. "You will let Dick come; I shall want him to manage the rope at the top, and you had better let me have a couple of sets of wagon ropes, if you have got them: it does not do to be short of material when there is work like this to be done. We shall want a couple of lanterns, too, and that is about all, unless you happen to have a portable windlass upon your place?"

Hester stared at him in amazement; but she had heard a great deal about the assumption of Canadian hired men in country places, and she knew that they were in many cases better bred and educated than their masters, and so she supposed it must be so in

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this case, and racked her brains to remember whether Mrs. Hinton had mentioned the name of this very superior hired man.

But he was by this time out of the room, ordering the loutish Dick round in a style which made that young man hustle for all he was worth. James Hinton had followed weakly in their wake, and even Mrs. Hinton had bustled away to see that the lanterns were in good burning order; and in less than ten minutes from the time that Hester had appeared at the door with her request, the three men had clambered into the wagon, with ropes, lanterns, and a queer contrivance that was to do duty for the portable windlass, which James Hinton did not possess.

"Will you drive, please? I do not know much about it," said Hester to Mr. Hinton, who sat on the front seat, while the other two had crowded in at the back.

"With pleasure, though I don't fancy it is possible to get much pace out of this old animal. I have often wondered that Sam Powell didn't have something a bit quicker than this, seeing how far he lives from the town, but he always said that he could not afford a better horse," said James Hinton, as he tried to tickle Dobbin into something smarter than the leisurely trot which was the creature's usual pace.

"I have seen Dobbin gallop at a tremendous rate, and I am inclined to think his speed is largely a question of who holds the lines," said Hester, smiling as she thought of the horse's mad career on that morning when she helped the hunted man to escape from his pursuers.

Then the stranger at the back leaned forward, and

began to question Hester about the open shaft, its probable depth, and so many other things which she could not answer that she had to turn him over to James Hinton for information.

"There was a good deal of mining in this district fourteen or fifteen years ago, so I have heard, but it got played out after a time, and the shafts were left as they had been sunk. The place was not settled at all, you see, and so it did not matter," explained James Hinton; and Hester noticed with extreme surprise that his tone was apologetic, whereat she wondered more than before.

"It is nothing short of criminal to leave these pitfalls in all sorts of unexpected places," said the stranger warmly.

"It couldn't have been unexpected to Sam Powell, for he has owned the land at Powell Gorge for ten years past," said James Hinton dryly.

"Then his falling in, if he did fall in, could not have been accident," said the stranger shortly, while the loutish youth named Dick sucked in his breath in a sort of sobbing whistle, which was his way of showing how his nerves were being screwed up, at this hint of something more than pure tragedy.

"It is likely that he might have been driven to it, for he and his wife didn't live on such very good terms. But there were faults on both sides; she was a lady, and the rough country life was more than she could put up with," said James Hinton, speaking of Mrs. Powell as if she were already dead. "Sam Powell had been well brought up, but he had let himself go at such a rate that it would have been hard to find anyone much rougher, even in a back-country place

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like this. I think that you did not know him, Miss Hope?"

"No, he was missing on the day when I arrived, and we found Mrs. Powell lying on the veranda unconscious," answered Hester; and then, to her surprise, the stranger leaned over and spoke to her.

"Are you Miss Hope? I have been supposing all this time that you were the other one," he remarked easily.

Hester's head went up with a quick jerk, for she resented the calm equality and even familiarity of the stranger's tone, and her voice was icy when she answered:

"If by the other one you mean Miss Trevor, she has a sprained ankle, and is an invalid at present."

"So everything has been dumped upon you! Well, I think it is fine how you have risen to the occasion, and you only a city girl too!" exclaimed the stranger, his tone if possible more friendly and familiar than before.

"I cannot see how this can possibly be any concern of yours," said Hester, in a freezing manner, and then was instantly angry with herself for having spoken in such an offensive fashion. For seeing that she was working for wages in one house, she could not be considered very much above the level of this man, whom she supposed to be working for wages in another house.

But the man merely laughed in an amused and tolerant way that lashed her into real anger, and it was James Hinton who put in a word to explain the situation.

"Mr. Landells says that he knows your folks down

east; didn't you let on that you were a sort of relation?" and the worthy farmer halted in his application of the whip to Dobbin, to do what he could to make the two known to each other.

"Yes, I am a sort of step-uncle to Miss Hope," Wilfred Landells said blithely, and then he spoke to Hester directly again. "I dined with your father and Mrs. Hope, who is my sister, on the night I passed through Toronto on my way out west, and I promised your father that I would come to Crag End and look you up as soon as possible. And the chance has come before I expected, for I found my instructions waiting for me *en route*, and discovered that your place lay dead on my trail."

Hester gave a little gasp of amazement. So this could not be by any possibility a hired man! And in her confusion she blurted out, "I thought that you were only——" then stopped abruptly, remembering that the real hired man was sitting behind her, and she must not hurt his feelings.

"You thought that I was only an impertinent stranger, who was more familiar than any stranger ought to be," he said, with an easy laugh which effectually covered the situation, and spared the feelings of the loutish Dick likewise. Then as Dobbin trotted smartly through the orchard, and the lights of the house were visible, Wilfred said briskly, "Now, can we drive nearer to the place, or must we stop here?"

"It is too steep for a wagon at night, but would you like us to bring the horse up?" asked James Hinton, and his tone was so deferential that Hester wondered what sort of a person this Mr. Landells could be.

"The horse will be useful to help to carry the things

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up; and we may want it for drawing me out of the shaft likewise, for you have no strength for that kind of thing, and Dick has not very much power to boast of either," answered Wilfred, with that quick grasp of the situation which had already won the grudging admiration of Hester.

"I must let Alice know that we are just going up to the shaft. Will you come in and speak to her?" she asked him, while James Hinton and Dick were unhitching Dobbin, and preparing to turn the animal into a pack horse.

"For a moment, yes, then I can tell her what to have ready in case of need," Wilfred answered, and again Hester was struck by his quiet air of authority.

"See, Alice, I have brought someone to help us," she said, as she ushered him into the house. "Let me introduce you to Mr. Landells, who is the brother of my—my stepmother."

"But how did you come here?" asked Alice blankly. She had risen to her feet in a great hurry, or at least to the foot upon which it was possible to stand, and supporting herself by the back of a chair she stood swaying nervously, while a drift of colour came into her face.

"Never mind how I came, that will do for another time. I am going down that shaft now to bring up Mr. Powell if he is there, and you must have hot water and warm blankets, a good fire in the stove, with milk or broth ready, if they are wanted. Can you manage to be left alone a little longer, to let Miss Hope go to the place with us?" Wilfred's voice lost half its curt-ness, and became simply kind as he looked at Alice and noted how fragile she appeared in the lamplight.

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"Oh yes, I shall do very well indeed, for I have Zota, the little Russian girl, and although we cannot make each other understand very well, still she is a great comfort to me; and I will have everything in readiness," answered Alice, with the quiet courage of endurance shining in her eyes. Then she lowered her voice to say hurriedly, while Hester was momentarily absent from the room, "Please, please take care that Hester does not get into danger, won't you? She is so splendidly brave and strong that she seems not to care how she risks herself, but I know that those shafts are fearfully dangerous places."

"I know it too, and I will be sure to see that she does not attempt any foolish risks," he said, giving Alice the benefit of his kindest smile. And then he hurried out of the house again, and she heard him issuing short, sharp orders to the loutish Dick and Mr. Hinton; even Hester came in for her share, and Alice could not refrain from a smile as she listened, for she did not fancy that Hester would submit to much dictation of any sort.

It was necessary to proceed up the narrow trail in Indian file, and now it was James Hinton who led the way, because he knew the road better than the others; but in the darkness he went past the place, and had to be recalled by Hester, who recognized an upstanding rock.

"You are right, Miss Hope; these places are frightfully misleading in the dark," said James Hinton, and then he turned short round on the trail, and crashing through a tangle of brambles and coarse grass he held his lantern close down to the ground, and went slowly forward, scanning each step of the way, for now he

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was very close to that yawning hole among the rocks. Hester had pressed to the front and was walking by his side, Wilfred Landells, heavily laden, was just behind, while Dick, leading Dobbin, stumbled along in the rear.

"What is that?" cried Hester sharply, stopping abruptly and holding up her hand.

A faint cry sounded from somewhere, whether above or below no one could tell. A cold shiver seized Hester, while Dick's teeth could be heard rattling in the background.

"Coming, we are coming, keep your courage up!" yelled Wilfred Landells, at the very top of his voice, for he thought the cry came from the man for whom they were searching.

"That wasn't a human cry, at least I don't think so," said James Hinton, as they pressed forward, breathing heavily.

"What was it, then?" demanded Wilfred sharply, while there came a frightened noise from the background, and Dick, who was superstitious, looked as if he were about to bolt, as Hester turned and flashed her lantern full into his face.

"It sounded like a pika, which is a creature something like a half-grown rabbit, and you will mostly find it in rocky country like this. It is not usual for it to cry at night, but I have heard it. Ah, here we are——!" and James Hinton stopped abruptly, for the black hole yawned just in front of him.

"What crass carelessness to leave a danger spot like this, when a couple of hours' work would have rendered it safe for a score of years!" exclaimed Wilfred, as he pressed forward, and dropping on his hands and knees,

crept to the crumbling edge so that he could look into the black depths below.

The bats were not there now, for night was their time for foraging. Wilfred shouted several times, but beyond the hollow echo of his own voice flung back at him there was no response. Then he threw a stone down, but though they listened with bated breath there was no sound of it reaching the bottom, and the group gathered round the top of the shaft looked at each other in perplexity and fear, until Wilfred spoke:

"It is plainly mud or dust at the bottom, or else the stone fell on the man's body, and for that reason I am afraid to send a bigger one down. But I do not think the shaft is very deep—not more than thirty or forty feet, by the look of it, and I have seen so many of the kind. I will go down directly. Here, Dick, step lively with those two planks, will you, please?"

It was certainly good for Dick to have to bustle, for he was getting simply demoralized with fear. Hester held the two lanterns while the others fixed the tackle at the top of the shaft, and then Wilfred tied one of them to his head and prepared to descend, while she kept the other at the top.

"Lower me steadily until I jerk the other rope or you hear me call," said Wilfred, and then he disappeared into the yawning mouth of the shaft, and there was no sound above save the breathing of the two men and the rasp of the rope.

The lantern shed a weird light on the broken and bulging sides of the shaft, but Wilfred, who had been down many places of this sort, kept his head, concerning himself not at all with the ghostly surroundings, but being very much on the alert to protect himself

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from the perils of the way. At any moment a shower of stones or a big fragment of rock might come tumbling upon him, for with the carelessness so characteristic of those who wrest wealth from the hills, and look for fortune in a shovelful of earth, those miners of the past had not even timbered the shaft in the most elementary fashion, so that descent was attended with considerable danger.

Watchful and cool, made wise by experience, Wilfred eased his own progress downwards, fending himself from the angles of the rocks which thrust sharp points upon him at every foot of the way. So busy was he with this that he forgot to look for the bottom; then suddenly remembering, he jerked his head so that the light of the lantern shone on what was below.

He was almost down, and the sight which greeted his eyes caused him to give a hurried tug at the rope to make the men above stop lowering.

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CHAPTER XI

The Find

NEVER in her life before had Hester known what it was to have her nerves gripped in this fashion. Hours of strain were compressed into those minutes when she stood holding the lantern and listening to the panting breath of James Hinton and the hired man, Dick, as they lowered the rope with great care and steadiness. It must have been a terrific strain for them, as Mr. Hinton was so weak from his illness, and Dick was not built for strength. But they put every atom of energy into the task that they could muster, and in the minds of both was a great thankfulness that it was Wilfred and not themselves who had to make the descent.

"Stop, stop!" cried Hester, for she had seen the spare rope jerk, and knew that it was the signal to stop lowering.

Silence again, while the ropes hung motionless, and the three watchers above waited with bated breath for some signal from below.

Would it never end?

Hester was feeling as if it would be the greatest relief to shriek at the very top of her voice. Why was Mr. Landells so long in letting them know what had happened, or what he had found away down there in the

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darkness? Then a wonder seized her as to whether there might be some foul gas down below which perhaps had overcome him, and a horrible fear gripped her as to his fate. Which of the two men left above would be the more fit to descend and search if he gave no signal? James Hinton was so weak from his illness that he was plainly not fit for such exertion, and Dick would be too scared to make the attempt; his face in the light of the lantern was ghastly white, and Hester saw him shudder every now and then, as if he could scarcely bear the strain.

"Do you think that he is all right down there?" she whispered, when some more slow minutes had dragged away, and there was nothing to break the silence saving the plaintive cry of the pika.

"There may be an old gallery running in under the hill, and he would have to search it; but I think that he is all right, for I saw the light of the lantern fade out gradual, and it would have gone sudden if there had been anything the matter," Hinton whispered back, with a sturdy common sense which was so unspeakably comforting just at the present time.

Hester nodded in token that she understood, and then there was silence again while the slow minutes dragged on, and Dick's face grew longer and more ghastly. Then away in the distance someone shouted, and because the sound was so utterly unexpected just then, Hester broke into a little cry of fear.

"It is a neighbour coming along to help, maybe," said James Hinton, in an encouraging tone. He was downright sorry for Hester, for he did not think it was fit work for a girl to have the strain of that vigil, and perhaps a forced sight of grim tragedy later on.

But he knew that when it came to the pulling of Mr. Landells out of the shaft they would need her help, and that of Dobbin too, so out of sheer gratitude for her vigorous young strength he must do what he could to reassure her now.

"I thought it sounded like the voice of Mr. Landells, and it startled me so much," said Hester, who was trembling, yet thoroughly ashamed of her weakness.

"It is someone alive, and it ain't a living man that is going to frighten me, though I don't mind owning that I am scared of dead folks," muttered Dick. And then he cried out sharply, "There is a man with a lantern coming round the hill, and I'm sure it is Mr. Landells."

"Nonsense!" said James Hinton sharply, and did not lift his head from the black hole he was watching so closely, for he was getting secretly very anxious about the man in the shaft.

Hester choked back another cry, and she too bent her head lower, for it seemed to her that she had seen a point of light far away down in the yawning blackness, and although it might only be a freak of her imagination, she was not sure of that just yet.

"Hullo, there! I have been able to save you the trouble of pulling me up," said the voice of Wilfred Landells, so close to them that Hester sprang to her feet now, and screamed in good earnest.

"Be careful, Miss Hope, or you will topple into that hole, and I shall have to descend to bring you out, and once of that sort of thing in a night is enough as a rule," Wilfred said quietly, as he came striding up to them.

"What did you find? And how did you get out?"

demanded James Hinton, who even now could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes and ears.

"I found nothing but dust and rubbish, a few old tools, and the ancient skeleton of what in life may have been a goat, but was certainly not a man," replied Wilfred. "I should say that the gallery down below was a silver working once, and it leads by a very steep path up into a little cave, round the angle of the hill yonder. I shall go down that way and have another look at it when I have more time, but I did not like to keep you waiting longer, for I was afraid that you would be getting scared on my account, especially as I did not tell you that I had to explore a gallery."

"I was getting uneasy," answered James Hinton quietly, which was his way of admitting that he had been in a frightful state of concern about the fate of his guest, who had so cheerfully undertaken the descent of the shaft.

"Did Mr. Powell get out that way?" asked Hester, with a thrill of indignation in her tone.

"No, for the simple reason that he was never down there. Of that I am quite certain," said Wilfred decidedly. "When I reached the bottom I went plump on to the skeleton of what I imagine to be a goat, and the thing collapsed with my weight. If he had fallen down it would, of course, have collapsed with him; that is only reasonable. Then there was dust an inch or two thick on the floor of the winding gallery by which I found my way out, and so I was sure that mine were the first feet to tread the path for a good many years."

"Then it was just bluff to drop that cap down there, and leave the coat where it would look like a clue?"

said James Hinton slowly, but with so much scorn and disgust in his tone that Hester felt herself growing suddenly sorry for Sam Powell in having so completely forfeited the respect of his neighbours.

"Just bluff. Perhaps he had what he thought to be good and sufficient reason, though, for wanting it to be believed that he had committed suicide. Are his financial affairs in any sort of confusion?" asked Wilfred Landells, as he busied himself in lading all the things possible on to the back of Dobbin for transport down the hill to the house, in which activity he was ably supported by Dick, who was industrious, although a bit of a coward.

"I don't know if Miss Hope knows how he stood about money; I don't," answered James Hinton.

"I know nothing either, except that I have gathered, from what Miss Trevor has told me, that he could not have been exactly a poor man," said Hester.

"Is his place mortgaged?" asked Wilfred, mortgaging being usually a sort of signpost to a man's financial instability.

"That I do not know, and I do not think that Alice knows either, but you can come in and ask her when we get to the house," Hester replied, wondering what there was in the house that could be made into a supper for these men, who had come so ungrudgingly to her help.

"We will not come in to-night, thank you," said Wilfred, speaking for the other two. "But if you will lend us your horse and wagon to drive home in, I will come over with it the first thing to-morrow morning, and then we can talk over the situation at length."

"Yes, that will do, only it seems brutal to let you

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go without a supper, considering all that you have done for us," said Hester, showing more relief in her tone than she was in any way aware of.

"It may seem so, but I fancy that it would be still more unkind to make us eat another meal this side of our night's rest. Mrs. Hinton provided us with a supper of the most solid description, and as I had eaten nothing since a very early breakfast, you can understand that I did full justice to it, with the result that food has lost interest for me until I have had a good night's rest," said Wilfred, laughing. And then he hurried forward to help Dick to hitch Dobbin to the wagon, and in about two minutes more they were off on their journey back to Hinton's place, while Hester went indoors to tell Alice of the result of the search.

"You did not find him?" said Alice, as, white and weary, Hester came into the room.

"No, he was not found, for the simple reason that he was not there," said Hester, sinking on to the nearest bench, and realizing how very tired she was.

Without getting up from her seat Alice reached forward, and poured something out of a saucepan into a cup and passed it across to Hester.

"Drink that, dear, and go to bed; I will hear all about your adventures in the morning. But I am sure that you must be worn out. Don't worry about anything, but just rest. I have managed with Zota's help to do everything for Mrs. Powell that is necessary. And now the poor child is so fast asleep that it would be a great pity to wake her."

"How good that is!" cried Hester, when she set the empty cup on the table. "What is it made from? I wish I had made my plucky step-uncle come in to have

some before he went back to Mrs. Hinton's, for I doubt if he will get anything as good there."

"It is only milk, thickened ever so slightly with corn-flour, and flavoured with ginger and nutmeg—spiced milk we call it—and it is reckoned the best thing one can have in cases of extreme exhaustion. I got it ready, because I thought if poor Mr. Powell were found alive down that terrible hole he would need something of the kind. There is another cupful of it, dear; you had better drink it, then you will not be too tired to sleep," said Alice.

Hester did as she was advised, and then going into the back-room she slipped off her boots, her coat, and her skirt, and being too tired to undress any further, she lay down on the bed and slept dreamlessly until the morning.

What a life it was! And yet she would not have changed it if she could just then, for the feeling that she was so badly needed, and that no one could help Alice as she was doing, made her happy for every hour in her toilsome day.

It was amazing, too, the pity that had awakened in her heart for poor helpless Mrs. Powell. In health, the woman must have been a terror to work for, but now she was just an object of pity, a someone who must be cared for; and because there was more of self-sacrifice in Hester's nature than she, or indeed anyone else dreamed of, she was putting her very best into her efforts now.

"Time to get up, is it? Why, I do not seem to have been asleep more than ten minutes!" cried Hester, when Zota came into the room to waken her next morning. "And I am not undressed either, which means a double task, since I shall be uncomfortable all day if I neglect things now."

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But Zota had run away again, for she loved to get out-of-doors before Hester, to get the work started and to show how well she could manage things.

Hester's toilet completed, she peeped into the room where Mrs. Powell lay, but withdrew again in noiseless fashion, because she saw that Alice was asleep; and although the poor woman stared at her, with that piteous, asking gaze, she hardened her heart and went, for certainly Alice must not be disturbed.

The live stock had all been fed and turned out for the day, the cow had been milked and was meditating a choice of pasture, when Hester, turning her steps to the house in search of breakfast, heard the sound of wheels, and saw Dobbin coming at a gay and festive trot through the orchard, driven by Wilfred Landells.

"I wonder whatever we shall give him for breakfast?" she muttered to herself, doubting whether there would be anything more than porridge, milk, and bread and butter, for in the unsettled condition of the household the girls did not know whether they ought to have anything but the very plainest fare.

"Good morning! did you sleep well?" called out the visitor, waving his hat in cheerful greeting.

"I suppose so; I don't remember anything about it," she said, then stood still to watch him approach. But the thought of breakfast rankled, and being very outspoken, she proceeded to relieve her mind: "I thought that you were one of the shrewdest people that I had met, but I am beginning to wonder whether first impressions are to be depended on."

"I am afraid that I do not follow you," he said, pausing as he got out of the wagon to stare at her in frank bewilderment.

"If you had been only commonly far-sighted and calculating, you would have stayed to breakfast with the Hintons, where there is bacon in abundance, with mutton pie, fried eggs, potatoes, and I know not what besides. But seeing that you were so lacking in judgment as to come here for breakfast, you will get only skim milk and mush, with bread and butter to follow," she said, laughing at the expression on his face.

"I love mush, especially with skim milk, and I will do my best to eat as much as I can; but I have already made a good meal of fried batter-pudding and onion sauce, or something of the kind. I felt, when I had finished the helping Mrs. Hinton gave me, that it would probably be two or three days before I took much interest in food again, but it is surprising how soon one can get hungry in this climate. I should not care to run a boarding-house in this district, it must be so difficult to make it pay," said Wilfred, as he turned to unhitch Dobbin from the wagon.

"That would largely depend on the kind of food provided, or so I should imagine," replied Hester. And then she lent a hand at the unharnessing business, after which they went into the house together, and Wilfred made himself at home at once, assisting to set the breakfast table, and teaching Zota English, with such good effect that she went about for the remainder of the day murmuring to herself: "We put sugar in our mush to make it nice," and "It is the English language which will carry a man farther than any other tongue under the sun."

The other three had a serious talk about ways and means while breakfast was in progress. The situation was so full of problems that both Hester and Alice felt

it was necessary to consult someone as to the best way of dealing with it.

"I was engaged by Mrs. Powell to work for her at a certain salary, therefore I am entitled to draw my board and my salary from the estate; would you not think so?" Hester asked, leaning forward a little to look more directly into the face of this brother of her stepmother's, and thinking that if Mrs. Hope were like him, it was not very wonderful that her father had wanted to marry again; for there was that in the manner of Wilfred Landells which invited confidence, and his prompt response to her call for help last night had made a tremendous impression on her.

"I should say that largely depended on whether you could make the place pay well enough for you to get your salary and your board. What do you think about it, Miss Trevor?" Wilfred asked, turning to Alice, who was quieter than usual because of the presence of this stranger at table.

"I am afraid that is what it will have to depend on," she answered. "There are so many expenses which must be met before either of us can touch a penny of salary, you see. Our board we must have, of course, but on a ranch like this that scarcely counts; it is the hard money that matters. The doctor's bill must be heavy, and we cannot do without him while Mrs. Powell lies in such a condition. But if we do well with the tobacco, and if the apples are a good crop, I think, perhaps, we shall manage to pay our way, and be able to get our salary too. It is so good of Hester to say that she will stay with me, for I certainly could not manage alone."

"And is it not equally good of you to stay with Miss

Hope?" asked Wilfred, who thought that Alice had a tendency to belittle herself, while Hester, on the other hand, was in no such danger.

"If I am really a relative, my position is different, of course, and it is my clear duty to stay and do my best for Mrs. Powell," Alice rejoined stiffly. She was considerably in awe of this stranger, who was plainly a man of culture, and also of authority, and when she was nervous her manner always became stiff and frigid, although she was entirely unconscious of this.

"Are you a relative?" he asked in surprise. "I did not know that there was any question of kinship involved—indeed, I had understood that Miss Hope took the post that you were giving up."

"So she did, and I should have been far enough away by this time if I could have obtained what I wanted," replied Alice; and then she explained to Wilfred the reason of her uncertainty about the relationship, owing to Mrs. Powell's attitude in the matter.

"It is like the irony of fate," he said. "To think that you, whom the poor woman would not own, should have to be responsible for her now! But it is hard lines for you."

"Not so very hard," chimed in Hester. "Alice has me to help her, to say nothing of Zota, and I can assure you that the assistance of our young Russian on a farm is not to be despised. We shall have to work hard, of course, but so we should in any situation; and although the care of a helpless invalid will be trying at times, it will be as nothing compared with what Alice has had to bear from Mrs. Powell when that lady had the use of her limbs and speech."

Noting the look of real affection which passed between

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the two girls, Wilfred decided that Hester was correct in what she said, and wasted no more breath in commiseration. He turned the talk into channels regarding ranch prospects for the summer, and was immediately surprised at the knowledge displayed by Alice about the working of the ranch, and the cultivation of tobacco and maize, which were the principal crops grown on Mr. Powell's place.

"I suppose that you will manage the maize all right, but I never heard of women or girls as cultivators of tobacco," he said very dubiously.

"There must always be a first time for everything, I suppose," said Hester. "And from what Alice has told me of the work, it certainly does not seem to be beyond the capacity of a girl. Indeed, all the plants having to be set by hand seems to put it on a level with bedding out, and I never heard of that being beyond the power of an average woman."

"That part is all right, but how can a woman be a judge of a good tobacco?" asked Wilfred, who did not intend giving up his point without a fight for it.

"The grower does not have to be a judge of tobacco, in the sense of understanding if it is fit to smoke," put in Alice rather hastily, for Hester was looking so contemptuous that she feared some sort of explosion from her. "The grower merely watches the development of the plant, sees that it is kept free from weeds, and sprayed if necessary; then when the flowers begin to show, these have to be picked off, and surely picking flowers is well within the scope of a girl's capacity?"

"Yes, I will admit so much," said Wilfred laughing, for he had the good sense to take his beating in the sense in which it was intended, and not to turn restive

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under it. "Then after the picking of the flowers, what comes next, or is that a trade secret?"

"There are no trade secrets until it comes to the curing, and with that we have nothing to do in this district, although on some plantations they have proper curing sheds, I believe. When we pick the flowers off, we also strip away the leaves that are not wanted, leaving about twelve or fifteen to every plant. And when gathering time comes, we pick the leaves by hand, and pack them off in shallow baskets to the curing sheds of the district, and our responsibility ends. Sometimes your leaves are cured for you, but last year Mr. Powell sold his green, and although he did not get so much for them, yet it was such a lessening of responsibility that I shall do the same this season, if I am still in charge when picking time comes," said Alice; and Wilfred realized that she certainly understood the business, and might be trusted to carry it through.

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CHAPTER XII

The Claimant

AFTER the visit of Wilfred Landells, life at Powell Gorge settled into lines of steady hard work, without much incident.

The police, acting with great promptitude, had succeeded in tracing Mrs. Wilmington, running her to earth in a boarding-house in New Westminster; and when found, she needed no pressing to tell what she knew of the relationship of Alice Trevor to Sam Powell and his wife. She said that she and Sam Powell had grown up in the same village in Kent, and that when a young man in his teens, he had been in love with his cousin, Lucy Groves, who, however, married Harry Trevor, and went with him to New York. But the upset in Sam's life was too great to admit of his getting over his cousin's marriage in a hurry, and he emigrated to Australia. Then Mrs. Wilmington married, and came to Canada, living for years at Duluth, on Lake Superior, and hearing nothing at all of her old friends.

About seven years before the police hunted her out, she came with her husband to a ranch which lay wide of Crag End, and there, to her surprise, she encountered her old friend, Sam Powell, who had come from Australia to settle in British Columbia some years previously.

Mrs. Powell was an English girl whom Sam appeared to have married out of pity, and her strongest characteristics, according to Mrs. Wilmington, were a very bad temper and a frightfully jealous disposition. Then Sam heard that his cousin Lucy had been left a widow with one child, stranded almost destitute in Chicago, and because of the old affection, which had never really died, he offered her and the child a home at Powell Gorge. It was not a happy arrangement, and it was, all things considered, a very good thing that Mrs. Trevor died. Although Mrs. Powell kept Alice, and even in her way tried to be kind to the motherless girl, she would never admit the relationship, which seemed rather silly, as there was surely no reason why her husband should not have relations, and support them in his home if he wished.

On being questioned by the police, Mrs. Wilmington gave it as a positive fact that Sam Powell had no nearer relative than Alice Trevor, for he had been an only child, while Lucy's brothers had all died young. Mrs. Wilmington knew nothing about Mrs. Powell's people, and gave it as her opinion that she had none worth mentioning; but this was of course a secondary consideration, Alice, as the cousin of Sam Powell, being regarded as nearer of kin than his wife's relatives could be. Mrs. Wilmington made her deposition before witnesses, and the proper legal forms having been observed, Alice Trevor was given a sort of power of attorney to act for her missing cousin until such time as he should appear again, or until his death should be understood to have taken place.

So far from being elated by this accession to power, Alice was fearfully depressed at the size of the burden

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which had descended upon her. As she said, it was all very well to be given the power to buy and sell, and make a profit with the money of someone else, when there was the money to do it with. But in this case there seemed no money for anything. And although she felt sure that Sam Powell had a banking account somewhere, she could find no trace of where it was; and matters would have been very serious indeed for the household at Powell Gorge but for a lucky find of Hester's, which with great prudence the girls kept to themselves.

Hester had been greatly annoyed by the dirty condition of Mrs. Powell's bedroom, and when the outdoor work pressed less severely than usual, for two or three days she and Alice, with a great deal of help from Zota, carried the helpless woman on her mattress into the back bedroom, and then Hester prepared to do her valiant best with the accumulated dirt of the front room. As she had had almost no training in housewifely matters, her methods were somewhat peculiar, although very drastic; and her one idea being to get rid of the dirt in the shortest possible time, she just bundled everything out of the room, and then proceeded to her cleaning. The bedstead refused to be ejected, and so had to be cleansed where it stood; but at least the bedding on it would be the better for an airing, and so she was tugging with tremendous energy to drag a heavy straw palliasse from its place, when something fell to the ground with a thud and a significant chink. Dropping the palliasse, she ran round to the other side and picked up the something, which proved to be a canvas bag of money, mostly in half-dollars, which when counted totted up to

three hundred dollars, a most welcome find under the circumstances, for they were sore put to it for money just then, and Hester had even been wondering whether she had better write to her father and beg the loan of a hundred dollars, just to carry them on until they could realize some of their produce.

"Oh, what a providential find!" cried Hester to herself, when she had examined the contents of the bag. She was quite alone in the place, Alice and Zota being busy in the tobacco field, which was at some distance from the house, and the poor invalid of course counting for nothing.

It took Hester only about two minutes to decide that nothing must be said to anyone concerning what she had found in the bed. For the present, at least, the knowledge must be confined to Alice and herself. Then, because she heard the trot of a horse's feet coming through the orchard, she hurried into her own room and slipped the bag into her big trunk, which had a stout lock, and was the best hiding-place she could think of on the spur of the moment.

Then she went back expecting to see the doctor, and intending to beg his assistance in getting that weighty palliasse out-of-doors, when, to her surprise, she saw that it was not the doctor who had ridden up, but a stranger.

She cast one searching glance upon him, and decided that she did not like his appearance at all. He was a short man, spare of build, with sandy hair, and with a furtive aspect; and she noticed that when he spoke to her he would not look her straight in the face.

"Good morning, miss! is Uncle Sam to home?" he

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asked, and there was an unpleasant ring in his voice which matched his face.

"Do you mean Mr. Powell?" asked Hester, with such a steady stare at the stranger as proved palpably disconcerting to him.

"That is the ticket, you bet. Is the old boy about?" and now the unknown tried to perpetrate a wink, but there was such a glint in the eyes so steadily regarding him that for very shame he let his other eye close also, his screwed-up face being so irresistibly comic that Hester would have laughed if she had not been so angry.

"Mr. Powell is not at home," she said, in a tone of freezing politeness, which, however, seemed to have little effect in chilling the disagreeable stranger.

"I'll see the old girl, then; I suppose she is at home," he said, with an easy self-confidence which made Hester fairly long to annihilate him in some way.

"Mrs. Powell is unfortunately not able to see visitors, so you will kindly state your business to me," she said, in such a repressive manner that he simply could not help being chilled.

"I don't know as I had any business in particular, only I thought that as I was in the neighbourhood I would give the old folks a look in. I am Mrs. Powell's nephew," he answered.

"Indeed!" Hester's tone expressed nothing save some latent boredom, although in reality she was keenly interested, and somewhat startled by this sudden appearance of a kinsman on the scene. Perhaps yesterday, or even that morning, it would not have affected her so much, but this finding of the money in such an unexpected fashion, and its con-

sequent solving of many difficulties, made her feel that she would rather not have to relinquish her share in the responsibilities of the situation just yet.

"I was not aware that Mrs. Powell had a nephew," she said crisply, determined that he should at least know what was expected of kinsfolk under the circumstances. "Mrs. Powell is lying helpless from a paralytic seizure, and can tell us nothing; and Mr. Powell is not at home, nor do we know where to find him, so that a kinsman, especially one who will be willing to put his hand in his pocket to pay for doctor and nursing, will really be a great blessing at this time."

"I hope that you don't expect me to pay out my money for the old people?" the stranger queried, with a startled look.

"Naturally that is what will be expected of you; but it is not the old people, only Mrs. Powell, for whom we want help. I think that I mentioned the fact of Mr. Powell not being at home," said Hester calmly, although there was the suspicion of a smile on her face.

The man muttered something inaudible, then said fiercely, "But surely there is some property or something that you can realize, to pay for the old woman's keep?"

"I do not think so," replied Hester blandly. "It is not legal, I think, to put a man's property up for sale just because he happens to be missing for a few weeks, or months, as the case may be; nor do we even know whether the ranch is his to sell, as it may be mortgaged. But the matter is in the hands of the police, and they will give you any information they think fit."

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The man winced so visibly that Hester at once determined he did not dare go to the police; but his manner was confident, even bold, as he demanded, "Well, who are you, anyhow, and why are you here?"

"Mrs. Powell engaged me as a lady help, and since her illness I have remained to help Miss Trevor," Hester answered, with a mischievous desire to bewilder the man as much as possible.

"Who is Miss Trevor?" he demanded blankly.

"Is it possible that you are a nephew of Mrs. Powell's and yet do not know Miss Trevor? She is a relative of Mr. Powell's, and is managing the place until he returns," said Hester.

"Then let her go on managing it, and keeping the old woman too. Certainly I haven't got the money to do it with. But see here, miss, when it comes to a question of accepting the fact of old Powell's death, and selling whatever there is to sell, I have got to have my say in the matter; and if Mrs. Powell outlives her husband, then naturally I am the heir to what is left, for I am her sister's son, and so her nearest kin, and don't you forget it! Joe Disney my name is, and I live at Coalville."

"Will you not stay and see Miss Trevor? She will be in at noon, or soon after," said Hester politely; and then added with a spice of malice, "I am sure that she will be very glad of a little help, which you as next-of-kin must naturally give, for the house has to be kept going; there are the expenses of working the ranch, and many other items, which all tell up."

"No, I can't stay, and I have no money to throw away on a thing that will bring me no return. If I knew that Sam Powell was dead, the case would of

course be different, and it would be my duty to look after my aunt, as I should of course be the heir to all that she leaves behind;" and Mr. Disney flung up his head with such an air of importance that Hester badly wanted to laugh, but refrained because she felt the man might be a dangerous foe, and she wanted to be rid of him as soon as possible. But she must not seem in a hurry to speed him on his way, and controlling her disapproval of him, so that it should not be apparent in her manner, she said quietly:

"But you will surely come into the house and see your poor aunt before you go away?"

"Not this time, thank you. I always did have a mortal aversion to sick people, I suppose it is because I am too sensitive. You can give my love to her, and tell her that I will look her up again later on, when we have discovered what has become of Uncle Sam." And having satisfied himself that there was nothing to be gained by lingering longer, Joe Disney jerked at the reluctant horse and rode away.

Hester was shivering from head to foot, as if she had an ague. The manner of the man had been rudely offensive, and she was heartily thankful that Alice had not been at home instead of herself.

When he had ridden out of sight she turned back into the house, and going into the room where Mrs. Powell was lying, she bent over the bed, and looking into the wide-open, asking eyes, she said slowly: "A man has been here; he said that his name was Joe Disney, and that he was your nephew. Do you like him?"

But Mrs. Powell only stared as if she did not understand a word of what was said to her, and so Hester

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was fain to leave the matter where it was, and went back to her neglected cleaning, struggling with the palliasse until she finally succeeded in getting it out-of-doors, where she beat it with a broom handle, then fled in disgust before the storm of dust that she had raised. But there was more dust yet to be faced, and going back to the room she swept walls, ceiling, and floor, then fled again, for in spite of the wide-open window the atmosphere was thick with horrid dust and flue.

"What filthy work!" she muttered, as she unbound the duster which had been wrapped about her head and shook it vigorously. She laughed softly as she turned into the house to cook a meal for Alice and Zota, and contrasted her life as it was with her life as it might have been but for her father's second marriage.

"Poor dear old daddy! I am beginning to think that his marriage was the very best thing that could have happened for me after all, for though the work is hard, and every hour bristles with difficulties, at least I have the satisfaction of having achieved!" she murmured, as she darted to and fro getting vegetables ready, and compounding a meal out of next to nothing, on the lines laid down by Alice. "I really think that I will write and tell him so. No, I won't; I will write to Mrs. Hope instead, and I will tell her how much I am indebted to her."

While the vegetables were cooking, Hester found time to scrub the floor of the room, and leaving it to dry, hurried to set the table on the veranda. They took all their meals on the veranda, now that the weather was growing pleasant, because it saved a large amount of work, which was a consideration, and because it gave

them a rest in the fresh air, and that was an especial benefit for Hester, as she was indoors so much more than the other two.

Noon brought Alice and Zota home from the tobacco field, where they had been busy for the last three or four hours among the young plants; and they were both so tired that they dropped on to the first seats they came to, declaring that they were quite exhausted.

"You might say that if you had had my work," laughed Hester, as she hurried in and out getting the meal ready; and then she told them of all the happenings of the morning, except indeed the bit about the money, which was reserved for the ears of Alice when they two were alone, for Hester was developing a bump of caution in those days.

Alice looked very grave upon hearing of the visit of Joe Disney.

"I cannot think who he can be, for I have never heard of him before," she said, as she drew closer to the table and began to eat in a languid fashion.

"I thought not, because he had apparently never heard of you," replied Hester with a laugh. "It struck me then that Mr. Joe Disney was probably a fraud, but for all that he may prove exceedingly troublesome to deal with if he takes it into his head to be so. I fancy our great safety for the present lies in refusing to accept the fact of Mr. Powell's death."

"I have never thought that he was dead, and I am always expecting to find him here when I come home from the field," remarked Alice, who was looking brighter already as the result of rest and food.

"I do not want the Mr. Powell to come home, for he will send me away, and here I want to stay," put in

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Zota in her broken English, of which she was very proud. She rarely relapsed into Russian now, saving when she was very excited.

"I wish that he would come, or that we could find some money from somewhere, for I am nearly worried out of my life in the effort of planning how to make both ends meet," said Alice, in such a dispirited tone that Hester decided that the news of her find must be told forthwith, in order to lift the burden of care which pressed so heavily.

But she could not speak until Zota had gone to feed the small chickens, and so she turned the talk resolutely away from money worries for the rest of the time that they were at table; and when the meal was over, she made Alice rest for half an hour on the settle in the sitting-room, while she cleared the dishes away, and Zota went off to attend to the wants of the poultry.

Running into the back-room as soon as Alice and she were alone, Hester hastily unlocked her big trunk, and lifting out the bag of dollars, carried it to the sitting-room, and plumped it on to Alice's lap.

"See what I have found, dear, and leave off worrying; it will last us for quite a long time, and when it is all gone we may have something to sell. Oh, we shall pull through now, I am quite sure, and I am as proud of it all as if it were my very own venture!" cried Hester, then plunged into a hurried description of how she had found it, while Alice sat staring at her and clutching the bag as if she were afraid that it would run away.

"This must have been a secret hoard of Mrs. Powell's; I am sure of it," said Alice. "And I suppose it was because of this that she was always so cross with me if

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I tried to do anything in her bedroom. But I am so surprised at her hoarding money, for she always seemed too careless and unbusinesslike to make it or to save it."

"Perhaps it was some that her husband had given her," said Hester. "Or she might——"

But the sentence was never completed, for looking up at that moment, she was horrified to see the face of Joe Disney pressed against the window!

CHAPTER XIII

Dangers Ahead

“WHAT is the matter?” cried Alice in alarm, for Hester had uttered a smothered sound and dashed out of the room. But quick as she was, when she got outside she found no one there, only the bright spring sunshine was flooding everything with light and heat. The window at which the man’s face had appeared was a little one at the side, and it took at least a minute to get out of the room, down the steps of the veranda, and so round the corner of the house, past the great clump of flowering currant, which had just done blooming, and was in the first flush of its green luxuriance.

Could the man have got away in that short time? Or was it merely a freak of her fancy to think that he had been there at all? Hester asked the two questions of herself, not once but many times, as she searched down through the young trees of the bush orchard, as it was called, then took a round of the barn and sheds, coming at length upon Zota, who was seated happily on the ground with a lapful of yellow ducklings, newly hatched, while a hen that was acting as foster mother walked round and round her with a troubled air.

“Zota, have you seen a strange man hanging about the place—a small, crafty-looking man, with a ferret

face and sandy hair?" she asked, too much worried and agitated to have any notice to give to the ducklings.

"There has been no man here that I have seen, so I could not tell the colour of his hair," said Zota, with a happy laugh. She was always supremely content when she was among the poultry, or looking after the animals, and Hester rushed away again in a great hurry, determined not to worry her by any explanations of a frightening character.

Alice was on the veranda when Hester got back to the house, and she looked nearly as much worried as Hester herself.

"Who was it?" she asked, as the latter came dashing round the corner, perspiring and breathless.

A great throb of relief came to Hester's heart. So Alice had seen the man, and hence it could be no delusion or freak of her disordered fancy; and bad as it was to know that anyone had happened along to spy upon them at that very awkward moment, it was infinitely better than to have the worrying consciousness that she was sufficiently out of sorts to see visions in broad daylight.

"You did see a man, then?" she cried, gasping still, because she was so painfully short of breath.

"I saw no one. I had my back to the window, you know, but I heard the run of footsteps away from the house when you rushed out of the door, and although I scrambled up and hurried to the window, the person was nowhere in sight," Alice replied.

"But where have you put that bag?" demanded Hester. "It was the face of Joe Disney that I saw at the window, and now that he has seen the money, he will not rest until he has got it by hook or by crook.

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Oh, I am sure of it, for he is just that low, thieving sort; it is writ in capital letters all over his mean little person!"

Alice laughed softly. "Oh, I have put it where no thief, be he ever so clever, will ever want to go and search for it, for I poked it into Mrs. Powell's bed; and, Hester, that is where we will keep it. She shall safeguard her own money, poor thing, and I am sure that not the hardest ruffian would care to face her staring eyes."

"I believe you are right, for I always feel that it needs a clear conscience to do anything for the poor thing, there is always such an accusing quality in her stare," said Hester, and then she heaved another sigh of relief. Alice had done the wisest thing possible, and for the moment there could be nothing more to fear.

"What a frightful muddle it all is! And why ever couldn't Mr. Powell have let us know what he was going to do?" burst out Alice, with the petulance she often displayed when she was very tired.

"Perhaps he could not help himself, poor man," said Hester. "The manner of his going is so wrapped in mystery that it is of no use to blame him until we know whether he really deserves it. I feel dreadfully angry with him as I think of that night when we suffered so many things in endeavouring to bring him up alive or dead from that shaft, only to find that he was not there. As you say, it is a fearful muddle, but there seems no way out of it, save to keep on doing our duty by Mrs. Powell, and leave the mystery to solve itself."

"I dare say that you are right; you mostly are," replied Alice. "You are the seventh wonder of the world to me; I am sure that no one else would have stood by

me as you have done, when you might at any time have turned your back on it all and gone back east to be free from worry, and happy in your own home."

"My dear Alice, do you ever read your Bible?" asked Hester, with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

"Of course; but what has that got to do with your sticking by me?" demanded Alice, in profound astonishment. Hester was so unexpected that you never knew what was coming next.

"Well, when you read the book of Jonah, you will understand why I should be afraid to run away from this and leave you to manage on your own. I am very cowardly at bottom, and I am quite sure that if I ran away from this trouble, I should have something infinitely worse to endure; and so I just get along as best I can, feeling thankful all the time that it is no worse."

Alice laughed at this view of the case, as Hester intended she should.

Matters went on quietly for a week or so after this. The apple trees had cast their blossom, and the young corn was showing green and strong in the sheltered fields on the sunny slopes of the hills. Then came the news of a great gold find on a piece of Government land above James Hinton's ranch.

It was Mrs. Hinton who brought the news, coming over on purpose to see the girls and to tell them the tidings, which in her eyes assumed the shape of a very big trouble indeed.

"But won't it make all the land in the neighbourhood boom?" asked Hester, who was always thirsting for information. "And if it does, and you are able to make so much more of your ranch, three or four times

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its value perhaps, you might sell out and buy again in a place that was more accessible to a town."

"Gold is so streaky and uncertain that it does not affect the value of land outside its own area very much," replied Mrs. Hinton. "And it always brings a peck of worries in its train. The country gets overrun with the scum of the earth, and if they are disappointed in the amount of the find, they are as likely as not to round on some innocent person, and to accuse him of salting. Do you remember how Abe Simpson was mauled by a bear just about the time you came here?"

"Yes, and because of it—no, I mean because of his being found with his hands full of gold-bearing quartz—there were no men and hardly any women found in Crag End, and so I had to unpack my big trunk, and Alice and I had to haul it up into the wagon as best we could, and then pack the things into it again," said Hester with a laugh.

"Well, that man, Abe Simpson, says that he will know the fellow who salted Hunter's Gully, for he had seen him up there the day before. If Abe does spot him, there will be trouble, as sure as my name is Arabella Hinton, and knowing how the men feel about it, I should not be surprised if they take the law in their own hands, the same as they do in the States. Good gracious, Miss Hope, how pale you have turned! Are you feeling faint?" cried Mrs. Hinton in dismay.

Hester struggled valiantly with an overpowering sensation of something that was akin to nausea, blindness, and deafness all rolled into one, while Mrs. Hinton, seizing a newspaper, waved it violently, making such a draught that Hester's hair was tossed hither and thither as if in a strong gale of wind; and in a minute

or so the latter had recovered enough to look up and say "Thank you," with a wavering smile.

"I am all right now, thank you, or rather, I shall be all right in about a minute. I am sorry to have been so foolish, but I expect it is the heat that made me feel queer," she went on, drawing a long breath and trying to recover from that sudden and dreadful dismay which had overtaken her.

"That is good, and your colour is coming back all right now. But a hearty-looking girl like you ought not to be bowled over in such a fashion. Are you sure that you take enough care of yourselves? I mean, do you have proper meals, and at proper times? Girls are sometimes so careless about these things; but when you have men to provide for, you are bound to have regular meals, or you would soon get in the wrong," said jolly Mrs. Hinton, with a jolly laugh. And then she rose to take her leave.

But she had left more trouble behind her than she had bargained for, and Hester spent the best part of the next night in wondering how she could warn the doctor that his rather disreputable father was in danger.

She remembered how Mrs. Hinton had told her that it was the doctor's father who had been hunted through the hills with a bloodhound, because it was supposed that he had been "salting". But nothing had been proved, there was no one who could say that it was really Lambert senior whom they had set out to hunt; and as they had failed to run their quarry down, there was only suspicion to go upon, and that is not very reliable stuff. Abe Simpson had been too ill then, from the mauling, to have much to say on the matter, but now that he had recovered there was no one in the

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district more determined than he to bring the offender to justice.

Supposing that Mrs. Hinton was right, and these fresh gold finds were just another case of "salting", and not real finds at all, what was more likely than that Lambert senior was back in the neighbourhood, and up to his old tricks once more? For the man himself Hester had very little pity; if he were caught and had to suffer, it would really serve him right. Her sympathies were with the doctor, and her trouble was how to warn him, so that she could let him know how important it was that his father should not be found anywhere in the neighbourhood, and yet not let him know that the warning came from herself.

"I could write him an anonymous letter. He has never seen my handwriting, and is never likely to see it. Of course, everyone abhors and detests anonymous letters, but in a case like this there is simply nothing else to be done, and I can sign myself 'Your real friend', or something of the sort, so that he shall see that there is nothing spiteful in my action. And as I am going to town to-morrow, I can mail it myself, and no one will be any the wiser."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Hester turned over and went to sleep; but as dawn was not far away, and they mostly rose with the sun, her night's rest was not as long as it should have been, and she was very weary indeed when she dragged herself from her bed to face the day that lay before her.

At breakfast it seemed as if the little plan she had laid with so much care was likely to be overthrown; for Alice, who had been out looking after the live stock, said that she thought she would have to go

herself on the town journey that day, since she wanted to consult Pete Carson, the storekeeper, about her chances of selling raspberry jam, as the crop promised to be a record one, and instead of merely pounds of fruit, as in other years, it seemed as if there might be hundredweights.

"Very well, what time will you want to start?" asked Hester, making up her mind in a great hurry that if she were prevented from going to town that day she would regard it as a sign that she was not required to warn the doctor of his father's possible danger, and so need not trouble herself about it.

"I think that I can be ready to set off at eight o'clock," replied Alice. "I am going up to the tobacco field with Zota for about an hour and a half, so I shall be back in plenty of time to change into decent garments and start comfortably by that time. What a lovely morning it is!"

"Delicious!" exclaimed Hester, looking round with a sniff of appreciation. "I always think people lose such a lot by staying in bed so long after the sun gets up in summer. Just fancy, the city dweller will only be crawling down to breakfast by the time that you are ready to start for the town, and you will have done half a day's work by that time!"

"You have done nearly that already," said Alice, as she rose slowly from the table and came to stand beside Hester, who was gazing out through the vistas of apple trees to where there was a glimpse of mountains in the background. "Your bread smells beautiful, and you always manage to get it light; it is so different from the awful stuff that Mrs. Powell used to make, and I just loathe bad bread."

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"Ah, I don't write poetry, you see, and so I am able to keep my brains for such mundane things as bread-making," said Hester with a laugh. And then her tone grew more serious as she went on: "Do you know that some of the things Mrs. Powell wrote were really fine? Have you read many of her verses?"

"No, indeed!" cried Alice. "Remember I had to eat the bread she made, and to endure her bad temper, poor thing! I fancy really to enjoy poetry, one ought never to know anything about the private life of the poet, for such knowledge takes the gilt from the gingerbread; so if you want to quote her writings to me, you must not tell me whose it is until after I have passed my judgment on it. Now I really must go off to work; but meal-times are so pleasant now that there is always the temptation to linger."

Left to herself, Hester fled about the house with great energy. If she were not going to town, she might as well have a washing day, and get the work out of the way instead of waiting until to-morrow. She would have Zota's help too, for if Alice were away Zota would be about the homestead all day, and she was a perfect genius in the art of getting clothes clean.

But the invalid was always Hester's first concern after breakfast in the morning, and she had become so adroit in moving the helpless woman that she rarely needed either Alice or Zota to assist her in the task. There was still the same piteous look of appeal in the eyes of the paralysed woman, but as she could not speak the others could not ease her trouble for her, because they did not know what it was.

This morning was as other mornings, and all the

time that Hester was attending to her patient she talked to her in the cheeriest possible fashion, which was a way she had, because she thought it must make the poor woman feel better to hear something that sounded pleasant, even if she could not tell what it was all about. With this idea uppermost in her mind, Hester talked of the crops, describing the forward state of the tobacco plantation, and saying how well the maize was coming on; and then she wandered off to a brisk account of the poultry, and mentioned the price of eggs at the store, giving it as her opinion that Pete Carson managed to get a big profit for himself by sending the eggs away to the city, where he probably got double what he gave for them.

But to all this the poor woman only responded with that piteous asking stare; nor was there any sign in her eyes that she understood when, with much feeling, Hester recited one of the poems which Mrs. Powell had herself composed before that living death encompassed her sound:

"The pine tree bent in the path of the storm,
The maple creaked, and cried,
The hardy thorns tossed their boughs about,
But the gentle lilac died."

"You poor dear, I think that you must be deaf, or surely you would know your own poetry," said Hester, when she had recited the verse in slow, clear tones; and yet, as she looked into the poor woman's face, it seemed to her that Mrs. Powell had understood, and really recognized her own poetry, only the other trouble was so great that she had no concern for anything else.

Before Hester had quite finished with the sickroom

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Alice was back from the field, looking pale, and seeming quite prostrate with a bad headache.

"It is of no use, Hester, I could not sit in the wagon for the journey to town to-day; you will have to go after all. I am so sorry, dear, for I know that you have so much to do; but on the other hand, the long drive will do you good, and as you have such a light load, there will be no need for you to walk any part of the way," said Alice, as she sank into a chair, thankful to be out of the glare of the sun.

"I will go with the greatest pleasure, if you will promise that you will just do nothing while I am gone," said Hester, then rushed to change her frock in honour of the occasion.

A rueful thought came into her mind, as she was doing up the buttons, that she had not written that letter of warning to the doctor which had occupied so many of her thoughts last night, and incidentally had deprived her of much sleep. Then it suddenly occurred to her that she might very well write the letter on the way to the town, for Dobbin's pace was not tremendous, especially when there was hill-climbing to be done.

"I will write to Mrs. Hope at the same time. It will be a good thing to get it off my mind; and I ought to write to her, for in a way she has done me a really good turn in taking my place at home," she murmured to herself, as she hastily clutched at her writing-case and stuffed it into her travelling bag, which she carried out to the wagon. Zota had already hitched up Dobbin to the wagon, and there was nothing for Hester to do but to gather up the reins and take her seat.

She had learned a little more about driving in the

weeks she had been at Powell Gorge; but she knew very well that she had no especial genius in dealing with horseflesh, and it was a great comfort to her that Dobbin needed very little driving, and so she would be quite free to follow her own bent during the time it took the old horse to traverse the distance to the town. It was not exactly easy work to write a decent letter with the bumping and swaying of the wagon over the rough trail, and there was so little likeness to her usually trim and tidy calligraphy in the letter which she wrote to the doctor that she chuckled to herself to think how little likely it was that he would ever discover the identity of the writer. She took much more pains with the one intended for her step-mother, for she wanted to make a really good impression there, and as she was by this time more used to the shaking of the wagon, it was not so difficult to do well.

When the letters were done, and stamped and sealed, she took up the whip, and set herself in good earnest to the task of getting a better pace out of Dobbin, and so in course of time arrived at Crag End.

The first thing she did was to drop her letters in the mail box, and when that was done she went about her business, anxious to get it over and to start on her homeward way as soon as possible; but she had not reckoned for the interruptions, which on that morning were manifold. To begin with, Pete Carson was not at home, and Willie Peel, his lame nephew and assistant, could not decide such a momentous question as that involved by the jam project of Alice without reference to his uncle. Hester waited for an hour, and then, as Pete Carson had not returned, she decided

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that she could wait no longer, even though that might involve a journey to the town to-morrow or the day after. She had been into the store to say this to Willie, and was just coming out at the door when two horses went by at a hand gallop; the rider of the first was the doctor, but she got something of a shock when she recognized in the man at his side the very same individual whom she had saved from being hunted down by the bloodhound.

Was it possible that her warning had come too late?

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CHAPTER XIV

Hester's Blunder

THE horses and their riders were headed away from the town, and so there was no chance of her stopping them even if she had wanted to; but her heart beat very fast, and there was such a loud singing in her ears that she did not at first realize that Willie Peel had followed her to the door, and was talking in that deferential tone which was supposed to be so pleasing to customers, although as a matter of fact it always irritated her, even when she tried to be most patient under the infliction.

"I'm real sorry that Uncle Pete isn't in, Miss Hope, but I will give him Miss Trevor's message, and we will get you word if we can by the doctor when he comes out to your place to-morrow; or if he isn't bound that way perhaps we can find someone who is going as far as James Hinton's place. The fact is, Uncle has gone to see Abe Simpson this morning, and I expect that is why he is so late in coming back, for Abe is a rare one for a gossip."

A cold shiver crept over Hester, but she forced herself to speak as if nothing were the matter.

"Ah, Mrs. Hinton was talking to me about Mr. Simpson yesterday; he is better, is he not?"

"Yes, miss, quite recovered, and as sound as a bell,

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barring scars, of which they say he has enough and to spare. A downright miracle it is, too, and Abe is so grateful to Dr. Lambert that they say there is nothing he wouldn't do for him."

Hester tried to get a little comfort from this statement, and was just clambering into her wagon when, with a great clanging of a most useful bell, the train of cars came puffing slowly up the street, and one of the passengers standing on the rear platform greeted her with a hearty shout, and springing off the car at some risk to life and limb, came running across to the wagon to speak to her.

It was Wilfred Landells, and at first she thought that he was coming back to Powell Gorge with her; but this he said was impossible, as he had to go on to the mines that day, and then he expected to start east by the early cars next morning, being away probably for a week.

"But I will come straight out to see you directly I get back, and I can bring you home news at first hand. How are things going at your place?" he asked, putting his question in that fashion because of some inner consciousness which would not let him make his question more explicit about what he really wanted to know.

"Oh, just about as usual. Mrs. Powell has not altered, and there is no news of her husband. We have had a disagreeable person turn up who calls himself Mrs. Powell's nephew, and says that he means to claim the place when the poor woman dies; but as he does not seem inclined to take much responsibility while she is alive, we are not unduly worried about him," said Hester. She added with a laugh, "I have been writing to Mrs. Hope on my way to the town to-day, and have

just mailed my letter. If I had known that you were going east I might have given it to you to carry, and so have saved myself the postage."

"It is safer in the post; and anything might happen to delay my journey even now," he answered. "For I am doing detective work in between whiles, and I am trying to lay an arrant rogue by the heels. A salter he is, and in rather a large way of business too, I fancy; if only I could get hold of him life would be appreciably easier for me."

Again a cold shiver crept over Hester, but she forced herself to say in a gay tone: "And pray, what is he like? I might be able to give you a valuable clue if he crosses my path, you know."

"I wish that I could tell you; some say that he is quite an elderly man, and others that he is quite young, so the safe theory is that he must be middle-aged. Does that description of the wanted man convey anything to you?" Wilfred asked, looking up at her, and thinking how pale she was.

But Hester had herself well in hand, and replied in an easy tone of banter: "It is so very lucid that certainly if I had seen anyone like it I should have recognized him in a flash. But look at that brakeman yonder! He will certainly injure his arm if he waves it so violently; he seems to be in a fearful hurry for you to get on board."

"I must go, goodbye. Please remember me very kindly to all at Powell Gorge," he said, with a hasty lifting of his hat, as he bolted away in the direction of the waiting cars.

"Now, step-uncle mine, just exactly what did you mean by that, I wonder?" said Hester to herself, as

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Dobbin trotted soberly away in the wake of the cars. If Wilfred Landells had wanted to be remembered to Alice, why had he not said so, instead of speaking in such a vague fashion—for, of course, neither Mrs. Powell nor Zota counted in the least. Then she remembered the Hintons, and supposed that he had intended to class them all in the same category, as living at Powell Gorge, and straightway dismissed the matter from her thoughts.

She had done her very best to give the doctor a warning of the danger in which his father stood, only she had bungled the business pretty badly, although she was happily quite unaware just then of having done anything of the sort.

Later on that same afternoon, when the doctor looked in at the store to see if some drugs which he had ordered had come by the cars, Willie Peel called out to him from the little office at the back, where the postal business was transacted, to say that there was a letter for him, which he could have then if he liked. Dr. Lambert strode across the shop and took the missive from the lame man, looking it over with active curiosity, for it was a local letter, but paper and envelope had an indefinable look of the city about them, and were much better in quality than was usual in the country.

It was for that reason he put the packet in his pocket, not choosing to read the letter there before the mildly curious eyes of Willie Peel. He got his drugs, then went away to the little shack where he made such a brave fight against narrow means, performing his small economies behind closed doors and showing always a brave face to the outer world.

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day, for his father had been spending a couple of days with him, and there were no elements of tidiness in the elder Lambert. But the old man had gone east to-day, not by the cars at first, having begun his journey on a stout horse through to a distant ranch, where medicine was wanted for a sick child, and whence a ten-mile ride through the hills would enable him to get the cars on the Cedar Fork railway. Of course it was the doctor's scanty means which had provided the funds for the hurried journey, but in this case there had been ample reason for the money having to be supplied, as it was a lawyer's letter that had summoned Lambert senior to Toronto, on business connected with a legacy left him by a man to whom he had done a good turn many years before.

When the doctor had shut the door of his abode he pulled the letter out of his pocket, and slitting open the envelope proceeded to make himself master of the contents. But the opening words were so amazing that in sheer desperation he turned the pages over to find the signature; and when he saw the name, Hester Hope, in clear, firm writing at the bottom of the last page, he uttered a long whistle of astonishment by way of expressing his feelings, after which he turned to the beginning once more, and proceeded to read the letter straight through:

"MY DEAR —,

"I am going to find a name for you later on, and this letter is to tell you how sorry I am that I have never written to you before. Just at first I will admit that I did not like you, and I bitterly resented your appearance on the horizon of my life, but I find that

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you have really been a great factor in my happiness, for you have set me free to become of real use in the world. I am so happy, dear, and nothing in this hard life can daunt me, because it is so good to know that I am of real use, and that this household at least would have great difficulty in getting along without me. I am writing this letter while Dobbin is taking me to town, and as the trail is of the roughest it must account for my want of eloquence and for all my other shortcomings also. Some day, when things are easier, I am coming home to make your acquaintance, and to thank you as best I can not only for making my father happy, but also for having incidentally put happiness in my way too. But before then, say at the end of the summer, I want you to do me a favour. I have talked a great deal in my letters to my father of Alice Trevor. She has had such a colourless life, and is so dead sick of the country, yet she sticks at her post here just because it is her duty. Well, I want you to invite her to stay for a month with you, and please give her a real good time, drives, dinners, dances, theatres, tea-parties, and all the functions which I just loathe, but which will be like a new world to her. She is very proud and sensitive, but she has nice manners, and is much better-looking than I am, so you will not be making a martyr of yourself in having to take her round. Indeed, I am quite sure that she will be more credit to you than I should have been, and oh, it will make her so very happy! Goodbye, dear —, and please, please write me just a little letter to say that you do not think too hardly of me.

“Sincerely yours,

“HESTER HOPE.”

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HOPE."

"Why, the letter could not have been meant for me at all!" exclaimed Dr. Lambert, speaking aloud in his surprise; and then he turned the pages over and read the letter all through again, which, of course, was a very improper thing to do, seeing that it was so obviously not meant for him. But it gave him a new light on Hester's character, and he was quite ready to admit that he had not always judged her without prejudice.

"She is a bundle of contradictions," he said, meaning to be very critical in manner, but only succeeding in getting a very tender intonation into his voice, which made him quite unreasonably angry. He worked his irritation off in an elaborate tidying of his shack, and then suddenly determined that it was his duty to ride out to Powell Gorge that very evening and take Hester back the letter which was so plainly meant for someone else.

"It might even be that I am wanted at Powell Gorge," he said to himself, as a sort of excuse for the ride he meant to take that afternoon, and he would not admit that it was scarcely likely in such a case that the letter would have been mailed, as requests for the doctor's services were invariably delivered at his house.

There was a thunderstorm that afternoon, and a couple of hours of drenching rain to follow, but even this was not enough to daunt the doctor, who by reason of his profession never allowed the weather to influence his journeyings. A tree had been torn down by the storm in the old fire lot, and flung across the trail. It was a dead tree, but none the less dangerous for that. For a full half-hour the doctor and his horse worked their hardest at removing the wreckage from the trail, and when it was done he knew that he would have to

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hurry if he wished to reach Powell Gorge before the household had retired for the night. No one dreamed of wasting lamp oil by stopping out of bed at this time of the year, and it was considered very bad form of visitors to drop along when dusk began to fall.

His horse, however, entered into the spirit of the thing, and as travelling was much more pleasant now that the heavy shower had cooled the air, the ride was accomplished in very good time, and the doctor rode through the apple orchard towards the house a full hour before the sun slid out of sight behind the mountains.

The wailing notes of a violin greeted him first. Hester was playing some Hungarian music, which was full of mournful melodies, and cadences that seemed charged with tears. But she drew the bow across the strings in a final flourish as the doctor rode up to the house, and then she came forward to greet him.

"I had no idea that you played like that; please go on, I love music," he said, so earnestly that Hester, who had a sudden fit of self-consciousness at the sight of him, hastened to give him the benefit of a lively mazurka, which brought Zota dancing and whirling out on to the veranda, where she came to a sudden pause with up-lifted foot at the sight of the doctor, for she had not heard that anyone had arrived.

"Thank you very much; but I think that I prefer the sad music myself, there is so much more soul in it," he said, when Hester had done. He was hoping that she would play some more to him, but she declared that she had had enough of sad things for that one evening at least.

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little that I took my fiddle to-night; music does help one to see things more clearly sometimes," she said, as she carefully laid her beloved violin away in its case.

"Ah, and that was why you sent for me!" he exclaimed, with a thrill of joy at the thought that it was to him she turned when trouble menaced. "I am sorry that I could not get here sooner, but the storm had brought down one of those trees in the old fire lot, and it took me a long time to get it clear of the trail."

"I have not sent for you," replied Hester, somewhat coldly. And then, as if she felt rather ashamed of herself, she added hastily: "But I am very glad that you have come, for we are really very badly in need of advice. Rather more than a week ago, a man calling himself Joe Disney happened along, declaring that he was the nephew of Mrs. Powell, and that in the event of her death he would claim everything as the nearest of kin. But when I suggested that he should take upon himself the burdens of the next-of-kin now, and help to provide for the stricken woman, he declared himself too poor to do anything of the sort, and rode away saying that we should hear of him again later on. Afterwards on that same day, when I was talking to Alice, I chanced to look up, and found the man with his face pressed against the window, prying into our concerns. I gave chase, but he was too quick for me, and had disappeared before I could get out of the house to go in pursuit."

"A sound thrashing would have done him good!" burst out the doctor wrathfully.

"He would have had it if I could have caught him," replied Hester; "but, as I said before, I was not quick enough, and so he got clear away. Alice said that she

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had never heard of the man before, so we decided that it was a mere piece of bluff from an extra bold adventurer, and we did not even trouble to write to the police about it. But this morning, while I was away at Crag End, the fellow came again and tried to force his way into the house. Alice, Zota, and the dog combined forces, however, and succeeded in keeping him outside, and when I arrived I added my arguments to theirs, with such good effect that he soon cleared off. Only he threatened as he went, and I feel it in my bones that we are going to have trouble with him. Of course we can tell the police, but we are so isolated up here that I don't see how they are going to help us much, unless they billet a mounted policeman on us, and that would not be pleasant, seeing that we are just a household of girls; yet we do want a man of some sort on the place very badly indeed just now."

"I know the very man who would serve your turn, and I believe that I could get him out here by to-morrow night, if you would care to have him," said the doctor eagerly.

"That would largely depend on the man," said Hester; and now there was a sudden frost in her manner, for she thought that the doctor was going to suggest his own father as a guardian for them, and in view of all that rumour said concerning the senior Lambert, she did not choose to have him at Powell Gorge. "There would be the difficulty of lodging him to be taken into consideration also, for there is no room in the house, and the barn is quite taken up with the animals and their fixings."

"I have a very serviceable tent, which I could let you have the loan of for a few weeks," replied the

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doctor. "The man I mean is a Russian refugee; indeed, he escaped from Siberia, and his adventures have been exciting enough to fill a couple of novels, I should think. He is old and white-haired, so Mrs. Grundy would have no cause for complaint; he is moreover a perfect gentleman, but he can speak very little English."

Hester's face became instantly brighter. "He sounds promising," she said with a sigh of relief. "Do you mind if I go and speak to Alice about it? She is the boss, you know, and I am merely the lady help, or, in unadulterated Saxon, just the hired girl. Poor Alice has gone to bed with a bad headache, for the encounter with Mr. Disney this morning proved too much for her nerves."

"Consult Miss Trevor by all means. Shall I go and have a look at Mrs. Powell now I am here? It is nearly a fortnight since I have seen her," said the doctor.

"Please do, though indeed she is just the same, and I fail to see the slightest change in her condition," said Hester; and then she went off to consult Alice, while the doctor went into Mrs. Powell's room and bent over the motionless figure on the bed. There was no change at all; the only motion of which the stricken woman seemed capable was to open and shut her eyes, and these tonight were closed, for she was asleep, and there was no haunting, asking gaze to trouble him when he went away.

Hester came in while he was still standing by the bed, and they went out together in silence, for they would not say anything in that room that might in any way bring trouble to the helpless patient. But when they were out on the veranda once more, in the pleasant coolness of the evening, Hester turned to the doctor

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with a quick eagerness of manner: "Alice says that I am to thank you for your kindness, and to say that she will be very glad indeed to have your Russian friend up here for a few weeks, if you can lend us the tent until a little shack can be built for him. We can pay him too—if he will not want more than an ordinary hired man, that is."

"Michael Warinski will not expect so much as the average hired man gets, because he cannot work very hard, poor fellow; but a little money, if you can spare it, will be a very great boon to him," answered the doctor. And then, changing his tone to a lower and more confidential key, he said, drawing Hester's envelope from his pocket, "Do you know, when you wrote to me you must have put the letter which was meant for me in the envelope of someone else, because this one that was sent to me was plainly not meant for me."

"Oh, what have I done?" gasped Hester.

"Nothing very dreadful, I fancy," he said, looking at her in amusement. "Only, I should like to know what it was that you wrote to me about; indeed, it was that which brought me over here this evening."

Hester's face was a study in conflicting emotions, chiefest among which was mortification, for now she would have to explain everything, instead of sheltering herself behind a convenient anonymity, as she had planned.

"It is just horrid, and I cannot think how I could have been so stupid," she said in a vexed tone, as she took the letter which he held out to her, and saw that it was the one she had intended for her stepmother.

"I am still in the dark," he reminded her, as she stood hesitating before him, uncertain where to begin, or how

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best to tell him that she knew his father was a rogue, and just then in danger of Judge Lynch.

"I suppose that I shall just have to make a clean breast of it," she said at length. "I wanted to warn you that your father was in danger, and I did not want you to know that I knew all about it; and so I sent you, as I thought, an anonymous letter, to beg you to smuggle him out of the neighbourhood before Abe Simpson could set eyes on him."

"Pardon me, but even now I fail to understand," said the doctor gently. "What danger could come to my father from Abe Simpson seeing him? As a matter of fact, father and I rode past Simpson's shack this morning, and stopped for an hour with him before father went on to Cedar Fork and I returned to Crag End. They are old friends, and they always have a tremendous lot to talk about when they do meet."

Hester stared at him in an amazement that was almost ludicrous; then she gasped out in a great hurry: "But it was your father who was being hunted on the hills that first day I came here, hunted with a bloodhound, because he had been caught salting. I took him into the wagon so that the dog should be foiled, and he drove down to the depot, just in time to catch the cars."

"Then it was because of that affair you would not give that poor lame beast a ride, and I thought—" he began, taking an eager step forward, but pausing suddenly, remembering that it was extremely awkward to say outright what he had thought.

"You thought that I was a coward, and so I was," she said with a laugh.

CHAPTER XV

On Guard

"I DON'T think that it was cowardice, but courage," said the doctor, who had somehow got hold of Hester's hand and was holding it fast. "And I could hide my head in the dust when I think how I misjudged you then."

"You thought that you had good reason, for you must admit that appearances were very much against me," she said, laughing nervously now, as she tried to withdraw her hand: but the doctor gripped it fast.

"I have a few more explanations to make before I have done," he went on, his voice not quite so steady as it had been. "You have doubtless been told that my father was caught red-handed at salting. But I say he was not, for the simple reason that, dissipated though he has been, he has never fallen so low as that. Moreover, as he did not own a rood of land anywhere on the face of the earth, he had no interest in making prices boom, don't you see? He was hunted, it is true, for he was suspected, and it was some of his clothes that the miners had got for scent; and as they were just mad that day, it was his life you saved when you took him into your wagon, and let him drive you to Crag End. He told me that he had got clear away, but he did not explain how, and I might never have

known if you had not bungled in putting your letters into their envelopes. When Abe Simpson came round enough to know that my father had been accused, he sent for one of the miners, and told the fellow to let his crowd know that they were on the wrong trail. He vows that he would know the man whom he saw working at the spot where he afterwards found the quartz, and he is going to make a round of likely places for meeting him, now that he is well enough to get about again."

"Then I need not have troubled at all, and my stupid blunder has given you this long ride this evening," said Hester, who was desperately vexed with herself because of her mistake, which had been the means of more self-betrayal than she had cared to display.

"It is a privilege to come where you are," replied the doctor, with so much feeling in his tone that Hester was seized with a sudden self-consciousness, and welcomed Zota, who came out at this moment to know if Hester was going to play her violin again that night.

"No, dear, I shall not play any more to-night, it is getting late, and we must go to bed soon," said Hester; and then, fearful lest Zota should go away again and leave her with the doctor, she began to tell the child that a real live Russian was coming the next day, to live in a tent in the orchard, and assist in protecting them.

"A Dukhobor?" asked Zota, with a scornful wrinkling of her shapely little nose.

"No, he is a poor unfortunate gentleman, who was banished to Siberia, but was able to make his escape through the aid of some kind friends," said Hester.

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The doctor was wise enough to take his leave then, for it was easy to see that Hester was not going to afford him any more opportunities for confidential talk that evening. But he had not got clear of the orchard when he caught sight of the figure of a man sneaking round in the shadow of a clump of pine trees, which had been planted for a wind break. He promptly gave chase, but the fellow was too quick for him, and had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him long before the doctor could come up with him.

"Now, whatever am I to do?" muttered the doctor; and going back to where he had left his horse, he stood leaning against the animal doing some pretty hard thinking. The fellow would be Joe Disney, without a doubt, and his presence about the place boded no good to the girls, who already had had so much trouble with him that day.

The doctor was tired, as well he might be seeing what a hard day's work had fallen to his share, but he could not go away leaving the household with no better protection than a dog. And equally he could not go back and tell Hester that he intended remaining all night on guard. But there was one thing he could do: he could remain all night within sight and sound of the little house, none of its inmates being any the wiser, and then when dawn came he could ride away, leaving a message at Hinton's place which would make them on the alert to stand by the girls, until he could give the police a warning of what was to the fore.

Leading his horse a little farther away, where there would be no likelihood of it attracting attention from

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anyone who might be looking out of the windows, he hobbled the creature so that it could feed but not stray; and then he made a wide circuit of the place, and finally took up a position where he could command the front and one end of the house. He saw a dim light appear in the room where Mrs. Powell lay, and then he heard the window opened and the heavy shutters shut, and inconvenient as those same shutters had once proved, he was very thankful that they had ever been put on the lonely little house.

After that, silence and darkness brooded down on orchard, house, and barn. What a lonely spot it was! And how remote it seemed from civilization! Yet it was a very desirable place to live in, if one did not mind being lonely. The doctor spent most of the night leaning against the trunk of a tree; sometimes he dozed, but he always woke with a start, for he knew himself to be a heavy sleeper, and it would not do to sleep on watch.

Then, after a long, long vigil, he saw the stars grow pale, while a rosy flush crept up the eastern sky. Morning had come, and the little household had slept in peace, so far as outside disturbances were concerned. The doctor crept away then to find his horse. How stiff he was! And how starving hungry! But it had been well worth while, he told himself, as he ran by the side of his horse for the first half-mile, in order to get a little warmth into his chilled limbs.

As he expected, he found the Hintons actively astir when he reached their place, and Mrs. Hinton quickly made him a big mug of coffee, which, with a mighty hunch of bread, immediately put a fresh complexion on matters for him. While he was eating, he told his

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hostess how he had spent the night, and asked that someone from there should go over during the day, just to see how the beleaguered household were getting on. He also told her that he was going to warn the police, although he did not see what even they could do in the matter, if the man Joe Disney were really the next-of-kin.

"It is an awkward business altogether, and I have never met the like of it before," said Mrs. Hinton. "I don't think anything could be finer than the way those two girls have stood by the place, with no obligation on either of them to do it, as you might say, for even if Alice Trevor is related to Sam Powell, she was never acknowledged as anything but a hired help, and hardly treated as well. Yet she has shown herself willing to do a daughter's part by Mrs. Powell in this trouble. The way Miss Hope has behaved is to me more wonderful still, for you can see at a glance that she has been brought up to a very different sort of life, and how ever she can stand the drudgery of her days at the Gorge is more than I can understand."

The doctor nodded in complete sympathy; he could have stood for a long time listening to these praises of Hester, but time pressed, and he had more to do that day than he would get through if he lingered talking now.

The first thing he did when he reached Crag End was to rouse up a very sleepy telegraph operator, and send a wire to Michael Warinski. It was long before the proper time for wiring, but a little judicious bribery made a good many things possible, and the doctor did not hesitate to resort to it now, although the price he would have to pay would be that his coffee would be

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taken sugarless and there would probably be no butter on his bread for a week or two to come; but that was a small matter which concerned no one save himself. Then he went home to his house, and as there were no patients in urgent need of attention, he shut his door and lay down for a much-needed rest.

Some hours later three women were taking it in turn to knock at his door, contriving by taking it thus to keep up a continual fusillade; and they had been at it without a moment of cessation when the train from the east came in, and deposited quite a little crowd of passengers in front of Pete Carson's store.

One of these, an elderly man with a sickly yellow face, and rather long grey hair, detached himself from his fellow-travellers, walked into the store, and enquired of Willie Peel where Dr. Lambert lived.

"It is at that house where the women are knocking at the door," returned the lame storekeeper, with a grin of amusement hovering round his good-natured mouth. He had been out at the door watching the trio's unavailing efforts to rouse the doctor until the coming of the train had driven him momentarily into the store, to bring out the mail bag, which was to be put into the hands of the brakeman.

"Is the doctor away from home, then?" demanded the stranger, who spoke with a strong foreign accent.

"He is at home right enough, only he was up all last night, and he is so tired that he is sleeping like a log. They do say that at such times a fellow could pick him up and carry him away without his being any the wiser; but for myself I should not like to attempt it, for though he is such a kind-hearted man, they do say he is just about dreadful when he is

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roused," replied Willie, who was great at putting strangers in touch with local gossip.

"He is, as you say, a good man, but I also know that he can be a lion when he is roused," said the stranger, with a laugh and a shrug of his bowed shoulders. Then he thanked Willie for the information, and took his way along the wide street to the house where the women were knocking at the door.

"Tut, tut, what an astonishing row to make! Why not open the door and walk in?" he asked, as a vigorous middle-aged woman made a fresh attack on the door.

"The doctor doesn't approve of too many liberties being taken with his house," explained one of the relief knockers.

"Is it urgent business that you have with him?" the stranger asked. He seemed in no hurry himself, for he leaned against a hitching post, which was all that was left of an original fence, and surveyed the group with an air of grave amusement.

"Mrs. Prior's baby has got a fit—not that it is to be wondered at, seeing that she will feed it on fried pork and beans. The doctor went on at her most awful the last time the poor mite was ill, and I expect that he will give it to her worse than ever to-day. But that can't be helped: the child can't be allowed to perish because its mother is afraid of a scolding. But the doctor was out last night, and he always does sleep so dreadfully sound if he has had to go a journey in the night," put in the woman who had been knocking, as she fell back exhausted, to let one of her companions take a turn.

"I think that your Mrs. Prior has very kind neighbours," said the stranger; and then he had no time to

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say more, for at this moment a sleepy voice from inside the house could be heard asking what all the noise was about, whereat all three women started knocking together, for at last there was hope in their task, and a moment later the doctor poked his head out of the window.

The first object upon which his gaze fell was the stranger leaning against the post, and at the sight he burst into a joyful shout of welcome: "My dear Warinski, how truly kind of you to come so promptly!"

"There is nothing in life worth living for save to serve one's best friends," said the Russian gravely. "I had your wire, and I packed my bag and boarded the cars. There will doubtless be one very angry man in Baskerville when it is known that I am not at my post. But what of that? He has not saved my life at the risk of his own, and you have, so you come first. Now I will get breakfast for you—or is it lunch?—while you go for to cure the baby who has a fit, as stated by these most kind ladies, whom I thank for having waked you up for me."

"Tell Mrs. Prior that I will be there in five minutes," said the doctor, with a wave of his hand to the indomitable three who had worked so hard to wake him.

It was really less than five minutes before he was at Mrs. Prior's door, and he did not leave the house until the baby had recovered to a certain extent from its seizure. He was tender with the babe, as he always was with sick children, and on this occasion he even forbore to "row" the helpless and unwise mother, who would not learn to feed her child in the manner best for an infant. But this was probably due to the fact that Warinski was waiting for him, and he was anxious

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to get back so that he might have a little time with his friend before driving him out to Powell Gorge. Michael Warinski and he had spent a whole winter together not so very long ago, a time of such poverty that sometimes for weeks together they had tasted no food except corn porridge and an occasional bit of bread. But what they had they shared, and it takes a very sturdy growth of friendship to live through troubles of that kind.

It was like the irony of fate, however, that the doctor was bound to be so busy that day. An old man in the town had a fit, a child fell down and cut its head open, and when these had been attended there came a messenger riding in hot haste from a distant ranch to fetch the doctor for a bad accident, in which two men had come near losing their lives.

As this ranch lay on the opposite side of the town to Powell Gorge it was easy to see that the doctor would not be able to drive Warinski out that day, and so he had to hire someone to take the Russian out to Sam Powell's place; and the only person whom he could find at liberty was Tim Lorimer, who had helped Hester on her first memorable drive to the town.

The trouble about Tim was that he, like his wife, was an inveterate gossip, and the doctor guessed that both Alice and Hester would choose to have as little comment as possible on the uncomfortable state of things at the ranch. However, as it had to be Tim or no one, there was nothing else to do but to make the best of it; so giving Warinski a brief outline of the case, and bidding him beware how much he talked to his driver, the doctor went off, leaving his friend to start as soon as Tim could be ready with his wagon.

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the Russian her household treasures, as she had shown them to Hester, and in trying to pump him as to his antecedents, in her usual wont. But Michael Warinski was by nature and training a very reserved man, and so it was not likely that Mrs. Lorimer would get much food for gossip from him, although he met her thirst for information with unvarying politeness, turning her questions back on to herself in a most disconcerting fashion.

On the way to the ranch it was Warinski who turned questioner, for there were so many things about the position he was to occupy which seemed mysterious to him that he must, if possible, get information from somewhere, and as the doctor was not there to enlighten him, he must find out from someone else. Luckily Tim was a great talker, and so the Russian was treated to a comprehensive and detailed account of every bit of cleared land that they passed, with a history of the people who owned and farmed it.

"And has it been settled long, this fertile region, which seems all sheltered valleys?" asked the Russian, with a wave of his hand meant to embrace the whole district.

"It has only been farmed for the last ten years—that is, Sam Powell took up land at Powell Gorge ten years ago—but the miners were here before that; and before they came it was a great hunting country, though it is that still higher in the mountains, and we pretty often get a chance of a bear when it has been a hard winter like the last," replied Tim Lorimer. And then he plunged into a description of Abe Simpson's encounter with the bear, which had brought more sensational developments than Tim had any knowledge of, since it

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had led in its way to Hester's rescue of the hunted man whom the miners suspected of "salting", and that in its turn had caused her to incur the doctor's scorn, which had ended in another feeling, as such things often will.

But from bears Tim Lorimer had passed by natural sequence to mining, then launched into a vivid description of the hunt for Sam Powell in the disused shaft under the hill above Powell Gorge, as he had had it from the loutish Dick, who was hired man to James Hinton at Cowley Drift, and was in his way as great a gossip as Tim himself.

"But this Sam Powell, where can he be? Has anything happened to him, do you think?" asked the Russian.

"No, I don't think so," replied Tim, with a knowing wag of his head. "My own opinion is that he wanted a little peace from his wife's continual fault-finding. My word, but that woman had a tongue! It was one continual nag from morning to night, and in the case of her husband, poor fellow, it is easy to understand that it would be from night to morning also. Now to stand that sort of thing for long, a man must be either a fully fledged saint, or a clod with a skin as thick as a rhinoceros hide; and Sam Powell being neither one thing nor the other, he just could not stand it, don't you see, and so he skedaddled for a little bit of a holiday. But I expect, poor chap, he'd be sorry enough for himself if he knew what had happened, and how he could be living in peace and comfort at home all this time—for they say that those three girls are running his ranch in a downright workmanlike style."

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were only two," said the Russian, with a puzzled air, for in the hurried description of affairs at the ranch which was all that the doctor had found time to give him, there had been no mention of Zota.

"Oh, yes, there are three of them: there is Miss Trevor, who has been there for years, and is some kin to Sam Powell—a cousin, I think; then there is Miss Hope, as nice a girl as you would be likely to meet with in a day's march, and a oner at work, they tell me. Mrs. Powell had engaged her as a lady help, and when she got here she found that it was a sort of hired gal that was wanted. Instead of turning round and running back to where she had come from, she just starts in and ketches hold of things as slick as if she'd been reared on a ranch. Then there is a little Dukhobor girl that can't speak anything but Dukhobor language, so I'm told, and not much of that; but she, like Miss Hope, seems to be a sort of genius at hard work, and she knows most everything about critters—that is, cows, horses, pigs, and poultry—that there is to be known. And the three of them just about make things hum. Folks say that their tobacco field doesn't show a weed of any sort, and the Indian corn gets hoed nearly once a week. I guess that Sam wouldn't know his own ranch if he happened along to see it just now."

"This is very interesting," said Warinski; and then, as Tim drove through the orchard, and a little maiden came dancing out to meet them, he cried hoarsely, "Tell me, tell me quickly, who is that child?"

CHAPTER XVI

Recognition

"THAT child?" queried Tim Lorimer, in a tone of surprise because of the stranger's agitation. "Why, it is the Dukhobor girl, I suppose, seeing that it is not either of the others. My word, what a lightfooted girl she is! Why! she spins round as if she were fixed on wires."

Zota had run out to meet the wagon, thinking that it was the doctor who was coming down through the orchard; but when she saw that it was a stranger who was driving the wagon, and that another stranger was sitting up beside him, she retreated in all haste, for she was very timid still, and the encounter with Joe Disney, when she had helped Alice to keep him out of the house, had made her feel that strangers were to be received with great caution.

"Why has she run away in such a hurry?" demanded the Russian, who spoke in a shaken tone.

"Skeered at the sight of us, I reckon," replied Tim, with an understanding of Zota's feelings which did him great credit, seeing that he had no children of his own.

"Poor little thing!" murmured the Russian, and then he went so white that Tim wondered what was going to happen next, so plunged into talk about the first subject that came uppermost, while his horse

dropped into a walk to approach the house. "They are queer creatures, those Dukhobors, only half-baked as to wits, so it seems to me; and the things they do are enough to astonish an ordinary person."

"Hush!" breathed the Russian, for Tim's voice was loud, and Zota must have heard every word he said.

Another girl came out at this moment, approaching the wagon with a springing step and an easy carriage which suggested close acquaintance with a gymnasium.

"Good morning, Miss Hope!" called out Tim, while the Russian swept off his hat in greeting, and treated Hester to a very close scrutiny, for there had been so much unconscious warmth in the doctor's tone when he spoke of her that it had not taken Michael Warinski long to make up his mind that in Miss Hope Robert Lambert had found his fate.

"Good morning, Mr. Lorimer! have you brought us a defender?" asked Hester crisply, while her heart gave a throb of relief at the sight of the Russian's refined face. Plainly the doctor had told the simple truth when he said that Michael Warinski was a gentleman.

"That is about it, Miss Hope. The doctor couldn't get over himself, as a good few folks have been taken sick to-day, so I came with Mr. Warinski for him; and I have got the tent in the wagon, and we will set to work and pitch it now if you will tell us where it is to go."

"It must be fairly near the house," said Hester, when she had greeted the Russian and thanked him for coming to their assistance so promptly. "What do you think of that flat bit along under the shadow of the barn? It would be sheltered from the winds that

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come sweeping up the valley, and it would also be well within call if we wanted help in a hurry."

"I should say that it was the very identical place: could not be better if it tried!" exclaimed Tim, rubbing his head until his carrotty hair stood up straight like a halo; then putting his hat on again, he drove across to the flat bit under the lee of the barn, and proceeded to unload the tent fixings.

Hester, however, retreated into the house, for she had a batch of bread at the critical stage, and was anxious to get it safely out of hand. Zota, too, had disappeared, and although the Russian looked longingly in the direction in which she had gone, he had learned patience in a hard school, and so turned his attention to helping to get the tent set up, so that Tim might be free to return.

When Hester had put the bread in the oven, she came out again to offer refreshment to Tim, which, however, he would not take, saying that he was in a hurry to get back, and that he could hold out very well to supper-time. Then he mounted into his wagon, and turned the head of his horse homewards, for he was really pressed for time that day—a strange happening in his easygoing life.

When he had gone, and the wagon had disappeared out of sight in the little grove of trees at the end of the orchard, the Russian said to Hester in a shaken tone, "I beg you to tell me where that child came from who ran out to meet the wagon when we drove up, but ran away again at sight of us?"

"Her name is Zota," replied Hester, with a quick glance at the pale, refined face of the stranger. "I found her crying on the ground after the Dukhobor

pilgrims had passed through this way, and we have kept her with us ever since, as we could not return her to the tribe, and we are very fond of her. She is a good, hard-working child, and when she knows enough English to tell us more about herself, I think that we shall find her very interesting. But I expect that you will be able to talk to her in her own language, when she has ceased to be shy of you. It is our great trouble with her that she is so afraid of fresh faces."

"She will not be afraid of me," said Warinski, with such a thrill of feeling in his tone that Hester gave a quick look at him, wondering what he meant; but as he vouchsafed no explanation, she began to speak of other things, and then forgot about the matter for the time.

The Russian begged to be set at work forthwith, and as there was a great deal to be done, Hester found him employment that kept him busy until supper was on the table. Then it was Alice who went to call him from work, and presently they were sitting round the table, which stood on the veranda, while Zota, sitting close to Hester, gave little furtive glances at the stranger from under her long lashes, privately wondering whether he would prove as nice as the doctor, who was always kind to her.

For a few minutes Michael Warinski took almost no notice of her, but occupied himself in talking to Hester and Alice, and hearing from them an account of the difficulty they were having in the matter of Joe Disney. Then when there came a pause he turned to Zota, and breaking into his native tongue he began to talk very rapidly, while Zota turned from red to white and then back to red again.

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"Why, that was my dear father!" she shrieked, then dropped her voice to a lower tone. Looking round with a scared air, she said, "But Anna said that I was never to speak of him, because walls had ears, and it was not safe."

"Where is Anna?" he asked, his voice shaken with strong feeling, although he was keeping himself well in hand, because he would not frighten her.

"Poor Anna died while we were in the big ship. Oh, I hated the ship, we were all so ill there!" cried the child mournfully. "And when they had taken Anna away Marie Mushtakovitch took care of me; but I hated that too, for she had so many babies, and they were always wailing. It was so ugly too, and sometimes there was only enough food for supper, with none at all for breakfast. Then I heard the men, who were most devout, talking of going on pilgrimage to a lovely land, where the sun always shone, and where the fruit dropped ripe from the trees all the year round; so when they started to find that pleasant land I followed behind, and that was how I came here."

"My poor little Zota!" said the man in shaken tones, leaning forward to lay a trembling hand on the girl's arm. "I have thought that you were dead these five years past, and now to find you alive is a joy unspeakable!"

"Why, you are my own father; I know you now, because your voice has grown so soft!" shrieked Zota, flinging herself into the stranger's arms, to the amazement of Hester and Alice; for as the talk between the other two had been in Russian, they had not understood what it was all about, even though a stray word here and there and the moved look on the man's face had

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warned them that it was more than usually engrossing.

"What is it—what is the matter?" asked Hester, springing up with intent to comfort Zota, who was sobbing violently.

"There is nothing the matter, Miss Hope," said Michael Warinski in English. His voice was broken and quavering, but there was quite a new fire in his eyes. "There is nothing the matter, but I have found my child again, my little Zota, who, they told me, had perished from the black death in the terrible year after I was banished to Siberia. Think of it! When I awoke this morning, I believed that there was only one person in all this world whom I had to love, or to be grateful to: that is the good doctor, who shared his scanty food with me when otherwise I must have starved. Then while I ate my breakfast before going to work, I had a telegram from this same good friend, saying that he had a great and sudden need of me, so I left my meal and rose up and came to him. He sent me here to do him service by helping you, and the first object I see, when I reach this place, is the living image of my dear dead wife rushing out to meet the wagon. The man who drove me said the maiden was a Dukhobor, but I who am Russian knew that this could not be; they are good people and of great sincerity, but they are clods and of the peasant class, with no education to uplift them or to put grace and beauty into their lives. This child in every movement betrayed her aristocratic birth; moreover, was she not the very image of the wife I loved, and who sleeps her last long sleep in far-away Russia? All the fatherhood in me rose up and cried out that this was my child, and in a moment I knew

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that I had been told falsely. I wanted to rush after Zota when she ran away, but I must not frighten her, and I must not make a scene. But now I sit quietly beside her, and I tell things about her past, and recall her old home to her, and it is the child who recognizes the father—ah, it is a happiness beyond the power of words to describe, and life again becomes a thing of value!"

"It is an amazing story!" exclaimed Hester, who was ashamed to find that the tears were running down her face, while Alice was crying too; and then they made an excuse of going to look after poor Mrs. Powell, so that they might leave the long-parted father and daughter together for a little while.

What an evening to be remembered that was! Hester brought out her violin and played her very best in honour of the occasion, while Zota danced until she was too tired to dance any longer; and then she sank on to the ground at her father's feet, and held the dog's head all wrapped up in her pinafore, while Hester played some of the wailing Hungarian melodies of which she was so fond, but which always made the dog howl in a weird and horrible manner.

Then Michael Warinski talked to Hester and Alice of the terrible things that sometimes happened in his native land, where even a man's religion could not be a thing between himself and his Maker, but must be arranged for by the law or it became at once a crime. He told her of the awful persecutions to which the Dukhobors had been subjected because of their faith, and so enlisted the pity of the two girls that the fanaticism of the poor creatures was forgotten in the pity their sufferings evoked.

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"But we must really go to bed, or where will the morning find us?" cried Hester, when the summer twilight had deepened into night, and the darkness still found them sitting on the veranda.

"What a blessing to think that we can sleep in peace to-night; I was so frightened last night for fear that we should have trouble with that horrid man, Joe Disney!" exclaimed Alice, with a sigh of relief, as she rose to her feet: but Hester said nothing at all, only flushed rosy red in the darkness.

"You had a much stronger protector last night, if only you had known it," replied Michael Warinski, who, not having been told to keep the matter private, saw no reason why he should not speak of it. "Dr. Lambert stayed here last night on guard; he found that someone was hovering about the place, and reckoned that it would be safest to stay until daylight."

"I knew it, I knew it!" murmured Hester to herself, as she went away to her bedroom. It was her turn to sleep with Zota to-night, while Alice took her rest in the front room with Mrs. Powell. But instead of going to sleep, as a person of ordinary common sense should have done, in view of the hard work which waited for her with the coming day, Hester lay open-eyed through the night, seeing visions and dreaming dreams that had nothing to do with slumber; and when morning came she was still dreaming, and was quite too happy to feel weary.

The Russian had come to work as well as to watch, and after breakfast he went off with Alice and Zota to hoe between the rows of the tobacco plants, and then to hand-weed the ground between the plants. Hester was thus left alone in the house; but this did not matter, as

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she had an ancient bugle which she used for the purpose of calling the others home from the field when dinner was ready, and which would do equally well to summon aid in case of emergency.

She was very busy this morning, and fled from task to task, singing as she went. Presently she remembered that, in the excitement of the Russian's arrival last evening, she had forgotten to gather the gooseberries which she wanted for to-day's pudding. The gooseberry bushes were in the garden at the other side of the house, but as it would only take her about five or six minutes to pull as much fruit as she required, Hester saw no reason why she should not go to get them. Taking a look at Mrs. Powell, who was just now lying with her eyes shut, she seized a basket, and, telling the dog to lie on guard, ran off to get the gooseberries. The bushes were in full view of the trail which led into the orchard, and so of course she would at once see if there were anyone approaching the house.

Pulling the berries off in handfuls she soon had her basket full, and started back to the house at a run, for she always hated leaving the poor invalid for a moment unguarded. To her surprise the dog was no longer lying on the doorstep, and making a mental note that she would certainly punish such a breach of faith, she laid her hand on the door handle to open it and enter, when, to her amazement, she found that it was bolted against her.

"But surely I came out this way?" she queried to herself, passing her hand over her face. Then a thrill of dismay crept over her, and she rushed round to the front of the house as fast as she could go, only to find that door locked also.

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For just one moment it seemed to Hester that she must be dreaming, and then, as she stood gazing at the window, wondering if she could manage to clamber up and break the frame to force an entrance, the face of Joe Disney appeared at the window of the sitting-room, and she knew that the very worst had happened, and the enemy was in possession of the citadel.

"Let me in at once, if you please," she said haughtily, although she felt that she would rather do anything than enter the house while he was in it; but she had poor Mrs. Powell to think of, and she must do her duty at all costs.

"We don't need you here just now, thank you, Miss Hope. I have brought a trained nurse over to take care of my poor aunt, and now I will see that she is properly cared for," he replied.

So the worst had come, and rushing to the old bugle, Hester blew a long and shrill blast upon it.

CHAPTER XVII

Shut Out

ALICE and Zota always started for the fields as soon as the work of feeding the live stock on the place was done. Then after a necessary spell in the fields, they were able to spend the latter part of each day in work about the house and orchard, or in the garden, which, like most of those on farms, was only cultivated when there was nothing more pressing to be done. With Michael Warinski for a helper, the field work would be put through in a shorter space than usual, for although he was not strong, and could not have done a day's work, in the sense of the word understood by the ordinary hired man, he was another pair of hands; and on a ranch where success depended on constant weeding and stirring with a hoe, this was a very great help indeed. It was not so much strength that was needed in the bringing to perfection of the tobacco crop as persistent and painstaking effort. The tobacco plants developed with almost tropical luxuriance, but then so did the weeds, and as it was not safe to poke a hoe in under the plants, all weeding round the roots had to be done by hand; and as there were nearly twelve thousand plants, the task was apt to become a little tedious.

But this morning the hours simply flew, for Michael Warinski had travelled largely, and was besides a keen

observer. He told the girls wonderful stories of his home in Southern Russia, lapsing into Russian every few minutes for the benefit of Zota, who could not always follow descriptions given in English. But as he was very anxious that she should learn to speak the tongue of her adopted country, he was not disposed to help out his talk with more lapses into Russian than were absolutely necessary.

But the morning was speeding on. In another hour they would have completed that day's portion of weeding, and would be starting back for the homestead, where other work awaited them, when Alice, who was crouching on the ground with her head under a tobacco plant, busily clearing out a luxuriant growth of weeds, of the ragged robin and starwort variety, suddenly jerked up her head, crying sharply, "What is that?"

Michael Warinski stopped abruptly in what he was saying, and Zota sprang up with a look of fear in her eyes, as round the shoulder of the hill came the long, quavering note of the bugle, followed by two jerky notes, as if the one who blew were short of breath or in great agitation.

"It is my dear Hester, and she is in trouble!" cried Zota, and dropping the weed-basket unheeded to the ground, she fled along the rows of tobacco plants, making a bee-line for the house on the other side of the hill.

"What is it?" asked the Russian, looking at Alice in surprise, for she had turned so white that he wondered if she were going to faint.

"Something is the matter, something rather bad, I fear, or Hester would certainly not have sent for us at

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this time in the morning," she said breathlessly, as she followed in the wake of Zota, only at a slower pace.

"Shall I go on ahead and see if help is needed?" he asked kindly, seeing that she was really not fit to hurry, yet guessing that hurry might be needful.

"I shall be so thankful if you will!" she said, looking at him with gratitude in her eyes, for she did not possess the radiant courage of Hester, and knew her own limitations in the matter of bravery.

Warinski strode away without another word. The smell of the earth, as he pulled up weeds that morning, had by some freak of association carried him back to his ancestral home on the Sea of Azof, and he felt as if he would be seeing the old town of Berdiansk when he rounded the corner of the hill, instead of the one little house in the orchard around which so much of trouble and mystery centred.

He was running now, for Zota, going with the speed of a young fawn, had already passed out of sight, and he was afraid lest there might be danger for her down there among the trees, where everything looked so peaceful. But to his surprise, when he reached the house it appeared to be entirely deserted. Even Zota had disappeared. He was just commenting to himself on the foolishness of shut windows in air and sunshine as cool and refreshing as those, when Hester came running round the house, and seeing him, waved to him to make haste.

"Oh, I am so glad that you have come!" she exclaimed, catching her breath in a sob. "Of course it is all the fault of my wicked carelessness in leaving the house even for a moment, but I never dreamed that they might be watching the house on the chance of

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getting in, or I would never have gone outside. Joe Disney has come, he has brought a woman with him, and the two of them have shut me out."

"Where is Zota?" he asked, anxious lest the child should in her very ignorance put herself in the way of danger.

"She came round the house to me a minute ago, and told me that you were both coming. I said that the police would have to be sent for, and she said then that she would run to catch Dobbin. Will you drive in to Crag End to bring help for us?" asked Hester, looking at him with so much misery in her eyes that he could not say one word of blame to her concerning her exceeding un wisdom in leaving the house.

"You had better send Miss Trevor," he answered. "It will be a good thing to get her away from here, for she looked as if she would faint when she heard your summons. And then I shall be here to take care of you."

"That will be best, perhaps, if we can make her go, only I am afraid that she will refuse," said Hester in a dubious tone. "Ah, here she comes! And I can see that Zota has caught Dobbin; will you go and help her to hitch him to the wagon, while I tell Alice all about it?"

"Certainly," replied Michael Warinski courteously, although he had only a vague notion of the meaning of the term hitching, and a still more vague idea as to how it was to be done. But Zota would doubtless know all about it, and so he strode away in the direction of his daughter and the horse, while Hester hurried to meet Alice.

"I am so sorry I just don't know how to bear my-

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self, and if I could have got at close quarters with that ugly little man, I would have made him repent his journey to Powell Gorge this time," she said, clenching her fists and looking fierce.

"Don't take so much blame to yourself, dear," replied Alice in a soothing tone. "Where we were really wrong was in letting Mr. Warinski go to work in the fields with us; although even if he had been watching the house all the time, that man Joe Disney might have contrived to get in just the same. But what are we to do next, I wonder?"

"I don't wonder, I know!" said Hester, with a stamp of her foot. "You have got to drive to Crag End as fast as you can put Dobbin along, and fetch help of some sort. If there are any of the Mounted Police in the town, of course you will not need anyone else, but if they should not happen to be on hand, leave a message asking them to follow, and hurry back with anyone who will volunteer. Ah! there is the doctor—be sure to bring him, because he can make them let him in to see poor Mrs. Powell, as she is his patient. Then I shall be easier in my mind, if I know that she is not having to suffer through my carelessness."

"But I am so untidy; how can I go to the town in these clothes?" cried Alice in consternation.

"My dear, when a house takes fire, people do not stop to change their frocks and put on their best boots before running to fetch the engine to put it out, and this journey of yours is pretty well as important," said Hester; adding with a laugh, "Besides, your clothes, like mine, are all in the house, and that is where we cannot get at present."

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"I shall nearly sink through the bottom of the wagon with shame every time anyone looks at me, for just think what an object I must look!" cried Alice, as she walked towards the wagon with much the same air of fortitude under trial as a martyr might have shown in going to the stake.

"Your blouse is tidy, and quite fairly clean; it is only your hair that is so rough and out of order. But you can easily do that as you go along; here, take this comb of mine, it is such a good one for use," said Hester, dragging a comb out of her own hair, and pressing it into the hand of Alice.

"How kind you are! I do hate to make a spectacle of myself," said Alice with a sigh of relief, as she took the comb and then clambered into the wagon.

"You might bring us back some provisions, things that do not want cooking, if you have time to think about it," cried Hester, as the wagon moved away down the trail. "I am fearfully hungry already, and what my condition will be before night is more than I can say."

"I am hungry too, and I expect my dear father is the same," said Zota, with a shy glance at her father, who smiled back at her in a reassuring fashion. "Do you not think we might have some eggs? There are plenty in the barn, and we could swallow them raw, you know."

"That is a truly splendid idea, and we will carry it out straight away," said Hester, who had not thought of eggs, but had believed that she would have to endure unsatisfied hunger until Alice returned, unless, indeed, Mrs. Hinton got to hear of their plight and came to their assistance.

Zota fetched the eggs, while Michael Warinski and

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Hester sat watching the doors of the house. Hester could not imagine where the dog could be, until presently she heard a yelp, as if the poor beast had had its toe trodden upon, and the next minute it was shot out of a window, falling with a resounding thump on to the floor of the veranda.

"Poor old fellow, see what you get by trusting the wrong people!" cried Hester, as she called the dog to her and patted its shaggy head. She had meant to punish the animal for having failed to keep guard, but realizing that Joe Disney had probably made friends with it days before, she saw that it would be cruel to do so for a fault of which it knew nothing.

They all felt better after they had taken a couple of eggs each, even though they were beaten with a stick, and served in a rather rusty tin dipper, which was used to carry water to the young poultry.

Zota wandered off after a time to look after the needs of the live stock, but Hester and the Russian maintained a close watch upon the house, for both were determined that if Joe Disney put his head out of the door they would rush the situation and get inside somehow. Of course there was the danger that the woman, if there indeed was a woman, might have a revolver; but, as Hester said, there were risks to be encountered in most things, and this was a case of "nothing venture, nothing have".

But the hours passed on, there was no sign of life from inside the house, and nothing happened outside until milking time arrived. Then Zota went off to milk the cow, coming back presently when the operation was finished to give them each a drink of new milk; and then the waiting went on again.

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"There is a man on horseback coming along the trail, but he is not in the uniform of the Mounted Police," said Michael Warinski, coming closer to Hester, and speaking in a low tone. He had been patrolling the other side of the house, and so got a glimpse of the arrival before Hester.

"Perhaps it is an advance guard sent forward by Alice, but it would have been more comforting if it had been one of the police," she said wearily, as she rose from the old bucket upon which she had been sitting so long and stretched herself. She was far more tired, she told herself, with that long waiting in the sunshine than she would have been from a day of real hard work, and she was hungry too, in spite of new milk and fresh eggs.

"The man is a stranger to me, so plainly Alice did not send him," she cried, with a disappointed ring in her tone. For when the Russian had told her that a man was riding along the trail towards the house, she naturally made up her mind that it was the doctor who had hurried to the rescue, although a moment of reflection might have told her that Warinski would have been swift to recognize the closest friend he had in all the wide world.

"He is a stranger to me also; I hope that he is not a friend of the other party," remarked the Russian with a frown as the man rode nearer, yet never made any movement which might express that he had come to their relief.

"Oh, don't even mention such a thing!" cried Hester, turning a face of dismay to scan the newcomer afresh. "It is quite bad enough to be compelled to sit down before the house like a besieging army, but

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if in addition to that we have got to have a free fight in the open, I shall begin to feel as if I want to run away."

"We will wait and see before we despair," rejoined Michael Warinski with a smile. Then he stepped forward, asking blandly, "What is your errand, stranger, and whom have you come to see?"

"Well, that mostly depends on whom I can find to see," the man replied, with a strong Yankee drawl; and then he looked from the Russian to Hester, and asked, drawling still, "Are you Miss Trevor, by any chance?"

"No," replied Hester with her most engaging smile. "I really could almost wish that I was Miss Trevor at this instant, because she is doubtless where she can satisfy a healthy appetite on something substantial, while I can get nothing but new-laid eggs and warm milk."

The stranger threw up his head with a loud guffaw of amusement, and then he said, "I suppose that it ain't no kind of use to ask whether Dr. Lambert happens to be paying a visit in there just now?" and he nodded towards the house.

"If only he were there it is not likely that we should have to be here," said Hester mournfully. She was thinking of those delightfully brown and crusty loaves which she had made yesterday, and which were carefully packed away in the bread-box. She very much hoped that Mr. Joe Disney would not happen to discover where she kept the bread, and then he would stand a chance of being as hungry as she was; and the reflection would have brought a certain amount of comfort with it, if it had not been for her fear that

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the poor helpless invalid would have to suffer also. Then she turned to the arrival with an eager air: "Will you please tell us who you are and where you come from? We are in such a tiresome fix that we do not know what to do or where to look for help."

"I didn't think that you looked overdriven in the matter of work as I came along the trail; but it is pleasant weather for sitting still," said the stranger, with such heavy and laboured sarcasm that Hester had to laugh in spite of herself.

"Yes, it would certainly be more unpleasant if it were winter-time, or if it were raining hard," she answered. "But please, please tell us who you are, and in whose interest you come, for we are, as I said before, in a truly horrid fix. There is a helpless invalid in that house yonder, but we cannot get in to look after her, because there is a man, calling himself her nephew, who has taken possession of the place and has turned us out. He says that he has brought a trained nurse with him to look after the invalid, but although this may be true we have not seen her yet."

"Now, who would he be?" asked the arrival in an interested tone. "I know that Alice Trevor is kin to Sam Powell, because Sam told me so himself, but I didn't know that they had any more folks knocking round these parts."

Hester heaved a sigh of relief. It was plain that the stranger was not on the side of the enemy, since they had no acquaintance, and she was quick to see that they might turn him into an ally, if only they went to work in the right way; so she said hurriedly: "The man who has come calls himself Joe Disney. He is

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rather short, inclined to be sandy, and he has a shifty eye."

"There are a good many men knocking about in this part of the world who might be described in that fashion," replied the stranger with a laugh. "But Joe Disney? Surely I have heard that name before, only I can't say straight off where I heard it. And now I come to think of it, I seem to recollect that I have heard Sam Powell say something about a nephew of his wife's who was a regular bad egg, and from what you say I don't know as I should be surprised if this was the man. I'll go and have a peek in at the window in a minute, and see what I can make of him. First of all, though, I wish that you would tell me where I can find the doctor, or Miss Trevor, for I want one or the other of them pretty bad."

"I have not the least idea where the doctor is at the present moment," said Hester; "but we are hoping that Miss Trevor will soon be back. She started for the town about four hours ago to bring us help, and we are expecting her every minute."

"Now that is downright awkward!" exclaimed the stranger. "I must have just missed her when I turned off to go to Bert Waring's place; but having two telegrams to deliver, it seemed most natural to deliver the nearest one first."

"Have you a telegram for Miss Trevor?" asked Hester, in surprise. Alice was not the kind to have telegrams; moreover, this man did not look like a post office messenger.

"No: that is to say, the wire is not for her, it is for the doctor, only Willie Peel—that is, the lame man at Carson's store, you know—told me to give it to Miss

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Trevor if I found her first, as it would save time, so I suppose that it concerns her. I undertook to deliver it for a consideration, because the proper messenger has gone to his mother's funeral away over in Pickville."

Hester stared at the man in amazement. Surely the ways of country post offices were marvellous beyond belief, when an official ordered that one person's telegram should be delivered to another person!

"What is the wire about?" she asked, thinking that perhaps Willie Peel might have read it to the messenger before starting him off to find someone to deliver it to.

The man shook his head, saying sadly, "Ah, he didn't tell me that—official secrets, don't you see?—but he did say that it came from Toronto, and that it was most awful important."

"Toronto?" cried Hester, turning white to the lips. "Then it concerns me, I am sure of it! Please, please let me open it for Alice!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A Discovery

BUT the man shook his head, saying regretfully: "I am very sorry, miss, but I am afraid that it would not do. It is one thing for Willie Peel to break the law and tell me that I can deliver the wire to this person or that, because it concerns them, but it is quite another for me to go round letting outsiders into post office secrets; so I am afraid that I can't oblige you, much as I hate to refuse a lady anything."

"Oh, but I must see it! Don't you understand that I come from Toronto? My people live there, and that wire may be to say that something has happened to my dear father. Give it to me at once, if you please, and I will take the blame, if there is any," said Hester, holding out her hand with an imperious air.

The stranger was not to be moved, however, though his face took on an expression of the deepest gloom at having to refuse her request.

"I can't do it, miss; I'm a servant of the post office for the time, you see, and I must obey the regulations. But don't you go taking on about your pa, and thinking that anything dreadful has happened to him, for Willie Peel said that it wasn't bad news, though it was most dreadful important."

Poor Hester! Her state of bewilderment was intense, for what message could the doctor and Alice have from Toronto in common which did not concern herself? And if it were not bad news why should it be sent to them instead of to her direct? She was not more curious than the average girl, but this mystery of the message made her feel as if she simply could not wait until Alice returned, to know what it was all about.

"I am sure that Miss Trevor would wish me to open any message which came for her in such a manner," she said, and there was more of pleading in her tone than she realized.

But the man only shook his head, while he patted the breast of his old coat, as if to infer that the message would stay where it was, safe from prying eyes. "I'm very sorry, miss, but honour forbids. You see, if it were Miss Trevor's own wire it would be different; but having been sent to the doctor, and having his name on the envelope, I can't as it were let a third party into the business."

"At least you can wait until Miss Trevor comes back? Imagine what her state of mind will be if she misses you, and then I tell her what you have told me!" said Hester.

"I'm truly sorry to disoblige a lady, but Willie Peel's orders were positive. I was to hunt round until I found either the doctor or Miss Trevor; and when I'm so to speak a Government servant, I must obey orders;" and the man bowed so stiffly that Hester wondered if it hurt him to bend.

"It is really tragic that we cannot offer you anything in the way of refreshments, unless you would like a drink of milk and a handful of gooseberries," she said,

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with an irrepressible gurgle of laughter at the thought of the plight they were in.

"I shall hold out till supper, thank you all the same, miss; but before I go, I'm going to have a squint at the gentleman who is holding the fort in yonder, for I'm sort of under a vow just at present to look at every man I meet, in the hope of finding someone I'm looking for." As he spoke, the man walked up to the door of the house and rapped smartly with the hazel stick which was all the riding whip he carried.

At first there was no response, but when the stranger roared through the keyhole that he should immediately batter the door down unless Mr. Disney gave him an audience at the window, there was a movement inside the house, and a sour-looking woman, wearing a white cap and apron like a trained nurse, put her head through the open window, asking, in tones which admirably matched her countenance, what the man wanted by making such a noise in a house where sickness was.

"I want to see Mr. Disney, if you please, ma'am," said the stranger, while Hester, Michael Warinski, and Zota looked on from the background.

"And what if I tell you that he is not here?" she asked.

"I shan't believe you," replied the man promptly; adding, with a jerk of his head in the direction of the door, "and I will put my foot through that flimsy bit of woodwork yonder if you don't tell him to come here, and to come quick too, for my time is precious to-day."

The woman disappeared. There was a wait of a few minutes, and Hester had just caught the sound of wheels coming along the trail from the town, and was going to tell the others, when there was a sudden

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roar of rage from the man, who was standing with his face pressed against the window.

"Look out!" yelled Warinski to Hester, at the same time throwing himself in front of Zota, who was staring at the window with frightened eyes, and even as he shouted there was the snap of a revolver and a puff of smoke, to show that the garrison meant mischief.

But Hester had caught sight of a man in a well-known uniform riding just in front of the wagon, which was coming at Dobbin's very best pace, and she cried out to the stranger to wait, for help was close at hand. This, however, was just what the man did not seem disposed to do, for rushing at the door he set his foot and his shoulder against it, and he would certainly have had it down if Hester and the Russian had not run to him and dragged him away by sheer force.

"Don't be a madman!" said the Russian sternly, realizing that Hester and himself were equally in danger with the man whom they were trying to save. "Can't you understand that the fellow inside means to punch holes in that hide of yours if you are not careful?"

"I tell you he is the man I'm looking for. Let me go, please, miss, for can't you see that it wouldn't be becoming in me to shake you off as if you were only a man?" he said, as Hester flung her arms round him and held him fast, regardless of appearances, for well she realized that it was the only way to save his life.

"No, no, you must wait, the police are coming, they are here quite close; and you are too good, I am sure, to fall a victim to that bad man's revolver," panted Hester, gripping his arms tighter than ever. Then she said, with a sob of thankfulness, "Ah, here they come: what a comfort indeed!"

CHAPTER XIX

In the Nick of Time

WHEN Alice set out on her journey to the town, she had intended going to the store to buy the things suggested by Hester; but as Dobbin, after an unusually slow progress, broke into a trot to descend the long slope to the railway, the first person she had a glimpse of was a man in the uniform of the Mounted Police. He was on horseback, and coming out of a narrow trail on the left he crossed the road a few yards in front of Dobbin's nose, then plunging into another trail on the right was instantly lost to view.

But that brief sight of the uniform was enough to put Alice on the alert, and realizing that if she let this chance go she might not get another that day, she shouted her loudest, and then swung into the narrow trail, reckless of the consequences to the wagon.

The man on horseback was travelling at a good pace, and whipping up Dobbin, she plunged ahead, so eager in trying to stop the rider that she did not trouble overmuch about the wagon, and so promptly came to grief. There was a sickening lurch, one wheel tilted into the air, the other slid down the bank, and Alice was tipped out into a clump of vigorous young alder bushes, while Dobbin, by dint of planting his feet very widely apart

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and scrambling vigorously, just contrived to save the wagon from being tipped over upon her.

But the commotion had done what all her shouting had failed to do; it had attracted the attention of the man in uniform who had been riding away in such a hurry, and turning his horse round, he came pounding back along the trail to the help of this damsel in distress.

It was lucky that he came when he did, for Dobbin, having pulled the wagon round in his frantic efforts, had contrived so to twist his collar that it was slowly choking him down. The man was quick to see what was the matter, and as quick to start on sorting things out. First setting Dobbin free, he next turned his attention to Alice, who was so perched among the alders that she could not free herself without assistance.

"It is only what you could expect in driving a wagon along such a trail," said he of the force in a reproachful tone, for surely this girl might have been more careful of a willing old horse than to risk it in such a fashion.

"There was no help for it; I had to stop you somehow, and if I had got out of the wagon and run along the trail in pursuit, I could not possibly have caught you up," answered Alice: and then, turning her back on the man whom she had made such frantic efforts to stop, she wound her arms about the neck of the old horse and besought the creature to forgive her.

The man surveyed her with a look of disgust. He was nearing middle age, and was absolutely without sentiment. Moreover, he had promised to meet the inspector of mines at a place farther along the trail, and now, of course, he had to see this girl out of trouble,

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and get her wagon righted if he could. At present it was lying completely on its side, and the righting looked as if it might be a rather big job.

"What did you want me for?" he asked. Of course if the business was serious he would have to go, and the inspector would be obliged to wait until another day; but it was a nuisance, and his attitude adequately expressed his opinion on the subject.

Alice plunged into her story then, telling it as quickly and briefly as she could, while all the time the man was busy in freeing Dobbin, and preparing to get the wagon right side up once more.

"I suppose that I had better come with you, and see what can be done in the matter," said the man. "But if this Joe Disney is nearer of kin than you, why on earth don't you let him take the job, and free you from an irksome responsibility? According to all accounts you don't owe Mrs. Powell any debt of gratitude, for rumour says she never treated you as she should, so why worry about her now?"

"That is the very question that I have asked myself all the way here," answered Alice with a short laugh. "But whichever way I look at it, and whatever arguments I use, I know quite well that I have got to stay, and I have got to get that man out of the house, too, for he will not do his duty by Mrs. Powell, I am certain of that."

"Then why is he there?" asked the man, giving a tremendous heave to the wagon, and nearly pulling it over on himself—nearly, but not quite, for he sprang out of the way just in the nick of time, and the wagon came down on all-fours, so to speak, with a crash that made Dobbin try to do a bolt.

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"There is the ranch for one thing, and that is worth having, especially to an adventurer," replied Alice bitterly; "and then there is the money we found the other day," and she plunged into the story of Hester's find, and how they were looking at it when they found the man staring through the window at them.

"There was no mention of money in the report given to the police," said the man, and there was no lack of interest in his manner now, for, of course, the most probable thing was that the man, having got into the house, would decamp with the money that had been discovered.

"That was because we had not found it then," said Alice. "Indeed, we were so hard driven for money for current expenses that Miss Hope had said she would write to her father, and ask him to lend us a little money until we had something that we could sell; so that the finding of it was the lifting of a very great burden."

"Just so," agreed the man with a nod. "Where is it now—I mean, where did you put it when you found that the man was peeping upon you?"

"We put it back in Mrs. Powell's bed, where we found it," replied Alice with a laugh. "He is not likely to think of looking there for it, and if he does, her terrible accusing gaze may well haunt him for a long time to come."

The man of the Mounted Police lifted his hat to her with an air of profound respect. "Well, there is one thing, you two young ladies are real grit to do for the poor woman as you have done, and I will go back with you at once. The inspector's business will have to wait, that is certain. Ah, here he comes! What a good thing,

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for I shall be able to explain matters to him before I go off to Powell Gorge with you."

Alice looked up with an air of alarm, and then turned rosy red right up to the roots of her hair. She had guessed from the man's talk that he was speaking of Wilfred Landells, but it had not occurred to her that Wilfred might be coming in this direction; and a wild desire seized upon her to run away, when she remembered what a sight she must be looking in her working garb, with the long slit down one side of the skirt where the alders had taken toll when she was tossed from the wagon into their unwilling embrace.

"Why, it is Miss Trevor!" exclaimed Wilfred in profound amazement, as the man in uniform asked him if he would come and lend a hand, for the wagon had to be got back into the main trail, and the work presented difficulties as Dobbin was not good at backing, and it was impossible to turn the wagon round.

"I suppose that you did not expect to find me here," said Alice, wondering if her hair looked very dreadful. She had done it most carefully on the way to the town, but that sudden incursion into the clump of alders was warranted to upset the tidiest head.

"It is a case of 'blessed is he that expecteth nothing'," laughed Wilfred. "Now I expected Mr. Dadds and he did not turn up, and getting tired of waiting for him to appear, I came to meet him, and had the unexpected pleasure of finding you. I hope that things are going well at Powell Gorge?"

"They are going very badly indeed, and that is why I am here," she replied, telling him how she had come for the police, and had driven into the cross-trail in pur-

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suit of the man who was helping her, and then by her own want of caution had come upon disaster.

"I might as well come out with you," said Wilfred, when he had heard the story. "Dadds can ride in front as a sort of advance guard, and I will ride with you; that will give my horse a rest, for I have been in the saddle for a long time now, and the poor beast is getting tired."

So it came about that Alice never went near the store, and she entirely forgot all about the provisions which Hester had begged her to buy. Of course, if she had gone to the store, Willie Peel would certainly have told her why it was that he had sent a messenger on horseback coasting round to find either Dr. Lambert or herself. As it was, she went back to Powell Gorge feeling that even untoward happenings had their bright side, when they ended as pleasantly as her journey was doing. Wilfred was driving, and she had nothing to do save sit at ease and laugh at his attempts to get more pace out of Dobbin. The thing that really did wake the old horse up was the fact of the horse of Mr. Dadds pounding along in front, for Dobbin just hated to be beaten; and the latter part of the journey was made in a helter-skelter fashion from his energetic efforts at catching up.

"Oh, look, look! What can be the matter?" cried Alice, when at length the house came in sight, and the first thing that met her eyes was the very lively struggle in front of the house, the Russian and Hester being apparently engaged in trying to hold a big man, who frantically wrestled to get away from them, while Zota coasted about the struggling group, plucking first at this one and then at the other, and the dog filled the air with noisy barking.

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"Why, they have got him!" cried Alice, standing up in the wagon in tremendous excitement. Then she said in a disappointed tone, "No, they have not, for that is not Joe Disney at all, it is—oh, I can't think of the man's name, but he was dreadfully mauled by a bear early in the spring."

"Do you mean Abe Simpson?" asked Wilfred, who had been hearing that story about the bear nearly every week on an average since he had been out west.

"Yes, that is the name. Ah, there goes Mr. Dadds, now it will be all right!" cried Alice, with that happy faith in the power of the Mounted Police which is shared by most people in the wide Dominion.

Wilfred let the whip lash curl under Dobbin's ribs, so quickening the pace of that animal, and then, tossing the reins to Alice, he sprang down and ran forward to give his assistance where it seemed to be most wanted; and Zota came running to Alice, telling a tale which was almost incoherent by reason of her constant lapses into Russian.

Alice got down from the wagon and stood hesitating, not knowing whether she ought to go forward and help in the wild scrimmage which appeared to be taking place closer to the house, or whether to stay where she was and comfort Zota, when Hester detached herself from the group and came running to the wagon.

"Oh, Alice, I don't think that I ever wanted to see anyone so much before, and you have come just in time!" she cried. "That man over there, whom we have been trying to keep from flinging his life away, came over here with a message—a telegram, I mean—which was to be given either to you or to Dr. Lambert, and he

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says that it comes from Toronto, so imagine my state of mind!"

"But who would be likely to send me a telegram?" asked Alice with a bewildered air.

"That is the question I asked," replied Hester, "but he would not tell me anything. Then he was going away to meet you, when he thought that he would have a look at Joe Disney before he went; and directly he set eyes on your ugly little relation——"

"He is no kin of mine," interrupted Alice hastily.

"The ugly little relation of Mrs. Powell, then; directly he saw this man, he suddenly seemed to go mad, and it has been all that Mr. Warinski and I could do to keep him from forcing an entrance into the house and getting shot for his pains, because Joe Disney has a revolver, and he does not hesitate to use it. Who is our friend, do you know?" asked Hester.

"It is Abe Simpson, the man who was hurt by the bear on the day before you came here," said Alice.

"That man? And I never guessed it!" cried Hester in great excitement. "Then of course it is easy enough to understand what is the matter; he has evidently recognized Joe Disney as a man he was in search of, and that is the reason of his excitement. Come along, Alice, let us go and help them; they look as if they are going to storm the house now, and to knock down both doors at once. I wonder who will pay for the damage?" and Hester caught at the hand of Alice to drag her nearer.

"I think that I will stay here until it is over, if you don't mind; it looks safer, and I am a desperate coward," said Alice, with a shrug of her shoulders; and then she turned her back on the house, while the four

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men, acting in concert, drove the door inwards and then rushed the situation.

There was a wild hurly-burly just inside the door; a revolver spoke out, there was a shrill scream from a woman, more struggling and confusion, and then the men emerged from the house again, and this time they were carrying the man who had made all the trouble, while the woman who was dressed as a nurse came out after them, crying and wringing her hands in a piteous fashion.

Alice forgot her fears then, and running to the woman asked if she were hurt.

"It is the man who is hurt, Miss Trevor," said Wilfred Landells gravely. "The revolver went off when he did not expect it, and left a bullet in his leg."

"He won't be able to give us so much trouble," put in the philosophic Mr. Dadds; but Abe Simpson turned quickly, crying out in a tone of relief:

"Miss Trevor, did you say? Now I call that downright fortunate for you to come along like this, for it will save me any more of this hide-and-seek business. It is pretty plain to me that I was not cut out for a public servant, for I don't take kindly to the waste of time, and though I suppose that I shall be paid for all my running round to-day, I don't feel that I have earned the money."

"What is it you want me for, Mr. Simpson?" asked Alice. And then she said with a laugh, "I should have thought that you would have known me, for do you not remember that I bound up your hand one day last winter when you had cut it so badly?"

"Perhaps I ought to have known you, but it is a fact that I didn't," he replied, and then he handed her the

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envelope directed to Dr. Lambert, which he had been carrying round so long that day.

"Do you think that I really ought to open the doctor's wire?" asked Alice, facing round upon Hester, who turned scarlet because she had been looked to to answer the question, and said impatiently:

"Open it, open it, open it, or I am sure that I shall snatch the thing out of your hands and open it myself! I am just wild to know what it is about, so please make haste!"

Alice tore open the envelope, dragged out the flimsy enclosure, then gave a cry of amazement at the contents, which were as follows:

"Have found Sam Powell in a hospital here; some of his people should come to him soon, as he is rather bad. Lambert, Toronto, to Lambert, Crag End."

CHAPTER XX

In the Old Portmanteau

"THAT news settles a good many things," said Mr. Dadds, wiping his hot face, for the struggle to capture Joe Disney had been fairly brisk while it lasted, and he was not the sort of man to do things by halves. "If Mr. Powell will settle who is to look after his affairs, we shall have no more trouble with gentlemen of this sort. Oh, you will, will you?" he exclaimed sharply, as the prisoner, with a sudden twist and wriggle, made a desperate bid for freedom. But it was quite a futile attempt, and Mr. Dadds spread-eagled him on the grass in no time at all, and then with the help of the other men bound him up as securely as a trussed chicken, in readiness to carry him to the town.

"Alice, it is you who will have to go to Toronto, and you must go straight to my home, for I am sure that Mrs. Hope will be sweet to you," said Hester, with the brisk decision which she always brought to bear on any subject that needed settling.

"I am sure of it too," put in Wilfred Landells, leaving the others to look after the prisoner, and coming to where Alice still stood with the open wire in her hand. "What is more, I will go with you, and see you safely through. I should have had to go to Toronto next

week in any case, so it is only anticipating my journey by a few days."

"That will be a great comfort," said Alice, accepting the offer with the sincerest gratitude. "But whatever will Hester do without me?"

"Oh, I shall manage very well indeed!" cried Hester with a laugh. "But you cannot get away until the early cars to-morrow morning, so now I am going first of all to see what they have been doing to poor Mrs. Powell. I should think that the poor creature must have been very badly scared if she realized those strangers were alone with her in the house."

"But I thought that you said Disney was her nephew?" said Wilfred, walking towards the house with the two girls, while the others loaded the prisoner into the wagon, which had been commandeered for the purpose.

"He says that he is, but I have never heard Mrs. Powell speak of him, or indeed of any of her people, and at least she has not seen him for six years," replied Alice.

"Oh, oh, look! Did you ever see such an awful confusion?" cried Hester in consternation, as she put her head inside the kitchen door. The room was simply upside down—even a part of the floor had been torn up; and when they passed from that room to the others, it was only to find the confusion greater still. In the back bedroom the floor was knee-deep in garments, bedding, and furniture, and even Hester's cherished violin lay tossed on to a heap of frocks and shoes which encumbered one corner.

"It looks as if they had made a pretty thorough search for something, and I think that it might be as

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well if we kept an eye on that so-called nurse until we know whether anything of value is missing," said Wilfred, stepping outside again and dropping a quiet word to Mr. Dadds, who promptly slipped a pair of handcuffs on the weeping woman, although he was somewhat exceeding his prerogative in so doing. But it was one of those cases where it is not safe to take risks, and so he provided against emergencies.

Hester meanwhile had pressed into Mrs. Powell's room, which was in a state of confusion equal to the others, except for the bed, which to her great relief had not been touched, so far as could be seen by a casual glance. But the poor invalid was in such a state of terror that it took the united exertions of Hester and Alice to soothe her fears; and when at length the lids dropped over her eyes, and she seemed to sleep, with considerable misgivings, the two lifted her up in their vigorous young arms to see if the bag of money was still in the place where they had put it.

"There it is!" said Hester softly. "Pull it out, Alice, and let us see if the money is all right, for, my dear, if it is not we shall have to borrow of Mr. Landells for your journey to Toronto."

"That would be hateful!" said Alice, as she shifted the weight she was holding to her other hand, and lifted the bag.

They carefully laid Mrs. Powell back on her pillows, smoothed down the bedding, and then proceeded to examine the bag. No, it had not been touched—though doubtless, had the time been longer, even the invalid's bed would have been rifled.

Putting the bag back in the place from which they had taken it, the two girls, with the help of Zota and

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her father, set to work to reduce the confusion of the house. But although they all worked as hard as they could, not even stopping for food, but taking a mouthful as they worked, darkness dropped before the place was cleared up and tidy once more. Cupboards had been ransacked, the contents of crocks and jars had been turned upside down on floors, tables, or any other place which seemed most handy; while the waste of stores and provisions was, as Alice said, enough to make one cry.

"Only we have no time to cry, seeing that we must have you ready to start by soon after five o'clock to-morrow morning, and I fancy that we shall have our hands full to do it in the time," said Hester briskly.

"I could cry over that too, for, will you believe it? I have absolutely nothing to wear; and fancy going to the city in my shabby old clothes!" wailed Alice.

"My dear, would you mind wearing some of mine?" asked Hester eagerly. "We are sufficiently near of a size for a coat and skirt to fit you quite decently, and no one will know anything about it. As Mrs. Hope has not seen me, she of course has not seen my clothes either. The servants would not know them, because if you will have that navy suit of mine, I never wore it in Toronto, so of course it is quite new."

"Oh, I should love to have them!" cried Alice, with a pink tinge of pure happiness stealing into her cheeks, for never, never in her life had she been well dressed, and the prospect of wearing nice clothes would make the journey into a pleasure jaunt, in spite of the sadness of her errand. Then she added hastily, "But I can't bear to borrow your things; will you let me buy them of you?"

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"We can settle that when you come back," replied Hester with a laugh. "At present the main thing is to sort the garments out of that pile of clothing on the floor. Oh, it was wicked of those people to make such a muddle of things! I believe that it will take us days to get straight again; indeed, to look at all the confusion is enough to make one wonder if we ever can get straight. And to think that the wretches took my dear violin out of its case and flung it down on the other things! That was really the last straw! Now I am going to find you some clothes, but you have to go to bed, for it is of no use being worn out before you start."

"You must be quite as tired as I am, and you will have to work to-morrow; let me help you to find the clothes, and then let us go to bed together," said Alice.

But Hester would not hear of it. "It will not matter in the least if I feel worn out, and look like a washed-out rag when the morning comes, for Zota can do what must be done with the help of her father, while I take things easily. But if you start on a long car journey in such a condition, the most likely thing to happen is that you will have a really bad attack of train sickness, and that is no joke, I can assure you. Get a good rest, dear, and I will see to the frocks and frills. You must have an evening frock, for my father does love to see girls looking pretty in the evenings, and you are really beautiful when you get a colour," said Hester, with so much sincerity that Alice went off to lie down beside Mrs. Powell, feeling happier than she had ever done before. There was no place except Mrs. Powell's bed where she could lie down, for Zota was curled up fast asleep on the settle in the

sitting-room, and the back bedroom was still in the state in which it had been left by the intruders.

"Ugh, the wretches!" muttered Hester between her clenched teeth, as she reached up and patted the case of her violin; and then, putting her lamp in a place of safety, she started on the task of tidying her wardrobe, and finding some suitable clothes for Alice. Sorting these into a heap she next hunted for a bag in which to pack them, for it would not do to send one of her own cases, as it would not suit the pride of Alice for other people to know that she was decked out in borrowed plumes.

Then she remembered an old leather portmanteau which stood in a corner of Mrs. Powell's room, a tidy but rather ancient article. Slipping quietly into the room so that she should not disturb Alice, who was already asleep, she pulled the portmanteau out from the corner where it stood, and was amazed to find that it had by some strange oversight escaped the general upheaval of the day, and had not been touched.

"Now that is the sort of thing that would have been ransacked first, so one would have thought," she muttered to herself, as she was turning to carry it from the room. Then happening to look at Mrs. Powell as she passed the bed, she was surprised to see the poor creature's eyes fixed upon her with quite a new expression in them; it was no longer that terrible asking stare, but a gaze of thankfulness, a something conveyed by the eye which could be scarcely put into adequate speech, and Hester's heart gave a sudden jump at the sight.

She forgot all about her unwillingness to wake Alice, and pausing by the bed, she asked in low, clear

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tones, "Is there something in here that you want me to find?"

There was no mistaking the look which flashed into the eyes of the poor woman now, and Hester caught her breath in a sob at sight of the relief her question had called up.

"What is the matter? Is it morning yet?" demanded Alice, rousing suddenly and struggling to a sitting posture.

"No, you silly, excited child; go to sleep, and leave me to fish out this tangle by myself," said Hester. "I have hit upon something that Mrs. Powell wants cleared up, and I am going to settle it somehow for her even if it takes till morning to do it."

"I should think things had been pretty well turned upside down in this house to-day, without your going in for another dose of the same sort of thing to-night," Alice murmured sleepily; and then she turned over and went to sleep again, while Hester fumbled at the fastenings of that ancient case.

It flew open with a click, and then she understood why it had apparently been undisturbed in the general upset, for it was empty; and she was going to shut it again with an exclamation of disgust, when the eager gaze of the poor woman made her change her mind; and sitting down on a box with the case open on her knees, she punched and prodded at the lining until she was rewarded by feeling something stiff, like a letter, which had been pushed down through a slit in the side.

"I have got it!" she exclaimed gleefully, never doubting that this must be the thing that Mrs. Powell wanted her to find.

Hester could not have explained what it was that she expected to see, but certainly she was amazed to find that it was a most ordinary sort of a letter, addressed to Mr. Sam Powell, Powell Gorge, near Crag End, B.C., and that the date was earlier in that same year, about a week before she herself had come west.

"Do you want me to read it?" she asked, looking down into the eyes which were so closely regarding her, and because there was nothing but calm content in the gaze, she took the letter from its envelope and proceeded to read it.

The letter was written on the official paper of the Ottawa General Hospital, and it took her some time to master the contents, for the writing was very shaky, as if the person who had held the pen had difficulty in the task:

"DEAR MR. POWELL,

"I do not deserve that you should pay any heed to this letter of mine, but if ever you have listened to the Divine injunction to forgive your enemies, perhaps you will listen to this request of mine, and come to me before it is too late. Well I know how little cause you have to love me. Indeed, you may not know how little it is. I won my wife away from you by a lie, for I told her that you were a secret gambler, and that you had been engaged to Ada Goring, and had left her because there was more money to be had by marrying your cousin. But our married life was not happy; we could not agree, and after Alice was born things grew more strained between us than ever. Then one day my wife burst out passionately that she wished that she had married you instead of tying herself up

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to my worthless self, and in my anger I left her and the child to sink or swim as best they could.

“But I have had my punishment, and whatever the sufferings of my wife and the poor little unfortunate child may have been, they cannot have equalled mine. I have been as near starved as it is possible for anyone to be and yet remain alive. I have been sick and cold, and worst of all, in all these years of wandering I have never had a word of love or even of kindness from any human being.

“Three years ago I heard that my wife was dead, and that by the irony of fate she had died in your house, and that my child was with you still. I don't know whether the prayers of such a man as I am can be of any good to you, but since I have been at grips with death I have prayed every day that you might be rewarded for your goodness in taking care of my worse than fatherless child. Now there is one more prayer I have, and it is to you I make my plea: bring my child to me, that I may see her before I die!

“I know that it is a long and expensive journey, and I have no money with which to repay you. But perhaps the kind and forgiving Father in Heaven may make it up to you and your good wife, if such you have.

“I pray you, do not turn a deaf ear to my plea. May you never have to know the burden of misery which I have carried these many years! I did love my wife, but, alas! she did not love me. She married me out of pique, because she was made to doubt your good faith, yet at the bottom her heart was all yours. Think of it, and pity me if you can. Then there was the child—ah, how I loved it!—but because I had sinned

so sorely against the mother I never had the heart of the child. The doctors tell me that I have not long to live, and I don't think that I am sorry, only I must, oh, I must see my child before I die!

"Bring her to me, Sam Powell, in token that you forgive me that old wrong, and through eternity I will be

"Yours gratefully,

"HARRY TREVOR."

Hester's tears were falling like rain when she had finished reading the letter from the father of Alice; but from the bed Mrs. Powell watched her with the old asking stare, and Alice slumbered on, unconscious of everything.

"But I must tell her before she goes; oh, the poor, poor child to be deprived in such a fashion of a sight of her father!" cried Hester. And then, looking down at the face on the bed with its solemn, asking eyes, she said sternly, "You have been a very wicked woman, and perhaps it is a part of your punishment that you have got to lie there, dead and yet alive."

But there was no response, only that exceedingly mournful stare, which was so heartbreaking to see. And after hesitating for a minute in quite an unwonted fashion, Hester laid a gentle hand on sleeping Alice, and said urgently, "Wake up, dear; it seems cruel to rouse you out of such a beautiful sleep, but dawn won't be long, and there is something I have found which you must be told about."

"Is it really morning?" asked Alice, stirring out of her sleep with the pleased eagerness of a child, for the journey was a prospect of pure pleasure after her hard-

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working years at Powell Gorge; and again the tears came into the eyes of Hester as she thought of the journey which should have been taken back in the spring, when the dying prodigal had sent craving a sight of his child.

"Crying, Hester! Why, my dear, what is the matter?" exclaimed Alice in great surprise, for Hester was in an ordinary way so brave and self-reliant that she and tears seemed to have nothing in common.

"I was not crying for myself, but for you," said Hester, giving a great gulp and swallowing a sob that came up in her throat and nearly choked her. "Do you know that between them Mr. and Mrs. Powell have both treated you very badly?"

"I dare say they have, but where is the sense in digging that up now?" demanded Alice with a touch of petulance in her tone. "If I take to brooding on that sort of thing, it makes the everyday duty so much the harder to do; whereas if I forget all about the past, then Mrs. Powell becomes less of a trial and more of a pleasure."

"What do you remember about your father?" asked Hester abruptly, realizing that although she had lived so closely side by side with Alice during those last weeks, there were some points of her character with which she was totally unacquainted.

"Nothing very distinctly. I remember that he was very much more refined in appearance than my mother, and that they were mostly quarrelling. Oh, Hester, isn't it sickening to think of the way married people quarrel! And that after they have taken the most solemn vows to love one another chiefest and best of all. I am sure that if I were married, I would not

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quarrel with my husband;" and a flood of rosy colour surged up over the face of Alice, bringing a smile to hover round the lips of Hester, who answered slowly:

"I think the trouble with the married people you have known has been that they did not most truly love each other at the beginning, and with your own father and mother there would always be the memory of the old deception cropping up to spoil any after chance of peace."

"What do you mean, and what can you possibly know about my father and mother?" asked Alice, with a touch of offence in her tone, for in many things she was abnormally sensitive.

"I have been reading a letter which was never meant for my eyes; but I should never have looked for it, and when I found it I should certainly never have read it, had it not been for poor Mrs. Powell," said Hester, realizing that some sort of apology was necessary for what might appear to have been merely curious prying. Then she put the letter into the hands of Alice, telling her briefly how she had come to find it, and explaining her feeling about not lending a travelling bag as well as clothes, because such a thing might be recognized by the servants of her father's household.

Then she picked up the old portmanteau and went away with it to the back-room, where she packed the garments which Alice would need for the city; and she was just putting the other clothes for travelling out in readiness to wear, when Alice came into the room with a look of distress on her face which made Hester wince, because it was her hand that had dealt this blow.

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"Oh, Hester, Hester, whatever shall I do?" cried the poor girl. "Just to think that my father has wanted me so badly, and I knew nothing about it!"

"It is of no use to blame yourself, dear, seeing that you knew nothing about it," said Hester gently. Then she did a thing very unusual with her; she slid her arms round the waist of Alice, holding her very closely for a few minutes in a clasp which said more than words.

"Hester, I must do something; shall I wire to Ottawa to tell my father that I am coming?" said Alice, after a few minutes; as she spoke she pushed away the encircling arms, so that she might look into the face of Hester and get her inspiration from there.

"It is of no use to do that," replied Hester decidedly. "You must go straight to Toronto and see Mr. Powell: he will tell you about your father. Then, if it is not too late, you can go on to Ottawa. Mr. Landells will see you safely through, I am sure, or if he cannot spare the time, my stepmother will look after you. I am beginning to find that a stepmother may be very useful after all. Now, dear, you had better dress while I go to get breakfast," said Hester, instinctively feeling that this was one of the times when action was the best safety valve for both of them.

"Oh, Hester, you poor thing, how tired you must be; why, you have not been to bed, nor even lain down all night!" cried Alice, for the face of Hester was white and weary, and there were lines of care upon it which gave her quite an elderly appearance.

"Things will happen so sometimes, but I shall survive; and I can have a beautiful sleep after you have gone, for Zota and her father can manage the outdoor work between them," replied Hester cheerfully, and then

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she went away to make a fire in the stove and to cook breakfast. But her heart was so heavy on account of Alice that she could have wept as she went about her manifold tasks.

"Oh, Hester, Hester, don't I look nice! You dear, kind thing, how can I ever thank you enough!" cried the voice of Alice from the door of the next room about twenty minutes later; and Hester looked up from her work of frying bacon and eggs, to exclaim at the vision of Alice in well-cut clothes and a hat of city style. She had thought the other an unusually pretty girl even in the old shabby clothes which were all that the poor girl appeared to possess; but garbed in really tasteful apparel the transformation was astonishing, and she realized that Alice was downright handsome.

"You will do; now come and feed," she said briefly, and then marvelled to herself to think that Alice could have thrown aside her grief about her father in such quick time. But the explanation of that came later, as they had breakfast in the grey summer dawning.

"I have been thinking about my father all the time I have been dressing," said Alice, and now there was a breathless note in her voice which showed the listener that the grief was only covered, not put away; "and if Mr. Powell tells me that he is still alive I shall go straight to him, Hester, and I shall try to make up to him for all that he failed to find in my mother. I will not judge him for the wrong he did my mother in the untruth by which he won her, because it is not right that a child should sit in judgment on its parent, but I will give him the truest devotion of which I am capable; and if my mother in heaven can know, I think that she will be glad, and will say that I am doing right."

CHAPTER XXI

The Meeting

IN the entrance hall of the General Hospital of Toronto Dr. Lambert's father walked to and fro with quick, unsteady steps, which betrayed much inward perturbation.

A great change for the better had come over him since the day when Hester had rescued him from the pursuit of the bloodhound. The fact of having money left to him appeared to have given him back his self-respect, and now he bore himself with a dignity to which he had long been a stranger, so that whatever cause his son had had to be ashamed of him in the past it was not likely that he would ever have to blush for him again.

"They are very late; if they don't soon come I am afraid the girl will not be in time," he said to the sleepy-looking porter, a man with a wooden leg who sat all day in a little office close to the big doors, to enquire the business of all comers, and to answer questions from those in need of information.

"It is surprising how people don't die when they are expected to, while the folks who are expected to get well have a trick of slipping out of life just when you think they are on the highroad to getting well," said the porter gloomily. He meant to be consoling in his speech, but only succeeded in adding a little more unrest to what

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was there before, causing Mr. Lambert to pace up and down with a more restless step.

Then a cab dashed up to the door, and Mr. Lambert made a bee-line for it, arriving just as Wilfred Landells stepped out and turned to assist Alice in alighting.

"Are you Miss Trevor?" demanded the elder Lambert, thrusting Wilfred aside with scant ceremony, and taking the hand of Alice in his own.

"Yes, and I have come to see Mr. Powell. Is he— I mean, am I in time?" she asked, with a flutter in her breath, while her face grew pale as she saw how serious he looked.

"I hope so; but the ward sister told me an hour ago that he was very low down, and I have been oppressed ever since with the irony of it, that I should bring you all this way for you to arrive too late!" he said, leading her away, and not even noticing in his absorbing agitation that Mrs. Hope was in the cab, and that Wilfred Landells was helping her out.

"Will Mr. Powell know me?" asked Alice, as her guide handed her over to a uniformed nurse, who came out from a long corridor to meet her.

"I hope so; he has suffered so much, poor man, because he has not been able to tell us anything about himself, and there was nothing in his clothes to serve as any clue to his identity," replied the nurse.

"But why could he not tell you?" asked Alice, in surprise; and then the wonder crossed her mind whether Sam Powell had been stricken down in the same way as his wife, only that seemed too wildly improbable, for coincidences of that kind did not happen in real life.

"He was brought into the accident ward nearly three weeks ago," said the nurse. "And he was most terribly

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smashed up—concussion, shock, and a broken jaw, as well as a broken arm; it is really quite wonderful that he has lived so long. He had been run over in the streets, and was supposed to be dead when he was picked up. A few days ago Mr. Lambert came into the ward with a policeman—they had brought in a poor little boy who had been hurt in the streets; and as the policeman was passing the bed where our unknown patient was lying, he remarked that the man was from his own old town, Crag End. Mr. Lambert, who has a son in the same town, was at once interested, and asked the policeman if he knew the sick man's name, upon which the policeman told us he was Sam Powell, of Powell Gorge; and from Mr. Lambert we learned that this man had been strangely missing from his home for many weeks past. Mr. Lambert thereupon undertook to communicate with Mr. Powell's people, and that is how you got your information as to his whereabouts."

"I have felt all the time that he was not dead," replied Alice, and then she walked with the nurse into the long ward, which was so full of sickness and suffering, and passed along the row of beds until she reached the one where Sam Powell was lying.

He lay so white and still that she thought he was dead, but the nurse whispered to her: "Speak to him, please; tell him who you are, and let him know of his wife's condition. We think that he might rally even now if only we could make him want to live."

It was then that inspiration came to Alice, and bending over the bed she said softly, "Oh, Mr. Powell, we are so thankful that we have found you, for poor Mrs. Powell wants you so badly; and although we have

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had to see her suffer, we have been unable to bring her the relief she craved."

At first there was no sign that Sam Powell heard or understood anything of what was being said to him. Then his eyelids slowly lifted, and he looked at Alice with a bewildered stare, as if unable to understand why she was there.

"Your wife has had a paralytic stroke; she can neither move nor speak, and yet she is always wanting something, and we have guessed that it is news of you for which she has been dumbly asking. Oh, you must try to get better for her sake, because it is such a terrible fate that has come upon her!" Alice went on in an urgent tone, and would have told him more, only the nurse touched her on the arm, saying softly:

"That is enough for now, he is so weak, you see."

Alice nodded, and sank into a chair by the side of the bed, trembling in every limb, and wondering if she had made the poor man worse instead of better.

Mrs. Hope came in after a few minutes and drew her away. "I have been talking to the ward sister, Miss Trevor, and she has promised to 'phone me if there is any need for you to come down again to-day; and now I am going to take you home to have a good rest. Wilfred has had to go off to the Departmental Offices, and he will not get up town until nearly dinner-time, so we will go together."

Alice permitted herself to be led away, feeling like someone in a dream. Surely it could not be herself, Alice Trevor, the shabby drudge of Powell Gorge, who had suddenly expanded into the well-dressed girl being whirled away through the busy streets of Toronto in a carriage with Mrs. Hope! The dreamlike feeling was

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stronger upon her still when she was dressing for dinner in the luxurious bedroom allotted to her in Mr. Hope's house; and when she went timidly down the wide stairs and found her way into the drawing-room, it seemed to her that she must have changed personalities with someone else.

There was no one in the room except a grey-haired, noble-looking man, whom she at once guessed to be the master of the house, and who came forward to greet her with outstretched hand.

"My dear Miss Trevor, you can't think how glad we are to see you, nor yet how much we feel in your debt for all the good you have done Hester," he said, beaming down upon her in such a kindly fashion that Alice felt the colour mounting right up to the roots of her hair.

"But it is Hester who has done so much for me; why, it seems to me that I owe everything to her! And you cannot think how truly noble she has been, or how hard she has worked!" Alice said, with so much earnestness that Mr. Hope burst into a genial laugh, while he worked her arm up and down as if it were a pump handle, and he were trying very hard to get some water.

"All the same you have worked a most marvellous reformation in my headstrong young daughter, and I am truly grateful to you. Hester is a typical young Canadian, and she will have her own way, come what may. But your steady sticking to your duty, and doing your best at all times and under all circumstances, has done her more good than anything. Why, she even writes affectionate letters to my wife now, and yet she practically ran away from home because she so keenly

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resented my second marriage. It is funny how those people who most want to have their own way in the world resent other people doing as they like," said Mr. Hope, as he put Alice into a comfortable chair.

Wilfred Landells came into the room soon after, and he stared at Alice as if she were something of a revelation, for he had never seen her in evening dress before, and the vision somewhat took his breath away. But he had some news for her which he could not tell her just then, for he knew that it must make her sad, and so he put it aside until the pleasant meal should be over.

Mrs. Hope had been hindered, and did not come into the room until just as the meal was announced. There was a shade of deeper gravity under her tenderness to Alice now, for her brother had told her of the news he had to impart, and her kind heart was just overflowing with sympathy, which as yet she might not express.

But when the meal was over she absorbed her husband's attention in affairs of her own, so that Wilfred should have the chance for quiet talk with Alice.

The two had the drawing-room to themselves, with the pleasant flower-decked balcony beyond. But at first they were very quiet, while Alice let her eyes roam round the beautiful room with a keen appreciation of her surroundings, and Wilfred's gaze was covertly on her face. It was in his heart to put off the evil moment, but there are some things that it is of no use to delay, and so at length he said, with startling abruptness:

"I have been wiring to the General Hospital at Ottawa since I left you at the hospital here."

"Yes?" queried Alice, with a start, and her eyes came back from their survey of the room to rest on his face,

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while there was a pant of hurry and apprehension in the single word she had been able to get out.

Wilfred, who had been standing by the window, came across to where she was sitting, and dropping into a chair at her side took her hand in his, while he said quietly: "The hospital secretary wired back that a man named Harry Trevor died on the very day that Hester arrived at Crag End—that is, the day that Mr. Powell disappeared, you see. The wire said that a person named Powell paid all the funeral expenses, and left a donation at the hospital in recognition of the care that the dead man had received; and that was all that was known of him, as he left no address."

"Dead? Oh, my poor father! And I never had the chance to let him know that I would have loved him!" wailed Alice, covering her face with her one free hand.

For a few minutes Wilfred let her cry unchecked; then he said gravely: "You say that you would have loved him, and yet, despite your best intentions, you might have found your task impossible. Remember how the past would have risen up in judgment against him, and think of the struggles you would have had between your inclination and your duty. The Providence which seems a disaster is often our greatest blessing. It was hard for him to die alone, I know, and of course he must have passed away before Mr. Powell could reach him; yet, as he himself appeared to recognize fully in the letter he wrote to Mr. Powell, there are some wrongs which must be expiated here on earth, and it is happy for him if, having suffered here for a few short years, he can go to the blessed rest of heaven, which is eternal."

"I know all that," said Alice, putting the most rigid self-control of which she was capable to guard her

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unsteady speech. "But I am so alone in the world, and if I could have had someone of my own to love and care for, it would have made all the difference to my outlook. Of course, I know that this sounds like pure selfishness, but you have never been alone, and so you cannot realize what it means."

"I think that I can in part," he said, and the grasp of his hand tightened upon hers, and his voice dropped to a caressing undertone as he went on. "But there is no reason why you should be lonely in future, for there is one person at least in the world who desires your companionship more than any other good that life can give him."

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning a startled face to look at him, and then as quickly turning it away from him because of the mantling blushes his words had called forth. After that there was little need of speech, and there was no need at all to light the lamps when the midsummer twilight stole gently into the room. But presently Mrs. Hope entered hurriedly.

"My dear Alice," she said, using the simple name instead of the more formal Miss Trevor, because the occasion seemed to demand it, "a message has come for you from the hospital, and you must go down at once, for there is a change."

"I will take her," said Wilfred; and now there was such an air of proprietorship in his manner that Alice, who had never known what it was to be precious to anyone since her mother died, thrilled and trembled at the new and overpowering joy which had come into her life. And Mrs. Hope knew without any more telling that Wilfred had found his fate.

CHAPTER XXII

A Night of Waiting

"BUT you cannot go like that, dear; remember, you may have to be there all night," said Mrs. Hope, with a motion of her hand towards Alice's evening frock.

"Shall I have time to change?" asked Alice with a gasping sob, and a swift remorse at her heart because she had the moment before been so absorbed in her own happiness as even to have forgotten the reason which had brought her down east.

"You must take time, for your own sake," answered Mrs. Hope; then turning to Wilfred, she told him that Alice should be ready in ten minutes, and that she had sent for a motor from the nearest garage to take them to the hospital.

"I meant to have gone with you myself, and to have stayed with you as long as necessary, but it only needed one look at my brother's face to know that he had the most right to take care of you," said Mrs. Hope, as she hurried Alice away to her room and began to unfasten her frock for her.

At any other time Alice would have blushed peony-red, and have been too embarrassed to utter a single word, but now she cried out sharply:

"Oh, what must you be thinking of me to be taking my own happiness at a time when I ought to have

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no thought for anything or anybody except poor Mr. Powell?"

"I do not think that you have done anything wrong, rest assured of that," replied Mrs. Hope warmly; and then, as she slid the frock over Alice's head, and tossing it on the bed reached for some warmer garments, she went on: "Wilfred was left a small boy to my care when our mother died, and I have always felt more like his mother than his sister, because, you see, I am the eldest and he is the youngest, while there were eight brothers and sisters in between. Like most mothers and elder sisters, I have been very fussed and worried as to the sort of woman he would take it in his head to marry when he came to years of discretion. But directly you stepped off the cars at the depot to-day, I was quite satisfied that he had chosen with his eyes open, and that he would be happy."

"But there was nothing; I—I mean I——" Here Alice broke off in some confusion and a little secret resentment, for it did not please her that her future should be settled for her before her consent had even been asked.

Mrs. Hope laughed softly, and then reaching Alice's coat and skirt from the wardrobe, she said, as she handed them to her: "My dear, it is the privilege of people with eyes to use them, and, knowing my brother as I do, it did not take me two minutes to decide that he had found what he wanted; but of course I did not know anything more than what my eyes and my instinct told me, for he is not the sort of man who goes about the world asking all and sundry to confirm his judgment on anything he has made up his mind to do. But now you are ready, and we have only been seven minutes, instead of the ten I said you might take."

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"How good you are to me!" burst out Alice; and then with an impulsive movement she put out her arms and gave Mrs. Hope a hug of gratitude and affection, but was immediately ashamed of her forwardness.

"We are going to be sisters, and it is not a question of goodness at all; but here comes the motor, so let us go down," said Mrs. Hope, kissing Alice and returning the hug with great fervour: then they went downstairs together. Alice was wrapped in a big cloak of Mrs. Hope's, for the summer night had a tang of cold in it; then the motor slid swiftly from the door, and with a terrific hoot took its way citywards.

The great entrance hall of the hospital was empty of everyone except the night porter when Alice, with Wilfred at her side, presented herself for admission. But she was expected, and was not kept waiting for more than two or three minutes before a nurse came running along the corridor, and at sight of her called out:

"Oh, Miss Trevor, we are glad that you have come, for Mr. Powell is awake, and continually asking whether it was a bad dream that he had, or whether someone really told him that his wife had had a paralytic stroke; and he is getting so excited about it all that we had to send for you, in the hope that a sight of you might quiet him, for it will never do to let him run up a temperature if we can avoid it."

"I am afraid that it is my fault for speaking to him as I did this afternoon, but he looked so much in need of rousing, and being made to want to live, that I said the very first thing that came into my head; only I am very sorry if it has done him harm," answered Alice in a penitent tone, as the nurse hurried her into the room where Sam Powell was lying.

"It is possible that you may have done him a great deal of good, only just at first we cannot be sure whether he has the strength to stand it," said the nurse.

The long row of beds, each bearing its burden of pain, did not oppress Alice as it had done on her first visit; indeed, she walked past the beds with the curious feeling of having been there many times before. Sam Powell was sitting propped against two pillows, a gaunt, thin-faced man with a haggard, anxious face, and he looked at Alice as if she were a stranger.

"Don't you know me, Mr. Powell?" she asked softly, stooping to touch his hand with her fingers before she sat down in the chair that the nurse brought forward for her.

"Is it you, Alice?" he asked in a puzzled tone; and then she flushed hotly, remembering the borrowed clothes she was wearing, which had made such a difference to her appearance that Mr. Powell actually did not know her.

"Did you think that I was a ghost?" she said with a nervous laugh. "Pinch me, Mr. Powell, and then you will find how very substantial I am;" and she thrust her hand towards him again, such a strong wave of pity for him flowing into her heart that it was all she could do to keep back her tears.

He took her hand and held it fast, saying feebly: "It is your voice right enough, only you look so different; I expect it is because you are slicked up for going out, and you didn't have much time for slicking up at Powell Gorge. I thought that I must have dreamed that you came here this afternoon and told me about my wife having had a paralytic stroke. Say, is it true, and does she suffer much, poor thing?"

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"We do not think that she suffers, because it seems to us that she can feel nothing at all," replied Alice, choking back a sob at the sight of the misery in his eyes. "She cannot move in the least, except her eyelids; and she cannot speak—we do not even know whether she can hear, or at least understand what we say to her: only there is such a terrible anxiety in her eyes all the time that we have felt sure it was news of you she wanted."

"When did it come on—the stroke, I mean?" he asked, and now the trouble in his eyes made Alice think of those of his wife.

"I found her lying on the floor of the veranda when I got back from Crag End with Hester," she said, as she gently stroked and patted his hand, which was still holding one of hers.

"Who is Hester?" he asked in surprise.

"She is the lady help whom Mrs. Powell engaged to take my place, and she has helped me most splendidly. She is taking care of Mrs. Powell now that I am away," explained Alice, with the queer feeling of having to begin at the beginning, yet afraid to say much from fear of overtiring the invalid.

"I had forgotten about her," he said wearily. "I think there must be a good many things that I have forgotten in those days since I left home. Alice, did you find out why I went away like that?" he asked.

"Yes: we found the telegram in your coat—the coat you left lying by the old mine shaft on the hill; and then the night before I came away Hester found the letter from the Ottawa Hospital about my father, and then we understood the telegram," she said softly. Then, forgetting discretion in her pain because of her father's

lonely death, she cried out: "Oh, why did you not tell me about my father? It was cruel, cruel to keep me in ignorance when he was dying, and wanted me."

"I know it looks like it, and I am very sorry," rejoined Sam Powell feebly. "Perhaps if I had my time to come over again I'd do a good many things differently. Harry Trevor is dead now, and it little becomes any of us to speak ill of the dead; but when I had that letter from him, I told myself that he was getting his deserts. But I would have gone, and taken you with me, only Mrs. Powell said no, and I'd got into the way of giving in to her, because it seemed too much trouble to stand out for my own way in things. We had words about it, though, and I'm sorry. Then when the telegram came we had more words, and I started for Ottawa, but I didn't tell her I was going; and to give her a scare I dropped my old coat at the mouth of the open shaft. Do you think that she found it there, and the shock brought on the stroke?" he asked mournfully.

"No, I am sure it was not that, for there was no dust on her boots when we found her lying on the veranda, and she could not have gone up the hill without getting her feet dusty on that day," answered Alice; "besides, we did not find the coat until a long while afterwards. But I am sure that you ought not to talk so much; and if you make yourself worse, the nurse will be angry with me."

"Perhaps it will be my only chance of talking to you, for I'm not very far from death, I think," he said, and she noticed how difficult his breathing seemed, while there was a grey look on his face that frightened her. Anxiously she looked about for a nurse, but all were

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momentarily absent from the ward, and after a long pause Sam Powell mastered his weakness and spoke again. "I couldn't talk, for I was too much hurt, when I was first brought in here; and when I began to feel better able to use my jaw I still would not say anything. Then it came over me that I was going to die, and no one would ever know whether I was really dead or alive, and it sort of frightened me; so I made up my mind that I would tell the nurses all about myself, and then I opened my eyes and saw you standing over me, only I thought it was a dream."

"That is enough talking for a little while," broke in the voice of a nurse who had come up behind Alice unperceived, and then she stooped over Sam Powell, who had closed his eyes from exhaustion, and, putting her finger on his pulse, motioned to Alice to hand her a bottle, from which she administered a draught.

"I am going to put a screen round the bed, it will be pleasanter for you," she said to Alice, but there was a kindly pity in her face which betrayed the truth she was trying to keep from Alice—that Sam Powell was very near to the end.

After that the time dragged slowly on. The house surgeon came into the ward soon after midnight, for there were other critical cases there besides the one where Alice maintained her watch, and presently he came round the screen and stooped over Sam, who still lay with his eyes closed, his breath coming in spasmodic jerks.

"If he lives the night out he will probably pull through for this time," said the surgeon in answer to a low-voiced question from Alice. "But you understand that his condition is critical. If he wants to talk,

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let him, it can do no harm; but do not you talk more than you can help. What he says himself may in some way relieve his mind; and it is the bottled-up thoughts and fears of these many past days that are troubling him so much to-night, poor man!"

After the doctor went away there was more waiting. A nurse came round the screen at intervals, and sometimes a moan from one of the other beds reached the ears of Alice, who sat with clasped hands as motionless for the most part as the man on the bed. It was not so much Sam Powell she was thinking of during that silent vigil; her thoughts were busy reconstructing a scene which must have taken place in the hospital at Ottawa a few weeks before, when her own father lay dying and eating out his heart in loneliness, —longing and longing for a sight of his child, which was his one tie to earth, and then at the last dying with the wish ungratified, all because a jealous woman a thousand miles away would not let her husband do an act of Christian charity to a man who had been his enemy. Ah, what a cruel and complex thing life could be! Presently a cold breath of wind stirred through the open window, and then a sleepy bird chirruped and twittered, to be answered a moment later by several others, and Alice knew that morning had come.

Then Sam Powell stirred in his bed, moved his hand to and fro across the coverlet as if seeking for something, and opened his eyes and looked at Alice.

"You here?" he asked in a tone of wonderment; then, remembrance coming back to him, he went on: "Ah, yes, you came yesterday and told me about my wife, poor thing, poor thing! And you say that she has wanted me?"

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"Hester says she is sure that it is you she has been wanting so badly; and now, when you are well enough, I will take you back to Crag End," said Alice, gathering the poor groping fingers into her own warm hand and holding them fast.

"And you will forgive me for not telling you about your father?" he asked in an incredulous tone.

Alice bent her head; words would not come easily just then; for her thoughts had been very bitter as she sat by Sam Powell's bed that night. But with the coming of the dawn there had floated into her heart some words of comfort from Holy Writ: "Ye shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, saith the Lord God."

If that was so, then at least the Most High God had permitted this thing, which Divine Providence might have averted had it seemed good; and if this was so, it was not for her to cry out against it. Wilfred himself had said it might be that the loneliness was some part of the price her father had to pay for his sin of deserting her mother and herself in their dire need. A rush of tenderness came into her heart as she thought of the happiness which was waiting for her outside the walls of the hospital, and, pressing the hand she held, she said softly:

"Yes, I forgive, as I hope to be forgiven. And now, dear Mr. Powell, you must rest, for it is urgent that you get better, so that I may take you home."

"Ah! it will be good to go home, for I have hungered sore for a sight of the old place; but I did not look to see it again, for I thought that I was going to die," he said with a deep-drawn sigh, and then his eyes closed again in utter content.

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A nurse came softly round the screen, and at sight of her Alice rose from the chair. But she would have fallen if the nurse had not promptly caught hold of her, because she was so stiff and worn out that there was simply no feeling in her feet.

"Poor thing, you are a wreck!" exclaimed the nurse, slipping a capable arm round her and supporting her from the ward. "But you have been better than physic to the poor man yonder. And now you are to come into the sister's sitting-room for a cup of tea before you start up town. Mr. Landells is waiting for you, and he said that when you were ready he would 'phone to the garage for a motor."

"Is Mr. Landells here still? Oh, I had no idea that he was going to wait all this time!" cried Alice, in keen distress at all the trouble she was giving.

"I guess it hasn't hurt him, and you don't look very fit to manage for yourself after sitting on that uncomfortable chair all night. But here comes the sister, so I will hand you over to her and hurry back; it is time I started on clearing up, or I shall not be through by the time I have to go off duty," said the nurse, as a tall figure in the uniform of a sister came out of a dimly lighted room at the end of the corridor.

"The kettle is boiling, and you shall have your cup of tea directly," said the sister, in such a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone that Alice was instantly comforted by it.

"You are very good," she murmured, allowing herself to be thrust into an easy chair.

"Ah! but it is nothing. Now drink this hot, then you will feel better," said the sister, as she put a fragrant, steaming cup into the shaking hands of Alice.

CHAPTER XXIII
Into the Sunshine

"For my heart was hot and restless,
And my life was full of care,
And the burden laid upon me
Seemed greater than I could bear.

"But now it has fallen from me
It is buried in the sea."

"AND really, that is just how I feel!" murmured Alice to herself as she stretched her limbs in luxurious content, and having opened her eyes sufficiently to take in her surroundings, shut them again, and lay repeating to herself the bit of Longfellow that had come into her mind when first she roused out of the dreamless sleep in which she had lain for so long.

She had been almost too weary to endure life when she left the hospital so early that morning, but it had been such a wonderful thing to be thought for and taken care of in the silent but efficient manner in which Wilfred had done it. He had scarcely spoken during the swift journey up town; but the quiet sympathy which asked no questions, and took her weariness so much for granted as not to consider it worth talking about, was quite a new experience for Alice, who was too worn out just then even to give a thought to what she must look like.

Then when they reached Mr. Hope's house Mrs. Hope had appeared in a dressing-gown, and, taking possession of her, had put her to bed as if she had been a baby, and then had insisted on her taking food, even though it had not seemed possible to swallow a single mouthful.

How utterly delightful it was to be taken care of! Never in the whole course of her life had Alice known such a lavishment of tenderness; it had always been her part to take care of someone else. In the past days when her sorrowful and heartbroken mother was alive the poor woman had needed all the care which the half-grown and very inefficient girl could give her. Those had been very terrible days to Alice, and she never willingly spoke of them. There had been the long journey from the Middle States to the house of Sam Powell, and then the grudging welcome of Mrs. Powell; a few weeks of strained relationships, then the brief illness of Mrs. Trevor, and the death that had set the poor woman free for ever from the burden of misery which she had borne so long.

It was the memory of those dark days which came crowding back upon her that banished the drowsiness of Alice, and the sweet content that had lapped her round, causing her to start up very wideawake, and prepare to set about the business of dressing. It was the middle of the afternoon, but as her room was on the shady side of the house it was cool and comfortable.

She was wrestling with the masses of her hair, which were in wild disorder from having been neglected before she went to sleep, when there was a light tap at the door, and Mrs. Hope entered the room.

"Ah, you are awake!" she exclaimed. "I was com-

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ing to see if you were ready to get up; then I thought you should have a cup of tea, and we would drive down to the hospital before dinner."

"Is Mr. Powell worse?" asked Alice, turning round with a handful of hair in either hand.

"No; I telephoned to the sister at two o'clock this afternoon, and she said that he was doing very well, and that you would be permitted to see him for a few minutes between five and six o'clock," said Mrs. Hope, coming forward into the room and sitting down by the dressing-table.

"Only a few minutes! And yet last night I was there for hours!" cried Alice in astonishment.

"Ah! they thought he was going to die then, poor man, and so nothing mattered, save to give him all the comfort possible; but now that there is a chance of pulling him through, they will take good care that you do not have too long with him," said Mrs. Hope: and then she asked if Alice had slept well.

"Oh, yes, I have not heard a sound; it might have been the middle of the night instead of the middle of the day, and I was so very comfortable!" said Alice, with a deep sigh of contentment which made Mrs. Hope laugh.

"I think that you deserve to be comfortable," she replied; "for it seems to me that you have had to spend all your time in looking after the comfort of other people."

"I don't think I looked after Mrs. Powell's comfort much when she was well—indeed, I disliked her too much; but I did use to be sorry for Mr. Powell, because I think he meant to be kind to me, only he was afraid," said Alice, and there was an inflection of unconscious

scorn in her tone. In the days of the past she had openly despised Sam Powell for being afraid of his wife, but the long hours she had passed sitting by his bed last night had taught her a larger charity for the poor man, and she guessed that much of what she in her youthful intolerance had called cowardice was really a desire to have peace at any price.

"Poor Hester! How very dreadful her life would have been with a woman of that description! It was really a mercy that Mrs. Powell was stricken down at that particular time," said Mrs. Hope thoughtfully.

"It does seem like it, for though Hester and I have had some rather hard times this spring, we have at least had peace; and oh, it has been very, very pleasant to live with Hester!" exclaimed Alice, so fervently that Mrs. Hope turned her head abruptly, so that the pain in her eyes should not be seen.

"You are very fond of Hester?" she queried.

"I love her," answered Alice, in a manner which implied that there was nothing further to be said on the subject.

"I would have loved her too if she had given me a chance; but I cannot tell you the pain it gave me to find that she had run away without even letting me make her acquaintance," said Mrs. Hope, and all unconsciously her secret pain made itself audible in her speech.

Alice had got her hair at the critical stage when it needed her whole attention, but letting it fall anyhow again, she turned swiftly to Mrs. Hope, saying earnestly:

"Please, please don't feel so bad about it. Can you not see that it was coming into such a life of difficulty that brought out the very best that was in Hester; and

but for your marrying Mr. Hope she would never have left home as she did, and I should have been overwhelmed with my troubles, for I could not have stood up under my burdens if it had not been for Hester? It was not you she disliked—how could she—because, you see, she did not know you? Of course she was in a state of revolt; but I think that all girls get into that condition more or less. You might have felt bad about it if Hester had waited at home to know you, and then had quarrelled with you, and left the house to make her own way in the world. But now when you know her you will be the best of friends; I am sure of it, for you are so much alike—I mean that you are both so large-hearted and good that you could not help liking each other.”

“What a champion Hester has in you!” exclaimed Mrs. Hope, but her face had cleared somewhat and her voice had a happier ring, for of course it was true, as Alice had said, that it could not be personal dislike which had driven Hester out from home, seeing that she did not know the stepmother from whom she had revolted.

“Hester has been so good to me, and she has taught me so many things, that I should be ingrate indeed if I did not love and admire her,” said Alice warmly. Then she hesitated a moment, did swift battle with her pride, and burst out impetuously: “Why, even the very clothes I am wearing belong to Hester, for I had none of my own that were fit for wearing in a house like this. Of course I will pay her for them when I get back, but that makes no difference to the spirit in which they were offered to me. And she was so careful to choose garments that she had not worn when she was at home, so that I should not be shamed in the eyes of your ser-

vants; indeed, it was that same care to shield my poverty which led to the finding of the letter from the Ottawa Hospital about my father, for she would not pack my clothes in one of her suit cases, but hunted out an old portmanteau of Mrs. Powell's, and then found the letter hidden away in the lining."

"My dear, why did you tell me all this; there was surely no need?" Mrs. Hope's voice was gently protesting now, for she realized what a lot it must have cost Alice to make her little confession.

"I could not sail under false colours to you, of all people in the world," said Alice bravely, but her lips were quivering, for she had touched the deepest depths of self-humiliation in telling of her poverty to this well-placed woman who was to be her sister-in-law. The temptation to keep the story of Hester's generosity to herself had been very great, and she might have felt justified in yielding to it, but she had to put Hester right with this unknown stepmother, and so she did it, regardless of her personal discomfort in the matter.

"Thank you so much, then, for telling me, for it shows my stepdaughter in a very lovable light," Mrs. Hope said gravely. "But it also does more than that—it shows me what real grit you have in not being ashamed of your poverty. Do you know, all my earlier years were full of such a fierce battle with ways and means that I have the greatest sympathy with other people who are in the thick of the same struggle."

"But I thought——" began Alice, then stopped abruptly, for how could she tell Mrs. Hope that she had believed Wilfred's family to be very highly placed, if not actually wealthy people?

"You thought we belonged to the moneyed classes,

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did you?" said Mrs. Hope with a smile. "So far from that being the case, we were the ten children of a Scottish manse, reared on an income that might have sufficed for the simple needs of a family of two, but took a tremendous amount of stretching to make it sufficient to feed and clothe half a score of hungry boys and girls. Then my mother died when I was so young, and Wilfred was only a wee boy of three, and I had not the genius for stretching the income which my mother possessed, although I did my best. We were brought up mainly on porridge and the vegetables that we grew ourselves; we were educated by our father and the scholarships which we won for ourselves; then when our father died also, we just helped each other until we were all on our feet and able to make our own way in the world. So you see there is no reason for you to be ashamed of your poverty in talking to me, Alice."

"I am afraid that I have always been ashamed of being poor. Hester laughs at me, and says that it is my pride; but poverty to me is like living in the cold, bleak north, with heavy shadows all about one, and I have just yearned for the sunshine of a more prosperous life," said Alice unsteadily. "You see, I have never known anything but the fiercest struggle to make ends meet. It was not disease that killed my mother, but the hardness of her life, and it has been hard ever since she went."

"I hope that you have left the bleak north of poverty for ever," said Mrs. Hope. "I think that you will expand in the sunshine like any other flower, and although Wilfred is not a rich man, he is certainly well enough off to give you decent comfort."

Alice flushed a sudden distressful red. "Oh, but I

hope you do not think that I care for him because of what he can give me in the shape of a home and that sort of thing!" she cried.

Mrs. Hope laughed. "I do not think anything of you that is not nice. But come along and have some tea, or we shall be late in reaching the hospital, and then perhaps they will not let you see Mr. Powell until to-morrow," she said, slipping her arm through that of Alice and drawing her from the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

News from the City

"HEIGH-HO, how very hot it is!" said Hester to herself, and leaving the stuffy kitchen, where she had been baking bread, she stepped out on to the veranda, and stood with her arms stretched high above her head, revelling in the fresh air, and trying to persuade herself that it was much cooler out in the fervid sunshine than in the house, where the heat of the stove made an almost unbearable atmosphere.

She was still standing there, watching a lurid storm cloud pile itself up against the shoulder of a distant mountain peak, when Zota came trailing round the corner of the house, carrying her hat in her hand, and looking hotter if possible than Hester felt.

"How hot it is!" she exclaimed, and then she plumped down on the lower step of the veranda and kicked off her shoes, because barefooted freedom seemed the most desirable thing on an afternoon like that.

"Now with those bare feet you look just like a little Dukhobor again," said Hester laughing softly, as she still stood with arms stretched up, because it seemed to her that she felt cooler that way.

"But I am glad that I am not a Dukhobor again," replied Zota, curling her bare toes in the dust with an air of restful enjoyment. "They were very kind to me,

and I am most grateful to them for rescuing me from being starved to death or some other similar fate, but I did hate the sordid, ugly life. We did not have anything pretty, not even pretty thoughts!"

"But one can always have beautiful thoughts, no matter what the surroundings may be," said Hester.

Zota shook her head; her English was not as yet sufficiently fluent for her to put into words the exact thing she meant, but she was improving daily, for her father would not talk to her in Russian, and Hester could not, so she had to get used to the English tongue or be left to silence, which was a thing she hated.

"It may be easy for you," she said slowly, feeling her way among the strange words which as yet seemed so inadequate to express her meaning—"easy for you who know so much, but when one is ignorant, as I am, there is nothing beautiful to see in hard, rough work, ugly clothes, and rooms without any ornament at all. Oh, I hated my life, and the feeling that if I lived to be an old, old woman, I should have to face all those endless years of grey, ugly days. It was dreadful, dreadful, and I was praying to the good God to let me die on that day when you found me lying on the ground behind the barn!"

"Poor little girl! It was very hard for you, I am sure," said Hester, coming to sit on the veranda step beside Zota, and slipping a loving arm round the girl's waist. "And the life here is hard for you too now that Alice is away, but on a ranch like this things have to be done when the time comes, or the crops would be ruined."

"Oh, I love this life!" cried Zota in a tone of sheer ecstasy. "And now that my dear father has come

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back to life again for me, there seems nothing left to wish for. He is so happy and safe here; and it is better for him than the towns, for one never knows where one may meet a Russian spy, and it is probable that if one met and knew him, my dear father would be shot down at sight, for the man who has escaped from Siberia is never safe, you know. That is why I love this solitary place, where no one comes except the kind neighbours, or those valiant Mounted Police, who are so different from the Russian police. But I am afraid that Mr. Powell will send us away when he is well enough to come back to his home again."

"I should think that he will be very glad to keep Mr. Warinski here for this summer at least," replied Hester cheerfully. "You know what Alice said in her letter the other day, that the doctors thought he would be very much an invalid for a long time to come, and so of course he will need help, especially as haymaking is close in front of us. Do you know, I am looking forward to that, for I have not been at a haymaking since I was a little girl, and my recollections of it are pure bliss."

"Ah, it is different when you do it really! then it makes your arms ache, and your back ache, and you feel as if you want a Sunday at least every other day," remarked Zota sagely; and then she jumped up, saying that she must go and get the cow home before the storm came on.

Hester sat awhile longer on the step; she was very tired, and the coming up of the storm had a sort of fascination for her. She heard Zota whistle for the dog, and then there was silence for a time, until the quick beat of a horse's hoofs sounded on the trail

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coming through the orchard, when she started to her feet in a great hurry, for really she was not very tidy to interview a visitor. Into the house she darted, and seizing a comb twisted her hair into shape with a few deft touches, pulled her blouse straight, and whisked off her cooking pinafore, all before the rider had arrived at the house, dismounted, and knocked at the door.

Then suddenly her hurry dropped from her, and she strolled slowly across the room to answer the summons in a leisurely manner, although her heart was certainly beating faster, because she had recognized the step of the man who had slid from his horse and mounted the steps of the veranda.

"Ah, Dr. Lambert, have you come to see your patient?" she asked with a calm smile, trying to appear quite cool and collected, although the dancing light in her eyes belied her casual bearing.

"No, I have come to see you," answered the doctor.

"But I am not ill," she remarked with a gleam of mischief, for he was manifestly ill at ease.

"I did not even suggest that you were; indeed, I don't think that I should care to undertake you if you were ill, because I am sure that you would be a very troublesome patient," he said coolly.

"Now that is not complimentary; and I cannot retaliate as I would, for, seeing that I am in charge of one of your patients, of course I have to treat you with proper respect," she said demurely.

"Of course, that goes without saying," he answered with a nod. And then he went on, "I have had a wire from Mr. Landells; he and Miss Trevor are bringing Mr. Powell home to-morrow, and I rode over to let you know."

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"So soon?" cried Hester in surprise. "Why, I thought that the doctors would not agree to his coming for another week or more."

"I do not think they would have permitted it, only I sent a letter to the house surgeon, and told him that for Mrs. Powell's sake I should be glad for them to send him as soon as possible," replied the doctor.

"Do you think that she is worse?" asked Hester, a little note of dismay in her tone, for she had become really attached to the helpless invalid, thereby showing herself a true woman, since it is characteristic of the finest of the sex to love most that which is most dependent on them.

"I do not think that the end is very far off," he answered. Then seeing the blank look on her face he went on: "And it would be sinful to grieve for her, poor creature; a wild bird suddenly caged, or a prisoner shut up to lifelong imprisonment, would be happy, compared with her in her living tomb."

"I know," said Hester, putting her hand up to her face to hide its quivering. "And yet I cannot help feeling bad at the thought of losing her, for she stands to me as a sort of turning-point in my life, a monument of the time when I really began to be useful."

"There is no need for you to cease being useful when she is taken—indeed, it should be all the greater incentive to you to be useful, now that you know how good it feels to justify the reason for your existence," he said quietly.

Hester sighed impatiently. "There are so many ways of justifying one's existence, and none of them appeal to me at this moment: and it seems to me that I shall be a loose end again, with nothing in the world

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to do except to go home and help my stepmother to dispense afternoon tea to people who are not hungry; and I hate small talk!" she said, with a burst of petulance.

"There is one career in which you would shine, and it does not include the giving of afternoon tea to people who would be better without it," he said, smiling at her.

"What do you mean? Is there someone else who wants a lady help of the unornamental sort?" she asked with a constrained laugh, then turned her head quickly, so that he should not see the hot tears which were smarting in her eyes. She had come to love the mountain country very dearly, the sombreness of the tree-clad heights, the solemn grandeur of the frowning rock precipices, and the solitude of the out-of-the-way fruit ranch. She would hate to live in a town again, to be conventional, and to do the stereotyped things which every well-bred woman does.

"Yes, but it is not an easy post by any means, and the pay is not good either," he said, with a curious note of hesitancy in his tone.

Hester's face cleared instantly, and she flashed a brilliant smile upon him. "Do you mean that you really know of someone who wants my help?" she cried joyfully. "I don't mind the work being hard, in fact I think that I like it, and I do not want an easy life either—sitting still in inglorious luxury does not appeal to me; please tell me where it is, and if the good folks who want help would be likely to take to me."

"There is only one to please in this situation, and he made up his mind a long time ago, even when he

thought that you were in streaks an arrant coward," laughed the doctor. And then he took possession of Hester's hands, holding them so fast that she could not get away, while he said earnestly: "You will have to say yes, Hester, because I want you so badly. Besides, you have been saying that you wanted to go where you could be most useful, and really you will shine indeed as the wife of a country doctor."

But by this time Hester had succeeded in wriggling her hands free, and as she went away into the house to look after the bread that was baking, she said with a mischievous laugh: "You said just now that you would not care to undertake me if I were ill, and that you thought I should be a very troublesome patient, so I fear that it would be altogether a breaking strain for you to have to put up with me entirely."

"That is my affair, and if I don't mind taking the risk, no one else need pity me," he said, as he followed her into the kitchen, which was odorous with the smell of newly baked bread, and shining with cleanliness also. And then, as she stooped over the stove, he went on, with a keen anxiety in his tone: "You will say yes, won't you, Hester? For you must remember that, whatever it may be to you, to me it is a matter more serious than anything else in the world."

She turned and swept him a little curtsy suggestive of gay defiance, and then replied demurely, "I am greatly honoured, and when I am in want of another situation I will let you know; only be sure of one thing, I shall go where I am most wanted."

"I can rest on that," he said, drawing a long breath of relief, as he stood by the table watching her. "For I know very well that in all this wide Dominion of

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Canada there is no one who wants you one-half as badly as I do. And as soon as your work is done here, I shall take my rights, trust me for that."

"Your rights?" she queried with uplifted eyebrows.

"Yes, my rights," he repeated firmly. "You said that you would go where you were most wanted, and that is where I score; and I can wait. Now let us go and see how Mrs. Powell is to-day."

CHAPTER XXV

Sam Powell's Homecoming

HESTER and Zota were astir with the dawn on the next morning, and by the time that city folks would be thinking of coming downstairs to breakfast, the little house at Powell Gorge had been swept and dusted from end to end. The invalid had been cared for and the live stock fed. The last-named piece of work had fallen largely to the share of Michael Warinski, who had fed the pigs as if he had been used to that sort of thing all the days of his life, instead of having been reared in the lap of luxury. But a few years of Siberia do a lot towards making a man contented with humble surroundings such as those at Powell Gorge, and in all the country of the Great Divide it would have been difficult to find a more thoroughly contented man than the Russian that morning.

Breakfast was a hurried meal, taken without any undue fuss or ceremony; for the drastic clearing up of the house had to be repeated out-of-doors, so barn, wood pile, piggeries, and garden would all receive more or less attention before the arrival of the long-absent master of the house.

But these activities would fall to the lot of Zota and her father, for Hester could not leave the invalid. Very unwell was Mrs. Powell this morning, and it did not

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need any words of the doctor's to show Hester how nearly the little sands of life had run out.

Would the poor woman live until her husband came home? The question troubled Hester so much all through the morning that she was never many minutes absent from the sickroom, even though there was little she could do for the sufferer except to fan her and paint her lips with a restorative left by the doctor yesterday.

How slowly the hours dragged on as noon crept near! The storm which threatened yesterday had not come, but the air was heavy and close, while dark clouds hung low about the mountain peak, which was the storm centre of the neighbourhood. Hester tried to tell herself that it was the closeness of the morning that made the sick woman so troubled to breathe; but her instinct told her another tale, and she simply longed for the sound of wagon wheels on the trail through the orchard.

Presently she heard it, and at that moment Zota came rushing in to say that the wagon with the travellers was close at hand.

"Tell them to get Mr. Powell in here as quickly as possible," said Hester urgently; but she made no attempt to go out to greet the travellers, and Zota rushed to meet the wagon with a startled look on her face, for death seemed so terrible to her, even though it came in the guise of an opened prison door to a weary captive.

Dr. Lambert had driven Alice and Mr. Powell from Crag End, for Wilfred Landells had been compelled to go on to the mines on business that morning.

"Hester says that you are to make haste or you will be too late!" cried Zota, forgetting in her agitation to

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be shy of the man who still had bandages on his face, and the most sorrowful look in his eyes that she had ever seen.

"We are coming," said the doctor briefly, and then, with the help of Michael Warinski, he lifted Sam Powell out of the wagon and hurried the poor man into the house.

There was more life in the face of Mrs. Powell than had been seen there since her seizure; but her breath was coming in fitful gasps, as if every one would be the last. Her features worked strangely when she saw her husband leaning over her bed, and making a tremendous effort, she breathed the one word, "Forgive," then slipped her fetters for ever.

Sam Powell had left home a strong man, but he came back an invalid, for the street accident in Toronto had been a serious affair, and nothing in the shape of hard work would be possible to him again. It was upon Alice that he chiefly leaned at this time, and great was his dismay when he found that Wilfred Landells did not intend that she should be left much longer at Powell Gorge. However, Alice promised to see him through the tobacco harvest, and with that he had to be content.

He refused to have Joe Disney prosecuted on account of the invasion of Powell Gorge, saying that the man would have to suffer quite heavily enough for his misdeeds in the matter of the "salting"; and he even went to the extent of helping the unfortunate woman who had posed as the nurse, when he heard that she was in reality Joe's wife. He told Alice that Joe was really the nephew of Mrs. Powell, only she would never

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acknowledge the relationship because she was ashamed of him.

There were a good many confidences between Alice and the invalid master of the house during those days immediately following Mrs. Powell's funeral. He told her that he was in reality quite a rich man, only he had never dared to let his wife know the extent of his wealth. A veritable coward he had been in many ways in the past, so far as his wife was concerned; but he must have cared for her after a fashion, for he would never speak of that last sad quarrel, when the violence of her tongue had driven him forth a wanderer.

"You see, I did not mean to come back, and I was mean enough to leave my coat lying where it could be found, so that she should believe that I was dead when I went off to Ottawa to find your father. My conscience was not clear about my treatment of you either, for I might have made your life easier if I had tried; and now my punishment is that when I most want you, you are going to leave me," he said with a sorrowful shake of his head.

"I shall not be far away, for Wilfred is going to build himself a house in Crag End, because it is so central for his district, so I can see that you are looked after," Alice answered with a smile and a blush. It seemed so strange to her that she, whom formerly no one had seemed to need especially, should now be a person of so much importance. Then she said slowly: "There is one thing you could do if you chose, and that is, you might ask Mr. Warinski and Zota to live with you for a time. Zota is quite able to keep house with a little help from her father, and I think that they would be pleasant companions for you."

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"I had thought of that myself. Do you think that they would be willing to stay with me?" asked Sam Powell.

"I am quite sure of it," replied Alice. "That poor child, Zota, is so afraid that someone may recognize her father and do him harm; but there is little danger for him in a remote place like this."

"I will talk to him about it," said the master of the house eagerly; and then, as Hester came running in from the garden with a great basket of early raspberries which she had been gathering, he rose to his feet with an effort and offered her his chair.

"I don't want to sit down, thank you," she replied; adding with a merry laugh, "and you must not forget that I am a sort of hired girl, so it is in no way necessary to get up for me to sit down every time I enter the room, just as if I were an important kind of a visitor."

"My dear Miss Hope, I could never think of you as a hired girl!" Sam Powell exclaimed in a shocked tone. "I remember that my poor wife said when she wrote to engage you that she was certain she had got hold of a lady, and she was most uncommon keen on that sort of thing."

"And I expect that you told her that a lady would be more bother than she was worth," retorted Hester in a mischievous tone.

"They were my very words, for I was uncommon sore to think of Alice going away, especially as I knew that I had not done all that I might for her in the past," said Sam. And then he went on half-hesitatingly: "Now, look here, I don't want you to be offended with me, but there is a bit of advice that I must give you, because you are so bright and smart, and you are so fond of having your own way. If you want to be happy

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when you are married, just be content to let the doctor be master in his own house. There is a lot of nonsense talked in these days about the emancipation of women and that sort of thing, and though I know that in some cases it is as well to give women their heads a bit, the only chance of married happiness is for man to be what his Maker intended he should be—the head of the house. And, my dear, don't you forget it."

"I am afraid that I shall not be allowed to," replied Hester. "But it is of no use to blame a poor woman for taking all that she can get, and if the man does not hold the driving lines with a firm hand, he must not be surprised if he gets gradually pushed from the place of power."

"Ah! you hit the bull's-eye plumb in the centre there, Miss Hope, and I see that it is the doctor that I ought to talk to on the subject; only I don't know after all that he is not quite capable of minding his own business without any help from me," said Sam.

Hester emptied a flood of crimson raspberries into a white earthenware bowl, and her cheeks seemed to gather colour from the fruit as she said softly, "And I think so too."

It was later in the day, and the heat which had been excessive at noontide had given place to a pleasant coolness. The sun was slipping out of sight behind a forest-clad shoulder of the hills, and Hester strolled out of the house to enjoy the cool breeze which stole down from the uplands.

Zota and her father were away in the pasture-land higher up the slopes fixing up a temporary repair of a broken fence, to keep the cow from trespassing in the growing corn; and Alice was helping Mr. Powell to

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sort some of the piles of manuscript papers left by Mrs. Powell.

"Heigh-ho, but it is a good old world to live in!" murmured Hester with a sigh of content, as she stretched her arms high above her head.

She had been hard at work since dawn, and dawn again must find her astir, for the long summer days were all too short for the work which had to be done in them. But when one is young and strong, work is only another sort of play, and there is a zest in effort and a satisfaction in achievement that are not to be surpassed.

Then there came to her ears the sound of the hoof-beats of a horse, and the colour flamed over her face as she said to herself, "It is the doctor, I expect, and I told him that he was not to come until to-morrow."

The doctor it proved to be, but he made no apology for having acted in defiance of her commands, deeming that the occasion justified his coming.

"I have had a letter from your father," he said abruptly, as he slid from his saddle to walk by her side.

"Yes?" The colour had deepened in her cheeks, but her eyes were shining, and there was a smile hovering round her lips.

"He says that I may have you, on condition that you are married from your own home," answered the doctor.

"Why, of course," said Hester with a laugh, "I should go home in any case now, just because I want to make the acquaintance of my stepmother, from whom at the first I ran away!"

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